

# Werner Siepmann (1931-2021): War opponent, anti-fascist, Trotskyist

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On Friday of last week, 13 August, our comrade Werner Siepmann passed away at the age of 90. Despite his advanced age, his death was unexpected by the members of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party—SGP), for his mind was alert until the end. Only four months ago many of us celebrated his 90th birthday, online due to the coronavirus pandemic. His death is a personal and also a political loss.

Like many millions of his age group, Werner Siepmann endured terrible experiences under National Socialism (Nazism) and in the Second World War. His first 14 years of life shaped his entire life. From this, he drew the conclusion: Never again!

What made Werner one of the best of his generation was that he consciously worked through his experiences. He never came to terms with the crimes of the Nazis and searched for the causes of fascism and war. He finally found answers at the age of just over 50, when he met the Trotskyist movement.

Werner was born in Duisburg on 21 April 1931. He spent his childhood and youth with his parents and two brothers in Duisburg-Ruhrort. His father Heinrich was a postal clerk there. Ruhrort was a lively district at the time because of its harbour at the mouth of the Ruhr into the Rhine. Werner's first memories, however, were of the crimes committed by the Nazis.

At the age of seven, in 1938, he and his father experienced *Kristallnacht*, in which Jewish neighbours' shops and the synagogue were destroyed.

When the war began, Werner was eight years old. In 1940, in preparation for the approaching French campaign, his family had to take in an 18-year-old soldier from Magdeburg, whose company had stopped in Ruhrort. Werner quickly made friends with the young man, who had moved into his nursery. He was all the more pained by the news that the young soldier had fallen shortly after he was seen off by the population as he was being sent in the direction of France.

Just a little later, Werner was evacuated to the countryside for the first time. After about half a year he returned to bomb-damaged Duisburg. One of his classmates had been killed in an air raid. He learned from his parents that his cousin had been killed at the age of 18. Werner often spoke about the night-

time bombing raids, which he usually spent in great fear with his family in air raid shelters.

In 1943, shortly after the heaviest air raid to that point, on 13 May, his school was transferred to the Czech Republic (into what the Nazis called the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia).

When he left there, Werner had just turned 12. He saw his father for the last time, who died shortly afterwards. Werner heard about this during his next evacuation, which took him first to the town of Prostějov and then to the spa town of Podbrdý. There were about 2,000 children, mainly from the Ruhr area and Berlin, in the town, which is located directly on the Elbe River.

In the evacuation camps, Werner experienced first-hand the cruelties of the Nazis and observed their terrorisation of the local population.

Almost two years later, on Adolf Hitler's 56th birthday, 20 April 1945, the Nazis fled the advancing Red Army, taking with them the children. The memory of the events at Prague's main railway station on that day is one of the starkest of Werner's life. He recounted it frequently.

Shortly before the train started moving, members of the Waffen-SS removed all the school children aged 14 and over, who were to be used to defend Prague. Werner was lucky. He was admitted to the Hitler Youth that very day, but his birthday was one day later, on 21 April. He was 13 for one more day and so was allowed to stay on the train. Many of his classmates were sent to the long-lost front to serve as cannon fodder. Werner never saw most of them again. Only 17 survived.

Like many of his generation, for Werner the post-war period was dominated by worries about his own existence. Families were torn apart, homes were largely destroyed. Hunger dominated workers' lives. Werner lived "from hand to mouth" with his mother and brothers.

In 1949, the year the Federal Republic (West Germany) was founded, Werner left school. He worked for Mannesmann Demag (Deutsche Maschinenbau-Aktiengesellschaft) as a piecework lathe operator. When he said goodbye to his Demag colleagues a few years later, an old Nazi provoked him with the lie that the concentration camps had never existed. Werner gave him a "hefty slap in the face," as he reported.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, he worked for various small businesses and briefly at the steelmaker Thyssen. It was during these years that he first came to know and appreciate foreign workers from Greece, Spain, Italy, Yugoslavia and Turkey.

