

Thoughts at the memorial for Active Nonviolence

SERVAS Alpe-Adria Meeting, 6-8 October 2023

We stand on the square in front of the New Town Hall with a view over the Danube along the Nibelungen Bridge and see the two large bridgehead buildings that border the main square.

With this, I have mentioned two architectural elements that date back to the National Socialist era. The Nibelungen Bridge and the bridgehead building. Linz was the "favourite city" for the person whose name I am not mentioning here now. Why am I not mentioning the name? Not because I can't think of it or because it would be unseemly or anything like that. No, to mention the name is to give a memory and a memorial. This is exactly what an institution in Jerusalem wants to do for the victims of the Nazi terror regime. Yad Vashem means a memorial and a name as a living reminder for all those people who are threatened by unimaginable violence to sink into nameless oblivion.

"To them I will erect a memorial in my house and within my walls; I will give them a memorial (Yad) and a name (Shem) ... that shall never be blotted out." Isaiah 56:5

Now back to the shaping of our city by that person. Linz was decisively shaped by Albert Speer, who was to design it as the "Führer's favourite city". The Nibelungen Bridge should also have had statues of the heroes of the Song of the Nibelungs. The two bridgehead buildings were to be the beginning of a boulevard up to the place where the music theatre stands today. A large library would have been planned there. Today's motorway bridge was already planned at that time, except that the middle pylon was meant to be a German hero, with the roadway passing between its legs. Only about five minutes' walk north from here, this person lived with his mother when he went to the Bürgerliche Oberschule in Linz. The grave of his parents at the cemetery in Leonding is now an unrecognisable meadow, because there have been repeated tributes to his son by politically right-wing groups. One last flash of history. The small balcony of the Old Town Hall, which we will still pass, has not been used for any purpose since the end of the war. It was there that this person received some 80,000 cheering people on the evening of 12 March 1938.

So much for the terrible character of our city for me.

In 1986 Linz declared itself a "City of Peace" on the initiative of the then mayor Hugo Schanovsky. This was not meant to be an empty term, but an impulse for a wide range of activities which, on the one hand, should help to come to terms with the terrible history and, on the other hand, pay tribute to the victims with honourable remembrance. Perhaps most importantly, this should contribute to strengthening peace in society.

Since then there has been a "Peace Initiative of the City of Linz" organised by the city's cultural office, in which people from different organisations and civil society are involved. Based on this group, there is also an annual "Peace Declaration" in which current problems and also demands of the city and the province are addressed and which is read out in the municipal council around 21 September, the World Day of Peace, and adopted as unanimously as possible.

It is before the product of another initiative that we now stand here. As the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, 2 October was declared the International Day of Nonviolence by the UN. That is why Europe's first "Monument / Memorial for Active Nonviolence" was inaugurated here on 2 October 2017. Reiner Steinweg, a respected peace researcher who lives in Linz, provided the impetus for this monument. The Linz artist Karl-Heinz Klopff designed it. One element of active non-violence is non-violent communication. It is precisely this that is symbolically represented here and at the same

time there is also an invitation to corresponding action and conversation. A cylindrical and a cubic pedestal sculpture, i.e. two different forms, face each other. They are inclined at an angle, thus showing an active turning towards each other. Two interlocutors with different points of view sit opposite each other, perceive each other and engage in an appreciative, listening, clarifying conversation at eye level.

Let's take another look back at the National Socialist era. In the centre of Linz, at Bischofsstraße 3, grew up the man who, as a senior employee of the Reich Security Main Office, was mainly responsible for the persecution and murder of about 6 million Jews. He was apprehended in Buenos Aires by the Israeli secret service Mossad and brought to Israel in May 1960, where he was tried. In this trial he declared himself not legally guilty, as he had dutifully followed the applicable laws in all his actions. What greater discrepancy can this legally correct exercise of unbelievable terror have with the attitude of active non-violence?

Perhaps this memorial is not self-explanatory when seen casually? Once engaged with it, its simplicity reminds me every time I pass or drive by how simple and how complex Nonviolent Communication is as a tool for achieving sustainable peace. In addition, this walk-in sculpture also wants to memorialise the people who had stood up against the terror regime in a non-violent way and were senselessly killed.

Another initiative of the city of Linz to give the victims a name again are the memorial stelae that have been in the streets since autumn 2022, near the house numbers where these people lived. A stele on Landstraße, for example, commemorates a Jewish doctor who helped many people regardless of their financial means and origin. He also regularly treated the mother mentioned above. Today, mechanical bells next to the name plates ring in the empty space as a reminder. These bells were made by apprentices of the Linz steelworks VOEST, which was originally founded as "Hermann Göring Werke". Here, awareness-raising training becomes another act of transforming violently burdened history.

Opposite, we see a dove of peace made of stainless steel. It is a symbol of the Jerusalem Way, which today marks a path of peace from Santiago de Compostella to Jerusalem. Again and again people walk this path initiated by Johannes Aschauer from Upper Austria in order to practise an attitude of peace in daily steps.

Before we go any further, I would like to invite you to take a photo with me, so that we can remember the power of this memorial.

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Peace Initiative of the City of Linz