



## Historic City tour: “Saarbrücken in Nazi Germany“

### Overview

Despite the damage the Second World War caused to the city centre of Saarbrücken during the 1940s, some places still remind inhabitants and visitors of the time during the reign of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) and its innumerable victims. The tour through the city will stop at **memorial places** and locations that were important for the functioning of Hitler's rule over Germany in general and the Saarland in particular. Its main goal is to show social structures and peoples' behaviour, circumstances and ideologies surrounding the **10 year rule of the Nazi party in the Saarland**.

Focussing on circumstances which characterised the Saarland before it was re-united with the *German Reich*, the tour explores the development of the region during and after the Nazi regime. The main focus will lie on **nationalist-socialist oppression strategies, propaganda, social policy and the persecuted and murdered victims of the dictatorship**. The tour will visit the following places: the old synagogue, the grave of Willi Graf, the police barracks, the Schlossplatz, the Gestapo-Cell in the basement of the Historic Museum and the memorial site „Goldene Bremm“. The guide will also explain the aftermath of World War 2 and the process of coming to terms with and remembering the horrible past.

### History of the Saarland (1793-1959)

Its **location on the border between France and Germany** has given the Saarland a unique history. After the **French Revolution**, the former independence of the states in the region of the Saarland was terminated in 1792 and made **part of the French Republic**. After the **Congress of Vienna** in 1815, the region was divided again. Most of it became part of the Prussian Rhine Province.

On July 31, 1870, the French Emperor Napoleon III ordered an invasion across the Saar River to seize Saarbrücken. The first shots of the **Franco-Prussian War 1870/71** were fired on the **Heights of Spichern** (*„Spicherer Höhen“*), south of Saarbrücken, where a battle with heavy losses for both sides took place. France could conquer the city of Spichern on the 2nd of August and build border fortifications on the high ground beyond the town. Four days later, on August 6th, German troops finally managed to occupy the fortification. During the war, the **German Empire** was founded and the Saar region became part of it. Although the battle was not important for the outcome of the war as a whole, it was fought with great propagandistic effort by the German military forces.

Today, two cemeteries are reminiscent of the 9000 victims that were injured or lost their lives in the battle. The cemetery „*Ehrental*“ was a shared burial place for the soldiers killed during the battle and is part of the **German-French Garden in Saarbrücken** since it was founded in 1950. The garden was designed by German and French gardeners and is now a popular site and meeting place for both tourist and inhabitants from the Lorraine and the Saarland.

After the defeat of the German Empire in the 1st **World War**, the **Treaty of Versailles** gave the Saar area jointly to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and France. In 1920, Britain and France established for the League of Nations mandate of the Saar a nominally independent occupation government in an area separated from the previous Prussian Rhine Province (main part) enlarged by two Bavarian districts (Homburg and St. Ingbert), ceded from the Palatinate. This was sanctioned by a 15 year League of Nations mandate. The **Independence Referendum** („*Saarabstimmung*“) that was held in 1935 resulted in favour of a return to Germany. Although the emigrated intelligentsia formed a **protest movement** called „*Status.Quo*“ to convince the population of voting for staying under the occupation government until Hitler was defeated, 90% of the voters chose for the Saarland to become a part of Nazi Germany.

In 1945, US forces left the occupied Saar area, which was heavily destroyed during air raids, and French troops established their occupational administration. In February 1946, France disentangled the Saar area from the allied zones of occupation and established the **separate Saar Protectorate** with Saarbrücken as its capital city. The government, installed by the French, consisted predominantly of former NS-opponents, i.e. emigrated and former persecuted victims of the Hitler regime. This caused the saarlandian de-Nazification to be more effective than it was in the rest of the country. The protectorate had its own government, citizenship („*Sarrois*“) and even a National Olympic Committee.



