

“The Train to Freedom”

The liberation of 1,200 concentration camp prisoners from Theresienstadt during the final stage of the Second World War – a research, exhibition and memorial project

Preliminary study, project concept (Stage 1)

As at 18 February 2021

1 Introduction

Under the financial and administrative coordination of the Mamlock Foundation, the three academic partners Freie Universität Berlin, Charles University in Prague and the Pädagogische Hochschule St.Gallen are conducting research into the history of the liberation of 1,200 prisoners from the Theresienstadt concentration camp in February 1945. In the course of several stages, the project will aim to establish a joint website dedicated to this topic, to develop teaching materials for the subjects of history and political education, and ultimately to conceptualise permanent and/or mobile exhibitions and memorials for Switzerland, the Czech Republic and Germany.

The basic idea of the project is the outcome of an exchange between Michael Mamlock, Thomas Metzger and Johannes Gunzenreiner from the Democratisation and Human Rights Department of the Pädagogische Hochschule St.Gallen. Since Michael Mamlock was interested in research into this topic for family reasons – a great-uncle of his was on the “Train to Freedom” – he came across the preliminary work done by the St.Gallen team of university teachers and contacted them. The department had started explorative research work in 2015, 70 years after the liberation operation, and realised a small exhibition about the topic. Since then, three Master’s theses have been written on individual aspects by way of case studies.¹

The remembrance of the Shoah, particularly in the public sphere, loses none of its importance at all with growing temporal distance. In the face of increasing right-wing nationalist, right-wing populist and extreme right-wing movements in Europe and the shifts in the “limits of what may be said” that are caused by them, this remembrance fulfils a function that is eminently supportive of democracy. Calls for an “authoritarian democracy” are becoming more vociferous and are weakening democracy. In the three project countries, too, right-wing

¹ With regard to the project, cf. the exhibition documentation: Gunzenreiner Johannes/Metzger Thomas, exhibition documentation “Flüchtlinge im Hadwig”. 8 May to 25 September 2015. Democratisation and Human Rights Department of the Pädagogische Hochschule St. Gallen, January 2019. Online at https://www.phsg.ch/sites/default/files/cms/Dienstleistung/Fachstellen-und-Kompetenzzentren/Demokratiebildung%20und%20Menschenrechte/Abgeschlossene%20Projekte/Doku_Flu%C3%88chtligeimHadwig.pdf. For the Master’s theses, cf. the bibliography in Chapter 2.

national and right-wing populist parties are actively involved in politics; as is the case of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), they even denigrate the remembrance culture and pursue reactionary history policies. In Germany, the antisemitically motivated attack on the synagogue in Halle (Saale) of 9 October 2019 marked a new danger level for Jewesses and Jews. Ultimately, the attack was also a manifestation of the fact that antisemitism can be expressed more blatantly once again.² Particularly in view of these frightening developments, this research, exhibition and memorial project will aim – on the basis of this extraordinary liberation operation during the disintegration stage of the “Third Reich” – to familiarise a wider public, and pupils in particular, with topics such as the structure and function of the National Socialist state, the mechanisms of antisemitism and racism, and especially the fate of the Jewesses and Jews caught up in the extermination machinery of National Socialist Germany. The intention is to sensitise people to historical issues, but also to the developments that are currently jeopardising democracy and social pluralism. To ensure that the educational dimension is sustainable, the conceptualisation of teaching materials about the topics of the projects is of major importance.

In a preliminary study involving students from the three partner universities, the first step will be to structure the copious existing source materials, on the basis of which focal points for further work were defined. During the partially overlapping project stages subsequent to the preliminary study, the research results and the didactically prepared teaching materials will be made available to the general public through a website. Finally, the object of research will be publicly presented by means of exhibitions in the Czech Republic, Germany and Switzerland. This will reinforce the national and transnational Shoa remembrance culture.

2 The research subject: the Theresienstadt transport to Switzerland – a brief outline

In the last few months of the Second World War, various efforts to snatch a few thousand Jewesses and Jews from National Socialist Germany’s death machinery were crowned with success.³ On 5 February, such a transport left Theresienstadt with 1,200 concentration camp prisoners. The majority of them were elderly people, but there were also children. The liberated prisoners came from Germany, including Austria (663), the Netherlands (434) and

² For this, cf. the current survey values: Kornelius Stefan, “Jeder vierte Deutsche denkt antisemitisch”, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 23 October 2019, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/antisemitismus-deutschland-juedischer-weltkongress-1.4652536>. For the “hate culture” in the internet also cf. Schwarz-Friesel Monika, *Antisemitismus 2.0 und die Netzkultur des Hasses. Judenfeindschaft als kulturelle Konstante und kollektiver Gefühlswert im digitalen Zeitalter* (abridged version). Online at https://www.linguistik.tu-berlin.de/fileadmin/fg72/Antisemitismus_2-0_kurz.pdf.

