May 4, 2025

Inauguration of the Country Memorial Sign at the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial

Speech manuscripts. The spoken word is binding.

Greeting words by Prof. Dr. Oliver von Wrochem, Director of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial

Thank you for the musical introduction - we have heard a song by jazz musician and Auschwitz survivor Coco Schumann, interpreted for us by Alexander Kranich's quartet.
I would like to welcome you, dear guests, to the 'House of Remembrance': to mark the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the prisoners of the Neuengamme concentration camp, the Hamburg Memorials and Learning Centres Foundation is today erecting a new national memorial, thus extending the international memorial from 1965.
I am delighted that the following will be speaking today on this occasion
Dr Martine Letterie, President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme and relative of Neuengamme prisoner Martinus Letterie,
Dr Iryna Tybinka, the Consul General of Ukraine in Hamburg,
and Vincent de Kom, relative of Neuengamme prisoner Anton de Kom.
Among the guests, I would also like to welcome many relatives of prisoners of the Neuengamme concentration camp - from the Netherlands, Ukraine, France, Spain and other countries, as well as Hamburg's Senator for Education, Ksenija Bekeris, and representatives of the consular corps and the Ministry of Culture and Media.
Why is a new memorial sign needed at the Neuengamme concentration camp memorial site? The extension of the international memorial from 1965 aims to take account of today's changed state formation and to give appropriate visibility to victim groups who do not see themselves represented by the site.
The 1965 international memorial was criticised in particular after Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 and the subsequent war. The criticism centred on the country plaque with the inscription 'USSR' for Soviet Union. This country plaque is part of an arrangement of 22 horizontal plaques on which a total of 26 countries are listed, including the former socialist

states of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. The inscriptions represent the political map of 1965 and the period of bloc confrontation between East and West.
For over two years, we discussed how this historical monument could be expanded in a contemporary and appropriate way. Our aim was and is to enable a multinational commemoration that does justice to the heterogeneous composition of the prisoners, but also enables the countries of the post-socialist and post-colonial space to be recognised.
In addition to the intensive internal discussions in our foundation, the associations represented in the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme, the committees of our foundation, i.e. the foundation council, the advisory board and the expert commission, were also involved in the discussions. In a public participatory workshop, we also discussed the divisions in the culture of remembrance of the Second World War and the Nazi crimes, the nationalisation and decolonisation of remembrance, and we also spoke with various other groups, the Jewish community in Hamburg and Hamburg associations of Sinti and Roma.
During these discussions, a research desideratum came to light: there were often no answers to the question of which regions the Soviet prisoners imprisoned in Neuengamme concentration camp came from, how many there were and which state they can be assigned to today. Many files of the SS administration of Neuengamme concentration camp had been destroyed and are difficult to reconstruct. In addition, the entries in the remaining files had not been systematically analysed according to the places of birth of the prisoners.
Our archive therefore researched the stated birthplaces of Neuengamme concentration camp prisoners in our database and localised them on today's political map in 70 sovereign states, including several post-socialist states. Other prisoners were born on the African and Asian continents, often in former colonial territories. They were mostly taken to German concentration camps while they were living in states invaded by or at war with Germany. As a result of intensive debates, it was decided that the new national memorial marker should bear the names of all 70 countries listed as sovereign states on the political map of 2025 in which the birthplaces of the prisoners of Neuengamme concentration camp are located.
I do not want to conceal the fact that there was and still is well-founded resistance to an extension of the international memorial. On the one hand, there are concerns about the nationalisation of remembrance, and on the other hand, it is questionable how membership of a national and ethnic group can be derived from geographical origin, i.e. how it can be determined how the prisoners defined their national or ethnic affiliation when they were imprisoned in Neuengamme concentration camp. We had to realise that the heterogeneous composition of the inmates, as well as the diverse backgrounds of the addressees today, defy a complete presentation and will inspire questions.

My thanks go to all those who have constructively supported the design process. I would also like to thank the Ministry of Culture and Media, which supported the project financially. Above all, I would like to thank the designers from MERA Landschaftsarchitekten and 2er-Pack-Identity, as well as the company Gödde, which produced the memorial plaque in its factory.
We believe that the new national memorial extends the commemoration of the victims of the Neuengamme concentration camp in a dignified way, also by visualising the global dimensions of the National Socialist war.
I would now like to hand over to Martine Letterie, who will comment on the search for a design solution and the significance of the national memorial for the associations of the Amicale Internationale. Thank you very much!

