



**MERK***würdig*  
ZEITHISTORISCHES  
ZENTRUM MELK

**MAUTHAUSEN**  
MEMORIAL | KZ-GEDENKSTÄTTE



## Annual commemoration at the Melk Memorial

May 11th, 2026

Theme of the Mauthausen Committee Austria:  
„Perpetrators“

Mauthausen Komitee  
Österreich  
Mauthausen Committee Austria

  
STADT MELK

KULTUR  
NIEDERÖSTERREICH



## Program

From 10:00 a.m. on music at the site of the subcamp memorial stele – Wolfgang Schweiger & Norbert Hauer

Start: 10:30 a.m.

Musical accompaniment by the Melk music middle school

1. Begrüßung: Alexander Hauer (Verein MERKwürdig | Association reMARKable) & Barbara Glück (KZ-Gedenkstätte Mauthausen | Mauthausen Memorial)
2. Gerhard Karner (Federal Minister of the Interior)
3. Melk Abbey Secondary School
  - a. Reflections on this Year's Theme – *Eva Stadlmann*
  - b. Conversation between two children – *Rosalie Raubek & András Léber*
  - c. It is good the way it is – *Natalia Klein*
  - d. How do people become perpetrators? What defines a perpetrator? – *Lina Marie Höfer, Marie Strauß, Lara Öckmayer, Felix Schiffer, Timotheus Divinzenz*
  - e. Our responsibility? – *Ella Rath*
4. Chantal & Patrice Lafaurie (Amicale de Mauthausen)
5. Visit to the memorial

Bundesminister für Inneres der Republik Österreich  
(Federal Minister of the Interior of the Republic of  
Austria)

When does a scene become a crime scene? Which action turns a person into a perpetrator? How does a deed become a misdeed? Is it active participation, or is passive inaction enough to make someone an accomplice or even a perpetrator?

From a purely legal point of view, these lines seem to be relatively clearly defined in a modern democratic state governed by the rule of law. Nevertheless, the question must be permissible and must be asked again and again:

Are the limits of the law still sufficient when these lines are repeatedly and deliberately shifted for political purposes?

As an example, I point to the term “remigration,” which is deliberately being introduced into parliamentary discourse from the far-right sphere. This is precisely how boundaries are pushed and taboos are deliberately broken.

The perpetrators back then found support for their atrocities and misdeeds not only in the approval and participation of the masses, but also in their silence and indifference. It is therefore essential to take responsibility and pay attention when boundaries are

moved. I thank this commemoration community (as organized by the association reMARKable (Verein MERKwürdig) and supported by the region's schools) for this conscious act of paying attention as a modern form of remembrance.

*Gerhard Karner*

## **Reflections on this Year's Theme**

The thematic focus of the commemorations in 2026 is dedicated to the theme “Perpetrators in National Socialism”. On a day dedicated to the victims of the National Socialist regime, we are talking about those who bore responsibility. We are talking about those responsible for the wounds, scars, and deaths that millions of people had to endure – and are sometimes still enduring now. We have gathered in a place of horror and are talking about those who made it one.

Naturally this raises the question: Why? After all we are not commemorating perpetrators, that would be absurd. We are not gathered here to think about their suffering. So why was the theme “Perpetrators” chosen?

Perhaps I should ask instead: Why not?

It is clear to all of us that perpetrators and victims have a symbiotic relationship. Without victims, there would be no perpetrators, without perpetrators, no victims. Two sides of the same coin, the same incident viewed from two entirely different, but intertwined perspectives. Yet light is only shed on one side and its story, while the other side remains in darkness.

That is precisely the point. Perpetrators have spent much time in that darkness. How many of our ancestors hid in that darkness? This doesn't mean that all our grandparents or great-grandparents were inveterate Nazis who committed murder themselves. Nor does it mean that only those who actually pointed a weapon at people were real perpetrators.

In this context perpetration is so much more than murder, it can have an incredible number of facets. The fact is that more people bore responsibility than we sometimes dare to acknowledge. Perpetrators are not only those who commit an actual crime. Those who pull a trigger – even if they acted “only on orders” – are not the only ones who bear the blame. They are not the only ones who became perpetrators. They are not the only ones who were able to hide, who were protected, on the flip side of the coin.

