

Speech Martine Letterie, President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme, commemoration ceremony Neuengamme, 3 May 2021

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

I would like to have been with you today at this event at the Neuengamme Memorial to commemorate the victims of the Neuengamme concentration camp and its satellite camps. When former prisoners and their relatives travel to these events from all of the countries from which the prisoners of Neuengamme came, not only do we feel connected to one another, our presence also illustrates the tremendous effects that the criminal Nazi regime had on European society.

Since it is not possible to travel at the moment, I decided to speak to you from a place that is linked to the dark history of the Neuengamme concentration camp. I stand here before the monument known as 'The Stone Man'. This statue, which depicts a prisoner facing the firing squad, commemorates the victims who died in the Amersfoort concentration camp in the Netherlands. This monument stands at the end of the 350-metre-long shooting range across from the former Amersfoort camp. This shooting range was dug out entirely by prisoners working under barbaric conditions. It was one of many execution sites in the area. Immediately after the war, multiple mass graves were uncovered in the shooting range.

The first prisoners arrived at the Amersfoort police transit camp on 18 August 1941. My grandfather Martinus Letterie was one of them, his camp number was 6. He was one of the 600 supposed or actual communists arrested in June 1941 during the so-called CPN operation. They were initially imprisoned in the Schoorl camp, but in August the first group was deported here to Amersfoort. They landed in a nightmare. Their treatment was much worse than that of all the prisoners who came after them.

This was because they were used for demonstration purposes. SS men who had come over specially from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp showed their new colleagues how they were supposed to deal with concentration camp prisoners, and they used this first group of prisoners to do so. In November 1941, the first transport left Amersfoort for the Neuengamme concentration camp, and the second followed on 13 December 1941. My grandfather Martinus Letterie was on it. He died five weeks after arriving in Neuengamme, at the age of 33.

There were places like the Amersfoort concentration camp all over Europe. Ninety per-cent of the prisoners in the Neuengamme concentration camp were not from Germany. In Belgium,

prisoners were deported from Fort Breendonk to Neuengamme; in France, both French and Spanish prisoners were sent from Compiègne and Belfort; Danish prisoners came from Horserød and Frøslev, and Polish prisoners from Pruszków. The German prisoners came from other concentration camps in Germany or from places such as Fuhlsbüttel, the Gestapo prison in Hamburg. There were also prisoners from Austria, Czechoslovakia, Luxembourg, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, Italy, Norway, Hungary, the Baltic states and Greece. Around half of the prisoners died, the others remained scarred for life.

In 1958, a group of survivors from different countries founded the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme, an organisation that united the associations of survivors and relatives from various nations.

The founders vowed to bear witness to the deportations and the crimes against humanity in the concentration camps. They wanted to do their part to contribute to a united and peaceful Europe in which human rights are guaranteed.

Bearing witness is what we continue to do today, wherever we are. We will continue to tell the stories of our fathers, mothers, uncles, grandfathers, grandmothers and granduncles and to remember the victims of the Nazi regime. In their name, we want to stand up for democracy and human rights in Europe and beyond!