Greetings words by Dr. Martine Letterie, President of the Amicale Internationale KZ-Neuengamme

Thank you very much, dear Oliver, and a warm welcome from me to everyone here!
Yes, it has not been an easy conversation about the important question of how we can appropriately expand the historical ensemble of the international memorial. I would like to start by explaining what the international memorial means to the Amicale Internationale in particular and then go into the expansion.
The construction of the international memorial in 1965 was preceded by years of negotiations. The International Association of Former Prisoners of Neuengamme Concentration Camp and its then existing national associations from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, Yugoslavia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Poland struggled with the Senate and the building authorities of the City of Hamburg to find a worthy solution. In May 1965, a worthy memorial site was finally created on the site of the former concentration camp, where international commemorations have been held regularly ever since. The memorial is therefore still of great importance today in honouring the victims of the Neuengamme concentration camp and is also symbolic of the struggle of the victims' associations as part of the culture of remembrance of the Nazi crimes.
In 1999, an agreement was concluded between the Amicale Internationale and the City of Hamburg regarding the erection of memorials on the grounds of the Neuengamme concentration camp memorial site: According to this agreement, no individual memorial signs with national symbolism were to be placed at the international memorial. I quote from the agreement: 'Since the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial is committed to the memory of all victims of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp, regardless of their different national, social, ideological and religious origins, the erection of memorials with clearly ideological, national or religious symbolism should be avoided.'
Nevertheless, in our discussions we recognised the need to expand the national memorial, as the memorial complex is also aimed at today's addressees and their remembrance - and we want to do justice to this.
Two elements were therefore important to us: the addition to the international memorial should enable a broader commemoration at the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial and illustrate the heterogeneous diversity of the prisoners, as this was a characteristic feature of the Neuengamme concentration camp in particular. However, the extension should also retain its commemorative character and blend in with the atmosphere of the existing site. A purely

conceptual-artistic solution, a commentary or a 'counter-monument' would not fulfil this purpose.
As we heard from Oliver von Wrochem, we discussed the number of countries to be named at length because we didn't want to forget anyone. Many other details were also important, such as the decision in favour of inscriptions in the respective country fonts. As in the historical memorial, the inscriptions in the new country memorial are uniform in size, regardless of the number of prisoners from the respective countries. Because when we delve into the history of this concentration camp, we always recognise individual fates in which every single person counts.
We were attracted by the proposal of the Hamburg landscape architecture firm MERA to develop a large circular memorial plaque on which the names of the countries are engraved in the form of a spiral. In the spiral arrangement, the countries appear connected to each other and at the same time not hierarchised, as the memorial plaque can be viewed from all sides. This shape also makes it possible to lay floral arrangements and flowers in different places. Persecuted groups that were persecuted in many countries and other groups from individual countries that have not yet been represented are also given the opportunity to be represented in the memorial grove with their own memorial.
When researching the birthplaces of the prisoners, the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial also investigated where the prisoners' lives began and what course they took. In particular, further research is being carried out into the circumstances that brought the people, who had all set out with their hopes and desires for their lives, to this terrible place, the Neuengamme concentration camp.
I would also like to point out that a digital tool has been developed that can be used to decipher the inscription on the new memorial sign. Further information on the origin of the prisoners will be available there in the near future. Many thanks for this to the agency with the eloquent name 'Neue Rituale'.
Today, Vincent de Kom will still speak of Anton de Kom, who was born in the former Dutch colony of Surinam and whose life story was characterised by both National Socialism and colonialism.
Many thousands of men and women from the Ukraine were deported to Germany for forced labour and to concentration camps; in the Neuengamme concentration camp, these people formed one of the largest groups of prisoners. This brings me to the speech by the Consul General of Ukraine in Hamburg, Dr Iryna Tybinka.
Before that, we will hear the ballad 'Au revoir mon amour', a farewell song.
Thank you very much for your attention!

