

Raising One's Voice and Standing Up Against Forgetting

Holocaust – A memorial event at WMF on Monday commemorated the former Geislingen concentration camp inmates in a dignified and moving way

A memorial event at WMF on Monday paid tribute in a dignified and moving way to the former Geislingen concentration camp inmates. There was a concentration camp in Geislingen. Until 2015, few people in Geislingen were aware of it—or they had suppressed the memory. That has since changed. On Monday afternoon, around 200 people gathered in the WMF communication center to remember the approximately 800 female concentration camp inmates who, between July 1944 and the end of April 1945, had to complete forced labor in twelve-hour shifts for the armaments industry. Among the attendees were also ten descendants of these women, including children and grandchildren of all ages. The event was initiated by Stefanie Leitenhoff, managing director of Groupe SEB WMF GmbH and organized together with the Geislingen initiative "remember – honor – reconcile" (see info box).

What the women had to endure was recounted by city archivist Philipp Lintner at the beginning of the memorial event. He described the miserable conditions in the camp, the fact that these young women were separated from their families and forced into hard labor in road construction. "The women were all the same, they were dehumanized," he noted. The audience listened in silence—it was a powerful moment. Then came the applause.

Reinhard Oesterle, chairman of the Protestant Church Board and, along with Stefanie Leitenhoff, one of the event's speakers, emphasized how important it is not to forget this: "Especially in times when antisemitism is once again present, when society must raise its voice and stand up against forgetting," said Oesterle.

"This is a place where history resides. A history that must be told, that must be heard and understood," said Leitenhoff in her speech. She emphasized that the descendants were "heartily and warmly" welcomed. Then she expressed her thanks: "With gratitude and great humility." In recent years, the company has taken several steps toward remembrance and dealing with its own history. Leitenhoff spoke of a process that has begun, "with listening and genuine encounters."

The managing director ended her speech with a moment of silence "for the women who suffered so much" and read aloud the message from German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

The evening was moderated by WMF employee Carsten Thiemann, who is also involved with the Evangelical Youth and is a member of the band "No Distance." The band played with 25 men and women from different generations, fittingly for the occasion. The musical highlight was a klezmer trio from the Stuttgart Music School.

Rosemarie Schneider from the initiative "remember – honor – reconcile" described the efforts of the initiative, which has worked tirelessly over the past ten years. She spoke about their search for the surviving Lenka Weksberg, with whom WMF staff first made contact in 2015. Peter Fiel searched for her and, as a result of this Nazi history research, the website of the initiative "remember – honor – reconcile" was created. Since then, descendants of the Geislingen concentration camp inmates have been rediscovering their family history.

This year's guests again confirmed how much the event meant to them. It was a moving event, said one woman from Charlotte Hahn's family. Her voice trembled as she added: "It was the first time we had met so many other descendants." Another guest said he was happy to be part of it and praised the heartfelt organization.

Once again, 17-year-old Lilly Lindenthal impressed the audience. Her personal reflections on history and the present (we reported on them in detail in last Tuesday's edition) brought many in the hall to tears. Afterward, students from Michelberg High School and Helfenstein High School once again shared their thoughts and poems about the horrors of the Holocaust and the importance of remembrance.

The event concluded with a very special guest: 91-year-old Holocaust survivor Eva Szepesi. She spoke about her survival in Auschwitz and the difficult postwar years. Her quiet voice filled the room, as did the many thoughts and emotions she stirred. Eva Szepesi's message was clear: Never forget.

— Claudia Burst