

Raise your voice and stand up against forgetting

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

There was a concentration camp in Geislingen. Until 2015, only a few people in Geislingen knew about it - or had suppressed the memory of it. That has since changed: late Monday afternoon, a memorial evening for the former concentration camp inmates was held in the WMF communication center with more than 200 visitors. This means, it took place exactly where more than 1,000 Jewish forced laborers had to work twelve-hour shifts for the armaments industry between July 1944 and the end of April 1945. Among the visitors were ten descendants of these women, children and grandchildren from all over the world. The event was initiated by Stefanie Leiterholt, Managing Director of Groupe SEB WMF GmbH and organized by the Geislingen-based initiative "remembering - honoring - reconciling" (see info).

80 years have passed since the horrors of the Geislingen concentration camp. At the beginning of Monday's event, city archivist Philipp Lintner told us what the women had to go through. He described life in the camp and how the emaciated women were part of the street scene on their way to and from work. "The silence was general," he stated. It took a while after his presentation before applause broke out. It was not a topic for applause.

Reinhard Oesterling, Chairman of the Evangelical Alliance, and Stefanie Leiterholt made it clear in their welcoming remarks that it is still important to remember this time. "Especially in times when anti-Semitism is becoming ever louder, we as a society must raise our voices and stand up against forgetting," appealed Oesterling.

"This is a place that holds history. History that hurts, but which must be heard so that it is never repeated," said Leiterholt, welcoming the ten guests of honor "with great gratitude and great humility". The injustice must be named so that it never happens again. "We have to look and give the victims back their dignity", she emphasized, adding that the evening was a step towards reconciliation and that this begins "with listening and genuine encounters".

The Managing Director ended her speech with a minute's silence "for the women who have suffered here" and read out a message from German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

The evening was presented by WMF employee Carsten Thieme, who also belongs to the Evangelical Alliance and is a member of the "No Distance" choir. With 25 men and women, the choir livened up the evening with songs to match the mood. Another musical highlight was provided by the music school's klezmer trio.

With her personal and intensely thoughtful view of what happened back then and how today's young people react to it, Mi-Gy eleventh grader Lilly Lindenthal touched the hearts of the visitors (we report separately) - many wiped tears from their eyes at the end. Afterwards, her classmates presented the Jewish guests of honor with a paper-folded rose with personal thoughts and reflections on their mother or grandmother.

Rosemarie Schneider from the "remembering - honoring - reconciling" initiative added her perspective to the evening. She reported on the efforts of former Geislingen town councillor Hansjürgen Götz in the 1980s and again in the 1990s to raise awareness of the concentration camp issue in Geislingen. Thanks to his efforts, the "Slain Head" memorial at the Heiligenäcker cemetery has been a reminder of this since 1984. "But public events have only been held there since 2012," she said. Schneider talked about the many coincidences or - in her opinion - God's providence that led to her and her husband Hermann being able to find survivors. She told of the survivor Lenka Weksberg, who sought contact with the then WMF boss Peter Feld in 2015 and that the name plaque at Gate 1 was subsequently created. And that, thanks to the website of the "remembering - honoring - reconciling" initiative, descendants of concentration camp inmates keep finding their way to Geislingen and are moved by the culture of commemoration.

It was personally confirmed that this year's guests felt the same. "What a wonderful event," Saša Šavel Burkart exclaimed before talking about her grandmother Charlotte Hahn and how she survived the Holocaust. Michael Simon told the visitors about the fate of his mother Hilde Lustig, who also experienced terrible things in the concentration camp. His voice broke several times and he had to gather himself before he could continue.

It became clear to the audience what a difference it makes to read about the horrors of National Socialism in books or to listen to the people directly affected, about individual fates and to experience the consternation of even the next generation and the generation after that. Both guests of honor expressed their gratitude for the invitation and the opportunity to speak. As Michael Simon put it: "Thank you for sharing this important day of remembrance with me today."

Further information about the initiative

The initiative "remembering - honoring - reconciling" with active members of the Evangelical Alliance Geislingen has set itself the task of coming to terms with the history of the Geislingen concentration camp inmates. Since 2012, they have researched and found former inmates, invited them to Geislingen several times, organized silent marches, built a memorial and created a website (kz-geislingen.de). First and foremost Rosemarie Schneider and, until his departure, the former Geislingen Baptist pastor, Matthias Lotz. He was also among the guests on Monday.