

May 3, 2022

## Programme of the Commemorative Ceremony

to Mark the 77<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the End of the War and Liberation of Concentration Camps

Song "Lagerlied" Neuer Chor Hamburg

Opening words Dr Detlef Garbe, Director of the Foundation of Hamburg Memorials and Learning Centres

Welcome Dr Dorothee Stapelfeldt, Senator of the Hamburg Ministry of Urban Development and Housing

Song "Mir lebn eibig"

Speech Helga Melmed, survivor of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp

Contribution Ukrainian, Russian and Belarusian voices against the war

Song "Les chants des partisans"

Speech Dr Jean-Michel Clère, President of the Amicale de Neuengamme et de ses Kommandos

Contribution "#WaswillstDutun?" (#WhatDoYouWantToDo?) in dialogue with Aleksandar Bančić

Song "Die Moorsoldaten"

Closing words Dr Oliver von Wrochem, Director of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial

This will be followed by the wreath-laying ceremony at the International Monument.

## Prof Dr Detlef Garbe

Dear Senator Dorothee Stapelfeldt,

Dear Helga Melmed, who has travelled all the way from Florida to be with us today,

My dear friend Dr Jean-Michel Clère, President of the Amicale de Neuengamme et de ses Kommandos,

Dear guests from near and far!

As Director of the Foundation of Hamburg Memorials and Learning Centres Commemorating the Victims of Nazi Crimes, I warmly welcome you to this commemoration ceremony, which was organised together with the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme, to mark the 77<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the prisoners of the Neuengamme concentration camp. I am delighted that delegations from the Amicale Internationale organisations of Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain, and family members of former Neuengamme prisoners from other countries are here with us today. We are especially thankful to have Helga Melmed, who will speak to us after Senator Stapelfeldt, as well as other survivors of Neuengamme and its satellite camps: Natan Grossmann from Munich, and Dita Kraus from Netanya, who have made the difficult trip here despite their advanced age to join us and participate in eyewitness conversations and film screenings.

The Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Minister of State Claudia Roth, unfortunately cannot be here today due to the closed meeting of the federal cabinet in Merseburg which was convened at short notice. She sends her regrets and hopes to be able to visit the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial very soon.

Earlier this morning, during the ceremony organised with the state government of Schleswig-Holstein at the Cap Arcona Memorial in Neustadt-Pelzerhaken, we commemorated the around 7,000 prisoners of Neuengamme who burned, drowned, or were shot by the SS while trying to reach safety when the ships *Cap Arcona* and *Thielbek* were bombed 77 years ago in the Baltic Sea. Such a tragedy! Just as British tanks were rolling into Hamburg to liberate the city from the National Socialists, the last remaining prisoners of the Neuengamme main camp died. On the

order of Karl Kaufmann, Gauleiter of Hamburg and Reich Commissioner for Shipping, the prisoners had been hastily taken from the city, which was ready to surrender, and crammed into three ships in the Bay of Lübeck which had been designated as floating camps. British fighter-bombers mistook them for troop transports, and the pilots bombed the prisoners they were fighting to liberate. When British soldiers carefully inspected the camp in Neuengamme on 4 May, they found a large complex with 170 buildings, mostly prisoners' barracks and workshops, but it was empty. In the days prior, it had been largely cleaned up by a work detail which had been left behind to remove all traces of the crimes. This is why there are no photographs of Neuengamme like those from Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald and other main camps, and why it is not possible to say that the Neuengamme concentration camp was liberated as such.

It took a very long time before the crimes committed here entered the public consciousness, but the grounds which were used as a prison from 1948 have now been dedicated entirely to documentation as a place of admonition and learning since 2005.

This gathering today is remarkable in multiple respects. Over the past two years, the coronavirus pandemic made it impossible for us to come together with the Amicale organisations and other guests. The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary was observed here with only a silent remembrance and wreath-laying by the President of the Hamburg Parliament, the First Mayor, and the Culture Senator. We had to rely on the internet, with many very touching video messages from survivors around the world, to keep us in contact on this meaningful day. We had hoped to be able to make up for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year, but everything changed at the last minute again. For the 76<sup>th</sup> anniversary, too, the programme had been planned and many people had booked their travel before we made the difficult decision to cancel on account of the pandemic. Thanks to the broadcast by NDR, many people were able to join us from afar, both through the live stream and the recording, which was accessed 7,200 times. Our multilingual and multimedia report 'Objects Carry Memories' was also very well received. Survivors and their relatives from around the world shared their personal stories for the anniversary of the liberation. But it was a gloomy sight when Hamburg's Mayor Peter Tschentscher, Schleswig-Holstein's Education Minister Karin Prien, Maria Bering representing the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, and Memorial Director Oliver von Wrochem spoke here symbolically before 1,000 empty chairs.

