<u>Speech by Jeremy Steinberger, great-great-grandson of Helmut Steinberger from Wehrheim</u> on the occasion of the vigil on November 9, 2025

When I was a kid, the only time I really heard anything close to German was when my great-grandmother—my Omama —would call me on my birthday.

She would sing Happy Birthday in English, but with such a deep Austrian-German accent that to my siblings and me, it felt like hearing the German national anthem.

We would laugh so much we hardly had time to consider why she sounded so different from our parents.

And as I grew up, Germany seemed about as far from my identity as any other European country. My German grandfather and I bonded over American things—like the Green Bay Packers and the New York Yankees.

But that started to change when my father came to Wehrheim in 2012.

He and my mom had only planned to visit Frankfurt for a work meeting, but once he realized how close he was to the town his grandfather Helmut was born in, he made a spontaneous decision to come here.

The train, as I'm learning is quite normal here, wasn't running that day—so he had to find another way.

When he arrived, he found himself in the center of town with no direction and no idea what to do next.

He spotted some locals near the Rathaus and asked if they knew where the Jewish cemetery was. They said yes, but when they brought him there, he saw crosses on every stone and knew it wasn't

the right place.

So he kept wandering until he found himself where we stood earlier for the Jewish burial service. For the first time, he was surrounded by his ancestors.

I wasn't there, but I knew how powerful it was for him by the way he told the story over and over that summer, every time we met new family or friends for dinner.

I was young then and still not sure how to make sense of it beyond being another American with roots in Europe.

I didn't yet know how much deeper it went—for him, and for us, the Steinbergers.

I didn't know that my great-grandfather Helmut had been imprisoned in a concentration camp.

I didn't know that when he rang my Omamas doorbell after being released, she didn't recognize him.

I didn't know he was never the same man again.

I didn't understand the pain of isolation my Omama carried, living far from her home for the rest of her life.

I hadn't yet seen the photos of our German ancestors smiling with joy here in Wehrheim—not in Wisconsin or California, where we've made our homes since.

Suddenly, her accent didn't feel so funny anymore.

Then, in 2016, Donald Trump became president of the United States

My father, fearing that our country could descend into fascism, decided it was time to explore getting another passport.

He remembered his visit to Wehrheim and wrote to the history society to see if they could help locate family documents proving our claim to German citizenship.

That's when he met Susanne (Kolass) — who has since become like family to me.

In many ways, she's the reason I'm standing here today.

Susanne and the team at the History Club—Michaela (Reese), Stefan (Velte), and others — had been relentlessly researching and archiving the Jewish history of Wehrheim.

We soon discovered they knew more about our family than we did.

Surely enough to prove we were entitled to citizenship, and in 2021, we became German citizens.

In 2023, I visited Wehrheim for the first time with my parents.

I still remember how sweet the strawberries were as we sat around a table while Susanne and Michaela showed us photos of our ancestors — images we had never seen before.

They took us to the home where Helmut and his parents and siblings lived, the store the Hirsch / Steinberger family ran, and the synagogue.

It was incredible—and overwhelming.

I knew I had to come back.

Last year, I decided to move to Germany to understand this history more deeply, to explore it through storytelling.

As I watched the places I called home burn in the Los Angeles fires and saw wars breaking out around the world, I felt an urgent need to look backward in order to act forward — to make meaning from the past in service of the present.

I remember standing with my father in the Jewish cemetery here for the first time.

He said to me, "If we forget, it could happen again."

It's something you hear often growing up Jewish, but it hit differently as we stood among our ancestors in the town they were forced to flee.

And this is what brings me to this monument.

I am deeply grateful to be here—to stand where my ancestors once stood, and to see how much care has gone into remembering them.

It means more to me than I can express.

Returning to Germany has reconnected me not just with my roots, but with the conditions that ruptured them.

And when I think back to my Omamas accent—the sound that once made me laugh—I understand it differently now.

It carries not only the memory of loss, but the echo of resilience, the bridge between that past and the responsibility I feel standing here today.

And as I carry that intergenerational pain of displacement, I face the same question that plagues many Jewish people:

What do we do with the pain of our ancestors?

We can let it turn into fear, into nationalism, into love for power disguised as safety.

Or we can transmute it—into solidarity, into compassion, into responsibility.

In Jewish tradition, honoring the dead is only the beginning.

Tikkun olam - to heal the world - is the task that follows mourning.

It's not enough to remember and expect salvation or redemption; we have a duty to repair the world as it sits in disarray today.

I find this symbol as important as ever in these times.

But if "never again" is to mean anything, it cannot be selective. It means refusing to weaponize our past suffering.

The story of Jewish survival must never be used to justify the suffering of others.

Yet today, the memory of our collective trauma is too often used to excuse new forms of domination — especially the ongoing oppression of Palestinians.

If "never again" is to hold any meaning, it must extend universally — to those facing genocide and mass violence today, from Palestine to Sudan and beyond.

So as we stand here and remember — and as I stand here in deep gratitude for the work this town has done — what I hope to project onto this monument is not only a symbol of Wehrheim's past, but a living reminder:

that the dignity of life is not a lesson of history, but a demand of the present.

Thank you.