



Hansestadt Lüneburg

The Cemetery of Honor in the Tiergarten

Final resting place of the victims of the most serious war crime in Lüneburg in April of 1945

Evacuation transport from the satellite camp Wilhelmshaven

Shortly before the end of the war, the SS evacuated the concentration camps before the arrival of the advancing allied troops, in order to cover up the tracks of their crimes. During these transfers (“death marches”), many prisoners died from exertion, but also from executions and combat action.



Aerial view after the attack of the US-American bomber on 7 April 1945, on the freight yard in Lüneburg
Top left: City center with the square Am Sande.
Picture: Royal Air Force. Municipal archive of Lüneburg

On 3 April 1945, the concentration camp Alter Banter Weg in Wilhelmshaven was closed. Approximately 390 sick, malnourished men, who were for the most part barely able to walk, were transported in trucks to the train station Wilhelmshaven/Mariensiel. Most of them had been part of the resistance against the German occupying force in their home countries (particularly France, Belgium, Italy, the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia). In Mariensiel, they were forced into three freight cars of the Reichsbahn, while the 14-person guard detail and their provisions traveled in the fourth carriage. The destination of the rail transport was

the Neuengamme concentration camp near Hamburg. The transport was led by the Obermaat of the Navy Johann Engelmann and SS Sturmman Gustav Jepsen. They oversaw the transport with 17 mostly older marines. The people in charge exposed the prisoners to inhumane conditions – they did not have enough water, only one loaf of bread and no sanitary provisions.

The air raid on the railway station

On the morning of 7 April, the train had stopped at the freight yard in Lüneburg. 72 prisoners had already died during the journey due to the horrific circumstances.



Freight car of the Reichsbahn as a symbol and memorial for the war crime of April 1945. Installed in the Wandrampark in 2015, on the initiative of the History Workshop of Lüneburg in cooperation with the Museum of Lüneburg.
Picture: Werner Waschke. Municipal archive of Lüneburg

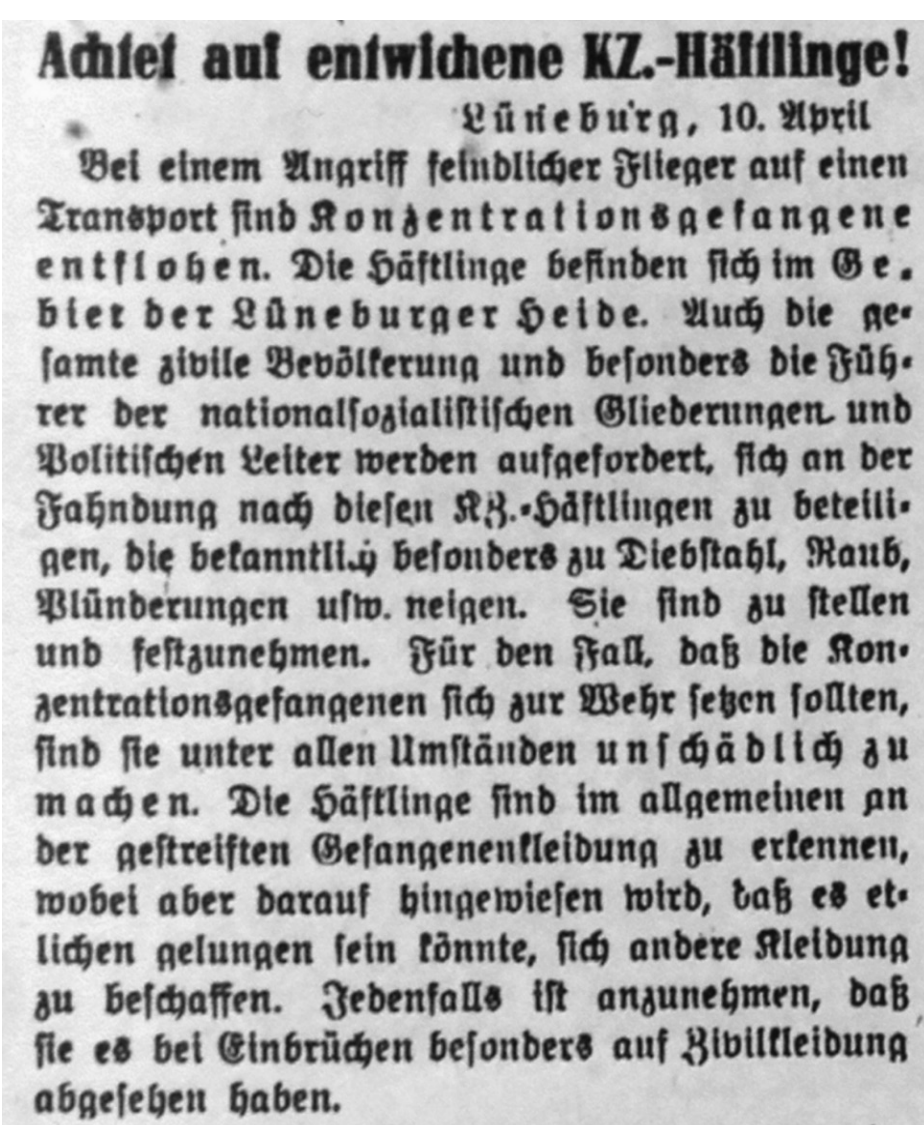
Around 3 pm, a US-American bomber attacked the railway station and despite an air raid warning that started at 1 pm, the prisoners had not been evacuated. A tank wagon filled with fuel that stood on the adjacent track was hit and exploded. As a result, the prisoners’ train was also badly damaged, and one carriage caught fire. Approximately 70 prisoners died, the survivors tried to save themselves from this inferno. During these attempts, many were shot or beaten to death by the guards who had taken cover. 20 prisoners were able to escape at first. Ultimately, only the Frenchman Roger Garoute and the Belgian Albert de Clercq were able to escape successfully.

