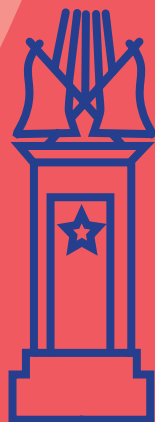


ELBE DAY



Torgau

1945 - 2020





At the Torgau landing,
Elbe Day 2017



Flag monument on the east bank of the Elbe with Hartenfels Castle in the background



Impressions of Elbe Day events: early 1990s (middle left), 2010 (middle right and lower left), 2012 (lower right)



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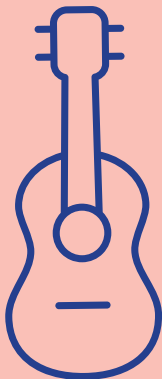
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Torgau, April 2020



Right:

In the Year of the Reformation 2017, an Elbe Day project was undertaken with title: "Torgau Builds Bridges. Reformation – Encounter – Present". School students and refugees designed individual building blocks for a bridge that was assembled on 25 April 2017 and since then has been on display in the courtyard of the city museum.

“Elbe Day couples Torgau’s town history with world history. It combines remembrance and commemoration with the warning and the hope of preserving peace. We feel obligated in equal measure to both history and the future: Elbe Day is both a memorial day and a festival of international understanding transcending all generations.”

Romina Barth

MAYOR OF THE CITY OF TORGAU



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Right:
The Torgau Link-Up Monument, 2020.
It underwent a comprehensive
restoration the previous year.



СССР

1945



СЛОВА
ИДЕОЛОГИИ
И ДЕЙСТВИЙ
И
ДОКАЗАТЕЛЬСТВ
И НАВЫКОВ
СОЗДАНИИ И
ОСУЩЕСТВЛЕНИИ
БОРЬБЫ
НАД
НАЦИСКИМИ
ПРЕСТАПЛИТЕЛЯМИ

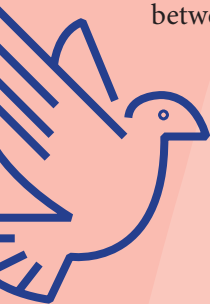


Introduction: Torgau – The Meeting Place

On 25 April 1945 American and Soviet soldiers met at the Elbe near Torgau. The soldiers shook hands on the ruins of the Elbe bridge in Torgau. The photo of the “handshake of Torgau” went around the world and to this day has symbolised the end of the Second World War and the liberation from the National Socialist tyranny.

Seventy-five years after the end of the war and 30 years after German reunification, this brochure seeks to present in a series of brief articles the significance of Elbe Day, its legacy for following generations and the living culture of remembrance. The texts look at history, the present and the future: What are we remembering today? What does Elbe Day mean to young people? What values do we seek to inculcate and to live by together? Elbe Day refers not only to the historic meeting of 1945 but also to the annual memorial day and the variety of cultural events associated with it. In the period following the opening of the border and subsequent reunification, “Elbe Tag” was celebrated until the term “Elbe Day” gradually became established.

Shortly before publication of this brochure, the spread of coronavirus forced the organisers to cancel the Elbe Day festivities for the first time and to postpone them to a later date. Elbe Day will continue to bring together international guests in this town on the Elbe in the future, guests who come to commemorate the end of the war and to keep alive the understanding between nations, countries and generations – in Torgau, the meeting place.





“A Picture the World Will Never Forget”

Photographer Allan Jackson worked for the American news agency International News Service and flew to Torgau on the morning of 26 April. He asked several American and Soviet soldiers to climb on the bridge for this photo and had them re-enact the meeting. The bridge that was destroyed by the Wehrmacht is clearly visible. At Jackson's request, the soldiers were not looking at the camera as they shook hands. “A picture the world will never forget” was the heading under which the British newspaper News Chronicle on 28 April 1945 published the photo showing the handshake on the bridge.

Bernard Kirschenbaum – Two Photos

I think the best way to fully understand and celebrate the meeting of the Americans and Russians across the river Elbe in 1945, is to take a look at the week just before the April 25 & 26 meet-up. My father, Bernard Kirschenbaum, is one of the American soldiers in the iconic photo of the Americans shaking hands with the Russians on April 26.

Like many veterans, my father refused to talk about the war. It wasn't until a few days before he died on February 16, 2016, that many of the pieces came together and I learned something about his experiences overseas.

First, in 2010, I found a photo buried in my father's papers. It was a tragic photo that my father had photographed with a borrowed camera in Leipzig. When I showed it to my father, he said, "That's a little girl I found in the war."

My father muted the TV and said, "We were in Leipzig, Germany and we found a whole arena full of dead bodies. I saw her and I borrowed a camera from a guy and took a picture of her. You can't imagine how difficult it was to get film developed. It was a war you know. Anyway, I always keep her with me. I didn't want her to be forgotten." He turned back to the television and clicked the sound back on. He was watching the news. That's all the information I could get out of him.

In 2015, I was leaving the American Holocaust museum gift shop, when I saw an insignia pin with his regiment number – the fighting 69th! It wasn't until January 2016, that I turned the pin over and read: "LIBERATED Leipzig-Thekla (Buchenwald subcamp), April 19, 1945."

Exactly one week before the triumphant photo of the Americans meeting the Russians, my father's regiment arrived at the smoldering remains of a labor camp. The camp SS had rounded up the last 304 men into a barracks, poured on oil, and set it aflame using grenade launchers. The prisoners who tried to escape through the windows, were shot. Some of the men who escaped the fire and the bullets were then electrocuted on the barbed wire that surrounded the camp. Only 67 men are known to have survived.

In this context, we can have a unique appreciation for the triumph these soldiers would have felt, exactly a week later, when they were sent to the beautiful town of Torgau to prepare for a meeting of American and Russian generals. They arrived early, on April 25, and my father remembered celebrating that night with the Russians. The next day, when the photographers arrived for both sides, he was pulled in for the famous photo. He is the second from the left (p. 9).

My father was never the same after the war. It traumatized him. He dedicated his life to creating buildings and sculptures that celebrated pure geometry and symmetry, searching, always, for the beauty in life.

Sara Kirschenbaum
PORTLAND, OREGON



Bernard Kirschenbaum

Tank Traps on the Market Square – Torgau at the End of the War in 1945

In February 1945 the schools in Torgau had to close. They were needed to house the refugees from the east who were arriving on foot or by rail. The small town of Torgau had a population of about 15,000 people in early 1945, and this number now began to increase. The school leaving certificates were issued on 15 March 1945 in the Holy Ghost Hospital on Entengasse.

Three days later a confirmation celebration was held in the town's Church of St. Mary. In March all the cinemas closed down, and there were no more dances. The town itself was of no strategic importance. The "Reich defence planning east" nonetheless stipulated that Torgau, like other towns along the Elbe, was to be fortified as a stronghold. Key points such as the streets leading to the market square and the major arterial roads were barricaded with tank traps. These consisted of tree trunks either rammed into the ground vertically or stacked horizontally. The spaces between them were filled with earth and often mined. Narrow passages were left for pedestrians.

