

## ...a long way!

### **The International Youth Hostel Dachau – an example for the conflict on the history of national socialism in the Federal Republic of Germany**

When on May 4, 1998 the Bavarian Secretary for Education and Science opened the International Youth Hostel in Dachau, it was a result of civil engagement to overcome yearlong disputes, tenacious negotiations on the local level, and solid support for the project by prominent German and foreign personalities.

**The idea to establish an institution for encounter and education of young people in Dachau** is in immediate connection with the memorial site of the former concentration camp Dachau. Since the early 1980s, it has been visited by 700.000 to 900.000 visitors annually, about a half of them young people. At that time, there was no accommodation and there existed no institution to stay longer for those who wanted to become more familiar with the history of the concentration camp and the lessons to be learned from it. **In 1981, a group of individuals started to initiate an International Youth Hostel Dachau**, in order to advance the idea for a permanent institution for education and international understanding. Role model was the International Youth Hostel Auschwitz in Polish Oświęcim, which corner stone had been laid in the same year after long deliberations of the German atonement movement, „Aktion Sühnezeichen“. Dachau concentration camp represented, as one of the first camps and as „school of violence“, the starting point of the NS terror, covering wide parts of Europe between 1933 and 1945, culminating in the extermination camp „Auschwitz–Birkenau“. Therefore it stood to reason to establish International Youth Hostels on both sites.

When it emerged that the realization of this idea would take a long time to establish, members of the protestant church took the initiative in their own hands. In summer **1983**, together with members of the memorial site in Dachau, the

Protestant Youth Association Munich and Volunteers of the “Action Sühnezeichen” organised the **first international youth camp** with the slogan “Learning from History”. Year after year, the provisional camp, as a preliminary forerunner institution, attracted hundreds of young people from Germany, France, Israel, Spain, the United Kingdom, Poland, Russia and many other countries, even non-European, to Dachau, demonstrating the necessity and meaning for a permanent institution.

In order to bestow even more tailwind for the idea, a development association for an International Youth Hostel Dachau was established in 1984, which in its first year presented a first concept for a future institution, thus winning influential proponents on a national and international level. Among them were personalities such as Inge Aicher-Scholl, Ralph Giordano, Hildegard Hamm-Brücher, Bruno Kreisky, Rosalinde von Ossietzky-Palm, Simon Snopkowski and Hans-Jochen Vogel.

**In 1986**, the Bavarian Youth Organization „Bayerischer Jugendring“ developed another concept, based on the ideas of the development association.

However, the initiative and its plans met refusal in the local council of Dachau. The majority in the deciding assemblies of city and county council thought that any additional institution dealing with the history of the concentration camp would further enhance the negative image of the city; further, dealing with the NS past would be a national task, rather than the burden of one single city such as Dachau.

**1987** For this reason, the Dachau city council refused the establishment of an International Youth Hostel.

After immense political pressure – e.g. members of the US Congress and Senate writing to the Bavarian Prime Minister Franz Josef Strauß – the State of Bavaria took matters in its hands. It was now the turn for the Bavarian Department for

Education, Science and Culture to draw up a new concept. In **1989** the Bavarian Parliament decided to establish an International Youth Hostel in Dachau. Later, Dachau city council and county made decisions along those paths. In **1991**, the State of Bavaria, the City of Dachau and Dachau County set up a charitable foundation „**Stiftung Jugendgästehaus Dachau**“, being responsible for the further proceedings and establishment of the Youth Hostel.

After an architectural competition in **1993/94** and the laying of the cornerstone in **1996**, the International Youth Hostel was opened to the public on **May 4, 1998**.

Today, the International Youth Hostel is an acknowledged institution for education and meeting point as well as for pedagogical projects, enjoying increasing interest by various visitors' groups.

In the meantime, the ambience in the city of Dachau did alter. Today, there is a broad political consensus among all officials to support the cultural and pedagogical offerings of the memorial site, the International Youth Hostel, and a number of associations and institutions being active in dealing with the past.

*See also at publications:*

*Judith Bauer, „Das Jugendgästehaus Dachau – Ein Beispiel für die Auseinandersetzung mit der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland“, München 2004*