

Artist defies death threats to honour 48,000 Nazi victims

Germany

David Charter Berlin

An art project that started with 31 brass plaques being fixed illegally to Berlin's pavements — identifying victims of the Nazis who lived in nearby houses — is expected to reach 50,000 memorials across Europe this year.

Gunter Demnig began installing *Stolpersteine* (stumbling blocks) as a symbolic work of social sculpture in 1996 outside the last known residence of Jews who were deported and killed.

The idea has since spread to 973 German cities, towns and villages as well as 18 countries where communities or relatives of victims have applied for the 10cm square plaques.

The project is controversial and some places, including Munich, Germany's third-largest city, refuse to allow any on their streets.

Mr Demnig, 66, has received death threats from neo-Nazis who occasionally vandalise the handmade plaques, which are secured to a stone block. Any that are ripped up are replaced within days.

"There are about 48,000 now; I am sure we will reach 50,000 this year," said the artist, who is based in Cologne where some early plaques were installed. "When I got the idea, I thought it was a good concept — it will always be symbolic because it will never be possible to lay *Stolpersteine* for the millions of victims of the Nazis. I thought maybe



In Hamburg, Demnig's plaques are polished by the daughters of SS men

it will reach a hundred, then maybe a thousand, but now it is clear it will go on for a long time. I will set up a foundation to continue the work."

Mr Demnig, who has won several humanitarian awards, tries to install as many as possible himself and last year visited 235 locations across Europe.

Each plaque carries the inscription "Here lived..." followed by a name, date of birth, date of deportation and a

description of the person's fate including the date they died, if it is known. Relatives have travelled from as far as Tasmania to see plaques installed.

"So far we have reached 18 countries in Europe, maybe next year we will add Greece and I will also go to Jersey to install six stones," Mr Demnig said.

"It is not only Jewish people but Jehovah's Witnesses, Roma and Sinti, homosexuals, dissidents, forced labourers, deserters — they were all victims of the Nazis. In some places there were more handicapped people killed than Jews, for example in Backnang near Stuttgart, 27 handicapped people were murdered and seven Jews."

A few of the plaques remember well-known victims, such as those in Pastorplatz in Aachen to the teenage diarist Anne Frank and her family, who lived there for a few months.

In Hamburg, three women have devoted themselves to polishing *Stolpersteine* to atone for the deeds of their SS fathers.

Some Jewish representatives object to the concept, however. Charlotte Knobloch, a former president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, said it was intolerable that victims would forever be "trampled underfoot".

That point of view has been used in Munich to oppose the memorials, but Mr Demnig said: "It is a crazy argument, not least because the Nazis did not stop at stepping on the Jews, they murdered them."