Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme

KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme
Ausstellungen
Begegnungen
Studienzentrum

3 May 2025

Programme for the Commemoration Ceremony

marking the 80th anniversary of the end of the war and the liberation of the concentration camps

Music	**Outburst for Unaccompanied Saxophone** by Chris Evan Hass (*1993)
Opening words	**Prof. Dr Oliver von Wrochem** *Director of the Foundation of Hamburg Memorials and Learning Centres*
Greeting	**Dr Peter Tschentscher** *First Mayor of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg*
Greeting	**Olaf Scholz** *Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany*
Music	**Und der Regen rinnt** by Ilse Weber (1903-1944) Ilse Weber was a German-speaking Czech author and singer. She was deported with her family to Theresienstadt in 1942. She wrote many songs there to comfort the children in the infirmary. When these children were deported to Auschwitz in 1944, she refused to let them go alone and voluntarily accompanied to the gas chamber along with her son.
Speech	**Helga Melmed** *Survivor of Neuengamme concentration camp*
Music	**Le Chant des Partisans** The "Song of the Partisans" was popularized in 1943 by Anna Marly, a Russian exile living in London. At the suggestion of the resistance fighter Emmanuel d'Astier, French lyrics were written for the originally Russian song by the journalist Joseph Kessel and the novelist Maurice Druon. The song is an appeal to join the life-and-death struggle for the liberation of

France. It was broadcast on French-language BBC programmes and the lyrics were printed in underground newspapers, leading it to become the anthem of the French Résistance.

Speech — **Dr. Martine Letterie**

President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme (AIN)

Music — **Die Moorsoldaten**

This song was written in 1933 by political prisoners in the Börgermoor concentration camp in the Emsland region. According to the composer Rudi Goguel, the piece was written "as a deliberate protest song by the resistance fighters against the oppressors to publicly demonstrate our higher morals compared to the bestiality of the SS."

Musical accompaniment provided by the award and scholarship winners of the Jugend musiziert Förderverein Hamburg e.V.: **Theresa Kanitz** (saxophone), **Jamie Freeman** (tenor) and **Mathis Simon** (baritone), with the support of **Natalie Böttcher** (accordion)

This will be followed by the wreath-laying ceremony at the International Monument.

Musical accompaniment: **Samantha Wright** (clarinet)

Oliver von Wrochem

Dear Helga Melmed and family,

dear Chancellor Scholz,

dear First Mayor Tschentscher,

dear President of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme, Martine Letterie,

dear representatives of the Bundestag, the Senate, the Hamburg Parliament, and the consular corps,

I am also delighted that delegations from the membership associations of the Amicale Internationale and family members of former Neuengamme prisoners from Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, the UK, Ukraine and the USA have travelled here,

and I would like to welcome everyone who is providing the musical accompaniment for our commemoration today,

and express my warmest thanks to all the employees of our Foundation who have made the events of today and the coming days possible,

dear ladies and gentlemen,

dear friends,

Eighty years after the end of the Second World War and the liberation of the concentration camps, we have come together here today at the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial, and I would like to welcome you all warmly on this occasion.

We remember in mourning the more than 100.000 people from all over Europe who were imprisoned in the Neuengamme camp system.

We think of the more than 42.000 people who were murdered in Neuengamme, in numerous satellite camps, on death marches, and in the Bay of Lübeck, or who perished of diseases, malnutrition, and exhaustion.

We think of the many men and women who managed to hold onto their humanity in the horrific conditions in the camp, who showed solidarity and shared what little they had, even if it was sometimes only a word or a glance.

We commemorate all of the recently deceased former prisoners of Neuengamme, whose deaths we learned of in the past 12 months. I will read out their names:

Bruno Fabretti, Pierre Graignic,

Natan Grossmann, Vasilis Papadopoulos,

Erik Preben Tanne, Lidija Turowskaja.

In remembering these wonderful people and their painful experiences, I would like to start by reminding us of what the former prisoners longed for – they longed for a world in which all people can live in dignity, one in which our thoughts and actions are determined not by fear and exclusion, but by humanity and confidence.

Many of you here today, whether you have come from near or far, are working to create such a world.

I thank you for this from the bottom of my heart. Your dedication gives me confidence – in times when it has sometimes been difficult to remain confident.

Ladies and gentlemen,

we live in a time when fewer and fewer people consider critical engagement with National Socialism to be an important basis of their self-conception. Trivializing the crimes of the National Socialists is also no longer a fringe phenomenon in society.

A party with far-right and historical revisionist elements is represented by nearly a quarter of the members of the German Bundestag and has become the strongest political force in some federal states.

In the space of a year, our social cohesion has massively weakened, and our democracy – which is oriented on universal values, equal rights for all, and human dignity – is more at risk than ever before.