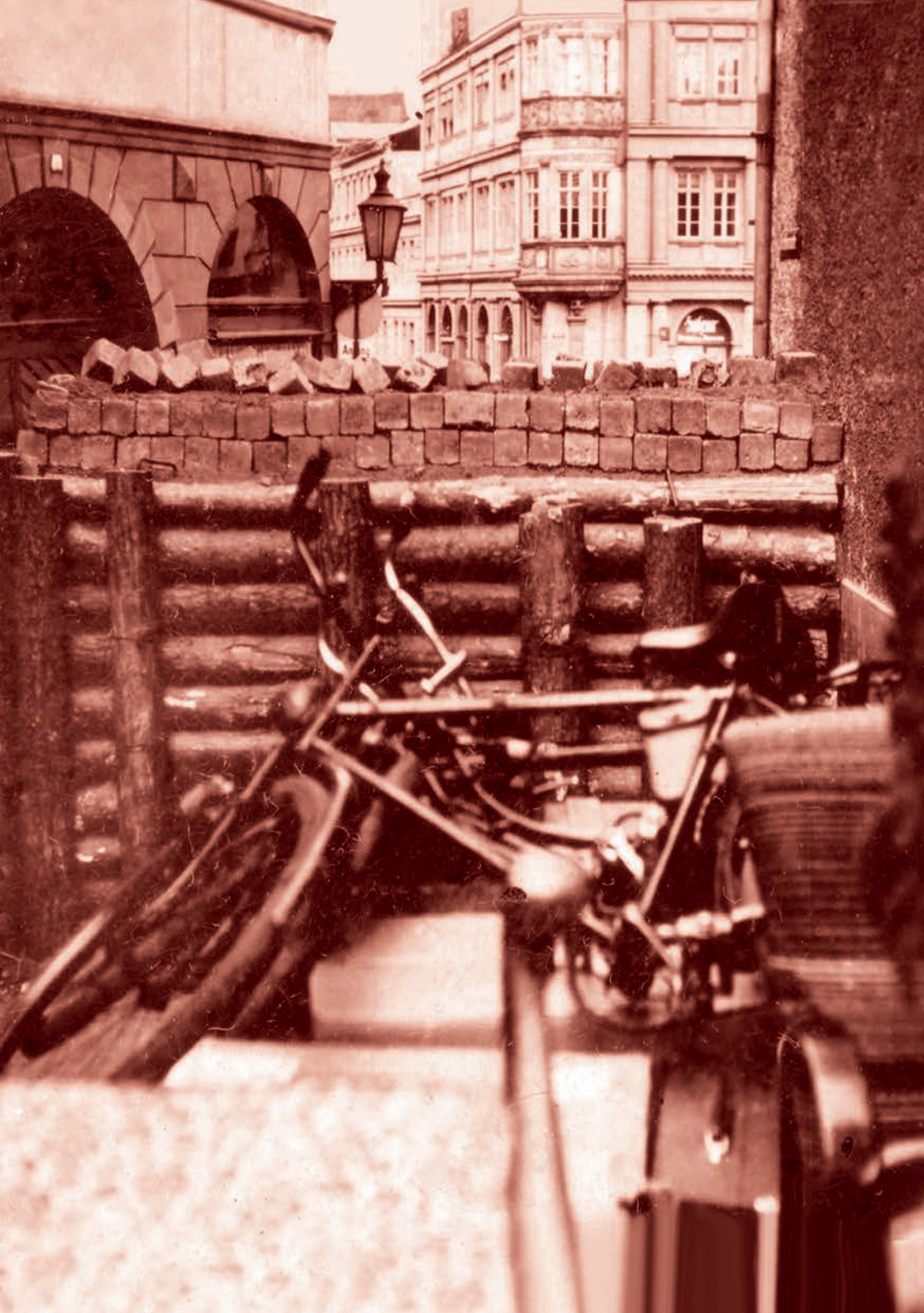
As of Saturday, 14 April 1945, Torgau was declared a fortress. All inhabitants of the city had to leave with all their belongings by 12:00 o'clock and find a place to stay in the surrounding villages. Except for soldiers of the Wehrmacht and the men of the Volkssturm, only medical personnel, a few employees in public administration and utility companies, police and the fire brigade were allowed to remain. In the end, it was decided not to defend the town by military means after all. In the early morning hours of 25 April 1945 Wehrmacht field engineers blew up Torgau's two Elbe bridges, and the last German soldiers left.

Dr. Uwe Niedersen

ASSOCIATION EUROPE ENCOUNTERS, TORGAU



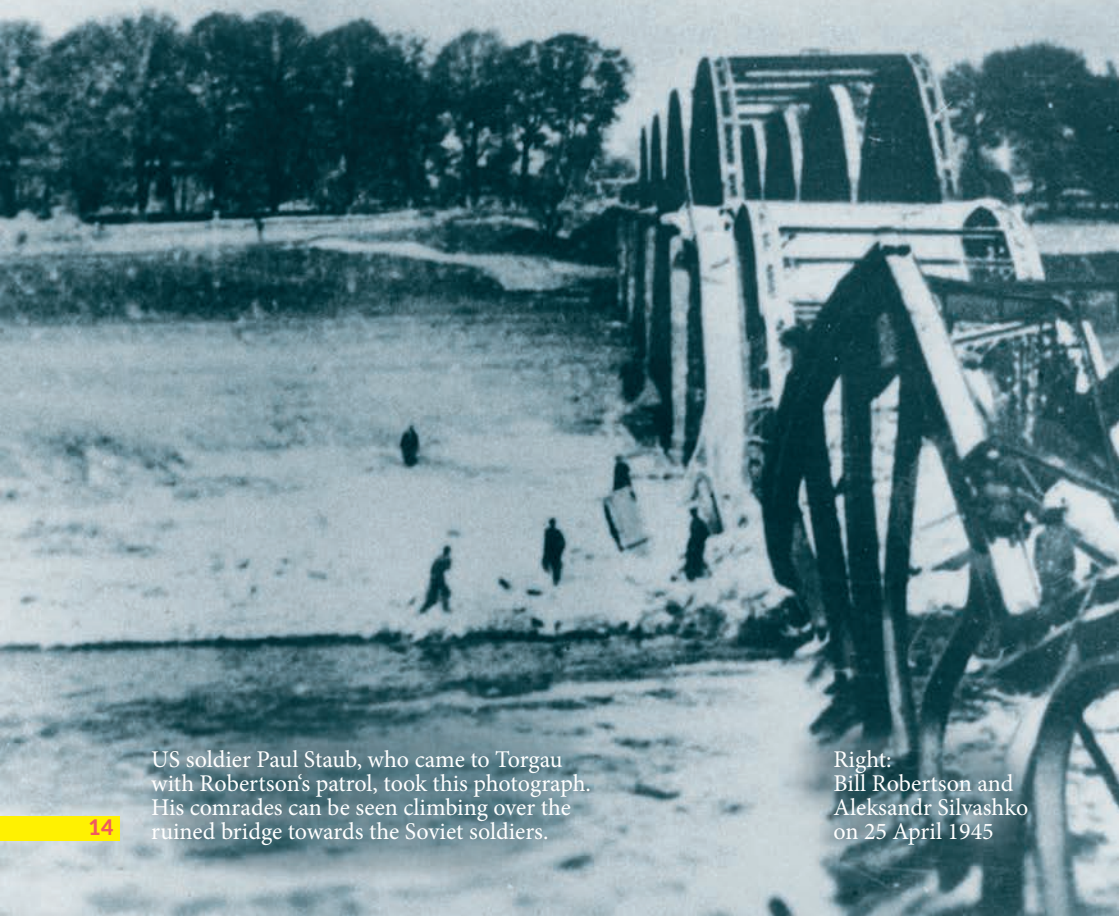
Right:
In Mid-April 1945
a tank trap blocks
Schlossstrasse where
it enters the market
square.



The Meeting on the Bridge in Torgau at 4:00 pm on 25 April 1945

The four-man US reconnaissance patrol led by Lieutenant Bill Robertson on 25 April 1945 was tasked with determining whether any German troops still remained between the Mulde and

the Elbe. Along the road near Sitzenroda the men heard from British soldiers from a German prisoner of war camp that Allied soldiers were being held in a Wehrmacht prison in Torgau. Acting on his own authority, Robertson altered the planned route and went to Torgau. In the evacuated town, the patrol came upon the German military prison Fort Zinna. There the Germans had left behind American prisoners. These prisoners told them that allied Soviet troops had already reached the opposite bank of the Elbe. Robertson and his men drove to Hartenfels Castle and saw the blown Elbe bridge lying in the water. They did not have the green flares that the allies had agreed upon as the identification signal.



