

Ladies and gentlemen,

we have come a long way to create this place of learning and remembrance and to embed it in the collective consciousness. We have come a long way, over the course of decades. We have passed through the stages that every inconceivable crime apparently must go through before it can be integrated into a society's sense of responsibility. Forgetting, denying, repressing, tentatively looking, putting into perspective, researching, listing statistically, acknowledging, being horrified. And then there are a few who begin to ask what we can learn from what has happened. All of this is linked to a clear 'Never again'. It is linked to a profound shaking of our very selves, our world view, our sense of identity. The 'Never again' does not seek to deny our destructive tendencies as human beings, but rather to learn to deal with them, to defuse them in good time before anything similar to what happened here in Hartheim occurs again.

We have come a long way. But, as we must now acknowledge, not everyone has come with us. Some even want to turn round and go back. This is what can also be described as a 'turning point in history'. People turn back, fantasising about a past that never actually existed. At least, that is what the uninformed public is led to believe by political movements that make use of fragments of the past.

Behind this lie tangible power interests. They must be taken seriously. They are reviving ideas and ideologies that are extremely dangerous. For all of us.

Media outlets such as *Der Standard* report from the circles of Identitarian gatherings. There, members measure each other's skulls. They claim there is something like an 'Aryan bone' in the head. Whoever can produce the longest one is deemed a 'super-Aryan'. The fact that this is linked to an image of masculinity that seeks to make 'women' submissive once again fits in well with this. If you might now think that these are simply 'silly boyish pranks', as was once said in an attempt to play down a church scandal, you are mistaken. They mean it seriously. In Austria, the leader of the party that demonstrably employs Identitarians – even in Parliament – downplays this violent, ethno-nationalist group as a 'right-wing NGO'.

The election winner in Sachsen-Anhalt (Germany) has, in all seriousness, declared that he supports the production of weapons in his state. After all, he argues, these will be needed to actually carry out the expulsion of 'foreigners' from the state. Exactly who these 'foreigners' are is deliberately left open. Work is still under on defining the enemy. But you can be sure that it will soon become clear.

I need not list any further examples for you. As alert members of our society, you probably feel the same as I do: the unease grows with every passing day. Which gate of hell, to quote Dante, is beginning to open once more? And above all, many of us are preoccupied with the question: what can we – still – prevent?

It is clear to most of us – including those who, unaware of what they are doing, vote for far-right groups or at least sympathise with them – that we want neither war nor destruction. We went through all of that twice in the 20th century. We do not need to go through it again. Anyone who sees things differently must be regarded as extremely dangerous. We know that enemy stereotypes are needed to make violence plausible in the first place. Only those convinced of their own superiority will be able to destroy others – those who, by their definition, do not belong to the elite – without a second thought. It is a small step to ‘life unworthy of life’, as it was called in our history. Anyone who laments the loss of ‘Aryan bone’ is already quite close to that.

On some days, I get the feeling that the time for taking a clear stand – and being prepared to bear all the consequences of doing so – is drawing nearer. Until now, it has been easy to be anti-fascist and humanist. It was simple to classify what happened as inhuman brutality, as a crime, and to say so publicly. The existence of the Hartheim Centre for Learning and Remembrance is a sign that we had reached a consensus on calling things by their proper names and had developed the will to learn from them. In a free society, we did not – and do not – have to fear any personal repercussions for doing so. On the contrary, we could count on being respected for taking this stance.

On some days, I am not sure whether this will still be the case in the near future. Over the past few months, I have been studying the history of Austrian women in great depth. Hartheim has also featured in at least three biographies of significant Austrian women. Members of the family of the Romani woman Ceija Stojka were taken to Hartheim to be killed. Barbara Gandl, the sister of the landlady of the ‘Weißes Rössl’ in Laufen – the inspiration for the operetta character in St Wolfgang – was murdered in Hartheim. The Mother Superior, Anna Bertha von Königsegg, urged her fellow sisters not to hand over lists of the people in their care to the Gestapo. She was arrested. The remaining sisters were fighting a losing battle. The people they had protected were forcibly removed, taken to Hartheim and killed.

Time and again, whilst studying this violent regime, I found myself wondering: how would I have behaved? Would I have had the

courage to stand up against an injustice that I recognised as such, even at the cost of personal disadvantage? Which sounds far too innocuous anyway. For in reality, totalitarian regimes are always a matter of life and death. Anyone who resists must expect to pay for it with their life, or at the very least with physical and psychological harm.

On some days, it crosses my mind that, even though I would never have imagined it, I might also find myself in a situation where I have to choose between cowardice and bravery, between looking the other way and speaking out, between fleeing and standing my ground.

That is a very apocalyptic thought. Perhaps my mind is already falling prey to the doomsday ideologies that form part of far-right thinking.

But – and this is what I want to say here and now – I am convinced that we must, at least in our thoughts, confront what is possible, what people are capable of. History does not repeat itself. We know that. But how we act as human beings, what drives us to give free rein to the destructive aspects of our nature – which we try to control through culture – that does repeat itself. Unfortunately.

That is why the question remains: what should we do now? Can we still counter this through education, through enlightenment, through reflection? Must we even do so, because it is our only means? The only thing that does not succumb to the logic of those prepared to use violence?

Must we encourage those who are slowly retreating in fear, draw them out, bring them together, and make them realise that there are still many who think differently and want something else?

I cannot offer you any answers, nor did you expect me to. So here are a few more questions.

Firstly: What is our humanism based on?

Does it have deep roots within us, or is it a shallow, holiday-season conviction? I think a discussion on this would be important. Also on the question of whether the erosion of religion – in the form of communities that provide a sense of space and belonging – is accelerating the loss of humanity.

Secondly: Where do we connect with one another?

What more can we offer in terms of physical spaces that foster a sense of belonging, reflection, a feeling of community, and even a shared sense of purpose?

Thirdly: Who tells us what is really going on?

How can we support those who educate, who investigate, who reveal what lies behind the demagogues, what their true intentions are, and how this may ultimately backfire on those who feel they are on the supposedly safe side in terms of ethnicity, nationalism and gender?

I am deeply convinced that there is only one path forward that makes sense. We must no longer stoop below the level of insight and humanity that we have worked so hard to achieve through so many destructive experiences. We can say with conviction that it is possible to deal with the destructive forces within us, that we are not simply at their mercy. We know that we are susceptible to seduction, but it is precisely for this reason that we can learn to maintain a sense of distance from ourselves and not, like those addicted to destruction, bring about our own collapse.

Those people who were murdered here in Hartheim died a senseless death. It served no purpose, not even to make us realise that this must never happen again. If we retain a sense of horror at just how brutal we, as human beings and as a community, can be, then at least it serves a purpose for us. Provided we also confront the dark sides within ourselves and within our society. And that is more necessary than ever.

Thank you for your attention.