

80 Years Since the End of the War: Confronting the Past

The female inmates of the Geislingen concentration camp were supposed to be transported to Dachau when they were liberated by American forces. The Geislingen initiative "remember – honor – reconcile" invited descendants of the forced laborers.

It has been 80 years since 800 women from the Geislingen concentration camp were packed onto a train bound for Dachau. On April 29, 1945, they were liberated by American soldiers. What they experienced before that was brutal. "My mother got her finger caught in the machine, and a piece of bone was sawed off without anesthesia," recounts Michael Simon. The 67-year-old American traveled with his wife and son from the U.S. to spend Monday (April 28) and Tuesday in Geislingen to engage with the past.

They were invited by the Geislingen initiative "remember – honor – reconcile" from the Evangelical Alliance, with help from Benjamin Decker from the Geislingen city library and strong support from WMF in Geislingen.

At WMF, between July 1944 and April 1945, a total of 1,000 Jewish girls and women between the ages of 11 and 45 were forced to work in twelve-hour shifts. They were housed in specially fenced-off barracks near Heidenheimer Straße, which was established as a satellite camp of the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp.

Spontaneous Arrival from Israel

The organizing team of the initiative "remember – honor – reconcile," consisting of Rosemarie and Hermann Schneider, Tom and Regine Geyer, and Eva Kerner, had been planning this two-day event since October of the previous year. On the evening of the past Sunday, the team received an email from an Israeli who had stumbled upon the initiative's website by chance. He asked to be informed if there were ever another commemorative event in Geislingen. "We immediately replied that there would be one on Monday and Tuesday, and now he has arrived this morning from Israel with his father and brother within just a few hours," said Eva Kerner, excitedly.

Altogether, ten descendants of former concentration camp inmates have now come to Geislingen to commemorate the Holocaust and live reconciliation – from Berlin, the U.S., Israel, and even Australia.

The Topic Was Long Suppressed in Geislingen

At a breakfast yesterday morning at the Focus Church, four of them met each other and also got to know residents of Geislingen. They talked and shared what they knew from their mothers or grandmothers. Michael Simon's mother was Hilde Lustig. "She went through terrible things. But she understood that the fact she was able to work in Geislingen saved her life." Saša Šavel Burkart heard similar things from her grandmother, Charlotte Hahn. "My grandma was only 16 when she went through all that," she reports. She recalls how, during a vacation in the 1960s, her grandmother met someone from Geislingen and asked if the camp barracks still stood. "He knew nothing about it. The people of Geislingen completely repressed it for years."

That's why she believes meetings like the one now in Geislingen are so important. Michael Simon also believes that "getting to know each other and becoming friends is the only way forward." He remembers that when he was young, every Jew around him hated the Germans. "But I'm no longer angry. I've come to understand that there are good and bad people all over the world."

Events Over Two Days

As part of the event, the visitors attended a reception at City Hall with Mayor Frank Dehmer on Monday and participated in a city tour. In the late afternoon, a major commemorative ceremony took place at WMF. On Tuesday, the guests will meet with students from four Geislingen schools at the Rätsche cultural center for a dialogue.