³ In terms of content, the following statements are based on the explorative research conducted in connection with the “Flüchtlinge im Hadwig” exhibition project of the Democratisation and Human Rights Department of the Pädagogische Hochschule St.Gallen. Reference: Gunzenreiner/Metzger, exhibition documentation [as in fn. 1]. For further references regarding this transport, cf. the bibliography at the end of this chapter.

Czechoslovakia (103). They reached Switzerland early in the morning of 7 February 1945 and were quartered in what was then the Hadwig primary school in St. Gallen.⁴

The Swiss authorities were blindsided by their arrival since the transport was the result of a private initiative launched by Recha and Isaac Sternbuch. Based in Switzerland, they ran the European arm of the North American Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States of America and Canada and its rescue committee Vaad Ha-Hatzalah. In mid-October 1944, they met the former Swiss Federal Councillor Jean-Marie Musy, who in previous – subcontracted – operations had succeeded in liberating individual people from concentration camps. Musy received the financial resources enabling him to contact the SS. Twice he managed to meet Heinrich Himmler (3 November 1944 near Breslau, and 21 January 1945 in Wildbad), whom Musy, who was sympathetic to fascist regimes, knew from anti-communist networks. As a result of the negotiations, 1,200 Jewesses and Jews a week were supposed to be released from the concentration camps. By way of compensation, five million Swiss francs were deposited as a surety in a blocked account. However, the transport of 5 February 1945 remained the only one since competing networks within the SS thwarted the scheme, whereupon Adolf Hitler clearly put paid to it all. During the disintegration stage of the Third Reich, Himmler hoped that this operation would improve his image among the Western Allies. Musy, too, presumably intended to spruce up his battered image by his course of action in view of the imminent post-war period.

The composition of the transport was communicated to the prisoners in the Theresienstadt concentration camp on 3 February 1945. The persons who were selected could then decide whether they wanted to join the transport or not. Many were afraid that the transport to Switzerland was a camouflaged journey to the extermination camps since 20,000 people had been deported to the east from Theresienstadt as recently as late 1944. Additionally, the selection was made by the hated camp commandant SS-Obersturmführer Karl Rahm and aimed inter alia to cover up the terrible conditions and the deaths of many people in the camp.⁵ The transport, which only proceeded at a sluggish pace, passed Bauschowitz (Bohušovice nad Ohří), Leitmeritz (Litoměřice) and Eger (Cheb) on its way to Augsburg, from which it continued to Ulm and Friedrichshafen to reach Petershausen near Constance. In the morning of 7 February 1945, it crossed the Swiss border at 11 a.m.

After their arrival at the suburban railway station of St.Fiden, 1,000 of the 1,200 liberated Jewesses and Jews were quartered in St.Gallen's Hadwig school building. This had been requisitioned as a so-called disinfection camp. The 200 persons placed in Bühler in the Canton of Appenzell Ausserrhoden returned to the Hadwig school for disinfection. The dormitories were situated on the upper floors of the Hadwig building; the floor was covered with straw, and beds were only available to people in very poor health. The arrival of the concentration

⁴ 200 liberated prisoners were lodged in Bühler (Canton of Appenzell Ausserrhoden) near St.Gallen.

⁵ Thus no relatives of people who had died in the camp were meant to join the transport. Rahm also threatened that there would be negative consequences for those who remained if the leavers should make unfavourable reports about the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

camp prisoners aroused a great deal of interest among the civilian population; however, the authorities tried to prevent them from contacting prisoners on the school grounds. From 10 February 1945 onwards, the Jewesses and Jews were moved on in groups of 200. The last group left the Hadwig school on 15 February 1945.