In the **Paris Agreements** of 23 October 1954, France offered to establish an independent "Saarland", under the auspices of the Western European Union. Minister-President of the Saarland Johannes Hoffmann supported this plan. He planned for the region to become an independent location for various European institutions. But then, a referendum held on 23 October 1955 rejected this plan by 67.7% to 32.3% , despite the public support of West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and the French Premier Pierre Mendès-France for the plan. The rejection of the plan by the Sarrois was interpreted as a decision to join the Federal Republic of Germany, which the Saarland did in 1957. In addition, the economic union with West Germany was to be completed by 1960, with the exact date of the replacement of the Saar and French franc by the D-Mark being kept a secret called "Day X" (*Tag X*).

### Memorial Sites in Saarbrücken

- **Old Synagogue:** The synagogue in the Kaiserstraße was built between 1880 and 1890 and was destroyed in 1938, during the Pogromnacht on November 9th and 10th. Other than an unobtrusive memorial plate, hung there on November 9th 2000, the city of Saarbrücken has yet to deliver an adequate memorial site.

- **Willi Graf (1918-1943):** Born to strict Catholic parents in Saarbrücken, Willi Graf was a pupil at the Ludwigsgymnasium before he became a medical student in Bonn in 1938. He became a member of the „Grauer Orden“, a group opposed to the Nazi regime. He and the other members were detained and charged because the group was illegal. During the war, he became a paramedic and a member of the „Weiße Rose“ (a non-violent, intellectual resistance group, its most prominent members were Hans and Sophie Scholl) in 1942. In 1943, he and his sister were detained and charged with high treason, giving aid and comfort to the enemy and undermining of military morale, and Graf was sentenced to death. After his execution by guillotine and the burial in Munich, Graf's corpse was transferred to Saarbrücken in 1946 and buried on the old cemetery in St. Johann. In 2003, on the 60th anniversary of his death, the resistance fighter was posthumously declared an honorary citizen of Saarbrücken.

„Every individual is responsible. But we are obligated to confront the doubt and head for a distinct direction.“ (Willi Graf in a letter to his sister, June 1942)

- **Saarbrücker Schlossplatz:** from 1935 to 1945 the headquarters of the Gestapo („Geheime Staatspolizei“) were located in front of the castle; at this site, art-students created the „Invisible Memorial“ in the 90s: it is a symbol for the remembering of the Holocaust, an appeal to stop repressing the past. The artists engraved names of Jewish graves into the underside of the bricks in front of the castle. In the beginning, this was kept secret but then supported by the city and done to 2146 bricks, the number of the Jewish cemeteries that were in Germany until 1933.

- **Historical Museum (Gestapo-Cell):** A former cell of the Gestapo can be seen in the basement of the museum. The walls of the holding cell show messages from the past, left by people that were imprisoned and tortured there. After being found, this place was made the centre of the exhibition „Ten instead of ten thousand years – National Socialism in the Saar-region“ from which today's Saarland museum emerged.

- **Memorial „Goldene Bremm“:** from 1940 to 1945, near the French border, between Saarbrücken, Spichern and Stiring-Wendel, was the Gestapo prison „Goldene Bremm“, a torture camp (Straflager). It was used as a work, torture and transit camp (i.e. to the concentration camps) for prisoners of war. Approximately 20.000 prisoners were killed after they had to endure sleep deprivation and other torture. The „Tribunal Général du Gouvernement Militaire de la Zone d'Occupation Française“ sentenced the German operators to maximum punishment because of their war crimes.

Parisian architect André Sive designed a memorial site that was implemented by the French government in 1947. It changed so much over the course of the years that after a short time it was not recognisable as a memorial site anymore, rather looking like an ordinary, anonymous building site and ignored by the public. In 1998 the „Initiative Neue Bremm“ was founded, which built a new memorial with the help of art students and graduates from the Saarland. Gertrud Riethmüller designed a steel plate in 1999 called „will nicht narben“, which is to mean „doesn't/don't want to scar“. It was designed, among other things, to help bring the past back into **collective perception** and stop the people from forgetting the NS-terror.

- **Saarländisches Staatstheater:** In 1937, as a reward for voting to be part of the Reich in 1935, the Nazi regime gave the theatre to Saarbrücken, although they let the city pay the majority of the costs. The grand entrance faces the direction to Paris because the theatre was a symbol against and ideological barrier from France.