Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme

Stadt Neustadt in Holstein

Commemorative Ceremony to Mark the 80th Anniversary of the Bombing of Prison Ships
May 3, 2025 at 10:30 a.m.

Cap Arcona Memorial Cemetery, Stutthofweg, Neustadt in Holstein

Welcome speech	Martine Letterie, President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme
Address	Karin Prien, Minister of Schleswig-Holstein
Address	Mirko Spieckermann, Mayor of Neustadt
Speech	Nieves Cajal, Niece of Miguel and Jesús Santos
Reading	Küstengymnasium Neustadt in Holstein and the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Neuengamme: Manfred Goldberg, Witness of May 3 and a Holocaust Survivor

Choirs of Jacob-Lienau-Schule and Küstengymnasium Neustadt in Holstein

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.

KINDER UND JUGEND NETZWERK Neustadt in Holstein e.V.

arbeitsgemeinschaft neuengamme eV

Bürgerstiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Gedenkstätten

Stiftung Hamburger Gedenkstätten und Lernorte zur Erinnerung an die Opfer der NS-Verbrechen

Martine Letterie
President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme
May 3, 2025
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

My name is Martine Letterie and I am the President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme and the granddaughter of Martinus Letterie, who was murdered at Neuengamme concentration camp on January 25, 1942.
The AIN was founded in 1958 by former prisoners of the Neuengamme concentration camp. They committed themselves to preserving the memory of the events that took place in this camp and its many satellite camps. For many years now, the AIN has organized this commemorative ceremony on May 3 in cooperation with the town of Neustadt in Holstein.

On behalf of all of us, I extend a warm welcome to the delegations who have traveled here from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Poland. Among us today, there are no survivors of the catastrophe that took place here exactly 80 years ago. But we are joined by relatives of its victims and by family members of former Neuengamme prisoners. We deeply appreciate your commitment and the effort you have made to be here.

A special welcome goes to Schleswig-Holstein Minister Karin Prien and to Nieves Cajal from Spain, who will later speak about her two uncles. I would also like to extend a warm welcome to Mirko Spiekermann, Mayor of Neustadt in Holstein.

Before I continue, a brief note: Please be aware that today's event is being filmed and photographed and several camera teams are present.

May 3, 1945. Let us go back to the morning of that day 80 years ago. At that time, around 10,000 prisoners were being held in Lübeck harbor, crammed onto several ships. In the weeks prior to that, they had been deported from Neuengamme concentration camp and its many satellite camps, as the Nazis evacuated the camps in an attempt to erase the evidence of their crimes.

The conditions on board the ships were horrific—worse, perhaps, than in the concentration camps themselves. On May 3, two of the ships carrying prisoners set sail and dropped anchor here in Neustadt Bay. These were the *Thielbek* and the *Cap Arcona*. The *Cap Arcona* held approximately 7,000 prisoners; the *Thielbek* between 2,500 and 3,000.

At 3:00 p.m., British aircraft attacked the two ships, believing them to be carrying fleeing German troops. The *Cap Arcona* went up in flames, while the *Thielbek* sank rapidly. Hell broke loose on both vessels. The prisoners tried to save their lives, but only a few succeeded. Most drowned or burned to death. British planes fired upon those who were drowning, while German SS officers and Hitler Youth shot at those who managed to reach the shore. Seven thousand people died a horrible death.
On May 4, 1945, the surrender of German forces in Northwest Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands was signed in Lüneburg Heath. One day later.

Today, we remember this terrible day and the crimes that led up to it, both here in Germany and in the many German-occupied countries. The fact that so many of us have gathered here shows that today this act of remembrance is more important than ever.

I would now like to invite Minister Karin Prien to speak, followed by Mayor Mirko Spieckermann, Nieves Cajal and the students from Küstengymnasium, accompanied by the Working Group Neuengamme.

Karin Prien
Minister for Education, Science, Research and Culture of
the State of Schleswig-Holstein
May 3, 2025
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

Note: The spoken word prevails. Translation by Deepl

Dear Ms. Letterie,
Dear Mr. Spieckermann,
Dear Ms. Cajal Santos
Ladies and gentlemen,

80 years ago today, British bombers sank the "Cap Arcona" and the "Thielbek" here in the Bay of Lübeck. They suspected German troops were on the ships – but they were wrong: there were 7,500 concentration camp prisoners on board, most of them from Neuengamme.

