

May 2, 2024

Poster presentation for "A Space to Remember, Connect and Support"

- Welcoming address **Barbara Hartje**
*President of the Friends of the Neuengamme Concentration
Camp Memorial*
- Speech **Sandra Polom**
Granddaughter of a female Polish concentration camp prisoner
- Speech **Henk Vlieger**
Nephew of four Dutch concentration camp prisoners
- Musical accompaniment by **Hans-Jürgen Buhl** (saxophone)

Barbara Hartje

Dear Friends of the Space to Remember, Connect and Support,

Dear Guests and Dear Relatives especially, some of whom have travelled from far away to be here.

I am particularly delighted to welcome once again guests from war-torn Ukraine. And I am astonished and touched by how many people have travelled here from the Netherlands, especially from Putten and Achterveld. A very warm welcome to you all!

The group that has travelled here from Achterveld has brought a film crew with them. If any of you do not wish to be filmed, please let the film crew know.

My name is Barbara Hartje, and I am speaking to you on behalf of the Friends of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial, who from the very outset have supported the Space to Remember, Connect and Support as an initiative of relatives of former prisoners.

This Space continues to grow, just as we had planned and hoped that it would. This year, for the third time, we are fortunate to be able to inaugurate a large number of new printing plates – 26 in total – as part of the commemoration days marking the liberation of Neuengamme Concentration Camp.

In fact, new metal racks have had to be built and set up as the existing space designed for 120 printing blocks was no longer sufficient.

So, a very warm welcome to all the family members who are here today to present "their" printing plate to us and put up "their" posters.

Each poster tells the very personal story of the suffering of someone imprisoned at Neuengamme Concentration Camp, whether they died from the inhumane conditions at the camp or survived them. And some of the posters also tell of the impact these fates have had on the children and grandchildren, in other words, the generations that followed in each of the families.

Today, on behalf of all of them, Sandra Polom will present the poster for her grandmother Genowefa Banasiak; and Henk Vlieger will tell us about the posters for his four uncles. All four were deported to Neuengamme; none survived.

But before that, I would like to take a few moments to thank all those involved in the project for the Space to Remember, Connect and Support project for their hard work over the past year.

Firstly, I would like to mention Karin van Steeg once again. As in previous years, she has been hugely committed personally to publicizing the project in the Netherlands and has supported relatives of former prisoners with many creative ideas and a great deal of empathy in designing the posters for their deported family members. Together with Pieter Dekker, she once again made the travel arrangements so people could come to this ceremony today. Karin, your commitment is an inspiration for us all and continues to give us strength!

The more our project, which was originally voluntary, expands into the Memorial's ongoing activities, the more support we have received from the staff of the Foundation of Hamburg Memorials and Learning Centers. Many of them are fully committed to our Space to Remember, Connect and Support. Our small working group of relatives of former prisoners and of volunteers, all of whom have been working together for almost nine years now since the project first launched, is very happy about this; indeed, our Space to Remember, Connect and Support needs a firm foundation in the long term, too. So, a big "thank you" to all of you. And there is one more "thank you" I would like to make, namely to Hans-Jürgen Buhl. He is the person you heard playing the saxophone at the outset, and I would like to thank him most warmly for the wonderful musical accompaniment to today's event.

Sandra Polom will now present the poster for her grandmother Genowefa Banasiak. It is the first poster at the Space to Remember, Connect and Support dedicated to a female prisoner from the many women's satellite camps of Neuengamme Concentration Camp; it is also the first poster for a prisoner from Poland. We hope this marks a new beginning. We very much hope that many other prisoners from Poland will be commemorated at our Space in the future. Sandra Polom now lives in Hesse, but she grew up in Sweden; indeed, it is to Sweden that her grandparents were sent after being rescued from the Nazi concentration camps at the end of the war. Both her grandmother and her grandfather had been deported from Poland. It was only after their liberation that they met in Sweden, where they remained and then started a family. Sandra Polom was born in 1975; she is their only grandchild. Sandra, who works in marketing, has been devoted to commemorating her grandparents' story of persecution for many years now.

