

Helmut Schmidt, Prof. Dr.-Ing., O.B. a.D.

Speech on the commemoration in Rabstein

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear students from Prague, dear citizens and compatriots,

We have come to the now idyllic valley of Rabstein to recall the time when the Sudetenland was incorporated into the German Reich and Czechoslovakia was illegally occupied by the German Reich. During the Second World War, under Hitler's rule of violence, people from all over Europe were abducted here and imprisoned behind barbed wire. These people have been forced to work - that was important for the German war industry. To do this, they had to build huge caves into the Rabstein rocks and work there under inhumane conditions. They knew that their work could also turn against their own homeland, because they made parts for fighter planes. Their hard work and poor nutrition killed more than 50 people. Some became seriously ill and later died as a result – we know this from contemporary witnesses from Johnsbach/ Janska also.

After the war, the survivors were able to return to their homeland, but their entire lifetime - wherever they were - was under the burden that was imposed on them here in Rabstein.

We remember the people who have been brought here from their homeland against their will from the countries written down on the memorial stones. The people had to do forced labour, and we especially remember those who lost their life here.

We now go to one of the barracks of the forced labor camp, which were used as a camp prison after the end of the war.

As a German, I know - and I have personally experienced this - how important it is for the victims of the German tyranny that we, together with them, their children and grandchildren, commemorate this excessive German injustice that has terrified the world, people of all backgrounds, of all ages, have suffered unbelievably and this has happened millions of times.

If today we commemorate together the suffering of many Germans in this place after the end of the war, this has nothing to do with equating state-organized injustice during the Nazi era. Rather, it is a turning point towards the people who, without regard to the person, whether SS-man, soldier, party official, entrepreneur, farmer, worker, man or woman, child or old man collectively has been found guilty and cruelly treated, tortured and many to death, beaten or shot.

We are here today with witnesses to these events after May 8th 1945. I myself learned it from my grandfather. He was the last German mayor of Bohemian Kamnitz. He did not leave his city at the end of the war out of responsibility for all citizens, whether Czechs or Germans. He was tortured almost to death here in this cellar and rescued as an alleged corpse by the German camp doctor. Three years later, he was convicted by a Czech people's court for his party membership, but was later expelled as an innocent out of his home country.

I am very moved that we, old and new citizens of my hometown, visitors from Prague, students and teachers, guests in the city and the surrounding area together remember all these people, their suffering and death in Rabstein after May 8th 1945.

We want to work together to ensure that - what we mourn together here - will never happen again, not only in this valley, but throughout our world. When we return to our familiar surroundings, we will be encouraged to work together in mutual respect, as neighbours in peace and freedom in one world, in a united Europe, in our homelands.