More than 7,000 people died. They burned to death, drowned or were shot on the beach. Five days later, the Second World War ended with Germany's complete surrender.

The events of that day, these "end-of-war crimes", remind us of how perfidiously and dehumanizingly the Nazis treated their prisoners outside the concentration camps as well: At a time when the war was already lost, they loaded them onto the two ships and accepted their deaths – at the very least.

The crimes of the National Socialists and the horrors of war – both have been inscribed in the collective memory of the global community. The United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are a response to this. The same goes for the European unification process.

Achievements that put the right of the individual and the peaceful community of states in place of the right of the strongest. These achievements are still being upheld today. But they are under more pressure than perhaps at any time since the end of the world war:

Human rights are being disregarded in many places around the world.
Parties and individuals who deny others these rights are experiencing strong growth.
Ukraine is fighting for its existence and Europe must ask itself whether it would be able to cope with an attack by Russia.

In order to protect the achievements of peace, we are currently investing massively in our military. In Russia, we are seeing a state that wants to reassert the law of the jungle in the world. China is also blatantly threatening its neighbors. And the USA is currently no longer a guarantor of the rules-based peace order.
We are experiencing a shift from the strength of the law to the law of the strongest.

That is why Europe must now make itself strong so that it can uphold justice and peace as far as possible. Externally and internally. Peace is not just the absence of war and direct violence. It is the lasting pursuit of a just society.

Over the course of 80 years, the memory seems to have faded from the collective memory. Today's commemorative event at one of the earliest places of remembrance in Schleswig-Holstein and the state-wide day of remembrance on May 8 is therefore perhaps more important than ever. I would like to thank all the organizers and everyone involved for their contribution.

Together you carry the memory of what happened here in the Bay of Lübeck in a world of war without human rights. This admonishes us all to stand up with all our strength against dehumanization and for the dignity of the individual and peace in the service of democracy.

The memory of the shipwreck of the Cap Arcona is one of the focal points of historical awareness in Schleswig-Holstein with a regional, cross-state, national and international dimension.

We commemorate the individual victims, we honor the victims, their families, their experienced and inherited traumas. We document and break the silence, the repression and trivialization. And we draw lessons for the present with a resolute "Never again". What happened then also shows us how it came to be today and how to take active and committed action.

Mirko Spieckermann
Mayor of Neustadt in Holstein
May 3, 2025
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken,

Check against delivery.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Minister Prien,
Mr. District Administrator,
Ms. Letterie,
Ms. Cajal Santos,

The Cap Arcona disaster of May 3, 1945, in which more than 7,000 people lost their lives, is deeply etched into our collective memory.

As Mayor of Neustadt in Holstein, I find it difficult to put into words the pain and loss that are still so present especially for you, the relatives of the victims.

Today, we are not only remembering a tragedy. We are honoring the victims of heinous crimes committed here, in the bay and town of Neustadt, just days before the end of World War II. And I see it as my responsibility, in my role as the Mayor of this town, to clearly name these crimes.

On the morning of May 3, 1945, German SS soldiers, navy personnel and police officers carried out a massacre of concentration camp prisoners from Stutthof here on the beach of Neustadt and on the way to the military barracks. Hundreds of people, most of them Jewish, were shot before British forces had a chance to liberate them. These were people who had already endured immense suffering in concentration and forced labor camps and had been deported across the Baltic Sea to this place.

The senseless killing continued into the afternoon. The British Royal Air Force mistakenly attacked the ships *Cap Arcona* and *Thielbek*. Thousands of concentration camp prisoners, most of them from Neuengamme, had been locked inside those ships by the SS. They were hoping for liberation and the end of the war. But instead, they burned to death, suffocated, or drowned. Only a few managed to escape. And even then, the SS and the German Navy continued their crimes: they fired at the survivors in the water, ran them over with rescue boats and made no serious attempts to save them.

