



Amicale
Internationale
KZ Neuengamme



**Stadt Neustadt
in Holstein**

May 3, 2023, 10:30 a.m.

Commemorative Ceremony to Mark the 78th Anniversary of the Air Raid on the Prison Ships on May 3, 1945

Location: Cap Arcona Memorial, Neustadt/Pelzerhaken, Stutthofweg

Wreath laying ceremony at the Cap Arcona Memorial

Opening speech: Dr. Martine Letterie
President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme

Welcome speech: Dr. Sabine Sütterlin-Waack
Schleswig-Holstein State Minister of the Interior, Municipal Affairs, Housing
and Sports

Welcome speech: Mirko Spieckermann
Mayor of Neustadt in Holstein

Video message: Manfred Goldberg
Survivor of the Stutthof concentration camp

Speech: Kristof Van Mierop
General Secretary of the AIN and the Belgian Vriendenkring Neuengamme and
the grandson of Roger Vyvey, a survivor of the "Athen"

Reading: Students of the Küstengymnasium high school in Neustadt in
Holstein and the Working Group Neuengamme
Polish prisoner Kazimierz Wajsen

Kaddish: Jewish Community Lübeck

Musical accompaniment: Jacob-Lienau-Gemeinschaftsschule, Küstengymnasium
Neustadt in Holstein

The commemorative ceremony is organized by the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme and Neustadt in Holstein and supported by the Working Group Neuengamme, the Brunswiker Foundation, the Schleswig-Holstein Memorials Community Foundation and the Foundation of Hamburg Memorials and Learning Centers Commemorating the Victims of Nazi Crimes.



Martine Letterie
President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme
May 3, 2023
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

Survivors of the Neuengamme concentration camp and relatives,
Ms. Minister,
Mr. Mayor,
representatives of Neustadt and Schleswig-Holstein,
ladies and gentlemen,

My name is Martine Letterie and I am the president of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme. For many years now the Amicale has worked with the town of Neustadt to organize commemorative ceremonies in Neustadt on May 3. The Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme was founded by former Neuengamme prisoners in 1958. Their objective was to make sure that what happened in this concentration camp and its satellite camps is never forgotten. To this day, the national associations of former Neuengamme prisoners and their relatives from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain come together in the AIN.

I am happy to welcome so many of you here today. May 3 is an important date which should forever be etched in our memory due to the dreadful events that took place on this day in 1945.

In the weeks leading up to this day, the Neuengamme concentration camp and many of its satellite camps were evacuated. The Nazis were thus hoping to remove all traces of their crimes. Some 10,000 prisoners ended up in the Lübeck harbor where they were forced to board several ships. Two of them, the Cap Arcona and the Thielbek, lay at anchor just off Neustadt on May 3.

On this day at 3 p.m., English Typhoons attacked the ships under the assumption they were carrying German troops trying to flee. However, there were 7,000 prisoners aboard the Cap Arcona and between 2,500 and 3,000 aboard the Thielbek. The Cap Arcona caught fire, the Thielbek sank almost immediately. On both ships all hell broke loose. The prisoners tried to save their lives but only few succeeded. Most of them drowned or died in the flames, the English planes shot at the drowning while the SS men and the Hitler Youth shot at the ones who reached the shore. Seven thousand people died a terrible death.

It is important to remember these atrocities and the crimes the Nazis committed. Not only do we honor the victims this way, but we remind ourselves how important it is to protect democracy and the state of law. Today more than ever we realize how vulnerable they are.

That is why we are very pleased that Minister Sabine Sütterlin-Waack took the trouble to come to Neustadt to speak to us, that Mayor Spiekermann will give a welcome speech, that Manfred Goldberg, a survivor of the Stutthof concentration camp, has recorded a video message for us and the General Secretary of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme Kristof Van Mierop came from Belgium to tell us about his grandfather Roger Vyvey.

It gives us great hope to see so many young people from Neustadt present here today. The students of the Jacob-Lienau-Gemeinschaftsschule will musically accompany the event and the students of the Küstengymnasium have prepared a reading about the Polish survivor of the air raid Kasimierz Wajsen.

