

Commemoration Ceremony Concentration Camp Geislingen, 28 April 2025

remembering - honoring - reconciling

A Jewish proverb tells us:

“Har ve har lo nifgashim, adam ve adam nifgashim”
that is: “people may meet, but mountains never do”.

I am very pleased that you followed our invitation for this small gathering in our townhall here today in Geislingen.

This Jewish proverb does certainly not only talk about people overcoming distances to meet, at least I wouldn't want to view it in this way only, but that we as humans are able to overcome difficult circumstances that hinder our relationships to one another.

It has been quite a few years since the initiative “remembering – honoring - reconciling” was formed for the reason that we want to give honor to the victims of the concentration camp through remembering their plight together and to continue with our steps towards reconciliation.

For this reason, it is a special honor to welcome our guests whose ancestors have spent probably the darkest years of their lives in Geislingen an der Steige:

Varda and Haim Sobel from Israel. They are visiting for the third time, I believe? It is lovely to have you here with us again!

We are expecting some additional guests from Israel around midday today, Shlomo Solomon with his sons Arik and Tomer, who only heard about this event yesterday evening!

Furthermore, I want to welcome our guests Wendy and Michael Simon with their son Jeremy from the United States, Ester Lewin from Australia and Saša Šavel Burkart from Slovenia.

(Mr. Dehmer now addressing the audience in English.)

Dear guests from Israel, USA, Australia and Slovenia. As the Lord Mayor of the city, it is a pleasure for me to give you a very warm welcome here in Geislingen an der Steige.

Thank you very much for joining us today and giving us the opportunity to celebrate another memorial service with you. I think that I can speak for all the people here, that it is an honor for us to have you here today! Thank you!

By the way: The rest of my speech will be translated for you by Regine Geyer, because otherwise not all other guests might understand me. Thank you, Mrs. Geyer, for translating for our guests today!

Baruch Haba to all of you!

Reconciliation can only work if both parties are willing to walk towards each other. One side asking for reconciliation, the other side willing to grant it.

All of you as children and grandchildren of Miryam Sobel, Hilda Simon, Ruthi Gruber, Šarika Horvat and Hannah Neufeld, who were, amongst hundreds of girls and women, imprisoned in the Camp in Geislingen, forced to do hard labor in the most difficult of circumstances:

You are here today as representatives of the victims.

We, the citizens of Geislingen and people from the surrounding area stand here as representatives of the perpetrators who have inflicted such horrors and sufferings on so many people during the time of National Socialism, including your own families.

Please allow me to introduce some more guests to you, who will be joining us at the memorial event tonight:

Dr. Stefanie Leiterholt, Dr. Carsten Thieme and Judith Hilscher of the Groupe SEB/WMF.

I am very glad how committed the Groupe SEB/WMF is, to bring to light these darkest times of WMFs history, to deal with those times, make them public and try to work through it, as well as possible. This work was started quite a few years ago and is being continued with great commitment, even today. Thank you so much for these signs of recognition by Groupe SEB/WMF for the women and girls as well as their families. These signs were and are very important to the victims themselves as well as their families and descendants. This is what Miryam Sobel, one of the victims who was incarcerated and had to do forced labor as a young girl, told me in a private conversation.

I am very pleased to have representatives of the initiative "remembering-honoring -reconciling" here with us today, as well! Some of them have worked with great dedication, from day one, to keep the memories alive and to keep in contact with the families of the women and girls. They have also helped to find out the names of the imprisoned, through transportation lists, so we are able to know the names of the 800 women today. This important research gave us names and faces to the personal fates of people, who were before, known in numbers, only!

Thank you so much, Rosemarie and Hermann Schneider, Eva and Thorsten Kerner with their guests Lea Einspieler (and her mum) and Junia Tiefenthaler.

Margit Wirth-Vogt, the representative of the cultural center "Rätschenmühle" has been excused this morning. She will join us a little later, but I am very pleased to welcome Mr. Decker from the city council as well as Mr. Lintner who works for the town archives and in the department of the town's history.

Let us take a quick look at the history of remembrance of the satellite concentration camp Geislingen.

We can probably take the letter from Gertrud Müller as the start of this history of remembrance. In 1983, she wrote a letter to the Senior Mayor of that time, Mr. von Au, to inform him that she had been an inmate at the camp in Geislingen and to object to there being no trace of the former concentration camp. She proposed the erection of a commemorative plaque. Dr. Götz made the issue known to a citizens' initiative called "Kommunaler Arbeitskreis" and started to work on the subject.

This initiative submitted an application to the municipality, for the establishment of a place of commemoration in Geislingen, which resulted in one being installed beside the crypt of the Heiligenäcker cemetery. One can really state that dealing with this part of Geislingen history was very controversial in those times! Many citizens were not interested or even happy about old stories being dug up and investigated.

A further application regarding the erection of a memorial in the municipal park was unsurprisingly denied. Even the erection of a memorial paid for by the initiative itself was not permitted. In spite of that, a wooden cross with the inscription "never forget" was erected. This motto is still increasing in importance throughout recent years. The aim, to remember, honor and reconcile has been filled with life during the last decade.

Following the denied applications to the municipality, different campaigns were launched, like the printing of leaflets and presentations to inform the public.

All this resulted in some fierce debates amongst the citizens of Geislingen. In the end, instead of putting a plaque up, which would have been for the girls and women only, a memorial was chosen, to commemorate all victims of the NS-regime, as was suggested by the senior mayor, Mr. von Au.

The artist, Heinz Knödler from Ellwangen, created the large sculpture "the maltreated head", as a memorial dedicated on 18 November 1984, by a wreath ceremony on Remembrance Sunday.

