Remarks of Andrew Sternberg
Delivered May, 10, 2014 at Ebensee, Austria upon the Commemoration of Liberation of Camps in 1945

69 years ago this past Monday, I was among the survivors of KZ Lager Ebensee. We had all first passed through the main camp at Mauthausen before being transported to Melk, and finally here, where we were forced to work as slaves.

At the time of my liberation by the American Army, I was 15 years old, orphaned, and far from my home in southwest Hungary. I am forever grateful to those brave American soldiers who scarified so much to free us and I pause here to thank them all again from the bottom of my heart. As the years passed, I felt that as a survivor of the camp once at this very place, and of those other nearby camps where so many more of our fellow prisoners were degraded, debased, dehumanized, and so, today, as in so many years past, I return to Austria and to your city, to remember those who suffered here and who died here and to honor them along with those who survived but who over the years have forever slipped away.
Every passing day the number of our surviving comrades grows fewer and fewer. Past speakers have recalled the miserable conditions of hunger, pain, cold and exhaustion we endured here.

These things forever scarred us and will never be erased from our memory. We must never forget that here in a place meant for only 2,500 people there were once 18,000 of us we should never forget that in that April of 1945 in just a few weeks before the liberation over 4,500 died here whether the medical reasons was hunger, or cold, or work accident, or sickness or beatings, each of those deaths, indeed, every other death here, was surely a murder today we pause to remember those who are no longer with us and to reflect on the good fortune decided by chance alone that allowed some of us to survive to build some kind of life to grow old and be able to return here and to bear witness.
I asked as part of my address today to share something of the story of the rest of my life following the end of the war how can someone summarize those nearly 70 years. What to include? What to leave out? I will try.

After the liberation and some weeks of recuperating and regaining strength I journeyed back to Hungary hoping maybe for a miracle back in my little village to maybe find alive my parents and grandparents who I last saw as we got off the

train in Auschwitz-Birkenau of course, there was no such miracle for me. No family to be found.
So to Budapest I went and there I apprenticed as a plumber and sheet metal workers after a few years, and the ongoing post- war political turmoil in Hungary. I was enlisted in the Hungarian Army in 1953 I married, and I had a son the next year. By I was out of the Army and working for a firm dealing in colorized pictures and portraits. Unfortunately, such an enterprise was not an officially approved social business so there were always problems of one kind or another but along came the revolution in October 1956. It was then I decided to leave Hungary with my young family and try for a better live somewhere else.
After a difficult exit across the Austrian border, and a few weeks in Vienna deciding what to do, we left for America and there we arrived in December without family, without friends, without work, without money and with only two English words known to me yes and no. With help I found work. Our daughter arrived the next march 13 and slowly we learned how life went in the U.S.A.
In 1959, less than 3 years after arriving in America, I had saved enough to start a business, heating, plumbing, sheet metal.
My second daughter was born in 1960 and my wife and I were working hard to give our children a better life than we had left behind in Hungary.
Through hard work and determination we built a successful business and a good life with the passing years. Thankfully the struggles slowly became fewer, and a little easier to comprehend and to deal with in our new country business expanded. I learned the air conditioning trade. I was fortunate to be able to attract loyal customers and to hire capable technicians we were able to send all three children to college and to enjoy some of the rewards of our hard work such as being able to vacation more we got older, and to return to Europe regularly.
In 1999 I sold my business after over 40 years. Three years later I went back to work for myself and, to this day, I Remain active in my chosen field - one I know well, and which has been good to me all these years my children are all grown with their children of their own. I have 2 Grandsons, 2 Granddaughters and 3 Step grandsons who came to America in 2008. I never thought in May, 1945 that I would live to my happy to be alive and to share my story with you thank you all for coming to this commemoration and for listening to a voice from the story of your past and mine.
In closing, I also wish to thank Dr. Wolfgang Quatember for inviting me to speak here today, and most of all for his friendship and interest permission.

Gerhard Rein, Speech on the liberation of Ebensee Concentration Camp, May 10,

Beyond Lisewo

I would like for all of you to imagine Lisewo, a small village on the Wisla River, or in English, the Vistula. Two churches, a village green, and a train station.

Rosa and Louis Rein, my grandparents, had a small farmyard in Lisewo, with a horse, a carriage and a flatbed truck. They used the carriage to pick up visitors from the train station and the flatbed to transport milk cans from the surrounding farms to the dairy in the nearby county seat of Kulm/ Chelmno. Rosa and Louis Rein had six children, all of whom – like their parents – considered themselves German. They moved to Berlin, took jobs as civil servants, as clothing salespeople at the Hertie Department Store, or sold ice cream for the Weiss Company.

According to the Treaty of Versailles, the youngest, born in 1904, was not allowed to choose between Germany and Poland, so Herbert remained with his parents in Lisewo. Herbert was my father.

A few days before German troops invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Hitler ordered the extermination of the Polish Catholic intelligentsia and the Jews. Shortly after the German invasion, Rosa and Louis Rein, my grandparents, were slain in their farmyard in Lisewo.

We still do not know exactly who killed them, whether it was Wehrmacht soldiers, the SS, the Gestapo, ethnic German vigilantes or their Christian neighbors, although some things suggest it was the neighbors. But we really do not know. We really don't know anything at all, and I certainly do not. All the things that were important in our family and for our family were never discussed, never talked about. Our family was as silent as a grave.

Herbert Rein married a devout Christian in Kulm/Chelmno, my mother. They had three children….I was the youngest, born in 1936. My mother and we three children survived the flight to the West, and were later coaxed and pushed by her into her beloved Protestant Church. We did not feel coerced, however. I became a pious, rather naïve Christian and was encouraged in my activities and interests at an early age; this led to my later discovery of the ecumenical movement as my actual place in the world.