US soldier Paul Staub, who came to Torgau with Robertson's patrol, took this photograph. His comrades can be seen climbing over the ruined bridge towards the Soviet soldiers.

Right:
Bill Robertson and
Aleksandr Silvashko
on 25 April 1945

A US flag hastily painted on a bed sheet with water colours looked so fake that the Soviet troops fired at it. With the help of a Soviet prisoner of war from Fort Zinna, they were finally able to communicate across the river. The soldiers climbed towards each other across the ruins of the bridge and hugged each other in relief. It was here that Bill Robertson met Soviet Lieutenant Aleksandr Silvashko. Several of the Soviet soldiers drove back to the American headquarters with Robertson's patrol. News of the meeting at the Elbe went around the world. To commemorate this historic moment Soviet troops erected the Link-Up Monument in September 1945. In 1995 Bill Robertson and Aleksandr Silvashko were named honorary citizens of the town of Torgau.

Wolfgang Oleschinski

SAXON MEMORIAL FOUNDATION / DOCUMENTATION
AND INFORMATION CENTRE (DIZ) TORGAU



The Meeting in Strehla at 12:00 on 25 April 1945

Soviet troops had already captured the small town of Strehla near Riesa on the west bank of the Elbe and were lying in wait on 25 April 1945. The US Army had advanced eastward past Wurzen. At around 10 o'clock on this day, the 69th Infantry Division sent out two reconnaissance patrols.

At about 11:30 the US patrol under Lieutenant Albert Kotzebue detected a Soviet outpost at a farmstead outside of Leckwitz. The Americans stopped and fired a green flare, the agreed identification signal. After brief consultation, the Soviet soldiers responded with a red flare; they had understood. Kotzebue and his men, among them Joe Polowsky, then drove to the farmstead. There they took along a person familiar with the territory and arrived at the ferry landing in Strehla shortly before noon. They crossed the river to Lorenzkirch in a boat and were greeted by Soviet soldiers and officers at about 12 o'clock.

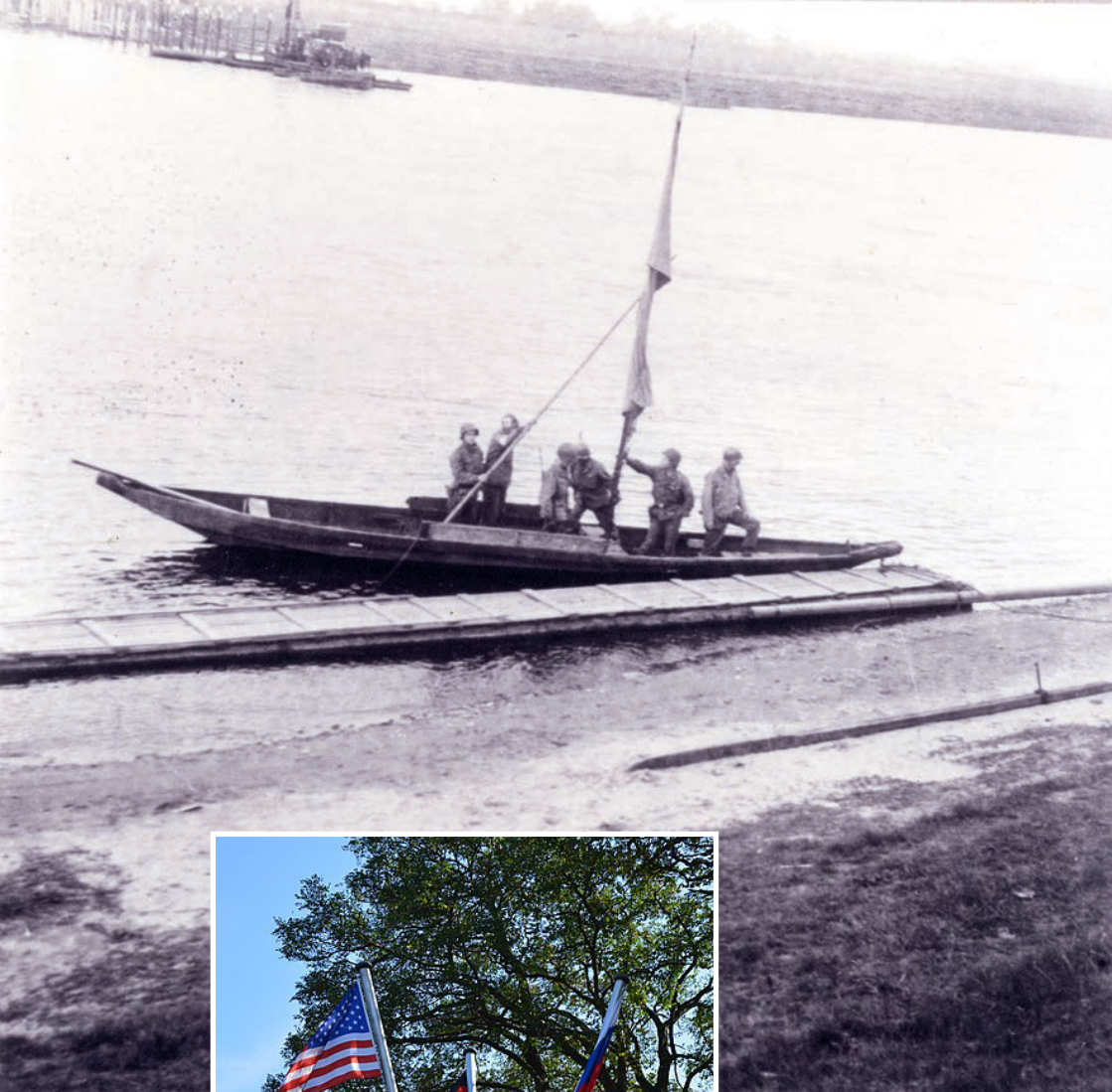
This historic event is the focus of an annual memorial ceremony in Strehla. In 1988 the committee of Soviet and American war veterans suggested erecting a memorial to commemorate the meeting in Strehla in 1945. The foundation stone was laid in April 1993 at the ferry landing in Strehla, and the monument was dedicated at the 50th anniversary of the meeting in 1995. This monument includes an ensemble of flags designed and donated by the 69th Infantry Division, a bronze relief created by Russian sculptor Vladimir Surovtsev and three bronze plaques that commemorate the historic moment in English, Russian and German. The boat in which Lieutenant Kotzebue crossed the river is now on exhibit at the museum of local history in Strehla.

Jörg Jeromin

MAYOR OF THE CITY OF STREHLA



US Lieutenant Albert Kotzebue with three of the soldiers of his reconnaissance patrol



Top:
Soldiers of Kotzebue's
patrol crossing the
Elbe in Strehla

Bottom:
The monument
erected in 1995 on
the bank of the Elbe
in Strehla

The Meeting in Kreinitz at 1:30 pm on 25 April 1945

When the American patrol under Kotzebue had crossed from Strehla to Lorenzkirch in a boat, they were cordially greeted by Soviet soldiers and Lieutenant Colonel Aleksandr Gordeyev. In the meadows along the Elbe lay the dead bodies of many German refugees and Wehrmacht soldiers. They had been killed when German troops blew up the bridge three days earlier and by Soviet fire. The Soviet political officer made it clear that this historic meeting with the American soldiers should be repeated at another site.