We all know how many people it takes to run a system like Hitler's. Strategic extermination, warfare, and propaganda require masses of people.

Admittedly, the little man doesn't play a direct part for the big shots. But if the little men didn't exist, the big shots wouldn't be so big either. A regime relies on enough people playing along. It relies on enough people believing that they are doing the right thing. It relies on enough people considering it an honor to be Hitler's

little man. Obviously, this honor must be defended. Be it as a soldier on the front lines, as a police officer in the cities, or as a broadcaster on the radio. Through their actions, their decisions, and their belief in the National Socialist value system, they consolidated their role in the Third Reich. But they also made themselves perpetrators.

So if we know that a regime relies on people who trust blindly what they are told, we already have the answer to why this year's theme was chosen – and why that is a good thing. The question can be answered in one word: learning.

Remembering and learning from it. That is why we are here and commemorate the victims of the Holocaust, by remembering their tormentors.

We are good at remembering. We are constantly reminded by organizing commemoration ceremonies, by building memorials, by talking about it in school. We have, in the truest sense of the word, an established remembrance culture. Which is good and mustn't be changed by any means. A failure to remember – thus, forgetting – would be, as we all agree, disastrous. Still, a culture of remembrance alone doesn't accomplish everything we hope for. It cannot, by itself, prevent the rise of fascism's popularity.

Only when we actively learn from these memories by recognizing patterns in political demands or noticing similarities in society's behavior and spotlighting them, can we fight against fascism and its perpetrators. Only when we actually put our memories to use and shed light on the dark side of the coin, do we contribute to democracy.

It is therefore important and right that this year's commemorations are dedicated to the theme "Perpetrators". If we simply left out one side of society, who knows if we would have made it this far with democracy at all.

*Eva Stadlmann*

## **Conversation between two children**

Andras: What are you doing?

Rosalie: I'm playing.

Andras: With rocks?

Rosalie: I don't have anything else...

Andras: Don't you have any toys?

Rosalie: No, they took everything from us...

Andras: Why would they do that?

Rosalie: They stormed our apartment, the only thing I remember after that is my mom crying and my dad being dragged out. I don't know where he is. Mom and me are here.

Andras: Did you do anything?

Rosalie: No, my parents ran a bakery together, and my brother and me were just getting ready for school.

Andras: Then why are you here?

Rosalie: The mean man with the gun said that all Jews had to come here. But somehow it is different here than we were told.

Andras: Is that why you are behind the fence?

Rosalie: I think so. Why aren't you here with us?

Andras: I'm not really sure what's this is all about. I only know that my dad works here. He has always said that real men work here.

Rosalie: Your dad? Is he on my side of the fence, too?

Andras: No, no, my dad is the man with the many badges on his uniform. He has a rifle, too. I don't know exactly what his work is. I only know that he is important and respected. He earns a lot of money, too. I have toy cars; if you want, I can bring them tomorrow.

Rosalie: Cars are for boys. I want my dolls back.

Andras: But you're a boy.

Rosalie: No!! I'm a girl.

Andras: Then why is your hair so short?

Rosalie: I don't know. They cut it before we got these new clothes.

Andras: I must go home now. Mom made dinner. Will we see each other again here tomorrow?

Rosalie: Okay! Friends?

Andras: Friends.

During the National Socialist era many crimes were committed by people who, on the surface, led perfectly normal lives. They were fathers, brothers, or neighbors,

mothers or sisters. They were people who could appear friendly, caring, or even loving in their daily lives. Especially for their own children, they were therefore often normal caregivers.

Children in these times usually had no access to actual events. They took in their surroundings as children do: influenced by trust in their parents.

When a father wore a uniform, his child often considered him “important”, “strong” or “admirable”. When he spoke of “work”, it sounded more like something good, like responsibility or pride, than something cruel. The reality hidden behind it, full of violence, fear, and injustice, was often deliberately concealed.

Those perpetrators were not far away and anonymous, but part of daily life. While unimaginable suffering occurred in one place, just a few streets down, people led very peaceful lives. Children grew up in this contradictory world without understanding that what meant safety and security for them reflected other people’s worst nightmares.

