

## **Welcome Speech**

### **commemorative event Buchenwald, April 10, 2022**

#### **Prof Dr. Jens Wagner**

On behalf of the memorial and on behalf of our friends of the IKBD, with whom we are jointly organizing the event today, I would like to welcome you to the Buchenwald memorial.

April 11, 1945 brought the liberation of 21,000 prisoners in Buchenwald. More than 20,000 additional men and women from the camp were still in the hands of their tormentors that day. They had been sent on death marches. Some survivors were not freed until May 8th. But they, too, later celebrated April 11 as the symbolic day of liberation.

April 11th is a day of joy celebrating the liberation and expressing gratitude towards the liberators. A day of mourning for those who were murdered, and a day for reflection. We are reflecting how these crimes could have happened in the first place, and who was responsible, who is responsible, and raises the question in what world we would like to live in today and in the future.

The fact that National Socialism was defeated is thanks to the Allied forces and the Europe-wide resistance against the German occupation. A resistance that was also evident in the concentration camps, also ... and especially here in the Buchenwald concentration camp.

In addition to thanking the liberators, there is mourning for those who were not able to see the day of their liberation. 56,000 men, women and children did not survive the deportation to Buchenwald - political prisoners from all European countries, Jews, Sinti and Roma, Soviet prisoners of war, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses and those persecuted as "asocial" or "career criminals". They died because the National Socialists denied them membership of the "Volksgemeinschaft" they propagated, because they

considered them inferior and dangerous, or simply because they opposed the National Socialist plan for the racist reorganization of Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen, It is probably not the first time that most of you are taking part in a commemoration event on the anniversary of the liberation. This is the 21st time that I have helped to organize such a commemoration day. This harbours the danger of repetition and ritualization. If the same program is played out every year, if a commemoration day becomes a compulsory event or at best mourning without thinking, we find ourselves on the wrong track.

However, if commemoration is combined with knowledge, reflection, and a critical examination of the past, ... if we ask ourselves: “What do the Nazi crimes and their victims have to do with our lives today”, then so-called "remembrance" means more than historically cored piety. Then on the one hand it is about the serious appreciation of those who suffered and died in Buchenwald, and on the other hand it is about historical lessons for the future.

In order to encourage reflection, we host the commemoration days under a changing theme every year. This year it is Buchenwald's role in the persecution and murder of European Jews.

The occasion is the 80th anniversary of the Wannsee Conference and the 80th anniversary of the deportation of Thuringian Jews to ghettos and camps in occupied Poland. Very few people know that Jewish prisoners made up the largest group of prisoners in Buchenwald– calculated over the entire period from 1937 to 1945.

Their number was particularly high in 1938, after the November pogroms, and from the summer of 1944, when Hungarian Jews had to perform forced labour, especially in satellite camps, and especially from the end of 1944 on, when emaciated and dying and sick people from the evacuated camps in the east arrived in Buchenwald.

We were able to hear about the fate of the Jews deported to Buchenwald during our tour of the campgrounds. I would like to thank everyone involved for their contributions. Now, on the roll call square, we will hear speeches from, among others, the President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Dr. Josef Schuster and the two survivors Naftali Fürst from Israel and Vasile Nussbaum from Romania. They will tell us what it meant to be deported to the Buchenwald concentration camp as a Jew.

Dear Mr. Fürst, dear Mr. Nussbaum, it is a very special honor for all of us that you are speaking to us today. A very special welcome!

77 years after the end of the Second World War, war is raging again in Central Europe. Russian forces have invaded Ukraine by the order of President Vladimir Putin. The war poses an existential threat to the Ukrainian civilian population and to thousands of Ukrainian Holocaust and concentration camp survivors.

Nothing shows this more clearly than the violent death of Buchenwald survivor and Vice President of the International Committee Buchenwald-Dora Boris Romantschneko. He died when a shell hit his home in his hometown of Kharkov. When we mourn the victims of Buchenwald today, we think of him in particular.

I was shocked when two weeks ago the 96-year-old survivor of Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen, Anastasia Gulej, told me how terrified she was in her basement while her neighbourhood in a Kyiv suburb was fired upon by Russian rockets. For several years, Ms Gulej has been the head of the Ukrainian Association of Former Political Prisoners of Nazi Concentration Camps. Putin's so-called "denazification" of Ukraine forced them to leave their homes. She currently lives in Saxony-Anhalt, and today she is here to join us in commemorating the victims of Nazi terror in Buchenwald.

Welcome, dear Ms. Gulej!

As Poland, the former Soviet Union bore the main burden of the German war of plunder and annihilation. It is largely thanks to the Red Army that Europe was liberated from National Socialism. Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian prisoners made up about a third of all prisoners in Buchenwald. They suffered together in Buchenwald and together they opposed the SS. After the liberation, they swore together to build a world of peace and freedom.

It is cynical arrogance for Putin to claim that he wants to denazify Ukraine. Yes, in Ukraine there are right-wing extremist military units such as the Azov regiment. In contrast to Germany and Russia, however, extreme right-wingers have not achieved a significant share of the vote in the elections of the last decades in Ukraine. And President Zelensky comes from a Jewish family that has several Holocaust victims to mourn.

It is a shame that Nazi survivors fear for their lives or even, like our friend Boris Romanchenko, are killed because of the Russian attack. And it is a disgrace to what extent German right-wing extremists, including the AfD, justify the Russian war of aggression.

German right-wing extremists celebrate Putin because his system is increasingly showing signs of fascist rule: authoritarianism, hatred of liberal democracy and open society, homophobia, imperial expansionism, nationalism, totalitarian propaganda, contempt for human rights - and, again and again, anti-Semitism.

But Putin is not a new Hitler. We should be careful with historical analogies. We have said this again and again over the past two years, when pandemic deniers notoriously equated the corona protection measures with Nazi crimes and thus downplayed the Shoah.

Despite all the outrage at the ruler in Moscow, who had Ukraine invaded and does not shy away from brutally oppressing his own people: the Shoah

and other Nazi crimes were singular, and they were committed in a specific historical context.

Let us beware of false historical analogies, let us beware of instrumentalizing the victims of the Nazi crimes for current political debates. Let's stay on the safe ground of scientifically sound, carefully considered critical examination of the past and present - always with a clear ethical compass that is aligned with human dignity and respect for human rights and democracy.

I wish you a thought-provoking day of remembrance that focuses on those who are our guests of honour today: the survivors of the Buchenwald concentration camp.