Together with Soviet officers, Kotzebue and his men returned to the ferry landing in Strehla and drove from there to the village of Görzig, where they recrossed the Elbe with their vehicles. Soviet field engineers had already set up a cable ferry to Kreinitz. Here at 1:30 pm on 25 April 1945, the second meeting between the American patrol under Kotzebue and Lieutenant Colonel Gordeyev took place. The Soviet side recorded this meeting as the first. The next day, staged pictures of this meeting were taken with General Rusakov, commander of the 58th Guards Rifle Division.

A second US patrol commanded by Major Frederick Craig had been looking for Kotzebue's patrol and entered Strehla on the afternoon of 25 April. These soldiers also crossed over to Kreinitz from Görzig and remained there with Kotzebue's men until 26 April. In Kreinitz there is a museum with items on display from the meeting on 25 April 1945 and with documents that bear witness to the subsequent impact of this meeting. There is also a monument on the bank of the Elbe commemorating the historic events.

Wolfgang Oleschinski

SAXON MEMORIAL FOUNDATION / DOCUMENTATION
AND INFORMATION CENTRE (DIZ) TORGAU





Top:
Kotzebue's patrol crossed the Elbe from Görzig with this cable ferry a second time to get to Kreinitz. The Soviets officially recorded that meeting as the first encounter.



Bottom:
A memorial stone in Kreinitz preserves the memory of the arrival of the Soviet troops and the Oath of the Elbe.

The River of Time – A Short Story

The old woman slowly walks across the battlefield. Tears flow down along the deep creases in her cheeks. In her arms she carries a dead soldier. She brings him back to his family, laying him gently on the ground. He looks as if he were sleeping and should not be woken.

Silently she stands and watches as his wife finds him, desperately tries to wake him and blurts out his name. Even long after they have taken him away the old woman remains rooted to the spot.

Night follows day and day follows night and slowly she goes on her way. She hardly dares glance up; she is afraid to look the suffering around her in the eye. Yet she hears it, hears the fighting, the screams, these horrible screams.

But then – silence.

The old woman stands still, her head lowered, not knowing which is worse: This oppressive silence or ... ?

No, she does want to think about it! About all the ghastly images burned deep into her memory.

She closes her eyes and hopes to forget, simply forget it all. Yet her

ears detect something, voices in the distance. Surprised, she looks up. At a distance she sees a group of men standing. Men in uniforms. They are different, these uniforms. And the old woman knows that they will soon begin to fight because they are from different countries, and until now that has always led to a bloody conflict.

She wants to avert her gaze, better still run away, yet her feet carry her inexorably towards the men.

Her eyes, which have seen so much already, will not simply close.

And now she finally realises that there is no hostility, rather solidarity between the two groups standing opposite each other.

One hand grasps the other, and the woman knows that this is a sign.

A sign that this seemingly interminable war is now drawing to a close. For strangers have become brothers.

With a smile she goes on her way. – The old woman. The old Elbe.

Celine Kastner

JOHANN-WALTER-GYMNASIUM, TORGAU



The Robertson Patrol Was Proof – The End of the Military Judiciary in Torgau



It was the Wehrmacht prison Fort Zinna that led the American patrol under Lieutenant Robertson to Torgau on 25 April 1945. The soldiers on the reconnaissance patrol spontaneously left their planned route to the Elbe and headed for Torgau when they heard of the prison. Maybe there were some of their own soldiers or allied soldiers to liberate. When the Jeep arrived at Fort Zinna, the last remaining inmates knew for certain that they were now free. The injustice of the military judiciary in Torgau had ended.

During the Second World War, the Wehrmacht incarcerated approximately 60,000 soldiers and civilians in its two prisons Fort Zinna and Brückenkopf. In 1943, in the middle of the war, the Reich Military Court also moved to Torgau. The town thus became the most important centre of the military judiciary in Europe in the Second World War.

Among the Wehrmacht inmates in Torgau were German soldiers who had courageously refused war service. They had been sentenced to death for desertion. Foreign soldiers were also imprisoned in Torgau. They had avoided forced military service for the Wehrmacht. Finally, the prisoners included members of the resistance from many occupied countries.

The Documentation and Information Centre (DIZ) Torgau of the Saxon Memorial Foundation informs visitors about this history and the fates of the persecuted people in its exhibition in Torgau's Hartenfels Castle. A memorial in front of Fort Zinna, now the Torgau Correctional Institution, commemorates the victims of the merciless military judiciary in the Second World War.

Elisabeth Kohlhaas

SAXON MEMORIAL FOUNDATION / DOCUMENTATION
AND INFORMATION CENTRE (DIZ) TORGAU





Top:
The Jeep of Robertson's patrol in front of the gate of the Fort Zinna Wehrmacht prison. With their arrival, the prisoners knew for certain that the war would soon be over.

Bottom:
Left behind, the prisoners had hoisted a red cross flag to avoid being shot at.

Brückenkopf Torgau – Meeting Place of the Allied Commanders

Disobeying orders goes against the grain for a soldier. Yet precisely this behaviour by Bill Robertson was what earned him and his men of the 69th Infantry Division the distinction of having established the link-up with the Soviet Army in Torgau on 25 April 1945. The next day the regimental commanders of both sides met at the Brückenkopf prison. The commander of the 69th Infantry Division, General Emil Reinhardt, came to Torgau on 27 April 1945 and was ferried to the east bank of the Elbe in a rowing boat. Here he met Major General Vladimir Rusakov, commander of the 58th Guards Rifle Division. The place where they now exchanged pleasantries had been the front line just a short time ago.

About 70 correspondents from American, British and French newspapers were on hand to report on these momentous events. Many journalists, men and women, had been close to the action as it was clear that the Allies would soon have to meet up at the Elbe. The meeting of the commanders took place in the kitchen hut of the former Brückenkopf Wehrmacht prison, which today no longer exists, and was reported in newsreels throughout the world. In many scenes the films also show the happy faces of rank-and-file soldiers.

Birgit Wöste
TORGAU



American and Soviet soldiers on Elbstrasse in Torgau,
26 April 1945



Top:
By the morning of 26 April 1945 the press had already arrived in Torgau. In the middle is journalist Ann Stringer, the fourth from the right is Allan Jackson, the photographer who took the famous handshake picture.

Bottom:
On 27 April 1945 American General Emil Reinhardt and Soviet Major General Vladimir Rusakov shook hands in the courtyard of the Brückenkopf complex, which only a short time before had served as a Wehrmacht prison.

Exhortation for Peace – The Link-Up Monument

On 25 April 1945 the American and Soviet allies came into direct contact with each other for the first time in the Second World War. The Soviet side wanted to commemorate this triumph by erecting a monument in Torgau.

Avraam Miletsky, a Soviet Army captain and architect, was entrusted with the task of designing the monument. The plan was crown it with a tank or a piece of heavy artillery, but Miletsky felt it was more important that the design convey a different message: “In Torgau the guns fell silent.” Thus the tip of the monument shows rifles stacked together in a pyramid. They are flanked by the flags of the Soviet Union and the USA, which are lowered. Both these elements symbolise the end of the fighting.

Miletsky’s own fate was itself a reflection of the horrible effects of Germany’s war of annihilation against the Soviet Union and the murder of the European Jews at the hands of the Germans. He came from Kiev; his family, which was of the Jewish faith, had about 70 members. He and an uncle were the only ones who survived the Second World War.

The work on the monument was performed by two Torgau stonemason firms, the Köhler and Hacker families. They were very happy for the order as this meant they now received food from Soviet Army supplies. The impressive monument was completed in September 1945.

At the site of the monument on the Elbe you can learn something about the treatment of history: Looking back across the street, you will note that the East German memorial stone of 1975 on that side thanks only the “Soviet people for its deed of liberation”. During the Cold War such an important ally as the USA was not even mentioned.

Birgit Wöste

TORGAU





Top:
Torgau stonemasons
erecting the Link-Up
Monument. On the left
is the plaster model with
the lowered flags and
pyramid of rifles.