Today we also remember the survivors who have passed away since last year. Some of them were involved with our work for a long time. Those we lost were: from Australia, Elza Just; from Belgium, Albert Rapaille; from Denmark, Karl Salling Møller and Henrik Mogens Nielsen; from France, Robert Bernadie, André Biaux, Teresa Stiland (née Matla Rozenberg), Jean-Pierre Tortiller, Albert and Gilbert Vuillet-à-Ciles; from the UK, Celia Jane Lee (née Cilly-Jutta Horwitz); from the USA, Melitta Stein; from Hungary, Kornelia Weisz; and from Poland, Helena Wendołowska. Once again, some of those who died were lost to Covid-19. We so longed to see them again. Our thoughts are with them and their families.

We could actually count ourselves lucky that, although the pandemic is not yet over, we have been able to hold this international gathering again thanks to high vaccination rates, the many people who have recovered from Covid, and the generally milder Omicron variant. But for the past ten weeks, a barbaric new war has been raging in Europe.

The conviction that conclusions for the present and future can be drawn from the experiences of the past has certainly been seriously challenged over these weeks. Russian President Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine is driven by imperialist interests, and it blatantly flouts international law, jeopardises world peace, and has led to immense destruction and thousands of dead.

Eighty years ago, Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, along with Poland, bore the brunt of the war of aggression and annihilation waged by the German Wehrmacht. Soviet prisoners made up the largest group in the Neuengamme concentration camp. The SS treated prisoners from Russia and Ukraine, from Belarus and other countries of the former Soviet Union indiscriminately and especially harshly.

History is being instrumentalised in the current war. The justification for the war is tied to disputes over the interpretation of the past and the actual or alleged claims arising from this. But this does not make everything equivalent, because history certainly makes a distinction between victims and perpetrators, justice and injustice.

Precisely because our core work consists of grappling with the crimes of National Socialist Germany and standing in solidarity with the victims, we believe it would be unacceptable for us

and our partners in the Amicale Internationale to come together with official representatives of the Russian Federation and Belarus for the purposes of commemoration this year, all while Russia wages a war of aggression against Ukraine with support from Belarus. For this reason, we informed the consular authorities of Russia and Belarus that they are not welcome at this year's commemorative events. At the same time, however, we will naturally honour the concentration camp victims from these countries today and lay wreaths for them. And we will not forget that the Red Army, too, was also very much thank for liberating Germany and Europe from the National Socialists.

Despite this war, like the many before it and others taking place right now in different parts of the world, the legacy of the survivors of the concentration camps remains relevant, as embodied by their slogan 'Never again fascism, never again war!' Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine must come to an end as soon as possible! It is no less important to remember the abyss of the National Socialist dictatorship, the mass murders of the SS and the Holocaust just because other horrific deeds and war crimes are happening elsewhere. Quite the opposite! The International Monument where we will lay wreaths later on bears the dedication: 'Your suffering, your struggle and your death shall not have been in vain!' It remains the duty of later generations to honour this vow, in educational work and in politics.

In closing, I would like to warmly thank everyone contributing here today: Aleksandar Bančić for his speech on '#WhatDoYouWantToDo?', Antanina Chumakova who will present Ukrainian, Russian and Belarusian voices against the war, and the members of the Neuer Chor conducted by Kay Philipp Fuhrmann, who is providing the musical accompaniment to our commemoration ceremony today.

Many thanks also go to those who made the earlier events as well as the programme for today and the coming days possible, including – to name but a few – Oliver von Wrochem, Alexandre Froidevaux and Juliane Podlaha representing his team, and Heidburg Behling representing the many volunteers.

Please allow me to make one last remark, some words of personal thanks. I was the director of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial for 30 years and have had the privilege of supporting its transformation into a foundation over the past three years. I will be retiring soon,

and this is a good opportunity to thank everyone for the support and encouragement I have received over nearly 33 years. I am especially grateful to have made the acquaintance of hundreds of survivors, many of whom subsequently became friends. My encounters with these individuals, who viewed their liberation as a chance to start anew and used it as such, even when the trauma of their time in the camps caught up with them again in old age – these friendships were a tremendous gift that outshone everything else. Nearly all of them have passed on now, but they have my eternal thanks.

Thank you for your attention.