Translation/ Übersetzung: Stephen Grynwasser

Sandra Polom

Dear Guests,

It is an honor for me to be able to give you an account here today of my grandparents' history of persecution and to commemorate them. And more particularly, to talk about my grandmother, who was a prisoner at a satellite camp of Neuengamme Concentration Camp. My grandparents came from different parts of Poland: my grandmother Genowefa Banasiak came from Łódź; my grandfather Jakub Chabinski from the area around Lviv. She survived three years of German captivity; and he, two years.

My grandparents were the only members of their respective families to be deported.

Growing up, I knew of course that my grandparents had been in a concentration camp, but I didn't know any of the details. My grandfather died when I was ten; my grandmother lived to be 90, yet she could not bring herself to talk about it in her old age.

But in 2017, everything was to change for me: My mother received a letter from the former International Tracing Service of the Red Cross (ITS) in Germany saying that they wanted to return my grandmother's jewelry, her so-called effects, which had been confiscated so many years ago when she was first deported to the concentration camp.

Once we had got over the initial shock of this news and had received the jewelry, I began to research obsessively, finding out more and more details; I just couldn't stop. Bit by bit, I was able to reconstruct almost in full the story of my grandparents' persecution.

There are photos of my grandmother from that period, which she sent to her family as post-cards. In Sweden, after the war, she also kept diaries, which gave an insight into the world of her emotions; and then of course, there is the jewelry.

I have the jewelry with me today if you would like to see it. It consists of a ring and a pair of earrings.

My grandmother came from the big city of Łódź, where she worked as a weaver.

As far as we know of her life before the war, she enjoyed it to the full. As a woman, she lived a rather unusual life for her time. Indeed, as beautiful as she was, aged 32, she was neither married nor did she have any children. And it was aged 32 that she was indiscriminately deported to Germany during a raid and assigned to forced labor.

She had to work long shifts in a factory that produced ammunition bags for the armaments industry.

In her diary, she describes that particular period like this:

"20 April 1942, I was deported to Germany to do forced labor.

I was put to work in a five-storey factory. It turned out that the factory manufactured materials for the army, ammunition; for me, it was awful: I had never handled gunpowder before. I was convinced it would explode and kill me on the spot. The foreman took me and another Polish woman over to a large machine and said: "This is where you'll be working, on this machine." The foreman read out the rules and regulations for us Polish women. Sabotaging the machine and other offences were punishable by death."

Ten months later, in February 1943, a fire raged inside the factory and entire floors burnt down. My grandmother was accused of sabotage, arrested by the Gestapo, and taken to prison in Chemnitz. There, for days on end, she was interrogated and bullied. Her cellmate turned out to be a spy who tried to manipulate my grandmother into confessing.

But as my grandmother continued to protest her innocence, the Gestapo threatened to have her shot the next day as well as her family back in Poland.

She describes her feelings in the following words:

"Before the war, I sometimes wondered how a person sentenced to death would feel, and today I find myself sitting in a basement knowing that I am to be shot.

Experiencing such a moment is horrific, and I couldn't even cry; my thoughts were far away, at home; no pen can describe the tragedy playing out in my heart. It is not enough that they are able to execute me, but also my family, my father, my brother and my sister.

I am not even guilty; surely some German did it and the Poles have to take the blame."

Here her notes about her time in forced labor end. She writes in great detail about the forced labor, the accusations of sabotage and the interrogations, which clearly shows that she was well aware of the threat to her life. Fortunately, she was not shot; she spent five months in that prison and was then deported to Ravensbrück Concentration Camp in July 1943.

The accusation of sabotage is evidently the reason for this turning point in the history of her persecution, resulting in her being sent to a camp.

After a year or so at Ravensbrück Concentration Camp, she was transferred to Hamburg in the summer of 1944, in cattle wagons along with around 500 other women. She was then in the Hamburg-Wandsbek satellite camp of Neuengamme Concentration Camp.

In Wandsbek the prisoners were forced to manufacture gas masks for the company Drägerwerk AG. They were also used for clean-up operations following bombing raids on Hamburg.