The crime

The guards rounded up the survivors on a field next to the tracks, where they had to spend the next few days out in the open. They refused to give the prisoners water, food and first aid. Prisoners who dared to stand up were killed. Two paramedics from the Reich Air Protection League from Lüneburg helped the prisoners, even though the marines threatened them with execution.

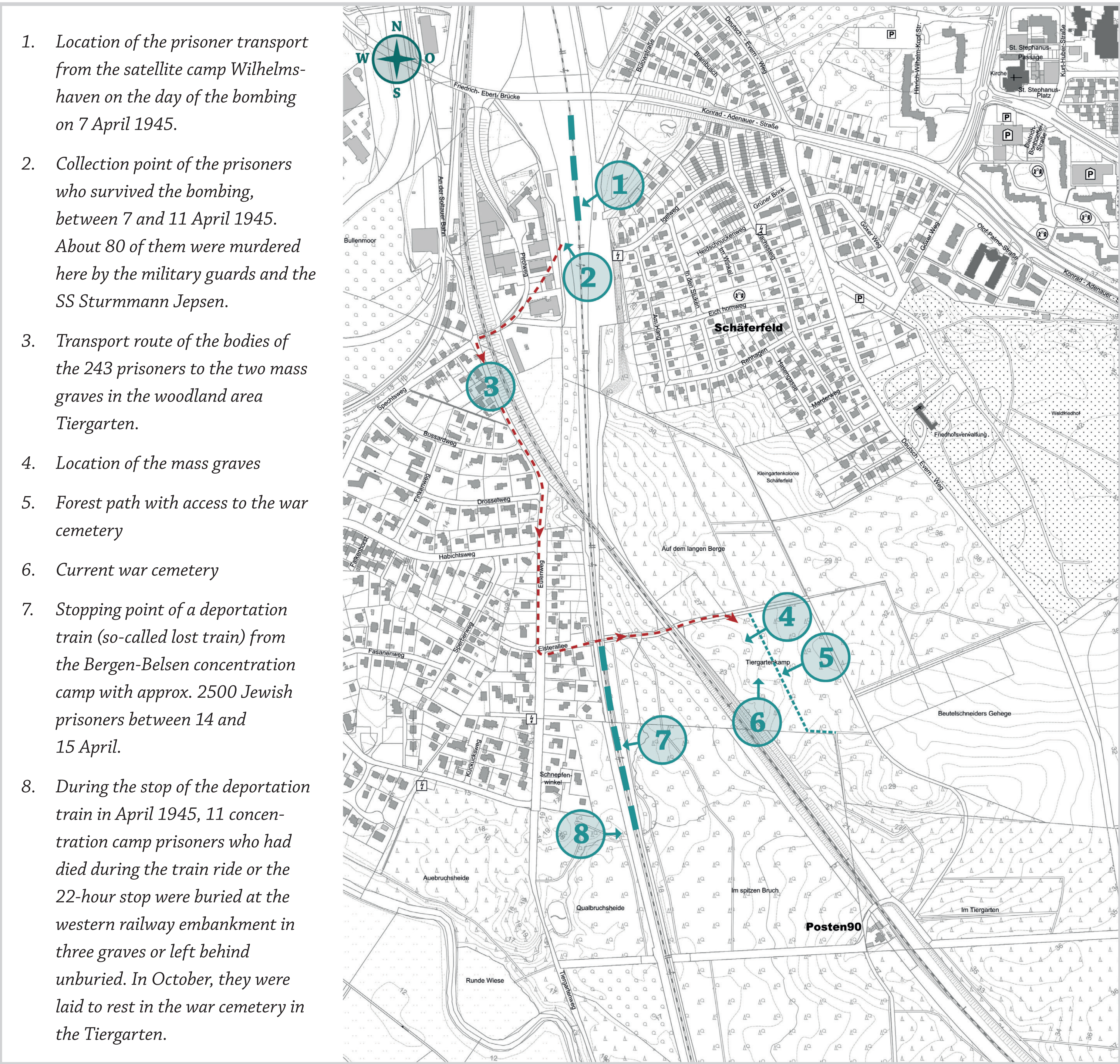
Jepsen retrieved orders from the Neuengamme concentration camp at the Gestapo office in Lüneburg and had approximately 150 prisoners transported in trucks to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp between 8 and 10 April. About 80 helpless prisoners without any sustenance or provisions stayed behind. The SS Sturmman Jepsen shot six prisoners. The other prisoners were shot dead or beaten to death by the marines on the orders of Engelmann. On 11 and 12 April, the municipal administration and the police had French and Soviet prisoners of war dig two mass graves in the nearby forest (Tiergarten) for the victims.

