

Historical Notes
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Wolfsburg

Issue 1



>>Learning from history<<

Comments on efforts by Volkswagen's workforce,
labor representatives, executives, and corporate
management to come to terms with the issue
of forced labor during the Third Reich

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Hilfsfonds
 ein entschuldigtes Versagen
 - Der Volkswagen
 wurde von hoch Entlohn-
 ten Zwangsarbeitern
 des Dritten Reiches
 gebaut. Europa gründet
 eine Vorkommnisse-
 Kommission, die die
 Täter bestraft, seine
 Namen mit anderen ab-
 rechnet, die Geschichte



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VW-Fonds mit 20 Millionen Mark ausgestattet

Autokonzern zahlt Entschädigung an alle noch lebenden Zwangsarbeiter / Peres und Vranitzky entscheiden im Kuratorium

Wolfsburg (Ini/mak). Die Volkswagen AG hat am Freitag beschlossen, einen privaten Hilfsfonds für ehemalige Zwangsarbeiter einzurichten. Er wird mit 20 Millionen Mark ausgestattet. Der Aufsichtsrat des Automobilkonzerns stimmte einem entsprechenden Vorschlag des Vorstandes zu.

Aus dem Fonds sollen „humanitäre Leistungen“ an alle noch lebenden früheren VW-Zwangsarbeiter gezahlt werden. Das Unternehmen will Personen „ungeachtet ihrer Herkunft und Nationalität zügig und direkt in die Aussicht gestellte Unterstützung zukommen lassen“.

Wie der Automobilkonzern außerdem mitteile, sei der Fonds gemäß dem bisherigen Kenntnisstand über die Zahl der noch lebenden Zwangsarbeiter hinreichend dotiert. Allerdings ist unklar, wie viele der 15 000 bis 20 000 ehemaligen VW-Zwangsarbeiter, darunter 15 000 Juden, heute noch leben. Auch über die Höhe der einzelnen Entschädigungen machte VW gestern keine Angaben. Das Unternehmen meint, daß Forderungen zwischen 5000 und 20 000 Mark gestellt werden.

Die genauen Beträge sollen offenbar von einem Kuratorium festgelegt werden. Hierfür hat der Konzern bereits

den früheren israelischen Ministerpräsidenten Schimon Peres und Österreichs Altbundeskanzler Franz Vranitzky gewonnen. Noch in diesem Jahr sollen die ersten Zahlungen geleistet werden. VW ist das erste deutsche Unternehmen, welches einen Entschädigungsfonds gegründet hat.

Volkswagen möchte mit dem Fonds auch den inzwischen erhobenen Klagen ehemaliger Zwangsarbeiter begegnen. Edward Pagan, einer der Holocaust-Opfer-Anwälte in den USA, sagte am Freitag, die Gründung eines privaten Fonds von VW mache eine Sammelklage der Opfer „nicht überflüssig“. Dage-

VW bringt den Stein ins Rollen

Industrie soll sich Entschädigung von Zwangsarbeitern anschließen

werk „Europa und der Reichseinsatz“ (das man auch bei VW benutzt) auch die einzelnen Herkunftsländer aufgelistet. Die Nationalität entschied häufig über Leben und Tod. Französische Fronarbeiter wurden bei VW und andernorts wie deutsche Arbeiter bezahlt. „Sie konnten nach Braunschweig zum Tanzen gehen.“ Für KZ-Häftlinge aus Polen oder Ungarn galt dagegen: Sie waren Sklaven. Von 400 000 jüdischen Zwangsarbeitern in deutschen Betrie-

ben fünf Monaten für vier Firmen gearbeitet“, weiß Graef. Der VW-Mann fände es daher „in höchstem Maße ungerrecht“, wenn nur die VW-Arbeiter jetzt finanzielle Hilfen erhielten. Lang ist die Liste der Unternehmen, die einst von der NS-Kriegswirtschaft und ihrem europaweiten Beutensystem profitierten, das auch die menschliche Arbeitskraft einschloß. Sie liest sich wie ein Who is Who der deutschen Industrie. Aber auch Kommunen hatten Zwangsarbei-

Ende eines Tabus

Lange Zeit hat die deutsche Wirtschaft das Thema Zwangsarbeit ignoriert – jetzt wird sie von der Vergangenheit eingeholt

VW stellt sich seiner Geschichte

Nach der Ankündigung des Auto-Konzerns, Zwangsarbeitern individuelle Entschädigung zu zahlen, geraten auch andere Firmen in Zugzwang.

