

AMBASSADOR OF REMEMBRANCE AMBASADOR PAMIĘCI

a documentary by Magdalena Żelasko

Austria 2024

Duration: 100 minutes

DCP, colour and black-and-white

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LOGLINE

In September 1943, 17-year-old Stanisław Zalewski was arrested in Warsaw as a member of a Polish resistance group and taken to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp for labour service. From there, he was sent to Mauthausen and finally to the Gusen camp, where the prisoners were forced to work for the German armaments industry under inhumane conditions. For a long time, Stanisław Zalewski, like many other victims of Nazi terror, remained silent about his painful experiences. It was only after forty years that he began to talk about it, at events, memorial services, and in schools, and he continues to do so to this day, even at the age of 99. Now, for the first time, he tells his stirring life story in a film as a deeply impressive ‘ambassador of remembrance’.



Stanisław Zalewski before his arrest in Warsaw (photo from the private archive)

CONTENT

As a 13-year-old boy, Stanisław Zalewski witnessed the invasion of Poland by the German Wehrmacht on 1 September 1939 and the outbreak of the Second World War. Like many other people in Poland, he initially thought the air battles were 'exercises'. It was the day his childhood came to an abrupt end.

Stanisław learned car mechanics and began working in a workshop in the infamous Warsaw ghetto, where he witnessed the misery and despair of the Jewish population crammed in there. He was in contact with various resistance groups and took part in small acts of sabotage in the car repair shop. Among other things, the engines of German vehicles were manipulated in such a way that they did not immediately break down, so suspicion could not fall on the garage.

When he and like-minded people painted a symbol of the Polish resistance on the wall of a destroyed house, he was arrested on 13 September 1943, and interrogated by the Gestapo. From the Pawiak prison, where political prisoners were interned, he was sent to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp, where he stayed for around a month and had to perform extremely hard physical labour. He learned about the harsh everyday life in the camp, full of deprivation and harassment, and also had to watch as fellow Jews, often completely unaware, were led to certain death by the SS henchmen.

In November 1943, he was selected to be sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp in Upper Austria and shortly afterwards to the Gusen camp. In Gusen, the supposed 'branch camp' of Mauthausen, thousands of prisoners had to perform hard labour under inhumane conditions in quarries and later also in underground tunnels, where the National Socialists had armament materials produced.

On 5 May 1945, shortly before the official surrender of the German Reich, the Gusen camp was liberated, and the last remaining guards were disarmed and arrested by the US army. It was not until 23 July 1945, after a long march and several weeks of service with the American army, that Zalewski returned to the largely destroyed city of Warsaw.

Stanisław Zalewski spent a total of 600 days in captivity and in the Nazi concentration camps. Like many other contemporary witnesses, he found it difficult for a long time to talk about what he had experienced; the memories were too painful. In many cases, the events of the recent past were tabooed or hushed up by official authorities, including in Austria.

However, since he decided to speak about his life and experiences around forty years ago, motivated by his son Hubert, Stanisław Zalewski has tirelessly visited memorials, events, and schools to educate young people about the crimes committed in the Nazi concentration camps, despite his now very advanced age. Stanisław Zalewski also talks about current political developments and campaigns against all forms of discrimination. And he continues to fight for the former concentration camp site in Gusen to become a worthy place of remembrance, and he hopes to live to see this happen.

He is a wise, charismatic, and deeply impressive 'ambassador of remembrance', who is portrayed here for the first time in a film.



Stanisław Zalewski on the grounds of the Gusen concentration camp in May 2023

PRODUCTION AND CINEMA RELEASE

'I packed my memories in a waterproof box, wrapped them in string, and threw them into the water. I pull them up occasionally, but after using the contents, I throw them back into the water,' says Stanisław Zalewski. Magdalena Żelasko (director, screenplay, and editor) and Michał Koziół (camera, screenplay, and editor) were allowed to accompany Zalewski, who survived around 600 days in the Auschwitz-Birkenau and Gusen concentration camps despite inhumane conditions, for over three years and repeatedly take a look inside his tightly sealed box full of memories. The documentary film *Ambassador of Remembrance* was created from over a hundred hours of footage. The film was shot between April 2021 and February 2024 in Auschwitz-Birkenau and Gusen, as well as in Vienna and Warsaw, for example, in Zalewski's office of the Association of Former Political Prisoners of Nazi Prisons and Concentration Camps, of which he is chairman. There, he talks about his youth with the help of a photo album. Several scenes were filmed in the former Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp (including in a historic barrack of the camp): Stanisław Zalewski reports on the inhumane living and working conditions, but also on the observations he made there – for example, how fellow Jews, most of whom had no idea what was about to happen to them, were led to the gas chambers by members of the SS.