I would now like to invite Ms. Sabine Sütterlin-Waack to say a few words.

Sabine Sütterlin-Waack
Schleswig-Holstein State Minister of Interior
May 3, 2023
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

Ms. Letterie,
Mr. Spieckermann,
Mr. Van Mierop,
Mr. Neurath-Wilson,
Mr. Gadon,
Ms. Wajsen,

In 2 years and 5 days, Europe will be commemorating the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II.

But also this year, 78 years after the end of World War II, we remember the end of a dreadful war which was started by Nazi Germany and cost millions of people their lives.

Dear survivors and relatives of the Holocaust survivors!

I cannot possibly imagine what you are feeling these days.

We must never forget the horrors of the Holocaust and we have to make sure that it will be remembered in the future too.

But remembering it alone is not enough, we also have to make sure that such a thing never happens again. We must all stand up for this.

As a representative of the state, I am acutely aware of this responsibility, and I believe that it is Germany's duty to take active steps against antisemitism both on its own soil and worldwide.

Former German president Richard von Weizäcker summed this up in his speech on the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II as follows:

“Our young people are not responsible for what happened at the time. But they are responsible for how it will go down in history. What we, older generations, owe young people is not the fulfilment of dreams but honesty. We must help them understand why it is vital to keep memories alive.”

Today we remember May 3, 1945.

On that day, shortly before World War II ended in Europe, one of the greatest maritime disasters in human history occurred in the Bay of Lübeck.

British bombers sank the German passenger ship Cap Arcona and the cargo ship Thielbek just off Neustadt in Holstein not realizing that there were thousands of people trapped on the ships – most of them prisoners brought from concentration camps.

More than 7,000 people died. Only a few prisoners survived the disaster.

I am very honored that you, survivors and the relatives of the survivors of this horrible event, have invited me to today's ceremony.

It is incredibly important for our democracy to document the experiences of victims and witnesses of the Nazi rule and the Holocaust to be able to show the young people how important it is to remember these crimes.

This also includes financial support and that is why it is only right that the state should participate in the development of the Cap Arcona documentation center in Neustadt. In addition to five million Euros from federal funds, the state provides subsidies which amount to 1.5 million Euros.

I have no doubt that memorials such as the Cap Arcona memorial in the Bay of Lübeck are vital to keeping memories alive.

Thank you!

Mirko Spieckermann
Mayor of Neustadt in Holstein
May 3, 2023
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

Ladies and gentlemen,

We gathered here today at the honorary cemetery to remember the victims and to express our condolences to their families.

What happened must never be forgotten!

There are days in our lives which get deeply engraved in our memories due to certain events. This is especially true of the Cap Arcona disaster which was caused by tragic circumstances and resulted in more than 7,000 deaths.

What a tragedy it was to see the long-awaited liberators bring death and destruction upon prisoners.

Many people have visited the honorary cemetery since its inception. They have attended commemorative events such as this one or simply took a moment to remember the victims while passing by.

Who were the people trapped on the ships under the Nazi dictatorship towards the end of World War II, awaiting the hours to come with great trepidation? They were people like us whose hopes of liberation were never fulfilled.

The survivors suffered under these atrocious conditions and that is why it is imperative they keep the memory of the Nazi horrors alive and together with us remember those who lost their lives in the air raids.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which has been raging on European soil for over a year, is a clear sign that in 2023 the culture of remembrance and the common wish for a world without war are more important and relevant than ever.

What happened must never be forgotten!

Solving the crimes against humanity is vital to dealing with the past. As long as there are eyewitnesses, they can talk about their fates and testify to the inhumane system of the Third Reich. And once they are no longer able to keep the memory alive, doing it will become our task.

More than anything, it is necessary for young generations to know how the disastrous development in Germany came about and what its consequences were because they are the ones who will take over the political responsibility in the future.

That is why it is important to know the painful history of our country and to draw the right conclusions from it. Only then will it be possible to defend ourselves from demagoguery and political radicalism.

What happened must never be forgotten!

