

The story of the Children of Bullenhuser Damm

In April 1945 the Allied armies have pressed far into National Socialist Germany. The outcome of the war has been decided long ago. But not until 8 May is a conditional surrender signed. Up to that point, those who are aware of the crimes they have perpetrated have been busily erasing as much evidence as possible.

At this time, 20 Jewish children are living in Neuengamme Concentration Camp outside Hamburg. They are aged between five and 12 years. There are ten girls and ten boys, including two pairs of siblings. For months, the SS doctor Kurt Heißmeyer has been maltreating them as test objects for medical experiments: he has injected live tuberculosis bacilli under their skin and used probes to introduce them into the lungs. Then he has operatively removed their lymph glands. In an interrogation in 1964, Heißmeyer declared that for him "there is no difference in principle between Jews and laboratory animals".

On 20 April 1945 the children, and four of the adult prisoners who have been looking after them in the camp, are brought to a large school building in Hamburg. It is almost midnight when they arrive. The adults are the two French doctors, Gabriel Florence and René Quenouille, and the Dutchmen Dirk Deutekom and Anton Hölzel. This is the school on Bullenhuser Damm, which serves as a satellite to the Neuengamme Concentration Camp. The group is brought into the cellars. The adults are hanged from a pipe under the ceiling in the boiler room. The children are injected with morphine and then, sleeping, hanged from hooks on the wall. SS man Johann Frahm hangs on to the children with his whole body weight, because they are so thin that the noose does not close. In a hearing in 1946 Frahm said, he had "hung the children up on the wall like pictures". None of them cries.

Then the next group of 24 Soviet prisoners-of-war is hanged. No one knows what their names are to this day.

Then, as if the children's murder had never taken place, life in Hamburg continued as usual. The school became a school again, although its pupils were never told about the events that had taken place in the cellars of the building. No search was ever made for the parents and families of the victims. The perpetrators of the crime were soon forgotten. Every year a handful of ex-Neuengamme fellow prisoners brought flowers to Bullenhuser Damm.

In the Curio-Haus trials in 1946 some defendants implicated the former superintendent of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp subsidiary camp in Hamburg, Arnold Strippel, of being involved in the murders at Bullenhuser Damm. In 1949 Strippel was convicted of murders committed in Buchenwald Concentration Camp and condemned to serial life sentences; in 1969 he was released, however, and paid financial compensation. An investigation into Strippel's involvement at Bullenhuser Damm by the Hamburg state prosecutor's office was shelved in 1967 because of "insufficient evidence".



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BACKGROUND

International remembrance

The fate of the 20 children also preoccupies people in other countries:

In 1996 a playground with a rose garden was laid out in Verona, Italy, and named after Sergio De Simone and in Naples a school was named for him in 1997. In 2007 a centrally located park in Milan was dedicated to the memory of the 20 murdered children. In Eindhoven in the Netherlands, remembrance ceremonies are held for the Hornemann brothers after whom a park has been named. In France a travelling exhibition was put on in recent years. Biographies of the children are displayed in the Auschwitz museum and in many other memorials world wide.

BACKGROUND

Curio-Haus trials

In 1946 the crime was reconstructed during the Curio-Haus trials and five of the perpetrators were condemned to death. In the 1960s, former prisoners of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp pressed for a public memorial and a memorial plaque in the school building. During this period, the SS doctor Kurt Heißmeyer was arrested in East Germany (GDR) and condemned to life imprisonment.

In the same year, lawyer Barbara Hüsing laid a charge of murder against Strippel on behalf of the relatives, which prompted the public prosecutor to reopen the investigation. The case was shelved again in 1987. In order to draw attention to the failure of the German justice system, the Children of Bullenhuser Damm association organized an “international tribunal” in 1986. Those giving evidence before the tribunal included relatives and former prisoners of Neuengamme Concentration Camp, as well as legal experts.

PUBLICATION

Der SS-Arzt und die Kinder vom Bullenhuser Damm



Günther Schwarberg, 1988
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Some of the children’s relatives had survived the ghettos and concentration camps. But despite intensive searches over many years they still did not know for sure what had happened to the children. Many of the survivors had also lost their possessions – and thus their personal mementoes through the process of deportation. The few photos which relatives who had emigrated or gone underground had managed to keep were the only remaining reminders of the children.

Then, 33 years after the terrible event, journalist Günther Schwarberg discovered the story and published a series of articles called “The SS Doctor and the Children” in the magazine Stern. After many years of research in many countries, Schwarberg had managed to track down some relatives of the children. Schwarberg preserved the children’s story for posterity in his book, “The Murders at Bullenhuser Damm: The SS Doctor and the Children”, which was translated into six languages. The relatives of 17 of the 20 children have been traced so far.

Children came to the remembrance ceremony in the school at Bullenhuser Damm for the first time on 20 April 1979 and with them came 2,000 Hamburg residents. The Children of Bullenhuser Damm association was founded to keep alive the memory of the children. It maintains close contact with relatives. The honorary president is Philippe Kohn of Paris, the brother of Georges-André Kohn.

Since 1980, the cellars of the building have housed a memorial. In 2010/2011 addition space in the basement was converted to be used for a new exhibition. Today, the memorial in the school at Bullenhuser Damm is not only an important place of remembrance for Hamburg and an extramural place of learning for schools, it is also internationally known.

A rose garden for the children of Bullenhuser Damm was laid out in which many thousand people have planted rose trees in memory of the children. In 1991 in the newly developed Hamburg suburb of Schnelsen-Burgwedel, streets, a kindergarten, a play house and a park have been named after some of the 20 children. The remembrance ceremony which takes place every year on 20 April is attended by many Hamburg citizens.



Chaim Altman, uncle of Mania Altman, at the tribunal in Bullenhuser Damm, 1986. Chaim Altman emigrated after the war to the USA with his wife Hilde and Mania’s mother. Pola Altman died in Chicago in 1971. She never found out how her daughter was murdered.
© Günther Schwarberg archives

BACKGROUND

International tribunal 1986

In 1986 a tribunal lasting several days took place in the Bullenhuser Damm memorial. The tribunal was composed of legal experts from the various countries affected. The tribunal was chaired by the former constitutional judge Martin Hirsch. The tribunal set out to discover why one of the main suspects of the infanticide, Arnold Strippel, was never put on trial. The tribunal did not attempt to be an “ersatz” court. It investigated the juridical background to the long years of inaction on the part of German federal justice with regard to Nazi crimes. During the procedures, extracts from the transcript of proceedings of the “Curio-Haus trials” were read out and witnesses, relatives and legal experts were questioned. In the view of the legal experts there was no excuse for the German juridical authorities having dragged their feet, and that this was typical of the treatment of Nazi crimes by the German justice system.