

Opening Speech for the International Liberation and Commemoration Ceremony 2023 by Willi Mernyi, Chairman of the Mauthausen Committee Austria

“As our moderators have just mentioned, the theme of this year’s commemoration and liberation celebrations is “Civil Courage”.

We commemorate the many people who were part of the resistance against national socialism or who have rescued the lives of other citizens.

People who have initiated courageous individual actions, against authorities or against Nazi officials, who have carried out acts of resistance in factories or in the armaments production. There were no reports about their activities until after the fall of the NS regime.

This handful of brave people acted during a time when the majority had adapted to the situation or was contributing to it. Those people showed their civilian courage under the most extreme circumstances we can imagine.

The regime prosecuted acts of resistance considered them to be acts of crime and proceeded against signs of civil courage with brute cruelty and force.

Research that was conducted as early as during the 60s and 70s shows that the vast majority of these helpers were just ordinary people. They were people who had neither special financial means nor large homes nor high education nor special contacts.

The essential finding was that they simply helped others because they had preserved inside themselves a speck of humanity and courage. What’s important: Two thirds of all helpers were women.

Saviours aren’t born saviours or raised to become saviours; they weren’t better people. In many cases they made decisions on the spot in favour of civil courage, and they grew as people thanks to their ingenuity and their resilience.

Today, we bow to those people who stood up for others who risked their own lives, and the lives of their families in doing so.

Your actions are our guiding light, even today, when it becomes necessary to stand up and to say NO loud and clear.”