

Culture of remembrance in Geislingen

It is January 1983, almost 38 years after the end of the Second World War. The former prisoner and block elder of the Geislingen satellite camp, Mrs. Gertrud Müller, writes a letter to the town of Geislingen. She criticizes the fact that there is no trace of the concentration camp in Geislingen and asks for an honorable memorial to be erected. The town council rejects this request in November 1983. There were still too many confidants, perhaps even accomplices, in the town.

A concentration camp remembrance initiative is formed, which begins its work in 1983/1984.

In January, they erected a wooden cross in the city park opposite WMF with the inscription: "Never forget." However, it has to be removed immediately.

In 1984, two former concentration camp women speak at the Rätschemühle: Mrs. Tiborne Koritschoner from Hungary and Mrs. Gertrud Müller from Feuerbach.

There are heated discussions in the town. Despite all the opposition, the "Wounded Head" memorial is unveiled in the Heiligenäcker cemetery outside the town on Remembrance Day 1984. It commemorates all the victims of Nazi tyranny who were degraded to forced labor in Geislingen. And there were many of them: Prisoners of war from various countries, deportees from the East and the Jewish girls and women who were brought from Auschwitz to work because there was nothing else available....

Then it became quiet again.

In 1995, 50 years after the end of the war, the topic of the concentration camp was brought back into the public eye. Under Lord Mayor Bauch, a public memorial service was held on April 10 at the „Wounded Head" memorial, at which the Chief Rabbi and survivor Gertrud Müller, among others, spoke.

There was also an exhibition entitled "Geislingen in the 3rd Reich".

Then it became quiet again, very quiet. On Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, a cemetery employee quietly laid a wreath at the Wounded Head, not in public.

In January 2011, a small group of interested people who met regularly in Geislingen to pray for Israel and the Jews found out about this. They were referred to Dr. Gölz, the man in Geislingen for this topic. On February 24, 2011, they had a meeting. He was pleased that someone was interested in this topic again. He brought some folders with him, which gave an insight into his laborious attempts to come to terms with the past in the 1980s. "It's a shame that nothing public takes place on Holocaust Memorial Day. It would also be important to find the names of the approximately 800 Jewish girls and women. They should be given a name again." Since 2012, public commemorations have been held annually on

Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27 January at the Wounded Head memorial, in the presence of the mayor and some citizens, thanks to Dr. Gölz.

At the same time, the Evangelical Alliance became aware of a former concentration camp in Geislingen. Is it our task as Christians to become active in this regard? Yes, was the clear answer. The new pastor of the Baptist church, Matthias Lotz, had recently learned about his grandfather's Nazi past and said: *"We need to get together."* My family and I also belong to this group. That's why I'm taking the liberty of continuing in the first person.

A first event was planned together: On May 8, 2014, we invited the city archivist Hartmut Gruber to give a public lecture on the Geislingen satellite camp in Kapellmühlsaal. The room was filled to capacity. Councillor Gölz, the pioneer of accounting for the past, was simply overwhelmed by the great interest shown by the public. Things had been different 30 years ago.

"We also need to plan something for 2015, 70 years after the end of the war," was Matthias Lotz's response. *"Let's sit together, pray and plan."* The Jahnhalle was booked. The only date available at the end of April/beginning of May for the anniversary of the liberation of the Jewish girls and women was May 8. It was May 8, exactly 70 years after the end of the war. Coincidence? Who should we invite as speakers, what should we do? Many meetings took place, many prayers went up to heaven. *"It would be so nice to find a survivor. But where should we look? It's like looking for a needle in a haystack."* I can still hear myself saying this in November 2014.

At the beginning of 2015, the town of Geislingen authorized a student from our region, who was in Israel at that time, to research lists of names of women from the Geislingen concentration camp at Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. At the same time, by divine intervention, we as a family got the impression that we should go to Israel ourselves to visit a survivor of the Geislingen concentration camp whom we had heard about by chance. Her name: Hanna Mann, unfortunately already suffering from dementia. Nevertheless, we booked tickets for February 2015 and were told to call her again from Israel to find out the location of the upcoming meeting. We did so using the phone of the host of our private guesthouse, somewhere in the mountains above the Sea of Galilee. When he found out who we were going to visit the next day, he became very excited. *"Look what's on our kitchen cupboard. It's a WMF box (the Israelis also appreciate German quality). Two weeks ago, a distant relative was sitting at this table, saw this box and said that her mother had had to do forced labor there. This woman is still alive. Do you want to meet her too? It's strange that we've never talked about this topic in the last 20 years. But now, just before you come, we talked about it. Only God can arrange that."* Since then, Yehuda Lavie, himself son of a German Holocaust survivor, has been telling this miraculous story to many of his German guests. And therefore, during this week in February 2015, we not only got to know Hanna Mann, but also Mirjam Sobel, who happily welcomed us into her home. She spent two hours telling us about her life in German and we were treated to a meal. When we announced that a memorial service would be held in Geislingen on May 8, 2015, she said: *"I'll come and I'll also bring my family."* And that's exactly what happened. She came with her two children, their spouses and four grandchildren and experienced this special day, the memorial march to WMF and the memorial service in the fully packed Jahnhalle. Mirjam

died five weeks later. Her son Haim informed us immediately and wrote: *"The visit to Geislingen closed the circle of our mother's life and she was able to go in peace. Please stay in touch with us."* Haim and Varda are here with us again today, already for the fourth time. Connections of hearts have developed.

Hanna Mann's descendants were also invited to Geislingen for this special day of remembrance. We also have a wonderful friendly relationship with them. We visited each other several times and met Hanna alive two more times. Despite her dementia, she was able to receive signs of comfort and love. She passed away on April 28, 2019, exactly 6 years ago to the day.

