

## International Liberation Commemoration 2015

Transcription of all speeches, in order of appearance

### **Markus Siller (mayor of Ebensee)**

Ladies and Gentlemen! As mayor of Ebensee it is my pleasure to welcome you here. Special greetings go to Mrs. Mag.<sup>a</sup> Johanna Mikl-Leitner (minister for internal affairs) as representative of the Austrian government and to Mrs. LAbg. Sabine Promberger and Martina Pühringer as representatives of Upper Austria. I also greet the former inmates of the camp, their descendants, all delegations of various nationalities and especially the mayor of Prato, Dr. Matteo Biffoni.

We meet here at the cemetery of the ancient camp to commemorate, which cruel atrocities happened here 70 years ago. May the common commemoration be a sign of our unity and friendship.

The warning voices of my grandparents – which demanded ever and ever again, due to their experiences in World War II – will forever be in my memory. Never again war! Never again dictatorship! These words are my guiding principles concerning the planning of our future. We are confronted with so many challenges. Never since World War II were so many people registered as refugees. Many of them try to find protection from war, terror and inhuman living conditions in our safe, wealthy Europe. Thousands of them lost their life, close to their destination, in full view. A tiny little part of these refugees arrived also in Ebensee. We will accommodate 25 asylum seekers in the next weeks, and we will support them as best as we can while they are waiting. Helpful inhabitants of Ebensee have formed a non-partisan platform to help these asylum seekers to integrate, to moderate their poverty and to enable a good cooperation. I wish them good luck and thank them for their commitment. It has not escaped my notice, that many people – here in Ebensee as well as all over Europe – are uncertain. They are afraid of foreign cultures, fascistic fanaticism. They see their personal wealth threatened, set off by growing unemployment, flood of refugees, uncertain jobs, seemingly sinking real wages and growing national debts.

We have to take this uncertainty very serious. It is one of the biggest challenges for our democratic, humanistic Europe. Because many people believe in the slogans of the populist parties, which want to make us believe that we are the good and the hard workers, the other are the bad; dangerous populist parties which want to make us believe that we are the good. The others are the origin of all our problems. This classification of people already led us to the absolute catastrophe once, World War II.

This is why we are challenged to confront these worrying developments. I think we need more solidarity with our fellow humans, a stronger standing up for justice, for freedom and for equality in Europe. The gap between poor and rich people has to be closed, we need social security for all classes of society.

I wish that we will succeed in building a good future for Ebensee, for Austria and for Europe. A future in peace. Thank you for your attention!

### **Dr. Matteo Biffoni (mayor of Prato)**

Dear minister for internal affairs! Dear mayor of Ebensee, Markus Siller! Dear friends from Ebensee, ladies and gentlemen!

133 persons from my city Prato have been deported into NS concentration camps 70 years ago. They have been deported to Mauthausen, Gusen and to this very spot, to Ebensee. Only 18 returned! Their sole fault was to have taken part in a strike.

To be here with you, dear friends from Ebensee, to celebrate the liberation of the camp together is an important sign of the friendship which connects our cities. In our *Museo della Deportazione* the youngsters are told a horrible history: The memories have to be held up, every single day, as the existence of the concentration camps as a cruel example of human cruelty must not be forgotten. The atrocities of history have to be punished by everlasting testifying, memories and opportunities like commemoration. And it is our obligation to give the remembrance a future, by setting strong accents (like the partnership of our cities does since many years). This partnership was wished by survivors of the camp in Ebensee and initiated so both communities could together go the path of peace and friendship.

70 years after liberation, civil and fundamental rights, as they are established in the constitutions of our states to hold up democracy, seem to be tried and tested achievements. But the appearances can be deceptive. The values of freedom and democracy, for which many people have fought hard, and which make our life better, have to be taken care of daily! In the concentration and extermination camps people were arrested and had to lose their lives just because they had another origin, thought differently, believed in different gods or because they were homosexuals. And today, when we hear those aggressive, of racism and homophobia marked slogans, against foreigners or against those, who appear to be "different", then we have to distance ourselves from it and judge it! The most valuable legacy which was left by those, who have been deported and died in Mauthausen, Ebensee and other camps, or those, who left relatives behind, is love and freedom, a good we have to protect and defend, the most valuable good at all, which we have to ensure for the future generations.

After 70 years we have a new power, so peace and freedom can continue to rule our life, the power of the unified people in a unified Europe. We, the European citizens, share those principles of democracy and freedom, which came after the darkest time in history, in which the countries in Europe were enemies. Those principles nowadays make the European Union a big democratic reality. If there is something positive from this tragedy, then it is the will for peace and cooperation. Those are values, which gifted my generation a Europe, whose future we can build together, also by the mean of moments like this, which fulfil us with sorrow, but also with certainties, which are the base for our future actions.

### **Wanda Nordlie (nurse at the 139<sup>th</sup> US Evacuation Hospital, USA)**

Wanda Thoen Nordlie served for 18 months with the U.S. Army in Europe as the fighting in Europe was drawing to a close. Her husband Don Nordlie was a U.S. Marine serving in the Central Pacific and participated in four combat landings culminating in the historic taking of Iwo Jima. I am Don's nephew and I have been asked to share Wanda's story, in her own words.

