



Forty roses on the death tracks

By Jürgen Werth

The last day. Blue sky over Auschwitz. Once again we stand by the tracks leading into the Birkenau death camp. Silently. Every one of us with a blood-red rose in their hand. We hear verses from Psalm 22, verses that Jews have prayed for thousands of years at the hour of their death. Jesus too. Here they have been cried out hundreds of thousands of times, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

One last time, we bow. Wordlessly. And lay our roses into the gravel bed.



Auschwitz, Oświećim. Almost 500 acres of horror. Cruelty. Here, 1.5 million people were tormented, tortured and murdered with ice-cold precision. Europe's largest cemetery, perhaps the largest in the world. We have visited the main camp and, one day later, also this extermination camp. We take our time, we need time. The inconceivable that has happened here cannot be grasped. Not in one day. Nor within several days. Over and over again, I remember a phrase from Paul Celan's Death Fugue: *"Death is a master from Germany."* Celan's parents perished in a German forced labour camp.

Yes, Germany. Our Germany. We shudder in the face of this mass extermination industry, devised with German thoroughness and the German sense of order. In one of the barracks at Birkenau, I read on the ceiling beams, *"Be honest!"* - *"Cleanliness = health!"* And *"Keep order!"*. Can it be any more German? Even more cynical?

Forty older people from Germany learn there and then what most of them have only known from books and films. A journey into the darkest chapter of German history was organized by Helmut Barthel and Regina Bäumer for the YMCA Seniors' Initiative. We



are especially glad to have each other in these days. How could you endure these impressions all by yourself! Because we feel exposed. And we face the facts. And formulate each and every one for themselves, what is likely the decisive message of this place: something like this must never happen again. Never again, not anywhere!

Thomas Brendel, former head of the YMCA Silesian Upper Lusatia, has prepared us knowledgeably and sensitively. In general, during our six-day trip to Poland, he proved to be a well-chosen travel guide, thought guide, soul guide. He knows his way around. He was here often. Especially with young people. He once told this to a young Pole. Who then asked him, "Were you *in Poland*, too?"

Were we? Oh yes! You bet! We got to know and love Breslau, the old capital of Silesia, which is now called Wroclaw. **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** was born here. In 1945, shortly before the end of World War 2, the Nazis executed him. In Flossenbürg, because Auschwitz had long since been liberated by the Russians. **Edith Stein** was also born here, the Christian convert, nun, philosopher. She was murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz in 1942.

We were in churches and synagogues. We met with brave members of the Protestant Church. The congregation has just 700 members in Wroclaw, but it is lively and cheerful. We strolled through vibrant places, learning, enjoying and eating, also learning in the process that in Poland there is no meal without soup.

We were in Krakow, the old capital of the Kingdom of Poland. We looked at the residence of Oskar Schindler. We walked across the Wawel, the rocky hill that still dominates the cityscape and was once the residence of Polish kings. Krakow Cathedral is also located here. To this day, for most Poles this is where their country's heart and soul are located.

We walked through the old Jewish quarter of Kazimierz. Around 65,000 Jews lived in the city before the Nazi era - today there are still 200. We met them at a touching and inspiring Klezmer concert.

Poland is alive. Lives today. Even if its history is omnipresent. We came to know a vibrant country. A country on the move -- but also, one that is threatened to be torn apart between Catholicism and secularism.

The past and the present: yesterday and today within six days. There is no today without yesterday and no tomorrow without today. Today it is we who write history. Not just our own little life story. We are participating in the writing of the history of our country. And that of the world.