

Theme: „Law and Justice in National Socialism”

Verein MERKwürdig – Zeithistorisches Zentrum Melk (Center for Contemporary History)

I came hoping that the law would be on my side.

This sentence from the opera “Justice” which was first performed in Sankt Pölten last Tuesday is followed by another one which fits in with the thematic focus of this year’s commemoration and liberation ceremonies:

Without justice we can’t change.

Law and justice – two big, highly charged words.

But also bendable – as we must observe again and again when looking back at History.

Ultimately, a third sentence from the opera touched me the most:

Nobody is holding my hand.

Loneliness, abandonment, lovelessness, being outcast, being pushed off, being isolated: those are probably the hardest sensations we can experience.

In a different context a psychologist explained to me a few days ago that it takes time to be perceived, for a meeting to be apprehended as a real encounter. Only a handshake, a touch of the hands that lasts at least six seconds indicates a serious interest, awareness, respect, connection.

This year it is exactly 80 years ago that the first prisoners came to the concentration camp in Melk.

For exactly 30 years, our commemoration association has been trying to perpetuate the remembrance of the victims of the concentration camp in Melk and to combine this with current sociopolitical issues.

The most moving and the most defining moments for me personally in this regard have been the encounters with former prisoners.

These men who were subjected to arbitrariness here – which was often supported the law –, approached us with outstretched arms and open hearts:

I don’t know if in these encounters they got the feeling that justice was being done to them.

Maybe the point is that in our common search we experience something like a common space of heartfelt justice.

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In any case many of them held my hand – much longer than six seconds. And these encounters, these touches of their hands still animate me.

That’s the reason why we chose the title “Handreichung” (“Extension of Hands”) for our street art project.

In our work we have frequently tried new approaches to commemorating; from the start artistic forms of expression have been part of that.

For the 30th anniversary of our association we wanted to make the culture of commemoration visible in the public space and chose pop-cultural means of expression.

Along the way that the prisoners had to walk from here to the spot where they boarded the train to Roggendorf, four new works of art have been created – as well as at Dr.-Sora-Platz and in the parish church.

At the former train stop EL JERRINO created an artwork called FROZEN HOURS.

At the crossroads of Abt-Karl-Straße we can find two works of art: GOLIF didn’t give a name to his creations: he painted a face on a silo to focus attention on sensory perception.

DEADBEATHERO created a huge painting called DIFFERENT BUT THE SAME.

These titles, even the ones missing, are already conceptual pieces of a jigsaw which are able to unleash a lot.

At Dr.-Sora-Platz DAVID LEITNER decided to represent the question HOW ARE YOU?

In all the 38 native languages which were spoken here in the camp.

And ultimately here at the Object 10, right at the crossroads, you can see the artwork by RAPUNZE called A HUMAN BEING BEHIND EACH NUMBER.

A human being behind each number!

How are you?

Maybe the most important sentences which we should recall, when we want to reflect about law and justice.

Alexander Hauer

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KZ- Gedenkstätte Mauthausen / Mauthausen Memorial

The diversity of remembrance

This year we commemorate the end of the concentration camps 79 years ago. The Mauthausen concentration camp memorial was inaugurated 75 years ago – only four years after the liberation from National Socialism and two years after the Soviet occupation force had handed over the former concentration camp of Mauthausen to the Republic of Austria.

In these past 75 years commemoration passed through many developmental stages: from places where the remembrance of the victims was central to those which invite to actively deal with History and its relevance for the present and the future. Memorials must become more accessible and “keep up with the times”, if we want to achieve our most important objective: to give the next generations an understanding of what commemoration is. With the passage of time, people’s way of looking at historical events has changed. Results of the latest research and interactive pedagogical programs allow not only for transfer of knowledge, but also for a reflective analysis. At the same time the growing distance in terms of time means that today’s young people, the great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren of the generation of the contemporary witnesses come less and less into contact with the history of National Socialism and the concentration camps within their families. For many of them the visit of the Mauthausen memorial and other memorial sites is one of their first direct points of contact with the topic outside of school lessons, and for some of them – as the many dedicated people working in the environment of a concentration camp memorial show – the starting point for dealing with the subject throughout their lives.