In June of 1944, I graduated from Fairview Hospital in Minneapolis. The war had been going on for several years and there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted to join the Army Nurse Corps. As so many billboards suggested, "I'd rather be with them than waiting." In November, my orders came to go to Camp Carson, Colorado, for basic training. After 6 weeks, we were sent to Fort Riley, Kansas to await further orders. When our orders came to our port of embarkation, we were told to tell no one we were leaving. No one gave us a clue as to where we were headed.. After a rough crossing we arrived in Le Havre. From afar it looked like a charming city but as we neared it we could see that it was just a city of empty shells and buildings – our first glimpse of the ravages of war. The beaches were filled with huge rolls of barbed wire. The realities of war were closing in on us.

When our unit assembled, we went on to Southern Germany. There was no way to guess where we were, as all road signs had been removed to prevent Allied Forces from knowing the precise location. We never heard gunfire, but each day we heard and watched the massive English bombers fly overhead on their way

to Berlin. We were now in the last months of the war and traveled in our open trucks, we would hear the whine of snipers' bullets fly past. SS troopers and Nazi officers, often disguised as priests or other civilians, hid in the countryside as Counter-intelligence actively picked them up. Meanwhile, *The Stars and Stripes* newspaper was publishing photographs of the concentration camps that our troops were discovering each day. It was difficult for us to imagine such horror. We nurses were assigned to the concentration camp in Ebensee. What was and is a beautiful Austrian village in the Tyrolean Alps has also been the home of many horrors. We were part of General Patton's Third Army and one of his units had discovered Ebensee. It seems impossible that such atrocities as Ebensee could have occurred amidst such beautiful surroundings. General Patton was appalled and said no nurse in his army would ever work in such a place. So, for the first week only the male officers and enlisted men were allowed inside the camp. They returned at night and told of bulldozing huge trenches for mass burials, as there were thousands of bodies that had been left to starve as the Nazis had fled to the mountains.

We nurses begged to be allowed to assist our overworked men in caring for prisoners. Our captain had served in gruesome areas in the Pacific Theater and felt that nurses could handle this too. She pleaded with General Patton. It was agreed that we would take a tour of the camp and if we survived that we would be allowed to set up our hospital tents. We walked through the dormitories, long insulated wooden barracks lined with three levels of wooden bunks – really only bare shelves with five men to a space less than four feet wide. It was dark, as there were only a few small windows in the entire building. As our eyes adjusted to the dim light, we could see large dark eyes peering at us from the bunks. These creatures did not seem human as we could only see round heads seemingly resting bodiless in the bunks. All was silent as we walked quietly down the narrow aisles. Then a voice called out gently as we walked by, "Diese schönen roten Lippen!" My high school German could translate that to "those beautiful red lips." So there was life in those men after all!

We saw the gas chambers in a neat tiled shower area where hundreds may have been killed a few weeks earlier; then the crematorium with its blackened ovens. All had been cleaned up for us as best they could, but death was all around us. The dead held us captive in their absence. The smell of death was all-pervasive and we lived it in our inner spirit for days. Eating was impossible but we were determined to set up our hospital tents and get to work. There had been 18,000 prisoners in a camp equipped to hold 10,000. The prisoners had been used as slave labor to carve out the insides of the surrounding mountains. This was near Hitler's Berchtesgaden, and he planned to go underground as much as possible. The prisoners would be marched through town each morning to work a 12-hour day. Some of the villagers would throw stones at them; others would smuggle them food, water, or medicine at the risk of their own lives. Any prisoners too weak to work were promised a shower, a Nazi euphemism for the gas chamber. The prisoners were marched in, 50 to 100 at a time. Out of the shower nozzles would flow the deadly gas which killed in 5 minutes. The bodies were cremated in the ovens, some not quite dead but too weak to move. There the last few drops of fat left on the bodies was collected to make soap. We heard that Jewish survivors cherished these bars of soap as they felt it could have been part of a loved one. Since only about 96 bodies could be cremated per day, a large swimming pool was built in the center of camp. When Swiss visitors from Geneva Convention would visit, they were told that the pool was for the prisoners to enjoy. At times, 500 to 1000 bodies went into the pool, covered with quick-lime and left to decay. Often many of those were alive and the grave could be seen moving for a time afterward. The prisoners claimed that Ebensee, along with Auschwitz, was one of the worst camps. Many prisoners had been to as many as ten camps. They wore loose-fitting dark blue and white striped pajamas; in the winter if they were lucky, they were given a pullover and a torn dirty overcoat. Most had to go barefoot, which caused many deaths from working in icy water. Breakfast was a large cup of black coffee, lunch was a cup of thin soup from potato peelings (the

meat of the potato went to the S.S. men). At night the prisoners were given a slice of bread made of 30% sawdust, along with a spoonful of canned meat, margarine, or jam.

