Commemorative event on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the end of the war and the liberation of the concentration camps

Remarks by First Mayor Dr. Peter Tschentscher

Check against delivery.

Dear Chancellor Scholz,
Professor von Wrochem,
Madam President of the Hamburg Parliament,
Ms. Melmed,
Dr. Letterie,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Exactly 80 years ago, on May 3rd 1945, World War II ended for the people of Hamburg.

Five days before the surrender of the German Wehrmacht, the city surrendered to the Allies without a fight.

A general curfew was imposed from 1 pm. In the afternoon, British troops marched in. At 6:25 pm, the city was officially handed over to them in front of the town hall portal.

There was great relief that the bombings had ended. But it was not a day of joy, because the war had led the city into great misery.

Large parts of Hamburg were destroyed. The population had fallen from 1.7 million at the beginning of the war to 1 million.

In addition, there was the realization that Germany carries a historical guilt and a responsibility for the devastation of Europe and the deaths of millions of people.

The systematic persecution, deportation, torture and murder of Jews had also taken place in Hamburg.

But weeks before the capitulation, the SS in the Hanseatic City had already begun to remove the traces of these crimes.

When the British troops reached the Neuengamme concentration camp, it was empty. The walls of the barracks had been freshly painted.

The prisoners had been taken on death marches to other camps or onto refugee ships in the Bay of Lübeck, where they were killed in an Allied bombing raid.

Children on whom cruel medical experiments had been carried out were taken from Neuengamme to the school on Bullenhuser Damm and murdered in a cellar room.

The torture facilities were also destroyed, as were the files documenting the systematic murder of tens of thousands of people.

It took many years and decades to investigate these crimes, as the post-war German society lacked the courage and willingness to do so.

The perpetrators did everything in their power to remain undetected and to cover up their involvement in the Nazi crimes.

The site of the former concentration camp was used as a prison after the war.

For many decades, former prisoners and the "Amicale Internationale de Neuengamme" association have fought for a worthy memorial to be built here.

Today, the former Neuengamme concentration camp is one of the largest memorial sites in Germany.

Together with other memorials and historical sites in Hamburg, it contributes to the culture of remembrance in Germany - as a tribute to the victims of the Nazis and as a warning to future generations.

On behalf of the Senate, I would like to thank the "Foundation of Hamburg Memorials and Learning Centres", its sponsors and all researchers for their commitment and work.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II and the so-called "liberation" of the Neuengamme concentration camp, survivors and relatives from numerous countries have come to Hamburg.

I welcome you to the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, which today is a diverse international metropolis, in which a large majority of its citizens stand up against xenophobia und anti-Semitism and commit itself to democracy and freedom.

We are honored that you join us on this special day to commemorate, but also to warn to learn the lessons of history.

To remind us that the Nazi crimes and the Holocaust began with discrimination, populism and propaganda, which led to the undermining of democracy and the rule of law, to systematic racism and contempt for humanity.

Today, we once again encounter populism, discrimination and xenophobia in many ways.

The 80th anniversary of the end of the war reminds us to resolutely oppose these tendencies.

"Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar" - „Human dignity shall be inviolable" is the article that the fathers and mothers of our Basic Law put in the first place – in the face of the historical experience and horror of the Nazis.

It is the cornerstone of our free, democratic order and at the same time an obligation for all citizens.

Democracy and freedom cannot be defended by laws and courts alone.

We must all stand up for them at all times - by acting consistently against anti-Semitism, populism and all forms of discrimination, with a clear stance for tolerance, humanity and freedom.

Thank you very much.