

On the Origin and Development of the Silent Heroes Memorial Center

The actions of people who at great personal risk helped Jews during the Nazi dictatorship were not officially recognized and appreciated as an integral part of resistance to the Nazis until the 1990s. Such assistance to Jews was previously ignored or repressed, or it remained largely unappreciated. Attempts in the 1950s and 1960s to give these aid efforts a positive place in the collective and cultural memory of the Federal Republic of Germany were unsuccessful.

Society's disdain or disregard for the helpers corresponded with another phenomenon: the helpers' silence. Many of them perceived and experienced their surroundings during the Nazi era as hostile, and for many this experience persisted after 1945. They continued to remain silent about their actions even when, in general, reservations against resisters slowly started to diminish. Moreover, many did not speak about the assistance they offered because they always regarded it as a matter of course.

Help provided to Jews represented a key challenge to the Nazi regime. The persecution and genocide of European Jewry was a central aspect of Nazi ideology and how the Nazis exercised their power. They wanted to murder all Jews within their sphere of influence, without exception. Whoever hid a Jew or helped in any other way was thus striking the system at its ideological core.

Anyone who helped Jews was radically questioning the system. In consideration of this aspect, assistance to Jews during the Nazi era must be seen as an extremely significant act of resistance. West German society in the 1950s was still far from being able to recognize this resistance.

There was another point too: the deportation of more than 160,000 German Jews to extermination camps and killing sites in the occupied territories in Poland and the Soviet Union had taken place before the eyes of the Germans, yet it triggered virtually no sign of protest or public opposition. Those who helped Jews were therefore demonstrating that alternative courses of action did in fact exist. Acknowledging this possibility after 1945 would have destroyed the image held by many Germans of their supposed helplessness in the face of the Nazi dictatorship.

In the permanent exhibition of the German Resistance Memorial Center, a section on "Aid for the Persecuted" was created in 1988 under the academic direction of Peter Steinbach, with much of the work of its creation done by Barbara Schieb. In this section the Community for Peace and Reconstruction resistance group formed around Werner Scharff and Hans Winkler was presented as an example of "Networks of Helpers." Winfried Meyer also documented "Operation 7," in which dissidents around Hans von Dohnanyi and Hans Oster of the German Office for Foreign Affairs/Counterintelligence

in the Armed Forces High Command (OKW) were able to help Jewish refugees escape to Switzerland in 1942. Examples were presented of Jews who were helped, describing the fates of Ilse and Werner Rewald, and Ella and Inge Deutschkron, as well as stories of individual helpers. However, even in 1988, the incorporation of "Aid for the Persecuted" into the general context of resistance to Nazism was controversial, as Peter Steinbach later described in detail.

Inspired by the association *Gegen Vergessen – Für Demokratie* (Against Oblivion – For Democracy), in particular by its founding chairman Hans-Jochen Vogel, the comprehensive research project "Rescuing Jews in Nazi Germany, 1933–1945" was carried out between 1997 and 2002 under the direction of Wolfgang Benz at the Technical University of Berlin's Center for Research on Antisemitism. Films such as *Schindler's List* and numerous publications also heightened interest in this subject in the 1990s.

Inge Deutschkron, a Jewish journalist who lived through the Nazi period in Berlin, was instrumental in further developing a student project at Berlin's University of Applied Sciences (FHTW) and the exhibition "Blindes Vertrauen" (Blind Trust) into the Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind at Rosenthaler Straße 39 in Berlin's Mitte district. During the Nazi era, the workshop primarily employed blind and deaf Jews under the protection of the brush manufacturer Otto Weidt (1883–1947). In 1999, following an initiative by the German Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Michael Naumann, the government assumed responsibility for the museum.

From that time on, there were considerable efforts—such as by then German president Johannes Rau—to provide more comprehensive commemoration in Berlin of helpers and people in hiding in Nazi Germany. In 2004, the building at Rosenthaler Straße 39 was purchased with funds from the German government and the Berlin Class Lottery Foundation; these funds had been earmarked for the expansion of the Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind and the establishment of a central "Silent Heroes" Memorial Center.

In April 2005, the German Resistance Memorial Center was commissioned with the conceptual and organizational planning of this new museum. In 2006, the permanent exhibition in the Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind was first revised and expanded. The Silent Heroes Memorial Center was then realized in 2008. Based on the research findings of the Center for Research on Antisemitism, a permanent exhibition was created that told the stories of people who helped Jews during the Nazi era. It presented the plight of Jews facing the threat of deportation as well as the actions and motivations of the women and men who helped them. The example set by the helpers often described as "silent heroes" confirms that even under the conditions of the Nazi dictatorship and the Second World War, individuals still had some leeway and options for making decisions to protect people facing persecution from mortal danger.

The permanent exhibition was designed by Dorothee Hauck, and its thematic content was prepared by a team of curators under the direction of Johannes Tuchel. Very limited in terms of space, it was devoted to rescue attempts

by Germans in Germany and the German-occupied territories. Plans were developed to expand it in a later phase to also include help for Jews offered by people in countries occupied by Germany. In 2008, the State Minister for Culture and the Media Bernd Neumann declared, "I spoke with Avner Shalev, director of Yad Vashem, about plans of the Silent Heroes Memorial Center in Berlin to give greater consideration in the future to the European dimension of rescuing Jews, working closely with Yad Vashem to this end."

It became clear in 2015 that the physical space of the memorial center at Rosenthaler Straße 39 was not sufficient for an expansion at that location. A solution to the problem was found in a proposal to move the Silent Heroes Memorial Center into exhibition space connected to the German Resistance Memorial Center at Stauffenbergstraße 13–14 in Berlin-Mitte. Pursuant to a resolution of the budget committee of the German Bundestag in November of 2016, the necessary funding was available as of 2017. A greatly expanded permanent exhibition on rescues and rescue attempts by Germans has been on display at the new site since February 2018. In collaboration with the Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem and many European partner institutions, a permanent exhibition on efforts to save Jews by helpers throughout German-occupied Europe will open there in 2020. A key aspect will be to always maintain the dual perspective of helpers and those they helped.

The exhibition that opened in early 2018 was planned and implemented by the exhibition architect Ursula Wilms and the Braun Engels Gestaltung design office in Ulm. The thematic content was prepared by a team of curators under the direction of Johannes Tuchel.

Objects, documents, and photographs in the exhibition illustrate both failed and successful rescue attempts by individuals and networks, as well as the varied relationships between those who helped and those who made the conscious decision to defy the Nazi policies of deportation and murder. Here visitors also have an opportunity to inform themselves at the media tables about additional individual cases, and to conduct intensive research at computer workstations. There is a database documenting several hundred rescuers and people who were helped; it will be expanded on an ongoing basis.

At its new location, the Silent Heroes Memorial Center will continue to gather as much information as possible about helpers and those they helped. However, it will not be possible to learn much more, as fewer and fewer of those involved are still alive. Many helpers and many of those who were rescued were never asked about their experiences. Regrettably, we can no longer make up for this neglect, which stemmed from persisting social ignorance, repression, and postwar defamation. The acknowledgement and appreciation of the "silent heroes" are not a matter of course, but the result of a long and arduous process.

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