Our purpose as nurses was to restore some semblance of humanity to the 3,000 sickest inmates. Our hospital was equipped to care for 400 patients, so we were spread very thin. Each nurse was in charge of one tent with two corpsmen to assist. We had many cots but not enough blankets so our men scrounged the area for bed clothes and came back with heavy paper sleeping bags. They were scratchy but did help keep out the cold mountain air. The day we were ready to admit our patients, I stood outside my tent and watched a long line of naked men line up. The men were mere skeletons with thin white skin stretched over their shriveled bones. Their heads were shaved and each had a purple mark on his ear. Each inmate was given a blanket or paper sleeping bag and led to a cot. The sickest were given plasma intravenously. Due to their damaged stomachs, the inmates were given a restricted diet of liquids, soups, and such. Each day, about 25 % of our prisoners died. They could die from the stimulus of a cigarette. Some died overcome with joy as they walked out of the gate. With the shortage of medics and so many dying, anyone could pronounce a patient dead. The body would be placed on a wooden litter and two corpsmen would carry it to the morgue. Once, as corpsmen were transporting a corpse to the morgue, they passed another wooden litter full of freshly-baked loaves of bread for the mess hall. The supposed dead man reached out and grabbed a loaf of bread. The corpsmen nearly died of shock but happily managed to return the patient to his cot.

It might be assumed that our patients would be deeply grateful for our hospital services, but many were suspicious of us and felt that we were just another country that had taken over. Our sickest men felt that we were continuing to starve them with the diet of a therapeutic soup seeming no more than the Nazis had fed them. Only the patients who were up and about and free to leave realized they had been liberated. There was one boy about camp who was very small for his age but not at all undernourished. It happened that sometimes a child would be cared for as a mascot, and what little food the prisoners had would be shared with this child. The boy looked about eight years old but said he was eleven. He could speak every language represented in this camp well enough to help us communicate with the patients. With my two years of high school German and a version of charades, I could usually make myself understood. German was the common language in the camp, of course, so nearly all of the inmates knew a smattering of that. The men were from Germany, France, Poland, Norway, Italy, and Russia, and surely others unknown to me as many patients would not tell us. All told six million Jews and 7 million others, 13 million in all. The local Austrians were ordered to help with food and supplies. Many did menial tasks about the camp. The Austrians were ordered to give a decent burial to each of the thousands of bodies that had been stacked like cordwood around the camp. They did this and there were many Christian crosses among the Jewish stars. As our patients gained weight and energy, getting them back to their homelands was the major problem. One day a burly Russian officer came into my tent and grabbed my book of patients' records, checking out their nationalities and home countries. He pointed out numerous names: "Ruski, they come with me!" The first real animation came from these patients; they bolted up on their cots. As the officer called out their names, each answered the same: "No Ruski, no Ruski!" Their eyes pleaded with me. When I denied the Russian the men he claimed, he jumped up and down, purple-faced, as his medals clanged on his chest. He shouted that he outranked me, but I held my ground. I grabbed my record book and told him *he could not outrank me on my ward!* To my amazement the Russian turned his heels and stomped off. My patients and I were both proud of me that day, but they couldn't see how I was shaking! I wish I could tell the patients' stories, but the language barrier made it impossible to hear them. A few could speak English and told of their experiences. Our presence at Ebensee began just days after the Americans came storming out of the woods. We stayed at Ebensee for six weeks. When we finally had the spare time to film the camp, it had

become almost normal looking. Our patients had each gained at least ten pounds and didn't look quite malnourished. We were finally trusted. The war was really over and they were free to return to their homes in all corners of Europe to their homes and families; and thus ends the story of the 139thth Evacuation Hospital and its role at Ebensee.

On behalf of my aunt, uncle, the survivors and all those lives that were lost, I want to thank you for allowing my aunt to see Ebensee today in its beauty and to share her story which like the holocaust, we should never forget.

### **Zvi Shmidmaier and Shimon Shahar (survivor with his son, Israel)**

Ladies and gentlemen!

My name is Shimon Shahar and I would like to say few words about my father who is standing next to me. It is unbelievable to him that he is standing here today, 71 years after he first arrived in Ebensee. It is beyond understanding that he survived nearly a year in this horrible place. He was Häftling Number 72580. As a Hungarian Jew, he was deported from his village Telciu, in May 1944 to Auschwitz-Birkenau with his parents and ten siblings. He survived selection and was sent with his brother Berci, to Mauthausen Camp. After a few days he was transferred to Ebensee concentration camp, where he spent 12 months in the tunnels as a slave laborer. Here he suffered terribly from hunger, and was beaten and raped by the Nazi soldiers.

His brother Berci took care of him during this period. His brother was murdered by a Nazi soldier two months before the camp was freed by the American army. We are filled with a profound gratitude to the American people. After liberation, he found one of his sisters but all the rest of his family, his parents and nine siblings, were murdered in Auschwitz. After the war, he went to Israel – the Jewish state, and started his own family. His great-grandchildren are his victory against the Nazi regime. I would like to thank Ebensee Museum team, for organizing this ceremony, and for preserving this place as a memorial for the next generations. We should not be deceived that this is all in the past. Today we see the growth of anti-Semitism across Europe. We have to make sure that the lesson of the past is learned. Thank you!