Scenes filmed in May 2023 during an official visit by Stanisław Zalewski to Austria are also of great importance, especially on the occasion of the commemoration and liberation ceremony at the concentration camp memorial site in Gusen, Upper Austria. Martha Gammer from the Gusen Memorial Service Committee and Bernhard Mühleder from the Mauthausen Memorial also have their say. Zalewski's participation in the 'March of the Living' in 2022 as guest of honour of the Austrian youth delegation 'March of Remembrance and Hope – Austria' and a tribute in the Parliament of the Republic of Austria in Vienna were also filmed. Unique archive footage, for example, from the Warsaw Ghetto, historical images, television reports, and never-before-seen memorabilia from Stanisław Zalewski's private archive, also play a central role.

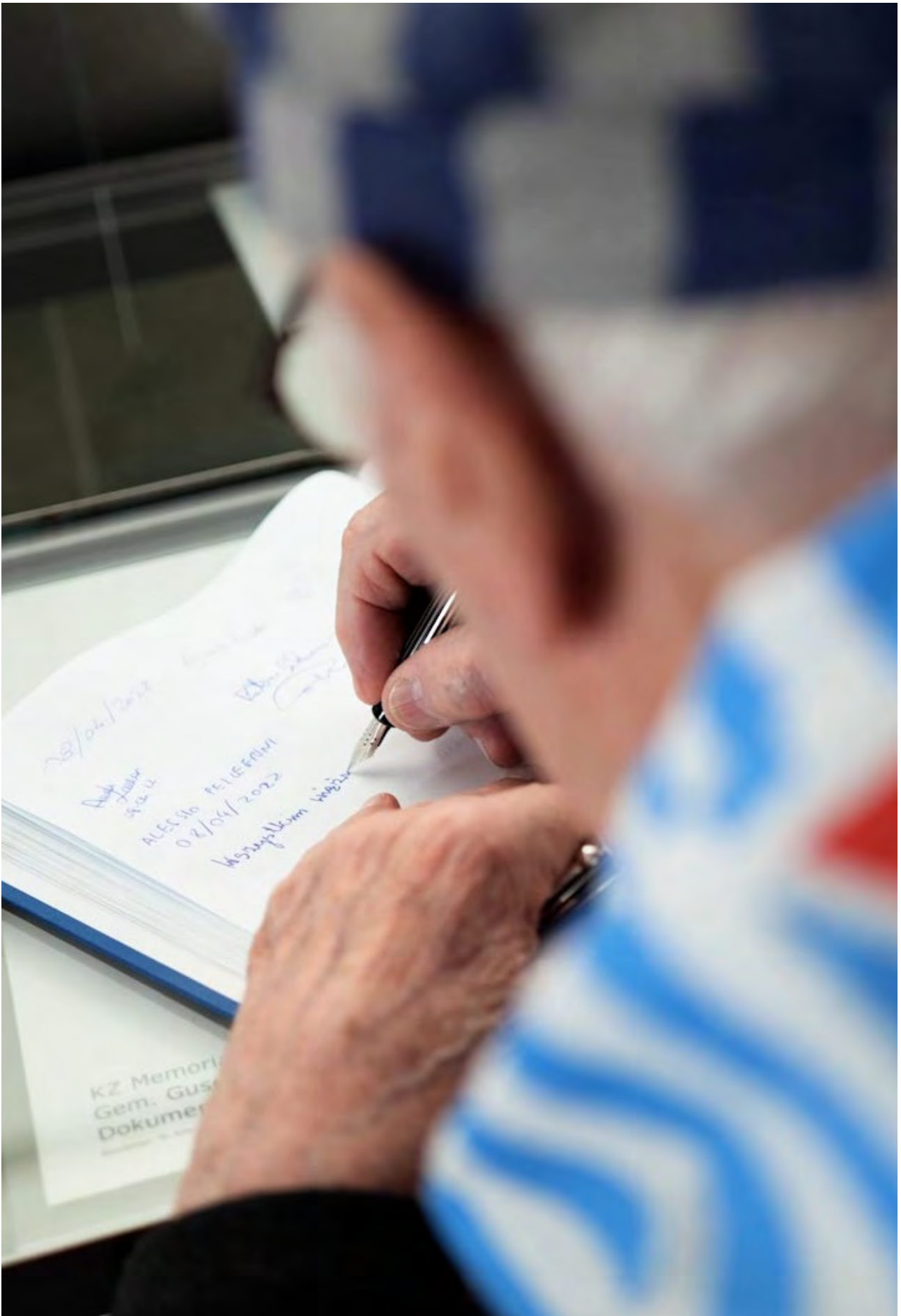
Cooperation partners and supporters include the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, the Institute of National Remembrance, the Federal Archives, the Gusen Memorial Committee, as well as the Austrian Broadcasting Company ORF and Telewizja Polska S.A. with their archives.