For people from many European countries, this day, which could have been the day of their liberation, ended in death. Twenty-four nationalities and ethnic groups are named on the memorial stone beside me. Over 7,000 people were killed. In many cases, we don’t even know their names.

They were people who resisted the German occupiers in their home countries. People who stood up against National Socialism. People who were persecuted, harassed and imprisoned in concentration camps because of their religion, their beliefs or their sexual orientation. People who, according to the Nazis' racist ideology, were not meant to have a right to live.

Today, I especially want to express my deepest sympathy to the families, descendants and friends of the victims.

On behalf of the town of Neustadt in Holstein, I acknowledge our responsibility to do everything in our power to ensure that such crimes can never happen again. It is our duty to keep the memory of these historical events alive, to educate future generations and to honor the victims.

This memorial cemetery was inaugurated in 1948, its creation and design made possible thanks to the efforts of survivors' committees. Since then, representatives of the city have taken part in commemorative ceremonies.

I am grateful that since the 1980s, the town of Neustadt has supported a critical and honest examination of the past. In 1990, the Cap Arcona Museum was established. We have moved beyond the silence, denial and distortion that once existed in our town as well.

Now, it is our job to ensure it stays that way. With the city council's decision to build a new Cap Arcona Documentation Center, Neustadt in Holstein is living up to its responsibility.

We are thankful that this project is being generously supported by the Federal Republic of Germany and the State of Schleswig-Holstein. And we thank the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme and the Cap Arcona Remembrance Network for their close collaboration on this initiative.

The tragedy of the *Cap Arcona* and Nazi crimes remind us that we must never allow ourselves to be guided by hatred or violence, but we must always strive for peace and humanity. We carry the responsibility to learn from the mistakes of the past and to work toward a future in which such horrors are never repeated.

Especially in today's world, taking responsibility means taking a clear stand for democracy, for the rule of law, for peace, for diversity and against antisemitism, racism, queerphobia and populism.

There are many civil society initiatives here in Neustadt that are deeply committed to this work. I would particularly like to thank the Children and Youth Network Neustadt in Holstein for their work with young people. Especially in the field of the culture of remembrance, their work represents an important foundation.

At this point, I would also like to thank the city council members, politicians, our international guests and every one of you for coming here today to join us in honoring the victims and remembering this painful history.

My deepest respect goes to the families and descendants of the victims. You keep the memory alive with tireless dedication, you reach out to younger generations and you travel often considerable distances to Neustadt in Holstein every year.

Your presence is a powerful reminder that the call for justice and peace knows no borders and that our humanity connects us across generations, countries and cultures. It is a sign of respect and solidarity that will resonate far beyond today.

Let us not only grieve on this 80th day of remembrance. Let us also hold on to the hope that remembering this tragedy will inspire all of us to work toward a better and more peaceful future.

The victims of the *Cap Arcona*, the *Thielbek* and the death marches that ended here in Neustadt have left us with a painful legacy — a legacy that urges us to cherish and protect democracy, freedom and peace.

It is up to us to prove ourselves worthy of that legacy.

Thank you.

Nieves Cajal Santos
Niece of former prisoners of the Neuengamme concentration camp,
Miguel und Jesús Santos
May 3, 2025
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

My name is Nieves Cajal Santos and I am the niece of two brothers whose lives came to an end after three years of fighting in the Spanish Civil War, five years in exile and one year in a Nazi concentration camp in Germany.

The younger brother, Miguel Santos, died off the coast of Neustadt aboard the *Thielbek*, one of the ships sunk by the British Allies, where the SS had crammed the prisoners after evacuating them from Neuengamme. His brother Jesús had previously been sent on a death march to Sandbostel – a separation they had managed to avoid ever since their flight from Spain in 1939. This account will focus on both men, who may have died under different circumstances, but these circumstances were created by the same people.

They were both born in Madrid and lived with their parents until the outbreak of the war. Jesús was already a practicing doctor and Miguel was close to completing his studies. My mother maintained extensive correspondence with them, which I only discovered a few years ago. Folders full of letters and documents have become a treasure trove of information, revealing the beautiful relationship they shared with their parents, the deep affection they had for my mother, their determination never to be separated, but also their hardships, told in their own words.