Since the outbreak of the war, Switzerland had created a system of labour camps and refugee camps. The 1,200 Jewesses and Jews were distributed according to established procedures among four quarantine camps, the majority of which were situated in Western Switzerland.⁶ After the expiry of the quarantine period, the refugees were quartered in refugee camps.⁷ A definitive stay in Switzerland was not planned.⁸ On the one hand, this was in line with the transit doctrine, to which Switzerland had been committed for a long time. Consequently, refugees had to leave Switzerland at the first possible opportunity. By the end of the war at the latest, the Jewesses and Jews liberated from Theresienstadt were also under massive pressure to organise their onward move. The right of residence in Switzerland was only granted in exceptional cases, often after many years of uncertainty.⁹ Whereas most of the refugees hailing from the Netherlands and from Czechoslovakia quickly returned to their home countries after the war, those from Germany very often emigrated to third countries such as the USA or Palestine. On the other hand, Switzerland’s attitude was also due to an antisemitic refugee policy. This policy had evolved after the First World War in conjunction with the fear of excessive immigration (*Überfremdung*), which was becoming popular in Switzerland, and was developed and implemented with the help of the Swiss Aliens Police, which was established in 1917. After 1933, this policy aimed to prevent Jewish refugees from entering Switzerland. They were refused the status of political refugees for so-called “racial reasons”. Also, Switzerland closed its borders to Jewish refugees as a matter of principle from

⁶ They were situated in a disused silk-weaving mill in Adliswil (approx. 500 persons), in the Hôtel des Sports in Les Avants above Montreux (approx. 400), in the Belmont Hotel in Montreux (approx. 200) and in Tour Haldimand near Lausanne (approx. 100).

⁷ Stays in Switzerland for individual people were dealt with on the basis of random samples in two Master’s theses at the Pädagogische Hochschule St.Gallen: Truninger Mirjam, *Von Theresienstadt via St. Gallen nach <Unbekannt>. Die Minderjährigen des Theresienstadt-Transports von Februar 1945*, Master’s thesis, Pädagogische Hochschule St.Gallen 2018, online at <http://cdm15782.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15782coll2/id/2179>; Schmid Catrina, *Der Zug in die Freiheit. Das Schicksal jüdischer Gefangener aus dem KZ Theresienstadt und ihr Aufenthalt im Hadwigschulhaus in St. Gallen im Februar 1945. Eine Untersuchung von Einzelfällen durch die Darstellung individueller Schicksale auf der Grundlage von Zeitzeugengesprächen und Quellenanalysen*, Master’s thesis, Pädagogische Hochschule St.Gallen 2017, online at: https://www.phsg.ch/sites/default/files/cms/Dienstleistung/Fachstellen-und-Kompetenzzentren/Demokratiebildung%20und%20Menschenrechte/Masterarbeiten/Masterarbeit_Schmid_Catrina_def_red.pdf.

⁸ For the camp system and the transit doctrine, cf. among others: Erlanger Simon, *„Nur ein Durchgangsland“. Arbeitslager und Internierungsheime für Flüchtlinge und Emigranten in der Schweiz 1940-1949*, Zurich 2006.

⁹ Initial explorations of these exceptional cases were conducted in the context of a Master’s thesis: Ramos Nelson, *Gerettet und unerwünscht. Sechs jüdische Flüchtlinge unter der Kontrolle einer antisemitisch motivierten, schweizerischen Bundesbehörde*, Master’s thesis, Pädagogische Hochschule St. Gallen 2018.

summer 1942 – a policy which was only terminated in summer 1945, when the end of the war was foreseeable.¹⁰

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Subsequent to the exhibition project of the Department of Democratisation and Human Rights of the Pädagogische Hochschule St. Gallen, students wrote several Master's theses by way of case studies.

¹⁰ For the antisemitic dimension of Swiss refugee policy, cf. primarily: Koller Guido, *Fluchtort Schweiz. Schweizerische Flüchtlingspolitik (1933-1945) und ihre Nachgeschichte*, Stuttgart 2017; Kury Patrick, "Wer agiert? Der Überfremdungsdiskurs und die schweizerische Flüchtlingspolitik", in: Eder Franz X. (ed.), *Historische Diskursanalysen. Genealogie, Theorie, Anwendungen*, Wiesbaden 2006, 205-221; Kury Patrick, *Über Fremde reden. Überfremdungsdiskurs und Ausgrenzung in der Schweiz 1900-1945*, Zurich 2003; *Unabhängige Expertenkommission Schweiz – Zweiter Weltkrieg, Die Schweiz und die Flüchtlinge zur Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*, Zurich 2001; Mächler Stefan, "Kampf gegen das Chaos – die antisemitische Bevölkerungspolitik der eidgenössischen Fremdenpolizei und Polizeiabteilung 1917-1954", in: Mattioli Aram (ed.), *Antisemitismus in der Schweiz 1848-1960. Mit einem Vorwort von Alfred A. Häsler*, Zurich 1998, 357-421; Gast Uriel, *Von der Kontrolle zur Abwehr. Die eidgenössische Fremdenpolizei im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Wirtschaft 1915-1933*, Zurich 1997; Picard Jacques, *Die Schweiz und die Juden 1933-1945. Schweizerischer Antisemitismus, jüdische Abwehr und internationale Migrations- und Flüchtlingspolitik*, Zurich 1997.