From 1 September 2024, exactly 85 years after the invasion of Poland by the German Wehrmacht and the outbreak of the Second World War, the film will be shown in cinemas throughout Austria, and from October 1, on Stanisław Zalewski's 99th birthday, also in numerous other European countries, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Croatia, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Greece thanks to Cineplex International.

In addition, there will be cooperation with other partners, above all with the Polish Institutes, Austrian Cultural Forums, as well as embassies and further cultural institutions, but also with local initiatives and personalities.

Thanks to the enormous importance of the topic, the charismatic protagonist with a multitude of memories that have never been conveyed before, and not least, thanks to subtitles in several languages, the chances of reaching a broad, international audience are extraordinarily good.

The film is also intended to be used in schools; multilingual didactic materials for teachers are being produced for this purpose.



Stanisław Zalewski at the visitor centre in Gusen in April 2022

ORIGINAL QUOTES BY STANISŁAW ZALEWSKI FROM THE FILM

ABOUT THE FIRST DAY OF THE WAR

I went off to school dressed like that. And suddenly, aeroplanes came, and our air defence started shooting at them. People said, “Oh, surely, just exercise.” But the noise of the falling bombs dispelled the illusions. This was the war that had been felt for several months. On open spaces and squares, trenches were dug for air defence, and anti-aircraft warfare was set up on the Vistula. And that was the first day of the war.

ABOUT THE WARSAW GHETTO

As you walked through the gate, you saw people so emaciated that their clothes hung as if on a skeleton. People were walking back and forth as if they had taken drugs. With their arms hanging down, they looked at the ground or the sky. Women had small stalls, but they were cages with bars where there were pieces of bread, a roll, or something like that. Children were sitting next to it. It looked like a camp.

The Warsaw ghetto was the precursor to the concentration camp. The Jews in the ghetto were used for various jobs. They cleaned up outside the ghetto and got something in return. Further. There were selections at times. I saw that the Jews who were selected – I don't know according to what criteria – were taken to the so-called transshipment point, from where they were taken to concentration camps, mostly to Treblinka, and we know what happened to them there.



Stanisław Zalewski in the historic barrack in Auschwitz II (Birkenau) concentration camp in May 2022

ABOUT THE TRANSPORT TO AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

There were goods trains there. I emphasise this because the general opinion is that prisoners were transported in cattle wagons. Some twist the facts to heighten the drama. If they really were wagons for the transport of live animals, then that would be first class. Wagons for the transport of live animals have large ventilation openings and are designed in such a way that the animals are not injured when the train moves. There were so many prisoners in the carriage that you could stand relatively freely, but if someone sat down, it became cramped.

ABOUT THE SLOGAN ‘WORK MAKES ONE FREE’

And so, the funeral procession continued until we reached the gate with the infamous saying, “Work makes one free.” I didn't know at the time what that meant, but I had learned German before and knew a few words. So, work and freedom. I thought, aha, work, so if I am going to work, I will be freed. That's how I translated it for myself.

ABOUT HIS PRISONER NUMBER

I have a number on the inside of my left upper arm. My number is 156569. So many years have passed, and I still remember it. This number is still alive because when I'm here, memories of what happened here come flooding back.



From the ZIB report (ORF) in May 2023

ABOUT UNDERNOURISHMENT

Grass and other things grew next to the barracks – spurge, as they say, or dandelions. When the prisoners were unobserved, they ran out, tore up the grass, and ate blades of grass and dandelions. That's how hungry they were. It ended differently.