When people speak of the genocide committed under National Socialism, they often forget — in Spain as well — the Spanish Republicans, a chapter the Franco regime sought to suppress, like so many others.

These men defended a democratically elected government against the military coup led by Franco — a war that became a testing ground for the German air force, sent by Hitler in support of the fascists. The Spanish Republic lost the war against fascism, largely because the other European nations failed to intervene. The immediate consequence was that half a million people crossed the border into France. There, in the town of Argelès-sur-Mer, began in February 1939, during the retreat known as the *Retirada*, the fateful journey of my uncles.

They fled the victorious fascism only to be interned on a beach in France, without food or shelter, behind barbed wire and under the watch of armed Senegalese guards, in a real concentration camp.

Two months after their arrival, the French government began organizing Companies of Foreign Workers and they were transferred to different camps. In 1942, they nearly managed to leave France for Casablanca, but once again, the plan fell through and they were forced to turn back.

In mid-1943, they succeeded in getting jobs as a doctor and a nurse respectively at the Montfort Health Center in Montmélian in the Savoie region. Their final message was a postcard, a format that "facilitated" the work of the censors, both Francoists in Spain and Nazis in occupied France. On that postcard, dated just seven days before their arrest, they wrote that they hoped to be home before the end of the year. After three months of searching, my mother and grandparents finally received word that on April 24, 1944, my uncles had been taken from the Montfort Health Center in Montmélian to an "unknown destination"…

They had been denounced by the French collaborator Paul Touvier, who was responsible for the arrest of 57 Spanish political refugees active in the Resistance in Montmélian. The Gestapo arrested them and transferred them to the Compiègne internment camp, north of Paris. A month later, they were crammed into cattle cars on the overcrowded Transport 1,214 and deported under inhumane conditions to the Neuengamme concentration camp over the course of three days. They arrived there on May 24, 1944 as political prisoners and were assigned the prisoner numbers 32059 and 32060.

Jesús was assigned to work as a prisoner doctor, while Miguel worked in the kitchen and later in the production of precision weapons on the Messap work detail.

As the Allied forces approached, Jesús, already suffering from tuberculosis, was forced onto a death march to the Sandbostel camp, where he arrived under horrific conditions. After the liberation by British troops, he was transferred in critical condition to a hospital in Unterstedt-Rotenburg., where he died on June 18, 1945, at the age of 32, more than a month after the war had ended.

My uncle Miguel Santos, now without his brother, was taken by the SS from Neuengamme on April 27, 1945, along with thousands of other prisoners, and brought to the port of Lübeck. There, they were crammed aboard several ships for thirteen days. What we know of this time comes from what the historian Pons Prades wrote in his book *Spanish Republicans in the Nazi Death Camps*:

“They loaded us onto the *Thielbek,* a Frenchman recounted. [...] Hundreds of Russians and Poles were already crammed into the cargo holds of the *Thielbek.* We learned from some Spanish comrades, among whom I remember Miguel Santos, that the International Red Cross was prepared to take responsibility for the deportees from Western European countries. Our three Spanish friends tried to pass themselves off as French in hopes of being evacuated and thus escaping the likely annihilation at the hands of the SS. But one of the French prisoners denounced them and the SS forced them to leave the Red Cross truck.
On May 3, after we had already spent several days at sea, we heard the sound of aircraft engines and shortly afterwards, Allied planes began bombing us. Our ship slowly began to sink. Near me, an SS guard shot himself. The lifeboats were occupied by the SS and whenever a prisoner tried to approach them, they were beaten or shot to keep them away.”

My uncle Miguel died here at the age of 29, just five days before the official end of World War II, in one of the largest maritime disasters in history which has been largely ignored and censored and remains insufficiently investigated to this day.

My family was marked forever, in a Spain where forty years of dictatorship led to silence in the families of both the survivors and those who were killed. Yet they were always present for us, especially for my mother. My sister and I grew up surrounded by their photos and memories. We even did our schoolwork in the medical practice that my husband, who is also a doctor, still uses today.

