

Speech  
**Dr. Carsten Sieling**

Mayor and President of the Senate of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen

Today, 70 years after the end of the war, 70 years after the construction of the Valentin Bunker was halted following an attack by the British Royal Air Force, 70 years after the immeasurable suffering of the forced labourers who were made to work at this location, we are unveiling the "Denkort Bunker Valentin".

70 years is a very long time. Memorials have existed in many former concentration camps for much longer, because they were obvious crime scenes. The bunker, however, was predominantly seen by its contemporaries as a technical masterpiece of German engineering, as opposed to a scene of violent Nazi crimes. A few years after the end of the war, the Bremen-based "Weserkurier" described it as "the 8th Wonder of the World in Weserstrand". In those days, hardly a thought was wasted on the people who had built the bunker – who had been forced to build it – and who had paid for it with their mental and physical health, and the thousand people who had paid for it with their lives.

All traces of them were quickly removed. The site was cleared, most of the prisoners were transferred to other camps or sent on death marches before British troops liberated Bremen-Nord. Nobody could, or wanted to, bear witness to what happened between May 1943 and April 1945. The engineers, officers, guards and local residents remained silent. When the German Navy took over the bunker, a fence was put up around the site and the surviving part was used as a storage facility, the bunker vanished from the consciousness of the people of Bremen.

It was only when two employees from Radio Bremen became interested in the history of the bunker and the surrounding camps, that the public debate about what to do with the site began. Christian

Siegel and Rainer Habel provided this impulse, and it is largely thanks to them that in 1983, the "Extermination through labour" memorial was installed in front of the bunker. The impressive plastic sculpture by Bremen artist Fritz Stein was the first visible memorial to the former forced labourers. Since then, many people and organisations have been committed to the establishment of a memorial site. Without this civic engagement, we would not be standing here today. It was these people who gradually made contact with survivors, invited them to share their stories, and tried to show them that German society had changed. Friendships were formed, exchanges arose and I am delighted to welcome representatives of these associations, and in particular former prisoners, here today. This place, this memorial site, is also dedicated to them in memory of their suffering here in Bremen-Farge and as a visible sign against forgetting. That is what the "Denkort Bunker Valentin" is all about. It is not a technology museum. It is not a submarine museum. It is a place that focuses on the people who had to carry out forced labour here against their will. Their voices are heard again, and their stories are preserved. These stories raise questions. How could this have happened? How could it be that 10,000 people from all over Europe had to carry out forced labour in a small district in Bremen? How could most people accept and tolerate it, while only very few people realised that it was a crime? How could this crime be forgotten?

These questions have been raised nationwide, not just in Bremen. But after the war, the people of Bremen made every effort to play down and deny their participation in National Socialism. They said that National Socialism had no chance in a liberal Hanseatic city such as Bremen. They did indeed have to adjust to the ideology of the NSDAP, but they never supported it. But as historians have proven in recent decades, that was not true. The "Valentin" Bunker is further, highly visible evidence. The manager of the planning office came from Bremen. Before the war, he was the port planning director. After the war, he was president of the port building authorities. Under his leadership, several Bremen-based firms worked on the construction of the bunker. One of the worst camps, the 'labour education camp' in Farge, was not owned by the SS or any of the authorities. It

was a camp owned by the Bremen Gestapo, led by officials from the Bremen Gestapo and set up in response to the Bremen economy, in order to discipline so-called "work objectors". And finally: thousands of prisoners would march past the houses of the people of Bremen every morning on their way to the construction site, and every evening on their way back to the camp. Some tried to help the prisoners by sneaking water or food to them along the way. Others abused the prisoners, and threw stones at them.

We do not want to keep these stories secret a moment longer. We do not want to hide the bunker anymore. We want to use this distinctive and indestructible relic of the Second World War to deal with an uncomfortable part of our history. That is why the Senate and the Parliament have commissioned the Regional Centre for Political Education to develop a concept for this site, and why we have asked the Government to support us (particularly financially) in the implementation of this concept. At this point, I would like to thank Mr Bernd Neumann for his previous personal involvement as Culture Secretary, and the Federal Government for its funding. I would also like to thank everyone who has been involved in the development of the memorial site over the last five years: The staff at the Regional Centre for Political Education, and the Scientific Advisory Board, who have expertly assisted the development and implementation. The associations and initiatives which are currently active on the site, and of which the involvement of which will continue to be of vital importance.

The Denkort Bunker Valentin is not intended to be a memorial which supports the State. It is intended to be a place of active engagement with history, in which people of all ages and from different backgrounds and descent can ask their various questions, talk about and debate history, and ask what this part of history means for us today. After all, one thing is clear: It is not just about what happened at the time, but also what effect it has today. The concept of this site does not provide the answer to this. People who come here are encouraged to think about it themselves.

Let me make one final remark and therefore return to the beginning and to the welcome for the former prisoners, their relatives and the international associations to which they belong. One often hears about the bunker in Farge, which is in the outer reaches of Bremen, and which is far away and so hardly anyone knows about it. The presence of our guests from many European countries demonstrates the opposite: Farge is not just a place in Bremen-Nord. Farge is a European memorial site. Maybe Farge is much more significant to the people of France, Italy, Belgium and Ireland than it is to us. Wilhelm Nolting-Hauff was a Financial Affairs Senator in Bremen. He was also a prisoner in Bremen-Farge. After his release, he wrote an autobiography. He wrote that Farge was like a small version of Europe. There was not a country which was not represented here. At the time, people from across Europe were forced to come to Farge to work here. Today I would like to invite the people of Bremen, as well as people from all over Europe, to come to Farge and to make a small contribution to the shaping of the present and the future at this memorial site.