

Lübeck Victims of National Socialism

Last weekend a group from the city centre churches were at St Mary's Church in the historic German city of Lübeck to share in their celebration of forty-five years as a partner in the Community of the Cross of Nails. It is particularly fitting that the church is remembered today in the Community's cycle of prayer. There is much to reflect on following our time there but today I would like to focus on one particularly moving part of our programme.

We were given what was described as a walking tour around part of the city. But this was no ordinary tourist trail. It is easy to talk in very general terms about peace and reconciliation, but we must never forget that individuals are involved. We were reminded that about 300 people were killed in the air raids on the city, which is of course a terrible loss of life. However, the number of Lübeck citizens killed by the National Socialist authorities there was around five thousand. This included about 600 Jewish people, together with those who resisted the regime for religious or political reasons, as well as Roma people, homosexuals and those who were physically or mentally handicapped. We were shown results of an ongoing project to remember these individual men, women and children by placing name plaques on the pavement in front to the houses where they lived, following detailed research into the individuals and their families.

We were shown examples of Jewish families but I was particular moved by a non-Jewish man Franz Neitzke. The name plaques are called Stolpersteine, or stumbling blocks, and this is his. He was born in 1893 and after military service in the First World War he become an active Communist and opponent of the National Socialist regime. He was under surveillance by the authorities and arrested in 1935. He died, or as the plaque states was murdered, in Sachsenhausen concentration camp on the first of August 1943.

There is a moving sequel to the story. His son did not really know his father and his grandparents did not talk about him. He thus assumed his father was a criminal. However, as a result of the research carried out by this project he was able to learn the facts about his father's life and was able to be proud of him and see him instead as a hero.

Many other personal stories have emerged and this shows not only the cruelty of the authorities at the time but also the resilience and courage of those who lived through that traumatic period. One of the aims of the Community of the Cross of Nails is to heal the wounds of history and this project is a practical and sobering way in which that task can be approached and achieved. Our hope and prayer is that all victims of injustice and terror rest in God's hands and in his peace and love.

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