On 18 April 1945, the British army occupied Lüneburg without a fight.



Appeal to the civilian population in the Lüneburger Zeitung (Official mouthpiece of the Gau Osthannover of the NSDAP and the authorities) on 11 April 1945. Memorial Bergen-Belsen

Official map (scale: 1:5000) with labeling of the crime scenes according to Manfred Messer. © Regional Office for geoinformation and land survey (2021)





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The consequences of the crime

The trial in Lüneburg

The British military justice charged the SS Sturmmann Gustav Jepsen, the SS Hauptsturmführer Dr. Joachim Freitag, head of the Gestapo in Lüneburg, and the police major Otto Müller, head of the local Schutzpolizei, with the killing of allied citizens. Obermaat Johann Engelmann had died on 3 May 1945. The trial started on 13 August 1946 in the building of the district court in Lüneburg. 34 witnesses were questioned extensively.



National socialists and workers from Lüneburg preparing the newly arranged individual tombs at the beginning of October of 1945. Picture: unknown. Collection Marcel Frank / United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington

concentration camp, Jepsen had demonstrably committed serious crimes against prisoners and displayed particular brutality.

Freitag und Müller were found innocent since the court was convinced that their involvement in the killings could not be proven. The British court convicted Jepsen of violating the Hague Convention on War on Land from 1907 and the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War from 1929, which were also legally binding in Germany. The assassination of the prisoners was therefore deemed a violation of the

“customs of war”. The fact that the defendants had refused to render any assistance was only deemed a serious ethical fault by the court. However, the court did not consider this failure to render assistance to be actionable.



Military honors from allied soldiers during the funeral service on 3 October 1945. Picture: unknown. Collection Marcel Frank / United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington



Under the supervision of British military personnel, on 3 October 1945, Nazis are forced to pay their last respects to the victims who had been moved to other graves. Picture: unknown. Collection Marcel Frank / United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington

The local media in Lüneburg reported on the trial in detail. In 1947, Jepsen was sentenced to death for other crimes committed in the Wilhelmshaven concentration camp and hanged on 26 June 1947 in the prison of Hamelin.

The transformation of the mass graves into a cemetery

The municipal administration had hidden the events at the freight yard and the two mass graves in the Tiergarten from the British military government. When the British found out anyhow, starting on 27 September 1945, they had the graves opened and for this purpose, called primarily on party members of the NS regime from Lüneburg. 243 corpses were retrieved, forensically identified to the extent possible and then buried with dignity in individual graves arranged in rows. Moreover, eleven Jewish victims were laid to rest here who had died during the evacuation transport from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and had been hastily buried in a railway embankment south of Lüneburg. Furthermore, this became the final resting place of two Soviet forced laborers who had been shot for allegedly stealing food from the destroyed freight cars.