Thanks to the documentation work of nameless Germans, we have recovered a ring that had belonged to Miguel and placed a headstone at the site where Jesús’ remains now rest.

Historical remembrance is a necessity and demanding it is a duty. But people never learn and we are horrified by the barbarities committed today, eighty years after these senseless crimes. Today, the leaders of the very countries that once fought against National Socialism or were massacred by it seem to lack both the memory and the will to recall these tragedies. And we, the citizens of today: Will we listen to the voices of the far right without responding, trusting, uncertain, or paralyzed by fear, just like back then?

Students from the Küstengymnasium Neustadt in Holstein and the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Neuengamme
Students Interview Survivor Manfred Goldberg
May 3, 2025, Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

In early May, Manfred Goldberg will return after 80 years. Today 80 years ago, almost to the hour of today's ceremony and right here on this beach, he survived a death march at the age of 14.

A senior class at the Küstengymnasium Neustadt has been studying Manfred Goldberg's story. In a Zoom interview, students had the opportunity to ask him questions. A longer in-person conversation with Manfred Goldberg will take place on May 8, made possible through the support of Christine Mänz.

On May 3, 1945, not only prisoners from the Neuengamme concentration camp were deported to Neustadt. Prisoners from the Stutthof concentration camp also arrived here by ship. Two barges carrying 2,000 prisoners reached Neustadt after a dramatic six-day journey. In late April 1945, the Stutthof camp primarily held Polish, Soviet and Jewish prisoners, as well as inmates from Western Europe and many women.

On the night of May 2, taking advantage of the absence of guards, prisoners on the barges, led by a group of Norwegian prisoners of war, managed to steer the vessels away from the *Cap Arcona* and toward the shore of Neustadt-Pelzerhaken.

They landed right here, where we now stand. But this was not their rescue yet. Alerted SS guards and armed units from Neustadt rounded up the concentration camp prisoners. Those unable to walk, as well as those who fell behind on the march to the Neustadt barracks, were shot. At least 240 prisoners were murdered.

Manfred Goldberg was one of the youngest among them. Born in 1930 into a Jewish family in Kassel, he was deported to Riga in December 1941 and endured three and a half years in camps. He was deported alongside his mother and a younger brother, who was later murdered.

After some time in the Riga Ghetto, Manfred Goldberg was forced, despite his young age, to perform heavy labor in satellite camps of the Stutthof concentration camp, including railway repair work and the transport of rails.

Manfred Goldberg speaks of the constant threat to life in the camps due to violence, malnutrition and disease. Especially deadly were the death marches following the evacuation of the Stutthof camp. On the way to the barges, on board the barges themselves and here on the beach of Neustadt.

In the interview with the students, Manfred Goldberg recalled the antisemitic attacks he experienced as a child on his way to school. He spoke of the lifelong friendship he shared with Zigi Shipper, which began in the camp where they were among the youngest.

Manfred Goldberg explained that during the time of his persecution, he did not yet draw strength from a belief in God and that he found that faith only after liberation. He also warned against lies, propaganda and scapegoating, all of which are widespread on the internet today.

Martine Letterie
President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme
May 3, 2025
Neustadt-Pelzerhaken

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Minister Karin Prien. Your presence here today and your dignified words mean a great deal to the survivors who are still with us, to the families of the victims and to the town of Neustadt.

My gratitude also goes to Nieves Cajal for speaking so movingly about her uncles and the impact their fate has had on her family.

Mayor Spieckermann, I thank you for your words, for the strong collaboration and for the commitment of the town of Neustadt to this commemoration and to the new museum we are breaking ground for today.

The contributions of young people today are especially important. The Küstengymnasium's performances, both in song and recitation, as well as the choir of Jacob Lienau School have been deeply meaningful and I know how much their participation is appreciated by everyone here.

But perhaps the most significant aspect of today's commemoration is the fact that so many of us, from all across Europe, have come together here. The fact that we commemorate together is a testament to our awareness of the importance of democracy, the rule of law and a free and united Europe. This is precisely what the founders of the AIN stood for from the very beginning and embedded in their constitution.