Speech by Dr. Iryna Tybinka, General Consul of Ukraine in Hamburg

Dear Prof Dr von Wrochem,
Dear Dr Letterie,
Dear Vincent de Kom,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The speciality of today's Ukrainian war diplomacy lies in being honest and calling a spade a spade.
Especially when talking to friends and like-minded people.
As I am here today in friendly company, I must admit that I was confused when the sketch of the new memorial plaque was first shown to me.
I didn't know how it could be interpreted - as a long-awaited achievement or as an attempt to obscure historical memory.
That's how far removed the result was from the impulse that led to the decision to expand the International Memorial ensemble in 2022.
At that time, we were talking about restoring historical justice for the Ukrainians, who were, if not the largest group of prisoners in the concentration camp.
And for the Ukrainian people, who suffered great losses - more than 8 million dead.
Including 1.5 million Ukrainian Jews who were exterminated.
And for the Ukrainian land, which was soaked in the blood of numerous battles and suffered some of the greatest destruction - 40% of all the cities destroyed in the Soviet Union during the Second World War were in Ukraine.
In total, over 700 Ukrainian towns and 28 thousand villages were wiped off the face of the earth.
Three years ago, we talked about creating a special place here that would make it possible to honour the memory of the bloody price Ukraine paid in the Second World War.
Basically, we talked about the embodiment of the slogan that was engraved on the stele here in 1965 - 'Your suffering, your struggle and your death shall not be in vain'.
The presence of a stone with the inscription USSR (CCCP) in the ensemble further emphasised the justified criticism.
Especially after 31 years of the collapse of the state which, together with Hitler's Germany, was responsible for the beginning of the greatest mass murder in history and for the millions of lives lost.

Especially in the context of Russia's monopolisation of the victory of 1945 and its instrumentalisation of the entire legacy of the Second World War, which it proclaimed as the successor to this criminal communist empire.
Especially in the context of the ongoing unprovoked war of extermination in Europe, fuelled by Stalin's ideological successor, Vladimir Putin.
And in order to justify this, Russian propaganda actively utilises the theories and concepts from the time of the fight against National Socialism.
They distort and manipulate them completely to their own advantage.
The knowledge of all this heavy burden, this deep trauma of my people - both in the past and in the present - provoked my first, rather ambivalent reaction.
Mr von Wrochem probably remembers this.
But later came a different perception.
More balanced and more conscious.
More objective.
It was shaped by reading the memoirs of former Ukrainian forced labourers and concentration camp prisoners.
These memoirs were not just about the pain, fear and abuse they experienced in captivity.
They also told of those who carried this cross with them - their friends in suffering from France, Poland, the Netherlands or even Suriname, where Mr Vincent de Kom came from.
They emphasised a simple truth: war does not discriminate by nationality.
Nor does it discriminate by social status, education or political preference.
War crushes everyone.
The realisation that the 70 countries listed on the new memorial plaque are not just a list of the countries of origin of the prisoners of the Neuengamme concentration camp contributed to the objectivity of perception.
This long list of country names, which spans all continents of the world, is proof of the extent of the catastrophe at that time and a confirmation of the well-known axiom - war knows no borders.
I am sure that among those who later found themselves in the Nazi torture chambers were people who in the 1930s did not believe that what was happening in a neighbouring country could affect them.
The tragic reality later proved to them - there are no foreign wars.
Especially when they are waged by totalitarian regimes for whom the value and dignity of human life is an empty sound.
Ladies and gentlemen,

You are all familiar with the saying that history spirals.
This statement is often used by politicians and historians.
On 29 January this year, the Bundestag held a special session to commemorate the millions of victims of National Socialism.
The keynote speech was given by a Ukrainian citizen Roman Schwarzman.
He survived the ghetto as a child.
From the rostrum of the German parliament, he said: "Hitler wanted to kill me because I am a Jew.
Now Putin is trying to kill me because I am a Ukrainian".
His words emphasise the whole truth about the spiral of history.
The memorial plaque also runs in a spiral.
I don't know whether the creators of the project attach the same importance to this memorial circle as I do.
But I would like to thank them in particular.
Because this pattern is a further reminder to us all - those who have learnt nothing from history are doomed to repeat it.
I would also like to thank the management and all the staff of the Hamburg Foundation of Memorials and Places of Learning in Memory of the Victims of Nazi Crimes.
For their tireless work and the preservation of historical remembrance.
For their efforts to give the memory an objective form after 80 years that is not embellished by the idealisation of the controversial heroes or old propaganda myths.
I very much hope that this work to emphasise the historical truth will continue.
Not so much for the sake of the past, but for the sake of the future of our civilisation.
Thank you for the plaque itself.
It not only expands the geography of the prisoners of this concentration camp, but also restores historical justice to many of those who have been forgotten.
At a time when once again a totalitarian regime is exercising the devastating aggression of revanchism, when the voices of right-wing extremists are becoming ever more assertive and when a significant proportion of democratic society prefers to turn a blind eye to what is happening around them for the sake of their inner comfort, this plaque should serve as a reminder and a warning - history does spiral, but it can vary.
Which variant of the development is realised depends on the decision of each and every one of us.

