

Albertinaplatz speech, 6.5.2018

Mr Federal President, ladies and gentlemen,

Austria has come together here today, at the Monument Against War and Fascism, to commemorate and honour all victims.

I would like to pay tribute to all those who suffered a terrible fate during this period – even the memories of this time leave unforgettably deep wounds.

Created by the Austrian sculptor Alfred Hrdlicka, the Monument Against War and Fascism was erected here in the memorial year of 1988 under Helmut Zilk.

This place has a special symbolism. In front of us are the Gates of Violence.

"The Gates of Violence" are carved from Mauthausen granite, commemorating the thousands of prisoners who lost their lives

on the infamous "Stairs of Death" in the quarry at Mauthausen concentration camp.

The sculptures on the sides represent the victims of the mass murder of millions and of a merciless killing machine.

In front is the bronze figure of the "Street-washing Jew".

In the days following the annexation of Austria to the German Reich, Jews were forced – while being spat on and mocked by the population – to scrub anti-Nazi slogans off the streets. This was before the systematic deportations to the SS death camps began and the horror of the Shoah was indelibly etched into the memory of humanity.

Today, therefore, we are especially commemorating all victims and all survivors of this terrible time. Its legacy weighs heavily on Austria.

However, we are also turning our gaze to the liberation. Rising to a conspicuous height is the "Stone of the Republic",

engraved with Austria's Declaration of Independence of 27 April 1945.

This important symbol of autonomy prompts us to take responsibility for the past and for the future.

Erich Fried, an Austrian poet who managed to escape to London after his father had died in 1938 from injuries received during interrogation by the Gestapo, wrote numerous moving poems that also leave us with a legacy of hope.

For instance, he refers to us as "The heirs of the righteous":

Those who went beneath the earth
and who sleep in the rivers
and who were blown away as ashes in the wind,
they will not praise, nor punish.

They will not march in your ranks,
they will not take you by the hand.

They leave you, the living, on your own.

Only your deed will be felt,

and its gravity will have to be like that of your country,

and it will give and take abundantly.

When beating, when creating, your hand should

not then shame your dead.