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The “Bunkermuseum” in Emden

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After the foundation of the “Arbeitskreis (working committee) Bunkermuseum e.V.” in March 1994, there have been several meetings of representatives of the municipality and the “Bundesvermoögensamt” to discuss the future of the “air-raid shelter - Holzsägerstraße”.

With the purpose of showing an exhibition on two restored floors of the former shelter, it was finally given over to the “Arbeitsgruppe Bunkermuseum”.

The small presentation that was inaugurated 50 years after the almost total destruction of Emden on September 6, 1944 attracted more than 4,000 visitors in the first 30 days.

It had been the first time since the end of World War II that the shelter was accessible to the citizens of Emden.

The huge response as well as a detailed news coverage even surprised the recently founded “Arbeitskreis Bunkermuseum e.V.”

An entry in the guest book demanded “*Hopefully always a museum*”.



The success, that has positively been accompanied by the two regional newspapers “Emder Zeitung” and “Ostfriesenzeitung”, encouraged us to set up a permanent exhibition inside the air-raid-shelter.

The municipality didn’t hamper this project and the ‘Bundesvermoögensamt’ allocated the shelter “Holzsägerstraße” to the ‘Bunkermuseum e. V.’ working-committee unlimitedly (in case of emergency the shelter has to be available for civil defence).

Everybody acclaimed the initiative and on May 6, 1995 the 50th anniversary of liberation from National Socialism and war in Eastfrisia, the shelter-museum opened officially.

The great dismay of Emden’s population led to a special readiness, that still goes on today, to promote and to support the museum. This becomes apparent by many gifts, donations and loans that include historical documents and objects that were given to us and are now exposed in our exhibition.

Among them are many personal things, which have an inestimable personal value; for example letters by soldiers killed in action, diplomas and photos taken by families. There are also some objects taken from ruins; for example plates and a coffee-pot. One contemporary witness wrote to us: “Nobody can imagine how it is to lose everything.” Many people were willing to tell their immediate personal experiences and let them be documented. Without this readiness of the citizens the “Bunkermuseum” couldn’t be a place of remembrance and recollection. But our museum doesn’t only want to be a memorial, but rather be a place of thinking and a place for a dialogue between the elder generation and the young people.

Visitors who go through our city these days feel addressed by the universal presence of the massive air-raid shelter.

The interest in these buildings has increased in the last few years.

This is why the museum is required to present information which would bring back to life the encounter as well as to compensate with the history and the lives of the people living during the National Socialism in World War II.

Many visitors decide to visit the Bunkermuseum first to get an idea of the oppressive atmosphere of the war which is still preserved in the bombshelter.

A realisation with the actual subjects National Socialism, persecution, resistance, building of the bombshelters and the bombardments is created while walking through the exhibition which is distributed in 26 rooms.

The real core of the exhibition is the sound-slide-show, which shows the development of Emden in the Weimarer Republic, Hitler's take-over of political power until the total destruction of the old Emden with its Renaissance city hall of 1574 in the town-centre, with 360 pictures presented in cross fading technique. The pictures of the ruined landscape in connection with the background sounds touches the observers immediately and makes them think about the insanity of wars. This already starts in the first unit in the entrance-area, in which a close-up shows a free view at the city with a high air-raid shelter in the landscape of ruins. The inscription next to it:

"Peace is not the absence of war.

Peace is a virtue, in inclination to goodness,

trust and justice"¹,

is supposed to strengthen the thoughtfulness. The intensity of the bombing at the "Heimatfront"(homefront) is documented by a commemorative plaque, which lists the names of the 368 victims of Emden during the bombing. In spring of 1940, the responsible in the municipal authority already realized the importance of the air-raid shelters and the security they provided for the inhabitants of Emden when there was an air-raid. That also counted for the art objects, paintings, archives and all the relicts from the Emden Armament chamber, which were brought away in time. The administration brought many of the valuable documents into the outbuildings of the bunker. It is especially owed mayor Renken to have built sufficient bunkers for Emden's inhabitants. If the air-raid shelters had not existed, many citizens would have lost their lives in the nights of bomb attacks which followed the attack on July 13, 1940. Altogether 35 big air-raid shelters (27 of them for the civil defence) and 120 small bunkers like fire-stations, cover ditches and protected transformer stations were built in the city territory. This part is exposed in the present exposition in the room "The war as an architect".

