

1. Gerhard Karner – 2. Präsident des NÖ Landtages

Commemoration can mean many things, should mean many things and must mean many things. Yes, it has to be multifaceted. By all means, it should never become boring routine or even annoying tradition. Especially here in Melk, a very diverse, a very personal, and a very human commemoration tries to recall the indescribable crimes of the Nazi regime and to always simultaneously urge us to remain alert and lucid in our commemoration and to never become blunted in our commemoration!

“Never a number – forever human”, a very personal thought is in the focus of this year’s commemorations – also here in Melk. A very personal thought which emphasizes that terror and destruction, racism and persecution are never anonymous, but always very individual crimes and personal destinies.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

in the name of the province of Lower Austria and on behalf of its governor Mrs. Johanna Mikl-Leitner I warmly greet you and welcome you in Melk.

Welcome to this commemoration in our province.

A commemoration which has just gotten a new dimension with yesterday’s commemoration march to the memorial in Roggendorf and thus allowing an additional inclusion of the region.

Many special thanks to Alexander Hauer and Christian Rabl for their thoughtful dedication in creating a diverse and lasting commemoration which keeps the memory alive!

Thank you to the students, the educators and all people who contribute to the commemoration.

Thank you to every one of you who came here today to commemorate.

Never forget, never again, never a number, forever human!

2. Laura Ferstl: Never a number – always a human being

A child is born and the first thing he or she gets is a name. A strong name, a name that fits. A name to be worn their whole life. Maybe it is a name with a lasting tradition in the family or perhaps simply a name their parents really liked. As a human being you start your life with your name and grow up with it. And one day it will be what is remembered in books or on a gravestone. It will come to represent your individuality, the key to yourself.

But back then, in the time of National Socialism, the right to a name, the right to a unique individuality was not guaranteed. First, people were not known by their names, but classified according to their religion and had to face restrictions and prejudices. “Jewish doctors are not allowed to practice anymore.” “Employment ban for Jewish actors and actresses” or “It is forbidden to buy in Jewish shops.” Those were some of the Nazi terror slogans. As a Jewish person you were worth nothing, you had no say in anything and you were denied a position in society.

Then, those people without rights were jammed into trains, crowded close together, and on a mass scale they were pushed towards a cold uncertainty. Small children, elderly women, strong men – soon they all wouldn’t be worth wearing a name or having a personality.

On cold days they were standing half-naked, freezing, without hair, with black and blue marks and bruises, behind the doors of death, and they were waiting. Waiting without hope, waiting for their nightmares, which would come true, even worse than expected. They were waiting to be made less human and more animal, albeit with the ability to speak and to think. On their pale arms bloody and black numbers were visible.

Human beings were reduced to an extreme. Human beings were tormented. And finally human beings were made numbers. On a mass scale they were made nameless. They were “dehumanized” so that they wouldn’t be part of the death statistics. They got numbers so that it would be easier to forget their stories, to extinguish them.

We never want to remember them as numbers, but always as human beings.

3. Emilia Baumgartner: Names and Numbers

Away with the name, here comes the number. They were robbed of their names. Names which were so much more than a succession of several letters.

Names with which they were born, weathered puberty and lived their young lives. Names with which they got to know and love others during their short journey through life. Names they were called by close friends, parents, siblings, loved ones, and their children. Names connected with numerous memories and stories they shared with others. Names associated with a special nature or positive character traits. Names which had accompanied people throughout their whole lives so far, which made them human beings.

But their names vanished and so did the human beings they had been. Their names vanished and so did the human dignity to which they were entitled. Their names vanished and so did the adventures which they had experienced. Their names vanished and so did the characteristics which had made them unique and special. Their names vanished and so did their lovable natures which nobody had ever wanted to miss. Their names vanished and so did everything that had made them what they were. Their names vanished, and soon afterwards, their lives.

Their names vanished – they were extinguished, replaced by a number.
The memory of these people and their fates mustn’t ever vanish.

4. Carolin Namrud

In the concentration camps people were – as we know and as the previous speakers already explained – treated in an inhumane way: their names and their dignity were taken away from them, their hair was shaved off, their feet were shackled, they were forced to perform the most difficult labor to make the way towards their own death as difficult and as rocky as possible.

And even if these days we think and affirm that those times mustn't repeat themselves, one can still find people who advocate radical right-wing ideologies. Racism is an everyday issue. Many schools offer numerous anti-bullying classes and constantly teach about racism and the significance of human rights, so that they are perceived as socially engaged schools, although everybody knows that in their own schoolyard there are pupils who harass the minority, the children with an immigrant background. Many people label persons who look different or who come from other countries as a problem and think that they might bring harm and doom to the homeland.

And back then? ... It wasn't so different, only that back then the persecuted persons really had a number tattooed onto their arms. And as a punishment for their existence which was thought to threaten the ruler's, they were forced to make the eternal acquaintance with death. The innocent became defenseless puppets, and their murderers pulled the strings. Because it was considerably easier to remove a number from a list than a human being who had made history with his or her mere existence.

If there is one thing that our world should have learned since humanity's catastrophe, it is acceptance and openness. We all know that there is still much to be done – not only in schools. And those who self-righteously believe themselves to evolve and become wiser, if they follow the social norm, should take this to heart: “Those who cannot learn from the past, stay ignorant and (are destined to) repeat it!”

5. Bernard Maingot, K. L. M. 62739

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

End of April 1944. 1033 deported were transported from Mauthausen to Melk with the intention that they dig tunnels and install an underground armaments factory there.

I was one of them.

The previous day we had all had to don the striped prisoners' garb, and upon it the number which was to become our only identity. I've never forgotten that number – 62739, in black ink, preceded by the letter F, inside the red triangle of the political prisoners.

In that convoy to Melk there were 900 Frenchmen: patriots who had been arrested within all regions of France: members of the resistance, escaped war prisoners, young men who had refused the Compulsory Work Service in Germany.....

And then, only the prisoner number counted. 62739. If you weren't able to tell your number to the SS guards or the kapos without making a mistake or if you failed to respond to it during a roll call, one could be punished by death. As of our arrival in Mauthausen death was promised to us: by the smoke rising from the chimneys of the crematorium.

That was our destiny.

But fortunately we knew – and that gave us hope – that in the West and the East people were fighting and dying for freedom, for theirs and for ours.

By every means possible we had to live, we didn't have to be resigned slaves. Supported by international solidarity we strived to hold on:

„Never a number. Always a human being.“

Melk, May 6th, 2019

By working as little as possible, as slowly as possible, by saving necessary strength to survive until the end of the war which we hoped was very close.

We, the survivors, are the ones who were lucky enough to hold on.

At the end of April 1945, when the Red Army approached Melk, the SS decided to evacuate the camp. To Ebensee, a satellite camp of Mauthausen, south-west of Linz. A difficult evacuation with many fatalities. Ebensee camp was completely overcrowded. No supplies.

On the 6th of May 1945 the American Army liberated the camp in Ebensee. We are free. The war is over. We are free, but sad, because there are so many dead to mourn!

A few weeks after my return to France I was summoned to a military court. When I came there, I learned that I was to testify during the trial of a German Gestapo agent who had operated in Angers.

In the presence of this white-haired, skinny man donned in prisoner's clothing I affirmed "in all conscience" that I didn't recognize the defendant and that I had never seen that man before.

When I left the courtroom I crossed the defendant's path. Handcuffed to a gendarme he looked me straight in the eye and said, "Thank you, Sir, you are a just man."

I have always remained human, simple as that. Despite the torments I had to suffer.

I don't feel hate, and I am happy about that.

Isn't that already a victory?

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