

Rediscover the former concentration camp Sonnenburg as an international place of remembrance

Hardly any other place evokes the memory of Hitler's takeover of power on 30th January 1933 in cause and effect of the criminal regime more strongly than the site of the former prison and temporary concentration camp Sonnenburg in the now Polish town of Słońsk. The murder of over 700 of Sonnenburg's 840 inmates, including numerous Frenchmen, Germans, Dutchmen, Belgians and Luxembourgers – among the latter 91 so-called *Lëtzebuurger Jongen* murdered by an SS command on the night of 30th January 1945 – was a dramatic end to the 12-year reign of terror of German fascism.

The significance of the site is however not only the remembrance of these victims. It was in the Sonnenburg concentration camp that regime opponents and resistance fighters from Germany and almost all other Nazi-occupied territories came together. The memory of 30th January 1933 and 30th January 1945 gives rise to questions about the social resistance necessary to tackle right-wing developments in Europe today. The revival of right-wing populist, nationalist, anti-Semitic and anti-Romany tendencies in Europe underlines the importance of remembering the victims of Nazi rule and of neo-Nazi and racist attacks in the present.

Since 2009 representatives of the *Berliner Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes – Bund der Antifaschisten (VVN-BdA)* [Berlin Association of the Victims of Nazi Persecution – Anti-Fascist Alliance] have participated in the annual memorial service for the murders of 30th January 1945. The memorial ceremonies at the *Museum of Martyrology of the Victims of the Sonnenburg Camp*, at the combatants' memorial, and at the prisoner of war cemetery where the murdered inmates are buried have a high profile. Former Polish combatants, partisans, concentration camp prisoners, local and regional politicians from Słońsk and Gorzów, representatives of the Seelower Höhen memorial and of the Belorussian and Luxembourg Embassies attend, as well as school pupils, representatives of the Catholic Church and civil society organisations. As part of the ceremony, a unit of the Polish armed forces holds a vigil and commemorates the dead by reading out their names.

Discussions were held by representatives of the VVN-BdA with combatants of the *ZKRP i BWP Gorzów* (an organisation for veterans and prisoners of war from the region) and Bożena Sławiak, member of the Sejm (Polish parliament). After these discussions, Mayor Janusz Krzyśków asked the Berlin VVN-BdA to play an active role in arranging the new exhibition.

It is essential to rediscover Słońsk/Sonnenburg as a place where Hitler's opponents – both from Germany and after 1939 from almost all Nazi-occupied countries – were imprisoned and murdered. Efforts should be made not only to increase the public's familiarity with the site in Germany and Poland, but also to involve all interested parties, especially those from countries whose nationals were subjected to forced labour, tortured and murdered. The direct border area is regarded as the gate to the Warta Mouth National Park. The schools there are interested in an exchange with foreign partner organisations, and it is therefore conceivable to promote international youth projects concerning the history of the region. Ideally this would integrate the exemplary tradition of remembrance work in Luxembourg lycées or Norwegian *bus blancs*. This process could be supported by a forum made up of former prisoners' relatives or their associations, with historians, representatives from memorial sites and from foundations in Germany, Luxembourg and Poland and other countries, as well as schools and the German-Polish Youth Association (*Deutsch-Polnischen Jugendwerk - DPJW*).

€324,890 in funds have already been approved by the Euroregion Pro Europa Viadrina for the reconstruction of the dilapidated museum. We have made arrangements with the mayor to hold a conference about Sonnenburg concentration camp and prison, history and commemorative culture, with the question of how the latter should be organised and shaped in the future. The provisional date for the conference is 12th – 13th September, and we anticipate attendees from Poland, Germany, Luxembourg, Norway, Belgium and other countries.

From 3rd April 1933 to 23rd April 1934 the prison – which had been shut down in 1931 due to catastrophic hygiene conditions – served as a concentration camp. Most of the over 1,000 prisoners

were communists. Nobel Prize winner Carl von Ossietzky, the writer Erich Mühsam, the lawyer Hans Litten and many others were among the inmates. Owing to the extreme brutality reported by prisoners who escaped, Sonnenburg concentration camp soon became known as a place of torturous horror. Towards the end of the 1980s a working group of the West Berlin peace movement involving Polish academics began to advance remembrance work as a collective project. Three booklets with information about the camp were put together 25 years ago. We are grateful to Peter Gerlinghoff, the project's initiator, who passed on all the documents about Sonnenburg to the Berlin VVN-BdA.

These materials are already being used by the Berlin VNN working group which formed in February to tackle the history of Sonnenburg concentration camp and prison. A database with the names of over 500 camp inmates is currently under construction. We also have a list with short biographies of around 600 prisoners that was compiled by the Polish historian and director of the local commission for research into Nazi-German crimes in Poland, Przemysław Mnichowski. Unfortunately there is still no complete list of the prison's victims who were hastily buried in the prisoner of war cemetery; research in archives and previously unknown publications from history centres and projects are a starting point.

If you would like to take part in the working group and/or the conference on 12th-13th September or are able to support our research with personal documents or photographs of camp inmates, reports from survivors, information about publications and archive documents, or by making a donation, please contact us at:

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