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“We need more than just a commemorative plaque”

The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) is calling for a memorial to the Swiss victims of National Socialism. The memorial should also commemorate courageous Swiss citizens who offered protection and help to the persecuted, says OSA President Remo Gysin.

INTERVIEW: SUSANNE WENGER

For the first time, a book presents verifiable victim numbers. It shows that the number of Swiss who died in the Nazi concentration camps is much higher than the OSA assumed. Are you surprised?

Remo Gysin: No, I'm not surprised that we now know of more than twice as many murdered Swiss victims. Everything is still very much in the dark. Further research will prove that there was an even higher number of victims.

“It should also be used to raise awareness of the dangers posed by racism, antisemitism and discrimination.”

The book reveals that the Swiss authorities could have done more to save the victims. Did the federal government abandon Swiss Abroad?

There is no doubt that the Swiss authorities could have saved more lives. The Bergier report on Switzerland's role in the Second World War spelled this out clearly. The new book provides further evidence. For example, I would have liked the Federal Council of the time and the Swiss ambassador to Berlin to have had a different attitude. I am thinking here of the bravery of Carl Lutz, who saved ten thousand persecuted Hungarian Jews when he was a Swiss diplomat in Hungary.

In 2018, the Council of the Swiss Abroad supported the idea of setting up a memorial

to the Swiss concentration camp prisoners. What is the aim of such a memorial?

The memory of these victims should be preserved and strengthened. We should use this glimpse into the past as a lesson for the future, and to raise awareness of the dangers that racism, antisemitism and discrimination hold. I have in mind a memorial that encourages self-reflection, thought and discussion.

Where should the memorial be placed and what form should it take?

It must be a public, easily visible and accessible place that is worthy of a memorial expressing Switzerland's acknowledgement of its historical responsibility. I think Berne is the obvious choice. It could take various forms, and these options should be examined closely as the process continues. A steering group consisting of the OSA, ETH Zurich's Archives of Contemporary history, Jewish organisations and an expert in memorials is already at work. Contrary to my original opinion, it needs to be more than just a simple commemorative plaque.

What message should it convey?

It should commemorate all the victims, and in particular the Swiss victims of National Socialism and the Holocaust. I also think it would be appropriate to remember Swiss citizens who fought against National Socialism or offered protection and help to the persecuted.

Who should finance the memorial?

At present, there has been no definitive decision on the matter. As a

member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, Switzerland has committed to preserving the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, so I believe the federal government will support and finance the project, possibly with the support of the cantons and the local municipality.

Are further steps required to reappraise this period of history?

Besides the memorial, the current developments in society and politics show us that there is a need for further intensive research and teaching, a comprehensive information concept and educational offers at different school levels.



Remo Gysin: Remo Gysin has presided over the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad since 2015. Before that, the doctor of economics led the Social Democratic party in the Swiss parliament for twelve years. He was a regional councillor in Canton Basel-Stadt for eight years.