### **Silvia Dinhof Cueto (daughter of the Spanish survivor Victor Cueto)**

I am a daughter of one of more than 7,000 Spanish Republicans, who were deported to Mauthausen and its subcamps after they fought Franco Fascism und fled to France. It is not my intention to provide specifications of Spanish Civil War 1938 to 1939 or to repeat the terrible experiences in the French Internment Camps. What I want to do is to honour all Spanish Republicans who lost their life in the hell of concentration camps and those who were lucky enough to survive. I dedicate my speech to a small group of those, who stayed in Austrian exile, first of all to my father Victor Cueto Espina, who, until his death, lived in a small village nearby. My speech consists of definitions, memories and questions, which were important to the life of my father in Mauthausen and after his liberation:

- A number, 3438, my father was reduced to, beginning with his deportation to Mauthausen in summer 1940 until his liberation in Ebensee in May 1945.
- The blue triangle. Concerning this item I want to refer to a text of Lisa Palli, a student of the university in Graz, which she used for the exhibition "Nacht und Nebel, Spanier in Mauthausen":

*The Spanish inmates of Mauthausen wore the blue triangle of the stateless (officially called "emigrants") with a "S" for Spanish sued onto it. The origin of this contradictory marking lies in an encounter of the Spanish secretary of State, Ramón Serrano Suner, and his German homologue Joachim von*

*Ribbentrop in 1940. During this meeting Serrano Suner said, that the fled Spanish were not regarded as citizens of Spain anymore. They weren't to return and the government would not take care of them. Therefore they definitely lost their citizenship as well as their status as prisoners of war. As they were enemies of Franco, they were enemies of Hitler as well. Although they were stateless, the "S" marked them as political enemy and "Rotspanier" at the same time.*

Up to 1955, that is after my birth, my father was stateless.

### **The life in the camp**

When he came to Mauthausen my father dared to ask for an interpreter before signing anything he didn't understand. After they hung him with his arms tied behind his back, till he lost consciousness, he signed. He didn't bother with language anymore. The luck, to get away from the labour in the quarry and the "Stairs of Death". One of the worst henchmen of the SS chose him arbitrarily to work in the market-garden alongside two or three other inmates. Being able to eat any plant could save a life. The humiliations. In 1942, very weak, he volunteered for a box match against a much stronger inmate, to gain a bit of nutrition as "price". He could save himself only by biting and scraping. And everything just for the pleasure of the SS. The despair, which once was great enough, that he was determined to throw into the electric fence. The solidly united decision to not go into the galleries of Ebensee, when they discovered that the SS planned to blow up the entrances just before the liberation.

### **The life afterwards in Austria**

What were the reasons to stay in Austria?

- their conviction and hope that Franco would be overthrown soon, to be able to return into their native country
- the bad memories concerning the time in France
- the fact to have found a well-loved woman and work
- and in the case of my father a disease, tuberculosis

Why no hate and no feelings of vengeance? An incident which impressed me greatly in my youth, gives a possible answer. In 1973 Simon Wiesenthal initiated legal proceedings against Johann Gogl, camp warden in Mauthausen and Ebensee. My father was also summoned as a witness. One day Gogl showed up at our place, just to see, if my father would recognize him. When he noticed who this visitor was, he prompted him to leave immediately. When I asked him why he didn't even slap this impudent person, he answered, "If I do so, I am no better than he is, and I don't want to be like that." Those who lived in Austria, which wasn't always easy, united a strong band: the band of friendship and of a remaining symbol of their identity: the republican flag. To respect this symbol, the memory of their suffering and the NEVER FORGET is and will always be our moral obligation.

### **Alessio Ducci (son of a survivor)**

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear representatives of the institutions!

First, I would like to thank you all to be allowed to speak here, on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the camp. I am the chair of the association ANED (association of former Italian inmates), situated in Florence, and I submit you the best greetings from all sections of our association. I'm thinking especially about ANED Prato, in commemoration of Roberto Castellani. My father Alberto Ducci (inmate no. 57101) was

arrested during the strike in March 1944. His transport left the train station of Florence on 8 March 1944 and arrived at the train station of Mauthausen after a horrendous trip which lasted three days. He arrived on 11 March in the concentration camp of Mauthausen and was transferred to Ebensee after 15 days of quarantine. My father told me that Ebensee was worse than every other camp he has been to, in his barrack were accommodated inmates of various nationalities. Some have been arrested by Italian fascists and therefore all Italians were called "Mussolini". On the other hand there were the soldiers of the SS and they also hated all Italians, because they thought them to be cowardly traitors after the armistice with the Allies in September 1943.

