

Remembrance and Commemoration in Detmold
Address commemorating the 9th November 1938
as given by Gudrun Mitschke-Buchholz on 9th November 2016

By the November pogrom 1938 the on-going terrorization of Jewish citizens and their expulsion from Germany reached a new dimension. Jews were being abused, killed, deported to concentration camps, synagogues were burnt down, business premises and homes destroyed. We know about that. We also know where the strife after systematic and remorseless annihilation of all Jews within the German sphere of influence ended and we seek to express this by talking of a rupture in civilization. Or we are talking of Auschwitz and we know that this name condenses the genocide of the Jews.

As we assemble here at this site of commemoration, also names of citizens of Detmold are read out that did not survive the so-called 'Third Reich'. We are also standing here next to the memorial stone where humans -who we have become accustomed to refer to as victims although they were so much more than that- have only got their place in public commemoration many decades after the end of World War II. The lives of some of those listed here ended in Auschwitz. They did not experience liberation; they also did live to experience that the German post-war society did not show much interest, or rather not any interest, in the ordeals of the few survivors and would not want to listen to them, instead showing a greater interest and dedication in re-building and the German 'economic miracle'. It cannot accurately be stated that many of the survivors kept silent for a long time, and that the scale of the crimes was not known of, because there was a multitude of accounts, memories and novels and volumes of poetry which were released right after the war- but they were not taken account of since they had been in Yiddish and no one took the trouble to make translations. Only this year Mordechai Strigler's Majdanek-Report, which he had already written in 1945, appeared in the German language.

There is a widespread emphasis on the notion that since the eye witnesses of the genocides have reached their final years our culture of remembrance will experience a momentum of transition. In this year two of the most prominent voices died with Elie Wiesel and Max Mannheimer.

But the end of giving evidence has not yet come. This year we got the opportunity to listen to several of the remaining eye witnesses. I am talking of the Detmold Auschwitz trial, which was one of the last of its kind.

In this trial, too, it became obvious very quickly that its legal proceedings were also about the failures of the state, its judicial branch and post-war German society. It was about the

latter, too, because many Germans did not consider themselves as culprits but as victims who had been unable to fend against NS propaganda in their state of blind deference to authority. The scandalous flaws of German jurisprudence revealed themselves just recently when it became obvious in a study commissioned by the Ministry of Justice that until 1973 more than half the leading managers in the ministry had been former party members of the National Socialist Party. In the initial years in the department of criminal justice the figure amounted to 77 percent of the managing executives among its civil servants. Not surprisingly therefore, the prosecution of NS-criminals was thwarted, the discrimination of the victims continued and the wording of the law was only superficially purged from National Socialist provisions. The democratic new beginning of the Federal Republic was – cautiously speaking – charged, hindered and delayed. And maybe we now start to have an idea which old rope Fritz Bauer had to take on from 1963 on when finally former SS-members were appearing in court in Frankfurt who at the time had to be proven to have had participated in committing first degree murder. For decades the judicial system failed to meet its duty to bring about appropriate persecution. The long due change came only about in 2011 in the Demjanjuk case who was sentenced for his part in accessory to murder within the “extermination machinery”, without specific evidence of an individual act of homicide on his part having to be produced any more. We all know that this sentence did not become legally valid because the offender died. Finally now in the trials against Oskar Gröning in Lüneburg and Reinhold Hanning in Detmold this changed legal attitude was pinpointed by the sentence, “Auschwitz was not a place to participate“.

