

## Stumbling Blocks: MAKING PLACES TALK



**The interview with Dr. Nicola Wenge, DZOK (Dokumentationszentrum Oberer Kuhberg Ulm e.V.) was conducted by Bertram Wegemer**

*Why are these Stumbling Blocks an important part of German remembrance culture?*

The basic idea of the Stumbling Blocks is that people stumble over people's destinies and names, of people who suffered at this very place unimaginable hardships during the National Socialist era. The Stumbling Blocks create a bridge between the world of the people of today and the people of that time. It is a task of memorial work in general, to create time zones where people can understand what had been in the past. To make the places speak. However, we also have to tell the stories.

*The first Stumbling Block in Germany was laid in Cologne in 1992 by the artist **Gunter Demnig**. How do you personally feel about the engagement of this artist?*

I have an enormous respect for his life's work, that he very unpretentiously found an artistic form of remembrance for the victims of National Socialism that makes many people think and motivates them to work for the culture of remembrance. I think that's great - personally, but also as the head of the local Nazi Documentation Centre that deals with precisely these questions.

*In Ulm, the first 14 stones were laid in May 2015. What was the reaction to this?*

The city wasn't all that enthusiastic at first because a memorial book for the victims of the Holocaust was being prepared at the time. It is important to create a scientific basis for remembrance. In a few sessions with those involved, we have considered when and where would be a good moment to lay the Stumbling Blocks. In 2015 the first laying took place and the city's reaction to it was incredibly positive. It has also shown that it was not a flash in the pan action, and that there is a continuous interest from citizens who accompany the Stumbling Blocks to this day. In other cities, there had been disputes with house owners who did not want the Stumbling Blocks to be laid in front of their property. We didn't have that at all.

*Not only the artist, but the city and the organisers are involved...*

Yes, for one particular group the Stumbling Blocks are incredibly important, these are the relatives of the victims. I find it remarkable that the initiative and the Documentation Centre have repeatedly succeeded in establishing contact and also in taking care of this group. And that people get underway to participate in laying of the Stumbling Blocks. This is a very important gesture of honour and for that alone this project is worthwhile. I think the importance of the connection of the second and the third generation to the cities from which their ancestors were expelled, abducted and murdered has long been underestimated. It is important that there are people today in this very city where the crimes took place, who not only distance themselves from the crimes of the National Socialists, but by these Stumbling Blocks they also honour the people who were killed by the Nazis. The history of these people, their existence, were to be erased from history. And that's exactly why the Stumbling Blocks and the biographies behind the names have an important function.

*How are the Stumbling Blocks received in the city today, at this time of resurgent racism?*

The Stumbling Blocks have established themselves as a natural part of the culture of remembrance, just like the Oberer Kuhberg concentration camp memorial, just like many other initiatives and memorials that exist in the city. I really don't see the situation getting any worse. In connection with the so-called "Corona walks", there are always attacks on the culture of remembrance or very weird comparisons with dictatorships, including the appropriation of victims. But so far, the Stumbling Blocks have not been affected.

*How is the cooperation with other organizations and with the relatives of the victims?*

The city archive is always there to advise when it comes to clarifying historical background. That's very important, and I've already mentioned the city, which helps with practical, organizational and ideological questions. However, other institutions are also involved. For example, the Theatre Ulm, when actors have performed at a laying. And of course, we as the DZOK can utilize the network of contacts with the relatives.

*How can the message of the Stumbling Blocks be passed on?*

The Stumbling Blocks alone do not speak. We have to provide the people with the background. We need to tell the stories that make the places speak. The Ulm Stumbling Block initiative, for example, puts the biographies of those whose names are on the stones on the Internet. Then you have not only the names and dates of the people, but also learn something about their personalities, about the family history. We need to include communication channels that young people use. For example, we are also on Instagram. Many of the younger ones do not even know what their ancestors did under National Socialism. But many also come to us from other cultures and we have to make connections: Why is this topic so important in our society?