

BITOLA

Restauration of the Jewish Cemetery and establishing a Park of Remembrance



-a review from Paulusgemeinde Staufenberg (PGS) as associated supporter.

1. JAN 7, 2016: Invitation

A dear friend, Eli Nacht, gave us the idea of “Reconciliation over the graves” in Bitola. H.E. Dan Oryan, invited us to take part in the commemoration ceremonies and collect donations for the trees in a future “Park of Remembrance” for the 3400 deported and murdered Jews from Bitola.

2. MAR 11, 2016: Commemoration

The council of elders of the Paulusgemeinde Staufenberg decided to accept the invitation. They adopted the Project, collected funds for the “trees” and sent Pfr. Scholz to Bitola.



3. JULY-AUG 2016: I. International Summercamp

An International work camp for young people could be prepared.

Together with Rita and Hans Scholz came 27 young people from the Evangelische Landeskirche in Baden and Christliche Gemeinschaft Ellmendingen with their Youth pastor Heiko Volz. They invited a Russian Pastor from Wolgograd-Stalingrad, who came with four young people from his church. One day a group of students from Bitola came to work with them in the cemetery. The Evangelic Church youth from Bitola was also coming to work and excursions, together with 7 American guests.



Together with local gardeners there came together 97 workers.

Two results can be stated: the three quadrants uphill left side were worked through with chops- no graves to discover. Then a certain number of already uncovered graves downhill could be cleaned.



a) Prep-tour July 11-16

Pfr. Scholz and his youth leader Tim Abel came to Bitola to get known with the responsible and prepare the summer camp.

b) Camp July-August

Before coming to Bitola, the group visited the Jewish Center in Skopje. They met the German ambassador, Dr. Christine Althaus. In Bitola the warmhearted welcome motivated the youngsters to get up for working in the cemetery on 4 a.m., take a glass of milk or a cup of coffee and start to work at 5 am, before sunrise. After breakfast they sat together in small groups to share their experience in social challenges as friendship, mobbing, trust and responsibility.



After siesta several excursions could be undertaken. They had fun at the lakes of Ohrid and Prespa, walking in the forest and picnicking. On a cultural evening the Russians, Macedonians and Germans presented typical characteristics of their country and nations. They also heard lessons, prepared by participants and leaders on Antisemitism, Social migration, Bitola's Jews, Reconciliation and Faith and met with believers of the Evangelic Church in Bitola for Service and sharing.

The most important event was the act of commemorating the 3400 deported and murdered Jews from Bitola am AUG 10. Names were read, with age and profession, family after family. While the young people sang hymns, the group together with spectators and pedestrians in the boulevard Shirok Sokak coming to Magnolia Square, set up 3400 log woods- 1,5 m in width, 24 m in length.

Meanwhile the sun went down, and the street lights covered the scene with a warm atmosphere... Some people had tears in the eyes.

4. OCT 2016: Visit

Rita and Hans-J. Scholz came to Bitola again to find out, how another youth camp in 2017 could be organized. On one side the contacts with young people in Bitola should be established, on the other side German young students need a strong motivation to join the project. So they prepared an invitation for young people from Bitola together with Project coordinator Maria Geras Dochovska (Mima).

Teodor Ivaniovski (Toshe) took responsibility to find and coach these young people, help create media and provide the group with flyers and give-aways informing on the plans.

FEB 2017: Youth delegation to Staufenberg

From FEB 9 -16 13 young people from Bitola came to Staufenberg. They presented the project in 5 classes of high schools. For a sponsoring dinner with H.E. Oryan, they contributed with pictures and eloquent speech, in presence of the Mayor of our town, Dieter Knittel. One evening was dedicated to a public presentation with the Dekan of the Evangelischer Kirchenbezirk Baden-Baden-Rastatt, Thomas Jammerthal. The young architects, members of the group, met with Gerd Zeltmann, a Garden engineer with own business in Loffenau, to discuss the details of their plans. Zeltmann was ready to give his advice as experienced professional.

The board of PGS together with our Superiors set up as goal for 2017: to figure out, how the relationship between PGS Staufenberg and the Project of ARHAM can be defined; the District Council is supporting it.



5. March 11, 2017: Commemoration

Tim Abel, Gerd Zeltmann, together with Pfr. Scholz discussed the project with the architects and ARHAM: the plan of the memorial park should be elaborated more detailed as to the working process: what- who- when –where?

They met young people from RED CROSS Bitola, with whom they agreed to sing a song of blessing to the Jewish friends at the Bitola Railway station, where the March of the Living would be ending.



Pfr. Scholz took part in the March in his Clergy's garment to make visible in public: the evangelische Kirche is not only confessing the sins of the fathers, but also turn away from those wicked ways, and now stand with the Jewish people, as it was often declared by Church leaders.

In Skopje Pfr. Scholz was invited to lay a wreath together with our German ambassador Dr. Althaus, who personally and officially supports the project: she donated for a Rose Garden, long side the "Jerusalem Path" in the Bitola cemetery.

6. JULY-AUG 2017: III. International Summercamp 2017

It's called the III. Summercamp, because in SEPT 2016, there was a second one, organized by "Forum Zivile Friedensdienste", dep. Skopje.

22 participants were coming together with Rita and Hans Scholz, and their youth leader Tim Abel.

a) Prep-tour July 6.-9.7.

Tim Abel and Pfr. Scholz finalized all practical details together with Mima and Toshe: Hotel, meals, excursions, timing and humanitarian aid for RED CROSS and partnering groups.

b) Camp July-August



This summer camp was special, because 14 students from Bitola signed in to participate as volunteers, from 5 to 11 a.m., together with the Germans, then come to have lunch with, go with them to the excursions and get more acquainted by small talk groups every day- 9 days at the cemetery, and at week ends.