ABOUT THE FATE OF JEWISH FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS

I remember. In Auschwitz-Birkenau. I remember how naked women, alive, were taken from the barracks to the gas chamber in trucks. I hear their screams in my subconscious when I return to those events in my thoughts. I remember well-dressed people, their armbands with the Star of David, who walked without any sign of fear. A very large group was led by only one SS soldier. He led them to the crematorium. But only I knew and a few prisoners who were standing next to me.

ABOUT THE ARRIVAL AT THE MAUTHAUSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP

And that's how I got to Mauthausen. Bathing in the cold water in the evening, outside all the time, it was already early November. In the morning, we were only given shirts, underpants, and wooden shoes. And so we walked, driven by SS soldiers, from Mauthausen to Gusen. That's about five kilometres. We know that whoever fell down did not get up again.

ABOUT THE GUSEN CAMP

I witnessed death sentences for practicing religion. I witnessed how a prisoner in a functionary role killed sick prisoners. How prisoners went into the electric barbed wires to commit suicide. On the first day of freedom, I was a witness to drastic vigilante justice by the liberated prisoners on prisoner functionaries, who, on the orders of the camp authorities or out of their own sadistic attitude that had arisen in the camp, had killed fellow prisoners. These are just a few examples.

ABOUT THE DAY OF LIBERATION IN MAY 1945

On 3 May, after the wake-up call, there was no gathering for work. There was no food distribution because there was nothing to hand out. We were simply not called to work. We were upset. And the second astonishment was that there were no more German soldiers at the posts or on the watchtowers, but, as we were told later, the so-called Volkssturm. Civil servants, but militarised. Old men who stood on the towers and called out to us that the war was over and we could run away. But the prisoners didn't believe it. They thought it was a deception and stayed in the camp. And that was the first day of freedom – a sad first day of freedom.



Stanisław Zalewski in the “Bergkristall” tunnel system in May 2023

ABOUT HIS METHOD OF LIVING WITH THESE MEMORIES

To live normally and creatively, I try not to think about the camp events. I have found a method that works for me. I have packed my memories in a waterproof box, wrapped with a string, and thrown them into the water. And I pull them up occasionally, for today's event, for example, but after using the contents, I throw the box back into the water.

ABOUT WAR AND FORGIVENESS

When I pray the Our Father, I say, “Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” Does forgiveness mean forgetting the injustice done? To refrain from punishment? To waive compensation? Can they be forgiven? They who had the inscription “God with us” on their belt buckle and deliberately killed people? I emphasise: with full intent. Because war is the art of killing. He who kills more wins. War causes violence on both sides, and the strongest dictates the law, which can be very cruel. War blurs the line between good and evil. For this not to happen, there must be reconciliation between the peoples. But reconciliation without historical truth and forgiveness is only a bridge without railings between the banks of a ravine. You can walk over it, but not without fear.

ABOUT CURRENT EVENTS IN EUROPE

I don't have to explain to you what is happening in Europe now. And that is why I regard with great understanding, and at the same time with compassion and a certain respect, those who are now experiencing what I experienced decades earlier.

ABOUT THE MEMORIAL SITE IN GUSEN

I have a small favour to ask. This place that is going to be here, that is going to be built, shouldn't be a memorial. We don't want any memorials anymore. We need spaces that are influential on the mindset and intelligence of those who will visit this place.



Stanisław Zalewski in the former crematorium of the Gusen concentration camp, pictured with Bernhard Mühleder (member of the education team at the Mauthausen Memorial) and Martha Gammer (Chairwoman of the Gusen Memorial Committee) in April 2022

ABOUT HAPPINESS

I am a happy person. But happiness doesn't fall from the sky. This is not a gift. It's not a present. You have to work for happiness. And as I have said, only another person can give us happiness. Castles won't do it, nor will diamonds, nor will yachts and cars. Just another person. Therefore, a human being should be a human being for another human being. And that is what happiness is.

ABOUT THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY

Every time I come here, thoughts come back to me, one after the other. Specifically, that people have not drawn any conclusions. They have not learned any lessons for the future from what happened here. This is evidenced by the incidents and events that are taking place all over the world. Let's take the eastern border; let's take Africa or other countries. Things happen there that claim hundreds or even thousands of lives. What is this? And all this for the goal of a single person who has devised an ideology and, according to this ideology, wants to rule over others. And what is that? This is the disregard of one person by another human being. If this continues, then I don't know in which direction the world will go.