Left:
The Link-Up Monu-
ment was completed
in September 1945.
The English translation
of the Russian inscription
was added in 1987.
Photo 2020

Politics and Remembrance – Elbe Day Anniversaries in East Germany

The commemoration of the end of the war in Torgau invariably depended on the general political climate. The American peace activist Joe Polowsky, who in 1945 had been at the meeting Strehla as a US soldier, visited Torgau in 1960 and 1961. When he wanted to return in 1965 and had already flown to West Berlin, East Germany refused him entry. Instead he received an invitation to Moscow from the ambassador of the Soviet Union in East Germany. However, he did not have the money to make this trip. Back in the USA, Joe Polowsky declared that he would no longer attempt to keep the spirit of the 1945 meeting at the Elbe alive. Fortunately, he did not adhere to this intention. For in the years that followed, he could be seen as a lonely one-man vigil in his home town of Chicago: “Across the Michigan Avenue Bridge walks a man: stocky, thickset, broad shoulders, dark eyes. His thoughts drift downstream with the river. Like every year in this night. Like every year on 25 April.” This is how a feature by East Germany’s Radio DDR described it, quoting Polowsky as saying: “I had to do it. I regard it as my duty to incessantly tell people that we must not forget the terrible sacrifices of the past war.”

In 1975 the world was still in the middle of the Cold War. At the time the newspaper in Torgau reported about the site of the meeting: “10,000 Torgau citizens commemorated the day of their liberation by the Soviet Army. The highpoint of the celebration was the solemn laying of the foundation stone for a monument that will express steadfast friendship with the liberators. The day drew to a close with fireworks and a cordial campfire meeting at the Elbe between FDJ [the East German communist youth organisation] members and Komsomol [the Soviet communist youth organisation] members.”

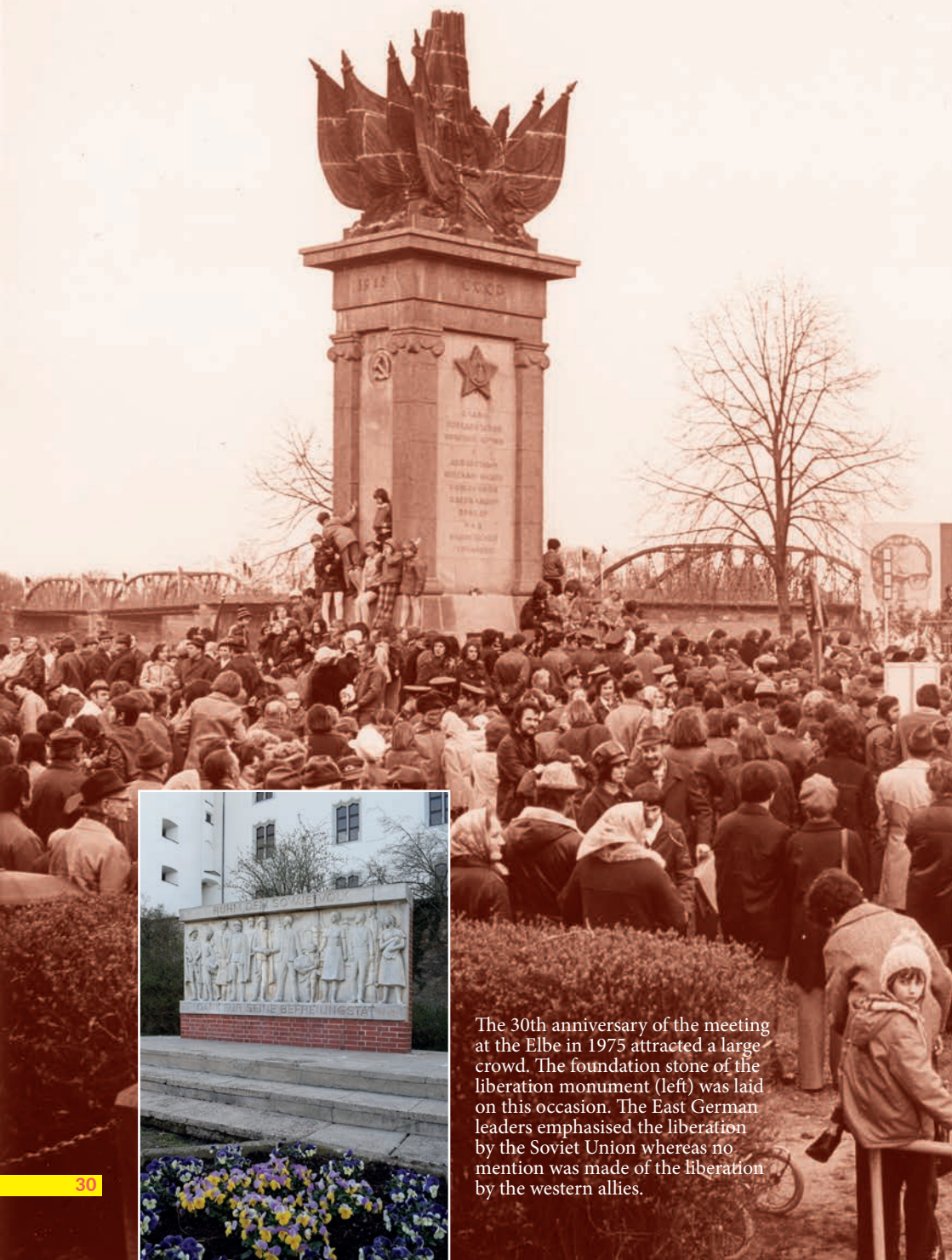
The policy of détente and the burial of Joe Polowsky in Torgau in 1983 brought about changes in thinking in politics and the military, in artistic expression and among ordinary citizens in east and west. The upcoming 40th anniversary of the meeting at the Elbe occupied them long before the event. The 1984 play “The Treaty of Torgau 85” portrayed fictitious negotiations about the future of Germany between the USA, the USSR, East Germany and West Germany at the foot of the Link-Up Monument.



The incident with American Major Nicholson (see p. 31) overshadowed the festivities of 25 April 1985. The USA called off its participation because of it. In spite of that, 25,000 people from East Germany and other countries came to Torgau.



On Elbe Day 1985 military officers, party functionaries and peace activists linked arms to re-create a well-known Torgau photo scene from the days after the meeting in 1945 (p. 24).



The 30th anniversary of the meeting at the Elbe in 1975 attracted a large crowd. The foundation stone of the liberation monument (left) was laid on this occasion. The East German leaders emphasised the liberation by the Soviet Union whereas no mention was made of the liberation by the western allies.

The East German and Soviet intelligence services created a joint task force with the goal of preventing “political provocations” in Torgau on 25 April 1985. In the USA, over 15 states and cities declared 25 April “Elbe Day”. Participation of representatives of the US Army in the celebrations in Torgau was planned. War veterans and peace activists from the USA and the USSR prepared to travel to Torgau. Then suddenly everything threatened to collapse. On 24 March 1985 US Major Arthur D. Nicholson was discovered attempting to illegally enter a Soviet military base in East Germany and was shot and killed by a sentry. In response, the United States called off the participation of all its official representatives in the celebrations in Torgau. Despite these obstacles, or perhaps for that very reason, over 25,000 people from East Germany, West Germany, the USSR, the USA and other countries gathered at the Link-Up Monument and renewed the Oath of the Elbe of 1945.

Ulf Podbielski

TORGAU HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Joe Polowsky, Peace Activist – Legacy and Traces in Torgau

It was not by chance that the US enlisted man Joseph “Joe” Polowsky was part of the patrol with Lieutenant Kotzebue that left Trebsen on the Mulde river towards the Elbe on 25 April 1945. As the son of Jewish parents from the region of Kiev who had immigrated to the USA, Polowsky also spoke Russian. The first contact with their Soviet brothers in arms occurred around noon near Strehla.