That is how deeply it was embedded in society. It was not always necessarily loud and obvious. On the contrary, often it was quiet and hidden behind familiar faces, invisible to children. Evil was not always

recognizable as such, but was sometimes hidden within the ordinary.

*Rosalie Raubek und András Léber*

## **It is good the way it is**

- from a soldier's perspective

Everything is just right the way it is.  
I know that, because that's what everybody says.

As a unit, we must go forward,  
stand up together for our cause  
and keep our goal in mind.  
And this is just right the way it is.  
I know that, because that's what everybody says.

And therefore, I go one step further day after day,  
another murder, another cover-up,  
and me – I feel less and less for the people I kill.  
But no, because they aren't people at all.  
Just numbers that harm our country.  
And I shouldn't have doubts.  
Because what I do  
is right just the way it is.  
I know that, because that's what everybody says.

But they are just people, too,  
just like you and me.  
People with personalities, dreams, and thoughts.  
Am I the only one who thinks that way?  
Yes – most certainly,  
because thinking that way is wrong.  
I know that, because that's what everybody says.

When I come home,  
my family hails me as a hero,  
they consider me courageous and brave,  
yes, they look up to me.  
And it is right the way it is.  
I know that, because that's how everybody sees it.

But maybe what everybody sees  
is not reality.  
Maybe the prisoners have a right to exist as well,  
and maybe I will regret my actions someday,  
but I carry on.  
Because resistance is something bad,  
and I want to do what's good.  
And it is good to obey.  
I know that, because that's what everybody says.

*Natalia Klein*

## **How do people become perpetrators? What defines a perpetrator?**

Becoming a perpetrator is not a sudden moment, but often a slow process. In these situations, the boundaries of what is perceived as right or wrong shift gradually.

The processes of how someone becomes a perpetrator become apparent not only in the past, but also in how similar actions take place today under different circumstances.

In the concentration camps some prisoners were forced to take on certain positions. The SS officers deliberately appointed so-called Kapos. A Kapo was him/herself a victim, but at the same time had to exercise power over other prisoners, which was sometimes severely exploited, but also led to great solidarity towards other prisoners. The Kapo could give orders, exercise control – and sometimes even decide over life and death.

The SS system was deliberately organized as to pit people against each other.

This shows the enormous pressure the victims were under. Many wanted to survive – for their families, for a life after the camp. Yet the system forced them, through hunger, violence, and fear, into situations in which it often was no longer a question of right or wrong, but merely about securing a small chance of survival.

We gather here today to commemorate the victims of National Socialism – people who were stripped of their dignity, their freedom, and their lives. Their suffering urges us to take a look, to remember, and to take responsibility.

But the past is not just the past. Today we see situations worldwide as well, where people are driven by fear, ideology, or power structures to inflict the suffering of others or to justify injustice. This challenges us to stay alert and to question our own actions.

At the same time, each generation reminds us that there is always a choice. There are those who have the courage to help others, even under difficult circumstances. They oppose indifference and injustice and preserve their compassion and humanity.

The contradictions exist not only in History or in stories – they exist in our world and within everyone of us as a possibility. For this very reason remembrance is so important: it means not merely looking back, but constitutes a mission for the present.

Today we commemorate the victims by deciding not to look away. By taking a stand for compassion instead of indifference, for civil courage instead of conformity, and for humanity instead of abuse of power.

May the commemoration not only make us sad, but also strengthen us – so that we are among those who help, who protect, and who do the right thing.

*Lina Marie Höfer, Marie Strauß, Lara Öckmayer, Felix  
Schiffer, Timotheus Divinzenz*

## **Our responsibility?**

We commemorate. Together, we commemorate. Year after year. We know exactly why. We have learned it. For every history test, for every revision. Worksheet after worksheet. We have listened carefully. We were shocked. Shocked by the cruel acts, the extent of which we can't even imagine.

We know exactly who the bad guys are. We know who the perpetrators are and who the victims are. We have a very clear image of the typical perpetrator in our head. A white man with a severe look. Always ready to reach for a weapon and to kill without batting an eyelash. Every morning he gets up knowing that, on this day, he is going to have countless innocent lives on his conscience.

He is convinced of the superiority of his "race", and he believes in a new, better Germany.

