

## Historical outline

75 years ago: end of the Second World War at Volkswagen and in Wolfsburg:

### **"Hour Zero?" A new start!**

**75 years ago, the Second World War came to an end in the Brunswick region. By that time, Allied air raids had caused extensive devastation and claimed many lives. The infrastructure, roads and rail systems as well as industrial facilities including the Volkswagen plant at Wolfsburg (then still known as "Stadt des KdF-Wagens") had been destroyed or severely damaged. On April 11, 1945, the Americans liberated the city and the plant. Shortly afterwards, they started production of "Volkswagen Jeeps" – in fact continuing the assembly of *Kübelwagen* utility vehicles.**

As a Nazi prestige project, the German Labor Front had financed the construction of a plant on the Mittellandkanal to produce the Volkswagen developed by Ferdinand Porsche from 1938 onwards. People in Germany were thrilled by the Volkswagen idea and Nazi propaganda exploited this enthusiasm for its own purposes. A model National Socialist city was to be built for the employees of the new factory, which created an almost utopian impression. Work on the city started at the same time as the construction of the plant. The name of the new city, "Stadt des KdF-Wagens" referred to the German Labor Front organization "Kraft durch Freude" (strength through joy), which was to promote sales of the Volkswagen through an installment savings plan. The new city was initially dominated by wooden sheds used to house Italian workers who had been brought in to provide support for the construction of the factory. There were only a few brick buildings, including some houses for senior staff of the plant on Steimker Berg and some workers' flats near to the plant.

When the plant was completed, World War II had already started in September 1939. As a result, all construction work on the plant itself and the city came to a halt. The Italian workers left the city and headed back home. Volkswagenwerk GmbH became part of the German armaments industry. As the Volkswagen was a civilian vehicle, it could not be produced during the war and the brand-new factory was soon used for armaments production. From 1940 onwards, the plant also assembled military vehicles for the German army designed by Porsche on the basis of the Volkswagen; these included the *Kübelwagen* utility car and the *Schwimmwagen* amphibious vehicle. The absent workforce was replaced from 1940 by forced laborers from countries occupied by the Wehrmacht including Poland, Belgium, the Netherlands, France and the Soviet Union. They were deported to Germany after they had been ordered to join a labor force in their home countries or attracted to Germany by false promises. They were then forced to work at the plant and were joined by prisoners of war from France and the Soviet Union, Italian military internees and concentration camp inmates. Especially people from Eastern Europe and Jewish concentration camp inmates faced massive racial discrimination. The Italian military internees, who were regarded as traitors following the fall of Mussolini, were also exposed to life-threatening abuse.

All in all, about 20,000 people were forced to work for the former Volkswagenwerk GmbH, including about 5,000 people from concentration camps. In 1944, two-thirds of the people working at the Volkswagen plant were forced laborers. Most of them were housed in wooden sheds in the city and there was a separate camp for concentration camp inmates at Laagberg.

*On July 9, 1943, Jean Baudet, a 21-year-old from a village in the Ardennes, was ordered to travel to Germany within the framework of the Service du Travail Obligatoire (STO). Together with 400 other people from France, he arrived in the Stadt des KdF-Wagens on July 24. They were accommodated in one of the wooden sheds in the workers' camp. Jean Baudet worked as a laborer in mechanical assembly before being transferred to a satellite plant operated under the codename "Kaffee" (coffee) in Neindorf about 10 kilometers from the main plant.*

The air raids, which had become more intensive from 1944, also made living and working conditions more difficult. Many forced laborers were transferred to satellite plants where they continued to work in production. Up to the beginning of April, the plant remained in operation and armaments production was continued despite the advance of the Allies from all directions. A total of 66,285 vehicles were produced, but only 630 civilian Volkswagen sedans.

*Judith Berkovitz, aged 19 was one of a group of almost 700 Jewish women and girls from Hungary and Romania who had been deported to the Volkswagen plant, mainly from Auschwitz concentration camp, since the summer of 1944. They had to assemble anti-tank mines and grenades in Hall 1 and were accommodated directly under the hall in a converted washroom.*

On April 7, the SS rounded up the 700 or so Jewish women who had assembled the mines and grenades in Hall 1 and transported them in closed railcars to Salzwedel, where they were eventually freed by the Americans. Following the removal of the Jewish women and girls, forced laborers from the occupied countries of Europe still remained in the workers' camps of the city. There had been rumors for some time and people were waiting for the Americans to come. At the beginning of April 1945, the American 9th Army occupied large areas in the north of Germany and advanced to the east up to the River Elbe. *Volkssturm* units from the Stadt des KdF-Wagens had been ordered to march towards Tangermünde from April 9. Mayor Kurt Hofer had given the men the option of following this order or maintaining public order in the Stadt des KdF-Wagens. Most of the senior employees of the factory remained at their posts. Ferdinand Porsche was in Zell am See, Austria, while Anton Piëch had travelled to Neudek (now Nejdek in the Czech Republic) where a subsidiary plant of the then Volkswagenwerk GmbH had been established for aircraft production at Neudeker Wollkämmerei und Kammgarnspinnerei AG in 1942. Forced labor was also deployed at that plant.

On April 10, 1945, things finally come to a head: work at the Volkswagen plant in the Stadt des KdF-Wagens was completely halted. The alarm had been given that American tanks were approaching. The troops advanced from Fallersleben along the Mittellandkanal to the former bridge at Hesslingen and through the city without encountering any military resistance. On the same day, the Americans advanced to the River Elbe. The maps used by the U.S. Army did not even show the city or the plant.