Von Andreas Moser

Wolfsburg. Hanna Reichenbach trug im Volkswagenwerk die Personalnummer 4003. In Tag- und Nachtschichten produzierte die Jüdin aus Oradea in Rumänien Teilmotoren für die deutsche Wehrmacht, mit Kriegsgefangenen aus Italien und Frankreich. Im Juli 1944 war die 17jährige im KZ Auschwitz von VW Verantwortlichen zusammen mit 500 anderen Frauen ausgewählt worden. Längst nicht alle erlebten den Tag der Befreiung neun Monate später am 12. April 1945. Erst nach mehr als einem halben Jahrhundert kann die 71jährige, die heute in Süddeutschland lebt, auf Entschädigung hoffen.

Es gab kaum einen Industrie-

betrieb in Deutschland, der während der NS-Zeit nicht auf Zwangsarbeiter aus besetzten Gebieten, Kriegsgefangenen oder KZ-Häftlinge zurückgriff. Und wie nahezu alle Nachkriegsunternehmen hat auch die Volkswagen AG unter Berufung auf das Londoner Schuldenabkommen von 1953 eine individuelle Entschädigung abgelehnt. Jetzt wagt der VW-Vorstand als erstes großes Unternehmen einen Kurswechsel. Er will einen privaten Hilfsfonds einrichten. Der Autokonzern bringt damit andere deutsche Firmen in Zugzwang.

Von den rund 15 000 VW-Zwangsarbeitern leben nur noch wenige. Jahrzehntlang wurden die dunklen Kapitel in der VW-Geschichte in Wolfsburg verdrängt und verschwiegen, bis im

Jahr 1988 der 50. Geburtstag von Werk und Stadt unweigerlich das Licht auf die Gründungsphase warf. Beide wären ohne die Nationalsozialisten nicht entstanden. Ferdinand Porsche, der Erfinder des VW Käfers, hatte das Ohr Adolf Hitlers. Und aus der Autoherstellung wurde Anfang der 40er Jahre schnell eine der größten Rüstungsmaschinen des Dritten Reiches.

Vor allem auf Drängen des Betriebsrates gab der VW-Vorstand vor zehn Jahren den Weg frei, die Vergangenheit aufarbeiten zu lassen. Unter Führung des Historikers Hans Mommsen entstand eine 1000seitige Studie. Sie belegt die besondere Rolle von VW: Mehr als jede andere Firma war das Werk auf Zwangsarbeiter angewiesen. Denn aus der strukturschwachen Region war keine Stammbelegschaft aufzubauen. So orderten Porsche und sein Schwiegersohn Anton Piech als Werkleiter bei den NS-Stellen schon früh Fremdarbeiter. Ohne den Blick für die Realität des na-

henden Unterganges des Nazi-Staates ließen sie Tausende Zwangsarbeiter laut Studie „bis zum letzten Augenblick des Krieges“ Rüstungsgüter herstellen.

Den Schritt zu einer individuellen Entschädigung geht der heutige VW-Chef Ferdinand Piech, nachdem angekündigte Klagen ehemaliger Zwangsarbeiter den öffentlichen Druck wachsen ließen. „Piech will keiner Debatte, aus dem Weg gehen“ sagt Vorstandstrügler Klaus Kocks. Ehemaligen Zwangsarbeitern des VW-Gründers und Sohn des früheren Werkleiters in eine falsche Art der Mitverantwortung zu nehmen.

Auch die weltweite Expansion des Wolfsburger Autokonzerns hat Überlegungen beflügelt, mit der eigenen Vergangenheit offensiver umzugehen. So geht bei einigen in der VW-Führung die Sorge um, neue Debatten über die Rolle von VW in der NS-Zeit könnten international das Image der deutschen Autobauer ethisch beschädigen.

Showing respect for the victims of injustice

Widespread approval greeted Volkswagen's decision in July 1998 to establish a humanitarian fund to make the first direct payments to help improve the lives of the individuals who had worked as forced laborers for its corporate forerunner under the Third Reich. But there were expressions of surprise as well. "Why is Volkswagen doing this – more than fifty years after the collapse of Nazi Germany?" Questions like this were frequently heard from media representatives, including foreign journalists.

Their surprise was understandable. Just a few months prior, Volkswagen had stated that it felt compelled to stand by the generally accepted legal position with regard to direct compensation payments to former forced laborers. The essence of this position – which is universally shared by German companies whose predecessors used forced laborers to manufacture armaments during the Third Reich – is that forced labor was an injustice emanating from the Nazi state. It was an integral and pervasive part of the wartime economy brought about by the Nazi state. Forced laborers were employed not just in industry, but in agriculture and by public entities as well.

Legal claims resulting from forced labor can thus be asserted only against the Federal Republic of Germany as the legal successor to the Third Reich. The Federal Republic of Germany has faced up to its responsibility for National Socialist injustice by entering into a network of international agreements and by enacting national compensation legislation.