In the first time my father was assigned to a working commando in charge of cutting wood (it was needed for the construction of the barracks), then he was forced to work in the gallery system, precisely in the tunnel which nowadays accommodates the exhibition. My father was born on 16 May 1927 and here in Ebensee he met another camp inmate from Turin, who you might remember, too. His name was Italo Tibaldi and as both were born on the same day, they were called "the twins". Months passed by before the camp was liberated, and from January 1945 till liberation thousands of prisoners were transported to Ebensee, as the Eastern camps very evacuated due to the approach of the Red Army. There were four people sleeping in a spot which was meant for one person, in between one could hear more and more gunfire. The SS men constantly grew more nervous so one naturally thought something was going to happen, but the day of liberation seemed to never come! Finally the 6 May 1945 arrived and my father was liberated in Ebensee. He was not even 18 years old, weighed about 27 kg and could barely stand on his feet. It took a whole month till he could stand upright and walk again. When he weighed 37 kg one told him that he could make his journey back to Italy. He was given an ID-card from the Red Cross and only underwear and a woollen coat. He hitch-hiked back to Florence.

In his hometown my grandmother barely recognized him, that much has he changed, not only in his appearance but also in his character. To get back into a routine was difficult for him: He wanted to talk, tell, but many people didn't believe him or did simply not want to hear such cruel stories. The need to talk also had to do with his feeling of guilt, because he made it and many friends or comrades didn't. He thought it to be his duty to report what he was living through and what he saw. And so he contacted the ANED association. In the beginning it was its concern to financially support the widows and orphans, but as time went by it grew more and more important to testify history, to hold up the memories. And then ANED began to organize pilgrimages to the former concentration camps. When I was little I began to accompany my parents on these trips and I never heard words of hate or disapproval come out of his mouth. His only constant concern was to speak with the youngsters, with hundreds of pupils which he met annually in Mauthausen and Ebensee. "The young people have to know! It must never happen again that anybody has to go through similar things we had to go through!" he constantly repeated. In May 1996, after a disease which has cost him a lot of strength and well aware that he would die soon, he wanted to visit Ebensee one last time, even if the medicals and my mother and me were against it! He died two months later, in the first days of July 1996. In the last 20 years the number of surviving camp inmates constantly decreased, in the association ANED Florenz Mario Piccioli was the last and he died in 2010. Since then the second and third generation carry on. In Italy there are approximately 300 former inmates which are still alive, but for many of them travelling is too exhausting due to their old age. Nevertheless something wonderful happened on 3 May in Milan: ANED organized a meeting between 30 surviving Jews and political prisoners. At the end of this meeting they left us an appeal, which I would like to read out loud to you now:

We, women and men, who survived the atrocities of the concentration camps, have – everyone of us with his own history, his own belief and his own convictions – come together to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation and the end of war. We have done so to strengthen and protect those values, which we were

prosecuted for: peace, equality, respect, solidarity, justice and democracy. Those values pose the legacy of our fellow-sufferers, who never returned from the camps. Even today these values are trampled on and we fear that future generations might have to rediscover and regain these values at a very high price. But we hope that our words are not in vain. The memories of the horrendous times of the 20<sup>th</sup> century must not go missing with us, they must be conveyed via learning and researching, at most in schools, and they must be the base for the meaning of democracy against new barbarity. The idea of a unified Europe dates back to the thirties in the placed of exiled anti-fascists and it's most paradox that this idea was reinforced by the variety of diverse nationalities in the concentration camps. This is why we demand from international institutions on a European and global basis that those places of suffering, at which the NS extermination took place, are acknowledged as heritage of humanity. But we mostly turn to the young Italian people: fight against indifference and conformity; take care of the public good, if you don't want others to do so. Recognize and judge every form of racism, discrimination and violence. Defend democracy and the constitution, freedom against every authoritarian outcry. Don't permit that women and men are prosecuted again because of their origin, their ideas and their belief.

I hope that every person here will internalize this appeal of former Italian camp inmates. Thank you!

### **Mag.<sup>a</sup> Johanna Miki-Leitner (Minister for internal affairs)**

Ladies and Gentlemen! This year is a very special one. 70 years ago the raging war in Europe came to an end. Way too much people didn't live to see the liberation. The 6th of May 2015 is the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the camp. The soldiers of the US army liberated Ebensee as one of the last remaining camps and gave the inmates freedom. Between November 1943 and May 1945 more than 8,200 prisoners (of 27,000 in total) fell victim to the Nazi extermination policy. Today we are standing here and we can barely grasp that this surroundings were a place of genocide. The life of the inmates was marked by merciless exploitation of their workforce, sadistic humiliation and the fear of extermination. The Nazis transferred them here for one sole purpose: their exploitation for the armaments industry, especially the construction of the gallery system, up to their extermination due to the hardest physical work imaginable.

More than 16,000 prisoners survived and lived to see the 6th of May, when the US army liberated the camp. They were offered a distressing sight. One could see dead bodies everywhere, died of starvation, and they met thousands of undernourished people: Those people could and wanted to testify the Nazi terror and never forget it. After 70 years I pose myself the question: What exactly means commemoration to us? Commemoration means primarily to not forget of those, who commit their lives to commemoration as a contemporary witness. They shoulder exhausting trips from all over the world. They appear in unison against forgetting. Today some of these contemporary witnesses are here in Ebensee. They return to a place, which tried to take their human dignity and their life from them. Like Andrew Sternberg, born 1929, living in Cleveland. He was born in Hungary (Pötrete) and was deported alongside his family to Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Melk and Ebensee. At the time of the liberation he was 16 years old. Today he's meeting the US-American Wanda Nordlie. As a member of the 139th Field Hospital of the US Army she arrived alongside with 40 medicals, 40 nurses and 200 volunteers in Ebensee just a week after the liberation of the concentration camp. As a 20 year old nurse, who just finished her training, she was responsible for the care of 60 persons in a tent assigned to her. There she nursed the inmates till they could return home. Today it's the first time that Wanda Nordlie returns to Ebensee.

