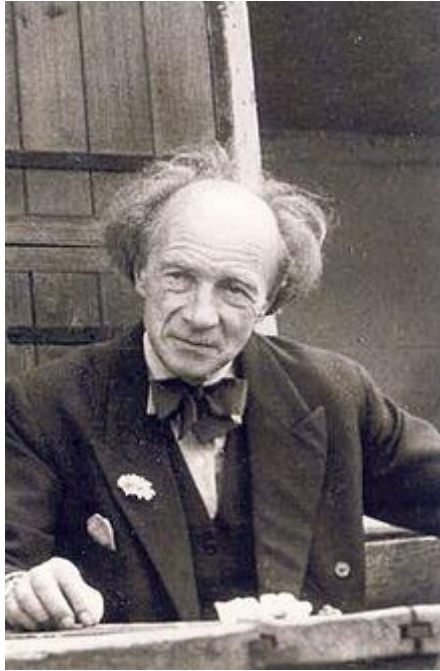


The First Dachau Memorial Rally (Gedächtnis Kundgebung)

The first Dachau Memorial Rally (Gedächtnis Kundgebung) took place on 17th May 1947. At that time, a welcoming speech - *Memory of the Dead* - was delivered to invited guests by Ernst Emile Wiechert, school teacher, writer and poet.



ERNST EMILE WIECHERT: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Ernst Emile Wiechert (aka. Ernst Barany Bjell) (born 18th May, 1887 in Forsthaus Kleinort near Peitschenmdorf in the East Prussian district of Sensburg in the Masurian forests; died 24th August, 1950 in Uerikon, Stäfa, a municipality in the district of Meilen in the canton of Zürich in Switzerland.) was a German-language writer and teacher. From the early 1930s until well into the 1950s, he was one of the most widely read German authors. He is one of the exponents of “the Inner Emigration” a view prompted by the curse of National Socialism.

Wiechert was strongly opposed to Nazism from its inception. In 1933 and 1935, openly he appealed to undergraduates in Munich to retain their critical thinking in relation to the national socialist ideology. By some, this was considered a call to internal resistance. The minutes of the speech circulated illegally in Germany and in 1937 smuggled to Moscow baked into a loaf of bread. There it was published in the influential exile magazine *Das Wort (The Word)*.

Wiechert went even further and dared to openly criticize the 1938 imprisonment by the Nazis of Martin Niemöller (1892 – 1984) German theologian and Lutheran pastor. As a consequence of his criticism, in April 1938 he was interned in the Buchenwald concentration camp for four months. Whilst there, appalled by what he saw and

experienced, secretly he penned *Der Totenwald (Forest of the dead)*, reminiscences of his imprisonment. The buried manuscript was later recovered and published in 1945.

In recent years, John Klapper and others (Oxford German Studies) has questioned the efficacy of Wiechert's literally opposition to Nazism, these revisionist appraisals seemingly not taking account of his likely post-traumatic stress syndrome and the recorded overt threats to his life made by Goebbels and others.

FOREST OF THE DEAD

This book grew out of the bitterness of his own experience as a prisoner of the Nazis in Buchenwald. This is the story of a German poet, who in his integrity, resisted the pressure of the Third Reich in 1938. As a political prisoner, he saw all freedom vanish, experienced all the infamies possible, and in Buchenwald, saw the cruelties suffered by the Jews and others.

The perversions of a slave state, the mental tortures and lower depths, are feelingly depicted, as the poet, Johannes, realizes the terrible road to which his country and his people have committed themselves. The physical ruination by Nazi forced labour is grimly described.

Following the complete collapse of his health, through the efforts of family and friends, he is released at the cost of silence. Given the author's own personal experiences, this is virtually autobiographical, but the third person technique provides a more objective telling of the story, a finer delineation of the despair, which is lightened, infrequently, by the unpredictable help, friendliness and wholesome beliefs of some of his companions in misery. Not in hatred, nor in the hot flame of anger, this constitutes an epitaph to the prelude to the last war.

DACHAU - GEDACHTNIS KUNDGEBUNG (DACHAU 1947)

A SHORT SUMMARY OF THE WELCOMING SPEECH
GIVEN BY ERNST WIECHERT 17 MAY 1947

*" I looked and saw all the injustice that was taking place under the sun
I saw the tears of the oppressed and they have no comforter,
power was on the side of their oppressor, and they have no comforter.
And I declared that the dead who have already died,
were happier than the living who are still alive. " (Ecc.4v1, Job 3 VII-13)*

Wiechert begins his memorial address with the repeat of the last sentence of the quotation from Ecclesiastes "I praised the dead who had already died " emphasizing with it how our souls want to revolt and our emotions trigger off a bitter form of anger that might even lead to hate, when death is brought about by the abuse of authority and power, thereby violating the quiet path of nature by destroying and ending life prematurely.

He continues, addressing all who are mourning and have come from the midst of the various nations wanting to establish what is right and true, who want to work together to aim for a better future. All who in some way have been touched by the darkness that has

affected so many, those who lost their way, those who were searching for answers, those who fought against it.

"But there is a difference - while this force of destruction only glazed 'us', it made a deadly impact on 'them'. It did not strike the fearful cowards who were reluctant to speak out, it struck the brave, the many who woke up to the truth. But first it struck those with a brave heart who spoke out for freedom and the dignity of mankind and not blind obedience. It struck those who disappeared and never came back.

The few who did return were chosen to give a testimony of quiet empathy. While witness can be given to the cruelty, the martyrdom, the injustice – and that is necessary, their testimony was not to keep the dead alive and not to preach hate and revenge.