He believes that his Führer will restore his fatherland to its former pride and glory. The slogans of the Third Reich, indoctrinated for years, have shown him a solution to all his worries and problems that requires no thinking, no reflecting, and above all, no more questioning. What is certain is who the enemy is. The Jew, the embodiment of all grievances and setbacks that the German people had to endure in recent years. Our perpetrator hates Jews

with all his heart. He hates people who look different, believe differently, think differently.

When you hear me talk like this, it all sounds like a completely different world. Something terrible that happened back then, but it would never happen again today.

“We know History far too well for that.”

But when perpetrators are always only “those from the past”, “the terrorists”, the “thoroughly evil ones”, the “murderers” and the “fascists”, then we create a distance. We wall ourselves off it. This all seems very reassuring, doesn't it? Something that happened a long time ago, and today only a few nutcases do it.

But where does this leave society's responsibility? Of course, I am not accusing anybody here of sharing extremist beliefs, let alone of being responsible for actions in the past. But a system of marginalization and persecution doesn't build itself overnight. It starts small. Responsibility starts with each one of us.

“The hatred of Jews was so unfounded.” But my neighbor Mustafa doesn't have the same chances at the same job as you, just because of the name on his application.

“I would never treat people worse because of their origin.” But in the supermarket, you address the Black woman next to you with a loud, exaggerated “Do you understand me?” and later praise her for her good knowledge of your language.

“How can anybody blindly follow such a radical political regime?” But political parties and politicians who speak of a “people’s chancellor” and “problems in the urban landscape” don’t set off your alarm bells.

“It was terrible that people had to leave their country in droves and were not welcomed by society.” But of course you chant “Foreigners out”, because you believe that refugees are taking your jobs, but that at the same time they are too lazy to work, and on top of that they bring crime to our country.

“Nobody should be discriminated against because of their religion or belief.” But at the same time, you get upset about women wearing headscarves or the visibility of other religions.

“How crazy is it to lock up people, only because they share different beliefs or political opinions.” But you can’t have a fair and calm discussion with anybody who doesn’t share your political opinion.

“It is easy to see through ideologies which are clearly dangerous.” But you let yourself be influenced, day after

day, by polarizing voices on social media, without thinking about what you're consuming.

Everyone of us bears responsibility – and with that, also has the power to change things. It is up to us to put it into effect and to use our voices.

*Ella Rath*

## Amicale de Mauthausen

**Melk, May 11, 2026** – Speech by Chantal and Patrice Lafaurie on behalf of the French Amicale

In 1989, Paul Le Caër, a deportee and historian of the Redl-Zipf camp, wrote in the newsletter of the French association Amicale de Mauthausen:

*“On December 21, 1988, Michael Bernstein, a judge in Washington at the Department of Justice’s Office of Investigations, died in the Lockerbie bombing in Scotland. He was tasked with investigating former SS members who had become U.S. citizens. To further his investigations, he had traveled from Washington to attend our association’s annual conference. In 1987, several of our comrades were called as witnesses of the prosecution in the case of SS officer Martin Bartesch, who had murdered the French Jewish prisoner Max Ochshorn at the Mauthausen camp on October 20, 1943.*

*The SS officer Bartesch had emigrated to the U.S. in 1955, concealing his service as a guard at Mauthausen from the Immigration Service. He became a U.S. citizen in 1966. Bartesch was scheduled to appear before the Chicago court on June 16, 1987, but, faced with the mounting evidence presented by Judge Bernstein, he*

*chose to flee the United States and seek refuge in Austria."*

### **Mike Bernstein, Washington, 1988**



### **Vienna, Leopoldstadt, 1987**



The SS officer Bartesch, the murderer of Max Ochshorn, was never convicted. What does he say about his role in the murder of Max Ochshorn?

When questioned in 1986 by Michael Bernstein about his presence at the Mauthausen camp, he refused to

answer. To the question, *“Did you mistreat a prisoner?”* he replied NO. To the question *“Did you shoot a prisoner?”*, he answered NO. To the question *“Did you kill a prisoner?”*, he answered NO. He was lying, even though Bernstein was aware of the Mauthausen Book of Unnatural Deaths, a record in which the SS had written the names of the guards responsible for unnatural deaths. Since the U.S. justice system deemed Bartesch’s life history incompatible with U.S. citizenship, he was stripped of it on May 29, 1987.

