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On the Foundation and Development of the Silent Heroes Memorial Center

It was not until the 1990s that the actions of those who took the great risk of helping persecuted Jews during the National Socialist dictatorship came to be publicly perceived and acknowledged as an integral element of the resistance. Up to that point, aiding Jews was ignored, blocked out, or devalued. A number of attempts to impress these acts of help positively on the West German collective and cultural memory, undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s, were unsuccessful.

German society's disdain for the helpers corresponded with another phenomenon, however: their silence. Many helpers had experienced and perceived their surroundings in the Nazi era as hostile—and many of those experiences continued into the years after 1945. The helpers maintained their silence even as reservations towards resistance activists in general began to subside. In addition, many had always seen the aid they provided as a perfectly natural thing to do, and therefore not a subject to talk about.

Fundamentally, we can say that help for persecuted Jews mounted a central challenge to the National Socialist system of rule. The persecution and genocide of Europe's Jews were at the center of National Socialist ideology and exercise of power. The National Socialists wanted to murder every Jewish person in their domain—without exception. Anyone hiding a Jew or helping them in any other way was thereby striking at the ideological core of the system's rule. Anyone helping a Jew was radically questioning the system.

Under this prerequisite, help for Jewish victims of persecution must be seen as an extremely significant act of resistance. However, West German society was far from ready to take this view in the 1950s. A second issue was also in play: The deportation of more than 160,000 German Jews to the extermination camps and murder sites in the occupied territories of Poland and the Soviet Union had taken place in plain view, almost without stirring protest or public dissent. Those who had helped Jews had thus demonstrated the existence of alternative options for action. Acknowledging this after 1945 would have destroyed many Germans' self-image of alleged powerlessness in the face of the National Socialist authorities.

In the German Resistance Memorial Center's permanent exhibition, the section on help for victims of persecution came about in 1988, prepared mainly by Barbara Schieb under the academic direction of Prof. Peter Steinbach. The Community for Peace and Reconstruction grouped around Werner Scharff and Hans Winkler was used to exemplify aid networks. Winfried Meyer also documented Operation Seven, through which the opponents of the regime gathered around Hans von Dohnanyi and Hans Oster from the Office for Foreign Affairs/Counterintelligence in the Armed Forces High Command managed to send Jewish refugees to Switzerland in 1942. The fates of Ilse and Werner Rewald and Ella and Inge Deutschkron were used as examples, as was the help provided by various individuals. However, including the subject of help for victims of persecution in the overall context of resistance against National Socialism was not uncontentious even in 1988, as the academic director of the German Resistance Memorial Center, Peter Steinbach, later detailed.

Prompted by the association Against Forgetting—For Democracy, and particularly by its founding chairman Dr. Hans-Jochen Vogel, the comprehensive research project Rescues of Jews in National Socialist Germany, 1933-1945 took place at the Technical University Berlin's Center for Research on Antisemitism under the academic direction of Prof. Wolfgang Benz between 1997 and 2002. Films such as Schindler's List and numerous publications also consolidated public interest in the subject during the 1990s.

With the significant involvement of the eye-witness and writer Inge Deutschkron, a project initiated by students at the Berlin University of Applied Sciences and the exhibition Blind Trust grew into the Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind, at Rosenthaler Straße 39 in Berlin-Mitte. In the workshop, mainly blind and deaf Jews worked under the protection of the minor factory-owner Otto Weidt (1883–1947) during the National Socialist period. In 1999 the German federal government assumed responsibility for the museum, following an initiative by the German Government Commissioner for Cultural and Media Affairs, Michael Naumann.

From then on, there have been many efforts, including by the then federal president, Johannes Rau, to remember helpers and people who went into hiding more extensively in Berlin. The building at Rosenthaler Straße 39 was purchased in 2004 using funding from the federal government and the German Lottery Foundation Berlin, for the purpose of expanding the Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind and establishing a central memorial center for "silent heroes."

The German Resistance Memorial Center was tasked in April 2005 with preparing the center's content and organization. The permanent exhibition in the Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind was first overhauled and expanded in 2006, before an initial exhibition in the now officially titled Silent Heroes Memorial Center was installed directly alongside the workshop itself in 2008.

Taking the findings of the Center for Research on Antisemitism as its starting point, a permanent exhibition was developed to tell the story of those who stood by persecuted Jews during the Nazi era. It presented both the Jews' predicament under threat of deportation and the actions and motives of the women and men who helped them. The example of the helpers often referred to as "silent heroes" shows that there were indeed options and scope for action and decisions to protect victims of persecution from deadly threats, even under the conditions of National Socialism.

This first permanent exhibition, designed by Dorothee Hauck with content developed by a curatorial team under the direction of Prof. Johannes Tuchel and occupying a very limited space, was devoted to rescue attempts by Germans in Germany and the German-occupied territories. It was to be expanded in a second step, to include help for persecuted Jews in the German-occupied territories. Government commissioner Bernd Neumann stated in 2008: "I have talked with Avner Shalev, the director of Yad Vashem, about the Silent Heroes Memorial Center wanting to focus more strongly in future on the European dimension of the rescue of persecuted Jews, and it will work closely with Yad Vashem on the project."

