

Bowing to the victims

GEISLINGEN: Artist Gunter Demnig laid a stumbling threshold in front of WMF on Tuesday. This memorial stone is in remembrance of the 813 women forced laborers who were imprisoned in this city of five valleys during the time of National Socialism.



memorial function - laying of a stumbling threshold at WMF - gate 1 by artist Gunter Demnig

Gunter Demnig is not a man of many words. In spite of the growing crowd in front of WMF main gate he goes back and forth at a smart pace between his van and the sidewalk on this Tuesday morning, carrying sacks of cement, buckets, broom and water cans. Does he have time for some words to the audience? Later, after the work is done. In less than an hour the artist from Frechen builds a memorial for the more than 800 Jewish girls and women who had to do forced labor for WMF as prisoners of concentration satellite camp Geislingen between August 1944 and March 1945.

photographer: Markus Sontheimer

It is one for of his stumbling thresholds - most notably for his stumbling stones - for which Gunter Demnig is well known far beyond Europe. As objects out of place, stumbling stones, the square memorial stones protrude from sidewalks in Germany and many other European countries. They motivate to pause, to read and think about the life and suffering of those of whom not more than their names, year of birth and - if known - year of death and fate is inscribed.

Now there is a whole stumbling threshold in Geislingen, representing the 813 victims: 8 stones long, one stone wide, the body made out of concrete, a brass plate with six lines of text.

Members of Culture Workshop Raetsche, who initiated this project, staff of the Geislingen municipality, councilmen, representatives of the churches, of WMF, students of Michelberg-Gymnasium and many citizens have come to attend Gunter Demnig's work. "It is impressive how many people are there to show their concern", says Sabine Reiff of Culture Workshop. "They do not want to look away any more when political injustice is committed and social misery happens - as is the case these days again."

Geislingen's Senior Mayor Frank Dehmer remembered Miryam Sobel from Israel, who - a former concentration camp inmate - took part in the memorial march from Robert-Bosch Straße to WMF in May and died in June, 88 years of age. Relatives wrote to Dehmer that Miryam Sobel has made her peace with her journey to Geislingen. Particularly because she has seen that her concern, never to forget, is being lived here. "This stumbling threshold is another contribution to that", the senior mayor emphasizes. "It is the task for the future generations to work against forgetting."

WMF joins the commemoration of the forced laborers in that she erects a memorial only a few yards away from the stumbling threshold. The engraved plate with a brick foundation on a block of marble is manufactured by WMF. "We stand by our history and want to set an example that this must not happen again in the future", says WMF-CEO Peter Feld.

Very quietly and attentively one person is standing in the crowd, whose family history is very closely linked to WMF and her cruel connection to National Socialism: Ruprecht von Gustedt is Ferdinand Bausback's grandson, who was WMF CEO from 1942 - 1945. Gustedt has occupied himself intensively with his grandfather and has come to terms with the past. The stumbling threshold in commemoration of the women who had to do forced labor "impresses me deeply - also because I see certain parallels with today's miserable figures who arrive in foreign cities by trains", he says.

In the meantime Gunter Demnig has laid his stumbling threshold. He is not a man of many words. But what he does say, is touching. "The initiative of the stumbling stones is no reason for joy. But I am happy about every stone and every place that is added". He has laid more than 50.000 stumbling stones and many stumbling thresholds. It is still no routine job, he emphasizes, "because every place and every fate is different".

Stumbling stones and thresholds are supported and criticized. You treat the memory of the victims of National Socialism with contempt, one of them says. For others - and, of course, Gunter Demnig belongs to this group - standing still and looking closely at the small brass plate with its fine letters means bowing before a human being. Or, like a student once said to him: "You stumble with your head and with your heart."

KZ - satellite camp in Geislingen

Victims: more than 800 Jewish girls and women had to do forced labor in the converted arms industry WMF from August 1944 to March 1945. They were imprisoned in the Geislingen satellite camp of concentration camp Natzweiler-Struthof. Rosemarie and Hermann Schneider from Gingen found all 813 names in Israel this year.

Commemorating: A silent march and a memorial function in Jahnhalle and an exhibition commemorated their fates. More events in Raetsche will follow.

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