After the war, Polowsky devoted a lot of energy to the veterans’ legacy and to the idea of peace that was expressed in the Oath of Peace at the Elbe. For decades he tried to have the United Nations declare 25 April the “Day of World Peace”. Yet even his meetings with national leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Walter Ulbricht did not have the desired effect. His annual vigils on the Michigan Avenue Bridge in Chicago failed to persuade the politicians to change their minds. In spite of this, he tried everything he could to influence major world politics with his citizen’s diplomacy.

On the tenth anniversary of the meeting at the Elbe in 1955, Polowsky visited Moscow together with Soviet war veterans. He only came back to Torgau in 1960. One year later he was in the town once again, following a visit with East German state council chairman Walter Ulbricht in Berlin. After that he was not allowed back into East Germany.

Before his death in Chicago on 17 October 1983, Joe Polowsky had expressed his wish to be buried in Torgau. Despite political obstacles, the responsible authorities played along. Erich Honecker personally gave his approval on behalf of the East German government. The burial in the Torgau cemetery on 26 November 1983 created a lot of excitement and received a lot of media coverage. With his last will, Polowsky succeeded in bringing east and west closer together for one moment.





Joe Polowsky (standing in the Jeep) together with American and Soviet soldiers, Burxdorf, April 1945. As a US soldier, he was with the Kotzebue patrol at the first meeting between the allies on 25 April 1945.



In 1960, peace activist Joe Polowsky (left, with flowers) visited Torgau and spoke at the Link-Up Monument.

The tireless crusader for peace was belatedly honoured in the USA in 1985. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the meeting at the Elbe, forty US governors declared 25 April “Elbe Day” or “World Peace Day” in their respective states. On the 50th anniversary of the end of the war in 1995, a Torgau school was renamed Joe-Polowsky-Gymnasium. In 2008 the school had to close. Parents, faculty and students all made an effort to keep the name Polowsky alive. With this in mind, they set up the Joe Polowsky Memorial Race, which is organised every year by the Johann-Walter-Gymnasium in Torgau. By participating, all the runners collect money for a good cause from sponsors. The school’s student council regularly decides on the cause to support. Each time the proceeds are donated to two charitable projects. Part of the money stays in Torgau and the other part goes to a project beyond the region. The idea behind this is to intervene in current affairs, in the spirit of Polowsky. The students collect money to help people requiring assistance, to relieve suffering, to make life in society a little more just and perhaps even to make the world we share a little more peaceful as well.

Where the Joe-Polowsky-Gymnasium once stood the street sign “Joe-Polowsky-Hain” (Joe Polowsky Grove) commemorates the American crusader for peace. The “Polowsky peace rose” has been a feature of the rose garden of Hartenfels Castle since 24 April 2010. Polowsky’s son Ted came to Elbe Day as a guest of honour and attended the planting of the Polowsky peace rose. To this day it commemorates a man who fought for peace in 1945 near Torgau and later in the Cold War as well. As a school director and citizen of the town, I hope that Polowsky’s idea of peace will continue to live on in people’s memory.

Peter Nowack

DIRECTOR OF THE JOHANN-WALTER-GYMNASIUM, TORGAU





On Elbe Day 1995 a jazz band played at Joe Polowsky's grave in the Torgau cemetery.



As part of the celebration of Elbe Day 1995 a Torgau school was renamed Joe-Polowsky-Gymnasium. Polowsky's granddaughter Tara and Torgau mayor Wolfgang Gerstenberg unveiled the nameplate.



The Joe Polowsky Memorial Race keeps the remembrance alive and is organised every year by the Johann-Walther-Gymnasium. Photo 2016

Friends of the Veterans – Bridge Builders

From 1990 on, Elbe Day was unthinkable without the participation of veterans of the meeting at the Elbe in 1945. Of course it was a lot easier for former US Army soldiers to organise and finance the trip to Torgau than it was for the Soviet Army veterans. I was an English teacher at a Torgau high school. As I could translate and interpret, I became somewhat of a bridge builder myself from 1990 on. Yet at the festivities in 1985, 40 years after the end of the war, they had no use for me because I was not a Communist party member. All that changed after the end of the German Democratic Republic. The many letters and visits of veterans even gave rise to personal friendships. My fellow teacher Karl-Heinz Lange, the collective farm chairman Heinz Richter, who had learned English to be able to actively participate in foreign aid, and I formed a triad as contact persons for the English-speaking veterans. In this function, we were on duty practically all the time.

In 1983, on the day of Joe Polowsky's burial, I met veteran Bill Beswick, with whom I later became friends, at the Link-Up Monument. At the time I thought Joe Polowsky would have his grave at that monument. However, the East German authorities had spread false information because they wanted as few Torgau citizens as possible at the burial in the cemetery.

For the future I wish that the meeting at the Elbe in 1945 will not be forgotten and that Elbe Day will continue to include music events. It fills me with pride and joy to know that we have helped to organise the meetings with American veterans in Torgau and have been able to anchor the significance of the end of the war on 25 April 1945 in the town's history. We have left our traces. Keeping the memory alive will primarily be the task of the younger generations.

Herbert Schedina

TORGAU



In 1995 Bill Robertson and Aleksandr Silvashko were named honorary citizens of the town of Torgau. On the right is Mayor Gerstenberg, Silvashko is seated, Robertson is to the left of him and Herbert Schedina is in the background.



Stickers with the motto
“Down by the Riverside”

“Down by the Riverside” – Elbe Day after 1990

The meeting at the Elbe in 1945 has been commemorated with a peace celebration and a public festival since 1990. The celebration includes jazz music, which unites the many participants. This commemorative event brings the Peace Oath of the Elbe, Joseph Polowsky’s dream of peace between east and west, into the present, at least for a few days.

Our newly founded aid association Europe Encounters developed out of a citizens’ initiative in the autumn of 1989. Since then we have assumed responsibility for content and conceptual design of Elbe Day under the slogan “Down by the Riverside“.

In 1945 Soviet and American troops met in Torgau as allies. Today music groups from east and west with banjo, saxophone, clarinet and other instruments come together at this historic site.

In numerous conversations with former Elbe veterans we can gain an insight into those historic hours around the handshake of 1945. This meeting was not orchestrated at the top level; these were rank-and-file front-line soldiers who met one another. Their heart triumphed over politics in spite of all the ideological differences between their respective countries and political systems.

The legendary Oath of Peace back then formed a symbolic bridge from Torgau all the way to San Francisco on the Pacific Ocean. By a historical coincidence, on the same day that American reconnaissance patrols encountered Soviet troops at the Elbe, delegates of many countries convened at the conference that established the United Nations, and that famous radio message from US president Harry S. Truman was broadcast. Both events occurred on 25 April 1945.

Commemorating the millions of war dead and the countless victims in the camps of both dictatorships has always been a part of Elbe Day for us. The organisers are also well aware of the power of the word. With this in mind, the programme has, over the years, consistently included talk shows with prominent guests from the new federal states of eastern Germany as well as from western Germany. Our organisation has been the one to organise the grand addresses, the encounters of the words, of the opinions and ideas about Elbe Day.

In this context we also conduct international meetings of entrepreneurs from east and west. To date there have been about 50 such events. We feel that promoting international business contacts is an act of bridge building as well. As an international town festival, Elbe Day has reflected to this day the agenda that has been set since 1990. We wish for the future that the historic meeting at the Elbe will remain the central substantive focus of this multifaceted public festival.

Dr. Uwe Niedersen

ASSOCIATION EUROPE ENCOUNTERS, TORGAU



Since 1990 Elbe Day has been celebrated as a peace festival with a lot of jazz music. Organisers Uwe Niedersen (waving) and Günter Schöne can be seen in the middle of this picture of the 1992 parade, which at that time still crossed over the historic bridge.