We, Germans, have to live with the fact that no other nation in Europe has done such injustice and brought so much suffering to their neighbors as ours.

And we, the inhabitants of Neustadt, have to live with the fact that a particularly tragic chapter of the war took place in our region. The Cap Arcona disaster became a dreadful part of our town's history 78 years ago.

Even though those of us who were born later bear no burden of immediate guilt, unlike our parents and grandparents, we have to live with the history today and make sure such an injustice never happens again.

What happened must never be forgotten!

In order to successfully participate in the federal program "Living Democracy", the Town of Neustadt receives funding for prevention projects dealing with social issues, promoting tolerance and undermining xenophobia and racism.

The responsibility for remembrance does not lie only in the hands of relatives, prisoners' associations, historians and educational institutions. It is an immense responsibility which has to be handled carefully.

For the victims' children and grandchildren and the generations to come, Neustadt will remain a place of commemoration in the future.

What happened must never be forgotten!

The Town of Neustadt in Holstein takes the responsibility for the dreadful events that took place in it or in its vicinity. Apart from the day of commemoration, this includes Cap Arcona Museum and its expansion through a documentation center among other things.

I would now like to take a moment to thank Ms. Wajsen and Mr. Gardon who have come from afar to attend this commemorative ceremony and kindly agreed to talk to students.

What happened must never be forgotten!

Keeping remembrance alive implies introducing new information and developments, questioning and reflecting the forms of remembrance and changing them if necessary.

We are now focusing our efforts on redesigning the Cap Arcona Museum and planning a Cap Arcona documentation center.

We are trying to think of ways to make remembrance interesting today, decades after the events, especially for young people, what pedagogical concepts are most suitable and how we can make our archive material on Cap Arcona more accessible for further scientific research.

As the Mayor of Neustadt in Holstein, I will use all means available to me to support this project.

Given the extent and significance of the Cap Arcona catastrophe, this legacy cannot rest squarely on the shoulders of our town. The federation and republics will hopefully get involved in the development of viable forms of political education.

Especially in light of the alarming political developments all over Europe, with far-right nationalist parties on the rise, we are all required to learn a lesson from the National Socialist barbarianism and prevent such discriminatory policies in the future.

We owe it to the witnesses, their families and those who did not survive the catastrophe.

What happened must never be forgotten!

We are standing here today to pay our respects to the victims of the Cap Arcona tragedy and to remember them. Their fate should be their legacy which urges us to fight for tolerance, freedom and humanity. The inhabitants of Neustadt are aware of this responsibility.

May there be no oppression, torture and death of dissidents in the future. We are all called upon to fight to advance our democracy and respect for human rights.

The Town of Neustadt in Holstein takes the responsibility for the dreadful events that took place in it or in its vicinity.

We owe it to the victims to prevent their suffering from falling into oblivion. We bear the responsibility to prevent the history from repeating itself. The peace, freedom and solidarity that we can live today are not to be taken for granted.

We are, therefore, committed to protecting democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Thank you!

Video message: Manfred Goldberg
Survivor of the Stutthof concentration camp
May 3, 2023
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

– no translation provided –

Kristof Van Mierop
Grandson of Roger Vyvey, survivor of the Athen
May 3, 2023
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

I have been attending this international ceremony for many years now and I always stand here with an ambivalent feeling. On the one hand, I am standing a few hundred meters away from the place where my grandfather was liberated exactly 78 years ago. He was aboard the Athen which lay at anchor here in the harbor of Neustadt and was liberated by British troops shortly after the air raids. That was a happy moment, his liberation, after he had spent months in the hell of concentration camps.

On the other hand, I am standing only a few meters away from the memorial with a number 7,000 garnering all the attention. On the same afternoon of May 3, 1945, three other ships were relentlessly sunk by Allied bombers just off the shore. 7,000 is the number of prisoners who were killed in this terrible catastrophe on that day. A sad moment, shortly before the end of the war, after all the suffering they'd endured, to not make it to the finish line.