During that time in Wandsbek, on August 29, 1944 to be precise, 19-year-old Raja Ilinauk dropped a heavy mould. We do not know whether this was intentional or simply due to exhaustion.

In an armaments factory, death by hanging was the punishment for any suspected act of sabotage. All the prisoners were made to line up and witness the execution as a deterrent.

My grandmother describes this terrible moment in the following words:

"We return from the rubble to Wandsbek where the gallows have been put up; someone is about to be hanged. At the roll call they brought out a 19-year-old girl, she worked in the same factory; the machine broke down, and she was accused of sabotage; she was hanged. We were made to stand for longer than usual and stare at the hanged woman. It began to pour terribly with rain and we were completely soaked; we were shaking, our knees knocking against each other. The next day we put on our wet rags and went to work. I am scared; at night I often find myself screaming. I'm unable to describe it."

There is a small but very beautiful memorial at the site of the Wandsbek satellite camp, and each year on August 29 young Raja is remembered there. The persecuted women are also mentioned by name. Without knowing that, I visited the site for the first time a few years ago and discovering my grandmother's name was an indescribably moving moment for me.

When I think about how randomly the decision was made between life and death... My grandmother could just as easily have been executed for sabotage, too, a year earlier. And then neither my mother nor I would ever have existed.

On May 1, 1945, my grandmother was taken to Sweden along with more than 2,800 female prisoners from various Hamburg satellite camps. First, they travelled by train from Hamburg to Denmark and then by ship to Sweden, where they arrived on May 4.

For a long time, I thought that she had come to Sweden on the so-called "White Buses." This was a rescue operation organized by the Swedish and Danish Red Cross, headed up by the Swedish Count Folke Bernadotte.

But it was not a planned liberation, as was later confirmed by the Swedish Red Cross in 2000. The transport from Hamburg had been organized by an SS liaison officer!

It took me a while to come to terms with the fact that my grandmother's rescue was not down to a Swedish count, but to an SS man!

In total, neutral Sweden took in around 30,000 prisoners, 15,000 of them via the White Buses rescue operation.

In Sweden, some of the arrivals were photographed during the registration process; my grandmother was one of them. Her picture can be seen on the poster that I have designed for the Space to Remember, Connect and Support; in it, she is still wearing the striped prisoner jacket, and the horrors of the past three years are clearly visible in her eyes.

It was in Sweden that she met Jakub Chabinski, who would later become my grandfather. If I may, I would like to tell you a little about him, too, even though he was not a prisoner at Neuengamme Concentration Camp. For me, their stories belong together.

Jakub was arrested in his home town in March 1943 and imprisoned in Lviv; from there he was taken to the Majdanek concentration and extermination camp. As the Red Army approached, the Majdanek prisoners were taken away in cattle wagons as part of large-scale transport operations. In April 1944 my grandfather was deported along with 1,500 prisoners from Majdanek to the Natzweiler concentration camp in France – a distance of some 1,500 km that must have taken several days.

He was then transported directly to Germany, to the Kochem satellite camp on the Moselle.

There, in a former railway tunnel, he was to put to work below ground making spark plugs for Bosch aircraft engines.

In October 1944, he was transferred to the 5th SS railway construction brigade in Osnabrück. The railway brigade was part of the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp and was a mobile labor unit, a so-called "concentration camp on rails". The 500 or so prisoners were housed in train carriages, in very cramped conditions; among other tasks, they were assigned to build railway tracks, defuse bombs, clear away rubble and recover corpses.

Towards the end of the war, this "concentration camp on rails" moved further and further north-west until it reached the coast. The prisoners from the railway construction brigade were loaded onto ships, along with thousands from other concentration camps. After two weeks without any food, they reached the port of Malmö in Sweden, on May 11, 1945.

On his arrival there, my grandfather weighed about 40 kg and had tuberculosis. Yet he survived. He died in 1986 at the age of 72.

As part of my research, I visited nearly all the places my grandparents were imprisoned and spoke to many people: the memorial sites but also various working groups and individuals who devote their free time and have conducted their own research for many decades, also on the "smaller" satellite camps. That in particular was enormously helpful to me in coming to terms with my own family's history.

