

Ladies and Gentlemen,

More than 80 years ago, on April 21, 1945, US Army soldiers entered what is now the town of Geislingen. With their arrival and after brief battles, the Second World War also ended in the "town of five valleys".. While the GIs had seen much destruction on their way through Germany, most recently in nearby Göppingen, they now found themselves in a largely intact small town - idyllically situated on the Albtrauf and with historical buildings, just as people overseas imagined a German town to be. However, this situation did not disguise where they were: at one of the many sites of the German armaments industry, where the weapons and associated munitions were produced that brought suffering and death to almost all of Europe in the service of the Nazi regime. In Geislingen, it was WMF, Maschinenfabrik MAG, Präzisionswerke and other companies that produced everything needed for a war of annihilation, from grenades and weapons for ordinary soldiers to parts for modern jet aircraft. The armaments machinery also received raw materials in the form of ore from the Stauffenstollen mine in the Filstal valley in Geislingen. Here, as in the armaments factories, the number of male workers was scarce. Civilian workers recruited since 1941 came from all parts of the German-controlled area, but above all from Eastern Europe, as well as forced laborers and prisoners of war who had been deported to the city. The US troops came across these people, most of whom had been forced to work, who had been housed in at least ten different locations in the city. They were among around 25,000 people in a small town that still had 17,000 inhabitants in 1939. Greek forced laborers, refugees from Estonia, bombing evacuees from Hamburg, they were all to be found in the town on April 21, 1945 - only one group had disappeared - more than 1,000 inmates of the subcamp on Heidenheimer Strasse. Their forced stay in the city had ended only 10 days earlier when they were transported eastwards.

Even a year before the end of the war, in the winter of 1943/1944, Geislingen was both a collection point for evacuees from the Reich territory and an important armaments location. Companies such as WMF were faced with ever greater problems in being able to make the required deliveries to the front. In addition to the direct effects of the war on railroad facilities and transport routes in the surrounding area, the main problem was a lack of manpower. As the possibilities of recruiting or allocating so-called "Eastern workers" dwindled due to the shrinking German-controlled area, WMF also took new paths. Like almost all large German companies and countless small and medium-sized enterprises, the company willingly accepted the offer of receiving concentration camp inmates for forced labor. In the summer of 1944, "Jewish laborers" were applied for via the Reich Ministry of Armaments and Munitions and the SS Economic Administration Main Office. The conditions for an allocation had already been created in advance, which essentially consisted of the construction of a separate camp. An area near Heidenheimer Straße, which had already been used for months as a so-called "foreign workers' camp", was divided off over an area of 100 by 100 meters. A 1.50 meter high fence with rows of barbed wire above it and an internal trench were intended to make escape more difficult. A wooden screen shielded the camp from view. Inside, there were five single-storey residential barracks with an area of 8x26 meters, an infirmary barrack and a utility barrack.

The first Jewish prisoners arrived in Geislingen on July 28, 1944. They had been deported to Hungary as part of the so-called "Hungarian transports". 425,000 people, mainly women and children, were transported directly to Auschwitz and the majority of them were murdered immediately upon arrival. The 699 women between the ages of 15 and 45 who reached Geislingen had escaped this murderous machinery - only through the SS's calculation to generate income by working at companies such as WMF before their deaths. The Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp was responsible for the "accounting" of the forced labour, the camp organization and the administration of the resulting Geislingen subcamp. The first camp commander Christian Ahrens and his three successors were sent from here, as were most of the guards. Security measures were tightened in the very first weeks of the camp's existence. New, electrically

charged barbed wire, floodlights and three watchtowers were added to the existing barriers. The internal structures were also expanded, not least by assigning six prisoners who had been arrested for political reasons and ten prisoners from the category of so-called "asocials". The new arrivals from Ravensbrück were deployed as kapos or block elders, so although they were also prisoners, they had privileges and authority over the others, who they could discipline, punish or simply harass without punishment. Only a few weeks later, on November 29, 1944, another 130 prisoners arrived who were intended for forced labour at the WMF.