In Detmold, too, the meaningfulness of a trial against a 94-year-old after 70 years had passed after the crimes of Auschwitz had taken place was challenged. Presiding judge in the trial Anke Grudda once and for all confronted these doubts by the only possible attitude that can be thought of as far as I believe by uttering, “This trial is the least a society can do to give a little justice to the numerous victims of the Holocaust.“ Or by quoting Hedy Bohm, one of the co-claimants, “When your parents have been murdered, your family and friends starved and being killed, would you not want the culprits to face trial? That they can simply get away without being tried in court because they are old? Is it possible for anybody to seriously believe that the criminals of those days who have lived a comfortable life within the circles of their families should not be held accountable, simply because they have succeeded in getting away with their deeds until now?“

Strangely unsettling to me was the compassion being stated towards the old man,

Hanning, could not be bothered with such a kind of trial and who should be spared. Strangely unsettling also that this empathy was rather not being expressed towards the survivor Leon Schwarzbaum who had approximately the same age, who for his part took on the inner and outer ordeals of such a trial and who has battled with a “life” sentence since he knows he will have to face his horrible memories up to his final days. And I ask myself, “Who is it that was to be finally spared?” I fear it is neither Hanning nor Schwarzbaum.

This occasion only allows for the presentation of a very small extract. But I am well aware that some members of the audience witnessed the legal proceedings deeply distressed and were changed by them in more than one respect.

This address is meant to centre on those who became the victims of the terror regime because they are those we still remember today.

What it might mean to the survivors that a German court in a German town tried a former SS-guard I wish to try to represent –which will certainly be only partially feasible- focusing on the example of the Auschwitz-survivor Hedy Bohm who travelled here with her daughter Vicky and had already been a co-claimant in Lüneburg. She here is to represent all those who have taken on the ordeals of the journey not only to lend their voice to those being extinguished. Auschwitz had never let go of any of them. Auschwitz remains inside of them- even after 70 years. They had had to learn to survive the camp. But Auschwitz lives within them and stays with them all their lives and beyond those in the generations to follow. What we heard in the courtroom were the stories of the lives of people who have got to know better than anyone else what life means. And please do not forget: The witnesses who gave their accounts live had become co-claimants because of the fact that their parents and siblings had been murdered and they themselves were survivors. When Hedy Bohm was asked by lawyer Thomas Walther to give evidence against the former SS-thugs, her first reaction had been, “Oh, no.” She was remembering only too well that when once travelling via Frankfurt she had right at once felt like being the lonely 16-year-old girl again that had become an Auschwitz detainee.

In a long process of inner struggles and sleepless nights she decided, however, to take part in the trials and becoming a part in something that promised hope for the future, whatever the emotional price would be on her side. No doubt her daughter accompanying her and staying by her side was helpful in what they were into and whatever would be demanded of them. Vicky Bohm, too, had to confront her mother’s past and not exclusively hers, and also had to dive much deeper into the topic and at the same time cope with the

consequences that arose out of all of that for herself. She listened to the stories of other survivors and had to learn to understand and also the chance to understand on an even different level than before. Insofar the witness accounts are more than merely pieces of evidence in a trial but moreover they are self-assurance which have a painful impact and that are likely to lead to the essence of a person. Vicky was preoccupied with Hedy's health and feared the return of the trauma; at the same time she hoped for healing and release. She witnessed Hedy's account of her experiences and her unveiling the most traumatic moments in the Lüneburg and Detmold courts. And Vicky Bohm was to say later how incredibly proud she was of her mother's dignified grace and was looking with awe at the strength of this person who had suffered so much and lost too much and who now was speaking up for her parents and ultimately also for herself – well-knowing who she was doing this for and what her responsibilities were. Maybe some of you assembled here tonight still remember well what and in which manner Hedy Bohm gave her witness account- who, by the way, was recently given the “woman of courage” award in Toronto.

Anybody who could not hear or read her accounts, can do this on the internet and also watch a documentary with Hedy and Vicky Bohm and others in the coming year.

