

Transcript: DenkOrt (English) – Audio Feature DenkOrt Deportationen/ Interview mit Benita Stolz

Victoria Porcu:

Every few weeks I take the train home to Nuremberg. If I have to hurry to catch my train on time, I just run past the DenkOrt. But when I arrive fresh in Würzburg and leave the station building, I sometimes deliberately walk around to the left. Then I see the replicas of suitcases, bags and backpacks made of stone, wood and concrete from afar.

When I then look closer at the pieces of luggage, it is as if I see the Jews standing just a few meters away from me. They are standing there on the railroad track with all their belongings, waiting for a train. They don't know where they will be taken, but I do know: they will be deported to Eastern Europe and murdered. This is what the "DenkOrt Deportationen 1941-1944" at Würzburg's main train station is intended to remind us of: the Jewish victims of the Nazi regime in Lower Franconia.

The DenkOrt was opened a year ago, on June 17, 2020. Thus, it is new in the Würzburg remembrance landscape and it also seemed new to me in its design. There are no heavy, cold stone slabs with inscriptions that commemorate and admonish, as I know from previous Holocaust memorials. I saw these two facts as an opportunity to ask: What do new forms of remembrance look like? What distinguishes DenkOrt from other Holocaust memorials? What kind of culture of remembrance can be found here?

For this I spoke with the "inventor of the DenkOrt" Benita Stolz. She told me why the DenkOrt is unique in Germany and the world and why the project is far from finished even after the opening.

First of all, I would like to briefly introduce Benita Stolz:

She was born in 1946 in Rhineland-Palatinate and was a member of the Environmental Party in Germany "Bündnis 90/Die Grünen" (Alliance 90/The Greens) and a member of the Würzburg City Council for a total of 30 years, from 1990 to 2020. Benita Stolz has been active in Würzburg's culture of remembrance since 2004. Among other things, she initiated the laying of "Stumbling Stones" (stumbling blocks) in Würzburg in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. She was also instrumental in the implementation of the "Weg der Erinnerung" (path of remembrance) in 2011. This was a memorial walk in which 3,000 people took part to commemorate the deportation of Jews from Lower Franconia. Since 2015, she has been in charge of the DenkOrt Deportationen project since 2015.

At the beginning, I asked Ms. Stolz what was important to her in the conception and design of the DenkOrt.

Benita Stolz:

In no way did I want something completely static, where people walk past it, stop for a moment and then leave again; I believe that this form of erecting a so-called Holocaust memorial, as we have it, is quite unique throughout Germany. Already during the construction of the memorial, the people were included, for whom the memorial should be built. Namely, for the people in the Lower Franconian communities in which the Jews lived together peacefully. And these communities were asked to create a memorial for their former Jewish residents. We didn't want a memorial, an artist and an annual commemoration, to put it bluntly, we would certainly have made more of it. This has also led to some unrest, because some artists had no chance to get a commission, understandably, artists have to live from something. But this fact, that now many thought, thought along, participated, caused also that the people can identify themselves at this place. This is also proven by the letters I always receive there: You have to treat the place with dignity, pay attention, I have seen this and that. There was also the suggestion that one should form a group that always watches over the place a bit and takes turns. There is a very intensive exchange with the communities.

Victoria Porcu:

From the very beginning, the communities in Lower Franconia were invited to participate in the establishment of the DenkOrt. As Ms. Stolz said, the DenkOrt was not to be designed by just one person. Through this special process of creation, the inhabitants of the communities identified themselves with the project at an early stage. Contact and exchange with them on site play a decisive role.

Benita Stolz:

We have already been to many local councils and presented the project and answered questions. This communication is very important to us. Or the sculpture school in Bischofsheim did it as an annual project. I think 15 students made pieces of luggage, completely individually, we were there two or three times, and they explained to us what they thought of the luggage. It was important to us, and some artists don't understand this, that the schools and the youth are involved, and not just us adults and old people.

Victoria Porcu:

In order to keep the memory alive, young people in particular also help with the design. With regard to the entire project, I was interested in the goals that Ms. Stolz and her team pursued with the DenkOrt.

