

Event Commemorating the End of the War in Europe

Tuesday 8 May 2018, 10 am

Speech by artist Arik Brauer in the Austrian Federal Chancellery:

"1945, late April, spring has sprung in the allotments of Ottakring, the Russians are in the Vienna Woods and the thunder of cannons can be heard. Whenever the cannons take a short break, the birds immediately start to sing and the crickets to chirp. I creep out of my hiding place between the bushes, take a glance at the Flötzersteig road and this is what I see: two men are standing in the shadow of a nut tree, in Waffen-SS uniform, and are gazing up towards Steinhof. What are they doing there? Surely, they cannot be planning to stop the Red Army between the two of them. They obviously have an entirely different task. They are watching to see whether perhaps a geriatric or adolescent member of the Volkssturm militia might stagger down the Flötzersteig in mortal terror and try to deposit his anti-tank weapon somewhere. In which case they would catch the traitor and, loyal as they are, they would string him up – possibly on the nut tree under which they are standing, an innocent participant in all of this. Loyalty is a precious thing. It is a wonderful word that should not be dragged through the mud; however, loyalty – not enforced, but given as a gift – is such a precious commodity that we should consider carefully to whom and for what we should show it. I creep back into my shelter, into this allotment shed. All day and all night I hear the shots and when morning comes, I hear a new sound, the rattling of tanks driving down the Flötzersteig. Down, hopefully not up. I take the Star of David off my jacket and, walking on the wide central lane, step out onto the Flötzersteig. And along comes a tank, lots of Russians sitting on top; I of course cheer at them in my high, young boy's voice. I was 16 years old, but still looked like a child, weighed barely 40 kilos, had no signs of a beard, still had a child's voice – soprano, good soprano – and I run along next to this tank, all down Gablenzgasse as far as the Gürtel ring road. The Russians waved at me, smiled at me. I tried to sing a few Russian songs that I still remembered from my father. Did they laugh at my Russian, laugh at my singing? It was a great moment in my life. At the Gürtel, the Russians became involved in a fight. Behind the Märzpark was a vocational school that the SS was still inside, and they put up fierce resistance. The Russians position their guns; I stand at the side and watch; in, boom, in, boom. I stand at the side and think to myself, now it is there, in that school, that some are dying, and I stand, entranced as if in a dream, and witness how my hometown and I myself are being liberated. To me

this was, of course, a liberation; to me this was, of course, a victory. Not so, to the population that now found itself in the ruins of the destroyed city of Vienna. And, as is so often the case, it was mainly women who ultimately bore the brunt of it all. Imagine a woman sitting in the ruins of her home; what is she thinking, what is she feeling, what is the picture she has of the situation? The flat has been destroyed – by whom? By British bombers. The son was killed – by whom? The Russians shot him. The daughter was raped, by Russian soldiers. The husband died in France. Am I now saved, am I liberated? Of course not. It was simply impossible for most people to see the situation in this way. People felt, we have lost the war and now we are left with the wreckage. That was the general feeling and common opinion. Memories of the past can be repressed, can be forgotten – the hysterical rejoicing of 1938 forgotten, the song 'We want to carry on marching when everything falls apart, because today the Ostmark belongs to us and tomorrow the whole world' – forgotten. The newsreels that show laughing German soldiers marching on through burning Russian villages – forgotten. The euphoric feeling of belonging to a chosen race that has the right and perhaps even the duty to conquer, suppress, enslave and if necessary eradicate all others – forgotten. The present is stronger than the past; the present exists, the past is no longer. The Arabs say, 'e la fat mat': the past is dead, finished. Most people at the time could not see or comprehend it any other way. I do not believe in collective guilt; I cannot understand collective guilt. Humanity consists of individuals, all of whom must and will account for themselves individually – to themselves, to society and also to the environment. And yet, someone has to be guilty; after all, it didn't come upon us like an avalanche, like a natural disaster. It was made, it was designed, and it was invented. The makers, designers and inventors of this tragedy are of course guilty. They are guilty of crimes against the peoples of Europe, guilty of crimes against the various minorities that they massacred, guilty of crimes against the hundreds of thousands of children they slaughtered, guilty of crimes against their own population for whom they dragged out the war, a war that had already been definitively lost, for months, for years – why? Just to gain time for their own lives and to gain time to take a few million more along with them to their deaths. And they are guilty of crimes against human civilisation, leading it to suffer an unparalleled tragedy. A new generation had to emerge and I am certain that the vast majority of people in Austria today are more than capable of correctly assessing the situation and truth of the Second World War. The winners, the losers at the time... who lost? The loser

was an ideology that had been inhumane, selfish and aggressive from the start, and the winner was the universal human need to live in peace and as much freedom as possible. And ultimately, democracy won out over dictatorship. Democracy... democracy is a fragile plant, as we know, and it needs to be constantly cared for and watered. Because democracy involves different interests, different ways of thinking and different feelings among the population – and that is very complicated and very difficult and gets on many people's nerves. And some people think: what's needed is a strong hand to take serious measures and establish order. A strong hand, dictatorship – is not something you can get a little bit of. A dictatorship takes hold the moment there is a concentration of unrestrained power; it spreads inexorably, it hardens inexorably, it inexorably becomes brutal and it inexorably penetrates all areas of human life – and that is horrific. If you have not lived in a dictatorship, lived under a dictatorship, you cannot know how terrible it is. It makes the evil and the contemptible that lives in us come to the surface. It is a time of malicious snitches; it is a time when parents are afraid of their own children. It is a time when friends are afraid of friends. Lies are told, people tell nothing but lies and everyone knows it. Dictatorship is a time when sadists, murderers and torturers can freely indulge themselves: Humanity has experienced and suffered this for centuries, for millennia in its history, and it really ought to be time that we understood what this is. Fortunate Europe. Fortunate Europe, where each country keeps an eye on the other to make sure that it obediently upholds and preserves its democracy – because our neighbours must be democratic. It's only funny when you go over the top in selfishly representing your own interests. And fortunate is the population with a government in which people are, hopefully, able to tolerate the public's criticism and control with patience and with joy, the more of it, the better.

Thank you."