My grandfather Roger Vyvey was a Belgian resistance fighter. He was arrested in April 1944 after being denounced. Having spent months in two different Belgian prisons, he and 1359 other Belgians were deported to Neuengamme in cattle cars on August 31, 1944. He arrived at the Neuengamme main camp on September 2, 1944. Brussels was liberated on September 3 and Nieuwpoort, the town on the Belgian coast that he came from, on September 9. So they were deported at the very last minute. Only about 200 out of 1359 Belgians returned. My grandfather was one of them.

After a week at the Neuengamme main camp, he was transferred to the Bremen-Blumenthal satellite camp where prisoners had to perform hard work, were malnourished and suffered physical and psychological abuse. In early April 1945, the Allied armies were getting closer, so he was sent on a four-day death march on foot which was followed by a selection. The weaker ones were taken to Sandbostel and the stronger ones were transported back to the main camp by train. My grandfather was in the latter group. After a few days at the main camp, he was taken to Lübeck on another transport.

In Lübeck harbor, they were taken aboard the Athen, a cargo ship with a hold made of steel plates. They slept on the floor, their wooden shoes serving as pillows. They were given soup once or twice more and fought over it. Many didn't even get up to get soup anymore. One corner of the hold served as a toilet, some went to the toilet and simply dropped dead there. According to my grandfather they were dying one by one.

At first, he was on the Athen for a few days and then transferred to the Cap Arcona, a luxury ship, on April 26, 1945. They had the feeling they moved from hell to heaven. However, it was only the ship that was luxurious but there was no luxury for the prisoners. It was a floating concentration camp. Ten to twelve people in a double cabin. Food and water were reduced to a minimum if there were any at all.

My grandfather made a tour of the ship and couldn't find his cabin anymore. That's how he ended up in a large room in the bow of the ship. On April 30, there were too many prisoners aboard the Cap Arcona, apparently 6,500 of them (!!!) and about 2,000 prisoners, including my grandfather Roger, were taken out again. From the luxurious cruise ship back to the Athen.

In the last days there was no food, nothing was happening... and the prisoners were dying even faster than in the first days on the ships. They took the dead people's clothes to keep warm. My grandfather had four layers of clothing on when he was liberated. Every day, the dead were pulled up by a rope and thrown into the sea.

Then, in the afternoon of May 3, 1945, the unthinkable – and to this day inexplicable – happened. The British Royal Air Force bombed the ships carrying the prisoners here, just off the coast of Neustadt.

The Athen was apparently in the harbor. My grandfather heard the bombing but he didn't see it. They didn't even know the ship was moored at the quay. In the midst of the commotion, the Germans left the ship and once that was clear, the prisoners started leaving the ship's hold. Some of them were not able to move fast enough so they were pushed by other prisoners off the ladder and fell down. On the deck, prisoners fought over suitcases they'd found which contained food. The ship lay along the quay wall, but they could not go down. He does not know how he managed, as weak as he was, but he climbed down a rope with a few fellow prisoners and as they were standing on the quay, British soldiers arrived.

On May 3, 1945, five days before the end of World War II in Europe and almost nine months after the liberation of Belgium, my grandfather was finally liberated along with about 2,000 other people. He was a 24-year-old man at the time who weighed 68 kilos before he was arrested and now only 37. The last move from the Cap Arcona to the Athen was his final salvation. On the same day, however, 7,000 of his fellow prisoners died.

Hence my particularly conflicted feelings when I stand at this spot each year to remember them, both the numerous dead and those who were fortunate enough to be liberated on that day. Let us never forget them.

Thank you.

Kristof Van Mierop
Grandson of Roger Vyvey (NG 44444)

Schüler:innen des Küstengymnasiums und Arbeitsgemeinschaft Neuengamme

Der polnische Häftling Kazimierz Wajsen

3. Mai 2023

Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

– keine Übersetzung –

Martine Letterie
President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme
May 3,2023
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

Closing Remarks

I would like to thank all our speakers and musicians. The effort the state of Schleswig-Holstein, the town of Neustadt and the town's youth have put into the event is impressive and I would like to thank all of you on behalf of the AIN. Thank you to all of you in attendance today and I hope to see you next year.