Although the heat and the dust made some youngsters sick, and 7 of them had seen a doctor, one even was in the hospital for physical examination with X-ray, the cleaning of all until then uncovered the gravestones downhill was achieved, and documentation could be done by the young architects.

Also the cistern was examined, unfortunately only some stones could be removed, but even if it is completely empty, in total the volume with 3,2 m depth and 80 cm width for sure is not enough to provide the cemetery abundantly with water, especially in dry summer time.

The left half part downhill with the already exposed graves was anew overgrown with blackberries, thistles and seed spreading



herbs. Partly we could fight against these enemies, but the workers knew, that that was their task for the following month.



Welcome picnic, lecture on "Forbidden love", Kemal Atatürk's love story, Excursions to Ohrid, Slepce Monastir, Babino, Trescovec, climbing on the Prilep mountains, bathing in the city pool, Prespa- and Ohrid lake, challenging sports and strolling on Shirok Sokak was only topped by all night load music from the near by to the hotel jazz club.

We listened to a lecture on Antisemitism today, prepared by a participant, and learned a lot from the experiences with life in MK shared by a German, who lives in Bitola since 18 years.

For Shabbat evening, we were at the Fish restaurant, a Jewish lady and her daughter came to explain the meaning of bread, wine and salt, lighting the candles and saying the blessing.

To prepare the public commemoration, we heard from Mima about "Hamsa"- the blessing hand. We drew the contours of our hands on colored papers and filled them with words of blessing and good wishes, then cut them out, stuck them on a large paperwall. We had decided to buy 340 Helium-balloons with a thread, where also a blessing hand was attached, with a summary of all blessings, and the address of ARHAM, to be released on AUG 8, on Magnolia Square.



The balloons were attached at the stage, boxes with our humanitarian aid and the logo of the Red Cross were handed out. Tim and Iskra explained the action, Pfr. Scholz delivered a speech of commemoration and the PGS music group KABA sang songs of blessing and confidence. Then the balloons were sent to the sky, a greeting to those who only have their graves in the cloudes (Paul Celan).

The closure meeting on AUG 11 at the cemetery was a special thanks giving to Mima, Toshe, the architects and all the workers. Just in this moment a group of Israeli tourists came in... That also happened on a working day, that a lonesome young man from New York arrived, asked what we do, and presented himself as a descendent of two Jewish families from Bitola. Next morning he came also at 5 a.m. and chopped with us: he also wanted to free at least one tombstone from the 15 cm thick carpet of grass roots...

7. SEPT 2017:

BITOLA for Men only



Dieter Hecker, Udo Kathan, Thomas Seckler, Gerd Zeltmann and Pfr. Scholz had booked for Bitola flight- then Udo had to cancel because of a business obligation, and Gerd fell sick just a day before departure... But from Israel Sarale Gutman's husband Pinni came and join



these men from Germany.

The team was asked to assist the GPS team in setting the markers all over the cemetery, where the pathway uphill and the 18 platforms shall be built. That could be done: iron sticks in the soil, white tubes of 1 m on them and a red-white banderole connecting them all, now this gives a clear impression, how the new design lays on the old uncovered graveyard like a modern system of coordinates.



The challenge for ARHAM now is obvious: construction plans, choosing the materials, calculation and fundraising.

Men only meetings brought some interested men from Bitola together, who hopefully will contribute in future to a successful next phase of the Project.



PGS clearly understands, that the remaining funds collected for the “trees”, must be saved, until the construction of the pathways etc is accomplished , and the water supply allows planting bushes and trees.

Perspective

PGS prepares the participation at the March of the Living on MAR 11, 2018 in Bitola with a group of young people, responsables of our Evangelische Kirche and supporters- some 15-18 persons are already willing to participate.

Until then for sure ARHAM is able to prepare the event at the cemetery, invite supporters as many as possible und spread the informations by facebook and internet. We believe, that PGS has promoted the Project so far, that now the initiatives for the pathways, the sundial and the monument for the 3400 must definitively be restarted.

The cooperation between ARHAM, the Municipality, the Jewish Community in Macedonia and the group of friends around Rahel Shelly Drummer must be set on a stable base and transparent communication. It is for sure, that without the acceptance of the Municipality and an active role of the heads of the Jewish community the project remain a desire of our hearts. Nevertheless, we opened the book of history: the gravestones lie before us and wait for being read. Only few white marble plaques allow us to read names and years and characteristics of the dead ones, but most of them are without plaques, some with concrete blocs, the majority is only the black stone closing the bed for the dead underneath. Und: there are so many graves without even this black stone on top, visible only with the side plates, coming out of the soil. So the great sad message is: the Jews of Bitola are not only annihilated in Treblinka, but their ancestors , buried in the Jewish Cemetery, also are robbed their identities...



Are we able to give them their dignity back? The Jewish cemetery of Bitola is a place of great meaning for those who want to learn from history. So Reconciliation must built a bridge of the huge gap of their history. Students should learn, adults must be invited to come. Teachers can learn and teach. Let's try to contribute to this great goal.

Rita and Hans J. Scholz, Pfr.

Dieter Hecker

Thomas Seckler

Elders of Paulusgemeinde Staufenberg

PS von Markus Neurohr

11. März 2018: Links zum Gedenkmarsch in Bitola zum 75-jährigen Gedenken an die Deportation der 3400 Juden von Bitola am 11.3.1943

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tf47Tnej_CA&feature=youtu.be

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOYH13nv7gQ>