

NEWS

Together in spirit

Rod McLoughlin spoke to the former mayor of Bad Wurzach, Helmuth Morczinietz, after joint plans to mark the German town's liberation were scrapped

AMONG those disappointed by the cancellation of the ceremony marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Bad Wurzach, the church organist has particular cause for regret.

When Helmuth Morczinietz was mayor of the town to which Islanders were deported during the Occupation, he worked ceaselessly to build relations between his community and the people of Jersey.

Those efforts culminated in the signing of the twinning agreement with St Helier shortly after his retirement in 2002, an accord with its roots in history more than 50 years earlier – history which could hardly have been more unpromising.

Bad Wurzach, a small town in the state of Baden-Württemberg, has a population a sixth of that of St Helier and is dominated by its baroque castle, or schloss. Yet the hundreds of Islanders for whom it became an enforced home for more than two years could hardly have been less enthusiastic visitors.

Uprooted in September 1942 and sent across Europe by train for three days, they spent several weeks in the camp at Biberach before making the short journey 18 miles south to Bad Wurzach. Yet through those troubled years personal contacts were already being developed which, had it not been for the current travel restrictions, would have been celebrated again on 28 April, the anniversary of the liberation of the schloss.

'It was already my predecessor as mayor who had, from the 1970s, tried to deepen the friendship between the people of Jersey and Bad Wurzach with a twinning,' Mr Morczinietz said.

But in spite of the fact that a Jersey delegation visited the town for its 700th anniversary celebrations in 1973, it was too soon to contemplate an agreement.

Nevertheless, members of the community – like school teacher Hermann Bilgeri, who arranged student exchanges – worked to add an official dimension to the personal relationships that existed.

'I myself interpreted these efforts as a kind of mission, because I have always been convinced of the importance of a twinning in the context of a Europe growing closer together and of reconciliation between people. And I was convinced that the attempt had to come from the town of Bad Wurzach.'

'Time and time again there were visitors from Jersey who encouraged me to pursue the attempt, so the wish to deepen our relationship was bilateral,' Mr Morczinietz said.

With the support of the town council, former Constable of St Helier Bob Le Brocq led a further delegation in 1983, but in spite of some optimism at the time, the initiative was again frustrated.

'It was rather disappointing, but the reasons were politely but decidedly spelt out to me. Of course, I was able to understand and accept it as we are all too aware of how the people of Jersey had been treated by Hitler's Germany. It was quite clear to me that sincere reconciliation had to precede any twinning.'

Working with the chairman of the ex-Evacuees Association, the late Michael Ginns, and supported by Angela Francey, Mr Morczinietz worked through the 1980s and 1990s to extend the hand of friendship.



■ Former Bad Wurzach mayor Helmuth Morczinietz (inset) said it was important for the present generations to ensure that knowledge of past events was passed on to others. Picture: TONY PIKE (27866528)

He adds that his successor as mayor later presented Mr Ginns with the citizens' medal of Bad Wurzach for his efforts.

He does not mention the fact that in 2005 the then Bailiff of Jersey, Sir Philip Bailhache, presented Mr Morczinietz with the Bailiff's silver medal in recognition of his own work.

By the time that St Helier Constable Simon Crowcroft had succeeded in taking a proposition to twin St Helier with Bad Wurzach through the parish assembly process, Mr Morczinietz had retired as mayor, but for him perhaps the seminal moment took place just before he left office.

'My wife and I were invited by Sir Philip Bailhache to attend the Liberation Day celebrations. It was a great honour and we saw it as a sign that my past endeavours had not been in vain.'

'We were deeply moved when Sir Philip addressed us in German, because in doing this he made it clear in public that reconciliation by twinning was to become a reality in the near future,' he said.

Mr Morczinietz pays tribute to the work of Constable Crowcroft and of Roland Buerkle, his successor as mayor, who signed the agreement, and those individuals who have worked together on exchanges and projects since then to cement relations between the communities.

In spite of the difficulties encountered on the road to concluding the agreement, he sees it as the conclusion of a process which has its roots in the dark days of the war.

'People in Bad Wurzach had developed a good and humane relationship with the internees in the schloss and friendships developed which continued in post-war times. The twinning is something to be grateful for, as it is a sign of growing together in Europe.'

Retired since 2002, the former mayor lives in Bad Wurzach with his wife, Elisabeth. He looks forward to the development of the relationship with Jersey under the current mayor, Alexandra Scherer.

'Many of those who witnessed the events of bygone years have passed away, so it is the duty of present generations to hand down the knowledge of what has happened and to work for a prosperous future,' Mr Morczinietz said.



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