

## Remembrance work within the Volkswagen Group

Volkswagenwerk GmbH was founded in 1937 as a company of *Deutsche Arbeitsfront* (DAF – German Labor Front), the largest National Socialist organization in the former German Reich. In 1939, the company was integrated in the armaments industry of the Nazi state. As a result, Volkswagen employed some 20,000 forced laborers. These included about 5,000 concentration camp inmates who were transferred from Auschwitz to the factory on the Mittellandkanal.

Initially, forced labor was not a prominent issue in society or in the company in the Federal Republic of Germany. It was only in the 1980s that the topic gradually attracted public attention. In 1986, Volkswagen commissioned Prof. Dr. Hans Mommsen of the University of Bochum to produce a study on forced labor at Volkswagen. The book published by Mommsen with his co-author Manfred Grieger in 1996 under the title of “Das Volkswagenwerk und seine Arbeiter im Dritten Reich” (Volkswagenwerk and its workers in the Third Reich) brought Volkswagen AG a leading role in reappraising its own corporate history.

While work on the study was in progress, Volkswagen supported humanitarian projects in the countries of Volkswagen’s forced labor victims, including Israel. Programs of visits allowed victims to return to the location where they had performed forced labor more than 40 years before. A stone of remembrance for the wrong suffered by forced labor victims was inaugurated in 1991 at Entrance 2 on Südstraße. At about the same time, a former air raid shelter was reopened as a Place of Remembrance. This structure had provided forced laborers with protection against air raids during the war.

Upon the foundation of the Corporate Archive, now known as “Heritage”, responsibility for the Place of Remembrance was transferred to this unit and the exhibition in the Place of Remembrance was professionally updated. The “Place of Remembrance of Forced Labor in the Volkswagen Factory “ was opened on December 17, 1999. Every year, about 3,500 internal and external international guests are guided through the permanent exhibition by members of the Heritage team.

A humanitarian fund was established by Volkswagen AG in 1998 in connection with a discussion concerning individual humanitarian aid for victims of forced labor. Volkswagen AG was also a co-founder of the German foundation which developed out of a fund created by German industry and the German government (with a capital of €5.2 billion) which made individual compensation payments in the amount of DM 10,000 each available to individuals who were personally affected from 2001 onwards. The remaining funds support the work of the foundation EVZ - Stiftung Erinnerung Verantwortung Zukunft.

From 1998 onwards, the humanitarian fund of Volkswagen AG made payments to about 2,150 affected individuals who could make plausible claims that they had been assigned to forced labor at the former Volkswagenwerk GmbH. These payments were handled by KPMG. Double payments were not made.

For some time even after the turn of the millennium, groups of former forced laborers visited the Volkswagen plant in Wolfsburg, especially on days of remembrance, to see this location which was so important for them and to show it to their family members. They were supported by a member of the Corporate Archive team. To this very day, victims of Nazi persecution who survived in the Volkswagen context such as Sara Frenkel and Sally Perel, come regularly to Wolfsburg, make presentations and are available for discussions. An exhibition concerning the story of Sally Perel’s

survival was recently held in the Heritage unit (from September 13 to November 9, 2018). Sara Frenkel-Bass was most recently a visitor to Volkswagen in Wolfsburg in May 2019. More and more children and grandchildren of former forced laborers are now contacting Volkswagen; during visits to the plant, they also receive support from the Heritage team, for example with individual guided tours of the Place of Remembrance.

Eyewitness reports by former forced laborers and survivors are available on the Heritage website as an e-book that can be downloaded free of charge. A printed edition is available to those who visit the Place of Remembrance. It provides deeper insight into the lives and work of former forced laborers.

## **Memorial Site work in Auschwitz – a joint project of Volkswagen and the International Auschwitz Committee (IAC)**

At the time when Volkswagen decided to commission the study by Hans Mommsen, the company already considered that it would be necessary to combine the historic research work with a future-oriented element in the form of intensifying Volkswagen's international youth and cultural work. For this reason, Volkswagen AG participated in the International Youth Meeting Center (IYMC) at Auschwitz, by providing funds in addition to many other donors. Volkswagen especially participated by providing ideas and practical support. This is reflected by the fact that the Volkswagen Group Board Member responsible for Human Resources, Gunnar Kilian, and Ines Doberanzke-Milnikel, Volkswagen Group Academy, are members of the committee of the International Youth Meeting Center foundation.

Work on the Memorial Site and the international youth meetings in Oświęcim have been a joint project of the International Auschwitz Committee (IAC) and Volkswagen for over 30 years. In 1987, Volkswagen enabled apprentices from Wolfsburg to take part in a seminar at the Auschwitz Concentration Camp Memorial Site for the first time. Nowadays, several groups of apprentices travel to Oświęcim every year. Together with young people from Poland, they live in the IYMC for about two weeks and work in the restoration workshop of the Concentration Can Memorial Site, the main Auschwitz concentration camp and the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. They make a significant contribution to improving the fabric of historic buildings and artifacts in order to maintain this monument for future generations. The apprentices excavate former paths or the foundations of huts, repair barbed wire fences, install new foundations, preserve the shoes of the victims and speak to eyewitnesses who survived Auschwitz.

The focus is also on youth encounters and learning from history together. At Auschwitz, apprentices from all German and Polish plants as well as Polish vocational college students meet and work together on the project. The educational objective is to keep remembrance alive and to sensitize the young people to the importance of international understanding, human rights and democracy.

This objective is underpinned by the works agreement "Partnerschaftliches Verhalten am Arbeitsplatz" (behavior at the workplace in a spirit of partnership) which has been in force at Volkswagen since 1996. This was the first time that a major company had adopted a binding regulation of this type. Under this agreement, there is a commitment to counteract all types of

discrimination for racial, xenophobic or religious reasons by educational measures in vocational and advanced training.

Cooperation between the Volkswagen Group and the IAC has been extended to projects for master craftsmen and craftswomen (2009) and other managers (2008) from the Group. They can visit the Auschwitz Memorial Site during a four-day seminar. The program includes encounters with survivors of the Holocaust and Auschwitz extermination camp as well as discussions with apprentices from Germany and Poland who are living in the IYMC at the same time. Seminars and tours of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp Memorial Site are organized and supported by the Vice-President of the International Auschwitz Committee, Christoph Heubner.

Over the past 30 years, the project “Auschwitz – Remembrance and Future“ has brought together more than 3,800 German and Polish apprentices, vocational college students, master craftspeople and managers at the Auschwitz Concentration Camp Remembrance Site and the International Youth Meeting Centre Auschwitz/Oświęcim.

Memorial Site work at Auschwitz and at the “Place of Remembrance of Forced Labor in the Volkswagen Factory “are supported equally strongly by employee representative bodies and management. They are key elements in the culture of remembrance and therefore the corporate culture of the Volkswagen Group. Nowadays, Volkswagen stands for tolerance, internationality and cosmopolitanism.

The International Auschwitz Committee (IAC) was founded in 1952 by survivors to ensure that Auschwitz would not be forgotten. The committee includes organizations, foundations and Holocaust survivors from 19 countries. Information on the committee is available in English, French, German and Polish at [www.auschwitz.info](http://www.auschwitz.info).

About 1.5 million people were murdered by the Nazi regime at Auschwitz concentration camp and the extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Red Army of the former Soviet Union liberated about 6,000 survivors on January 27, 1945..

Wolfsburg, December 2019