Less well known than the above is that the process of actively facing up to the injustice of forced labor has been underway at Volkswagen for almost twenty years. This has included consideration of the moral as well as the legal dimensions of the issue. The need to face up to the past in this manner is all the more obvious in areas in which later generations, while bearing no direct responsibility, nevertheless have an obligation to learn from history and to show their respect for the victims of injustice. The establishment of the Humanitarian Fund is a continuation of this process. ■

International Herald Tribune, 12.09.1998

Volkswagen: \$12 Million Goes to Slave Labor Fund

By Edmund L. Andrews
New York Times Service

FRANKFURT — Faced with a new lawsuit over the use of slave labor during World War II, Volkswagen AG announced plans Friday to set up a fund of 20 million marks (about \$12 million) to compensate surviving workers.

The fund will be overseen by Shimon Peres, a former prime minister of Israel, according to people working with the company.

The move comes at a time when U.S. lawyers have filed class-action suits over slave labor against Volkswagen and many other German industrial companies.

Most of the companies acknowledge that they used slave laborers during

profits that can be attributed to slave labor. If the suit against the companies is successful, it would mean compensation in the billions of dollars.

Volkswagen, along with most other German companies, continues to deny any legal responsibility for its actions during the Hitler years.

But Volkswagen announced nearly two months ago that it would create a compensation fund.

At the time, survivors' groups had not filed their lawsuit against Volkswagen but were threatening to do so.

Company executives warned that they did not want to be pinned down to precise numbers on the size of the new fund. But they estimate that between 1,000 and 2,000 forced laborers are still alive and that a fund of \$12 million would be enough to provide compen-

in 1996 by Benjamin Netanyahu.

Mr. Peres, according to a person who spoke on the condition of anonymity, will head an independent board that will evaluate all the claims and decide how much to pay each survivor.

The pressure on Volkswagen and the other German companies that are being sued has increased since Switzerland's three biggest banks reached a \$1.25 billion settlement with Jewish organizations last month over money and gold that belonged to Holocaust victims and was never returned.

On the issue of slave labor, a group of lawyers in New York and Munich has sued all the German car manufacturers, including BMW and Daimler-Benz; electronic companies, including Siemens; steel companies, including Krupp; and chemical companies.

Voluntary humanitarian assistance

...for projects

In 1991, Volkswagen AG provided funds totaling DM 12 million for disbursement through appropriate intermediary organizations to support future-oriented projects in the countries from which most of former forced laborers came. The expenditure of these funds, which was completed by March 1993, was placed in the hands a Board of Curators, which included the following distinguished members:

- Professor Dr. Dietrich Goldschmidt,
former chairman of the organization "Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste e.V." [Initiative: Sign of Atonement, Services for Peace, reg. assn.]
- Hans Koschnik,
former mayor of the German city of Bremen
- Professor Dr. Hans Mommsen,
Department of History of the Ruhr University in Bochum
- Klaus Volkert,
Chairman of the Central and Group Works Councils at Volkswagen AG
- Dr. Peter Frerk,
Member of the Board of Management of Volkswagen AG.

These funds were divided in almost equal amounts among nearly 30 projects in Belarus, Israel, Poland, and the Ukraine. The projects receiving grants were practical in nature and intended to assist the young, the elderly, the handicapped, and hospital patients.

... for individual forced laborers

The humanitarian fund which Volkswagen decided on in July 1998 was established in September of that year and provided with the sum of DM 20 million. The fund is supervised by its Board of Curators, which is chaired by Shimon Peres, former Prime Minister of Israel, and includes Dr. Franz Vranitzky, former Chancellor of Austria, and Dr. Richard von Weizsäcker, former President of Germany.

In order to ensure that payments are disbursed swiftly and unbureaucratically, Volkswagen appointed KPMG Deutsche Treuhand-Gesellschaft AG to administer the fund and make the individual payments. Notices were placed in publications in 22 different countries requesting persons who had performed forced labor for the Volkswagen company which existed at the time to contact the Humanitarian Fund at the following address:

KPMG Deutsche Treuhand-Gesellschaft AG
Postfach 55 03 50
60 402 Frankfurt am Main
Germany

A "miracle" in Wolfsburg

The plant which had originally been built to manufacture "the people's car" (the "Volkswagen") for average Germans was just a few years old when United States troops entered the neighboring town of Fallersleben on April 10, 1945, thus ushering in a new era. Shortly thereafter, an American eyewitness wrote the following account:

"A couple of German workers set to work in the factory... At first there were six of them, then twelve, and more and more kept coming. They waded through knee-deep water, trying to clear away rubble and debris with their bare hands. They brought back the machines that had been hidden in the vicinity and set about repairing them. Then they built two complete cars."