Wiechert calls to all who want to commemorate the dead not to highlight and focus on all the exposed evil and depravity, but rather to see the big picture of the suffering which so many took upon themselves, and who were able to carry it, and who were able to conquer it.

He then reflects on the different faces of comradeship in the midst of the constant awareness of the incarceration and the experience of brutality. He remembers how the individuality and the difference of the faces around him disappeared, how they melted into one, being conscious only of their shared humanity. The sharing of a smile even in pain and sharing the last crust of bread. The compassion and care for one another to comfort the pain, mixed with quiet words about the future and how to make a better world.

He still sees the haunting sad faces that looked at him when he was released, how those who had to remain behind produced a smile to comfort his sad heart, just to let him know they were still alive in the midst of the work fields, the courtyard of the dead, the barracks, the dirt, the insult of everything that surrounded them. It was Wiechert's wish that the thoughts and the inexpressible longings behind the eyes that looked out of those faces should be thought of, and remembered, and never be forgotten.

But death took its course. Losses were on both sides, the conqueror and the conquered. In fact everything was lost, country, war, home, clothes, bread and wine. Whatever earth had given was given back to earth. But the vision of the painful faces of a whole nation should never be lost. It must always be a reminder what mankind is capable of. It seems as if the cross had been erected again on that horrific place of skulls, and the curtain had been torn again over the earth that is in darkness. Again, it shows a horrific picture of suffering, human suffering.

Wiechert continues with a series of questions. Are we all hopelessly wicked? Will mankind ever be able to heal itself? Will the different nations be able to create unity by power, by conquering and winning, or will they be able to unite from the result of human suffering? Is there anyone who has come out of this conflict of nations, out of this terrible destruction of life with a clean conscience? Have our thoughts been freed from selfish wishes and desires, from envy and hate? The faces of the dead are looking at us, day and night. Silently and unreachable they are watching us.

He concludes, emphasizing the importance of nations to motivate themselves to build bridges for a future in order to avoid a repeat of the past. To never forget the atrocities mankind is capable of and to never forget the suffering it has caused.

Wiechert's final words (slightly paraphrased in translation)

"When we depart from here, may we, and all the members of the different nations (present here), leave with determination and willing hearts to keep the memory of the fallen close to us. May we all be able to unlearn to only want for ourselves and learn from those who were able to do so. May the memory of their past motivate us to start building a new kingdom, that which we are capable of building, the kingdom of love. Even the poorest among those now dead knew that he could be as generous as a king by giving from his heart. Their hearts are no longer beating, it now depends on our hearts to keep on beating for all those who are still grieving. "

SOURCES

1. Dachau - Gedächtnis Kundgebung, Dachau 1947. Vortrag Ernst Wiecherts. Repository of the University of Lodz, Poland. <http://hdl.handle.net/11089/954>
2. Translation: Marley Daghari (marley@umlaut.co.za) and Denise Pelteret 2018
3. Commentary: Mr Hartmut Hayn 2018

Philatelic item: GERMAN POSTCARD MARKING the 1st POST-LIBERATION RALLY, THE DACHAU FREEDOM ANNOUNCEMENT 1947

Design: Male prisoners banded together, dressed in striped uniform (colloquially known as “striped pyjamas”) vest, trousers, coat, hat and clogs. The insignia is that of the sponsor The Union of Persecutees of the Nazi Regime/Federation of Antifascists (VVN-BdA)

Artist: Gerhard Kreische (Merseburg 1905-1974) was best known for his Logotypes and Bookplates. He studied in the Leipzig Academy of Graphics Arts under Walter Tiemann and Hans Alexander Müller.

Provenance: Argyll Etkin Ltd, London 2017

Stamp: issued 1947 (15th May): 50th Death Anniversary of Ernst Heinrich Wilhelm (von) STEPHAN (1831-1897), director of postal services for the German Empire; integral in the founding of the Universal Postal Union in 1874; and in 1877 introduced the telephone to Germany.

Canceller: circular lettering 1-DACHAU-GEDACHTNISKUNDGEBUNG DACHAU dated 18-5-47, *the actual birthday of Ernst Wiechert*



Philatelic item: GERMAN MEMORIAL COVER 2005 MARKING 60 ANNIVERSARY OF THE LIBERATION OF DACHAU CONCENTRATION CAMP

Design: includes Dove of Peace, up-raised arm clothed in striped pyjamas and barbed wire; the text reads 60. JAHRESTAG DER BEFREIUNG DES KONZENTRATIONSLAGERS DACHAU 1.MAY 2005 (60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE LIBERATION OF THE CONCENTRATION CAMP DACHAU 1.MAY 2005)

Provenance: Natalie Karelis, Alexandria, U.S.A 2018

Stamp: GERMANY issued 4th January 2003, featuring G. ELSER, resistance fighter. This was the first occasion that Elser was officially acknowledged for his role in fighting for freedom. Many in a variety of forms have followed since.

Canceller: Dachau 85221 dated 1st May 2005 marks the 60 Year Anniversary of the liberation of the camp. It features the Dove of Peace and the slogan known for appearing on the entrance of Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps, "ARBEIT MACHT FREI" (work sets you free).

Johann Georg Elser: born 4th January 1903, Hermaringen, was a German factory worker who alone planned and carried out an assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler and other high-ranking Nazi leaders on 8th November 1939 at the Bürgerbräukeller, Munich where, on the anniversary of the Beer Hall Putsch, annually Hitler delivered a speech. Though he failed, Elser killed eight people and injured over 62 others. Elser was held as a prisoner in various camps for over five years until he was executed on 9th April 1945, Dachau concentration camp, 20 days before the camp was liberated by the US Army. On 7th May 1945, 9 days later, Germany signed an unconditional surrender at Allied headquarters in Reims, France.

