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Denied Dignity
A Contemporary Comment

Introductory Remarks

I was in Goslar a few days ago and was showing some private foreign guests the Imperial Palace before which two great bronze equestrian statues stand covered in green patina.

They date from the year 1900 and show the emperor, Wilhelm the First, who was the German emperor from 1871 – 1888, and the emperor Friedrich the First Barbarossa who was the German King and Holy Roman Emperor from 1152 – 1190.

Before we got close to them, we went past a garden with sculptures and memorials in front of the palace. There one can see a very big naked figure of a man in steel, even bigger than the emperor, together with two relatively big memorial stones with long inscriptions and a frame on which a very old bell hangs.

They were and are dedicated to the millions of German victims who were displaced at the end of the war, and also to the German dead from this war. They represent a deep emotional sadness for these war experiences and were erected by the responsible authorities in Goslar between 1946 and 1955.

Nobody can say anything against this.

But, there is no memorial dedicated to those prisoners of war who died, or those people from other countries, who died from forced or slave labour in the Goslar area.

I do not formulate this as a criticism or an accusation.

It shows us that in Goslar one had not understood the terrible sacrifice of the war as a political and moral catastrophe, but rather as a personal and individual issue.

In this way, one spared oneself the uncomfortable question about one's own responsibility. A responsibility that also arises through indifference and ignorance.

We Germans mourned the approximately 1 million German prisoners of war who died in soviet prison camps after the war. But, we did not mourn the 3 million foreigners, mainly soviet soldiers, who under the control and responsibility of the German

army, died between 1941 to 1945, with 100,000 of them actually dying in Niedersachsen.

This book, which is being presented here today, is about Burgdorf and those who were there in forced or slave labour, as prisoners of war and as displaced foreign people. Its publication has come late. But, it is a commemorative and commendable work.

One cannot be thankful enough that the instigators and authors of this work have taken up the problem of forced or slave labour in the local area.

For, it is undeniable that the naming of factories, farms, streets and neighbourhoods must be connected with those who were then active and responsible. They were, in part, the fathers or grand-fathers of people living in the town today.

As a result, it is unavoidable to ask about the behaviour of fathers, grand-fathers and also sometimes mothers with regard to these foreign people.

Many simple German people were glad to hear in those days that they were biologically superior to Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, and Jews.

Such people also existed in Burgdorf.

In Burgdorf, people who spoke differently were discriminated against, people who presented themselves differently, or who did not comply with the normal German way of doing things were discriminated against.

In Burgdorf, the lunacy of the "Blutschande", was accepted and young people who had nothing more than love in their heads were criminalised.

In Burgdorf, women in forced labour were denounced because they were too slow, or because they ate something without asking, or because they didn't comply with other expectations and as a result, were sent to a concentration camp.

For me, the most impressive outcome from these carefully researched individual stories is to understand how widely spread the readiness to denunciate others was. Not only were foreign workers denounced, but also German neighbours and colleagues who handled their allocated workers in an orderly and humane way.

One can hardly believe that you were criminally liable when you allowed workers in forced labour to sit together with you at your table to eat a meal with you.

I know personally that such things happened. In the village where I grew up, there was a Polish worker who was denounced. It was claimed that he had committed "Blutschande". He was executed. A lot of the local people were part of it.

The book presented here contains different aspects which are to do with the presence of foreign people in Burgdorf. It gives us insights into the housing and working situation then.

We are made to take notice of the fact that alongside private neighbourhoods and places of work in the town like households, workshops, businesses, and farms, there was also mass accommodation in camps.

While on the way to work from a labour camp, the East European workers were not allowed to use the sidewalk or pavement. To give them food or to throw them food was forbidden.

According to our way of thinking today, those are unacceptable rules. We demand respect for the dignity of a human being today.

A better awareness of Christian understanding should have demanded another kind of behaviour.

Another fact is also of interesting value.

Fire brigade units and youth groups were stationed in Burgdorf and were used for firefighting after bombing attacks even as far away as Berlin.

Their politicisation is convincingly described.

When we talk about war, we tend to have a view of only what happens at the front. However, the administration and security of the state must also be maintained.

Up to 15 million men were under arms at that time. This meant that many functions of the state had to be taken over by women and young people.

These duties had to be carried out with the presence of up to 10 million workers in forced labour. This increased the complexity of the interrelationship.

The book opens up new local insights in this respect.

Of special importance are the remarks about the DP-Camps, (Displaced Person Camps), after the war.

Surprisingly, one notes the high the number of people who did not want to return in any way to their home countries after they had come under soviet control.

Stalin had identified all soviet citizens, who had been taken prisoner or who had been taken to Germany to serve as forced labour, as cowards and possible traitors.

In fact, millions had already been deported to soviet forced labour camps in Siberia and this had become known.

So the partly aggressive reactions of Ukrainian people towards the soviet presence are of some topicality and the hostile reactions towards Soviet or Russian power then become understandable.

For this reason, many who had no citizenship and lived in Displaced People Camps, like in Burgdorf, wanted to stay in Germany or to move on to other countries.

In Lower Saxony, we have often heard and talked about the Displaced People's Camp situated in the barracks area at Bergen-Belsen.

That was the Camp where Jewish people waited for their departure for America or Palestine.

They maintained schools, produced newspapers and designed a culture programme until they could leave the camp.

It is moving to read in our book how also in the Displaced People's Camp, known as 'Ohio', in Burgdorf, people endeavoured to find a way of life as well as a future in free western countries.

This book allows us to see how closely the criminal events of the Nazi era were connected with the difficult post-war situation.

That this has been so little discussed in Germany is very much to do with the German people being so occupied with their own re-building programme following the war.

This allowed, consciously or unconsciously, little room for an appropriate consideration of the prisoners of war and forced labour workers in Germany.

It is, therefore, of very great importance that in this book the truth is brought to our awareness and connected to a clear locality. This truth shows that the suffering of those people at that time was more complex than our own understandable fate in a country where almost everything had to be re-built.

One can rightly say that this book presents a necessary extension of our view about the history of our homeland.

The inclination or tendency of many who are engaged in local history has been to avoid the details of circumstances which are connected with the National Socialist era. This book has not followed this direction.

That is the very great value of this publication.

The dignity of a human being exists not only in his physical integrity and the respect he receives.

It exists also in an honest and conscious memory of the life and suffering of a human being and his or her relatives and dependents.

An example of this is found with great vividness at the end of the book.

Harald Scherdin-Wendlandt describes the loss of contact to his natural father and his eventual discovery in Australia after many decades of searching for him.

In conclusion, I would like to say that the town of Burgdorf can be proud of the people who have written this book. They have worked with great attention to detail in archives and in discussions with contemporary witnesses.

They have honestly re-appraised an important part of the history of your town.

They have created a source from which adults, young people, schools and other educational institutions can work and discuss these facts effectively.

Perhaps, that is more important and of greater value than the memorials that I saw in front of the imperial palace in Goslar.