

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 48 (2021)
Heft: 4

Artikel: Preventing words from turning into deeds again
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051924>

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Preventing words from turning into deeds again

Switzerland intends to create a national memorial to the victims of the Nazis. Politicians have responded favourably to a proposal put together by a handful of organisations – a project group that also aims to combat current-day prejudice and exclusion.

SUSANNE WENGER

At the end of May, five organisations – including the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) – presented the Federal Council with a detailed plan for the creation of a memorial site in the city of Berne. They said that the purpose of the site was to remember Swiss whom the Nazi regime “persecuted, disenfranchised or murdered for being Jewish, for being political opponents, or for other reasons”. The monument would also be dedicated to those who resisted the Nazis or offered protection or help to people who were persecuted. Furthermore, it would commemorate the unfortunate men, women and children whom the Swiss authorities refused to rescue.

Some 150 initial signatories (including numerous celebrities) and 30 organisations have given their backing to the proposal. There are already a number of private commemorative plaques etc. around the country. For example,

Forgotten Swiss victims

In a book published at the end of 2019, three journalists from German-speaking Switzerland looked at the fate of Swiss concentration camp prisoners, of whom most were expatriates (see edition 1/2021 of “Swiss Review”). An updated version of this much-noted book is now available in French. “After the book came out, readers contacted us to give us information on previously omitted Swiss cases,” says co-author Benno Tuchs Schmid. The sources were compiled and verified, and the supplemented book now covers 749 Nazi victims with Swiss connections. One of the new additions is Henryka Sigmann, a Jewish woman who, along with her husband and two of her five children, was arrested in the Netherlands and deported to Auschwitz, where she was murdered in 1943. Eugène Edouard Scheuch died at Gusen concentration camp in 1945 after being arrested two years previously in France for unlawful possession of firearms.

“Les victimes oubliées du 3e Reich” (The forgotten victims of the Third Reich). By Balz Spörri, René Staubli and Benno Tuchs Schmid. Editions Alphil, 384 pages. CHF 29, EUR 25. Available from October 2021.

“Stolpersteine” (stumbling stones) were laid at the end of last year. These brass square plaques affixed on top of cuboid concrete blocks – already well known in Germany and France – were installed into the pavement in front of the former homes of several Swiss victims in Zurich. “But now is the time for us to have an official monument funded by the federal government,” says OSA President Remo Gysin.

Remembering the horrors

It is important to preserve the memory of the unimaginable horrors of the Holocaust and Nazi terror in Switzerland too, not least with an eye to the younger generation, says Ralph Lewin, president of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities. In addition to an aesthetic public memorial, the aim is to include an educational and information programme that can also be accessed online. This is because there was minimal public awareness of there being any Swiss Nazi victims until a few years ago, whereas recent research shows that around 1,000 people with Swiss connections suffered in concentration camps, of whom more than 200 were killed.

Zurich social democrat Albert Mülli (1916–1997) survived the Dachau concentration camp. He had smuggled pamphlets to Vienna in 1938. On being liberated from Dachau, Mülli was told by the Swiss authorities that he had “only himself to blame”. It all took its toll –overwhelming him as he got older, as Mülli’s daughter Ursula Zellweger recalls. “It is high time that the Swiss government ack-



Remembering also means putting names and faces to the victims – Albert Mülli was imprisoned at Dachau concentration camp. Photo: Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv



The authors of the memorial proposal submitting their project to the Federal Council. Photo: Keystone

nowledged this,” she says. Former federal judge Vera Rottenberg, 77, also supports the memorial proposal. When she was a baby, Rottenberg and her Jewish family only narrowly escaped deportation from German-occupied Budapest in 1944. Because Vera’s mother had lost her Swiss citizenship by marrying a Hungarian, the family were initially refused repatriation. It was only thanks to the determined intervention of a diplomat that they were able to flee. “Harald

Feller was the diplomat,” says Rottenberg, adding that too little is known about him and other courageous Swiss men and women who saved people in their hour of need.

Standing up for democracy

The authors of the proposal believe it is important to make reference to the present day. “The massive increase in anti-Semitism on social media worries us,” says Lewin. Hate speech, discrimination, and racism need to be combated. Because as history shows: “Thoughts turned into words, words turned into deeds.” The memorial is intended to increase awareness of core values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Parliament supports the plan for an official Swiss remembrance site. Before the summer recess, the Council of States unanimously approved a motion to this effect from the SP politician Daniel Jositsch. Numerous members of parliament across the political spectrum signed an identical motion from Alfred Heer (SVP) in the National Council. The government is also open to the proposal. Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis (FDP) said that the Federal Council wanted to play an active part in creating a memorial. The government cannot impose the project, the impetus must come from the people – which it does in this instance, he acknowledged.



“Stolpersteine” (stumbling stones) commemorating the victims of National Socialism have now been laid in Swiss cities too. Photo: Keystone

www.swissmemorial.ch | www.stolpersteine.ch