

**Commemorative Ceremony on May 3, 2024, at 10:30 a.m.
To Mark the 79th Anniversary of the Bombing of Prison Ships**

Cap Arcona Memorial Cemetery, Stutthofweg, Neustadt in Holstein

Wreath laying ceremony and flag bearers

Recitation of Kaddish by Nathan Grinberg, Rabbi of the Jewish Community Lübeck

Choir of Küstengymnasium Neustadt in Holstein: "Moorsoldaten"

Welcome speech by Martine Letterie, President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme

Address by Heinrich-Anton Holtfester, Head of the Neustadt Town Council

Address by Timo Gaarz, Chief Administrative Officer of the Ostholstein District

Speech by Jean-Luc Gadon, Nephew of Serge Léopold Camman

Reading by Küstengymnasium Neustadt in Holstein and the Working Group Neuengamme: Prisoner Biographies

Choir of Jacob-Lienau-Schule Neustadt in Holstein: "Dona Nobis Pacem"

Closing Remarks by Martine Letterie

**Following the Event:
Jewish Cemetery at Grasweg, Neustadt in Holstein**

Laying of wreaths and recitation of Kaddish by Nathan Grinberg

The commemorative ceremony will be photographed and filmed. If you do not wish to be photographed or filmed, please let photographers and the camera team know.

The commemorative event is organized by the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme and the City of Neustadt in Holstein, with the support of the Children and Youth Network Neustadt in Holstein, the Neustadt schools, the Working Group Neuengamme, the Schleswig-Holstein Memorials Community Foundation, as well as 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, 2024
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

Dear survivors of the Neuengamme concentration camp, dear relatives, ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of the city of Neustadt in Holstein and the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme, I would like to extend a special welcome today to Jean-Luc Gadon, Kristof van Mierop, Bruno Neurath-Wilson, and Magda Wajsen, the relatives of former prisoners, who have traveled from all over Europe to be present here today. I would also like to welcome Heinrich-Anton Holtfester, the Mayor of the City of Neustadt in Holstein, and Timo Gaarz, the Chief Administrative Officer of the Ostholstein District.

Before I introduce myself, I'd like to inform you that today's ceremony is being filmed and that several camera crews are present.

My name is Martine Letterie, and I am the President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme (AIN). Together with the City of Neustadt, the AIN has been organizing this commemorative ceremony on May 3 for many years.

The Amicale was founded in 1958 by former prisoners of the Neuengamme concentration camp. Their goal was to keep the memory of the events in that concentration camp and its numerous satellite camps alive. Currently, the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme represents national associations of former prisoners of the Neuengamme concentration camp and their relatives from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain.

The tragedy we remember here occurred 79 years ago. That may sound like a distant past, but it is nevertheless important to remember it. This applies not only to former prisoners and survivors, although they probably know better than other people what the collapse of the rule of law means. Former prisoners have experienced this firsthand, while relatives have seen what it did to their loved ones and how it has continued to affect generations. That's why it's important for us to remember this catastrophe today, as a tribute to the victims and as a warning for the present. That's why it's also important to keep putting into words what happened on May 3, 1945. And that is what I will do now.

In the weeks leading up to this day, the Neuengamme concentration camp and its numerous satellite camps were evacuated. In this way, the Nazis hoped to cover up the traces of their crimes. Approximately 10,000 prisoners ended up in Lübeck, where they were taken aboard several ships in the harbor. Two of these ships, the Cap Arcona and the Thielbek were anchored off Neustadt on May 3.

At 3 o'clock in the afternoon on that day, English Typhoons attacked the two ships, assuming they were carrying German troops trying to flee. There were approximately 7,000 prisoners on board the Cap Arcona, and 2,500 to 3,000 on board the Thielbek. The Cap Arcona caught fire, and the Thielbek sank relatively quickly. All hell broke loose on both ships. The prisoners tried to save their lives, but only a few succeeded. Most drowned or were killed in the flames. British planes shot at the drowning prisoners, while German SS men and Hitler Youth shot at those who reached the shore. 7,000 people died a horrific death.

Heinrich Holtfester
Head of the Neustadt Town Council
May 3, 2024
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There are days in people's lives that are deeply ingrained in their consciousness due to specific events. This particularly applies to the Cap Arcona disaster of May 3, 1945, which was triggered by tragic circumstances and resulted in the loss of over 7,000 lives.

Active commemoration also means incorporating and implementing new developments. Through generous funding from the federal and state governments for the construction, renovation, and equipping of a modern documentation center dedicated to this disaster, we are finally able to realize this project. On February 29, 2024, the City Council unanimously decided to implement all measures for this purpose.