I found out that my father was a Jew when I was 17 years old. It was a surprise but not a shock. I still do not understand why I was so slow and

hesitating with my questions. My mother's standard answer was always, "Oh Lord, if you only knew." But I didn't. And she would not say anything else. At the most, she apologized for marrying this man who had been our father……there really hadn't been any other men in the area available that came into question. This answer neither satisfied nor pleased me.
I only found out later that her brother – my uncle – had been a real Nazi. The silence was passed on to the children. My older siblings never shared anything they found out. Each member of this reticent, silent family kept everything to him or herself.
This created a tangle of conjectures, rumors, suspicions, ludicrous stories and bizarre myths.
My father left the house in Kulm/Chelmno when I was two years old, in 1938.
Did Polish friends hide him? Was he protected by German soldiers who had been his friends?
Was he arrested as a Polish officer, seen in Paris, shot after the invasion? I couldn't figure out what was true and what was fabricated.
I became a journalist and still ask myself why I was – and am – so timid when it comes to approaching the story of my father, his parents, and his siblings. After a time, however, things started to come together, beginning with his five siblings in Berlin. Georg, my father's eldest brother, was shot in Riga Concentration Camp, his sister Betty and her husband were gassed in Auschwitz. His brother Leopold was wanted by the Gestapo and hung himself in a hotel in Berlin. His sister Helene escaped to Australia with her husband and his brother Hugo made it to Brazil.
I feel more connected than ever with their surviving children, my cousins….us, the grandchildren from Lisewo. With Zipora and Zeev in Jerusalem (in blessed remembrance), with Eva and Sol in Melbourne, with Peter and Tova in El Paso, Texas, and with Alicia and Billy in Montevideo, Uruguay.
This is my Jewish clan that I have just come to discover in the past few years, scattered all over the world. And what am I for them? A non-Jewish Jew? Or perhaps evermore the non-Christian Christian?
And still nothing from my father. I inquired about him at Auschwitz and at Yad Vashem but the answer was always the same: No entries.
And suddenly, on June 19, 2006, eight years ago, I found a link to Mauthausen and then to Ebensee in the computer at the Information Center of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. A prisoner

identity card number 121213 for Herbert Rein, with his correct birthdate, his birthplace Lisewo and his street address in Kulm, Friedrichstrasse 17.
The information about my father was confirmed with help from the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Vienna, the archives at the Mauthausen Concentration Camp Memorial and from Dr. Wolfgang Quatember here at the Ebensee Memorial. According to this information, my father was deported to Auschwitz in July, 1944.
In January, 1945, two weeks before the Red Army liberated Auschwitz my father was ordered to join one of the so-called death marches and arrived at Ebensee on January 25, 1945 via Mauthausen. I was unable to find out where he had spent the time between 1938 and his arrival at Auschwitz.
My father died here at Ebensee on March 8, 1945. Each death was a murder. He was forty years old. Most of the survivors of Ebensee were much younger than my father.
My Christian and my Jewish families, each of which had come to terms with their version of my father's fate, were shocked and confused when I informed them about Mauthausen and Ebensee. I traveled immediately to Ebensee with my wife. Dr. Quatember showed us the tunnel, and here in the cemetery we recited the Kaddish in quiet, trembling voices…..us, the amateur non-Jews. My father left behind no notes, no smuggled slips of paper, no letters.
I often search for texts by concentration camp survivors, from people who were able to put into words what they saw, heard and suffered. Just like my father.
"There is this mass of bodies all jammed and packed together in the railway car, this sharp pain in the right knee. Day, night…..we are now headed into the fourth night, the fifth day…..but is it even right to say that we were headed somewhere? Because we can't move, we are wedged so tightly together….instead, it is the night that moves in over us, these motionless, soon-to-be corpses." This is what the Spanish author Jorge Semprún remembered.
"We are digging a grave in the sky it is ample to lie there…..
Death comes as a master from Germany
He shouts stroke darker the strings and as smoke you shall climb to the sky
Then you'll have a grave in the clouds it is ample to lie there."
This is how the Romanian-French poet Paul Celan described his experience.
And I can't let go of this oft-quoted sentence by the Italian writer Primo

Levi, “It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say.”

I live in Germany. I value the openness of its society and the predominately tolerant attitude that enables the Federal Republic to present a pleasant, congenial face to the world. But this Germany is currently the world’s third-largest weapons and arms exporter. Our chancellor passes off scandalous weapons exports to volatile areas as part of the German peace policy. The Federal President considers his fellow countrymen to be “spoiled by peace”, to be “addicted to happiness” and complains that too many of them adhere to and maintain “the magnitude of German guilt”. I deplore the creeping militarization of my country which completely disregards and violates the obligation of peace as required by the Constitution. The political class demands that the new power Federal Republic assumes responsibility for increased military operations and that our culture of restraint come to an end. This change upends everything the Germans painstakingly had to learn about peace following the disaster of the Second World War, following 1945. I deplore the creeping militarization of our thinking.

I am extremely worried. “It happened, therefore it can happen again.” My concern is also the worry that what happened to my so normal, so strange family locked between Poland and Germany, between Jews and Christian can happen anytime, anywhere again.

I have never spoken publicly about Rosa and Louis, my grandparents, about Herbert, my father, about Lisewo, the small village on the Vistula. Ebensee is the right place to do so. My father was not liberated from Ebensee. We found him again, here. Dead. But his name is preserved here. This is his place.