Autocracies are on the rise around the world. As the USA, Russia, Hungary, Italy, Argentina and many other countries demonstrate, this goes hand in hand with the gradual destruction of the state's separation of powers, the weakening of social institutions, the undermining of the rule of law, and alliances between oligarchs and populists.

Many of us are speechless in the face of such a widespread lack of empathy, and we don't know how this will counter Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine or the unprecedented antisemitism, antiziganism, racism, hatred, and agitation.

I ask myself and all of you: How can we and how do we want to respond to this?

In trying to find an answer, I would like to mention some of the hopes, desires, and expectations expressed by former concentration camp prisoners. In 2022, Helga Melmed addressed the following words to us:

"We must learn to respect all the differences in the world and not destroy them."

Dear Helga, I am so pleased that you and your family once again undertook the long journey from the USA to speak to us. We are very grateful to you for this, and we extend another warm welcome to you.

I would also like to quote Edith Kraus, who called upon us in 2018:

> "People, teach your children not to hate anyone. Hate leads to war and death. [...] Hate poisons the soul. Do not be influenced by those who preach that someone whose skin is a different skin colour to yours or who prays to God differently than you must be destroyed!"

And Ewa Żelechowska-Stolzman from Poland spoke the following words in 2020:

> "People, be a human to your fellow humans and not an enemy, do not think only of yourself, but instead change your 'I' into 'every person is close to me'".

These messages and many others from survivors have been displayed today at the back of this former brick factory. Many come from people who are no longer with us, or who can no longer visit us on account of their advanced age. I am so pleased that these people can still be present with us here in this way nonetheless. They create a framework for our commemoration ceremony, and they point the way to a more optimistic present and future.

Let us confidently embrace their messages. Respect for diversity and respect in dealing with one another is an asset that we should preserve and protect. This also means that we must counter the enemies of democracy with all the means at our disposal.

I am convinced that is no longer enough today for memorials to educate people about the injustices of National Socialism, and it is no longer enough for people from around the world to visit memorial sites. It is up to all of us everywhere to ensure that the memory of National Socialism leads to value-driven democratic action. Knowing where ideologies of inequality, antisemitism, antiziganism, racism and hostility towards democracy can lead, we must stand up for a democratic coexistence, for the ability to compromise, for compassion, and for a value-led dialog – in our everyday lives, our families, amongst our friends, at work, in our leisure time, and in the political arena.

As a memorials foundation in Hamburg, we and many others have organized various public activities in the city to mark the 80th anniversary of the liberation. I encourage you to take part in them. Visit our Tent of Diverse Remembrance in Neuengamme tomorrow, attend the readings to hear the voices of the liberated and other events in the city, and join initiatives that are actively participating in memorial culture.

I am grateful that so many of you are here today, and I am especially thankful for the attendance of so many descendants of victims of persecution who stand firmly by our side, on whose behalf Martine Letterie will speak today.

It shows tremendous appreciation for our work that so many parliamentary representatives have come today, and that the Federal Chancellor and First Mayor will speak to us. In doing so, they show that the memory of National Socialist crimes remains firmly anchored as a part our democratic society in Germany.

I would now like to hand over to the First Mayor.

Peter Tschentscher

Olaf Scholz

Helga Melmed

Hello,

my name is Helga Melmed. I am Jewish and a Holocaust survivor. I was born in Germany and I am a German citizen. The United States is my adopted country and I am also an American citizen.

I am here today to talk about discrimination, evil, propaganda and violence. I felt discrimination early in my life, long before I could spell the word discrimination. I was only 5 years old when my teacher beat my hands bloody with a ruler and had my classmates to call me a "dirty Jew". I experienced pure evil for the first time at age 10 when the nazi soldiers burnt down the Jewish school I went to in Berlin and laughed when they threw our books into a fire pit.

Although I didn't know the right words, I noticed that propaganda greatly influenced the laws over the next years. The laws forbad Jewish people from entering movie theaters, parks, the zoo and every other place for entertainment. Many forbad Jews from attending universities, having a profession of any kind and/or owning anything of value, even owning a radio was against the law!

In 1941 violence came in the middle of the night when the nazi soldiers banged open the door and my family and I were taken by force, from the home I was born in, the only home I had ever known. We were shoved into cattle cars and shipped off to another country with another language and a different culture.

It was there, in the ghetto of Lodz, that my father was shot and killed. He had been used as a human target for practice by the nazi military. My mother, brokenhearted without my father, grew ill from consumption and died of starvation on my 14th birthday leaving me alone and scared in an ugly world.

The eldest of the Jews at the ghetto, an administrator, had been able to choose some of the orphaned children to live in a group together, in a home, in a different part of the ghetto. It was while living there I met and became friends with three girls from different countries and they became what I call my camp sisters. I'd like to pause here a moment to mention that here with us today one of my camp sister's daughter, Nina Halden Rönnlund, has traveled from Sweden so we could meet in person, and I am very happy to have this opportunity to see my sister again in the features of her daughter.

