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Germany's living history Chancellor of unity

The ties that bind and hurt Helmut Kohl, Wolfgang Schäuble and Angela Merkel

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WHAT a week it has been for two men in



Kohl looks up to "the girl"

wheelchairs and the woman they once called "the girl". One is Helmut Kohl, now 82, who became the German chancellor 30 years ago on October 1st, and was being wheeled by his second wife, 48, from one commemoration to another. The other is Wolfgang Schäuble, who turned 70 on September 18th. For years he was Mr Kohl's main ally and heir apparent, before the men fell out after a party-finance scandal in 1999-2000 that ended Mr Kohl's political life and indirectly derailed Mr Schäuble's. The "girl" is Angela Merkel, picked by Mr Kohl from

obscurity in eastern Germany just after unification to rise in his political party, the CDU. During the 1999 scandal, she broke with Mr Kohl, then outmanoeuvred even Mr Schäuble to become leader of the party, and eventually chancellor.

What these three have lived through was "historic" by any standard and is not over yet. So it was fitting that Mrs Merkel gave the keynote address for Mr Kohl at Berlin's German Historical Museum, where he was described as "chancellor of unity and honorary citizen of Europe."

Mr Kohl was a war child, growing up as the bombs fell on his home town in the Palatinate. He never lost its rustic dialect and later subjected many a world leader to local delicacies such as sow's stomach. His instinct for power proved formidable, and he rose to lead his *Land* (state), then his party. In 1982 he seized the chancellorship with a daring parliamentary manoeuvre.

For seven years, he did not appear destined to make history. Then, in 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, and Mr Kohl displayed a sure-footed instinct for the big moment. Weaving through the anxieties of three of the allied powers (Britain under Margaret Thatcher, France under François Mitterrand, and the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev) with support from the fourth (America under George Bush senior), Mr Kohl incorporated East Germany in less than one year. To *Ossis* (easterners) at the time, he brought the D-mark, ie, prosperity.

Mr Schäuble, as interior minister, designed the details of reunification in October 1990. That same month, a madman shot a bullet into his spine. Mr Schäuble was paralysed, but stayed in politics, believing that his turn as chancellor would come. With Mr Kohl, he worked on uniting Europe, the other historic project.

The euro may have started as a French idea (Mr Mitterrand considered the D-mark "Germany's atom bomb" and wanted to submerge it in a common currency). But Mr Kohl made it his pet project. A quasi-religious believer in Franco-German and pan-European reconciliation, Mr Kohl wanted the euro politically, suppressing the economic concerns of sceptics as he had done when giving the East Germans the D-mark. There are those who say that this is where today's crisis began.

It has now fallen to Mrs Merkel as chancellor to try to save the euro

Mr Kohl has had to watch all this largely in silence. In 2001 his first wife committed suicide. His two sons have broken with him, and one described his father as an egomaniac in a book. In 2008 Mr Kohl was found on his kitchen floor in a puddle of blood, after a bad fall. He is still lucid but can hardly speak. There is much that this trio might like to say to each other, and much that they left unsaid this week.

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