## Dr Dorothee Stapelfeldt

Mrs Helga Melmed and survivors of the Neuengamme concentration camp,

Professor Dr. Detlef Garbe,

Dr. Oliver von Wrochem,

Dr. Britta Bopf,

Dr. Jean-Michel Clère,

ladies and gentlemen,

77 years ago today, on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1945, British troops made their way to the Neuengamme concentration camp. They found little to nothing there. At least nothing comparable to the horrors found in Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and other concentration camps that had been liberated during the first months of 1945.

170 buildings stood on this site but beyond that, the liberators had very few clues that would have revealed the function of the camp.

Since 21<sup>st</sup> April, a group of 700 prisoners had been busy covering the traces of the nefarious deed: all the barracks were cleaned of straw and rubbish while the walls were freshly whitewashed or even painted over.

The gallows and torture devices disappeared and the Commandant's files and any Gestapo records were destroyed. The inmates' valuables were taken away, as were cigarettes and leftover Red Cross care packages.

The place should no longer be able to speak or to reveal anything.

However, this large-scale clean-up operation failed to achieve its goal of permanently neutralizing the history of this 57-hectare site.

From eyewitness accounts and a variety of sources, it was possible to reconstruct the contours of the suffering and misery that the Nazi henchmen inflicted on their victims in the Neuengamme Concentration Camp. Suffering and misery and torture inflicted on around 100,000 prisoners, at least 50,000 of whom died. However, at first hardly anyone was interested.

For far too long, it was almost exclusively the survivors who saw it as their task to remember what happened in Neuengamme.

The post-war use of the site by the British occupying forces also facilitated the prevailing attitude of wanting to quickly forget.

Part of the concentration camp was used as an internment camp for Nazi functionaries, SS leaders and incriminated state officials. A transit camp for repatriated German families was built next door.

In 1948, the site was handed back to the city of Hamburg, which of all things built a men's prison here using the old barracks.

When Federal President Theodor Heuss said in November 1952 at the inauguration of a memorial stone in the former Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, and I quote: "... Germans must never forget what was done by people of their own nationality during these shameful years" – this was a moral demand that did not find many listening ears.

Repress and rebuild: These were the silent watchwords of post-war German society. In the East as well as in the West.

And so it was that the first memorial plaque in Neuengamme was only installed in 1953 by former inmates of the concentration camp.

It was not until twelve years later that there was also an official version. Many of the existing buildings were rededicated and gradually demolished. Farmland was designated, flats were built.

With the construction of a second prison (the Neuengamme Juvenile Detention Centre) in 1965 and finally with its commissioning in January 1970, the grounds of the former Neuengamme Concentration Camp were no longer accessible. A cemetery with locked fences that no longer gave anyone access to mourn or remember.

It took the persistence of the survivors and the will to remember of those born later to tear down these fences again.

Only in 1984 the remaining concentration camp buildings were made listed buildings. Years later both prisons were relocated and in 2005 the foundations of the roll call square were uncovered.

Since then, the will has grown to help make what happened more vivid, piece by piece. The suffering and the ordeals, the humiliation and torture and the mass murder, are to be presented for all future generations.

Ladies and Gentlemen, even these brief remarks on the history of the camp after the war make it clear that the commemoration of Nazi atrocities is something which is very present.

A process of awareness that began agonisingly slowly - and which was faced with resistance - but which today occupies a firm place in our cultural and intellectual life.

In the meantime, thousands of dates and stories in the memorial help train our memory and our historical consciousness.

In addition to the programme for former victims of persecution in Hamburg, the memorial's diverse offerings for young people of all backgrounds make me particularly confident that the inhumanity of a totalitarian regime will never again take possession of people in our country.

Today, the concentration camp memorial is not only a place of remembrance, but also a place of learning. It includes a study centre with rooms for groups, a media workshop and an open archive that can be used by schoolchildren and adult groups.

The Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial has thus become a place of encounter, exchange, reflection and enquiry, also in relation to the outlined history of the concentration camp after 1945.

As a central inner-city location, the Hannoversche Bahnhof will offer opportunities for events in the middle of the city. The future documentation centre will be of great importance for the debate on the politics of remembrance. After conceptual differences - which have since been resolved – the completion of the documentation centre is planned for 2026.

Let me mention three projects by way of example that are hosted by the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial.

First of all, there is the three-year multimedia project "Waswillstdutun?" (What do you want to do?), which started in January 2020. Here, participants will investigate the question of how their family lived from 1933 to 1945, whether in Europe, Asia, Africa or elsewhere.

The project promotes the important dialogue between people with diverse family histories, also via the image-based platform Instagram. This summer there will be an online exhibition, and from autumn the educational materials will be presented in a training session and will then be available to download free of charge.