In an enormous effort the 88-year-old gave an account of her sheltered childhood in Rumania, about a life in safety and under the shelter of her parents. As long as they were present she felt safe and secure. All this was torn apart and Hedy was sent to the ghetto with her parents and from there deported to Auschwitz in March 1944. To her walking impaired father who was on the spot degraded as “unworthy of life” because of this, she could not even say goodbye when he was separated from her parents. She also lost sight of her mother right away. “ I cried out after my mom. She heard me and turned, looking at me. Time stood still. I don't know if it was a moment, or a minute. I looked at her. Her eyes met mine. Then, without a word, she turned and marched on.” From now on Hedy had to fend for herself and live in a mood for which the German language has the word “mutterseelenallein”, meaning completely alone “mother-soul-alone.” After the procedures of disinfection, shaving and tattooing and having been clothed in prisoner's clothing, she did not recognize herself when she coincidentally saw herself and other prisoners mirrored in a window. She had to count the reflections of the faces in the window to make out which of the pale bald girls she was. Totally fallen out of time and place, alienated from herself- this image comprises the dehumanizing force of Auschwitz in one single scene.

At the beginning, in Lüneburg, Hedy Bohm was initially waiting for three words to be

uttered by Oskar Gröning whose attitude and demeanour she considered arrogant. These three words are “I am sorry”, and at a certain stage she even no longer expected those words anymore and she guessed that maybe Gröning would have profited the most of them.

When here in Detmold Reinhold Hanning read out his text, which he had not written himself and which contained an apology that did not seem to come from the heart lacking both truthfulness and honesty, she likewise was not surprised any more.

It was a missed opportunity- something that will still continue to have to be considered for some time.

What did not only increasingly irritate Hedy Bohm in the Detmold trial was Reinhold Hanning's demeanour who would sit there slightly sunken into himself and evoking the impression as if he had completely retreated into himself. He seemed detached from what was going on around him. This picture still remains with us and was shared worldwide by the media. When Hedy Bohm had read out her evidence, she looked directly at the accused – which had not been planned beforehand- and asked him whether he had understood what she had said. When there was no reaction visible, she said something some of you surely remember, “Mr. Hanning, look at me. Don't be afraid.” He had his lawyer state that he did hear and understand, he, however, would not wish to talk to her. Many weeks later Hedy Bohm told me, “I wonder what went through his mind. Did he feel anything? I will never know. Than he looked at me, meeting my eyes.”

It is almost beyond comprehension what happened in this moment when victim and culprit looked at each other, not only on the side of Hedy Bohm. To follow this was knowable and comprehensible would be presumptuous. Therefore these incidents point far beyond themselves. They are far more than that what could be heard and seen in the courtroom. Also this will still have to be considered for a long time.

“It is not important for me whether the verdict will be executed. The punishment itself is not important. I do not have feelings of revenge. We all have scars, most of them invisible. Nevertheless it hurts- an eternal shadow on your life. What is most important is that in Germany, in front of a German jury, and by German judges the culprit, the former SS-guard, has been declared guilty. This is nothing less than a miracle. And myself being part of this”, Hedy Bohm wrote to me only a couple of weeks ago, “is another miracle. And I am eternally grateful for this.”

For us the punishment of the culprits may be a self-evident matter of course, which was

accomplished very late but considering the age of those involved only just on time.

This trial, however, was a long-time wished for opportunity not only for Hedy Bohm to make something like peace, to take an incredibly heavy burden from her soul and stand up for her family and speak out not only for her parents but for the most part also lend her voice to those who were murdered. In this also those are included who had to endure not the November pogrom and much more and did not return and whose names can now be read on this memorial slate in Detmold.

For Hedy Bohm, she told me, the trials and sentences of Lüneburg and Detmold are like the flowers on her parents' graves that do not exist.

Taking this background into account, questioning the meaningfulness of these trials which might be the last of their kinds is out of the question.

We, as the generation born later, could and can listen first of all to the survivors having given evidence in the Detmold Auschwitz trial but then also to those of the second generation, individuals like Vicky Bohm, who can tell us so much and who can talk about the burden on their shoulders which their parents involuntarily passed on to them. There we have an obligation, too. There we also must confront the truth.

And in this sense I understand Hedy Bohm's words at the same time as an appeal to us, "Look at me. Don't be afraid."