

Media release: Austrian Mauthausen Committee

Thousands commemorate liberation of the Mauthausen concentration camp

72 years ago, on 5 May 1945, prisoners held at the Mauthausen concentration camp and its sub-camps were liberated. Thousands of people from Austria and abroad, including the last survivors of the camps, took part in the Memorial and Liberation Commemorations at the Mauthausen memorial today. At the end of the ceremony, a procession of all participants leading out of the former “Schutzhaftlager” was led by survivors of the camps as a symbolic act to commemorate its liberation.

Vienna/Mauthausen, 7 May 2017 – The annual International Memorial and Liberation Commemorations were held today at the Mauthausen concentration camp to mark the liberation of its survivors on 5 May 1945. Thousands of visitors from Austria and abroad took part in the commemorations once again this year to mark the 72nd anniversary. The International Memorial and Liberation Commemorations were organised by the Austrian Mauthausen Committee (MKÖ) in close cooperation with the Austrian Camp Community Mauthausen (ÖLM) and the Comité International de Mauthausen (CIM).

This year’s theme: internationality unites

Since 2006 the annual Memorial and Liberation Commemorations have been dedicated to a different theme related to the history of the Mauthausen concentration camp or Austria’s Nazi past. An essential element in each year’s theme is establishing a link to the present to give young people a frame of reference and a topical perspective on the National Socialist era and ideology.

Willi Mernyi, Chairman of the Austrian Mauthausen Committee: “We owe it to the tens of thousands of victims of Mauthausen to provide an international context for our memorial ceremonies. We have a duty to ourselves and our children to reject all forms of populism and nationalism and instil an international mindset as the prevailing principle. This applies to the commemorations at Mauthausen just as it does to today’s efforts to create a fairer, more socially responsible and humane world.”

As more than 90 percent of the victims of the Mauthausen camp were neither German nor Austrian, this ceremony has great international significance and is the largest of its kind in the world. The Liberation Commemorations began with a reading of the Mauthausen Oath in more than 20 different languages – at a place like the former Mauthausen concentration camp where German was the only language permitted between 1938 and 1945, this made a strong statement about internationality.

Instead of a procession into the site by national and international delegations, all of the participants filed out of the area at the end of the ceremony to mark its conclusion. This year, the procession leading out of Mauthausen was led by camp survivors Dušan Stefancic, Yauhen Chrol, Nikolai Kireev, Aba Lewit, Jehuda Gurvich, Shaul Spielmann, Andrew Sternberg alongside GIs from the United States Embassy and pupils from Mauthausen middle school to symbolise the liberation of those incarcerated at the camp.

International participation in the Memorial and Liberation Commemorations

The memorial ceremony at the Mauthausen concentration camp began with an ecumenical liturgy with Bishop Michael Bünker, Diocesan Bishop Manfred Scheuer and Archpriest Ioannis Nikolitsis. This was followed by an

opening address from Willi Mernyi and laying of the wreaths by Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen, Federal Chancellor Christian Kern, and international and local delegations and youth organisations. During the wreath-laying ceremony, representatives of victims' organisations from France and the USA made memorial speeches in their national languages. This year's Memorial and Liberation Commemorations were led by Konstanze Breitebner and Mercedes Echerer.

Photos and press material on the 2017 Memorial and Liberation Commemorations available from <http://www.mkoe.at/service/presseinfo>

Statements:

President Alexander Van der Bellen:

“Nationalism, violation of human dignity and rejection of all things foreign does not solve any problems. It simply creates new ones. We have to work together to create a world in which human rights, freedom and respect are guaranteed.”

Federal Chancellor Christian Kern:

„Commemoration is our commitment and mission. Nationalism, chauvinism and racism, which today also show their ugly grimaces, must be countered with our strongest weapons. The solidarity, the tolerance and the courage and to proudly live these values.“

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