

Memorial and Liberation Ceremonies 2019

“Never a number. Forever human.”

“The last attribute of individuality was taken from new arrivals in the final act of their internment. On registration in the office, each person was assigned a number. The theft of their names was part of the most profound mutilation of their identities and documents the end of their life story until then.”

Wolfgang Sofsky, *“Die Ordnung des Terrors: Das Konzentrationslager“* (“The Order of Terror: the Concentration Camp”)

As the prisoners in Mauthausen concentration camp were registered by name, they were assigned numbers. This assignment could take hours or even days. After prisoners received their number, they were treated from then on as a mere number. This number had to be worn as dog tags and on their prisoners’ uniforms. Their own name ceased to exist. Prisoners could report only with their numbers and were addressed only with this number. To keep from being killed, they had to know this number, along with various commands, in German – at a location where more than 90% of the prisoners were not native German speakers. Morning and evening, dead and living prisoners were counted with their numbers at role call on the muster ground.

For the denial of human dignity, individuality and personality, this was neither the end nor the beginning. The newly arriving prisoners had to stand outside for hours, regardless of weather. All their clothing and their personal belongings and memorabilia were taken from them. They were stripped naked and their hair was shorn; there was frequent excessive violence by the SS. Only then did they receive their prisoners’ clothing, prisoner number and block number.

“After they took our modest possessions, after the sheering, after the disinfection and a warm bath, they left us standing half naked in the snow with only wooden shoes, some up to five hours at minus 25°C. Many suffered frostbite and died sooner or later from the repercussions.” (Milos Vitek, former Mauthausen prisoner)

This procedure was accompanied by intimidation, threats, harassment and beatings with sticks by SS members and prisoner functionaries (capos). Dehumanization and erosion of solidarity occurred at the camp in these first hours and days; the goal was to break any spirit of resistance. Many died in these initial hours and days in the camp. The message that the SS was broadcasting was: *“From here on you are worth nothing as a person, nothing as an individual.”* Depending on the reason for their incarceration and their nationality, each prisoner wore a colored triangle next to the number on the prisoner’s uniform. Thereby the prisoners, in addition to their numbering, were marked according to their nationality and the reason for their incarceration. This classification influenced not only their everyday lives and so the chance of survival; it also systematically countered any solidarity among the prisoners and possible resistance activity. Nonetheless, there were solidarity and resistance among the prisoners.

Around the world today, dehumanization and erosion of solidarity are occurring again, and identity is again a buzzword. Right-wing groups are concealing racism and right-wing extremism under the guise of protecting their own identity. Simultaneously such groups are robbing other people of their identities, their individuality; they categorize them in the group “the others”, determined by their nationality, religion, sexuality or minority status. Those on the right depict these “others” as a threat instead of our equals. One such enemy stereotype is the group of refugees – categorized, in part even numbered, stigmatized – and those who help are denounced as do-gooders.

When people today are robbed of their individuality, then it is our job to stand up and oppose this. Resistance was possible even in the Nazi period. We can honor those persons who resisted, not with dignified speeches but with concrete actions of solidarity and humanity. It is our job to stand up and ensure that persons are not degraded to numbers but always remain humans. Never again!