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Club of Former KL Ravensbrück Prisoners  
Warsaw (Poland)  
KL Ravensbrück prisoner at the age of 9*

**Speech for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of KL Ravensbrück at the  
Ravensbrück Memorial Site  
19 April 2020**

Honourable survivors, with your families and friends,  
All those celebrating today the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of KL Ravensbrück,  
Officials holding high public positions in many countries,  
Representatives of many organisations and social groups,

The coronavirus pandemic has made it impossible for us to gather at the Memorial and Museum of the former Ravensbrück Concentration Camp.

I think we are all united in the desire to honour the women, children and men who suffered and died in Ravensbrück. We want the memory of the tragic fate of people held in concentration camps to be preserved as a warning against hatred, disdain and greed that lead to wars and the inhuman treatment of powerless victims.

What are the origins of the madness driving leaders, social groups and whole nations to performing acts of atrocity?

Soon after the traumatic experience of the First World War, Europe was confronted with the rise of totalitarian ideologies offering simple solutions to economic problems which the Europeans were then facing. The authorities led by the NSDAP and Hitler advertised the superiority of Germans over other nations, demanding "Lebensraum", living space, and promising prosperity to the Germans, at the price of subjugating other nations and liquidating the Jewish nation. The 1930s witnessed an escalation of violence in Germany, from seemingly insignificant events to general

developments affecting larger groups in society. In the name of maintaining racial purity, extermination started with Germans who were mentally ill or incapacitated, mentally or physically disabled. Jews, Sinti and Roma were persecuted, imprisoned and confined to concentration camps, together with criminal offenders.

Hitler's gradual expansion into Europe led to the Second World War which started for Poland in September 1939 – I was four years old at the time and lived with my parents in Warsaw. On 1 September, the German army entered Poland from the west, and the Soviet army came from the east on 17 September. My country was split into two occupation zones. The German army controlled almost the whole of Europe in 1939-1941, while the Soviet army took over Latvia, Estonia and, partially, Finland and Romania.

The initial balance of power changed after the German forces attacked their original ally, the Soviet Union, in June 1941. In December 1941, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States joined the Allied forces against the Axis powers.

From the onset of the occupation of European countries, terror pervaded, citizens were oppressed, forced into slave labour, expelled from their homes, arrested and taken to concentration camps.

In occupied Poland, the harassment of citizens was especially violent; members of the intelligentsia and the academic elite were killed, Jews were persecuted. The Germans shot people dead or hanged them in street executions, transported citizens to forced-labour and concentration camps. They promoted the Germanisation of Polish children. Secondary schools, universities and cultural centres were closed.

From the areas occupied by the Soviets since 1939, hundreds of thousands of Polish citizens were deported to remote places in the Soviet Union and to forced-labour camps – gulags. In 1940, the Soviets executed over 20,000 Polish officers, high-ranking civil servants and representatives of the intelligentsia – these events have the name “The Katyń Massacre”. The aggressors wanted to turn the defeated Polish nation into obedient, unskilled workers.

My normal life, my regular childhood came to an end. As a small girl, I anxiously waited with my mother every day for my father to come home from work. Will he come or not? I can remember, I can still see and hear the air-raid sirens, the glow of the burning

city and of houses on fire, us hiding and living in the basement. What has caused the evil ideologies to captivate human minds and hearts so that “people doomed people to this fate” – as Polish writer Zofia Nałkowska says in her stories on the Second World War? Why?

As part of Hitler’s plan to bring about “die Endlösung der Judenfrage”, the final solution of the Jewish question, Jewish people all over Europe were persecuted, locked in ghettos and sent by Germans to extermination camps, such as Bełżec, Treblinka, Sobibór, Auschwitz-Birkenau. Why was the Holocaust their goal? What drove some doctors, contrary to their professional mission, to participate in mass killings of Jews and in pseudo-medical experiments, murdering both children and adults in extermination and concentration camps?

The best known, dramatic and honourable insurgence of the Jewish community against the Holocaust was the armed uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto in April 1943. The 77<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its outbreak is celebrated on 19 April 2020; Warsaw remembers this tragic event.

In the terrorised and occupied countries resistance was developing and its actions were intensifying as years of occupation went by and citizens were treated with inhuman cruelty. In Poland, the largest resistance organisation was the underground Home Army, the Armia Krajowa. The occupants punished all acts of resistance with large-scale retaliation that affected civilians as well.

The resistance movement was also active in concentration camps. In Ravensbrück, it included prisoners of various nations, who supported one another, helped the weaker and the sick, organized clandestine educational, artistic, religious and information activities. They ignored the orders of the authorities and hid in barracks prisoners who were facing death. Those working at factories organized “small-scale” sabotage.

As the eastern front approached, the authorities of the Polish Underground State decided to wage an armed uprising in Warsaw against the occupants. It broke out on 1 August 1944. The Soviet army stationed on the other bank of the Vistula river did not help the insurgents. The bombardment, heavy gunfire and the uneven direct fight against the German Nazi army lasted 63 days. I still remember that, in the basement where we lived at that time, first-aid material and food were prepared for the insurgents.