In light of the deeply concerning rise of right-wing nationalist movements across Europe, it is imperative for us all to learn from the atrocities of the Nazi regime and to vehemently oppose any resurgence of such inhumane policies. This applies to Germany too!

How can it be that people at public rallies and gatherings call for antisemitic actions? Xenophobia and racism have no place in our society and they must not be given any room.

Unfortunately, there are increasingly more groups spreading antagonism toward the rule of law and seeking to undermine our fundamental democratic principles. Many of these ideologies echo the dark times in our country's history. None of us should want or support such things.

More than 2 million people in Germany have taken to the streets in recent weeks to attend protests and vigils. Every day, more and more people join, because Germany is open-minded, diverse, and colorful. I would like to express my gratitude to Ms. Martine Letterie, the President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme for this joint commemorative ceremony.

Thank you.

Timo Gaarz
Chief Administrative Officer of the Ostholstein District
May 3, 2024
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

Ms. Martine Letterie, President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme,
Mr. Heinrich-Anton Holtfester, Head of the Neustadt Town Council,
Distinguished guests and relatives,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for your invitation to today's commemorative event.

Today marks one of the saddest events of the Second World War on the German Baltic coast and one of the largest maritime disasters in history. It took place in the final days of the war in the Lübeck Bay, on May 3, 1945, ensuring that Ostholstein was not spared the cruelty of war. Over 7,000 people lost their lives, and it is for these people that we stand here today, preserving their memory.

The Cap Arcona disaster is a painful and distressing testament to the brutality of the Second World War and wars in general. And it is May 3 in particular – just five days before the end of the war – that continually prompts us all to ask why.

As the Chief Administrative Officer of the Ostholstein District, I believe it is imperative for me to be personally present at this event today. Together with you, I want to remember the victims who tragically lost their lives here, very close to us, when the Cap Arcona and the Thielbek sank.

We can only imagine the mortal fear and despair that gripped everyone on the ships while they were sinking. But even 79 years later, this event deeply affects us, it deeply affects me, saddens me and gives me pause for thought.

It is our duty to keep the memory of this tragic event of May 3, 1945 alive, so that future generations can draw the right lessons from the history filled with destruction and death. The Cap Arcona disaster reminds us to take responsibility for the present. Today's May 3 also reminds us to accept responsibility for the past, because the past does not simply fade away.

A cross-generational culture of remembrance that nurtures and embodies the way individuals and the society deal with their past and history is more important than ever. Our civil society stands for values such as peace, humanity, and tolerance. Our German constitution, our Basic Law, celebrates its 75th anniversary on May 23. The foundation of our constitution is our free democratic basic order. The mothers and fathers of the Basic Law were acutely aware, when formulating our constitution, of what must never again emerge in Germany. As stated in the preamble of the Basic Law:

“Conscious of their responsibility before God and man, inspired by the determination to promote world peace as an equal partner in a united Europe, the German people, in the exercise of their constituent power, have adopted this Basic Law.”

Our Basic Law is our compass for peace and freedom.

Let us together advocate for a world where wars and such dreadful catastrophes can never happen again – and where humanity and compassion triumph over hatred and violence. Especially now, we should be very aware of this responsibility.

May this commemorative ceremony serve not only as a reminder of the past, but also an appeal to take conscious and determined action aimed at creating a world of respect, tolerance, and openness.

Today, we are commemorating the victims of May 3, 1945. They remind us of the importance of peace and friendship among nations.

Thank you to all who are participating in today’s commemorative ceremony.

Jean-Luc Gadon
Nephew of Serge Léopold Camman (Neuengamme, No. 39779),
Survivor of the Athen
May 3, 2024
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

I would like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to speak today at this particularly tragic place and to honor my uncle, Serge Léopold Camman. To tell one of these stories that give faces to the victims, which - albeit only partially - bear witness to the terrible suffering endured by all deportees, to the immense courage displayed by them all so that future generations may live in freedom and peace.

My uncle wrote the story of his war experiences in the early 1980s, his memories still vivid. It was 40 years later that I reread his writing and rediscovered his voice in this harrowing and moving account.

My uncle was born on July 21, 1912, in French Catalonia. His father fell in battle on November 5, 1915. The economic crisis of the 1930s forced him to move to Paris, where he married a sister of my mother in August 1938. Their son was born in March 1939. In September, the general mobilization took place.

My uncle joined an infantry regiment in Béziers. The troops set out on a long march and eventually reached the Somme on May 31, 1940, amidst the noise of German air raids and a tide of refugees. Due to the lack of leadership, the troops soon scattered, attempting to escape encirclement in disarray; everyone wanted to board ships in Saint-Valery-en-Caux. On June 10, the remaining members of my uncle's regiment stood on a cliff facing their first German tank.

