

Dr. Dieter Vaupel awarded Order of Merit of the Federal Republic for Germany

Award recognizes German educator's research and reconciliation efforts regarding Jews sent into slave labor and Jewish communities destroyed by Nazis in Northern Hesse, Germany

The German educator Dr. Dieter Vaupel has been awarded the Merit on Ribbon of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic for his Work of Germany with a certificate dated 20.08.2024. The Order of Merit is Germany's highest non-military honor and only Federal decoration.

Vaupel's discovery that Jews had been sent into slave labor in Hessisch Lichtenau began in 1983 when he was a teacher at the local high school. When news came out that the groundwater was poisoned from TNT residues, some students proposed looking into how this happened.

Vaupel guided the research and encouraged them to persevere even though they were met with a wall of silence. Vaupel was himself threatened to stop digging up the past.

They discovered that 1,000 Jewish women and girls had been sent from Auschwitz to become slave laborers in the nearby munitions factory. It had been one of the largest munitions factories in Europe where some 8,000 forced laborers worked. Much of the factory was blown up and dismantled by Americans after the war, with locals then denying it ever existed. When survivor Judith Isaacson returned to Hessich Lichtenau in the early 1980s to document her memories as a slave laborer for her memoir, she was told by residents to go home, there was no such place.

In 1986, Vaupel along with some townspeople invited Jewish survivors and other forced workers to their town for a meeting. This meeting forged lifelong friendships between survivors and townspeople. Denied a promotion because his research was considered too controversial, Vaupel temporarily left teaching to earn a doctorate in history from the University of Kassel, focusing on forced labor and compensation.

Subsequently, Vaupel began researching Jewish communities eradicated by the Nazis in several Northern Hesse towns. Vaupel included students in his research and led many memorial initiatives. He has published numerous articles and books on the subject. To this day Vaupel consistently goes beyond historical research, personally seeking out survivors and their descendants to hear their stories and invite them to Germany to commemorate their or their family members' experiences.

Vaupel's work was first covered by the publisher Vallentine Mitchell in the biography of Kati and Willi Salcer, *No Past Tense: Love and Survival in the Shadow of the Holocaust* by D.Z. Stone. Kati Salcer, who had been a slave laborer at the munitions factory, wasn't quite believed about her experience as there was no historical documentation of the factory. In her research Stone learned of Vaupel and was able to tell Mrs. Salcer that she had not imagined this, she had been there. Stone then wrote in detail of Vaupel's work for Vallentine Mitchell in Part 1 of *A Fairy Tale Unmasked: The Teacher and the Nazi Slaves*. Part 2, by Dieter Vaupel, is a memoir of survivor Blanka Pudler written by Vaupel based on extensive interviews on her experiences in Auschwitz and the munitions factory in Hessisch Lichtenau.