Incidentally, during our trip in February 2015, we visited Yad Vashem with this student and his authorisation and did find a transportation list. This was sent to us digitally a few weeks later and just a few hours after it landed in Geislingen, the signal came from WMF: we will use it to create a worthy memorial directly on our company site. This resulted in the name plaque directly at Gate 1.

But other citizens in Geislingen were also active: the Kulturwerkstatt Rätsche organized the laying of a stumbling block. A kick-off event was held in March 2015. In September 2015, the Stolperschwelle in memory of the Jewish girls and women was laid on the sidewalk in front of WMF by the artist Günter Demnig. The topic was very present in the city on various channels.

2015, 70 years after the end of the war, was truly a special year. In the summer, we received the address of another survivor who had also been in the Geislingen concentration camp with her four sisters: Lenka Weksberg. She came back to Geislingen from Canada in November 2015 with her son and daughter-in-law. Her greatest wish was to give a speech of thanks at the grave of Adolph Schoofs, a foreman at WMF. He had treated her and her sisters like human beings, not like numbers. He had risked his life defending Lenka and her sister from an SS guard. His grave is now maintained by the town of Geislingen as an honorary grave in the Altenstadt cemetery. Lenka also really wanted to meet one of the CEOs from WMF. She asked us if that was possible. Yes, the then WMF CEO Peter Feld had reserved one hour for her. Lenka handed him a letter in which she thanked him that she had been able to escape the hell of Auschwitz, and thus certain death, through her work at WMF. This attitude surprised everyone and some people wiped a tear from their faces. Mr. Feld changed his schedule at short notice and showed Lenka around the factory halls. Together they dedicated the name plaque at Gate 1. What a moving moment to read her name there and the names of her sisters. They have regained their dignity as human beings, even in Geislingen. Lenka died on 10.03.2023 at the age of 96. We were able to visit her youngest sister Rosalie Simon in New York last year. She would have loved to come. But at almost 94 years old, such a long journey is no longer possible for her.

Over the last few years, descendants of survivors have repeatedly come forward who were overwhelmed to discover the names of their mothers or grandmothers. During a visit to Israel in 2016, we met Berta Weiss, née Fischer. She really wanted to have a photo with her name on the name plaque. Deeply impressed, she called us: "I've never heard of such a way of honoring Holocaust victims. Other companies should take WMF as an example." We had

invited Berta to the inauguration of the concentration camp memorial at the bike path in April 2018. But she passed away suddenly just a few days before the event. But we have a friendly relationship with her son. Unfortunately, he can't be here today, but he has Geislingen firmly booked in his vacation plans.

In 2017, the Evangelical Alliance became active again. A memorial was to be built directly on the site of the former concentration camp. Once again, an active group formed around Matthias Lotz. City archivist Hartmut Gruber searched the archives for old plans, wooden clogs were borrowed from another memorial site, from which the bronze sculptures were created by Heidelberger Druck. Barbed wire and mesh fencing were organized from this period. The town's building yard arrived and together they erected a handsome memorial with information boards. The inauguration took place on 28.04.2018 in the presence of descendants of survivors Hanna Mann, Mirjam Sobel and Regina Kaufmann. A memorial march led through the city and the WMF opened the communication center for a public event. Unfortunately, during the silent march through the city, there was loud abuse from people who grew up hating Jews. Remembering and meeting Jews today is more important than ever.

In 2018, Mrs. Sybille Eberhardt compiled an impressive documentation on the history of the Geislingen satellite camp in her book "Als das Boot zur Galeere wurde" (When the boat became a galley). She has given three readings in the Geislingen public library and elsewhere.

On 09.11.2019, a memorial event was held on occasion of Reichsprogromnacht.

Our concern is not only to honor the dead Jews who suffered so horribly at the hands of the Nazis. To ensure that this would never happen again, narratives must be questioned and prejudices dismantled. What is the best way to do this? Through encounters. That's why Eva Kerner and I started organizing a German-Israeli youth exchange in 2019. Pupils from Geislingen were happy to take part. Contacts were established with a school in Ashdod, whose teacher visited us in Geislingen. In Jan. 2020, we visited Israel as a family and were warmly welcomed and bid farewell by the students: "*See you in Geislingen in April.*" But then came Corona. Everything had to be canceled. What a pity.

But even during Corona, the commemoration did not stop.

09.11.2020: Remembering Kristallnacht at the memorial site

A digital memorial was launched on 09.11.2021: the website WWW.kz-geislingen.de. Pupils, students and schools can obtain information in German and English. Since then, we have repeatedly received inquiries from descendants looking for information about their mothers/grandmothers, who want to get in touch with us or even visit us. Some of them are here with us today. We are so grateful that you have accepted our invitation and are reaching out to us, wanting to talk to us and work together: Never again is now!

In the meantime, a Geislingen school has become very active in standing up against anti-Semitism. At the beginning of 2024, a committed teacher conducted interviews with pupils on the topic of "Geislingen concentration camp, I'll tell your story." This resulted in nine radio programs that were broadcast on local radio.

The number of participants at the Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration on January 27, 2025 exceeded all commemorative events in recent years. A positive sign.

We are grateful that the town of Geislingen has faced its history. We would like to thank all citizens, associations, initiatives and schools for their commitment.

We would like to thank all private donors, companies and organizations who have made all these projects possible with their financial support.

And on behalf of the "remembering-honoring-reconciling" initiative, we thank the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who has repeatedly given us ideas, paved the ways and opened doors for us.

We are excited to see how the commemoration in Geislingen continues to develop. Soon the last contemporary witnesses will no longer be alive, so it is more important than ever that we continue remembering. Because those who do not look at the past are in danger of making the same mistakes again. Therefore: Never again is now!