

Last Witness Leaves a Message for the Future

Gäufelden: Mordechai Ciechanover survived Auschwitz and the Hailfingen/Tailfingen concentration camp as a young man. He dedicated his life to remembering the horrors of the Holocaust well into old age. He has now passed away in Israel at over 100 years old.



The last survivor of the Tailfingen concentration camp, Mordechai Ciechanover, has passed away at an advanced age in Israel. (Photo: Benjamin Merkt)

After his liberation on April 15, 1945, Mordechai Ciechanover vowed never to set foot on German soil again. However, nearly 20 years ago, he made his first visit to share his experiences of the Holocaust, particularly what he endured in the Upper Gäu region shortly before the end of the war. With his approachable and kind nature, he deeply moved many people. More visits followed, including visits to his home in Israel, leading to close connections. The Hailfingen/Tailfingen concentration camp memorial in its present form owes much to him. Now, the last survivor of the former subcamp has passed away in Israel at the age of 100.

Until shortly before his death, he maintained regular contact with members of the memorial. Just last Sunday, eight days before his passing, he had a brief phone conversation with Johannes Kuhn, who had documented his story on film years ago. "I have no strength, forgive me," he said in a weak voice, ending the call with, "Greet all my friends!" His farewell was not just for his closest friends—this becomes evident in the message recorded by Benjamin Merkt, chairman of the memorial association, at his home in Israel last year. Back then, the witness sent greetings to everyone he knew and even to those he did not know, but who knew him.

Since the 1990s, Mordechai Ciechanover made it his life's mission to remind the world of the crimes of the Holocaust. Over the years and decades, he spoke to thousands, sharing his story. He wanted to fulfill this task until his last breath, a mission that perhaps kept

him alive for so long. Even at an advanced age, he endured hardships for this cause. During the two-week filming of the documentary *The Roofer of Birkenau*, he traveled over 3,000 km with the film crew, including Harald Roth.

"For me, Mordechai was a witness, a Holocaust survivor, but with every encounter, he became more than that—he became a living presence, a unique person radiating warmth," says Roth.

In 2014, *The Roofer of Birkenau* premiered in Herrenberg—of course, in the presence of the witness himself and his wife Dvora, whom he had married in Israel in 1950. She passed away in 2018.

Mordechai Ciechanover was born in 1924 in Maków Mazowiecki, north of Warsaw. Raised in the Jewish quarter, his native language was Yiddish—his accent was always noticeable. His happy childhood was abruptly ended by the German invasion in 1939, when a ghetto was established in his hometown, separating the Christian and Jewish populations with a fence. Forced labor and humiliations followed, leading to deportation to the Mława transit camp, from which his grandparents were sent to the Treblinka extermination camp.

Mordechai Ciechanover and his family were transported to Auschwitz, where his mother and both sisters were immediately murdered in the gas chambers. Alongside his father, the 18-year-old endured terrible conditions in the Buna-Monowitz subcamp, where thousands of prisoners were forced to work on IG Farben construction sites. When his father was sent to the infirmary with frostbitten hands, their paths diverged. The son eventually managed to improve his situation by joining the roofing unit in the Birkenau death camp.

After nearly two years in Auschwitz, he was deported via Stutthof to Tailfingen. He recalled the catastrophic hygiene conditions there ("We had nothing to eat, but the lice ate us!") as well as the rotten apples sometimes found along the roadside that helped ease hunger. After enduring horrific conditions in the Wüstelager Dautmergen, his final station was Bergen-Belsen. Starving and reduced to just 35 kg, the 21-year-old miraculously survived.

At the DP camp in Feldafing, he was reunited with his father after the war. Together, with the help of the Jewish Brigade, they fled to Israel disguised as British soldiers.

When Benjamin Merkt asked Ciechanover last year how he managed to reach the biblical age of 100, he replied: "I was sure I wouldn't reach 100, nor 90, nor even 80, because I have been through so much in my life, so much."

A Milestone on the Path to the Memorial

Johannes Kuhn recalls that Ciechanover's greatest fear was developing dementia. Harald Roth emphasizes: "Mordechai always thanked us, but in reality, we owe him an infinite

debt of gratitude. His testimony in the Tailfingen community hall in 2005 was a milestone—it was the breakthrough in our remembrance work. His words played a crucial role in ensuring that the subcamp would not be forgotten and that the victims would regain their names.”

The trio of initiators of the Hailfingen/Tailfingen memorial—Harald Roth, Volker Mall, and Birgit Kipfer—were often referred to by Ciechanover, with a smile, as the ‘Troika.’ Former state parliament member Birgit Kipfer fondly remembers the times when he stayed at her home in Gärtringen during his visits. “His warmth and kindness, his wit and humor, his openness and his songs—we will never forget them,” she says.

Mordechai Ciechanover is survived by two daughters, six grandchildren, and numerous great-grandchildren. Some of them visited in 2023 to plant an apple tree in his honor on the former Hailfingen airstrip.

Benjamin Merkt, Johannes Kuhn
Hailfingen/Tailfingen Concentration Camp Memorial

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