Germany: Remembrance for the victims of National Socialism

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On Wednesday, 27 January 2021, the Bundestag remembered the victims of National Socialism. The Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism was introduced in 1996 by the Federal President at the time, Professor Roman Herzog. This day marks the liberation of the survivors of the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp by soldiers of the Red Army on 27 January 1945.

This year's guest speakers were the President of the Jewish Community of Munich and Upper Bavaria, Dr h. c. Charlotte Knobloch, and publicist Marina Weisband. Bundestag President Dr Wolfgang Schäuble opened the Ceremony of Remembrance at 11 a.m. with a welcome address in the plenary chamber of the Reichstag Building in Berlin. Federal President Dr Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Bundesrat President Dr Reiner Haseloff, Federal Chancellor Dr Angela Merkel and Federal Constitutional Court President Professor Stephan Harbarth also participated as representatives of the other constitutional organs.

1700 years of Jewish life in Germany

This year, the Ceremony of Remembrance took place in the context of the anniversary year ‘321-2021: 1700 Years of Jewish Life in Germany’. The focus was on the Jewish culture which had such a defining influence over the course of many centuries prior to 1933, and on Jewish life since 1945 in the shadow of Auschwitz – in contrast to the breakdown in civilisation which the Shoah represented.

Charlotte Knobloch

The first guest speaker was Dr h. c. Charlotte Knobloch, born in 1932, who has been President of the Jewish Community of Munich and Upper Bavaria since 1985. Having been born in Munich, she survived the Holocaust by being hidden away in the countryside. From 1997 she was Vice-President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany and from 2006 to 2010 its President.

In addition, Charlotte Knobloch was Vice-President of the European Jewish Congress from 2003 to 2011 and Vice-President of the World Jewish Congress from 2005 to 2013, and has been WJC Commissioner for Holocaust Memory since 2013.

Marina Weisband

The second guest speaker was Marina Weisband. She is a publicist, psychologist and expert on digital participation and education. She spoke as a representative of the third post-Shoah generation. She was born in 1987 to Jewish parents in Kiev and moved with her family to Germany in 1994.

From 2011 to 2012, Marina Weisband was political secretary of the Pirate Party in Germany. Since 2018, she has been a member of Alliance 90/The Greens, where she has been particularly active on the topics of digitalisation and education.

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Sulzbach Torah scroll from the year 1793

The ceremony also included the screening of a short film on the Sulzbach Torah scroll from the year 1793, which has been restored in Israel. Later on, a ceremony for the completion of the Torah scroll took place in the Bundestag's Reflection and Prayer Room in the Reichstag Building, with participation by the representatives of the constitutional organs, guest speaker Charlotte Knobloch, Rabbi of the Amberg Jewish Community Elias Dray and President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany Dr Josef Schuster – as a symbol of the German state's commitment to protecting and safeguarding on a lasting basis Jewish life in Germany. Rabbi Elias Dray and Rabbi Shaul Nekrich gave introductory remarks.

The Sulzbach Torah scroll was written in 1793 for the new synagogue in Sulzbach (Bavaria) and is today regarded as one of the oldest surviving Torah scrolls in southern Germany. In 1934, the synagogue was converted into a Heimat museum and the Torah scroll was taken to Amberg. It survived the Night of the Pogrom on 9-10 November 1938 unscathed. Amberg's Rabbi Elias Dray discovered the Torah scroll in 2015. Thanks to his efforts, the scroll was able to be restored in Bnei Brak (Israel). After its ceremonial completion in the Reflection and Prayer Room of the Bundestag, it is returning to be used by the Jewish community of Amberg.

Music in the plenary chamber and Reflection and Prayer Room

The Ceremony of Remembrance began with the cadenza by Joseph Joachim (1831-1907) for the first movement of the Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77, by Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), played by violinist Professor Kolja Lessing. After the speech by Charlotte Knobloch, Lessing also played the second piece, No. 1 Andante, No. 4 Schnell and No. 5 Larghetto, from Aphorisms I (five pieces for solo violin from 2009) by Ursula Mamlok (1923-2016). Following Marina Weisband's speech, a performance of Far away by Yael Nachshon Levin (vocals), Haggai Cohen Milo (double bass) and Tomer Moked (guitar) was heard.

During the ceremony in the Reflection and Prayer Room, the 'Le Chant Sacré' synagogue choir, conducted by Rémi Studer, was heard performing Seu Sheorim by Samuel Naumbourg (1817-1880), with a solo by Hazan Jacky Ouaknine. The instrumental piece Oyfn Pripetchik by Mark Markovich Warshawsky (1848-1907) was played in the background – which was recorded and arranged by guitarist Karsten Troyke, accompanied on the violin by Daniel Weltlinger. A performance by 'Le Chant Sacré' of Baavur David by Joseph Rumshinsky (1881-1956), with Hazan Jonathan Blum as soloist, was also heard.

Further information:
Speech by Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble in Remembrance of the Victims of National Socialism at the Ceremony of Remembrance, 27 January 2021

Source: Deutscher Bundestag.