Speech by Vincent de Kom, Descendant of the Anton de Kom, prisoner of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp

Dear guests, dear friends
Dear general consul Tybink,
Today we gather here, on historic ground, to remember. We also reflect on the new Länder Memorial here in Neuengamme — a monument that offers space to commemorate victims from various countries.
This plaque is a tangible acknowledgment of their suffering and is part of an international series of memorials that give national remembrance a place on this historic ground.
Here in Neuengamme, the lives of many came to an end, among them was Anton de Kom.
A man who dedicated his entire life to the international fight for justice and freedom — and against injustice, racism, colonialism, and Nazism.
Anton, my greatgrandfather, was born on February 22, 1898, in Paramaribo, Suriname, then a Dutch colony.
At a time when the scars of slavery were still deeply felt. His father had been born into slavery.
That awareness — that he was only one generation removed from total lack of freedom — became fundamental to his worldview.
He grew up with a deep sense of justice and a sharp eye for inequality.
As a young man, Anton came to the Netherlands, where he was introduced to socialist and anti-colonial ideas.
He married the love of his life, Nel, and together they had four children.
But his heart continued to beat for Suriname. In 1933, he returned, determined to stand up for his people.
Back in Suriname, he spoke publicly, listened to the concerns of workers, and sought to raise awareness of social and economic injustices.
But his struggle was soon made impossible.
The response from the colonial authorities was harsh: Anton was arrested and subsequently exiled from his homeland.
Back in the Netherlands, he continued tirelessly. Among other things, he wrote his book *We Slaves of Suriname*, which was revolutionary.
Never before had a Surinamese so powerfully criticized colonial history and given a voice to the enslaved and the oppressed.
It was both an indictment and a call for awareness.
When the Second World War broke out, he had no doubt which side he was on. He was an internationalist who wanted to fight all forms of injustice.

Anton joined the resistance, contributed to the underground newspapers, and used his voice and words as weapons against Nazism.
But on August 7, 1944, he was arrested.
He ended up in the Oranjehotel in Scheveningen, then in Camp Vught, later in Sachsenhausen — and finally here, in Neuengamme.
A journey full of suffering, full of dehumanization.
In April 1945, just days before liberation, Anton de Kom died in Sandbostel.
We as a family lived in uncertainty about his fate for years.
It wasn't until 1960 that his remains were found in a mass grave.
His wife Nel had spent years sitting every day in the bay window of her house, staring at the horizon, hoping for his return.
It is an image that touches me deeply — the quiet, painful waiting for a man who never came home.
And yet — Anton and his legacy live on.
He was posthumously honored, and the government offered its apologies for how he was treated.
He was included in the Canon of Dutch History, and his books are more well-known than ever before.
Here, in this place, we remember him not only as a victim, but also as an example.
As someone who used his words to tear down walls.
Who believed in equality, in justice, in the power of solidarity.
His fight against colonialism, racism, and fascism — and for freedom and equality — remains deeply relevant today.
So let us today not only reflect on his death, but more so on his life.
On the values he stood for.
On the hope he gave.
Anton de Kom was a man of hope.
Let his voice live on in our words and our thoughts.
Let his courage inspire us to act.
And let us continue to fight injustice – around the globe.

Closing words by Oliver von Wrochem

Thank you very much for your sinciere words!
Before we go together to the new memorial sign, I would like to invite you all to visit the commemorative projects in our tent of diverse memories and at the place of solidarity.
We will now listen to a piece of music. We will then make our way to the new memorial sign, with the speakers leading the way. We have provided flowers at the exit and you are cordially invited to lay one at the new country memorial. We are thus dedicating the extension and today's event to the memory of all prisoners of the Neuengamme concentration camp.
Thank you !