The frequent question of young people, "What does this have to do with us?" is addressed as a second example by the multi-day project on racism and antisemitism. The focus is on the ideology of National Socialism as the basis of persecution, on dealing with antisemitism and racism in our time, with the exclusion of people and with right-wing terror– leading to the question: "What can we do today?"

In addition to the project on colonial and racist thought and conduct in National Socialism, which ended in 2019 and whose results and materials are available both online and in a brochure as well as in a small exhibition, the strong activity of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial in the Twitter, Instagram and TikTok networks should also be highlighted, including current references, for example, to present-day racism against people with dark skin or to "queer" life stories and associated experiences of intolerance.

Ladies and Gentlemen, for me personally, remembering the horrors of Nazi rule, engaging in dialogue with survivors and descendants of the victims, and at the same time strengthening the fight against anti-human, anti-democratic aspirations is always an important priority.

The rise of right-wing populist parties and movements in Europe and the frightening developments in neighbouring countries once celebrated for their love of freedom, such as Poland and Hungary, must be a reminder to us just as we must stand by Ukraine in its struggle to maintain its autonomy and democracy and against Russia's war of aggression, which is contrary to international law.

The Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial serves as a powerful reminder of what happens when we let our guard down against threats to democracy and human rights.

Especially today in the 77<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the Neuengamme concentration camp we recognise that this must never happen and the memorial and the Foundation of Hamburg Memorials and Learning Centres support us in this. Thank you.

## Helga Melmed

### I AM A SURVIVOR

My name is Helga Melmed. I was born in Berlin, Germany and I am a Jew. I enjoyed living a normal life with my parents, as a spoiled only child. Then when I started school at age 5, my teacher beat my hands with a ruler and the students called me names. I did not understand why they would call me "a dirty Jew" when I bathed and was clean. My parents took me out of public school and I went to private school. This school was burnt to the ground in 1938 during Kristallnacht. Life as a Jew became increasingly harder over the next few years until 1941. That is when the nazi soldiers slammed in our front door and ripped us out of our home. It took them only 20 minutes to destroy my lifelong home.

We were brought to the Bahnhof track #17 and deported on a cattle car with a thousand other people to "a better place!" I wondered what place could be better than my home. As the cattle car left the depot no one could have told me what the years ahead would be, I would not have believed them.

I spent the next 6 years, of my teenage life in concentration camps; one of these camps was Neuengamme/Poppenbüttel. I WAS 12 years old and about to become a teenager. These should have been the most wonderful years of my life. Instead, I worked mending uniforms until my fingers bled. I lost both my parents. My father was target practice, entertainment for the Nazi soldiers. My mother, so filled with fear and grief got very sick and died on my birthday. Without my parents I was completely alone, always scared and always hungry.

I was sent from the ghetto in Poland to Auschwitz, where I believed I would die in the gas showers. Somehow spared of death, and sent to Neuengamme/Poppenbüttel. I then was forced to do hard labor cleaning the streets of Hamburg from the rubble bombing created.

When liberation finally came to the camps, I was so ill with typhus and typhoid fever I did not realize just what was happening. At that point I was a young woman and I weighed less than 20 kilos!

How could this happen? Why did it happen to me? A child still, I certainly could not have done anything to provoke or be deserving of the many years of torture and slavery I endured.

The simple truth is "HATE"! Hate breeds prejudice and often violence. Prejudice stems from differences, no matter how large or small; and ignorance. Ignorance from lack of education! I am a Jew. But, there are many many different people and beliefs in the world. Ignorance is not bliss, ignorance is ignorance! Shall we hate everyone? Maybe we could try love instead of hate! We need to learn how to respect, not destroy, all the differences around the world. The cure, to the core, is education. We must educate and be educated. Young people, I say directly to you, "you have the power in your hands to make this world a better place. How about if we educate...Instead of hate and try to imagine love!"

Thank you

## Ukrainian, Russian and Belarusian voices against the war

Voices from Ukraine,

from the Russian and Belarusian diaspora.

How does one speak, how do the descendants of Neuengamme survivors speak, how do we speak about a war, about this current war?

All words seem wrong, especially now; difficult, unfitting somehow, out of place. Many of us are speechless, perhaps all of us.

In the following, we want to give a voice to people who are closely connected to Neuengamme. They have fled from the Russian war of aggression. They are still in Ukraine, in territories now occupied. Some of them wanted to be here today, but the war makes it impossible.

We will read the words of people from the Belarusian and Russian diaspora who have opposed and continue to oppose the political systems there.