Dear Mrs. Nordlie, regardless your own well-being you held many human lives in your hands and you knew how to protect them. You have been dedicated a chapter in a book of Richard McDonald concerning the concentration camp of Ebensee and due to that chapter, Andrew Sternberg remembered himself that you

were an integral part of that time. Mr Sternberg, since many years you have dedicated your life to letting people not forget, what you had to go through under the Nazi regime. People like you were and are the connecting part between past and present, between yesterday and today, between oblivion and remembrance and – between the cultures. That’s why this place connects us altogether – especially in our fight against ignorance, intolerance and xenophobia. The 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation means 70 years of peace. I want to thank all those, who were contributing their part to the end of the war, the liberation from fascism and to not letting fall the mechanisms of the Nazi reign and the consequences of the Holocaust into oblivion. I want to thank all those, who are dealing with this specific topic in their personal environment. I thank every person here and out there, who’s talking about it, thinking loudly, writing about it, reporting it and not being quiet about it. Ladies and Gentlemen! It is our obligation to honour and appreciate the legacy of the survivors if they aren’t anymore one day. Places like this keep the legacy of the surviving people, because eventually we have to thank the contemporary witnesses to have made this spot a bridge between past and present. Therefore it is our duty to continue their efforts of holding up the remembrance of the past, which is at the same time an effort for enlightenment and conveyance of democratic values. Due to these facts this place is very important for us, for the next coming generation. It is a memorial for all of us, to never leave the way of democracy. Let us do anything possible to fulfil this so to say promise of remembrance, especially on the 70th anniversary. As responsible minister for internal affairs it is my concern to encourage all commemoration. Only those who are aware of the treasure of peace and freedom can oppose the mechanisms, which are threatening it. Therefore I’m firmly convicted that the here and now is decisive. Like you are present here and now, remembering here and now, showing civil courage here and now, will the here and now decide our future and the future of the coming generations. Due to these facts we don’t only need contemporary witnesses as allies in our constant effort for enlightenment and understanding our history but also for the purpose of showing the treasure of peace, now and forever. Therefore we should listen to them as long as their voices sound and hopefully continue to resound forever. I bow in deepest sorrow and commemoration to the victims which fell victim to the Nazi terror at this very place.

### **Commemorative speech of Michael Köhlmeier (Austrian writer)**

Elfriede Frischmann was born on 10 November 1933. Till she was six years old, the family lived in St. Pölten, Franziskanergasse. Soon they moved to Vienna, Dorotheergasse 6/13 in the first borough. On 26 January 1942 Elfriede and her parents were deported to Riga and assassinated shortly after their arrival. Elfriede Frischmann only lived for nine years. I don’t know more about that child. From the parents, I only know the name. Elfriede is 17 years younger than my mother and 11 years younger than my father. My father was 62 years, my mother 72 years old when they died. They didn’t live an adventurous life, but a good life. They saw their hopes fulfilled, and their illusions evaporate in thin air. If one could measure their laughing and their crying, one could probably fill weeks or even months. They had enough time to be astonished by so many things, and they could pass this astonishment on to my sister and me. They had enough time to do bad and they had enough time to apologize and make up for it. They had enough possibilities to do good and they seized these possibilities. Elfriede Frischmann only lived for nine years. And everything I know about her is said in seven short lines. If a human dies, a whole world dies. And if there is nobody who is remembering this human, than it’s like this human dies again.

There is a photo of Elfriede Frischmann, a simple photo. The girl looks directly into my eyes. I think that she isn’t older than four years on it. Little Elfriede doesn’t know that this photo is taken of her. Maybe her father or her mother told her, “And now Elfriede, don’t move, look to us and don’t move.” Her mouth is a little open, she is astonished, curious and would like to obey. She has a round face with fringed bangs. She wears a sleeveless dress with floral design. The photo was probably taken in the summer. The chubby little

arms are crossed in front of her. Then her mother or her father says, "You did very well, Elfriede, very well indeed." And she is running towards them and laughs and giggles, because her father tickles her back. After a certain time the mother or the father fetches the picture at the photographer and show it to their daughter. "That's you, look Elfriede." And the girl shakes her head. She obviously doesn't know how she looks like. She is not interested in her appearance. Or is she?

