

The future has long since begun

Good understanding between generations in Oswiecim (Auschwitz) /
Account of an ESCU journey / By Ulrich Winz

“Visiting Oswiecim was a rich and varied experience for me and my companions”, said ESCU President Dr. Worms on 6 March after returning from the southern Polish town. “We experienced here what old and young may achieve together. We also saw how deep Europe’s roots go in the mindset and actions of its generations.” What Worms did not pronounce was the evident high regard accorded to the European Senior Citizens’ Union everywhere. It found expression in words and gestures, which became profoundly engraved in the visitors’ memories and brought to birth the first projects. These would be at first the participation of citizens of all ages at a commemoration ceremony 70 years after the outbreak of war. It will be held in Autumn 2009 in Abbey Brauweiler (district of Pulheim) including a tribute to Maximilian Kolbe, one of the victims of the Auschwitz concentration camp. The invitation, issued by Dr. Karlheinz Gierden on behalf of the Brauweiler Development Association, met with a warm and positive response according to the mayor Janusz Marszalek who went on to voice the opinion that some consideration ought to be given to setting up a European Senior Citizen’s Union “support base” in his town. That would be a first in the 13-year history of our association and further proof of its growing impact and influence.

Fruits of cooperation

Oswiecim is an up-and-coming town. The Nazis had renamed it “Auschwitz”. What they intended to do here would be associated with a German name. In actual fact, even over 60 years on, the town is still synonymous to this day with unprecedented mass genocide in the name of the Germans. Responsible political action is to thank for the fact that, despite everything, new life emerged not far from what was then the concentration camp and what is today a national place of commemoration - especially since 2002 when Marszalek was elected mayor. The revival has impacted on the town council, members of parliament, the infrastructure, the “State Higher Vocational School”, which relocated to Oswiecim, commercial enterprises and welfare services. Church life, culture and sport find favour. The town has produced some famous swimmers.

The interaction of large parts of the population benefits all generations. They claim to like living in the town. The atmosphere is also exemplary for development beyond the town’s limits.

Scene of horror

Oswiecim is well aware of its past. Anyone visiting the place in remembrance of the dead from many nations is a welcome sight. They flock from all corners of the globe to peer at Auschwitz and Birkenau and, having taken stock of the scenes of horror, they leave the town in a reflective mood - and enriched with a deeper appreciation of history. Indeed, some cell buildings displayed as museum-pieces unlock the past in a way which continues to have a lifelong effect. A crowd of young people from Poland witnessed in silence the act of commemoration held by the ESCU group at the “death block”. The young people were simply unable to talk in view of the experiences.

Stones of solidarity

Some visitors bring stones with them which are inscribed with their origin. They are laid out in the Council Room. We read Nazareth, Rome, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Jerusalem, but also

German cities like Hanover, Kerpen, Hildesheim, Göttingen, Amberg, Auerbach (Upper Palatinate), Wolfen, Dresden and Magdeburg. Identifying the origin of some stones requires special help - such as those from the "Wailing Wall". These and other signs of global solidarity are worthy of a place of honour. A mound heaped to a height of 42 m in front of the gates of the town will fulfil the wish for peace cherished by Prof. Jozef Szajna and by the former prisoners of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. The cornerstone for this initiative was laid on 14 June 2007. The idea behind the Mound of Remembrance and Reconciliation - according to Marszalek - is to put the spotlight on the memorial place, the historic old town and new residential areas. The church named after Maximilian Kolbe has been part of the Oswiecim skyline for over two decades. The name of a children's home set up in 1994 is indebted to the doctor, writer, educator and Polish Jew, Dr. Janusz Korczak, who voluntarily accompanied 200 children from his Warsaw orphanage to the Treblinka extermination camp in 1942.

Children and senior citizens in care

Children without biological parents and from difficult social backgrounds have a home here - as they once did with Korczak. Ms Joanna Marko is their substitute mother and shares responsibility with the young houseparent Sylvia Sadko. Angelyka has been here for 12 years. The home is run by the trust "Closer to Man" ("Blizej Czlowieka"), managed by Ms Marta Marszalek. Support comes from several angles, with regular aid from Germany granted by Bavarian politician Rudolf Kraus of the CSU Senior Citizens' Union. They are particularly thrilled with the two vehicles for disabled people and medical emergencies donated by the Malteser Hilfsdienst in Amberg, a similar institution to the Red Cross. Two buildings in the 5-hectare "children's village" still need renovating. They do not have the necessary funds.

The atmosphere is also friendly in the day care centre for senior citizens ("Dzienny Dom Pomocy"). It is run by Agata Klaja with great enthusiasm. This is home to 67-year-old Antonina Hurnik, a Lithuanian by birth. She is confined to a wheelchair and is brought here every day. At last she can pursue her artistic passion - copying famous painters. The walls of the little coffee room are full of her pictures. Dr. Gierden took her rendering of Gustav Klimt's "Bride" back to the Rhineland with him, a work she had particularly enjoyed creating. He will explore the possibility of an exhibition of her pictures in 2009.