A "miracle" of sorts was in the making in Wolfsburg. Work was resumed in May/June 1945. In mid-August 1945, the plant was placed under the trusteeship of the British Military Government. By the end of the year, 9,000 workers had produced a total of 1,785 vehicles, which, however, were delivered entirely to the Allied occupying forces and the German post office. In the year which followed, 1946, 10,020 Volkswagens were manufactured – the first ever in fact destined for civilian owners.

During this period, those working at Volkswagen in Wolfsburg, like people everywhere in West Germany, concen-

trated entirely on economic reconstruction and social advancement – even though life in Wolfsburg in the initial post-war years was overshadowed by the very realistic threat that Volkswagen's factory would be dismantled and cease to exist.

It was the positive attitude, favorable actions, and talent for improvisation of the British Military Government in the person of its representative in Wolfsburg, Major Ivan Hirst, which constituted the true catalysts for a new beginning. Major Hirst got production rolling by making liberal use of the possibilities the British had for procuring materials. He helped secure the first large-scale order for 20,000 Beetles, which assured the factory's continued existence, and he had a stabilizing and motivating effect on the German plant managers, whose courage often threatened to fail them.

Democracy and the market economy – "bequeathed" to Germany by its western allies – were the driving forces of the new republic. It was on this basis that Heinrich Nordhoff took over in Wolfsburg in 1948 and began the rebuilding process which soon turned Volkswagen into a global player as the manufacturer of the VW Beetle and the VW Transporter.

The rapid series of successes which followed filled people with pride. This success, together with the prevailing social and political climate of the time, also initially inclined people to suppress their memories of the past. It was not until political changes occurred in Germany in the late 1960s and early 1970s that "coming to terms with the past" was placed squarely on the political agenda. ■

Forced labor in the Nazi state: civilian workers, POW's, concentration camp inmates

More than 10 million foreigners were employed in the German economy during World War II. Some 7 million foreign civilians, prisoners of war, and concentration camp inmates were forcibly compelled to labor for the German wartime economy.

Forced labor was ubiquitous in the wartime society of the "Pan-Germanic Reich." Forced labor was used for raw materials production as well as in agriculture and forestry. It extended from the armaments industry down through the manual trades, the services sector, and the transportation system. Forced laborers thus worked for farmers, for bakers, even for local government, which used Soviet prisoners of war to see to garbage collection. And they also worked for some 12,000 industrial firms which performed armaments contracts.

By the summer of 1944, one job in four in the German Reich was done by a foreign worker. In industry, German wartime production was maintained by increasing reliance on forced labor. In agriculture, forced laborers ensured the supply of food to feed the population. What had begun in the winter of 1939 / 40 as an emergency measure to overcome short-term labor shortages developed into a permanent feature of labor policy in accordance with the improvisation typical of the Nazi system.

Forced laborers were subjected to a governmental policy of discrimination which went beyond the exploitation of their labor. They were forced to endure severe disadvantages compared with the German population and German workers by reason of their origin, nationality, or ethnic group. The principal motivation for this discrimination was racial. It was considered politically legitimate and constituted an integral component of state policy during the Nazi era.

The forced laborers included large numbers of civilians deported from Poland and the former Soviet Union, more than half of them women. Prisoners of war from Poland, France and Serbia as well as Italian military internees and hundreds of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war were also put to work. Finally, in 1944 / 45 some 400,000 concentration camp inmates of widely disparate nationalities, including approximately 100,000 Jews, were forced to work for the German wartime economy.

In addition to the origin of the forced laborers, their status as either civilians, prisoners of war, or concentration camp inmates also had an impact on their situation. The treatment, nutrition, and remuneration of foreign workers was marked by a graduated system of increasing discrimination from West to East. Whereas the treatment of the Danes, the Dutch, and the civilian workers from Italy, Germany's political ally at the time, was more or less equivalent to that of German workers, members of the Slavic peoples were the object of racial discrimination. The Nazi dictatorship enacted special discriminatory laws for Poles and Russians in an

attempt to regiment all areas of their lives down to the most petty details. These persons were at the mercy of the security forces. Their freedom of movement was drastically limited. They were stigmatized by having to wear a badge sewn to their clothing with a "P" or the word "Ost" ("East") written on it.