In 2015 an expansion within the available space at Rosenthaler Straße 39 proved impossible. A solution to the problem emerged through a relocation of the Silent Heroes Memorial Center to the premises of the German Resistance Memorial Center at Stauffenbergstraße 13–14 in Berlin-Tiergarten. Following a decision by the German parliamentary budget committee in November 2016, the necessary funding was made available from 2017. A considerably enlarged permanent exhibition on rescues and attempted rescues by Germans went on display at Stauffenbergstraße in February 2018.

This new exhibition was planned by the exhibition architect Ursula Wilms and the Ulm-based design office Braun Engels, and installed under their direction. The content was developed by a curatorial team under the project management of Prof. Johannes Tuchel. Objects, documents, and photos illustrate failed and successful rescue attempts by individuals and networks, and the wide range of relationships between those who

helped and those who had previously made an active decision to elude the National Socialist policy of persecution and murder. For reasons of space, however, the exhibition was restricted to the subject of help provided by Germans.

In a second expansion phase, it has now been possible to install a permanent exhibition on the rescue of Jews all over German-occupied Europe, in conjunction with the Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center and many European partner institutions. A central concern was to reflect the dual perspectives of helpers and persecuted Jews. In many cases, the first decision was made by the Jews who went into illegal hiding, paving the way to the further development. Those who helped them accepted and supported that decision. However, there were also many Jews who only found the bravery to evade deportation when they were encouraged to do so by non-Jews.

Help and rescue attempts for Jews during World War II always developed within a specific historical and political context and a particular society. Various factors had a major influence on the extent to which individuals or groups from a majority population were prepared to take the risk of saving Jews from the German extermination apparatus. The differing historical preconditions, the respective political situation before 1939 or 1941, the Jewish minority's position in the pre-war societies, traditional images of and prejudices towards Jews, but also the respective country's relations with National Socialist Germany, the type of occupation regime, and not least the military situation in the course of the war all played a role. It was also particularly significant whether and when the Germans' treatment of Jews was recognized as a targeted extermination program. These factors determined the scope for non-Jewish helpers to undertake rescue attempts and also the persecuted Jews' chances of survival.

Integrating European rescue stories into the Silent Heroes Memorial Center will contribute towards a clearer presentation of scope for action and willingness to take personal responsibility under the conditions of National Socialist occupation and rule than was previously the case. It may thus also contribute towards understanding the story of the "silent heroes" everywhere as part of a common European history.

As thematic groundwork, seven volumes have been published to date on help for persecuted Jews in the Netherlands, Norway, Latvia, Bulgaria, Belorussia, Lithuania, and Romania. Further volumes are forthcoming, beginning in 2021 with Italy.

The new Silent Heroes Memorial Center exhibition was once again planned and designed by the exhibition architect Ursula Wilms and the Ulm-based design office Braun Engels, and installed under their direction. The entire exhibition is accessible for people with a range of disabilities. A team of curators worked on the exhibition content, developing a comprehensive overview of the resistance against the National Socialist persecution of the Jews for the first time, with the support of many institutions and individuals from across Europe and Israel.

The exhibition begins with the development from the marginalization of Europe's Jews to their genocide, providing historical context. It then goes into the basic conditions of rescue attempts, possibilities for escape, and hiding places, places of refuge, false identities, along with the dangers faced by the helpers and the persecuted Jews. This is followed by an exhibition unit on the possibilities for protest and resistance, before a large section detailing individual actors that illustrates the diverse forms of help provided. The focal point of the exhibition on help in Europe is on seven extensive exemplary case studies. A large multimedia-supported presentation shows the differing course of the persecution of Jews in the various European countries and the reactions of Jews and helpers to this constantly intensifying terror. The exhibition concludes with a room displaying information on the fates of rescuers and the rescued after 1945.

The exhibition's multimedia aspects also include intensive research opportunities at terminals, documenting the biographies of several hundred helpers and persecuted Jews. This database is continuously updated.

The exhibition also shows that not nearly all rescue attempts were successful. In some countries, approval for German persecution measures was too strong. In others, the support for persecuted Jews was greater—this depended on the national context, the course of the war, and the Jewish minority's integration into the general population. We do not know how many persecuted Jews were saved by the efforts of their fellow men and women. Numbers are estimated in the tens of thousands. However, the great majority, between 5.4 and 6 million European Jews, fell victim to the National Socialist genocide. Yet the aid given to victims of persecution shows that help was possible, also in the European context—and that more help would have been feasible and necessary.

For this reason, the Silent Heroes Memorial Center in the German Resistance Memorial Center Foundation will not only continue its thematic research over the coming years, but also work with Yad Vashem and many European partner institutions to take a comparative perspective of the resistance against the persecution of Jews in German-occupied Europe, and to translate this into a wide range of concepts of historical and political education work in a European context. Such a common view of this part of German and European history will also foster better understanding of the various European nations' respective narratives of resistance against the National Socialist persecution of Jews.

There is certainly one common denominator. The writer and honorary citizen of Berlin Inge Deutschkron played a significant role in the establishment of both the Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind and the Silent Heroes Memorial Center. She formulated the following conclusion: "To act humanely was their highest imperative. I consider them to be heroes."