Thus, in autumn of 1945, 256 victims had been buried in the new cemetery in the Tiergarten. Their graves were arranged in rows and each individual tomb was furnished with a wooden cross.

In the following years, many relatives wanted to transfer the dead to their home country. However, the exact grave site in the cemetery could often not be determined. Especially the French National Office for Veterans and Victims of War took an active part. Until 1959, 89 identified victims were able to be transferred to their respective home countries. The remaining victims are buried in 167 individual graves. To date, 144 names have been established.



During the funeral service on 3 October 1945, National Socialists and the local population of Lüneburg are confronted with the war crime at the coffins. Picture: unknown. Collection Marcel Frank / United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington



Reconstruction of hand bones during the exhumation, 1951. Picture: unknown. Collection Günter Paul Schulz / Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial



Exhumation by the French National Office for Veterans and Victims of War, 1951. Picture: unknown. Collection Günter Paul Schulz / Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial



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The Cemetery of Honor in the Tiergarten

The long road towards a cemetery of honor as a place of remembrance and learning

Between 1945 and 1948, the authorities in Lüneburg, the victims' associations of the Jewish community, the committee of former political prisoners and the German Association of Persecutees of the Nazi Regime (VVN) initially held memorial services together.



Wooden cross with added plaque for the Jewish victims buried here, 1945-1951. Picture: unknown. Collection Günter Paul Schulz / Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial

In the course of the division of Germany and the beginning of the Cold War, the relationship became strained. Many victims of Nazi persecution were also associated with the bogeyman “communism”, and the VVN was banned. In Lüneburg, former Nazis managed to occupy posts again that guaranteed them political influence. They wanted to erase the memory of the crimes and refused to cooperate with the victims' associations. A proposal by the committee of former political prisoners to erect a monument at the cemetery was also rejected: a statue of a kneeling prisoner was supposed to commemorate the execution of the prisoners at the freight yard.

At the inauguration of the monument consisting of three stone blocks of stone in December of 1951, the city officials remained amongst themselves and excluded the victims' associations with help from the police.

With the reintroduction of the German National Day of Mourning, since the beginning of the 1950s, the official focus was on mourning the fallen German soldiers and on their commemoration. In 1954, the German War Graves Commission (VDK) had a cemetery of honor for members of the Wehrmacht and the SS created at the central cemetery of Lüneburg and placed it in the care of the municipal administration. There, the former NS head mayor Wilhelm Wetzel delivered the main speech for the VDK in 1959.



Entire facility of the cemetery of honor, 1945-1951. Picture: probably Martin Cailliau. Municipal archive of Lüneburg

In 1954, the city had the individual graves leveled and the burial crosses with the respective prisoner numbers removed. The rows of graves and the numbered gravestones did not receive borders either. For the purpose of a “low-maintenance” horticultural restructuring, every individual remembrance of the victims was thus made impossible. In 1956, the monument was also redesigned. The two steles, which had supported the main memorial stone before, were furnished with a Star of David and a cross respectively and placed at the entrance. The inscription on the memorial stone was changed from “To the victims of National Socialism 1945” to “On 7 April 1945, 256 prisoners of concentration camps died here”. The outcry from the German Social Democratic Party SPD went unheeded. From then on, the site was barely recognizable as a cemetery. It retained that form until 2019.

Against the backdrop of macrosocial developments, a change in thinking began in the 1970s. With the reappraisal of the NS period by a younger generation of historians and the examination of the causes and consequences of the Nazi crimes, a factual and political reorientation became possible. Together with victims' associations, history workshops and political decision-makers of the postwar generation, the significance of memorial sites serving as warning and commemoration at the same time became relevant to the public interest. Memorial services organized primarily by the VVN took place at the cemetery in the Tiergarten and were attended by political parties, associations, and above all, also by relatives and descendants of the victims.

Starting in 1987, the French “Amicale de Neuengamme”, an association of former prisoners of the Neuengamme concentration camp and their families, undertook their commemorative trips or pilgrimages (“pèlerinages” in French) to Lüneburg as well, to the graves of their relatives and friends. School initiatives increasingly addressed the murders of the prisoners of the concentration camps (e.g., under the responsibility of the school pastor Zabel from the secondary school in Oedeme), and the Geschichtswerkstatt Lüneburg (history workshop) published its first research paper. Starting in May 2000, the residents of the nearby Therapeutic Community Wilschenbruch took over the maintenance of the graves until 2012.

