

Press release

FORCED LABOR 1939 - 1945 MEMORY AND HISTORY

A digital archive for education and research

A cooperation between the Foundation "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future", Freie Universität Berlin and the German Historical Museum

600 former forced laborers from 26 countries remember the past

Berlin, 22 January 2009. The online archive on the theme of forced labor under National Socialism in Germany was presented to the public for the first time on Thursday. The internet portal "Forced Labor 1939-1945" commemorates the more than 12 million people who were forced to work for Nazi Germany. 590 eyewitnesses from 26 countries tell their life stories in 393 audio interviews and 190 video interviews. *"Many survivors from Central and Eastern Europe talk for the first time about their suffering and the difficult times many of them faced after 1945. By supporting the online archive, the Foundation "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future" is working to keep alive the memory of these victims of National Socialism and at the same time making their life stories accessible to young people and academics for the purpose of political education and research,"* explained Günther Saathoff, Member of the Board of Directors of the Foundation at a press conference held in Berlin on Thursday. Visitors to the website can call up the statements and recollections of Jewish and non-Jewish concentration camp inmates, Sinti and Roma, forced laborers who worked in the mines, industry or agriculture, as well as those of Italian military internees and Soviet prisoners of war.

Work on the online archive started in 2004. 32 teams from international institutions recorded the testimonies of former forced laborers on a total of 2,000 tapes. In 2007, the Foundation and the Freie Universität Berlin signed a cooperation agreement on the compilation and preparation of the interviews. This was the start signal for the academic team under Professor Dr Gertrud Pickhan and Professor Dr Nicolas Apostolopoulos who then commenced assigning keywords, digitising the audio and video tapes and setting up the online archive. *"With the wealth of material available, the collection opens up innumerable possibilities to gain new insights – it is a treasure trove, and not only for historians,"* enthused Dr Pickhan, Chair of Eastern and Central European History at the Institute for East-European Studies of the Freie Universität. The primary aim of the online archive is to give researchers access to information on a variety of aspects of Nazi forced labor. Professor Dr Ursula Lehmkuhl, First Vice President of the Freie Universität Berlin, explains: *"Autobiographical material, especially when not exclusively in written form, has great educational potential and opens up new paths to understanding for the younger generation. Nothing documents a particular epoch or historical event more realistically than first-hand accounts."*

The online service is currently open to students, researchers and teachers. More detailed educational materials, such as short film biographies, classroom materials and a DVD will be available and publicly presented in autumn to mark the 70th anniversary of the beginning of the war.



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In 2007, the German Historical Museum also joined the project as partner. A multimedia work station containing 12 interviews has been installed at the museum and was opened for public use on Thursday. The reports and documents are now part of the museum's permanent exhibition. The interview partners were selected to represent the major victim groups among the forced laborers: a Ukrainian *Ostarbeiterin* (female worker from the East), a Polish forced laborer, a Soviet prisoner of war, slave laborers from concentration camps and an Italian military internee report on the various kinds of work they had to do in industry, agriculture, mining and private households. The interviews can be selected under various categories, for example "Origins and family", "Work and terror", "Return and emigration". Users can access additional information in the form of introductory texts as well as facts and figures on forced labor. The video interviews have German subtitles.

"With the reopening of the permanent exhibition in June 2006, befitting space was found in the museum for its displays on foreign workers and forced laborers under the National Socialist dictatorship. And we can add an extra dimension to this theme through the inclusion of the interview excerpts from former forced laborers on the newly installed work station. The particular value of this form of display is that it gives us a direct link to the culture of remembrance and to historical accounts as related by those affected," says Dr Dieter Vorsteher, Deputy President and head curator at the German Historical Museum in Berlin.

The project is also supported by Professor Felix Kolmer, Vice President of the International Auschwitz Committee and member of the advisory committee of the "Forced Labor 1939–1945" project. *"As former forced laborers, it is important for us that we do not differentiate or establish a victim hierarchy that distinguishes between Jewish and non-Jewish victims, or between Polish, Czech, Ukrainian, Russian or Italian forced laborers in this eyewitness archive. All of these forced laborers, who together make up a cross-section of the whole system of German forced labor, are represented by their experiences of suffering and survival and joined together in a common expression of remembrance."*

Various speakers talked about particular aspects of the online portal at the press conference held at the German Historical Museum on 22 January 2009, including Günter Saathoff (Member of the Board of Directors of the Foundation "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future") Ursula Lehmkuhl (First Vice President of the Freie Universität Berlin), Dieter Vorsteher (Deputy President and head curator at the German Historical Museum in Berlin), Gertrud Pickhan (Project Manager, Chair of Eastern and Central European History at the Institute for East-European Studies of the Freie Universität Berlin) and Felix Kolmer (eyewitness, Vice President of the International Auschwitz Committee, member of the advisory committee of the project "Forced Labor 1939–1945").

Eyewitness Helena Bohle-Szacki was also present to answer questions. Ms Bohle-Szacki was born in 1928 into a German-Polish-Jewish family in eastern Poland. In 1944, she was a forced laborer at the Ravensbruck concentration camp. She survived the death march in 1945. After the war, she studied art in Poland (Łódz) and has lived in Berlin since 1969.

The press release, photographs of former forced laborers and background materials are available to members of the press at:

www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/presse/pressematerial

For further information on the interview collection on "Forced Labor 1939-1945" go to:
www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de

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