At that time, there were about 9,100 people in the plant of whom more than 7,700, or 85 percent were foreigners; most of these people were forced laborers. The largest group, of 3,000 people, came from the Soviet Union, chiefly from Ukraine.

The SS and the company security force had been withdrawn or had fled before the American advance. The *Volkssturm* had been dissolved and there was a power vacuum which threatened to become dangerous. Former forced laborers and prisoners of war who saw the end of their sufferings approaching released their anger at the injustice they had suffered, resulting in plundering and destruction.

*48-year-old Fritz Kuntze had joined Volkswagen as manager of the power plant on July 1, 1937 and was among those responsible for the construction of the power plant. He had studied in Stuttgart and Danzig and then emigrated to the USA as a young engineering graduate. He had worked for Ford in Detroit, where he had met Ferdinand Porsche on his tour of America. Porsche recruited him and other people of German origin and gave them management positions at the factory planned to build the Volkswagen. In 1939 Kuntze was naturalized and again became a German citizen.*

Fritz Kuntze, the manager of the power plant, was determined to avoid damage to the power plant, which was essential for the city and the factory. Just before the liberation of the plant, he had refused to obey the orders given by the local Nazi leaders to blow up the power plant and bridges. With two other German-American engineers who had also been recruited as specialists in Detroit by Ferdinand Porsche on his US trip in 1937, he called for the assistance of the US military. Together with Father Antonius Holling, they drove to Fallersleben, where they were able to convince the American soldiers of the urgency of their request. By April 15, the Americans had occupied the plant and the city and the staff officers of the 9th Army gradually arrived up to April 15. Initially, they appointed Hans Mayr as plant manager. 14 days later, he was removed from his post and replaced by Rudolf Brörmann, formerly inspection manager.

At first, the U.S. Army wanted to establish a repair facility for military vehicles at the plant. However, they soon found that the factory offered other possibilities. In May, the 9th Army headquarters already reported that production had started at the Volkswagen plant with a workforce of 200 people. The number was to be increased to 1,000. The ambitious plans were to produce 500 vehicles per month. The Americans had noticed that there were parts and stocks for the production of vehicles at the plant and in the vicinity. A total of 133 *Kübelwagen* utility cars, now called "Volkswagen Jeeps", were assembled under extremely precarious conditions to meet the mobility needs of the US troops. These vehicles marked the resumption of production at the plant following the war. Production was subject to considerable restrictions and all the vehicles produced were initially intended for use by the occupying forces and later by German bodies. However, the most important fact was that production was continuing.

Immediately after the end of the war, work started on the conversion of the armaments factory, parts of which had been damaged or destroyed by bombing, into a civilian vehicle factory. When the British troops reached their occupation zone in June 1945 and assumed responsibility for the city and the plant from the Americans, they continued what the Americans had already started. In December 1945, they started series production of the civilian Volkswagen Type 1, the Beetle. Production conditions were still challenging.

The Americans had not only placed the Volkswagen plant under new management. The democratization process in the Stadt des KdF-Wagens started with the formation of a *Magistrat* (municipal administration) and a *Stadtverordnetenversammlung* (city council). At its first meeting on May 25, 1945, the city council resolved to rename the city "Wolfsburg" at the suggestion of the municipal administration as the original name had been based on the defunct National Socialist organization Strength through Joy. The young city took its historic name from Wolfsburg Castle, which was mentioned for the first time in documents in 1302. Initially, the castle was the only landmark of the city until it was joined by the four chimneys of the Volkswagen power plant in the 1960s.

*Judith Berkovitz had survived. She wanted to emigrate to Palestine. Her journey took her via Prague and Budapest, where she met her later husband David Berger, a young man whom she had already known before she was deported. He had survived Buchenwald concentration camp. Judith and David married and reached their destination in January 1947. They made their home in Rishon Le Zion near Tel Aviv and had two daughters whom they named after their murdered mothers: Miriam and Rivka. Judith Berger worked as a precision mechanic until her retirement in 1985. David Berger died in 1972 aged 49. Judith never came to Wolfsburg again. Her daughter Rivka visited the Place of Remembrance with her family in 2017. Judith Berger died in 2011.*

*Jean Baudet was freed by the Americans in Neindorf on April 12. He started his homeward journey to France from the Stadt des KdF-Wagens railway station on May 4. This trip took several days. Later, he wrote down his memories on the basis of calendar notes and contemporary records. In "Jean Baudet STO à KdF, 1943 – 1945. Memoirs", which appeared in the Historic Communications publication series, he describes his impressions and his memories of his time as a forced laborer. He has visited Wolfsburg several times, provided support for the establishment of the Place of Remembrance, and is an important eyewitness. Jean Baudet, now aged 97, lives in Nice.*

*Both these former forced laborers received a payment from the Volkswagen AG humanitarian fund in 1998.*

*Fritz Kuntze, the manager of the power plant, was interned by the Americans on April 13, 1945. He returned to Wolfsburg in November 1945 and resumed work at the Volkswagen plant from April 1947, holding a management position in the vehicle fleet. In the same year, he became Head of the Vehicle Fleet Department. Fritz Kuntze, who had retired in the summer of 1961, died in January 1983.*

Link to the Volkswagen Chronicle: <https://www.volkswagenag.com/en/group/history.html>

Wolfsburg, April 2020