ABOUT THE REBUILDING OF WARSAW

When you consider that after the war everything was in rubble, even the castle... And everything was made possible by the sacrifice of the people, rebuilt in so-called communism. And that is now strangely forgotten. But that was the effort of the people who wanted their capital city back.

BIOGRAPHY OF STANISŁAW ZALEWSKI

Stanisław Zalewski was born on 1 October 1925 as one of nine siblings in Sucha Wola, near Warsaw. He was only 14 years old when the Nazis invaded his country, sparking off the Second World War. He began his training as a car mechanic and soon joined a resistance group. Among other things, he tried to support the fight against the occupying forces by sabotaging vehicles. He also painted signs of Polish resistance on the walls of buildings in Warsaw with like-minded people. On 13 September 1943, however, Zalewski was arrested during one such action and taken to the notorious Pawiak prison, where political prisoners were interned.

After interrogation by the Gestapo, he was taken to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp for labour service, around a month later he was transferred to Mauthausen and immediately afterwards to the so-called Gusen branch camp. Until his liberation by the US Army in May 1945, he spent a total of 600 days in the most inhumane conditions and hard physical labour in Nazi concentration camps. In the Gusen II concentration camp, Stanisław Zalewski was part of the Messerschmitt and Bergkristall commandos and had to help produce aircraft parts for the Nazis in the Bergkristall tunnel system. After his liberation, Stanisław Zalewski was transported to Nuremberg by the US Army.

He returned to Poland after a 72-day march. He subsequently completed his schooling, studied engineering, and started a family. After many years of not wanting or being able to talk about his traumatic experiences, he has now dedicated himself to remembrance work for some time and, through his valuable eyewitness accounts and as chairman of the Polish Association of Former Political Prisoners of Nazi Prisons and Concentration Camps, ensures that the horrors of that time are never forgotten. His autobiography 'Events and Signs of the Times from the Years 1939–1945' was published in April 2020.

He is particularly committed to the establishment of a dignified memorial site at the Gusen concentration camp, which has long been neglected in historical reappraisal. Stanisław Zalewski turns 99 shortly after the release of the film *Ambassador of Remembrance*.



Stanisław Zalewski with his son Hubert at the press screening of the film *Ambassador of Remembrance* at the Village Cinema Wien Mitte in May 2024

THE TEAM

MAGDALENA ŻELASKO

Director, Screenplay, Montage, Producer



Magdalena Żelasko, born in the Polish city Krakow, has lived in Vienna for around 30 years. The certified marketing and advertising expert studied Slavic studies as well as journalism and communication science at the University of Vienna, where she completed her doctorate in 2005. She has worked in management for several international companies and as a journalist for various Austrian and Polish media. Before founding the LET'S CEE association and managing the successful festival of the same name from 2012 to 2018, she worked as a lecturer in the Department of Culture and Communication at the University of Vienna. Since 2022, she has been implementing the innovative EU-funded film education project 'EU Youth Cinema: Green Deal', which is now offered in twelve countries.

MICHAŁ KOZIOŁ

Cinematographer, Screenplay, Montage, Postproduction



Born in Dąbrowa Tarnowska in Poland, Michał Kozioł studied international tourism at the Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski Krakow University, before graduating from dental technology school. In 2012, he moved to Vienna, where he still works as a dental technician. In 2019, he founded his own production company, EML MEDIA, which now has over 50 clients in its portfolio, including companies such as The Ritz-Carlton, LOIDL Consulting, LET'S CEE, and Future Smile. In his spare time, he is a member of the volunteer fire brigade and supports numerous charitable projects, including as a member of the peace patrol of the Pol'and'Rock Festival and as a volunteer of the Great Orchestra of Christmas Aid in Poland.

IVAN LOHVIN

Film Score



Ivan Lohvin is a professional pianist from Ukraine and also works as a composer and singer. He began his musical education at the age of five at the local music school, attended a music college, and graduated from the Kharkiv National University of Arts with a Master's degree. He was a member of a professional music band and currently works as a concertmaster at a music college in his home country.

