

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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Jehovah's Witnesses praised as "double victims" under both the Nazi state and Communism

BERLIN—Under Hitler, Lothar Hörnig of Pegau was imprisoned in a series of Gestapo prisons, forced to serve in a work gang near the Russian front, and saw his father sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp for eight years. Under Walter Ulbricht, Communist leader of the GDR (German Democratic Republic, also called East Germany), he served nine years in prison, five and a half of them in solitary confinement at the Brandenburg penitentiary.

"Both imprisonments were for the same crime," Mr. Hörnig, now 71, said. "I was guilty of being one of Jehovah's Witnesses."

Hitler's regime targeted Jehovah's Witnesses for brutal suppression. Thousands were imprisoned in Nazi camps and prisons, where many died, some by execution. Similar treatment was accorded them under the GDR of Ulbricht.

"The reaction of totalitarian nations to the nonconformity of Jehovah's Witnesses covers a spectrum from discrimination to torture and murder," said Berlin Mayor Eberhard Diepgen in a message read at a formal ceremony today.

The ceremony marked the opening of a new exhibit on the official persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in the GDR. The exhibit is housed in the former *Stasi* (GDR Secret Police) headquarters in Berlin, now called the Forschungs- und Gedenkstätte Normannenstraße (Normannenstrasse Research and Memorial Site). As part of the permanent collection of the site, the newly opened exhibit provides an overview of 40 years of official persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in the GDR, documented by photographs, personal testimonies of victims, and police and court records.

Among those present at the opening ceremony were historians and officials from scientific institutions and memorial sites in Germany, as well as survivors of this long period of persecution. Concerning the exhibit, Mayor Diepgen stated: "I see in this not only an important part of scientific assimilation of history, but also an opportunity for historical truth and justice."

Over 5,000 of Jehovah's Witnesses were detained in the infamous East German detention centers and forced labor camps because of their Christian Bible education activity and their conscientious objection to participation in the GDR's armed forces. Of these, at least 250 of the Witnesses imprisoned by the GDR were "double victims." They had previously been incarcerated in Nazi prisons and concentration camps because of their activity as Jehovah's Witnesses; then they were hunted down and imprisoned during the 1950s—this time by the *Stasi* of the GDR.

Lothar Hörnig was one of these. "I was charged by the *Stasi* with 'boycotting war, warmongering and espionage,' and sentenced to 15 years in the penitentiary," he said.

"The story of men and women like Lothar Hörnig, along with all the documentation seen here today, helps keep alive the memories of the victims of injustice and violence," said Johannes Wrobel, chairman of the Historical Archives of Jehovah's Witnesses. "We must not forget this part of our history, one of spiritual resistance and courage under dictatorship."

For more information on Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany visit www.jehovaszeugen.de.

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