Not least, we read as people.

*"On the 22nd of Feb, after being fed up with the anxiety caused by constant reports of the possibility of war (...) for months, I flew to Ukraine, to Lviv.*

*It was so peaceful (...). People on the streets, kids on the playground.*

*I remember calling my friends in Germany (...) saying that they shouldn't believe the Western Media – there will be no war (...).*

*And then at 6am, (...) [February] 24th we received a call from my godmother: "Please, don't worry, but the war has started".*

*4 words. (...)*

*The.*

*War.*

*Has.*

*Started.*

*(...) From then on and for the next 48 hours (right up until I arrived Poland) I will not be sleeping."*

Solomia Romanenko, 23 years old, a current volunteer at Neuengamme Memorial

*„До війни 24 лютого ми жили в тихому містечку в Запоріжжі (...)"*

*Before the war began on Feb 24, my family lived in a quiet and peaceful town in Zaporizhia region, Huliaipole, located 50 km from the border with Donetsk region. In peacetime, miners came to us to do shopping because we had a cheap market for agricultural and meat products. But when Russia came to Donbas in 2014, it sowed hatred and discord between us.*

*A month ago, Russian tanks appeared on the outskirts of our city to 'protect' us from something we didn't even know we needed protection from. The first "greeting" their tanks sent us was a shell to our Orthodox church, the second - to that same market that fed the miners, and the third shell hit the house.*

*(...) My family stayed in the basement for two weeks. (...) [No] electricity, water, gas or cell connection (...), (...) lack of food, no medicine (...)*

*My family left behind the whole farm, cows, pigs, poultry, we took only documents and a small dog and evacuated through the green corridor to Zaporizhia, and then to Hamburg.*

*Hamburg is the city where my uncle Ivan Titov, who was only 20 years old, during Second World War died at the hands of the Nazis in the Neuengamme concentration camp. My second uncle, Mykola Titov, died in Wernigerode at the age of 18. Both were deported as forced laborers to Germany and never returned home.*

*This is the fate of my family, that Nazis tried to destroy during Second World War and today the Russian Nazi Putin is trying to do it again. (...)"*

Mykola Titov, aged 68

*"That which I could never have imagined is part of everyday life in Belarus – the despotism, (...) the repressions...It is painful to read reports about it and then go back to normal life [in Germany] as if nothing had happened.*

*The attack on Ukraine first made it clear to me that we, [the people in and from Belarus,] are being trampled into the ground (...) so that a new loyal population can settle in our territory. I have learned so much about the Holocaust, but only now do I understand that the worst thing [was and] is that others just looked on..."*

Antanina Chumakova, born in 1988 in Minsk, volunteer at the Neuengamme Memorial in 2018/19, now part of the Belarusian diaspora in Hamburg

Email from Olga, living in Southern Ukraine, now occupied by Russian Military, April 11, 2022, 5.37 pm:

*"I have absolutely no certainty where I'll be or could end up by May 3rd. (...) Will we actually be alive by that time? It may sound strange and scary, but it's our true reality (...). I also understand that my statement may have a very strong political context, which I'm not ready to change in order to compromise as a victim of this modern war in Ukraine.*

*In the realities of today, Russia is not a great winner of the Second World War - a huge part of the army was not even Russian soldiers, but a lot of different nationalities, as well as Ukrainians and Belarus people).*

*Russia today is an aggressor who groundlessly kills hundreds of civilians in Ukraine every day – women and children. Cruelly and blindness, without any rationality or explanation, covering all its actions under the heavy curtain of propaganda.*

*My grandfather [a survivor of Neuengamme Concentration Camp] is buried in Lugansk, today an occupied territory. Russia occupied it (...) in 2014, starting a war in Eastern Ukraine.*

*And today Russia is using the occupation of Donbas as an argument and excuse for unleashing this new, absolutely senseless and merciless war against whole Ukraine. -*

*I have rethought and reflected quite a lot since 2014, when me and my family lost our home for the first time. - History should teach that it's impossible to calm down an aggressor, it's impossible to come to an agreement with a dictator and a totalitarian*

*regime, - Unfortunately, after 77 years since 1945, it still should be reminded again and again.*

*In an informational world, a state is capable of educating a whole country of haters, where even ordinary citizens can wish the deaths of ordinary people in Ukraine without feeling responsibility. How blind must the world be not to draw parallels with what has happened in the past and what is happening right now?"*