Talk shows with prominent public figures are a part of Elbe Day. The 1994 event in Torgau's House of Culture included politician Gregor Gysi, Pastor Friedrich Schorlemmer and Bishop Gottfried Forck.

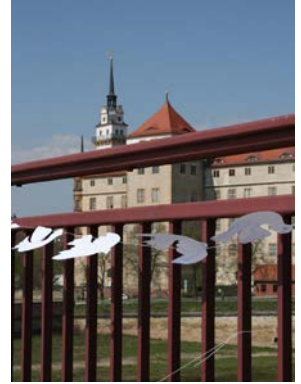




The relaxed atmosphere in the meadows along the Elbe was typical of Elbe Day in the early 1990s. The Elbe bridge that was blown up in June of 1994 is visible on the left in the picture.



Elbe Day is a festival of encounters and it offers visitors a great variety of activities.



The railing of the Elbe bridge is decorated with peace doves created as part of a project by school students.



Bottom:
Balloons rise into the air in front of the flag monument, 2015.





A memorial ceremony with international guests is held every year on 25 April. Photo 2017

Sites of Remembrance – Flag Monument and the Torgau Double Head



Looking from Hartenfels Castle across the river to the opposite bank of the Elbe, you will see the flag monument. Whereas the two monuments on the town side commemorate the turning point of 1945, this site in front of the Brückenkopf draws our attention to the present as well. In 1998, the American and Soviet veterans of the meeting at the Elbe created their own memorial in Torgau.

Three flagpoles form an equilateral triangle. The Russian, American and German flags are at the same distance from one another and at the same height. At the foot of the flagpoles are three memorial stones of sandstone fragments from Torgau's historic Elbe bridge. Plaques commemorate the “spirit of the Elbe” in Russian, English and German. In light of the Second World War and the Cold War that followed, the flag monument admonishes us to “resolve differences by peaceful means only“.

A few metres further, the “Torgau Double Head” commemorates the old Elbe bridge. Artist Ingo Domdey created this sculpture for the anniversary of the meeting in 1997. The profile silhouette of a head is made from a series of steel plates. At eye level there is a broad viewing slit through which one can discern the remainder of the historic bridge on the town side, the viewing platform. Thus one follows the course of the old bridge that was torn down in 1994. This historic site evokes many thoughts about the past and present as well as about the future of nations.

Birgit Wöste

TORGAU





The flag monument was created in 1998 on the initiative of American and Soviet veterans. In addition to the flagpoles, there are inscribed plaques on sandstone blocks from the historic Elbe bridge.

Looking through the viewing slit of the Double Head one can see the course of the old Torgau Elbe bridge.



We Are Duds – Poetry Slam

When I go out
And look at the dusty, crowded streets of this town
There are people there
People like me
Their heads full of confusion and fear
They stagger and seek their goal
They want to read each other
Like maps
All the lines and pathways
Even the elevations
Every leaf, every stone
Every footprint in the mud

But then it occurs to me that we were never boy scouts
That navigation systems and Google Maps were
What we grew up with
That we don't know even know how to read maps

And then I see how I wander about
Like a shade
Through the narrow alleyways of this town
For in this town I'm the lowest one
Without a goal
Without a grip
Without love
Without strength

And when I have nothing
Nothing that defines me
Nothing that appeals to me
Nothing that lays the happiness of this world at my feet
Then I am proud of my country
Simply because everyone is right now

Because the slogans in Gothic script on my skin
Best reflect my opinion
Like a mirror
For I don't want to think now
I don't even want to think about thinking
Because in thinking, errors in reasoning,
Thinking, during thinking,
Can creep in
And I don't want to risk it

And when I look in the mirror
Then I see a head full of vile deeds
That by vile deeds
Has lost its Self
And then what?
Then I look for a way to let off steam
One that explains everything
For it's obvious
That it's not me
But the immigrants
Who are the reason for the problem

And the immigrant is the target
That I now
Sear into other's minds
For they have to leave
Leave my homeland
Leave my, my country

For there is only room here for German life
Over which the good national thoughts soar
And then I tell my children it's stardust
Only in brown, like back then

For I am a dud bomb
Erring blindly
Through the town and the streets
Through joy and suffering
Through morning and evening
For I have it, thank God
That great, honest patriotism
That guides me
Through the black darkness
Of the mind

Or am I someone else entirely?

Am I the one who doesn't grasp
How one functions in this ready-made system?
For whom the norms of society remain incomprehensible?
Whose thoughts escape to other realms
Realms in which people take off their masks
And maybe even consider living in peace
Together, where friend and foe open marmalade jars together
To catch the moment as in a fisherman's net?

And the fish are named
By the mouths of innocent children
Because in their eyes all are equal
No matter from what country
From what school
From what city
And from what class

They call each other by their names
"Love, Understanding and Tolerance"
And tolerate the acceptance of the accepting
Tolerant ones

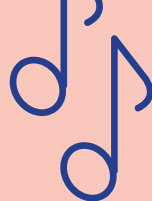
For great holes and gaps have formed in the world
Because tolerance has run away
And acceptance has also gone into hiding
And now we seek
I seek
Searching for those searching
For the marmalade jars
To once again bring a little more tolerance
Into the world
And while searching
I encounter the others
Who call me a dud
Because I do not function
The way I am expected to
Because I am an unexploded bomb
That doesn't go off in war
Because I do something different
Than what my actual plan allows me to

So I am simply an unexploded bomb
Yet I'd rather be a dud bomb that fails to explode
Then a walking dud
Who walks and fails to see
And in failing to see loses his Self

Franziska Franke

TORGAU

Our Society Needs Remembrance!



Since its founding, the Cultural Action Project Torgau (KAP) has participated in Elbe Day and will continue to do so in the future. As music event managers we have many contacts in the scene, also internationally. Jazz, blues, folk and world music: year in and year out, the Culture Bastion organises large parts of the Elbe Day programme in cooperation with other initiatives. Over the last few years, our media workshop has repeatedly filmed Elbe Day, conducted interviews and compiled video documentaries from this material. The KAP also participates in the international youth camp organised by the city of Torgau on Elbe Day. This event brings young activists together directly and across borders. Joe Polowsky once dreamed of such encounters.

The meeting at the Elbe in 1945 as a historic event took place at a time that for young people was very long ago. Nonetheless, the message of this bridge building continues to resonate today. We do not want it to be eclipsed by a colourful public Elbe Day festival. If we filter out the memory of war, destruction and refugees, then we also lose the ability to recognise and combat indications of imbalances in our own society such as xenophobia, anti-Semitism and hate messages in social media.

Our offerings are intended to make peace and openness to the world practically accessible. Inculcating fundamental values such as democracy, human rights, peace and respect for minorities is an integral part of this. Political education with young people that fails to sensitise them to these topics will miss the mark. The young people can learn in our projects that they as active persons are part of society and that how we overcome the divisions within our society is also up to them.

Uwe Narkunat

CULTURAL ACTION PROJECT TORGAU (KAP)

Right:

From the broad spectrum of the musical program at Elbe Day 2005: Events in the meadows along the Elbe with spectators along the Elbe bridge and in the Culture Bastion of the Cultural Action Project (KAP) Torgau.



“Love Thine Enemies!”

There could be no talk of this in 1945 when American and Soviet troops met at the Elbe near Torgau. Jesus' commandment would have sounded absurd to the soldiers back then. It was the same with his contemporaries when the man from Nazareth radically demanded that people love their neighbours to overcome the Old Testament commandment of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Even today we prefer to speak of accommodation and understanding rather than loving one's enemies, of confidence-building measures and peace treaties to regulate our interaction.