NIKA HAM

Art Design, Artistic Advice



Nika Ham was born in Slovenia and has graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Ljubljana. Although she originally majored in painting, she developed an interest in graphic design, video, animation and 3D design and has worked in those fields for years. She also studied in England and was involved in many art Projects in several European countries. Moreover, Nika was teaching at an art School, organised her own painting courses, participated and curated solo and group exhibitions and worked on various poster designs and print preparations.

DIRECTOR MAGDALENA ŻELASKO ABOUT HER FILM

When I first met the then-94-year-old Stanisław Zalewski in Vienna around four years ago, I was immediately taken by his personality and his life story: How can it be that someone who spent 600 days in prisons and concentration camps is so full of joie de vivre and still has the strength to work in an office three times a week and keep travelling back and forth between Poland and Austria to speak to young people as a contemporary witness?

Stanisław Zalewski is now also the only active contemporary witness from the Gusen concentration camp who is still able to take part in relevant commemorative events, most recently in May 2023, which was covered by the media for the first time. The previous year was remembered all too well when, for the first time, no contemporary witness was present at the official commemorative event in Gusen, not even Stanisław Zalewski himself.

At the same time, the question arose in my mind: how can it be that someone who has so much to tell – and is still able to do so thanks to his exceptionally perceptive memory – has never had the opportunity to reach a broad, international audience as the protagonist of a documentary film in order to bear witness, especially in times like these, to what it can lead to “when a human stops being a human to another human”. There can never be enough anti-war films that educate young generations about Nazi terror and Nazi crimes of violence. Especially when those who remember that time are still alive.

So I started to accompany Stanisław Zalewski on countless activities with a small camera team and to document his life story and his words for future generations. Over the past three years, around 100 hours of footage have been recorded, with the footage from the former Mauthausen-Gusen and Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps being some of the most poignant. In addition, several archive recordings, historical footage, television reports, and never-before-seen memorabilia from Stanisław Zalewski’s private archive were edited into a film. The result is an almost 100-minute documentary film about the charismatic contemporary witness.

From 1 September, the 85th anniversary of Nazi Germany’s invasion of Poland and thus the outbreak of the Second World War, the film will be shown in several cinemas in Austria. On October 1, Stanisław Zalewski’s 99th birthday, the film will be also presented in more than ten other countries with the support of the Cineplexx cinema group, hopefully reaching many people regardless of their origin, age, and cultural roots.



PRESS REVIEWS

“Stanisław Zalewski survived Auschwitz, Mauthausen and Gusen as a political prisoner. Director Magdalena Żelasko returned with him to the original locations, let him tell his story and gave him plenty of time to convey his message. She accompanied him on his travels for three years and then told the story largely chronologically, without dramaturgical gimmickry. She collected 100 hours of material. In the end, it became 100 minutes of film.”

– Gerald Schubert, DER STANDARD

“If you’re looking for high gloss and grand staging à la Netflix, this film is not for you. And that’s a good thing, because Magdalena Żelasko simply lets her protagonist tell his story. He has a lot to say, even about comparatively banal things, such as how the prisoners in Auschwitz shared their daily bread in groups of five or how they were robbed of the most nutritious parts of the soup pot by the Kapos using a ladle trick. He also openly addresses the topic of sexuality, which was omnipresent in the camp.

The film has its strongest moments in Gusen, of all places, which was forgotten for decades as a ‘satellite camp’ of Mauthausen, where Zalewski was forced to participate in armaments production as a prisoner. The increasing emptiness of institutional Holocaust remembrance becomes too tangible there. The director extensively shows how half of the federal government, headed by Chancellor Karl Nehammer (ÖVP), stands around in a pose of consternation, and an Israeli delegation awkwardly tries to make small talk with Zalewski. The then ambassador, Mordechai Rodgold, wished the then-97-year-old a happy 120 years. ‘That’s too much, because people are getting worse and worse,’ Zalewski replies crystal clear. People had ‘not drawn any conclusions from what happened. What’s that all about?’ he then tells a television reporter.”

– Stefan Vospernik, Austrian Press Agency, APA



Stanisław Zalewski as guest of honour at the “March of the Living”
at the Auschwitz concentration camp in May 2022

INTERVIEW WITH STANISŁAW ZALEWSKI

Joachim Ciecierski: Mr Zalewski, what was a day in the Gusen labour camp like?