Evelina, historian from Moscow

*"Today, on the anniversary of the liberation of the Neuengamme concentration camp, it is impossible to remain silent about Russia's attack on Ukraine. It is impossible to say that the lessons of Second World War's terrible crimes have been learned. Crimes against humanity are committed again, right now, exactly at this moment when these words are spoken.*

*Why are imperialist wars and killings of civilians still possible in the 21st century? One of the reasons is the whitewashing of the Soviet past, the whitewashing of the figure of Stalin, the Soviet repressions in Russia. The majority of Russian students have not been to museums on the sites of the Gulag camps and never will. Pride of the victory in the Second World War is raised in young people, the readiness to die for the state and to kill others for the state is raised in them.*

*Citizens of Ukraine die for the unlearned lessons of my country. Women, children, old people are dying - the Russian army has no mercy to anyone. We must find everyone who killed and raped.*

*And here I would like to appeal to the heads of European states: stop financing the aggressor country, stop buying Russian gas. Otherwise the war will continue.*

*I would very much like to address the call "stop the war" to Russian citizens, but I have no hope that the destitute people listening to propaganda 24 hours a day will be able to wake up.*

*I can only appeal to those Russians who were able to emigrate. About 300 thousand people left Russia. I would like to ask my compatriot emigrants to stop mourning the*

*cancelling of Russian culture and help Ukrainians instead. Volunteer at railway and bus stations, offer free lessons to Ukrainian children, spread information about the crimes of the Russian army.*

*There is no point in asking for forgiveness from Ukrainians, such crimes cannot be forgiven."*

Further from Olga's Email

*"What would my grandfather [a survivor of Neuengamme Concentration Camp] say to all that if he would be alive?*

*My grandfather was a patriot of his country – Ukraine. He raised me up in the paradigm of belonging to the people of Ukraine, its culture, language and traditions. I don't need another motherland; I do not need liberation from my own identity. Would he support the violent actions of Russia today, Would he be ready and happy to change his passport and citizenship from Ukrainian to Russian one?*

*Of course not!*

*We are, Ukrainians, who remain here today, in our country, in cities where there is a war going day by day, where there are shelling and bombing, where Russia is trying to establish an occupation regime, killing, torture, raping, looting – will we ever be able to forgive and forget what we are going through today?*

*It's too early to ask for understanding, neutrality or compromises, it's too impossible for those who have already lost families, parents, children, relatives, friends. In Mariupol, Bucha, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Mykolaiv, Kramatorsk, Kyiv, Sumy.*

*We all are living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the very center of Europe, but history does not teach the world and does not warn against repeating the same mistakes.*

*I would like these words of mine to be read, understood and heard, even knowing that not everyone will like them. It is truth and truth always taste bitter and unpleasant.*

*Olga"*

## Dr Jean-Michel Clère

Madam Senator,

Professor Detlef Garbe,

Mr Oliver von Wrochem, Director of the Neuengamme Memorial,

Madam President of the Amicale Internationale, Martine Letterie,

Dear Survivors,

Dear Members of the Amicale Internationale,

Dear Members of the Amicales de déportés,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Friends,

The COVID pandemic put a stop to the large-scale gathering of deportees and their families to mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp in 2020; it did so again the following year. But this year, at last, we are able to meet once again.

And so I have the honour to speak on behalf of the deportees and their families. My grandfather, Robert CLÈRE, a former French commanding officer in the army, had fought in the First World War. In May 1944, aged 57, he was deported to the main camp at Neuengamme for acts of resistance. Registered under No. 31059, he died of typhus at the Sandbostel camp on 18 May 1945, oblivious of the fact that one of his sons, my uncle Maurice CLÈRE, had been killed on 6 May 1945 in a final battle waged by the German army. They were among the victims of this unprecedented, global, destructive and catastrophic war.

The French Amicale de Neuengamme has called its newsletter bulletin *N'Oublions Jamais*, ('Let us never forget'). It is a name well suited to the objectives that must be ours: namely never to forget. Never to forget what this camp was; never to forget what the other camps were, and the atrocities committed during the war. To study the mechanisms that led to this war; and never to forget them so they may never again be repeated.

The Neuengamme Camp and its satellite camps received more than 106,000 deportees, including more than 34,000 Soviets, 17,000 Poles, 11,500 French, 9,200 Germans, 6,950 Dutch, 4,800 Belgians, 2,600 Hungarians, 2,200 Norwegians, 1,500 Yugoslavs, 1,400 Czechoslovaks, 1,300 Greeks, 750 Spaniards, and many others from different countries I am not listing here, but are no less important. More than half of those deported to Neuengamme did not survive their internment, leaving their families grieving and distraught. As for the survivors, they were scarred forever, traumatised in both body and mind. Those still alive today will testify to this.