The sequence of the premises in the exhibition in the bunker is adapted to the real demands to a well-balanced formation. The topic and the sequence of rooms in the exhibition give the spectator a glance into the happenings of the pre-war years, the war time and the post-war years. This especially applies to the basic exhibition. The view through the showcase in the hall for example makes a view into the "Life in the Third Reich-living-room 1938" possible in advance. Then the spectator is led through the area of the air-raid shelter-construction into the pre-war living-room, then into the air-raid shelter room "Life in the world of the air-raid shelter" with the air-raid shelter-benches and the wooden suitcases, in which the last belongings found their place after the total destruction. The existing pictures and the essential exhibits are loans, which are put at the air-raid shelter's disposal by the population.

These and other areas of the exhibition show clearly the actual meaning of the aphorism "OUTSIDE WORLDS – INSIDE WORLDS", that is repeated often revolving around the facade of the shelter. Inside the air-raid shelter as an authentic place and in the exhibition the visitors get to know how the people lived in the shelter by means of the construction, its architecture, the "living-room 1938" and the room in which the people took shelter from the bombs. Additionally, the reality of war which is difficult to understand nowadays becomes visible by two paintings that were damaged by bombsplinters. They belong to the few still visible signs of the irresistible destruction of a city.

Emden's path down to total destruction ends at the visual demonstrations of the triptych on September 6, 1944. There the consequences of the complete destruction, that the visitors already encounter in the entrance hall, become visible. The small exhibition "Crashed aircraft in the Emden area" shall remind visitors of the other side of the aerial warfare and right next to it historical flyers document a part of the psychological warfare.

It was still there, resistance: This is shown exemplarily through the life story of "Cor" Max Windmüller, who was killed in a concentration camp and after whom a street in Emden was named in 1998. The "Picture of War" and the useless weapons effused on the floor show the nonsense of war. The special

exhibition about the displaced persons' "Expulsion from Home" established in 2000 shows the high percentage of displaced persons' involved in the reconstruction of our town, but also the hard fate of these people.

The compulsory labour by foreign workers and deportees in Emden as well as the work for peace and reconciliation of the "Kriegsgraeberfuersorge" (war grave committee) was created by teenagers in an exhibition of photographs in association with the "Volksbund Deutscher Kriegsgraeberfuersorge". This also applies to the presentation with the title "Faces of War", that deals with military conflicts in the past and present.

Our museum was featured with an audio sign-posting last year, which allows the visitor to recall audio-documents and explanations about the exhibition in each room. Since its foundation over all about 72,000 persons have visited the museum, one third of these were adolescents who came in the context of school activities and school trips. Also the rate of visitors from abroad, especially those from the Netherlands, is steadily increasing. During winter (from November until May) the museum stays officially closed to visitors because it's impossible to heat the whole air-raid shelter.

The committee can't raise the costs after we finance ourselves out of the very low entrance fees (youth 1 Euro and adults 2 Euro).

In spite of the substantial help of the population or other persons the working committee "Bunkermuseum" is conscious of the fact that the museum doesn't have a perfect exhibition, but in the course of time it will undergo many changes. The members get involved in many areas and contribute with their inquiries that many different themes become worked off. At the time it especially refers to the research project "Fallen and missing soldiers of Emden in World War II". The state of research can be looked up at www.bunkermuseum.de. But also other parts of our city's history from 1933 till 1945, like the bomb-war, air-raid protection, aerial photographs or views of Emden in colour can be loaded up.

We would appreciate your visit!

¹ Baruch (Bencadictus) de Spinoza, Dutch philosopher, 1632 – 1677