The prisoners had been put to work at WMF since August 16, 1944, when the payment of 4 Reichsmark per prisoner per working day to the SS began. The WMF also had to pay for the work of a few prisoners in the camp, for example in the kitchen, and also for some of the prisoners' clothing. The use of women was not much appreciated, as male forced laborers were desired in order to carry out physically strenuous work efficiently. For lack of an alternative, the women were nevertheless used, whose one-sided and generally inadequate rations were slightly supplemented with produce from a small camp nursery at WMF's expense. The fact that the focus was on the women's labor and not their well-being is shown by their relentless exploitation for production. An eleven-hour and a twelve-hour shift determined the working day. These were interrupted by three breaks with meagre meals that were delivered to the factory from the camp kitchen. The overtired, weak and malnourished prisoners then had to carry out heavy work on dangerous machines. The resulting accidents often led to serious injuries, including amputations, which often had fatal consequences - ultimately, a prolonged inability to work in the SS extermination system inevitably led to the prisoners being sent back to Auschwitz and dying there. The prisoners worked in the factory halls as isolated as possible from the civilian workers, mostly separated from possible witnesses to the events by wooden walls. Foremen and supervisors, who could not be dispensed with for product control, among other things, as well as factory nurses were obliged to maintain secrecy and to refrain from assisting the prisoners in any way. However, individual WMF employees, such as Adolf Schoofs, treated the women as humanely as possible, turning a blind eye to negligence or even slipping them a piece of bread on occasion. Such assistance, whether at the factory, on the way to work or at the camp itself, was forbidden and extremely dangerous for those involved. The number of those who dared to do so was correspondingly small. Instead, there was a large number of witnesses who met the use of women and their proverbial extermination through work with silence. For example, employees at the WMF who witnessed the forced labor despite all the shielding measures. However, the injustice was most visible to the general public during the multiple daily marches of hundreds of female concentration camp inmates from Heidenheimer Straße to Gate 1 or Gate 3 of the WMF. For almost a year, the emaciated, shaven-headed women in convict clothing and clogs were part of the street scene, especially in the Seebach district. Despite the thousands of other forced and foreign laborers in the city, the maltreated women were bound to attract attention, but the silence about the conditions was general.

Much less was known about what happened in the camp itself. When the gate closed behind the women after they returned from work, they were largely cut off from the outside world. Their main aim was to rest and recover from the hard work - an almost hopeless undertaking in view of the hours spent standing in the roll call area and the constant fear of brutal punishments for the slightest offense or torture by the Kapos. The latter also had the upper hand in the distribution of food or what was left of it after the camp administration kept large parts of the planned allocation for itself. All too often in Geislingen, too, the Kapos and their confidants helped themselves to the food afterwards, leaving only a sad remnant for the mass of prisoners.

Anyone who did not manage to survive the working day without injury in this system and get enough food in the camp to continue working was admitted to the infirmary. Here it was important to recover quickly using

the most primitive aids. If the prisoners could not be quickly restored to working condition, they were at risk of being transported back to Auschwitz. Sick, injured and dying women were deported back to Auschwitz on several occasions, where they were murdered in the gas chambers on arrival. A fate that could also befall pregnant prisoners. In at least one case, a woman concealed her pregnancy and gave birth to the child in the camp. According to several witnesses, the newborn froze to death during a cold night in front of the prisoners at roll call. The child was just one of the victims of the Geislingen concentration camp. Eight of those murdered through work, malnutrition and illness were buried in the Geislingen cemetery and later moved to Göppingen, where four other Geislingen victims had already been buried. How many prisoners died on the way to or from Geislingen on the transport trains or had to return to Auschwitz to certain death is still not known today. This is also due to the chaotic conditions that prevailed in the spring of 1945. The end of the Geislingen concentration camp began with the last transport of 230 prisoners, which arrived on March 28, 1945. The background to the odyssey of the women from Hungary and Poland, who were deported from Auschwitz via Bergen-Belsen, Geisenheim and Calw further and further into supposedly safe territory to Geislingen, was no longer a work assignment, but simply evacuation from the approaching front. But here, too, the end of the war could be felt. The director of the WMF asked the SS to "take the 700 women back (...)" in fear of reprisals after the expected Allied invasion. As the women were no longer working in the factory, the additional food rations from the WMF were no longer available and the already more than insufficient amount of food had to be divided up even further.

On April 10, 1945, the 813 girls and women remaining in the camp and one man were put on a transport train. The destination of their "evacuation" before the approaching front was Allach near Munich.

Immediately after the transport of the concentration camp inmates, all signs of the camp, such as the barbed wire fence and the watchtowers, were removed. The US Americans who occupied Geislingen on April 21, 1945 found the situation described above.

As in many places where crimes of the "Third Reich" were committed, years of repression and disremembering began in Geislingen.