As a rule, these eastern European forced laborers were housed in mass accommodations. Although the situation at the hutted camps and in the makeshift facilities such as cinemas, gymnasiums and shacks did vary, the non-German occupants usually suffered from cramped and dirty quarters as well as the lack of sanitary facilities, making life crowded together, sometimes for years on end, unbearable indeed. The inhabitants of the hutted camps, which were usually surrounded by barbed wire, must have felt like prisoners deprived of their individuality by the restrictions on their freedom of movement and the minute rules governing every human impulse. Moreover, the Nazi regime imposed a special tax on the wages paid to Poles and "eastern workers" so as to reduce their remuneration even further.

Soviet prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates received no wages to begin with. The work they had to perform was the dirtiest, the most physically demanding, and the most dangerous to health. They received starvation rations and lacked suitable clothing, medical attention, and other necessities of life. The mortality rate among prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates was correspondingly high.

In concentration camps, Gypsies, resistance fighters from occupied countries, political adversaries (particularly communists and social democrats), so-called "anti-social persons," Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals lived in constant fear for their lives. The extermination camps Auschwitz and Treblinka were places of genocide.

Historians today distinguish between three groups of forced laborers: concentration camp inmates, prisoners of war, and civilian forced laborers. They define forced laborers as follows:

- Persons made to work by acts of compulsion – deportation, military order, or obligatory service;
- Persons who suffered massive discrimination in their working and living conditions compared with German workers. This discrimination was racially motivated in the case of Slavs (Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians) and Jews;
- Persons who were at the complete mercy of the forces of repression (Gestapo, Nazi party, SS, etc.).



Workforce makeup at the main VW factory

The following table shows the number of forced laborers used at different moments in time at the Volkswagen company then in existence:

	Germans	%	Non-Germans	%	Totals
12/31/1939	2,696	100	0	0	2,696
12/31/1940	5,663	86	919	14	6,582
12/31/1941	5,997	74	2,070	26	8,067
12/31/1942	4,660	39	7,258	61	11,917
12/31/1943	5,621	33	11,401	67	17,022
12/31/1944	6,031	35	11,334	65	17,365

Evolution of the company

1938 - 1939

Factory construction

1939 - 1941

Conversion to armaments production

1941 - 1942

Armaments production consolidated

1942 - 1944

Armaments production expanded

1944 - 1945

Decentralization and transfer to underground sites

Recruitment of forced and voluntary labor

1938 Recruitment of volunteer foreign civilian workers from Italy as a form of international migratory labor

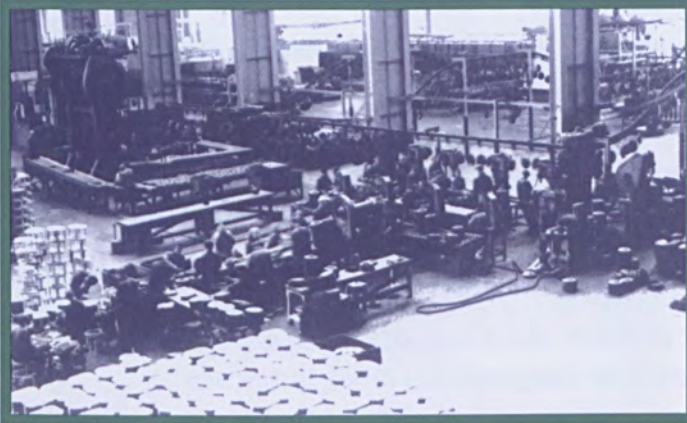
1940 Female Polish forced laborers (300),
1941 German military prisoners (1,000).
Transition to involuntary labor

1941 Soviet prisoners of war (1,000),
1942 Concentration camp inmates (800). Distinction between employment of non-Germans and forced labor

1942 "Eastern workers" (5,000),
1943 Polish (600), French (1,500),
and Dutch (300) forced laborers,
1942 French prisoners of war (1,800),
1943 Serbian prisoners of war (200),
1943 Italian military internees (1,640)

1944 Concentration camp inmates (4,460),
1944 Jewish "Special Service Workers" (400),
1944 Prisoners sentenced by the courts (300)

Forced labor at the former Volkswagen company



Two thirds of the workforce came from foreign countries

The situation at the Volkswagen factory, which was built in 1938, was unusual in that the first serious labor shortage occurred before construction of the automobile factory had even been completed. Work at most of the plant's construction sites on the Mittelland Canal came to a standstill in the summer of 1938 because several thousand German construction workers had been dispatched to build the so-called Siegfried Line ("Westwall"). The German Labor Front (Deutsche Arbeitsfront), which owned the company – Volkswagenwerk GmbH – regarded the agreement it signed on August 6, 1938 to recruit Italian construction workers as a temporary stopgap solution to this labor shortage.