The participation process during the expansion of the Gusen concentration camp memorial made it possible for us to meet all victim groups, all organizations committed to perpetuating the remembrance, as well as the residents of the neighboring places. The joint planning of the future up-to-date memorial has allowed us to move closer together. It can only be perceived as enriching to get to know these people’s points of view, with their different backgrounds and stages in life. Now we would like to initiate these experiences of togetherness at other memorial sites as well, for example in Melk and Ebensee.

So what does commemoration mean today?

Commemoration is diverse, multifaceted and generation-spanning. It happens at the places where the events took place, on a daily basis as well as for special occasions such as remembrance and liberation ceremonies. It finds its expression in monuments, signs, artworks, biographies, movie shows, conversations and in our daily communication work and knowledge transfer.

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We can contribute by staying in the conversation and facilitating encounters between all interested parties. An active culture of commemoration only develops by reflecting together, by exchanging ideas and by creating opportunities to learn from each other.

“I wish that memorial places are resistant to the winds of history, that is to sociopolitical changes which take place all over the world. And that all current and future nations and generations should understand these places.” **Stanislaw Zalewski**

Barbara Glück

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Stiftsgymnasium Melk (Melk Abbey Secondary School)

Compass for the Future

On the scale of justice lies the weight,
between right and wrong, in a wide light.
Two souls, linked by the ribbon of truth,
read the poem of justice in unison.

One soul speaks of duty and morality,
of equal opportunities for every person in the room.

The other one adds, with compassion and reason,
that this is the only way that justice grows in this land.

Justice is not just a word written on paper,
it is the foundation of a respectable society.
Two hearts in harmony, for law and duty,
carry the flame of justice towards the light.
They fight for the weak, the voiceless,
give hope to the desperate, the outcasts.
For justice is the link that holds us together,
no matter which color, religion or ethnic group.

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Steeped in the shadows of the past
rest the dark years when injustice prevailed.
The cries of the innocent still reverberate,
from the camps' walls, the forgotten infamy.
But time moves on, albeit not without burden,
for the ghosts of the past have not yet faded.
They are reflected in hate and prejudices,
which still lead people into disaster today.

Memory is our compass which guides us,
so that the darkness of History won't ever catch up with us again.
Law and justice are now our tools
against each form of injustice and capture.

The lesson must reach people's hearts
that the past must not be forgotten,
but that the past must be remembered genuinely.
Only then we can build a clear and free future where we don't pit ourselves against each
other:
by never forgetting the dark and broad shadows of the Nazi era.

Lena Stelzeneder, presented with Johanna Punesch

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Justice in a World of Law

In a world, where law rules, and not always justice,
people strive for fair rules.

Laws should serve as guidelines for all to ensure a peaceful coexistence,
and institutions should fairly maintain everyone's rights.

But reality is often far away from Utopia.

Not every voice carries the same weight, not every side of the scale has the same length.

Justice is distorted by unfair laws,
and some find themselves disadvantaged by the rules of the game,
without a voice and without protection.

Yet the vision of fair justice remains a radiant goal.

It is our common responsibility to keep banning unfair rules from the codes of law,
until each and every one is treated justly in court.

So that every person can equally benefit from the fruit of justice growing on the tree of law.

Alina Winkler, Tabea Thaler und Vincent Gosch

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Katerina Frolova

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A field of flowers where diversity blossoms.

A shoe treads down on it,
destroying it violently.

It squashes hopes, and crushes dreams,
and deprives the blossoms of their joy.

No flower is spared,
for the shoe has the power.

It brings along misery and distress.

Before it reaches the ground and touches the field,
it casts deep shadows on the flowers.

And already the field, once full of diversity,
is completely quiet and remains silent.

Only one destroyed so many,
but there were so many more,
and soon not only this field was empty.

All the blossoms that it breaks
are not only robbed of their lives,
but also of their rights.