During the uprising, over 20,000 insurgents and about 200,000 civilians died or were cruelly murdered. Those who managed to survive were expelled from Warsaw. Some were taken to do forced labour in Germany or to concentration camps, Ravensbrück among them. After the uprising had collapsed and citizens of Warsaw had been expelled, the buildings throughout the city were methodically burned and blasted.

It was then, at the beginning of October 1944, that I was taken with my parents to Germany after selection at the Dulag 121 transition camp in Pruszków. Families were put on trains, squeezed into cattle wagons. Of that trainload, men and boys over 16 were taken to the Neuengamme concentration camp near Hamburg, including my father who died there as early as 8 December 1944, aged 44. Women and children were transported to KL Ravensbrück and put in a huge tent. Our situation was abominable – famine, cold, lice and inhuman sanitary conditions. Children, including myself, lived in constant fear of getting separated from their mothers. The dread was aggravated when we saw SS men with dogs and female guards, Aufseherinnen, whipping the prisoners. Having spent weeks in the tent, the women were taken with their children to do hard labour outside the camp. I remember their toil at a farm, a brickyard and a sugar processing plant – our mothers worked under harsh conditions and were beaten. We, the children, hungry, infected with lice and locked up when our mothers had to go on their daily grind, lived in foreboding fear of being separated from them.

Towards the end of the war, in order to obliterate any evidence of the camps and eliminate unwelcome witnesses, the Nazis sent their prisoners on death marches. On one of those marches, I went through experiences that could have meant immediate death. Where did all that ruthlessness come from? Why, in the face of losing the war, did the tyrants continue to kill innocent, helpless people forced to go on those death marches? What were the thoughts and feelings of those shooting at them?

We survived thanks to my mother's strong will; she had not given in to despair, subconsciously hoping to be free and trusting in God's care. Nevertheless, during my whole life, my attitude towards people and the world has been influenced by the calamities of occupied Warsaw, the camp and other places of wartime wanderings as well as the death march.

After the end of the war, until mid-1946, my mother and I stayed in Germany at the centres established by Americans where the freed victims of the Nazi system were

taken care of. We returned to Poland in July 1946 after receiving an official confirmation of my father's death.

The over five years of German occupation were a time of huge deprivation for Poland: just about 40% of the pre-war national resources was still there, about 6 million Polish citizens had died and the capital city, Warsaw, was almost totally destroyed. When we came home, we were forced to face the cruel reality – millions of Poles had to start their lives anew, under the system imposed upon us by the Soviets. My mother and I found ourselves in austere conditions: without my father, without a place to live, with no belongings. It took us many years to reach certain basic standards of living. Most Polish families, including my own, experienced the damaging effects of war even more acutely when they lost their near and dear to both the Nazi and the Soviet invasion.

It is our – the survivors' – duty to pass on the history and experiences to the generations that follow. It is a warning, as we said it on the Polish commemorating plaque: "If the echo of their voices fades – we shall perish!" - "Wenn das Echo ihrer Stimmen verstummt, werden auch wir untergehen!"

Our generation is stepping down; perhaps at the next anniversary only few of us will be there. Therefore, our call must resonate stronger, **"this must not be forgotten", in order to prevent the proliferation of hatred, disdain or the desire to dominate others at any cost.** This is addressed both to ordinary people and to those holding power. Violence must not be encouraged or approved, and that also refers to the language of hatred and contempt, threatening, dividing and excluding people. That terrifying human tragedy must be documented and the horrors of living in captivity must be shared with others as a warning. We must not be indifferent to discrimination of those less strong; our experience is an obligation to defend those whose safety and dignity are infringed. Evil must be counteracted before it spreads – "overcome evil with good" as St. Paul wrote to the Romans, and the words of the crucial Christian prayer, "and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us", should resonate.

The continued existence of memorial museums at former concentration camps is very important to our generation and should be important to the generations that follow. It is through documents, testimonies, descriptions of life at concentration camps, objects handcrafted by prisoners, poetry written in captivity that we learn about the suffering and tragedies, as well as of outstanding attitudes and courage of the prisoners, of sustaining

dignity despite humiliation, of upholding fundamental values, of mutual support and solidarity when forced to live in a concentration camp. I am convinced that collecting, preserving and displaying the evidence of this horrible life behind barbed wire, with hardly any hope for freedom, here at the Ravensbrück museum, is crucial for each of the 27 countries from which prisoners came here. We emphasize the need to maintain the memorial rooms in the actual cells of the former cell building at Ravensbrück and the need for describing special places, for placing memorial plaques and for supporting various forms of honouring memory during celebrations.

I would like to congratulate Dr. Insa Eschebach and the whole team of the museum for the outstanding quality of their work and wish them success in the efforts aimed at further cooperation between the various countries, mutual understanding and respect.

Thank you for your attention.