As the granddaughter of two former victims, I see it as my duty not only to commemorate what happened, but also to give an account specifically of these two individual destinies – to mention their names, to be a mouthpiece for them – so they are not just part of the statistics. Carrying such a story around with you is not easy, but it helps to talk about it and to share it with others.

And that is why I would like to thank all those who dedicate themselves to remembrance work and carry it through into the present and into the future – for me, it makes my personal story and history itself a little easier to bear. Thank you.

Translation/ Übersetzung: Stephen Grynwasser

Barbara Hartje

Thank you very much, Sandra Polom, for your remarkable speech.

I would now like to introduce Henk Vlieger, who will tell us about his four uncles and their persecution.

Henk Vlieger teaches history in the Netherlands and takes a keen interest in the history of the Second World War. Germany's invasion of the Netherlands had terrible consequences for his family. His four uncles were deported to Neuengamme Concentration Camp. None survived. The youngest of the four brothers was only 18 when he died. Henk Vlieger has designed a poster for each of his four uncles to honor them at the Space to Remember, Connect and Support.

Translation/ Übersetzung: Stephen Grynwasser

Henk Vlieger

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear families, friends, and loved ones of prisoners of the Neuengamme concentration camp,

Today, we stand at a place steeped in history, not only as witnesses of the past but also with our own personal perspectives. For me, the Neuengamme concentration camp is not just an abstract memory but a place deeply rooted in my family history. Four of my uncles, innocent men, were pulled out of their lives between February and April 1945 and murdered in the Neuengamme camp as well as in the Wöbbelin and Sandbostel satellite camps.

It is here, in the midst of this oppressive atmosphere, that I feel my personal connection to this history. I feel compelled not only to honor my uncles but also to bear witness to the immense suffering they and countless other prisoners endured. Their names and their faces are the living memory that brings me here, to this place of pain and loss.

Allow me to tell you about an initiative that embodies the power of remembrance and connectedness. The Place to Remember, Connect and Support is a special project offering families of the deceased as well as of victims who returned home, the chance to design and publish posters. These posters serve as a lasting memory of their loved ones, similar to the more well-known Stolpersteine (stumbling stones) that we encounter in many streets.

In our collective endeavor to commemorate so as not to forget, the power of individual stories is shared and spread. These posters, like modern memorial plaques, fill the space with the names, faces, and stories of those who lost their lives. They serve as silent witnesses to human aspects of the history, reminding us that each victim led a uniquely individual life, full of dreams and hopes. Therefore, today at this place, the posters of my uncles are unveiled. Allow me to briefly tell you their story.

On December 10, 1944, "the Green Police" carried out an operation in the municipality De Haere near Doornspijk. This term was used in the Netherlands to refer to the order police of the German occupiers. In this area as well as throughout the region, numerous resistance activities were taking place. The Green Police aimed to arrest all those involved in suspicious illegal activities. Additionally, they sought to apprehend anyone trying to avoid "labor deployment." This term was used by the occupiers to denote forced labor in the German Reich, which had been mandated in 1943 for all Dutch men aged 18 to 35. On the same day, several

people were arrested, including Diesmer Vlieger and his 17-year-old daughter, Hendrikje. Hendrikje was arrested while fetching milk. When she didn't return home, her father Diesmer decided to look for her and was also arrested in the process.

In the early hours of the following Monday, December 11, 1944, the four sons of the gamekeeper Hendrik Vlieger were also arrested. The boys were on their way to their workplace in the forest. They were unaware that several people had been arrested the previous evening. These boys were the brothers of my father, my uncles.

Their names are Willem, Hendrik, Beert, and Teunis Vlieger. Shortly after their arrest, they were transported by truck, along with other detainees, to the Koning-Willem-III Barracks in Apeldoorn. Their uncle Diesmer Vlieger and their cousin Hendrikje were also held there. On December 19, 1944, the four brothers were transferred from Apeldoorn to the Amersfoort camp. On January 5, 1945, Hendrikje ("Zus") Vlieger was released in Apeldoorn.