The Nazi war of aggression prevented the planned mass production of civilian passenger cars and caused the company to switch to the production of armaments. Instead of making Volkswagens, the factory manufactured droppable wooden fuel tanks, airplane wings, and later jeep-type and amphibian vehicles as well. Once the war had begun, the Volkswagen company of the time constantly relied on non-German replacement workers in order to maintain its armaments production, which was slow in starting up. Following the assignment of 300 Polish women to the Volkswagen factory at the end of the summer of 1940, the transition to forced labor occurred in January 1941 when more than 1,000 German military prisoners were assigned to the main factory. These military prisoners were placed in a part of the temporary housing complex which was divided from the rest of the camp.

The use of forced labor became Volkswagen's permanent solution to the constant labor shortages. It was extended to include the use of Soviet prisoners of war in industrial production. In fact, the assignment of approximately 650 Soviet prisoners of war from Stalag XI B to the Volkswagen factory in October of 1941 constituted the first such use of Soviet prisoners in the entire German economy. It proved impossible, however, to assign these prisoners to normal industrial jobs as a result of their pitiful physical condition and undernourishment. Some of the prisoners had become so weak that they were unable to walk by themselves or collapsed from exhaustion while working at the machines. Company management then arranged for the prisoner's rations to be supplemented with food raised on factory-owned farms in order to nurse the emaciated workers back to strength. While the plant management was later able to obtain an increase in the rations provided to Soviet prisoners of war, the situation still remained unsatisfactory.

It was characteristic of the wartime economic system that the companies subject to this system were constantly seeking to obtain workers with the special skills which they required. Besides civilians and prisoners of war, such workers also included concentration camp prisoners, who were sent to industrial companies "on loan" from the SS.

In 1944/45, concentration camp prisoners produced flying bombs, anti-tank mines, and bazookas at the main factory in Wolfsburg. The food and accommodations they received there were an improvement over their treatment in the large concentration camps. At the various dispersal sites, however, concentration camp inmates as a rule labored with exceedingly meager resources to convert mines, asphalt pits, and railroad tunnels into factories or assembly plants. While historians believe that the conditions in the production detachments working for the Volkswagen factory were sufficient to ensure the survival of the great majority of these forced laborers, there were nonetheless numerous fatalities among the workers used to convert the underground sites.

The Allied soldiers who liberated the surviving forced laborers put an end to this dark chapter of German history. At the same time, the American and British officers laid the foundation for a new era. For the workforce, this new era was personified by Major Ivan Hirst, a man still remembered with great respect by those who witnessed his deeds. ■



Informing and Educating · Personal Encounters



Promoting Remembrance
Attempting Reconciliation · Providing Humanitarian Assistance

Action against suppression of the past

In the 1980s, the men and women working at Volkswagen joined in the political discussion which had begun in German society in the 1970s and led to a consensus that it was crucial to face up to Germany's history during the Nazi era. Specifically, labor representatives headed by the then Chairman of the Central and Group Works Councils, Walter Hiller, put this issue on the agenda time and again. They demanded and themselves took action to resist suppression of the past and to reinforce commitment to the lessons for the future to be learned from what had happened in the past.

Since then,

- Informing and educating,
- Arranging personal encounters,
- Promoting remembrance,
- Attempting reconciliation, and
- Providing humanitarian assistance

have become the essential elements of how Volkswagen deals with its own history.

Hans Mommsen and Manfred Grieger: The Volkswagen Factory and its Workers in the Third Reich

The notion of having an independent expert in contemporary history conduct a scholarly study of forced labor at the Volkswagen company which existed at the time was first broached at Volkswagen AG in 1986 – in the context of the discussions as to how the company should deal with its own history in light of its forthcoming 50th anniversary in 1988.

A Volkswagen AG press release published on May 7, 1986, reads:

"The period of Nazi tyranny inflicted indescribable suffering on millions of innocent people. Like many other industrial companies which had converted to production for the war-time economy, the Volkswagen factory also employed forced laborers who worked under appalling conditions. Many of these people lost their lives or forfeited their health.

The Board of Management, the Works Council, and the workforce of Volkswagen AG consider it their duty to help make sure that injustice, violence, and the fomentation of racial and ethnic hatred will never again supplant justice and peace. In particular, everything possible must be done to prevent workers from being subjected to treatment which is antithetical to the basic principles of human dignity.

The Board of Management and Works Council of Volkswagen AG consider it necessary to elucidate these events as completely and comprehensively as is possible, using all records still in existence. They have therefore called upon Dr. Hans Mommsen, Professor of Contemporary History at the Ruhr University in Bochum, to form an independent research group which will work with the support of the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich and the Federal Archives in Koblenz to prepare a scholarly analysis of all issues relating to forced labor during the Third Reich at the Volkswagen company then in existence. The results of their investigations will be published. This research group will be given unrestricted access to the Volkswagen AG archives and other relevant company documents.

