

## Acceptance speech

**by Angelika Rieber for the Projekt Jüdisches Leben in Frankfurt  
at the Obermayer-award ceremony on 23rd January, 2017 in Berlin**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are delighted to celebrate this honor with you all.

Our first and foremost thanks go to the persons who considered the Projekt Jüdisches Leben worthy of this award. For this appreciation and trust we would especially like to thank Harriet Mayer, Natalie Giles and Renata Levy, who nominated the project for this award.



We would also like to express our gratitude towards the many people and institutions we cooperate with and who support our work: schools, museums, archives and local researchers in and around Frankfurt, the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, the city of Frankfurt and the Hessian Ministry of Education

What motivated you to preoccupy yourself with this topic? I am frequently asked. Each member of the project would probably answer differently.

The motives, questions, tasks and challenges have changed since the establishment of the project in the mid-seventies - as well as we have. Walter Sommers, a former Frankfurter,



who fled to the USA in 1939, recently received the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in recognition of his volunteer work as an eye-witness. The award ceremony took place in Terre Haute, Indiana, where he now lives. In his acceptance speech Walter Sommers said: "I am a scholar of the Holocaust". This corresponds with our own experience. With every research and above all: during the encounters we increase our knowledge, discover new aspects, new perspectives and new insights.

I myself was first introduced into the topic when I encountered resistance fighters who gave testimonials in front of young people. I was impressed by their readiness to talk about their experience and their courage that they wished to pass on to the young.



At that time only few experts were concerned with Jewish history. The presentation in the school books was limited and uninspiring. A handful of fellow students and I founded a project group. It was important for us to convey the history of National Socialism in a more interesting manner. We searched for documents, compiled alternative city tours, guided tours of Jewish cemeteries and offered training courses for teachers. The members of the group have changed over the years.

It became clear to us that something important was lacking, namely the perspective of the persecuted. How did they experience Jewish life before the Nazi era, the persecution and the emigration, the loss of relatives? What was there life in exile like?



We decided to participate in the city's visiting program for former Jewish citizens of Frankfurt, to record the visitors' memories, to contribute to the studies of the history of the Jews of Frankfurt and to develop educational material.

Numerous biographical portraits and family histories have been documented. They are like a microcosm, in which not only the history of National Socialism is illustrated, but also Jewish life before and after the Nazi era. These life stories create proximity, touch the hearts and minds.



Since 1989, we have also invited the guests of the city to schools. We observed that the encounter with a person who tells his/her story and responds to the questions of the young people often serves as a “door opener” and initiates constructive discussions about the past. Whoever talks and exchanges ideas openly, can examine, reflect and, if necessary, correct his own images, attitudes or prejudices. Visitors are often surprised at how open and curious the young people are. That gives them cause for hope.



Encounter and dialogues therefore were essential in addition to all the other work of the project. Since this time, the project group has organized and arranged many talks at schools. An estimated number of 10,000 pupils have participated in these school talks organized by the project group. For this purpose, a concept for the preparation, organization and follow-up of such encounters has been developed, which includes a get-to-gether between students and teachers of participating schools and the visitors at the beginning of the visiting program.

Germany has changed, has become an immigration country. Often, the concern is expressed that young people with a migration background have no interest in Jewish history, but biographies and encounters open up the opportunity for these young people to establish links and to integrate their migration histories into the learning process.





Home

BIOGRAPHIEN UND

“I am coming to learn as much as to share”\*

Suchen

AKTUELLES

Soon there will be no eye-witnesses of the Nazi period anymore. How do we deal with this new challenge?

We increasingly intensify the documentation and publication of biographies. Currently 50 family biographies are published on our website. We give voice to those who cannot speak for themselves anymore. The target readers of the bilingual English/German website are schools, local researchers and the former citizens of Frankfurt and their families. .

Learning from the past is a major concern of our project: to create awareness and to study the mechanisms of repression and tyranny. Also to not accept simple solutions and reflect the past from different viewpoints. To apply these tools to the current political situation and be critical. To raise your voice against injustice, fight against prejudice, simplifications, xenophobia and hatred.



Fundamental questions of human coexistence thus move into the focus of attention.: How does a society deal with minorities? What does it mean to leave home? What are the difficulties adjusting to life in a foreign country? What challenges does society face? How to deal with the trauma of persecution and exile? These and other questions moved us

to lead an initiative for a memorial that would commemorate the “Kindertransport-Kinder”. On the pictures you see two participants of the visitors program who never saw their parents resp. mother again.



Extremely important for our project is the continuation of the dialogue with the future generations. Since the 1990s, we had already included the children accompanying their parents in the school talks. That made us realize how important it is for them to visit the places connected to the childhood and youth of their parents or grandparents.

Since 2012 the City of Frankfurt has been inviting the children and grandchildren. We help and support visitors searching for their families roots. "Our roots are here in Frankfurt." said Ron Sommers in his farewell speech in 2012 in the Frankfurt Römer (City Hall). An important conclusion he drew during his stay.



We continue the encounters with the second generation and have received enthusiastic feedback. The nature of these talks however have changed. They have turned into a mutual exchange of ideas. A visitor remarked accordingly: "I am coming to learn as much as to share". By sharing memories and by constructive communication among people with different attitudes we can contribute to mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence among people.

And we have become eye-witnesses ourselves, the encounters with eye-witnesses have changed us and turned us into eye-witnesses of the commemorative culture in Germany. This is an irritating aspect but on the other hand a new challenge for the future.

Thanks again to everyone involved in awarding the project. We are happy about the appreciation and recognition connected to this award, and feel encouraged to continue our work.