



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
given at the ceremony commemorating the
76th anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald
concentration camp
in Weimar
11 April 2021**

To each his due – to lawyers, these words constitute a traditional legal principle. Each of us should be afforded justice, our individuality should be respected, our preferences, needs and interests recognised. No one should be disadvantaged, degraded or insulted. To each his due means respecting human beings as individuals who are equal before the law. It is a pledge of law and justice for all, regardless of their nationality, their political or religious world view.

Anyone who passed through the entrance gate of Buchenwald concentration camp as a prisoner experienced the reverse of this pledge, the perversion of the law in a place of institutionalised injustice.

Visitors to the Buchenwald Memorial are familiar with the inscription on the camp gate. It faces inwards. And it is thus only legible when you look back from the roll call square: To each his due.

To each his due: for around a quarter of a million people between 1937 and 1945 this meant imprisonment, hunger, torture and forced labour. More than 34,000 male prisoners died in Buchenwald, while more than 300 female prisoners lost their lives in its 27 satellite camps for women. Eight thousand Soviet prisoners of war were shot dead by the SS in a facility specially constructed for shooting them in the back of the neck, while 1100 nameless prisoners were hanged in the camp's own crematorium. At least 12,000 prisoners died on the death marches in April 1945 and hundreds more people during the first days after the liberation. All in all, therefore, at least 56,000 people were killed in one of the largest concentration camps in the territory of National Socialist Germany during the Nazi rule.

And those who survived, who experienced the day of liberation 76 years ago today, were scarred for life by what they had gone through here in Buchenwald and in the satellite camps.

Elie Wiesel wrote in his memoirs that for weeks after the liberation "a corpse" gazed back at him from the depths of the mirror and that the look in his eyes had never left him.

It is not only the number of dead but also the conditions under which people in Buchenwald were deprived of their rights and exploited, tortured and killed; the conditions which make this a place of terror. It is the reversal of all values, the perversion of justice, of morals and of humanity.

And it is the place itself, chosen for all of this. It is the proximity to Weimar – a city whose name is known around the world: a name associated with the first German republic, our country's first democratic constitution. It is the city of Goethe and Schiller, Wieland and Herder.

Schloss Ettersburg, the summer residence of Duchess Anna Amalia on the Ettersberg, was not just one of the sites of German Classicism – it was the site.

Close by in 1937, the SS established Ettersberg concentration camp. It had to be renamed that same year because the NS-Kulturgemeinde in Weimar, a National Socialist cultural association, objected to the name Ettersberg being linked to a concentration camp. To them, Ettersberg was synonymous with the name Goethe.

It was all about names. Otherwise, there was little resistance back then to the existence of the camp – just a few kilometres as the crow flies from Frauenplan, where Goethe had lived and worked.

The concentration camp was built and it was agreed to call it Buchenwald.

In February 1942, the joiner's workshop in the camp was instructed to make copies of the furniture in Schiller's study and bedroom, as well as crates to store Goethe's library. Due to the risk of air raids on Weimar, the city's most important cultural property was to be stored somewhere else without there being a need to close the museums.

To each his due: Goethe and Schiller for some, death and annihilation for others. After the war, civic leaders and representatives of both churches absolved the inhabitants of the city and the surrounding area of complicity or responsibility. Their excuse was that they had not known anything, indeed that they had had no idea what was going on.

Representatives of the city and the churches asked the American military government to ensure that Weimar, the city of culture, was not unfairly stigmatised.

However, the exploitation of prisoners, the forced labour in companies in the surrounding area, was a fixture of the regional economy, and not only of the arms industry.

The city fathers will have suspected, indeed will have known, that what happened on the Ettersberg would remain associated with Weimar for ever.

The harmonious co-existence of high culture and barbarism, according to the historian Jens Schley, was what was so disturbing about Weimar and Buchenwald standing side by side.

And it remains disturbing to this very day. Therefore, we should not forget, nor want to forget, what happened here. For those who no longer remember what happened have forgotten what can happen.