The Board of Management and Works Council of Volkswagen AG are determined to do even more to foster initiatives that will help to overcome the suffering and bitterness of World War II, which continues to separate peoples, and replace it with understanding and international cooperation. A first step in this direction will be to intensify international cultural and youth exchange activities."

Breaking new ground in industrial history research

Professor Mommsen proposed treating the specific issue of forced labor in the broader context of the history of the Volkswagen factory during the Third Reich. This study broke new ground in the field of industrial history research. At this time, no other company had ever consented to such comprehensive scholarly examination of its history during the Nazi era. Volkswagen AG adhered stringently to its agreed role throughout the duration of the research project: it provided financial and organizational support, but made no attempt to influence content.

The research work required more time than originally anticipated. The reasons for this delay included the difficulties in finding records, the discovery of previously unknown documents in the air-raid shelters at the Wolfsburg factory, and the accessibility of East German archives from 1989/90 onwards as a result of German reunification.

Following two scholarly symposiums on the subject held by the Ruhr University in Bochum, the results of the study were published in German in November 1996 by the ECON publishing house in a work entitled (in translation) *The Volkswagen Factory and its Workers in the Third Reich*. ■



The 1,000 page landmark study in the field of corporate history, published in 1996: *The Volkswagen Factory and its Workers in the Third Reich*

Learning by meeting – Volkswagen's international youth exchange activities

At the time of the decision to commission Professor Mommsen's study, it was also considered necessary to add a future-oriented component to the research of the past by intensifying Volkswagen's international youth and cultural activities.

Volkswagen's involvement in international youth programs in fact began in the 1960s as a means of promoting reconciliation with Germany's western neighbors. This included an apprentice exchange program with Renault in Paris as well as a program in which Volkswagen apprentices tend graves in war cemeteries.

In 1986, at the same time it commissioned Professor Mommsen to conduct his study, Volkswagen thus also began setting up international programs to bring young people from Germany together with their counterparts in the central and eastern European countries that were home to the forced laborers of the Volkswagen company in existence during World War II.

The Oświęcim seminars

Regular visits by groups of apprentices from Volkswagen AG to the International Youth Meeting Center in Oświęcim/Auschwitz play a special role in this con-



text. This center, which is intended to bring together young people from different countries, is located about a mile from the original Auschwitz camp. It was founded on the initiative of the German organization "Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste e.V." (Initiative: Sign of Atonement, Services for Peace).

This International Youth Meeting Center was built with funds donated by numerous private sector entities, including Volkswagen, and by the Federal Republic of Germany and the individual German states. Starting in the mid 1980s, donations from Volkswagen helped expand and enlarge the Center. Volkswagen's overall donations of more than DM 800,000 have provided the International Youth Meeting Center with substantial financial support. More important still have been Volkswagen's non-monetary and practical support for the Center. Hans-Jürgen Uhl, General Manager of the Volkswagen AG Central and Group Works Councils, is a member of the Center's board of governors.

Since 1987, Volkswagen has held seminars at the International Youth Meeting Center focusing on German history and its consequences. Since 1992, various groups of 35 apprentices from all of Volkswagen's factories have taken part in two-week visits to upgrade the structural condition of the Auschwitz memorial site in order to preserve this memorial as a admonition to future generations. Apprentices are accompanied by instructors during these two-week stays and also go through preparatory and follow-up activities. The educational goal of this program is to keep memories alive and teach these young people to perceive current threats to democracy and human rights.

VW trainees at the site of the Auschwitz memorial



Seminars, interviews with eyewitnesses of the time, encounters between young people, and reconstruction work – formative experiences for tomorrow's technicians and executives

Personal encounter.
Former concentration
camp inmates visit
the makeshift WW II
air-raid shelters
together with VW
employees



VW trainees construct a place
of remembrance of forced
labor at an historical location
in the Volkswagen plant

Places of remembrance at Volkswagen's Wolfsburg plant

This chapter began in September 1991 with a project by participants in the VW excursions to Oświęcim. One of these groups presented its experiences and impressions in an exhibition entitled "Living With History – Shaping the Future as Partners". This exhibition was first shown at the Wolfsburg factory and then later at all of Volkswagen's other plants in Germany.