Ramos Nelson, *Gerettet und unerwünscht. Sechs jüdische Flüchtlinge unter der Kontrolle einer antisemitisch motivierten, schweizerischen Bundesbehörde.* Master's thesis, Pädagogische Hochschule St. Gallen 2018.

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3 The project

The overall project “The liberation of 1,200 concentration camp prisoners from Theresienstadt during the final stage of the Second World War – a research, exhibition and memorial project” will extend to four stages. Project Stage 1 will be described in more detail below. This will be followed by a brief outline of the further planned project stages, which will deal with a more extensive historical treatment of the liberation operation, the implementation of the results on a website, the development of teaching materials and the creation of exhibitions and memorials specific to the individual countries. The more detailed conceptual configuration of these subsequent stages will depend on the research results of the preliminary study and will also be pressed ahead with in the course of this first project stage.

3.1 Preliminary study

The preliminary study, which is scheduled for one year and will ideally start in May 2021, will conduct preliminary work crucial to further project implementation. This first project stage is made of up four work packages. In a period of about four months (Work Package 1), the project partners will explore the state of the records concerning the liberation in their respective countries:

- Germany: Federal Archive, Berlin; Land Archive, Berlin; Compensation Board, Berlin; ITS Bad Arolsen; local archives.
- Switzerland: Swiss Federal Archives, Archives of Contemporary History, Archive(s) of the (Swiss) Red Cross, cantonal archives, local archives.
- Czech Republic: Terezín Memorial (in Theresienstadt) and Terezín Initiative Institute; National Archive; Jewish Museum, Prague; State Regional Archives, Litoměřice; as well as national and local archives.

- **Netherlands:** the Mamlock Foundation will conduct preliminary studies regarding the significant group of Dutch Jews on the liberation transport and will contact the NIOD (Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies) in Amsterdam for this purpose.

An excellent starting point for research is constituted by the files which the Swiss kept on all the refugees who reached Switzerland during the Second World War and which are stored in the Swiss Federal Archives. Consequently, such files also exist on the 1,200 people liberated from the Theresienstadt concentration camp. The first work package includes a brief sifting and photographic recording of these 1,200 dossiers. The analysis with regard to various criteria such as place of origin, deportation date (if entered), abode in Switzerland, return/onward journey and continued stay in Switzerland will enable us, for the benefit of the further steps, to define individual destinies that are of particular relevance to the multinational perspective on the liberation. Individual destinies will be of great importance for the website, the teaching materials and the exhibitions.

The selection of twelve individual destinies will provide the starting point for the second work package. The further-reaching biographical research work will be integrated into university teaching in Berlin and St.Gallen. Students of both institutions will conduct in-depth research into, and reconstruct, the individual destinies in the form of a project seminar in Spring Semester/Summer Semester 2022. At Charles University, the project seminar will be run in English for linguistic reasons. This seminar will focus on research into and the documentation of possible remembrance locations along that part of the deportation route that led through Czech territory. In addition, a junior Prague academic will cooperate with the seminars organised in Berlin and St.Gallen with regard to contents in order to make the predominantly German-language records from the investigation period accessible.

The participants in the three seminars, the junior Prague academic and the project team will meet for a summer school in summer 2022 in order to discuss their findings in depth (Work Package 3). At the same time, they will visit all the locations during this week and also become acquainted with the authentic remembrance places (such as the Theresienstadt concentration camp and the Hadwig school building).



Fig. 1: Outline of the structure of the preliminary studies divided up into four packages.

In parallel with the first three packages, the project partners will specify the concepts for the further project stages on the basis of the preliminary research, the results of the project seminars and the winter school. The specification or determination¹¹ of the concepts for the website, the didactic implementation and the exhibitions will gradually enable us to raise third-party funds for the individual project stages. This course of action will enhance the visibility for a realistic scheduling of the individual working steps and for accurate budgeting.