We need to remember the many torments to which the deportees were systematically exposed. Need we remind ourselves of one such torment, namely the roll calls at the main camp? Henri JOANNON, identification No. 36770, gave this testimony of an evening roll call during the winter of 44-45, which, we should remember, was a particularly cold winter. I quote: *'With temperatures at minus twenty and even lower, we were forced to stand more or less still. And without any possibility of cover. I recall one of the toughest roll calls I ever had to endure. In December, the men were being herded together and brutally beaten with clubs and truncheons as the ranks were not lining up properly. There was a strong northerly wind blowing, so everyone waited for their comrades to line up first on the side the wind was blowing from, to shelter as much as possible behind them. All I had in the way of clothes was an alpaca jacket and a small short-sleeved shirt ... The roll call lasted two hours. Next to me, men already well advanced in years had collapsed, seized with congestion. They were left to lie there in the snow. This was not uncommon ... Those who fell were not attended to until after the roll call. That particular evening, one man was shivering so much from the cold that he was unable to stand still, to attention. He too fell to the ground, but it was under the blows from the guards.'*

Each of the deportees, each of the families of deportees has a unique story. They make up, in essence, more than 106,000 stories. Unfortunately, many will remain unknown as those deported disappeared without trace, and without family ties.

It is in remembrance of all these people, those who died and those who survived life in a concentration camp, that we gather here, 77 years after the camp was shut down. They are the victims of Nazi barbarity; they are the unwilling protagonists in the ignominious showpiece

staged by despotic regimes that violate the more balanced social mode espoused by democratic systems.

We must thank the City of Hamburg for transforming this former camp into a place of remembrance for those deported, a place of historical study and an educational centre that allows visitors to learn about the awful history of the camp and its satellites, all of which also form part of Hamburg's history. We must thank the team of the Neuengamme Memorial (*Gedenkstätte*), which continues to spare no effort in collecting testimonies, written documents and exhibits so they can be showcased more effectively, and so that the memory of this past legacy can be disseminated and kept alive. This memorial, by virtue of its historical and educational remit, is a tremendous focal point of citizenry.

It is vital that the largest number of people possible know that concentration camp life existed here in Neuengamme and that it was not limited to the vast cemetery that was Auschwitz. We need to remember that concentration camps and their satellite camps existed throughout Germany and in her neighbouring countries. We need to remember that the *Waffen-SS* and the *Einsatzgruppen* terrorised eastern Europe in particular. This represents a horrific history and story, unique in its conceptualisation of terror and its systematic deployment on a vast scale. It is our history and our story.

Over the past few years – and even today – our democracies have faced various threats, threats to their survival.

- The threat of Islamist terrorism, which has spread death indiscriminately in Europe and throughout the world for many years, on the pretext of imposing a dogmatic, unequal and sectarian religious vision.
- The threat of nationalist groups with fascist overtones who advocate an inward-looking attitude to the world and the rejection of others, and who, at every election, raise fears that they might assume power.
- Only recently, on 6 January 2021, a great democratic nation, the United States, teetered on the brink for a day during the pro-Trump march on the Capitol in Washington DC, leaving us all astounded and aghast.

- On February 24 of this year, Russia, which at one time had had 34,000 of her children detained at Neuengamme, launched an attack on Ukraine, its democratically governed neighbour. Every day our national news broadcasts images of death and terror. War rages less than 2,500 km from our doorsteps, and we are left to wonder what we should do.

I wish to make a plea for the preservation of democracy in our European nations, from the Atlantic to the Urals. Any such preservation requires unity and courage. I can but remain cautious in the light of evolving military operations. In the days that followed the start of the invasion ordered by the Russian President, our democracies stood united; it is imperative that this unity does not fade under the weight of our national egos. It is our duty to put an end to this war through courage and intelligence. The French writer and philosopher Albert Camus once said: 'When a war breaks out, people say: "It's too stupid; it can't last long."' And while there can be no doubt that a war is certainly too stupid, it does not prevent it from lasting.

The European nations at the very forefront of the threats from their Russian neighbour must not give in to blackmail nor to the fear of confrontation; they must take part in drawing up a solution that ensures peace in the short and long term so that nations can live within a framework of good understanding, without bitterness or rancour, which all too often are the driving forces that propel subsequent wars. Should that entail the evolution of the European Union in its political and military objectives, in its organisational structure, and in the number of nations that are its constituent members?

Perhaps that is the great message left behind by the deportees who wanted us 'Never to forget'. 'Never to forget' so as not to reproduce the concentration camps; 'Never to forget' so that war does not rage once again.

