

Speech by Dorothee Roos, delivered on Sunday, 22 April 2018 at the ceremony for the European Heritage Label at the Eckerwald Memorial

Ladies and gentlemen, honored guests and guests of honor of this ceremony, who have come from near and far, among them especially the concentration camp survivors and contemporary witnesses,

it is my pleasure and honor to speak to you today.

Let me introduce myself: my name is Dorothee Roos and I am the honorary director of the Neckarelz concentration camp memorial site. At the same time, I am the chairwoman of the Association of Former Natzweiler Concentration Camp Complex Natzweiler Memorial Sites, which was founded in 2016. The network includes 13 memorials from former Natzweiler subcamps, 12 of them from Baden-Württemberg. Together with our French partners from another 3 memorial sites on French soil, including the very large memorial site of the former Natzweiler main camp, we have applied for the European Heritage Label, which was officially awarded in Bulgaria a month ago. I am not saying this to boast. I mean that we are already very close to the motto of this year's Week of Encounter: "Overcoming Borders - Building Bridges - Shaping Europe". Let me now give you some thoughts on this. All memorial sites in the area of the former Natzweiler concentration camp have done European reconciliation and Peace work from the moment they were founded. And when we consider what kind of work it is and was, then we can say: yes, we have overcome many borders, built bridges over deep trenches. The concept of the bridge presupposes the abyss, the depth. And anyone who wants to build a bridge has to know the abyss.

The story we are concerned with is the story of people from over 30 European countries who were taken as prisoners to our respective places. Europe was here - in 1944/45, here in the oil shale factories, here in the camps of the "Wüste" (Wüste means desert) concentration camp complex and also in all the other camps of Natzweiler.

These people experienced terrible things in the camps - and those who survived usually never wanted to set foot in Germany again in the years immediately after the war. Terror, fear, hatred - all these very legitimate feelings blocked the way. Take France and Germany as an example.

After three terrible, increasingly horrific wars, the relationship between these two countries were completely disrupted in 1945. And yet, great statesmen such as the head of the French resistance movement against the Nazi occupation, General Charles de Gaulle, and the German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer had a very early idea that this hatred, which seemed to have frozen into a solid block, was not an absolute limit in Europe. The border could and can be overcome or melted if many people help, if there are many bridge-builders - and if some who can already see further open up a perspective, a vision. This perspective was and is called Europe - a peaceful, democratic Europe.

In this process of understanding and reconciliation, town twinning, youth encounters and school exchanges have played an important role over the past 60 years. They were important, necessary and indispensable. But - often these encounters were aimed at letting the past rest and making a new beginning.

It was different with the memorials. Her contribution to reconciliation and peace did not omit the darkest, the most painful moments. On the contrary: the memorials looked where it hurts. The memorials made contact with survivors or with the families of the dead - in almost every country in Europe and beyond, because sometimes the families lived in the USA, Israel or Australia. They were told what had happened - on their own doorstep, in their own city, in their own district. It was often a very painful process. But lo and behold: these narratives, the writing of the stories, the publication of books and films did not deepen the hatred, on the contrary. Memory has a healing effect when it occurs in the spirit of building bridges and overcoming boundaries. That is still true today - we can all tell many stories about it.

The work of the memorials was not welcomed from the very beginning. Quite often mayors or local councillors were not pleased when the dark chapters of local history were opened. But at some point they too jumped over the shadow, got infected by the building of bridges and the overcoming of borders, which are mainly in the minds of people. All of us have had the experience together that something positive can ultimately grow out of a negative story, something that brings joy, because people come together who have been separated by history. However, I want to say this in all clarity, these positive developments do not retrospectively give meaning to our terrible history.

In recent years, this process, which started about 30 years ago, has reached a new level. The memorial sites of the former subcamps of Natzweiler have joined forces and become increasingly networked, and there have also been increasingly intensive contacts with French colleagues. This cooperation brings together different cultures of remembrance, and is therefore "cross-border" in several respects.

We have now managed to successfully complete the first cross-border application in the field of the European Heritage Label (EHL). But the EHL is only an external sign of an internal process. We have managed to take a common view of a common history - it is a European view that is of course open to other countries and can and should include them. However, the geographical distribution of the Natzweiler subcamps suggests, first of all, a link between France and Germany. Together we can further develop the culture of remembrance and make it fruitful for the present and, above all, the future.

After all, there is no point in merely remaining in the past. Even if we have meticulously researched this past and are still discovering new facts - we are not doing this for the sake of the past. We want and we must raise awareness of how valuable peace in Europe is - and how precious and also fragile democratic structures are.

We are currently witnessing many examples of a resurgence of nationalism in Europe. There are many who would like to see borders, walls and fences grow again, there are many who consider democratic cornerstones such as the separation of powers, freedom of the press or respect for human rights to be superfluous and who think above all in terms of categories of national size and power. Memorials must face up to this European responsibility. They must show where a policy of national strength can lead.

For the experience of war and dictatorship is slowly disappearing from collective memory. Memorials in Europe suspend history - in a double sense. They preserve it, but they also transcend it, point beyond it. For memorials are not museums, they also have a political mission in a broad sense: in the sense of reflection and sensitisation.

I would like to conclude with the words of a concentration camp survivor, Albert Geiregat from Nancy. He was the youngest political prisoner in the Neckarelz camp and it was in this awareness that he wrote a letter to German young people. This letter expresses very well what I have tried to rewrite. Albert Geiregat first tells of the suffering he suffered, but then the tone of his letter changes. I quote:

"All this lies so far back today... But the Neckar is still there; quietly it flows between its banks.

For a long time he has taken the image of those completely emaciated pale creatures that populated its banks, down into the depths of its waters and carried it into the sea.

You young people of today belong to a new generation. It is only in my thoughts that I can make a connection between me seventeen years old back in Neckarelz and you seventeen years old today.

My grandson, who lives in Strasbourg, is seventeen years old too. He lives on the left, the French bank of the Rhine. This border, which used to separate us, is now disappearing with the great bridge over Europe.

Your task, that of the younger generation, will be to maintain this bridge. You must continue to make it bigger, in the spirit of fraternity and the peace we have found again.

But be vigilant so that the monster of yesteryear does not rise again and break the unity of the peoples of Europe anew.

I will end my little speech by telling you our motto. Please remember it well and keep it in your minds:

NO HATE - NO FORGETTING!"