3.2 Further project steps - prospects

The project stages subsequent to the preliminary study will extend to a period of approx. three years and will be secured by separate funding rounds. The individual stages will be concluded with the generation of concrete products, which in their chronological sequence will be created step by step, but will be able to be implemented independently of each other.

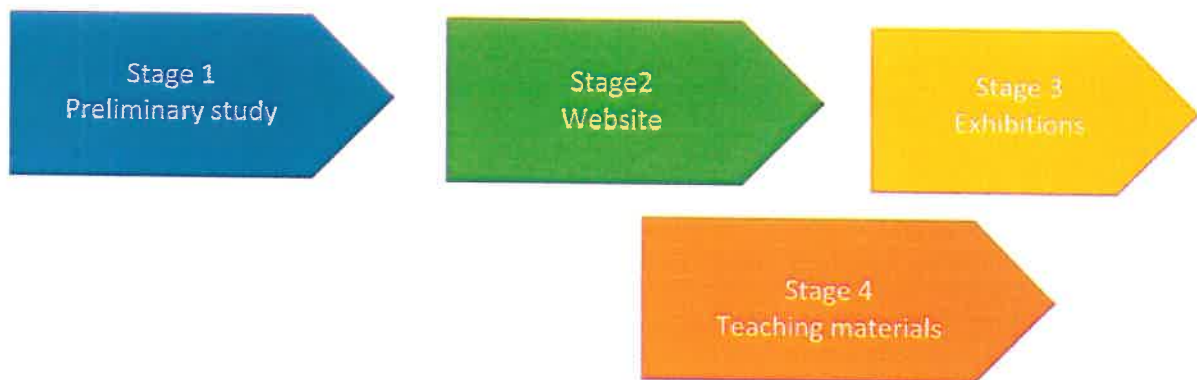


Fig. 2: Outline of the structure of the approx. three-year four-stage overall project

Website about the liberation

In terms of products, the multilingual website will bracket together the overall project. The website will be created and maintained in the long term in the Czech Republic.

In Stage 2 of the overall project, the broad historical treatment of the liberation of the 1,200 prisoners from the Theresienstadt concentration camp will take place on the basis of such records as have been found, the preliminary work of the project seminars (individual biographies) and the existing research literature. The website will combine the findings from the areas that have been researched with the aspect of a (virtual) memorial location and a platform for teachers. The technical implementation and the maintenance will be carried out by the Malach Center for Visual History of the Charles University in Prague. Besides the negotiations and intentions behind the liberation, the content of the website will focus on the composition of the transport in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, the transport route

¹¹ The conceptualisation of the working stages that have been scheduled last will not have been concluded by the end of Stage 1.

and the transport as such, the arrival and accommodation in Switzerland ranging from the so-called disinfection camps and the quarantine to the refugee camps and to “life after survival”. The researched individual destinies and the characterisation of the various groups among the liberated Jewesses and Jews will further develop and illustrate these topics. The deportations to Theresienstadt and the perpetrator groups involved will also be of interest.

Generation of teaching materials and didactic concepts

Together with the planned exhibitions, which must also be conceived of as part of a public way of teaching history, the teaching materials are also of great importance. Teaching materials will be developed for the three countries in Stage 3 on the basis of the research results. The liberation and its contextualisation will enable us to implement various topics from the subject areas “Holocaust Education”, “The History of National Socialism” and “Second World War” in schools. Much can be exemplified with the help of, say, individual destinies and perpetrator biographies. Above and beyond the teaching of this knowledge, the materials will be geared to the promotion of competencies in the field of democratisation/political education. The teaching materials create specific references to the individual national curricula in order to guarantee that they can be used by teachers. The teaching materials will be accessible through the project website.

The broad pedagogic impact of the project is intended to reach beyond the teaching materials for the school levels and the dimension of the public teaching of history with the planned exhibitions. The project will also generate didactic concepts and documents in order to have an impact on further areas of education/training, for instance at a corporate level. Also, further education programmes are intended to familiarise teachers with the teaching materials. In addition, the students involved in Stage 1 and possibly in further stages are indicative of the fact that on the one hand, the researched contents will be integrated into university teaching by the project partners. On the other hand, the students involved will be important ambassadors for the project at the same time.