The soldiers who shook hands on the banks of the Elbe near Torgau in April 1945 had only one wish: to finally force National Socialist Germany to its knees, to finally end the war, to finally return home to their own families and friends. In any case, they were not yet thinking of reconciliation with the defeated enemy as they fraternised with their allies.

Years passed before reconciliation had a chance. The national political leaders soon shifted their focus back to the interests of their countries and during the Cold War had little use for peace activists such as the taxi driver and former American soldier Joseph Polowsky. He devoted his whole life to peace and reconciliation. With his decision to make Torgau his final resting place, he promoted the tradition of the Elbe Day celebrations.

Jesus' commandment stands, even when in many situations it seems absurd to us. It has nothing to do with romantic love, but with respect for every person, with esteem, with tolerance and also with the will to reconciliation. Our future will depend on whether such human kindness will become and remain the decisive factor, namely for all those who are prepared to assume responsibility for our world.

Pastor Christiane Schmidt

PROTESTANT CHURCH PARISH TORGAU



Pastor Christiane Schmidt at a memorial ceremony at the Link-Up Monument



Memorial ceremony 2019

“Folders for Peace! Join Us!”

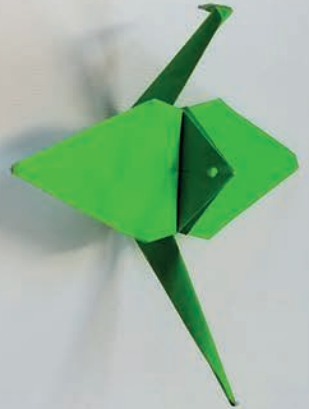
Peace is an ideal that every human being longs for. School students in Torgau have many ideas about how peace can be made possible and preserved. “First of all that people in the family are friendly to one another”, says Martin Schmidt for example, “and that is how it should be with the different countries. I am impressed by how the soldiers shook hands here in Torgau. I would feel helpless and desperate in a war and wouldn’t know what to do.” Education as the comprehensive basis for a just world, more international communication, through youth exchanges as well, education about other religions and initiatives against racism: Pia Abendroth regards all these things as peacemaking measures.

The year 2019 saw the inception, on the joint initiative of a technical school teacher and a pastor, of the drive “Folders for peace! Join us!” It challenges people to fold a crane of paper and thus join in the worldwide drive against nuclear war. These are small steps that are setting something in motion. The walking tour “All Around Torgau” takes people to various memorials to war victims and sensitises young people to the topic. Even in the fifth grade, children get an impression of what happened here in Torgau in 1945 and connect this impression to the material covered in history class. The school students are aware that creating peace is nothing to be taken for granted. And as with climate protection they want to play an active part.

Beate Senftleben

PROTESTANT YOUTH EDUCATION PROJECT “wintergrüne”





Folded paper cranes from the
“Folders for peace” project

International Youth Camp - Continuing the Idea of Peace!

Since 2019, the city of Torgau, together with its citizens, has contributed to carrying the idea of peace into the future by organising the youth encounter “International Youth Camp Elbe Day”. The meeting between American and Soviet soldiers at the end of the Second World War has symbolised peace and understanding among nations to this day. Over the last three-quarters of a century, enemies have become friends, mutually respected admonishers and discussion partners. With the youth encounter, the city of Torgau seeks to keep alive the memory and the idea of peace and pass these on to the next generation, in keeping with the Oath of Peace at the Elbe: “No more war!” On Elbe Day citizens of Torgau come together with young people of many different nationalities. Not only do they want to better understand the historical circumstances of the meeting at the end of the Second World War, they also seek to jointly build new bridges of understanding, cooperation and friendship. With numerous workshops, the “International Youth Camp Elbe Day” invites visitors to join in discussions together, get to know different cultures, develop new ideas and make international friendships.

Together with the church, schools and civic organisations, in particular the Cultural Action Project (KAP) Torgau, the Saxon Memorial Foundation / Documentation and Information Centre (DIZ) Torgau and the Protestant Youth Education Project “wintergrüne” in Torgau, workshops have been and are being developed: a peace project for living together in Europe and for a common world! With the support of the German foreign ministry, the project was successfully launched with young people from four nations in 2019. The “International Youth Camp Elbe Day” Plans has been continued and expanded since then.

We look forward to joint exchanges, discussions, lectures, forums, sports and musical activities as well as artistic and media design ideas from the young generation of many countries!

Dr. Lars Föhling

DEPUTY MAYOR OF THE CITY OF TORGAU



Participants of the international youth project at Elbe Day 2019 display their works at the Documentation and Information Centre (DIZ) Torgau.



Statements from a 2019 peace project by the Youth Education Project “wintergrüne” in which 10th-grade students of the Johann-Walter-Gymnasium in Torgau participated.

“Elbe Day Is in My Opinion ...”

... a **good** opportunity to remember this historic event and to appeal to people to treat each other peacefully and tolerantly.

... an **important** event to show people how important peace is. Yet it is also a memorial day, not only to familiarise people with the end of the Second World War and remind them of it, but also to remind people that there is still war in the world. That we have not learned from such barbarous world wars, but that there is still hate everywhere in our world.

... an **important** festival for Torgau because we remember the day on which the war was finally over and this day was a new chance for the population, which could now live without fear.

... a **day** of great historical significance.

... a **day** of remembrance. We think of the war and learn to value peace.

... a **good** opportunity to commemorate the misery of the war and the many victims of the Second World War and also to show the younger generation that war is nothing good. Elbe Day shows how important it is to preserve peace so that history will not repeat itself.

... a **good** day of remembrance. Unfortunately many young people know too little about the historical context.

... an **important** memorial day which should make people aware of how important peace is and that living in a peaceful country is not to be taken for granted.

... a **day** that everyone should celebrate because peace is also for everyone.

... an **important** memorial day for remembering the horrible events that occurred under Hitler’s rule and to learn from this and to commemorate the people who died in a senseless war or were persecuted.

“Peace Means to Me ...”

... that all people can live together peacefully, that is without conflicts. It also means to me that all people are tolerant of others and all people can do what they enjoy doing and can build their own future.

... that there is no war and conflict, that no one need fear attacks on their person, family or home. And that one can enjoy one's life without bad things.

... that all people get on with each other and that something like terror no longer exists.

... that my family and my friends live well and there are no problems. Peace also means to me that everyone in the world lives well, that everyone has enough to eat and a roof over their head and everyone, no matter how old, no matter their gender or skin colour, receives the same opportunities in life. Peace is equal rights for all people.

... to live together without any fear that it could all be over tomorrow. I feel it is important that every person in the world can experience peace at least once, although for some this will unfortunately not be possible. We who live in peace should value it all the more and not get upset over every trifle.

... not having to flee from something that has arisen from a tiny decision or a difference of opinion and now tears families apart, destroys cities and kills thousands of people. Being able to learn and to freely express my opinion without being persecuted for it.

... that all people can live in harmony. People live in peace when they do not flee, when they live under a roof and have no reason to be dissatisfied. In peace all people are equal and no one has to hate or envy another for something. Living in peace means to me that I can believe what I want, that I can love what and whom I want and that I feel safe in my home and my country every day.

... that people no longer need to carry out conflicts aggressively and can live quietly. Additionally, dwellings should no longer be intentionally destroyed and made uninhabitable.

... a harmonious life with one another. Resolving conflicts that arise without resorting to violence.

... that I live in a country in which problems can be solved without violence. And also that everyone can voice their opinion freely without being persecuted or condemned for it. Also that I can go to school and have a life without violence, hate and fear.

... that you can express your opinion freely and can go out without fear, for example to buy something. Peace for me also means being able to travel almost anywhere.

Maps of Torgau and Vicinity



DOKUMENTATIONS- UND
INFORMATIONSZENTRUM
DIZ TORGAU



STIFTUNG
SÄCHSISCHE
GEDENKSTÄTTEN