## Natascha Höhn for the #WaswillstDutun? Project

Family history has a lasting effect. It shapes our thoughts and actions – even when we are not always aware of it. The #WaswillstDutun? ('What do you want to do?') project aims to enable young people to research their family history between 1933 and 1945, and to encourage them to reflect on how this history has influenced their identity and formulate their hopes for our communal life as a society. The project is being funded by the 'Jugend erinnert' ('Youth remembers') programme of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media.

For this project, interviews were conducted with fourteen descendants of people who were persecuted on political, racist or antisemitic grounds, who were considered 'unworthy of life' by the National Socialists due to psychological afflictions, who were deported to the German Reich as forced labourers, or who were arrested as a result of so-called 'retaliatory measures'. Our interviewees live in various European countries and are members of the second, third and fourth generations. Some know a lot about the persecution of their relatives, some very little. Some learned about it as children, others only decades later. They are all united by one big question: What traces did the persecution – and, in many cases, murder – of my sisters, father, mother, grandparents, great-grandfather or great-granduncle leave on my own life?

In a moment I will hand the microphone to Aleksandar Bančić from Pula in Croatia. Aleksandar's grandfather, Josip Bančić, joined the partisans in Istria, was arrested, and was deported first to Dachau and a short time later to Neuengamme. He died on 10 December 1944 in the Spaldingstraße satellite camp. The story of Josip Bančić is a story of persecution, imprisonment and murder. But it is also the story of a warm-hearted and caring father, and a determined and courageous man who was prepared to stand up for his ideals and fight. And it is the story of a man who left behind traces, and who lives on in the memories, ideals and actions of those who knew and loved him. Including Aleksandar, who never had the chance to meet him.

Dear Aleksandar, I am so delighted that you accepted our invitation and will now speak for the first time in front a large audience about your history and that of your grandfather.

## Aleksandar Bančić

Good afternoon everybody,

When I received the invitation to speak at today's ceremony, I did not think twice about accepting it. Although I did not know what I should talk about, something told me that this is where I need to be. Having thought about it afterwards, I realized that this place and this moment represent a closure for me.

I am a drama teacher and storyteller by profession. Telling stories is what I do. In my work, I often come across the so-called hero's journey, the common template for most stories we know. A hero sets off on a journey or an adventure in pursuit of treasure or a solution to a problem. It is a journey which puts the hero in great danger only to change him and make him a better person in the end. We can all certainly recognize the metaphor for human life in this, for growing up and finding your true self.

Like all of you, I too have set off on such a journey. The journey of getting to know myself and answering questions such as "Who am I?" and "What is the meaning of my life?" And I would be very happy if I had answers to these questions today, but you know how it is, the more you ask, the more questions arise.

As in every true adventure, there have been challenges on my journey. One of the major ones was the absence of my paternal grandfather throughout my life. There was a name – Josip Bančić. There was a piece of information – perished in a concentration camp. And that was all. So many unanswered questions. In order to continue my journey, I had to find the answers to these questions. I had to find Josip Bančić.

The search brought me here, to Hamburg, where his remains lie. More importantly, it opened the door to new stories, stories about a man who selflessly helped others, a decent and hardworking blacksmith who, in times of great danger, refused to quit and continued fighting for the prosperity of his family, his local community and his people. It is a story of a fight for anti-fascist values and for freedom. The freedom to speak one's own language and the freedom to express one's identity. It is a story about a young man's sacrifice that must not remain untold.

Josip met his death here, far away from home, but a part of him has continued to live on in his loved ones.

I have often wondered how much I have inherited from him. Although I never met him, could he have shaped what I have become? The values I cultivate and live by? Has Josip's life, his decisions, his struggles and his sacrifice influenced the things I have done in my life, the work I do, the beliefs I fight for?

I like to believe they have. I like to believe that I am the person I am today precisely because of my grandfather's sad fate. Josip Bančić's earthly remains might lie buried in Hamburg but his spirit, his ideas and his stories are still above ground, standing right in front of you and they keep reminding us that we must never ever take the freedom we live in for granted.

The time we live in shows us that we must never let our guard down. We, who have gathered here today, who carry in ourselves our ancestors, the victims of a violent and inhumane regime, must become storytellers and tell their stories as loudly as we can. These stories must be a warning to new generations that evil can return easily, but also that every era must have its hero.

## **Dr. Oliver von Wrochem**

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hereby declare the commemoration ceremony at the historic brick factory closed.

We will now walk together to the International Monument for a solemn commemoration.