Benita Stolz:

There are two, so first of all simply the culture of remembrance. The Holocaust must be addressed because of its scope, its uniqueness and its ethnic dimension here in the German-speaking world, the Holocaust has a very special significance, also in Würzburg and in Lower Franconia, where a particularly large number of Jews lived. Thus, the culture of remembrance takes place on two levels: One is direct access to the past, which also means intensive engagement with the victims. For example, there is a teddy bear lying casually on the bench, which then also makes associations with the victims, that there were children, that many children were deported with them. So, the reference to the victims should be created very intensively and on the other hand, it is very important, at least the equally important pillar, the critical examination of state and social crimes, so the reference to the present. For example, dealing with refugees. That's what we have to do, this form of transmission, we want to learn from history. Perhaps one could also put a life jacket on the DenkOrt at some point to create a somewhat more visible reference to the present.

Victoria Porcu:

I found the reference to the present particularly exciting. Later, Ms. Stolz told me that she will use a life jacket during her tours and would like to add it "spontaneously" to the other pieces of luggage. The life jacket functions as an insistent impulse for an examination of discrimination in the present.

This component is also reflected in the term "DenkOrt": it is a way of thinking about yesterday, today and tomorrow. According to Ms. Stolz, conventional terms such as "place of remembrance" get too caught up in the past. How does the DenkOrt differ from previous Holocaust memorials?

Benita Stolz:

It differs, as I said at the beginning, already in the process of creation. We have been working on this DenkOrt since 2015, when we formed a large group that included the Lord Mayor and Doctor Schuster, as well as representatives from all of Lower Franconia, the local historians, and we already considered how the topic could be implemented. It was a tough, tough road, but there alone was the fact that we want to include everything. I think this two-pronged approach is also a very, very important distinguishing feature. On the one hand, there is the central memorial at the Würzburg train station, and on the other hand, there is the decentralized memorial in the individual towns. There is the same piece of luggage as at the Würzburg main station and the people who come from these places to the DenkOrt here in Würzburg, they already have a thought process behind them. And note, they have already gone the way the Jews had to go, namely from their home village away to the Würzburg main station into the very cruel uncertainty. So, the events of that time can be made imaginable and that is also a different approach. Normally, tourists come to see this, but we want this connection, this two-track approach is deliberately intended. By the way, Doctor Schuster insisted on it. It's a one-time good idea, he said, "I want the communities not to leave their duty of remembrance at the Würzburg main station, but they have to remember it at home, too." And that is sometimes harder for the parishes at home to put the luggage, to find a good place, in Würzburg the suitcase is far away.

Victoria Porcu:

Dr. Josef Schuster, whom Ms. Stolz just mentioned, is the president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany. He and Christian Schuchardt, the mayor of Würzburg, were also there from the beginning.

A second opening is scheduled for September. 24, with more luggage. In two to three years, Ms. Stolz says, it will probably be all of them. I asked her what will follow then. How can the community idea be continued? How can the memory at the DenkOrt be kept in motion?

Benita Stolz:

We are now in the process of putting together a leadership group. These are volunteers, we meet there and think about how we can make good guided tours. I am also thinking, for example, of tandem solutions, older people explaining to younger people, younger people explaining to older people, and I have already started to make contact with a school. I went to a school and said: "Listen, we want to do guided tours at the DenkOrt, we would like to try this out, could you come and tell us if this appeals to you or what we should change or can you also learn to do this, that you also do a guided tour for your students? So for me it is very important that this exchange takes place.

Victoria Porcu:

That brings us to the end.

The conversation with Ms. Stolz made me realize again how much remembering has to do with identification. Creating this identification is the great task for the makers of monuments. In the case of the DenkOrt the focus was on participation and an attempt was made to involve many different groups in the development process. In addition, the luggage ties the communities to the DenkOrt. By making and maintaining it, they are in constant contact with it. In this way, Ms. Stolz and her team have found an answer to how the Holocaust can be remembered in the future, when those who experienced it are no longer around.

I would like to thank Ms. Stolz for her time and recommend everyone to pay a visit to the DenkOrt at the latest the next time they arrive at Würzburg Central Station.

The interview was conducted by Victoria Porcu. The entire audio feature was created as part of the seminar "Monuments and Memories" at the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg in the summer semester of 2021.

Source reference/ Music:

Germany - Atmospheres - Germany - Railway station (Munich), in: BBC Sound Effects. URL: [https://sound-effects.bbcrewind.co.uk/search?q=railway station](https://sound-effects.bbcrewind.co.uk/search?q=railway+station) [Last accessed: 05.08.2021].