The four of us stayed together through everything that followed, and we shared everything, our food, our blankets, our hard labor and mostly we shared a love for each other. It was that caring, that love, that saw us through the horrors we would endure. We were evacuated from the ghetto when the Russians came close to the Polish border. Sent, again in cattle cars, to Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration

camp. While there we were made to strip down to our bare bodies and our heads were shaved. We had been selected for forced labor in Germany and deported to Hamburg.

It was in 1944 when we arrived at the Dessauer Ufer in the port of Hamburg. Later we were sent to Poppenbüttel, a hard labor camp for young women. We were forced to clean the debris from the bombings that destroyed Hamburg. The conditions were so bad; we were tired, hungry and scared at all times. Sometimes we prayed that the bombs would fall on our location and put an end to all the fear.

It was early in 1945 when we were marched, in the winter, without shoes and under heavy guard, to Bergen-Belsen. The camp was about 90 miles away and during this long journey many of us were shot or died of exhaustion.

Upon arrival, I was separated from my camp sisters and was deathly ill with typhus fever and tuberculosis. I was 17 years old and weighed 46 pounds. The camp was liberated in mid-April by the British troops, but I barely remember the occasion.

After some time in a military hospital tent, I went by ship to Sweden to recover. I grew to love Sweden and the family I stayed with when I was well. Then, my aunt in New York city found me through the World Jewish Congress and insisted that I come to America to live with her. I thrived in the U.S., I went to school, became a Registered Nurse, married a wonderful man, raised 4 children and I have 4 grandchildren. Some of my family is here with me and I appreciate them for coming.

As I think back to those long and horrible years, I shiver. The world is in chaos again and it seems to me no one knows what to do to stop it. The U.S. is divided in half, the Maga and American Nationalist groups have become powerful forces. Anti-Semitism is on the rise worldwide!!

Once again, the hypnosis of propaganda is making its way into the minds of everyday people. The ruthless and rich, who want to control everything for their own selfish desires, are using the same methods that were used 85 years ago, and there is war and anger everywhere! Peace and tranquility for all seems like a distant dream, just as it did so long ago.

I wonder if the world leaders are making the same mistakes all over again. Where are the decent and truthful leaders? It's time for a better world! What can the ordinary people do to make this a better world? YES, WE ALL MUST SPEAK OUT AGAINST HATE AND OPRESSION WHEREVER AND WHENEVER WE COME ACROSS IT.

We must be vigilant, yet... more than that, in order to truly win the battle of good vs. evil we must find a way to see the joy and beauty in our daily living and be decent and kind everyday so we don't become what we despise!

After the Holocaust we said, "yad v'sham" never again!

Along with that, today I say "never is now!"

Never stop being kind, never stop caring, and never ever stop loving!

Thank you.

Martine Letterie

Dear Ms Helga Melmed,

dear Mr Chancellor Scholz,

dear Mr Mayor Peter Tschentscher,

dear Mr von Wrochem, Oliver,

dear representatives of the Bundestag, the Senate, the Hamburg Parliament, and the consular corps,

dear ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

My name is Martine Letterie. I am the president of the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme and the granddaughter of Martinus Letterie, who was murdered on 25 January 1942 in Neuengamme concentration camp. Today we mark the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Neuengamme concentration camp and the beginning of peace in Europe five days later. This brought an end to the National Socialist regime of terror that had held Europe in its grip for nearly two decades.

Almost immediately, former prisoners tried to visit the grounds of the liberated camp to commemorate their fallen comrades. But they faced resistance from the authorities. This prompted them to join the forces of the various national associations of former prisoners, and in 1958 they founded the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme.

The goals that the founders formulated in their statutes are still relevant today, which is why I will read the first three aloud:

a) To preserve peace and European security, for easing international tensions as well as strengthening the friendship between nations and fighting neo-Nazi, neo-fascist and revanchist activities.

b) To urge its members to embrace the spirit of brotherhood and humanity, just as the concentration camp prisoners demonstrated, regardless of ethnicity, religion and political opinion.

c) To bear witness to the deportations and crimes against humanity in the concentration camps.

Past board members and presidents have been very committed to promoting these goals. It is thanks to the efforts of the AIN that an international monument was erected in 1965, with thousands of former prisoners and their families attending the dedication ceremony.

Through the tireless campaigning of former board members who repeatedly approached the City of Hamburg with their requests, the House of Remembrance was built and the prisons that were constructed in the grounds after the war were torn down so that a worthy memorial could finally be inaugurated in 2005.

