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(portrait)

Stolperstein inventor Gunter Demnig turns 75 Commemoration with a future By Clara Engelen and Anita Hirschbeck (KNA) (With picture)

They are considered the world's largest decentralized memorial: Stolpersteine commemorate the victims of the Nazi regime. Inventor Gunter Demnig lays most of the stones himself, even at almost 75 years of age.

Cologne (KNA) After a few minutes, the man in the workman's outfit and the floppy hat is ready. Gunter Demnig needs only a few hand movements, then he has laid five so-called Stolpersteine in the prefabricated hole in the footpath. The gaps are filled with a compound, then Demnig cleans the brass plaques, each ten square centimeters in size, with a paper handkerchief. They commemorate five members of the Jewish Silberbach family who used to live in the house directly on the footpath in the Marienburg district of Cologne. The Nazis had driven them out of their home.

On Thursday, the inventor of the Stolpersteine, Gunter Demnig, turns 75 - and he still sets most of the stones himself.

Next year, the 100,000th will be among them. They bear the names of Nazi victims, Jews, Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, people with disabilities and those persecuted for political or religious reasons. They are often laid in front of their last freely chosen place of residence. They now exist in 31 countries, including France and the Netherlands. Today, Stolpersteine are considered the largest decentralized memorial in the world.

After 30 years, laying the stones has not yet become assembly-line work for Demnig, as he explains. He spends about two-thirds of the year on Stolpersteine. He can place the stones in the dark if need be, but the fates behind them are unique. "So much positive comes back that it still gives me joy. With all the background that does not cause joy."

His life project also has something to do with his personal history. Born two years after the end of the war, Demnig grew up in the GDR and later in West Berlin. From his father, who had served as a soldier in France, "nothing could ever be extracted" about the war, he says. And at school, history lessons stopped at the Weimar Republic.

Demnig has already used public space for several art actions. In 1968, he raised a U.S. flag in Berlin during the Vietnam War - with skulls instead of stars. In 1991, he laid the "Trail of Memories": a color trail in Cologne that traced the deportation routes of the Sinti and Roma. A woman approached him and was of the opinion that "no Gypsies would have lived here after all." So Demnig realized that more projects were needed about the stories of the displaced and murdered.

He laid his first stumbling block in front of the city hall in Cologne about 30 years ago without permission. He had his studio in the cathedral city for years. A short time later, an acquaintance reported on the action in an art projects book entitled "megalomania." "I thought: yes, it fits," says the sculptor with a laugh. He says he was also encouraged by a Cologne pastor who said, "You probably won't make the million, but you can start small."

A descendant has traveled from the U.S. to attend the laying for the Silberbachs, who fled to America in the late 1930s. Terry Mandel decorates the freshly laid stones with flowers, then slips Demnig a personal thank-you note. Later, the petite woman with the gray mottled short haircut tells of her family history. A school class is present, as are the current owners of the former Silberbach house. Looking at the artist, Mandel says, "These stones changed his life and the lives of millions of people around the world."

He received encouragement from relatives from the beginning, Demnig says. So he decided to keep going, he says. The stones are financed through sponsorships, which individuals, schools or associations can take on for about 130 euros. The demand is high. Demnig is currently fully booked until August 2023.

To its dates the artist brings meanwhile a cushion.

He wants to continue as long as his knees allow him to, he says. For the time after that, he has established the Spuren Gunter Demnig Foundation in Alsfeld, Hesse. Even today, he says, he no longer has to lay every stone himself. For example, his wife, who is 28 years younger, helps out. As for the future of his life's work, Demnig is convinced: "It will continue."

Note:

Photos can be found in the KNA image database at [www.kna-bild.de](http://www.kna-bild.de) or directly with the following link:

<http://kna-bild.de/paket/221024-89-00090>

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## Editorial notes

- Message "Stumbling stone inventor: my father never talked about the war" already sent.

## Internet

- [Stolpersteine project page] (<https://www.stolpersteine.eu/start/>)

- [Foundation Traces Gunter Demnig]  
(<https://www.stiftung-spuren-gunterdemnig.eu/>)

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