1991: Sector 2 memorial stone

Another step was taken when the interim results of the research project headed by Professor Mommsen were presented. A memorial stone dedicated to forced laborers who worked at the Volkswagen factory was unveiled on October 9, 1991 at the entrance to the plant's Sector 2 on South Street (Südstrasse), a hub of communication at the Wolfsburg factory. On this occasion, Klaus Volkert, then as now Chairman of the Volkswagen AG Central and Group Works Councils, gave a speech addressing fundamental issues. He stressed the historical obligations arising out of the suffering and death of those who, at Volkswagen as well, were victimized by a merciless fascist system of racial hatred and xenophobia. Klaus Volkert continued:

"Those responsible for Volkswagen today cannot be held accountable for this [injustice]. But this does not release us from our obligation to confront the past. Only those who are prepared to shoulder this burden are in a position to assume responsibility for the future. It is therefore wrong to say that we should step out of the shadow of the past, because it is we who cast this shadow. We cannot step to one side of our own historical development. Instead, we must be prepared to accept the responsibility that arises out of our history. And this requires an uncompromising willingness to examine those aspects of our historical development which must never recur."

1995 / 99: Place of remembrance and document center in the "air-raid shelters" in Hall 1

A special place of remembrance is currently in the final stages of preparation. On the initiative of the Volkswagen Works Council, a memorial was established at an historical location – the shelters in Hall 1 of the Wolfsburg factory in which forced laborers took refuge during air raids in World War II. Apprentices who had studied and worked in Oświęcim set about creating this memorial with a great deal of commitment but only modest resources.

The climatic conditions in the air-raid shelters soon put the exhibits at risk, making it necessary to redesign the facility. For this reason and with a view to current discussions and developments on the issue of forced labor, Volkswagen decided to take a special step.

An internal working group was formed from among employees of Volkswagen's Coaching Company and its Communication Division and assigned the job of creating a permanent facility to serve as a "place of remembrance and document center for forced labor in the Volkswagen factory."

This redesigned memorial is being modeled after comparable international facilities and represents an aspect of Volkswagen's efforts to preserve its history. This aspect will be incorporated into the company's ongoing communication activities. The redesigned memorial is scheduled for completion in autumn 1999.

For many years, it has also been routine practice for Volkswagen's Board of Management and Works Council to invite former forced laborers to the events by which Volkswagen remembers its history. Participation by individuals who actually witnessed the events in question stimulates remembrance and helps resist the blurring of the past.

In 1990, a group of 24 former forced laborers now living in Israel visited Volkswagen with their wives at the invitation of the Board of Management. The former forced laborers first arrived in Wolfsburg from Auschwitz in 1944. The initial uneasiness on both sides dissipated in the course of the direct personal encounter. The Board of Management expressed its profound regret concerning the Nazi injustices. Contacts are maintained with members of this group. Volkswagen has also supported the establishment of a memorial room in Israel for this group. Contacts with former forced laborers from Poland and the Netherlands are also maintained with support from the company. ■

Volkswagen today: A culture in which cooperation and partnership are lived on a daily basis

After the end of World War II and the four-year transition period under British administration, a company was built up in Wolfsburg which has nothing in common with the one founded during the Nazi era except its name and location.

Integrated in the democratic social order of the Federal Republic of Germany, Volkswagen has grown from its base in Wolfsburg to become a multi-brand group with 39 different locations on all continents of the world. Today, this Group employs nearly 300,000 people and makes more than one out of every nine new cars sold in the world.

For Volkswagen, having an obligation to history means applying the principles of social responsibility, cooperation, and openness to the world as the standards by which its actions are judged. It is first and foremost intra-company relations which are shaped by a culture based on the spirit of partnership. In particular, the company's model for the cooperative resolution of conflicts between management and labor representatives is distinctly typical of Volkswagen and regarded as one of the guarantees of its success. The company has long had a European Group Works Council as a platform for discussing current and long-term issues of corporate development. As a result of Volkswagen's globalization, this body has expanded as well and evolved into a global Group Works Council.

Another key component was added to this partnership-based culture in 1996 when, for the very first time at a major corporation, an agreement was adopted by the Works Council and management stipulating, with binding intra-corporate effect, that education against all types of discrimination, whether racist, xenophobic, or religious in nature, shall be an integral part of Volkswagen's vocational training and continued training programs.

All this has its external counterpart first in the company's outside activities and investments. These have contributed towards the improvement of the economic and social conditions in many countries around the world and helped provide an economic foundation for peaceful development.

The facts of history cannot be undone. But people can develop the ability to learn from such facts. Volkswagen has drawn the necessary consequences from this insight and worked actively to preserve the collective memory of the years from 1938 to 1945.

Following the deliberate and candid treatment of the earliest part of its past in this brochure, it is appropriate for Volkswagen to turn its attention next to the actual core of its corporate history – the five decades over which the automobile manufacturer headquartered in Wolfsburg grew into one of the greatest and most spectacular industrial successes of the post-war era. ■