I am therefore grateful for the Weimar declaration which former camp prisoners and representatives of the city issued together, stating their desire to keep the memory alive and to shoulder responsibility. Every initiative dedicated to the memory of Buchenwald and its satellite camps helps achieve that. And I know of many private initiatives in Thuringia researching the history of former satellite camps of Buchenwald or the death marches in the last days of the war, thus helping to ensure that the fates of so many prisoners will not be forgotten.

For this, too, is part of Buchenwald's history: men and women from nearly all European countries occupied by the German Wehrmacht were brought here – prisoners of war, as well as those who had been arbitrarily arrested and transported to the German Reich for forced labour.

Buchenwald lives on in many European families. In French, Dutch, Polish and Czech families, as well as families of many other nationalities. The mass graves in the satellite camp Mittelbau-Dora and its sub-camp Ellrich-Juliushütte are considered to be the largest French cemetery outside France.

Communists and democrats were interned in Buchenwald, as were homosexuals and supposed anti-social individuals. Jews, Sinti and Roma were transported here and then murdered.

With its variety of victims, Buchenwald stands for the entire spectrum of the Nazis' barbarism, for an outwardly aggressive nationalism, for dictatorship and oppression within Germany and for an ethnocentric thinking. Buchenwald stands for racist fanaticism, torture, murder and annihilation.

Soviet prisoners of war and Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians deported for forced labour made up the largest group in Buchenwald concentration camp. The National Socialists' pseudo-scientific racial doctrine saw no place within human society for them. Indeed, they were

not even considered to be part of society, and the same applied to Jews and those who were referred to back then as gypsies. They were marked down for annihilation, through work or hunger, mostly through both.

In some places, the German population could observe this annihilation – in prisoner-of-war camps which were not camps, in which prisoners of war were held outdoors, crowded together behind barbed wire, being fed at best bread and water.

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the invasion of the Soviet Union by the German Wehrmacht. 22 June 1941 also had direct consequences for Buchenwald concentration camp. The arrival of Soviet prisoners of war meant there was a new group of victims on the Ettersberg. In the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, political commissars, party officials and Jews captured at the front were shot on sight. Yet the Gestapo even continued to search for suspects among the prisoners of war in the camps on German soil. Anyone handed over to the SS by the Wehrmacht lost their prisoner-of-war status and was earmarked for death in the nearest concentration camp.

In Buchenwald, an old horse stable was converted into a facility for shooting them in the back of the neck. It was a place built for the cowardly murder of thousands of prisoners, one after another without a break, designed in the same way as the gas chambers in the Auschwitz and Treblinka extermination camps. They deceived the prisoners, told them they were going for a medical examination, led them past SS men wearing white coats, and placed them in front of a measuring stick attached to the wall. In an adjacent room, an SS man could shoot through a slit, killing his victim from behind with a bullet in the neck at the precise level indicated.

Yes, a dictatorship, a National Socialist dictatorship was responsible for the most heinous crimes and genocide. However, it was human beings, Germans, who did this to other human beings.

Eight thousand alleged suspects, Soviet officers and Jews, were murdered in Buchenwald alone. For too long, the Soviet prisoners of war were a forgotten group of victims. It is therefore only right that we pay more attention to them, especially this year.

We must uphold the dignity of the victims by ensuring that we do not forget them.

It is possible to come to Buchenwald many times without learning the full history of the camp. The full history of the victims, as well as that of the perpetrators and their accomplices, the profiteers.

All of this is our history. Our country's history. We do not want to forget it.

I am grateful that, time and again, many people have taken on the task of keeping alive the memory of Buchenwald and have done so with

great dedication. I would like to thank the survivors from around the world who have kept alive these painful memories, thus handing down to us their legacy. I would like to thank the directors of the memorials and the curators in Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora, who always find fresh and contemporary ways to commemorate and remember. I would also like to thank them for standing up with resolve to all those who deliberately disregard the dignity of the victims today. And I would like to thank the many young people, the school pupils, trainees and students who devote their spare time to this remembrance work. You are all doing the right thing. Pay no attention to anyone who challenges you. Your work remains vital: not because we today are responsible for what happened back then but because all of us who regard ourselves as human beings are responsible for ensuring that it never happens again.