

Speech by Peter Tschentscher, Mayor of Hamburg, Neuengamme commemoration ceremony, 3 May 2021

On 3 May 1945, Hamburg was surrendered without a fight to British troops in order to prevent the further destruction of the city, which already lay largely in ruins. But for thousands of prisoners from the Neuengamme concentration camp, this was not the end of the suffering and horror. To conceal the traces of the Nazis' crimes, no one was to encounter the emaciated prisoners. Instead of being released, they were sent on death marches or taken to ships in the Bay of Lübeck. More than 6,000 people died when British aircraft bombed the ships, which were thought to hold German troops.

Other evidence of the Nazis' reign of terror was also supposed to be eliminated. Huts were torn down in the Neuengamme concentration camp, walls were freshly whitewashed. This is how it came to be that while Neuengamme – with more than 80 satellite camps and over 100,000 prisoners, more than 40,000 of whom died – was one of the major concentration camps in Nazi Germany ... the countless images of horror that circulated around the world were sent from other camps.

After the end of the war, a prison was established in the grounds of the former Neuengamme concentration camp. The remembrance of Nazi crimes played no role for a long time. Former prisoners and the Amicale Internationale de Neuengamme fought for decades to create a worthy site of remembrance here.

Today Hamburg is facing up to its historical responsibility. The former Neuengamme concentration camp is a place of commemoration, learning and encounters. Each year on 3 May, the citizens and Senate come together with former prisoners and their relatives to remember the liberation of the concentration camps and the victims of war and persecution during the Nazi period. This commemoration is painful but important, as a way of honouring their memory and as an admonishment for the future. Humanity, democracy and freedom cannot be protected by the constitution, authorities or courts alone. All of us must defend them every day by taking a clear stance and consistent action against antisemitism, discrimination and populism. The Neuengamme Memorial is making an important contribution to strengthening democracy and human rights in Hamburg, in Germany and beyond.

Dear survivors,
dear relatives,

unfortunately it is not possible to meet with you in person again this year. But the importance of remembering 3 May 1945 and the message of this commemoration remain unchanged: We will keep alive the memory of the victims of National Socialism – as an honour and as a reminder for the generations to come.