Victor Malbecq, the last former prisoner who served as president of the AIN, died in 2015. He was born in a suburb of Brussels in 1925 and was active in the Belgian "Milices Patriotiques" resistance group during the war. He was arrested by the German Security Police in August 1944, at the age of 19, and arrived in Neuengamme concentration camp on 2 September.

After just four days, he was transferred to the Schandelah satellite camp. When the SS cleared this camp, Victor Malbecq was taken to the Wöbbelin satellite camp on 10 April 1945. There he experienced the worst days of his concentration camp imprisonment. The living conditions in Wöbbelin were catastrophic. New transports reached the camp every day. There were no beds, tables or places to sit. Hardly any food was distributed.

Victor Malbecq worked in the "corpse commando" in order to get a bit of soup. Each day, he and other prisoners had to transport up to sixty bodies to a mass grave located a kilometre from the camp. On 2 May 1945, Malbecq was liberated in Wöbbelin. He took on the dreadful task of telling the families of his deceased comrades what had happened to them. After he retired, he continued to work tirelessly to keep alive the memory of the events in Neuengamme and the satellite camps.

Victor Malbecq was one of more than 100,000 prisoners who were held captive in Neuengamme or one of the satellite camps. Only half of them survived, and all of their stories are moving and shocking.

Victor Malbecq came from Belgium, but the prisoners came from all countries that were occupied or at war with Nazi Germany, as well as Spain and Switzerland. There were more than 25 different nationalities.

Organizations from seven different countries are currently part of the Amicale Internationale. The associations come from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain. In some countries, two organizations have joined together, one national and one more local. This is the case in the Netherlands with Stichting Oktober 44, the organization that

commemorates the raid in the village of Putten in October 1944. The Belgian association NCPGR Meensel-Kiezegem preserves the memory of the raid on 11 August 1944 in Meensel-Kiezegem. Some associations are large, such as the one in France, while others are somewhat smaller, like those in Denmark and Germany, and others are smaller still, like the one in Poland.

Not all countries have worked through the past in the same way. The Spanish Amical was only founded a few years ago and is dedicated to remembering the Spanish victims of Neuengamme concentration camp. These Spaniards had first fought for the Republic and against the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War. When the Nationalists won, many Spanish anti-fascists fled to France, where they often later joined the resistance. For many decades during Franco's dictatorship and the following period, it was almost impossible to speak publicly about those who had been arrested in occupied France and deported to concentration camps in the German Reich. So, the Spanish Amical was not founded until 2019. On its initiative, a monument to the Spanish prisoners and the prisoners from the International Brigades was erected in the grounds of the Memorial in 2023.

In a certain way, we find ourselves at a turning point in the history of the AIN. There are very few survivors left among us, and these few are not strong enough to travel or actively participate in an organization.

Now it is up to us, the descendants. Our organization members include the children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nieces and nephews of former prisoners. We cannot and do not want to speak in the name of the former prisoners. What they went through is too horrific to comprehend. But within our families, we have experienced just how long a war can last and what it meant for those who were left behind when a beloved person never returned and instead lost their life in a terrible place under dreadful conditions. And we have seen how the former prisoners who did return were marked forever by what they had endured.

Perhaps this has made us more aware of how fragile our seemingly secure existence actually is – that democracy and the rule of law protect us from the bestiality our relatives experienced. Perhaps this is why the alarm bells go off a bit sooner for us than for others.

The founders of the AIN did not pass on the statutes for nothing. We have therefore also dedicated ourselves to preserving peace and European security, for easing international tensions, and for strengthening the friendship between nations and fighting neo-Nazi, neo-fascist and revanchist activities.

For a long time, the threat to European peace seemed hypothetical, but now it is terrifyingly real. Many European countries have already lurched to the right or are heading in that direction. Far-right parties gnaw at the foundations of the rule of law and democracy. In my own country, Geert Wilders is now the shadow prime minister. So far, he has not kept any of the promises he made before the election. His ministers try to circumvent the laws, and Wilders continually criticizes his own cabinet on the social network X. He sows chaos and increases polarization, but he is still doing very well in the polls.

People who elect politicians like Wilders or similar parties probably hope these parties will improve their lives. But history has taught us that, in the end, this will not be the case even for these people.

This is why it is important for us to continue fighting against neo-Nazi, neo-fascist and revanchist activities. We also must bear in mind that the growing polarization of society paved the way for these types of parties. In light of this, and in keeping with our statutes, we want to urge not just our members but all of our fellow citizens to embrace the spirit of brotherhood and humanity, just as the concentration camp prisoners demonstrated, regardless of ethnicity, religion and political opinion.

Translation/Übersetzung: Jessica Spengler

Oliver von Wrochem

Dear guests,

The commemoration event here at the Klinkerwerk is now over. It will continue with the wreath-laying ceremony at the International Monument. Please leave the hall through the gates through which you entered. Outside, please turn right and then right again. Our staff will show you the way in the grounds.