The warden also encourages talent in choral singing, decorating Easter eggs, doing handicrafts and gymnastics. Even the computer is the chosen occupation of some attending the centre. A physiotherapist is a welcome sight in the centre. It is also a base for the voluntary editorial team of the newsletter "S for Senior Citizen". It is issued free of charge and advertises the day care centre in the town. The editor-in-chief Agata Klaja had included a piece about the ESCU and the members of the delegation in the current second issue, and so they were already familiar faces when they walked in the senior citizens' day care centre.

The ESCU President wrote this comment in the visitors' book: "We sensed human kindness in action. God bless the town and all who live here. Our respect goes out to those who work here for their daily concern for those entrusted to their care."

Shared responsibility

Over 50 students and lecturers had come to the "State Higher Vocational School" to take part in a discussion with representatives from near and far. The event has been coordinated by Grzegorz Baranowski, director of the civic centre for social welfare. Addressing the issue "There's no grey hair on the heart...", Dr. Worms underlined the shared responsibility of old and young for the future. For Poland, for Europe, for the whole world. A high standard of education is vital. In his view increased life expectancy would also necessitate consequences in all areas.

There were words of appreciation from the students for Poland's membership of the European Union, but some voiced criticism about shortcomings in family life and upbringing. Complaints were aimed at parents who gave their children too little attention, and credence was given to the perceived danger that weaker pupils were falling by the wayside in schools.

The ESCU President emphasised the role of grandparents in this regard who sometimes have more authority over adolescents than their parents.

Need for volunteers

Ewelina Zdebska, an educator with experience in social work, is predicting that senior citizens will make up 30 percent of the population by 2030 (2008: 19 percent). Oswiecim has already made preparations for this eventuality. Lecturer Dr. Marek Pyka believes it is essential for government bodies and institutions to work with members of the public who are active in a voluntary capacity. Only in this way can human freedom and equal opportunities flourish in her view. People with chronic illnesses and disabled people also have a right, she added, pointing to the danger for solidarity and the community if the economic sphere is absolutized. 200 elderly people in Oswiecim (only six of them men!) have sidestepped the danger of isolation described by Pyka by becoming students of the "University of the Third Age". Karolina Domider coordinates the diverse range of courses, which broaden the horizons of the senior citizens, both in terms of knowledge and new contacts. She is occasionally told by course participants that they have no time left for other things because there are so many events on offer!

True to the ESCU

The older generation in the town generally meet in their clubs, associations and church groups. To be invited to the large centrally located cultural centre is something new for all the citizens of the town - and for the town council. And - if the organisers have their way - it will not be the last meeting of this kind. The idea was suggested by the ESCU President and willingly followed up by the mayor.

Nearly 200 senior citizens poured into the room and more chairs had to be fetched in. The event was intended to express "the solidarity of the senior citizens of Oswiecim with the ESCU". This is how it was phrased in the day care centre magazine and this is indeed how the afternoon unfolded. First of all, the senior citizens' groups introduced themselves and talked about what they offer. The ESCU President was asked to speak after the mayor Marszalek.

Dr. Worms: The elderly are our treasure

Overwhelmed by the atmosphere, he pointed out, "The best medicine for old age is being active. We, the elderly, have a right to be acknowledged by society but we also owe society something in return. This was the rallying cry to all the generations from the ESCU in its Magna Charta in 2002. Stay true to your town and your country, stay true to Europe! The united Europe is becoming increasingly aware of the riches embodied by the older generation. They had to survive the Nazi era and war, and toiled under difficult conditions to finish the rebuilding work. It was a desire for greater understanding of this time, which motivated the ESCU to visit your town. Be proud of your college and its students who are concerned about their own future and that of their environment."

"Stay true to Christianity and spread its message!" continued Dr. Worms, "I am thankful that many of you have celebrated Mass with us today in St. Maximilian Kolbe Church. We have seen through new eyes what it means to preserve human dignity during our visit to the concentration camp memorial with your mayor. The memory of the Franciscan Father Kolbe, who voluntarily gave his life for a fellow prisoner here in 1941, is also kept alive in our homeland, Germany. The things we have seen and experienced elsewhere in your town strengthen our conviction that Oswiecim has a humanitarian future based on peace and liberty."

European anthem

A female choir responded to these reflective words by singing Schiller's "Ode to Joy" set to music by Beethoven, which is generally regarded as the "European anthem". The diverse cultural scene was evident in performances by three choirs, the "Bugajski" family ensemble, and a troupe of actors, who entertained the audience by poking fun at the antiquated lifestyle of many elderly married couples. The afternoon ended with a folk art presentation and a buffet put on by the local women.

It was an indication of good relations between the generations that young Red Cross volunteers, of which there are 100 in the town, were mindful of the welfare of the elderly and only left the cultural centre when all the guests had gone. They were still there when the ESCU President was interviewed by a Krakow television crew.

Chief administrative officer of the district Jozef Kala (member of the PSL), whom we met during discussions in the restored Piast castle, is justifiably proud of the development of the town and district of Oswiecim! Bernhard Worms thanked him most sincerely on behalf of all the local people who had responsibility for the visit of the ESCU delegates. Further contacts will follow.

With his good linguistic ability and excellent driving skills, the services of Wojcek Parcer were invaluable to the ESCU delegates.