

Association for Christian-Jewish Cooperation
Address to mark the reopening of the Synagogue Memorial
9 November 2018 Lüneburg - Hans-Wilfried Haase

Ladies and Gentlemen, Honoured Guests!

The highs and lows of German history are never as close together as on 9 November. One hundred years ago today, the first German republic was proclaimed, and 29 years ago, the Berlin Wall fell. But there was also that horrific day 80 years ago, when across Germany thousands of Jewish businesses and homesteads were raided and destroyed. When synagogues and prayer rooms stood in flames and cemeteries were desecrated. Jews were shamefully jeered and humiliated, robbed of their rights and their dignity. Hundreds were murdered, 30000 disappeared into concentration camps. It was the start of an unprecedented attempt, conducted with meticulous bureaucracy, to eliminate German and European Jews and their culture.

For many years, we have assembled in this place on 9 November to commemorate the victims of Nazi terror here in Lüneburg. Their names are now recorded on one of the four bronze tablets within the new memorial. The places of their deaths speak for themselves.

Today, we have once again assembled here. But the emotions of dismay, grief and anger that I have felt on this occasion over the years are today also joined by some feelings of joy. Finally, Lüneburg has a worthy place of commemoration and remembrance.

The commemoration is not restricted to the victims of those years. We also commemorate the many Jewish families who used to be part of our town. Three tablets bear the names of all Jewish families who lived in Lüneburg since the construction of the synagogue in 1894. The synagogue stands as a symbol for all Jews even though undoubtedly not all were members. It stands for centuries of Jewish culture that was violently terminated in 1938.

The intention had been to destroy anything Jewish, to annihilate Jewish culture, to expunge Jewish names. Now these names are cast in bronze so that

those coming after us can read them still. Our bequest to subsequent generations has to be that the darkness of history must be faced in order to work valiantly and clear-sightedly towards a future in which human dignity is more than an empty phrase.

Many people in our town have waited many years for this memorial to be built. This is evident in their numerous large and small donations and also in the many positive messages of support that we received. And it is also evident in the great number of people here today. This is an important signal at a time when we are confronted with racist and anti-Semitic events that leave us stunned and bewildered.

We are very grateful to the many descendants of Jewish families from our town who have joined us today, and we welcome you cordially to our midst. Furthermore, we are most grateful for the participation and support by Rabbi Jona Simon who travelled from Oldenburg to be with us today.

Many people have contributed to the construction of our new memorial. We would like to thank the town council, the culture committee and the municipal administration, in particular Mayor Mäde, for moral support and financial backing. Our thanks also go to those who worked on conducting research into the Jewish families and compiling the list of names, in particular Käthe Gudemann of the History Workshop and the historian Anneke de Rudder.

We are grateful to the Regional Association of Jewish Congregations, to the churches and institutions who have donated large sums, to Henning Claassen whose support went far beyond the merely financial, and to the many other individual donors. Later, the names of all donors will be displayed on a small plaque.

Two names deserve a special mention:

First of all our architect Carl-Peter von Mansberg. He did not treat this project as any other commission, but approached it with dedication and passion. In our conversations with him, we could see for ourselves how much mental work had gone into his design: biblical references, references to the building structures of the former synagogue, implementation of the golden rule and

great attention to design details. I believe that this has given rise to a wonderful edifice, a worthy place of remembrance and reflection, for which we are immensely grateful.

And second and most importantly: Ela Griepenkerl, our honorary chairman. If illness had not prevented her, she would have stood at my side today. She refers to this memorial lovingly as her “baby” - and quite rightly so. It was she who had initiated this project, pursued it with tenacity and kept pushing it forward. And it was Ela who eight years ago had first sought out Carl-Peter von Mansberg and incited him to produce a first draft design.

However, the idea dates much further back and to a different source. Ela told me of a visit by Schalom Ben-Chorin, the Jewish philosopher of religion, with whom she was friends. She had shown him the site where the synagogue had once stood. And then they were standing in front of the stele hidden in a dark corner. His laconic comment: This really cannot stay like that! A view shared by many others subsequently.

Ben Chorin was born in Munich in 1913 as Fritz Rosenthal and emigrated to Israel in 1935. In dark times in 1942, he wrote a poem that was later set to music and has now found its way into our hymn books. It is entitled “The sign”, and it may be familiar to many of you:

Almond trees, renewed in bloom,
do they not proclaim
life returning year by year,
love that will remain?

Almond blossom, sign of life
in the face of pain,
raises hope in people’s hearts:
spring has come again.

War destroys a thousand-fold,
hatred scars the earth,
but the day when almonds bloom

is a time of birth.

Friends, give thanks for almond blooms
swaying in the wind:
token that the gift of life
triumphs in the end.ⁱ

It is a hymn of hope in which Jews and Christians and all people of good will
can recognise themselves.

May there be many of them who pass this place and feel invited to linger for a
moment, to reflect and to be encouraged in hope for a world of respect,
reconciliation and peace.

i Translated by Fred Kaan: <https://christinabetweenthelines.wordpress.com/bits-and-pieces/>