A field of flowers where emptiness prevails.

We take a look at it and ask, “How was that just?”

Victoria Gunacker

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Amicale de Mauthausen

To talk about justice in the context of concentration camps is an impossible exercise, and the former prisoners would have been surprised, that they should be asked to:

- They were never convicted nor informed about the reasons for their detainment, even if many of them were avowed enemies of the Nazi regime.
- They found themselves in living and working conditions imposed on them by a ubiquitous institutional violence most often performed because of the power conferred to the kapos who on their part were criminals coming from “regular” prisons.
- If they were not brought to death because of a – most often invented – “serious offense” (e.g. attempted escape, disobedience), then their minor “misdemeanors” were indistinctly sanctioned with a basic punishment, whose origin Ernest Vinurel, a prisoner here in Melk, evokes in his book *Rive de Cendre (Shore of Ashes)*:

“To punish a prisoner with 25 whiplashes or strokes with a rubber bludgeon was in accordance with [...] the regulations and came from a circular decree to all the camp commanders by the SS general Pohl, who was responsible for the concentration camp system. At a meeting organized by the SS High Command the number of strokes for minor misdemeanors was determined following the opinion of the SS doctors in attendance, so that – according to that expert board – there wouldn’t be fatal consequences for the victim. The fact that, in the 20th century, in Europe, in a so-called civilized country, high-ranking officials, officers and doctors bound by the Hippocratic oath could meet that way to decide the number of whiplashes to be given to a human being for an offense they consider minor shows to which level of immoral behavior [...] and inhumanity the Nazi regime had reduced the German people including their elites within a few years.”

He draws the conclusion that *“in spite of written rules the concentration camp universe was subjected to the laws of the jungle where the strongest one absolutely dominated without his arbitrariness being limited by anyone in any way.”*

So that’s the historical paradox with which the Nazi order confronts us: precise regulations established by alleged specialists, but whose implementation was *arbitrary, random and absurd*.

- *Arbitrary*, because the convict is never given the floor to defend himself, and accusers, judges, as well as enforcers are the same persons. The principle of this caricatural judicial power corresponds to the phrase put down by Primo Levi and quoted by Vinurel: *“Here there is no why.”*

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- *Random*, because the punishment could come upon anybody anytime, following an instantaneous procedure without nuance nor proportionality. The principle here would thus be the inscription at the entrance to the concentration camp Buchenwald: *“To each his own.”*
- *Absurd*, because there is no sense to be found in the inflicted punishment which can't be escaped except through the crematorium's chimney: *“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.”*

If one wants to find a principle in such a system, then it's precisely on the side of injustice and the inequality which is presented as natural, because in a camp the prisoners were treated differently from the outset based on their “ethnic” background: being “Aryan”, Slavic or Jewish predetermined their fate. The idea of a universal right which is equally applied to everybody is foreign to the National Socialist universe, and the concentration camp is a demonstration of that. The only collective duty is to obey. But a Jew's obedience avails to nothing; a Slav's obedience amounts to approval of his status as a slave. An SS man's or kapo's obedience brings him a reward and will one day serve as an excuse, when he will be asked in front of Allied tribunals to account for his crimes and to explain “why”: *“I obeyed orders.”*

So, without vindicating them, it is possible to understand that prisoners settled the score immediately after their liberation: in their eyes no sentence could have been in due proportion to the tortures and other perversities that they had had to endure anyway. Another paradox: it was necessary to reestablish justice as an institution, but tens of thousands of victims of the Mauthausen system would never see the justice to which they were due.

And therefore, the voices of the survivors must be heard who knew full well that ultimately there was only one lesson to be learned from that hell: to prevent at all costs that it recurs. And so, from now on, we must – in each generation – ask ourselves, if the world genuinely pursues the way of “Never Again”.

That's why each attempt to establish a law based on ethnic traditions must be fought. Each discrimination must be prohibited. Each threat to human rights must be understood as an alarm signal, as a weakness to be eradicated in a civilized society.

Claude Simon