The Talmud and the Quran tell us in similar wording: "A man, who kills another human being, should feel like he killed the whole world. And a man, who saves another human being, should feel like he saved the whole world." After the 20<sup>nd</sup> century there remains no definition of the evil, and less than ever an archetypical bad person. Mephisto has lost every horror, as well as the monsters in the medieval cathedrals. There is no eerie vision left, which we can face as something strange, something that looks different than us. Not even the terrible aliens of the ateliers of Hollywood could really frighten us and were nevertheless invented, to appease the horror with the horror itself. We are without terms, since we can't distinguish the bad from what stares at us, when we look into the mirror. In the face of Adolf Eichmann one only sees harmlessness, nothing but boring, humourless harmlessness. Now we know for sure: The bad is trivial, like Hannah Arendth wrote. But this insight didn't horrify us as much as the fact that we already knew. The devils we invented served the simple purpose of appeasing and distracting ourselves. We didn't want to look at us, we never trusted our friendly look. We wanted to distract us from ourselves. That's why we invented the devil. Even the message of Robert Louis' novel of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde that we bear the evil inside us can't calm us down, since we know that we don't only bear it in us, but we are it. The devils which we encounter in literature and tales, those lucid monsters, would be as horrified of us as we once were of them.

These were my thoughts for a long time, after my father had given me the book "The Yellow Star". For the first time I saw pictures of the Shoah. I was 15 years old. The images of piles of corpses, which were pushed into common graves by caterpillars, I didn't want to look at them, I didn't endure it. And the images of the survivors, pinched and twisted monstrously, I couldn't look at these pictures either, I didn't endure it either. They were heroes just because they were victims. I thought that this was the appearance of the heroes of our time. About me, I know that I wasn't a hero. I couldn't identify with the victims. Their suffering was too big to grasp for me. Therefore I searched in the faces of the culprits, the camp wardens, in the face of Rudolf Höss, which follows his process via headphones, in the face of Heinrich Himmler. But what was I expecting to find? Their faces were embittered, sardonic and bad; and they had harmless faces. Nothing in them showed more than the human side. I knew that if I would be embittered, if I had sardonic thoughts, if I was mad at somebody, my face wouldn't change. I concluded that the horrible, incomparable things had left no signs in the faces of these bad persons. But why not? Dorian Gray (as in the novel of the same title of Oscar Wilde) keeps his pure face, whereas his painted self shows all signs of the bad things he commits in his life. And this bad is insignificant in comparison to the great bad of the Shoah. I studied the history of the culprits, read what they left behind, and listened to their words in the interrogations. I read the notes of the tape recordings of the Eichmann interrogations. I found nothing.

And then I stopped to occupy with the culprits. A character of a novel, oddly enough of a novel written by myself, pointed at me and said, "What you are doing is nothing than worshipping these dark heroes. Why do you give them the honour of retelling their story, of imagining their motives, thoughts and possibilities? Why do you ponder what their careers could have been, if they didn't become what they actually became in the end?" I was ashamed. I had posed the same questions like thousands before me and thousands at the same time as me. Where does the bad come from? What is the bad? And I had discovered nothing. But what did I expect to discover? That I could never ever become a person like them? Would my life have changed by this response? No, I didn't want to worship the dark heroes of our time, not at all. The writer

imagines something, every human does it more or less. The writer does it on paper, so it can be shown to the whole world, and he does it professionally. It is his profession and his vocation.

Elfriede Frischmann only reached the age of nine. For her 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary she would maybe have had a little party and invited her new classmate, who just recently moved to the city with her parents. "Invite her", maybe her mother or father would have said. "She doesn't have a friend, you yourself said that she is very kind." And then the country lass, who doesn't have to be afraid of anything, as she only exists in the imagination of the writer, would have come over with a cake, which her mother baked, because she wants, that her child finds a friend. One is constantly afraid. One is constantly afraid of anything. And not even the narrator can banish the fear completely. But on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Elfriede a small group of children sits around the table in the first borough of Vienna. The cake is cut and shared among the kids, and none of them has to fear death in this moment. And also not in the next moment. Or in the moment afterwards. Or in the moment after the next. Or in the moment which follows. And if the narrator could do magic, he would relate one moment with the next, till 73 years have gone by and the story reaches present day. Elfriede Frischmann would be an old lady, sitting among us and having so much to tell, about her hopes, her illusions, about something bad she had done and later made up for and of the possibilities to do good, which she seized. If one could measure her laughing and crying, one could fill weeks or even months. And maybe it would be of little importance if it was more laughing or ore crying, because both are part of the life. And how comfortable and wise it would be at the same time, to pronounce this truism after a long time, in which no bad and no violence could possibly harm this human.

## **Andrew Sternberg (survivor, USA)**

I am Andrew Sternberg. I am 85 years old. I am one man among many men and women who were imprisoned. I was a child. I have had a life while millions perished. I have a personal story. Others were denied their lives and denied their stories. I will tell you some memories of my four camps. I will tell you about my distinct feelings about my imprisonment and my liberation.

### **Hungary**

In 1944 I was a 14 year old boy in Nagykanizsa, Hungary. I would have grown into an 85 year old man in Hungary. Today, I am an American. In 1944 I was a school boy. I played soccer. My family was strong and independent. I looked forward to the opportunity of a full life. The posted notices in my town terrorized my family and confused me. I was rounded up in a courtyard and ended up in a ghetto. My whole family was transported to Auschwitz. They never left Auschwitz.

