

Ansprache von Shraga Milstein, Vorsitzender des Irgun Sherit Hapleta Israel Bergen-Belsen, zur Gedenkveranstaltung anlässlich des 72. Jahrestags der Befreiung des Konzentrationslagers Bergen-Belsen am 23.4.2017

72 years ago on April 15, 1945 our world changed. I was then 12 years old in the women's camp, hungry, sick and scared, surrounded by heaps of dead bodies and not knowing what the next hour will bring.

I was born in Poland and arrived in Bergen Belsen from Buchenwald in January 1945. In the freezing winter we made our way by foot from the railway ramp to the camp, watched by dogs and armed guards.

Liberation came in the form of an armored vehicle flying the flag of Great Britain and a loudspeaker in a language we did not understand.

The change was profound – from complete neglect and apathy to human compassion and a true effort to help the scared, hungry and sick inmates.

Soon we were taken by the British military commanders from the squalor of the KZ camp to proper housing and clean beds in the Wehrmacht Hohne Kaserne.

In June 1945 I left to Sweden with thousands of other Bergen Belsen survivors, for recovery and convalescence, as guests of the Swedish Red Cross, under the leadership of Count Folke Bernadotte. I reached Israel just weeks before its declaration of Independence in 1948 and live there since then.

We are gathered here today to remember the tens of thousands of innocent people, Jews and non Jews, who perished here in Bergen Belsen, after prolonged suffering, in the most horrendous circumstances, only because the Nazi regime decided that they have no right to live. We remember them with deep sorrow and among them my mother Regina-Rywka Milstein of blessed memory.

We who survived remember with gratitude our liberators and people of good will who gave us a helping hand in order to return to normal life, raise a family and continue living despite our horrible experience.

Many of us felt then that the right thing to do is to leave Europe and participate in the historic effort of building a modern state of our own – ISRAEL, so that we Jews can be equal to other nations and not live at the mercy of host states.

After a traumatic experience people react in two common ways – they break down and wait for help or they gather all the power left and continue their life. Most of the Jewish survivors choose the second way and the DP camp of Bergen Belsen is a vivid example of it. Right after the end of WW2 it became a centre of Jewish life with families, children, education and culture. All this under indigenous leadership with the aim of moving one day to Israel.

During my adolescence years, when talking with friends about the Holocaust, there were two things that annoyed and worried me – that people did not believe our stories about life in KZ camps and that the Holocaust and its lessons will be forgotten as life goes on.

Both turned out exactly the opposite.

The Holocaust is studied today in most universities around the world with the purpose that this atrocity of historic proportions will never occur again. Let me here express my thanks to the State Authorities of Niedersachsen and the Stiftung Niedersächsische Gedenkstätten for their successful efforts to keep the memory alive and bring it to the attention of more and more young people.

When the horrors of the Holocaust and the destruction of most European countries during the Second World War were exposed to the world in 1945, the shock generated new political international concepts. Many of them were adopted by the Allied governments in order to provide alternatives to war as a means of solving conflicts between nations. These were the new international foundations on which the United Nations and the European Union developed later. They were naturally based on the principles of freedom, democracy and equality of all human beings.

These principles were also part of Israel's Declaration of Independence in May 1948, only 3 years after the end of WW2, providing "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex".

In the last years, different opinions and seeds of racism and xenophobia became popular in many countries around the world. The time has come for people of good will to raise our voices loudly against racism and for maintaining a liberal western democracy based on human freedom and equality. The Nazi crimes and reign of terror are not only history they are a warning into what racism can deteriorate!

Our interest should be in people and not in politics. It is therefore important to build bridges between nations and let young people meet in order to learn and understand each other.

Our organization of Bergen Belsen Survivors in Israel is maintaining on going activities in this direction for the general public and members of our families of second, third and fourth generation. Our aim being to maintain the memory of the Holocaust while leading a life of equality and tolerance toward others.

Let us always remember the innocent victims of Bergen Belsen and the millions who perished during the Holocaust and the Nazi regime of hate!