Ultimately, the criticism of the anonymity of the cemetery, the calls for its restoration with individual appreciation of the victims, the complaints of the Jewish concentration camp survivor Dr. Ariel Koretz from Israel regarding the violation of Jewish religious laws, the identification of individual victims by the VDK as well as a publication from the VVN-BdA resulted in the building and cemetery authority of the Hanseatic City of Lüneburg taking on the restructuring of the cemetery and establishing a task force. After long discussions, the responsible committees of the city council decided on a new concept, so that this place of remembrance, which also has to serve as a place of learning, was redesigned in a more dignified way in 2019/20.

Therefore, the history of the cemetery of honor especially reflects the culture of remembrance of the postwar years, which is always tied to the era, the context and the relevant interests, and reminds us of the importance of democracy and peace.



Cemetery of honor with memorial stone, 1951-1954. Picture: unknown. Collection Boldt / Municipal archive of Lüneburg



Entrance to the site, 2013. Picture: Hans-Georg Grzenia. Municipal archive of Lüneburg

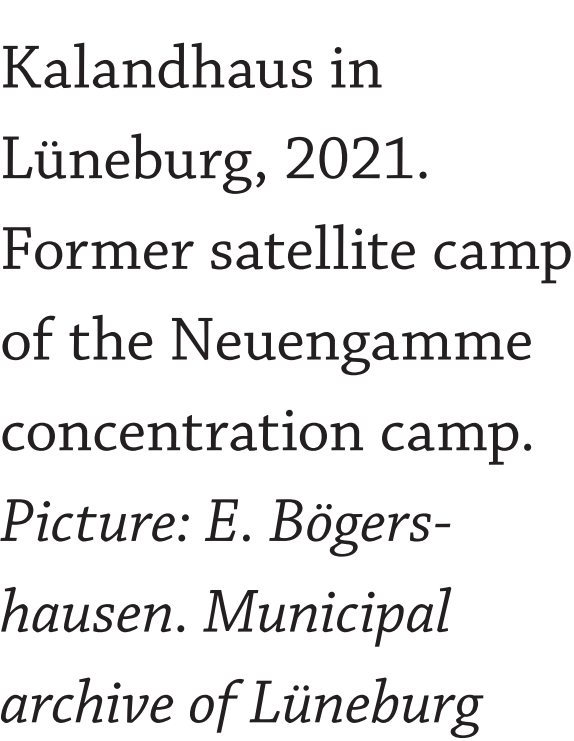
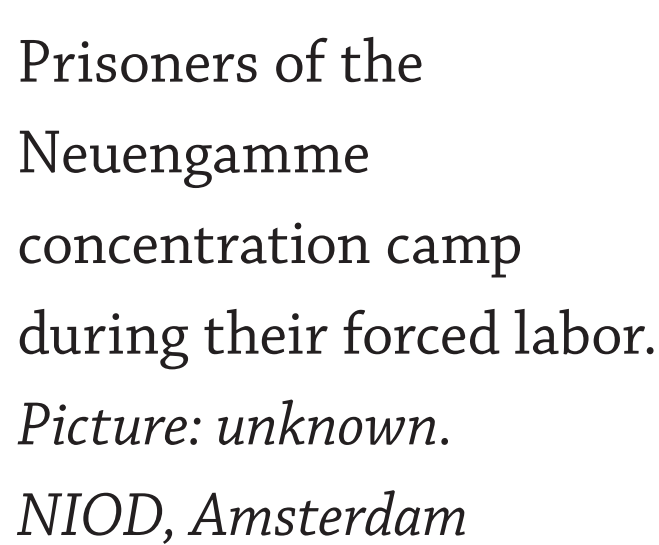


The Neuengamme concentration camp and its satellite camps in Northern Germany



The satellite camps were created after the Ministry of Armaments and the industry increasingly called for the use of concentration camp prisoners as workers starting in 1942. In Wilhelmshaven, the Neuengamme concentration camp maintained the satellite camp “Alter Banter Weg”. The prisoners were forced to work for the local navy shipyard.

Neuengamme
concentration camp,
1945.
Picture: unknown.
National museum
Denmark



Antoine Le Bris,
1943.
Picture: unknown.
Private property
Le Bris / Neuengamme
Concentration Camp
Memorial

Panel 4