### **Auschwitz**

My deepest memory of Auschwitz in 1944 is that everyone knew or immediately learned the slogan of Auschwitz – "You came in through the gate, you will leave through the chimney." Everyone knew the slogan of Auschwitz from their first step through the gate. There need be said nothing more about Auschwitz.

### **Mauthausen**

I was transported to Mauthausen. I was given Number 68840. I learned that Mauthausen was a "mother camp" in Austria. It is a brutal irony to use a maternal word and refer to this camp as being a "Mother." Here is my deepest memory of Mauthausen. I met a Man with the Number 14. He told me that in his early days 100 went out in the morning to the quarry to cut stones and 17 or 18 returned. The road was called "Todsteiger" – the dead road. Then, in 1944, in my time, he told me that times were "better" since now

when 100 went out in the morning, 70 or 80 returned at the end of the day. To say that this was “better” reveals the perversity of Mauthausen. Eighty thousand died in Mauthausen.

## **Melk**

I was transported to Melk on June 3, 1944. At that time, prisoner population in Melk was about 2000. On June 5, 1944 I began work in the tunnels. We heard about D-Day – June 6, 1944. An Allied bombing hit the camp in June 1944 – some attempted to escape but were captured on the same day. We were forced to witness their execution. At Melk I lost my best friend of my same age, Lazlo Lipkovich – a boy from the North of Hungary – unfortunately he died in the bombing. I lost another friend, Lazlo’s cousin Leftkovich – he fell behind me in a tunnel collapse and his falling down saved my life. I was alone. Cold. Rain. Daily food was sparse. Starvation was all around us. I was alive. By the end of July and beginning of August, 1944, the prisoner population at Melk grew to 9,000 – tunnel workers. The daily dead grew in numbers. A crematorium was built at Melk by September, 1944 as the number of the daily dead grew beyond the capacity that that the Nazis wished to transport to the Mauthausen crematorium.

On Christmas Eve, 1944, two Frenchmen attempted to escape through a sewer pipe – they were captured by the SS in the sewer and returned. The Nazi guards celebrated Christmas Eve by forcing prisoners to pull a cart with the recaptured Frenchmen chanting “Ich bin wieder da.” I am back again. This is one memory of their Christmas Eve terror. All were weak, cold, and hungry. In February, 1945, I attempted to trade a cigarette with a Wehrmacht soldier, hoping to receive a small piece of “Brot”. I touched his coat, whispered, and nodded that I had a dry cigarette. He took the cigarette and gave me nothing. He could have executed me on the spot. He had been trained to kill. I put my own Life on the line by risking to touch or even speak with this guard. Later on a train back from the tunnels at the end of the day – in the dark – he gave me a tiny crust of “Brot”, just the dry hard skin of the “Brot”. Was there some “humanity” here??? I did feel some small affirmation of humanity. To this day I believe that this dry crust of “Brot” contributed to my survival. I still do.

A dry cigarette for a crust of “Brot”. I dared to appeal to a Wehrmacht soldier and put my life at risk. Through luck and some humanity – I preserved my life for another day. A soldier valued a cigarette for a few moments of pleasure. I valued life and the hope of living my life. There is no balance on the scales between a cigarette and a crust of “Brot”. The philosophers try to explain the value of life. We survivors valued life. At Melk the balance of the scales did not value life except in the hearts of the prisoners and the survivors. After the war, we learned that 4,800 prisoners died in Melk.

## **Ebensee**

Between April 9 and 14, 1945 Melk was evacuated. Some were transported by barge. Others were transported by train. I was transported to Ebensee by train. Such beautiful mountains. So beautiful that I thought that no one would ever find us or look for us – the beauty of Ebensee – again, how ironic and how perverse. To be hidden forever by the beauty of Ebensee, my fear.

By May 4, 1945, flames and smoke were everywhere outside the gate at the offices and barracks. Papers were being burned. For a final perverse trick, on Saturday May 5, 1945, Nazi Commander Ganz assembled all 18,000 prisoners at the roll call place. He announced that the Americans were coming, and in a final trickery ordered all prisoners to move to the mountain tunnels. He said it would keep us from being caught in the middle of their on-coming battle with the Americans. For “our safety and our protection”, he said. All 18,000 renounced this trick with a loud and unanimous “NEIN”. We refused to die in a final trick as captives in a mountain tunnel dynamited at its entrance.

**Liberation**

Liberation was May 6, 1945. I thank the United States Military for my personal liberation. Our camp survivors were from all parts of the world. We thank all of the Allied Liberators, American, British, Red Army, Polish, French, Belgian, Norwegian, and all of the Resistance Forces of the free world. Thank you to United States Army, 80<sup>th</sup> Division Evacuation Forces. Thank you to the people of Austria, the Austrian Government, and all of the officials and organizers in Ebensee for your many years of recognition of the Liberation. Thank you to my family and friends. Thank you to my fellow survivors. I returned to Hungary, learned a craft, went to Budapest, and in 1956 went to America with my son Sandor. For me, the value of life is the right and opportunity to have freedom and love – with family and with the warmth of the sun in the morning and a peaceful sleep at night under the light of the moon. The value of my life is life itself.