The living conditions in the Amersfoort camp were harsh. The deputy commandant Joseph Kotalla imposed a reign of terror there. On February 2, 1945, the brothers and their uncle Diesmer were transferred to the Neuengamme concentration camp, the place where we are standing now. Life in Neuengamme was extremely difficult. Falling ill in the camp often led to death. The catastrophic lack of provisions coupled with heavy forced labor, poor hygienic conditions, and inadequate medical care quickly led to a life-threatening weakening of the prisoners. Due to the heavy forced labor and poor living conditions, the prisoners often couldn't survive longer than three months. The death certificates usually cited causes of death arbitrarily selected from a list. The deceased were taken from the barracks by the corpse detail and cremated in the crematorium.

Hendrik Vlieger died in the Neuengamme concentration camp on March 3, 1945, allegedly as a result of blood poisoning. He was 25 years old. Beert and Teunis Vlieger were eventually transferred to the Wöbbelin concentration camp. There, they ultimately succumbed to the effects of hunger and disease. According to the official statement from the Red Cross, Beert Vlieger died from dysentery on February 28, 1945, at the age of 23 in Wöbbelin. Teunis Vlieger, the youngest of the four brothers, died from exhaustion on April 30, 1945, at the age of only 18 in Wöbbelin.

From eyewitness accounts and registration lists, we were able to conclude that the oldest brother, Willem and his uncle Diesmer spent the last days of their lives together. There are

indications that both men were sent to the Hamburg-Spaldingstraße satellite camp on February 16, 1945. There, they were subjected to hard labor. They had to tear down and clear ruined parts of buildings that remained standing after the bombing raids on the city. On April 17 and 21, 1945, there were two evacuation transports from this camp in Hamburg to Sandbostel. Based on thorough research, it could be established that Diesmer Vlieger died no later than April 24, 1945. The place of his death was most likely Sandbostel. The death of the oldest brother, Willem, must also have occurred shortly before or on April 24, 1945. It is possible that, like his uncle Diesmer, he died during the transport from Hamburg to Sandbostel. Willem Vlieger was 29 years old. His uncle Diesmer was about to celebrate his 43rd birthday. The posters of my uncles, presented here today, vividly testify to the understanding, much like the Stolpersteine in our streets, that remembrance should not be confined to museums or memorials. Remembrance should be a part of our daily lives, an integral part of our society and our thoughts.

The Place to Remember, Connect and Support demonstrates that remembrance is not just an individual act but also a collective one and that we bear the responsibility for preserving history together. So, as we gather here today, let us not only commemorate the loss but also celebrate the power of memory and our interconnectedness.

It is important to me that we remember history and continue to fight together against indifference and injustice. My personal story, combined with initiatives like the Place to Remember, Connect and Support is an urgent appeal to keep remembering and keep telling the stories, so that future generations understand that peace, freedom, and humanity are never to be taken for granted.

Thank you very much!

Translation/ Übersetzung: Ana Buka

Barbara Hartje

Thank you, Henk Vlieger, for your wonderful words! Next, Hans-Jürgen Buhl will perform another piece.

[Piece performed by Hans-Jürgen Buhl]

May we now ask all the relatives who have designed a poster for a family member this year or in previous years to come forward. The printing plates produced in accordance with your designs are laid out here on this table. If you would be so kind as to take the printing plate corresponding to your persecuted family member and then line up here at the front so that all the printing plates are clearly visible. All the relatives are invited to hold up the printing plate of their poster and to speak the name of their persecuted family member loudly, clearly and distinctly.

[Reading of the names]

A very warm "thank you" to you all! Hans-Jürgen Buhl will now play one final piece for us. If you like, you are welcome to stay here at the front while he does so. Afterwards, we will put up the posters together. You will find the tables with your prepared posters at the exit. Take your time when putting up your poster and be careful of your clothing as the paste is quite difficult to wash out again! I shall say goodbye now, and I look forward to ending the evening chatting with you either at the poster wall or inside the marquee. Many thanks, and we hope you enjoy putting up the posters!

[Piece performed by Hans-Jürgen Buhl]

Translation/ Übersetzung: Stephen Grynwasser