Werner increasingly became politically involved. The post-war upswing showed clear signs of breaking down internationally. In 1966, a recession shook the world economy. In Germany, 1963 heralded a new phase of class struggle with a metalworkers' strike in Baden-Württemberg. The strikers not only demanded higher wages, but also passed resolutions against the planned Emergency Acts. In the Ruhr area, miners mobilised at the same time against the collapse of mining.

In 1966, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) was brought into government for the first time since the late 1920s. Under conservative Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a former NSDAP (Nazi Party) member, Willy Brandt took over as foreign minister and vice-chancellor in a grand coalition. The SPD's most important task was to push through the Emergency Acts against the resistance of workers and students.

During this time, Werner, by then married and a father, gave his life a new direction. With his wife, son and daughter (a second son was to follow), he moved to Rheda-Wiedenbrück in Westphalia, where he took on the tasks of youth leader, caretaker and verger in a Protestant parish. In Bielefeld, in his late 30s, he retrained as an educator.

In Rheda-Wiedenbrück he was involved in counselling conscientious objectors. Back in Duisburg at the end of the 1970s, he continued to work in youth social work until he retired.

In 1983, in Duisburg, he encountered the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (League of Socialist Workers), the predecessor organisation of the SGP and German section of the Fourth International, and became a member. Drawing on the writings of Leon Trotsky on the rise of National Socialism and the socio-economic foundations of fascism and war, he was now able to understand his experiences politically and historically.

He was also attracted to the international perspective and the living internationalism of the Trotskyist movement; they corresponded to his experiences from his time as a lathe operator and metalworker. In 1984, he attended an event about the British miners' strike in London.

During the split within the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1985-1986, he stood firmly on the side of the orthodox Trotskyists of the ICFI and their international perspective. He tirelessly fought for this into old age—selling party newspapers outside factory gates and in working class neighbourhoods, collecting signatures to enable the party to stand in elections, and participating in numerous political campaigns.

The focus of his political work was always to pass on his experiences to the younger generation and help them come to the political conclusion to fight not the symptoms, but the cause of fascism and war, capitalism.

These themes were reflected in his article *World for the Socialist Web Site*. In 1999, he wrote about UNICEF studies on the situation of children. In 2004, he reported on the crisis in old people's homes, and in 2008 on the attempt of the Deutsche Bahn railway company to block the travelling exhibition "Train of Remembrance." The exhibition commemorated the deportation of around one million children and young people during the Nazi era and shed light on the role of the Reichsbahn at the time.

Also in 2008, he wrote about the fate of workers at the Vulkan shipyard following its closure. And in 2014, Werner reviewed the book *Enough is enough! elderly people also have rights*, detailing the neglect of the elderly in the care system.

Particularly worth reading is his "Warning appeal to all young people", in which he shares his experiences in the face of an advertising campaign by the German armed forces at schools and universities.

Werner continued to speak to school classes about his experiences under the Nazis and in the Second World War right up to the end. He would read from his memoirs, which he had contributed to the memory workshop of the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities in Essen, and which were published by Juventa-Verlag in a documentary titled *Working together on family history*.

For all his seriousness and emphasis on the dangers of fascism and war, Werner was an open, warm person and—not untypical of the Ruhr area—straightforward. He wore his heart on his sleeve. Music was one of his great passions. He loved to dance and sang in choirs all his life, most recently together with children and young people in a multi-generational choir. He attended rock concerts with his sons, but also loved classical music—including Beethoven, Handel and Puccini.

Werner liked to travel. In the 1970s he hitchhiked to Barcelona, with his younger son he flew to the US, a few years ago to Paris and finally once again to Podbrady in the Czech Republic, where some of the most formative moments in his life had taken place.

We mourn with his family, his children and his grandchildren, and we will preserve Werner Siepmann's memory by politically arming the youth—with the help of his experiences—so that it is finally said: Never again!

*The WSWS will publish a video about Werner Siepmann's life in the coming days.*



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