This memorial site is still in use today and every year on January 27, the Holocaust Memorial Day, we are having a wreath ceremony which is a public event ever since 2012.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, we held a commemoration event on 10 April 1995, which was attended not only by the Senior Mayor, Mr. Bauch, and the Secretary of the Interior, Frieder Birzele, but also by the concentration camp survivor, Gertrud Müller, and the State Rabbi, Joel Berger.

After a presentation of the history of the satellite concentration camp to the youth council and the reservist association by the town archivist Hartmut Gruber in June 2013 followed a public presentation of the same topic in the "Kapellmühlsaal" in Geislingen in May 2014. This sparked suddenly great and unexpected interest within the audience and beyond.

The next event was in 2015. This was an exhibition with the title "Freedom – so close but far away" in the gallery of the "Alter Bau" (the towns museum) followed by a recital with Helene Scheidermann in the "Rätschenmühle."

During a private visit of the Schneider family in Israel in February 2015, two survivors of the Geislingen concentration camp were found: Hannah Mann née Jekel and Miryam Sobel née Kaufmann.

At the kick-off event of the "Stumbling Block" project in the "Rätsche" in March 2015, the names of the incarcerated girls and women were read aloud to the audience as to lift them up from anonymity, giving them back their names which had been taken by assigning numbers to them instead of names during their time in the camps.

In April 2015, like a miracle, a folder was found at Yad Vashem. It contained the previously mentioned transportation list with the names of all the girls and women who were taken by train on 11 April 1945 from Geislingen with the concentration camp Dachau/Allach as destination. More or less exactly 70 years after the transport took place, the list was rediscovered—almost exactly 10 years ago!

The first commemoration event under the motto "remembering-honoring-reconciling" took place on 8 Mai 2015 with an impressive silent march from the site of the former concentration camp to the grounds of the WMF factory. Miryam Sobel and her family as well as the family of another survivor from Israel took part in this march, together with more than 600 citizens of Geislingen.

In the autumn of 2015, the stumbling block of the sculpturer and artist Gunter Deming was inserted into the sidewalk in front of the WMF main entrance, to provoke thought in passers-by. In November of the same year, the plaque with all known names of the Jewish girls and women was unveiled in front of the WMF building in the presence of another survivor, Lenka Weksberg née Lebovic. In the evening of the same day, Mrs. Weksberg told the audience in a very moving speech about her life. I want to mention at this point that the WMF commissioned the names plaque and paid for it as a small token of recognition, appreciation and as a sign of their attitude in the present. In my view, this is a very beautiful sign of recognition.

I had the opportunity to speak to Miryam Sobel as well as Lenka Weksberg. Such conversations make us feel uneasy at first – how does one talk to women in the later years of their lives who return to a place where they, their families and friends have been subjected to such indescribable suffering and sorrow? How do these women feel, when they meet with people who could be descendants of their tormentors?

I can tell you that these conversations turned out to be really pleasant, indeed. Both ladies were so full of warmth and showed me how important the thoughts of reconciliation were to them, too. I did also realize, of

course, that they weren't able to reveal every emotion they were going through during their visit, but it is my belief that this journey back to Geislingen was very important and positive for both of them.

Especially for Miryam Sobel this journey was met with great strain. But through her visit in Geislingen she was able to close this chapter of her life, at least partially. Both women told me that back then in Geislingen, they felt that there were other Germans besides those who tortured them, beat them or made them suffer hunger. There saw also Germans, who tried to help them as well as they could, given the circumstances, even if they endangered their own wellbeing in doing so.

I am very grateful for these encounters and conversations and after almost 11 years in administration these were probably the most touching moments of my entire time in office.

Another former inmate of the camp was found in Israel in April 2016, Mrs. Berta Weiss. She was planning to take part in our 2018 Commemoration event but sadly she passed away on 18 April 2018 due to complications following a stroke. At this same commemoration event in 2018, a memorial site by the former concentration camp grounds was installed, comprising information boards.

And now, in the year 2025, you are our very welcome guests in Geislingen. 80 years after the end of WWII, it is certainly not the time to put the past to rest or start to forget what happened! Quite the contrary: Especially today it is more important than ever to commemorate this part of history. Worldwide, as well as here in Germany, antisemitism is on the rise again and people are being oppressed because of their faith, background or the color of their skin.

It is not only required and right to commemorate because the victims deserve their fates to be remembered by us.

It is also not only required to do so for the girls and women to be honored.

And it is not only required to do so to for making further steps towards reconciliation.

No – there are so many more reasons for your journey here and for keeping history awake:

If we observe the media and what is happening in Germany and around the world, particularly since the horrific and heinous assault by Hamas on October 7 in Israel.

Besides there are many reports about the rise of antisemitic crimes during the last year, which is a very frightening development!

The need for increased security for synagogues and other Jewish facilities is a reality in Germany as well and had to be stepped up during the last few months and years. How sad for things to have become this way!

I don't want to end my speech by spreading fear and gloom.

It is important to me to show and underline that it is good and right to continue our work with the motto of our initiative here in Geislingen: "remembering-honoring-reconciling" – three simple words of such great significance and meaning!

Thankfully, so far it is only a minority of our population who apparently have learned nothing from the past or even try outright to deny it. It continues to be our mission to keep this group a minority or even try to decrease their numbers through education.

Thank you very much to all of you – co-organizers of this visit and the commemorative events of past and present. Thank you very much to all our guests for coming, it is a pleasure to have you and please continue to fill our mission with life by coming here!

Senior Mayor Frank Dehmer, Town Hall 28 April 2025

For our future I wish and hope for all of us, to be able to live on a planet, where all humans live together peacefully. This is our greatest hope that should continue to connect us all.

Shalom!