

A Call to Confront History

Jewish guests of the "Remember – Honor – Reconcile" initiative spoke to 200 students about life in the Geislingen concentration camp and answered their questions.

Ruti Gruber was 13 when Nazi thugs stormed the Jewish ghetto in the Romanian city of Sighet, which was under Hungarian occupation. Before her eyes, they shot her grandmother. She and the rest of her family were crammed into a cattle car without food or water and deported to Auschwitz. Many died during the journey. To be classified as fit for work upon arrival, Ruti lied about her age, claiming to be 16, and assumed the identity of a girl who had died in the wagon. That saved her life.

She was sent to Geislingen with 700 other women as a forced laborer and was later freed by American troops in late April 1945 from a train that was meant to take them to Dachau for the so-called "Final Solution."

It was her granddaughter, Esther Lewin, who shared these experiences with more than 200 attentive students Tuesday morning at the Räsche venue. She came to Geislingen at the invitation of the local "Remember – Honor – Reconcile" initiative to participate in the events commemorating the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the women held in the concentration camp.

Throughout her speech, despite speaking in English and the translation only being shown on a screen behind her, the room remained silent and focused.

Doctor Sawed Off a Piece of Injured Bone

Michael Simon followed, having traveled from the U.S. with his wife Wendy and son Jeremy. He told the story of his mother, Hilde Lustig—of the antisemitism she faced in Nagykanizsa, Hungary, of being forced into the ghetto, and of sharing her last breakfast there—orange marmalade—with her grandmother. Hilde never ate orange marmalade again, Michael said, choking up as he had the night before at the memorial event at WMF.

Hilde Lustig, too, was brought to Geislingen, forced to live in the camp barracks, and made to work twelve-hour shifts at the WMF factory. One day, from exhaustion, her finger slipped into a machine. The doctor didn't stitch the wound—he sawed off a piece of the injured bone without anesthesia.

To avoid being sent back to Auschwitz like many others, Hilde never cried in public—only at night, Michael explained.

Like Esther Lewin before him, he also mentioned the moments of kindness his mother experienced—both from Geislingen residents and certain foremen at WMF or the camp.

Powerful Words Prompt Reflection

The students were deeply moved. "It hits differently when someone tells it so directly," said Ava, 16. Frederik, also in 11th grade at Michelberg Gymnasium, was enthusiastic about the event:

"This way of confronting history is a direct call to us to make sure something like this never happens again," he said. He's committed to standing up for that.

Maya from Helfenstein Gymnasium shared a similar impression: "It really touched me when he got so emotional."

Rosemarie Schneider and Eva Kerner from the organizing team of the "Remember – Honor – Reconcile" initiative were pleased by the strong interest from the students. In addition to Michelberg and Helfenstein Gymnasiums, classes from the Daniel-Straub and Schubart secondary schools also attended.

The students had prepared questions in advance, which they asked the guests on stage. In addition to Esther Lewin and Michael Simon with his family, those present included: Haim Sobel, son of survivor Mirjam Sobel, who came with his wife Varda; Savel Burkart, granddaughter of Charlotte Hahn; and Arik Solomon, grandson of Hanna Solomon, who had traveled on short notice from Israel with his father Shlomo and brother Tomer.

New Generation Listens and Carries the Torch

The students wanted to know what it meant to the guests to share these family stories, how they cope with the past, whether they talk about it with friends, and whether we should commemorate differently or more. Several guests responded to each question.

"It helps me sleep at night knowing that students here in Germany care and are committed to making sure this never happens again," said Michael Simon.

Alek Solomon added, "It's powerful—being a living memory and knowing that you, a new generation, are listening and making time for this."

The Holocaust is a constant part of life, even at family gatherings, said Alek Solomon in response to another question. He recalled that his math teacher in school never used the term final solution for a mathematical answer because of its chilling historical connotation.

Asked about future remembrance, Michael Simon expressed how overwhelmed he was by what has happened in Geislingen in the twelve years since his first visit in terms of addressing the past.

At the end, Eva Kerner and Rosemarie Schneider called on Geislingen's schools to take up the baton of remembrance work from the "Remember – Honor – Reconcile" initiative:

"We hope that Geislingen will find its own way to continue commemorating, and if you have an idea, reach out to us or your teachers."