

Memorial stele in honour of Mildred Harnack-Fish officially inaugurated

Special ceremony at the Campus for Cultural Studies and Humanities during the 45th anniversary year of the Hesse and Wisconsin partnership

Joint commemoration across continents: Two “sister” steles at Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU) and in Madison / Wisconsin, US, commemorate the American-born resistance fighter and JLU alumna Mildred Harnack-Fish. The first obelisk was inaugurated in July 2019 in Madison’s Marshall Park during a visit from Hessen’s Minister President Volker Bouffier; at the end of September 2020, its sister stele was erected in front of the Philosophikum building on Alten Steinbacher Weg in Giessen. The dedication ceremony attended by Hessen’s Minister for Digital Strategy and Development and Deputy Chair and current Director of the Hessen-Wisconsin Friendship Association Prof. Kristina Sinemus took place on 15 September 2021 in what is the 45th anniversary year of the partnership between the federal states of Hesse and Wisconsin.

The memorial’s location references Mildred Harnack-Fish’s doctoral degree in literature at JLU and her work as a lecturer. A number of guests from academia and politics, the university and the city of Giessen gathered at the Campus for Cultural Studies and Humanities to remember the resistance fighter in a festive setting. Numerous partners unable to travel to Giessen as a result of the pandemic, especially those in Wisconsin, were able to follow the ceremony virtually thanks to an online broadcast.

State Minister Kristina Sinemus commented: “Mildred Harnack-Fish stood up for her beliefs in defiance of the dangers of the Nazi regime. She was a passionate and extraordinarily courageous fighter of democracy who fought for freedom and campaigned against Nazi tyranny to her last breath. Mildred Harnack-Fish is also a symbolic link between the state of Wisconsin and the state of Hesse. We are here at a university, a place where ideas are openly exchanged on a daily basis. Freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democracy, and defending our beliefs is more important than ever before. As Germans, we have a historical responsibility because there must never be an end to remembering.”

JLU President Prof. Dr Joybrato Mukherjee considers it to be a profound obligation and a social responsibility to remember the crimes committed by the Nazis. “Above all, practicing a culture of remembrance means keeping alive the memory of those who courageously resisted Nazi tyranny.” “The memorial stele sends out a signal that is visible from afar so that the unfaltering determination of our alumna Mildred Harnack-Fish will remain with us forever.” JLU Vice-President Prof. Dr Verena Dolle stressed that the memorial site also builds another bridge to JLU’s partner university in Wisconsin: “The joint commemoration reflects the close ties that exist with numerous partners in Wisconsin, and it adds the equally important dimension of cultural and social responsibility to our international research and teaching collaborations.”

The idea of honouring Mildred Harnack-Fish with a memorial stele at JLU came from American Professor Nick Schweitzer of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School, who spent time teaching at JLU's Faculty of Law in 2018 as part of the universities' intensive, long-standing cooperation. During his guest lectureship, he contacted the Dean's office and put forward his proposal of commemorating Mildred Harnack-Fish.

The sister stele is based on artist John Durbrow's Mildred Harnack-Fish memorial, which was erected in Madison/Wisconsin in 2018. The German federal state of Hessen has maintained links to Wisconsin for over four decades, hence the decision to inaugurate the memorial in Madison during a visit to the US by Hessen's Minister President Volker Bouffier in July 2019. The event was also attended by an academic delegation, including JLU President Prof. Dr Joybrato Mukherjee and Head of JLU's International Office, Julia Volz.

In agreement with the State Chancellery of Hessen, the city of Madison, artist John Durbrow and initiator Professor Nick Schweitzer, the Executive Board decided to erect a sister stele at JLU. The stele was produced by stonemason Alexander Horst from Hungen, near Giessen. A base plate bears the inscription: "In memory of Mildred Harnack-Fish (1902 – 1943), student of the University Wisconsin-Madison and graduate of Giessen University. A resistance activist who fought against the Nazi regime of injustice, she was executed by the Nazis in February 1943."

Costing around € 9,000 to produce and install, the stele was realised with the financial support of Dr Schweitzer, the State Chancellery of Hesse and Volksbank Mittelhessen. In addition to this memorial, the Mildred-Harnack-Fish House, a university canteen and student residences also honour the resistance fighter and JLU alumna.

Mildred Harnack-Fish

Mildred Harnack-Fish was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on 16 September 1902. She studied English language and literature in the US and completed a doctoral degree in Giessen in 1941. She had previously lectured in German literature at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she met lawyer and Rockefeller scholar Arvid Harnack, whom she married and followed to Germany in 1929. Both became active in the German resistance movement against Nazi rule, which ultimately cost them their lives. Mildred Harnack-Fish was initially sentenced to six years in prison, but on the direct order of Adolf Hitler was re-trialled and sentenced to death. She was executed by the Nazis in Plötzensee prison on 16 February 1943.

Further information

The recording of the event is available at: https://youtu.be/vjRNz9Q_8wE

Photo:



Dedication ceremony for the memorial stele honouring Mildred Harnack-Fish at JLU (from left to right): Julia Volz, Head of JLU's International Office, Prof. Dr Kristina Sinemus, Hesse's Minister for Digital Strategy and Development and Deputy Chair and current Director of the Hesse-Wisconsin Friendship Association, Professor Nick Schweitzer of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School, Prof. Dr Verena Dolle, JLU Vice-President, Natalija Korbmacher, Chief Representative of Volksbank Mittelhessen.

Photo: JLU / Katrina Friese

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Founded in 1607, **Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU)** is a research university with a rich tradition and a student population of around 28,000. Alongside a broad range of study programmes – from the traditional natural sciences, law and economics, social and educational sciences to language and cultural studies – it also offers a portfolio of life science subjects, including human and veterinary medicine, agricultural, environmental and nutritional sciences and food chemistry, which is unique not just in Hesse. Among the prominent figures who researched and taught at JLU are several Nobel laureates, such as Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen (Nobel Prize for Physics, 1901) and Wangari Maathai (Nobel Peace Prize, 2004). Since 2006, research at JLU has been continuously funded by the German federal and Länder governments' Excellence Initiative and Excellence Strategy.