The fight was brief. Another tank fired on them from behind. The group was decimated, and my uncle wounded in the back and shoulder. The wounded were left behind and transferred to Abbeville on June 12 or 13. The prisoners crossed Belgium by train and then passed through Dordrecht to Wesel, finally arriving at the notorious Stalag VI/A in Hemer.

My uncle was soon assigned to the work detail in Schwerte near Dortmund. There, the prisoners were treated fairly. His wounds healed, he worked in a foundry, began to learn German, and to carefully plan his solitary escape. On November 13, 1941, he escaped to Aachen by bicycle, then by freight train to Liège, and finally to Paris. In January 1942, after his demobilization in the "free zone", life started anew.

Certainly marked by defeat, driven by an ideal, my uncle gradually became consumed by the feeling of an unspoken obligation guided by the instinct of camaraderie, trusting the people around him, especially at work. He was temporarily stationed in the countryside and carried out courier missions from anonymous contacts at various locations. He had joined the resistance and multiplied his liaison missions between Paris and the maquis in Brittany.

On April 25, 1944, he was arrested in Rennes along with several comrades from his group following a denunciation. He was tortured by the Gestapo and held in the Jacques Cartier prison in Rennes. The beatings, the waiting, and the executions of some comrades made the imprisonment a gruesome ordeal.

On July 2, the prison was evacuated, and the prisoners were transported in cattle cars to Compiègne and the Royallieu camp, where they arrived on July 15, 1944. Everyone expected imminent liberation, as the Allies had already triumphed landing in Normandy over a month earlier.

On July 28, at the Compiègne station, the journey to Germany began and for many, it would end in death (only 542 out of the 1652 deportees on the train would return). The train drove through without stopping and arrived at the Neuengamme concentration camp on July 31, 1944. Much has already been said about the life in the camp and its satellite camps, about the conditions of imprisonment, the constant violence, the extermination through forced labor, hunger, and diseases...

My uncle was given the prisoner number 39779. He was transferred to a satellite camp and then taken to the one belonging to the *Kriegsmarine* (the German Navy during the Nazi regime) on the Weser River, where a submarine bunker was being constructed. The work was extremely hard, especially when it comes to transporting heavy cement bags from barges to the shore and to the construction sites. The death toll rose steadily, and in November 1944, more prisoners arrived to replace those who had died. By March 1945, half of the workforce had perished. The situation in Farge was even more dire. After work, the prisoners were crammed into a barrack without ventilation or light. Not to mention the Allied air raids.

In mid-April 1945, as the fighting drew nearer and liberation seemed imminent, an order was given to evacuate the camp.

All those who could no longer walk were taken on cattle cars, the train headed towards Sandbostel. There were 9,500 people on the train, 3,000 of whom died during the transport or in the following days. The rest ended up in Bergen-Belsen.

Prisoners able to walk were forced to march from the camp. The first stop was Farge. On the third day, the prisoners were put on a train that took them to the main Neuengamme camp. Following a night filled with the sound of air raid sirens and fighting, they left again, headed to Travemünde. There, they were taken aboard the passenger ship Cap Arcona and crammed into its cargo holds under terrible conditions, before being moved onto a smaller cargo ship, the Athen. In the early afternoon of May 3, British planes bombed the ships Cap Arcona, Thielbek and Deutschland, anchored off the coast and sailing under the Nazi flag. This was the beginning of a terrible tragedy in which 7,300 people lose their lives. The Athen, which had weighed anchor, managed to moor on a pontoon in the port of Neustadt. The crew had abandoned the ship. After a long wait and facing their final danger, the prisoners of the Athen reached the mainland. Tanks approached from the opposite direction; they were English tanks.

In honor of my uncle and aunt, both of whom have passed away and who took in my twin sister and me after our mother died. We had just turned six years old.

JL Gadon

Martine Letterie
President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme
May 3, 2024
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

Closing Remarks

The fact that so many family members are present here today, and that many actively participate in this commemorative ceremony, shows that this event is important for them, for all of us. Moreover, the fact that the Mayor and the Chief Administrative Officer have spoken here today demonstrates that the City of Neustadt and the Ostholstein District recognize the significance of this ceremony. Therefore, thank you to the speakers for their words and commitment. I would also like to extend my thanks to the choirs of Küstengymnasium and Jacob-Lienau School for their musical contributions. To have young people involved in this commemorative event too is of great value. Thank you all for being here and I hope to see you next year.