Exhibitions

Several exhibition formats will take up the topic of the liberation of 1,200 concentration camp prisoners from Theresienstadt in the three countries involved in the projects and will acquaint a wider public with the subject matter of the project.

- One authentic memorial location is constituted by the former Hadwig primary school building, which was used as a disinfection camp in 1945 and is now part of the Pädagogische Hochschule St.Gallen. The building is, and will continue to be, used as an educational institution. Information panels placed in front of the building are intended to refer to its history. QR codes will refer visitors to the information placed on the

website. This part of the exhibition is accessible regardless of the university building's opening hours. A photo gallery which was created by the photographer Walter Scheiwiller on site in the Hadwig building in February 1945 and which reveals the situation of the liberated prisoners in the requisitioned building is of great documentary importance. In the building itself, references are made to specific aspects of the refugees' life in the building in places which can be identified on the basis of Walter Scheiwiller's photo gallery, and information panels refer to the historical circumstances of the operation. Here, too, links lead visitors directly to further information on the website.

- In the Czech Republic, information about the liberation operation is intended to be integrated into the Theresienstadt memorial site. In terms of content, this constitutes an exciting complement to the extensive permanent exhibition. There will be preliminary work on the transport route through Bauschowitz (Bohušovice nad Ohří), Leitmeritz (Litoměřice) and Eger (Cheb) as far as the Czech border, after which the train proceeded in the direction of Augsburg (mapping and establishing contact with local authorities).
- In Germany, many deportations in the direction of the Theresienstadt concentration camp started in Berlin. Similarly to what will be done in the Czech Republic, information is intended to be integrated into existing memorial arrangements or added to them as an autonomous memorial site. Possible instances are Platform 17 (Grunewald Railway Station), Levetzowstraße and Anhalter Bahnhof.
- The broad impact will be enhanced by means of mobile and decentralised exhibition settings. Specifically, exhibitions or information panels in the Czech Republic and in Germany are intended to ensure a wide dissemination of the topic along the route of the liberation transport.

The research results are also meant to be made accessible to the scientific community and the general public in publications. This can be done in the form of academic exhibition documents, for example.

4 Project partners (in alphabetic order)

Johannes Gunzenreiner is Professor of History and Political Education and co-head of the Democratisation and Human Rights Department at the Pädagogische Hochschule St.Gallen, as well as director of the Regional Didactic Centre in Gossau (Switzerland).

Kateřina Králová is an Associate Professor of contemporary European history and Head of the Department of Russian and Eastern European Studies at Charles University, Prague. In her research she focuses on reconciliation with the Nazi past, post-conflict societies, the Holocaust, the Greek Civil War and historical migration. She completed her Ph.D. with a thesis

on Greek-German relations later published in Czech, Greek and German (*Das Vermächtnis der Besatzung*, Böhlau 2016/BPB 2017). Latest publications in English: “In the Shadow of the Nazi Past” (EHQ 2016), “Being traitors.” (SEEBSS 2017), “The ‘Holocausts’ in Greece” (Holocaust Studies 2017), “Being a Holocaust Survivor in Greece” (book chapter, CUP 2018), *Jewish Life in Southeast Europe* (volume, Routledge 2019). Currently she is finalising her second book about Holocaust survivors in Greece.

Martin Lücke is Professor of the Didactics of History at the Friedrich Meinecke Institute of Freie Universität Berlin, Scientific Director of the Margherita von Brentano Centre for Gender Studies of Freie Universität Berlin. His project-related focal research points are the Shoah and historical learning, empirical history culture research and public history.

Michael Mamlock is a self-employed businessman with many years’ experience in project development in the medical/pharmaceutical industry, as well as in real estate. At the same time, he has worked as an initiator of various projects for the treatment of National Socialism and the Shoah for many years. He is a founder member of the Jewish Forum for Democracy and against Antisemitism (JFDA) of the Jewish community in Berlin, which was established in 2008. He is a founder member and committee member of the Förderverein Jüdischer Friedhof Berlin-Weißensee e.V. He has been involved in international fund-raising and in various exhibitions and projects such as the funding of the restoration of several burial grounds in the Jewish cemetery in Berlin-Weißensee in the 1990s.

Thomas Metzger is Professor of History and Co-Head of the Department of Democratisation and Human Rights at the Pädagogische Hochschule St. Gallen. His project-related focal research points are the history of the culture, social aspects and ideas of antisemitism, the Swiss refugee history of 1933-1945 and the history of Fascism.