

How can you say goodbye forever?

In conversation with Holocaust survivor Pieter Kohnstam

On the Thursday before the carnival holidays, all year 11 students gathered in various classrooms of the NGN to take advantage of a unique opportunity: Holocaust survivor Pieter Kohnstam from Florida was connected to the students via Zoom. The fact that not only year 11 students wanted to participate in the conversation, but that also students from other grades voluntarily joined on Thursday afternoon at 3 p.m., underlines the enormous interest in the direct exchange with a man who had to experience the horrors of National Socialist rule first-hand.



The students, the deputy headmaster, StD Felix Rosenberger, and the history teachers of the NGN followed the explanations of StD Dr. Joachim Mathieu, who was connected from Eichstätt. Dr. Mathieu spoke about the life of the Kohnstam

family, which is closely linked to the cities of Nuremberg and Fürth: On March 17, 1932, Ruth and Hans Kohnstam, Pieter's parents, married in Nuremberg's main synagogue on Hans-Sachs-Platz, which was then destroyed in August 1938, i.e. even before the November pogroms, at the behest of NSDAP Gauleiter Julius Schleicher. In addition, the speaker pointed out that the Kohnstam family was the owner of an internationally operating toy company, which was located at Nürnberger Straße 56-58 in Fürth. The company building was sold to *Quelle* (a very successful mail-order business in the mid-/late 20th century in Germany) founder Gustav Schickedanz after the Kohnstams had had to emigrate.

Pieter Kohnstam, who was born in Amsterdam in 1936 after his parents had fled there, then took the floor. Visibly moved by the connection with his parents' old hometown, he talked about his life at Merwedeplein in Amsterdam, where his family lived in the immediate vicinity of the Frank family. In addition to childhood memories as a playmate of Anne Frank, he also candidly described his experiences after the occupation of the Netherlands by National Socialist Germany. Particularly impressive were his memories of the constant fear of possible deportation. Mr. Kohnstam also reported on



the incredible flight of his family from Amsterdam via France to Spain and finally to Argentina.

At the end of the event, the students had the opportunity to ask Mr. Kohnstam questions. Mr. Kohnstam willingly answered very personal questions, such as the question about his feelings when he had to leave his entire life behind in Amsterdam or about his relationship to Germany and the German language.

No films, video recordings, lessons or books can achieve what everyone involved was able to learn from and with Mr. Kohnstam that afternoon. The conversation with a contemporary witness whose life was directly influenced and upset by the crimes of the Holocaust makes it clear once again that forgetting the past is not an option and that responsibility arises from history, namely the responsibility to shape the present in such a way that no one has to suffer from disregard, exclusion, discrimination and persecution.

Many thanks to all those who contributed to the success of the discussion and lecture afternoon, especially to StD Dr. Joachim Mathieu, who took over the organization from Eichstätt.

Dear Pieter Kohnstam, thank you so much for sharing your incredible story with us. It was a great privilege and honor for us. Thank you for helping us remember this period of history.

Some statements of students summing up their reactions:

The eyewitness interview went great! It is an important experience, because soon such conversations will no longer be possible. Experiencing history face to face is something very special. As Mr. Kohnstam said: "You fight IGNORANCE with KNOWLEDGE!" (Lisa Maspimby, Q11)

I found his story enlightening, before I had never been aware of how much one had to leave behind and give up to escape, often family members whose chances of survival remained unknown even many years later. The sentence "How can you say goodbye forever?" particularly touched me. (Anonymous, Q11)

I found the lecture very interesting. Hearing how a Holocaust survivor fared during Hitler's time is important and reminds us that history must not repeat itself. (Anonymous, Q11)