Back in Austria, Bartesch stated in an interview, *“I shot Ochshorn because he was running away.”* These words are now repeated by Holocaust-denying websites. Let us examine the Mauthausen death register: in a list of 15 deaths recorded from October 19 to 21, 1943, there are four inmates from Block 5, the Jewish block: Wolf ZINGER, murdered on the 19th; Max OCHSHORN on the 20th; Jean POLLNOW and Siegfried HOLZMANN on the 21st. These four prisoners, all of whom arrived from France on a *“Nacht und Nebel”* transport and were all registered as French Jews, were the only prisoners shot for attempting to escape between October 19 and 21. This was a deliberate effort to kill a specific category of prisoners: French Jewish resistance fighters. To speak of an escape is to promote a Holocaust-denying narrative. Let’s look at the exhibition in this room, *“The Visible Part”*. The curators chose to include the SS’s

photographs of prisoners supposedly shot for attempting to escape. These photos reveal scenes staged by the SS.

In 1989, Bartesch made yet another statement regarding Ochshorn's death: *"I acted on orders and do not consider myself guilty."* As if the fact that he was a low-ranking SS officer at Mauthausen absolved him of all responsibility and any sense of guilt. Bartesch was not a high-ranking Nazi official. He had neither the money nor the connections to the clandestine Nazi networks leading to South America, unlike Adolf Eichmann or Franz Stangl. He entered the U.S. as a refugee, not as an engineer of high scientific value like Wernher von Braun or Karl Fiebinger, who planned the construction of the tunnels near Melk for the "Project Quartz".

Bartesch was a criminal and a proponent of the denial of Nazi crimes. In 1964, in his application for naturalization, he dared to write: *"has always fought for freedom."* Today, an internet search immediately yields a link to Holocaust denial websites repeating Bartesch's lies and portraying him as a victim of the U.S. government in 1987. In the eyes of Holocaust deniers, the criminal, a cog in the machinery of terror at Mauthausen, has become a victim!

Michael Bernstein, who had tracked down terrorists, was killed in the deadliest terrorist attack against American civilians prior to September 11, 2001. In late 1988, he returned to the United States after several days of successful negotiations in Vienna with the Austrian government. Michael Bernstein had visited Mauthausen: he said that climbing the stairs from the quarry had been one of the most moving experiences of his life. Paul Le Caër wrote in 1988: *“He knew, better than anyone, how to analyze our moral dilemmas regarding our tormentors.”*

In closing, a few words about Max Ochshorn and how he is remembered in Austria and France.

Since 1987, a plaque in Vienna has commemorated his fight against fascism in Austria, Spain, and France. In 1942, Max Ochshorn and two other Austrian Jews—communists and veterans of the International Brigades in Spain—let themselves be hired by the Wehrmacht in Bordeaux as French interpreters, thanks to forged French identity papers. On January 30, 1943, the three resistance fighters were arrested and imprisoned in Bordeaux, then deported to Mauthausen on August 27, 1943 in the context of the *Nacht und Nebel* program. It was with great emotion that I discovered Max Ochshorn was a member of the Resistance in Bordeaux and that

he was arrested there. It was in this same city of Bordeaux that my father-in-law, Jean Gavard, a member of another Resistance group, was arrested on June 6, 1942, by the Gestapo. The Bordeaux prison was the first stop of the deportation to Mauthausen on March 27, 1943, for Jean Gavard, a French Resistance fighter and "*Nacht und Nebel*" detainee.

Today, the prison in Bordeaux has been demolished. In its place we find the École Nationale de la Magistrature (National School for the Judiciary) and the Parvis des Droits de l'Homme (Parvis of Human Rights). It was there that, in 2017, three "*Stolpersteine*", memorial stones, were laid. These were the first three in the city of Bordeaux, which chose to honor, first and foremost, the foreigners who had fought for the freedom of France and the world:

Three Austrian heroes of the French Resistance  
Fritz Weiss, Alfred Lohner and Alfred Gottlieb aka Max  
Ochshorn.

**Bordeaux, Parvis des Droits de l'Homme (Parvis of  
Human Rights), 2017**



*Chantal & Patrice Lafaurie*