Stanisław Zalewski: That depended very much on the workplace. In the Messerschmitt detachment, we worked ten hours a day. We got up at 5 a.m.; we had to make our beds properly; at the beginning, we slept individually. Then there was a morning roll call, then breakfast in the form of a bowl of unsweetened coffee with a little something extra. Then we were called together, divided into labour detachments, and marched from the camp to the workplace. Five of us walked at a steady pace. At the gate, the SS man counted the prisoners in the commando led by the Kapo. It was different with the midday meal. It was either taken to the workplace or we returned to the barracks in the camp to eat. We had to eat very quickly. Sometimes, not everyone makes it in time. Then we went to work and returned to the camp in the late afternoon. Counting at the gate, changing in the barracks, whoever had something to change into, washing up, and standing for roll call. In Gusen, there were always roll calls for all prisoners on the roll call square. Dinner was served after the roll call. The prisoners then had free time until the bell rang. After the bell, everyone had to go to sleep.

Were the nights quiet?

Fortunately, I was in a barrack where there were no assaults by SS men and Kapos. However, I learned from other colleagues that SS men would come in in the evening and catch prisoners who the Kapo had noted down for avoiding work or because someone had taken off their cap incorrectly.

Has this ever happened to you?

Prisoners noticed that there was a potato field near our road from the railway ramp to the production hall. Two or three, I don't remember exactly, jumped off the wagon and dug up a lot of potatoes. When they arrived in the hall, they put the potatoes in the oven that was used to heat the room. During lunch, someone asked me to take them out so they wouldn't burn. I had to pass a table where two SS men were sitting. As instructed, I took off my cap, put my hands on my hips, and walked on at a parade pace. They pulled me back. When passing by again, one of the seated men put his leg in front of me. Another SS man stood up and spoke something in German; I only understood that I had done something wrong. He punched me in the face with all his strength. I staggered but managed to get up. The second SS man told his colleague that he didn't know how to hit properly. He stood up and hit me with his hand so that I fell to the ground. After that, they were no longer interested in me. The only thought I had when I got up was the fear that the potatoes were already burned. The hunger of a prisoner decided everything.

545 days in the Mauthausen-Gusen camp. Over 30 days in Auschwitz. You said you locked this time away in a watertight chest that you sent to the bottom of the ocean.

I have sunk it. But I tied a string to this chest. And this string is in a certain place. It was on purpose. Because I had to recover after the camp and resurface to the surface of a social stratum. My material existence depended on it. And I actually managed to do that. But when there are any commemorations, I open this chest again and tell them what they asked me. I don't talk about everything. I only answer questions on certain topics. When I've finished, I throw the chest back into the water. But that doesn't always really work. As soon as all the emotions are gone, some thoughts come back. And then the contents of this chest overcome the defences of the water and enter my mind. It causes confusion and questions that I can't answer.

Being familiar with death in the camp was obvious. You knew why and by whom. But now, with what is happening in the world, I realise that people have not drawn any conclusions from the tragic history of the Second World War. Especially from the time when there were German Nazi concentration camps. People commit military crimes and acts of violence against other people in the name of their own purposes or for something else. That leads to victims.



75th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, Source: Telewizja Polska

It bears the hallmarks of genocide. And the tragic history of the Second World War is being repeated here. That is an unpleasant memory for me. People suffered terribly back then, and now it is happening again.

You say there are many conflicts and wars in the world. The most recent cruel war is taking place several hundred kilometres away from Warsaw, in Ukraine. When you see pictures from Ukraine today, I understand that these childhood memories keep coming back to you.

That's the tragic thing about it. I thought I had already forgotten these memories. I had lost my sensitivity to what concerned me. But it turns out that's not true. When I heard the news, I kind of digested it. But when I saw the destroyed houses, the corpses lying in the streets, the children, the shelling of the soldiers, tanks smashed into small pieces, streets full of rubble, and demolished houses, I immediately remembered 1939 and the concentration camps. It was an indescribable feeling for me. Is it regret or sadness, or is it anger that there are people who cannot live together in peace? People should live together in harmony and peace. And if there are conflicts, they should be resolved. I don't know how, but there was the League of Nations, for example, but it was later dissolved. Now we have the United Nations, which doesn't work so well either.

40 years after the end of the war, you came to Mauthausen for the first time to see the concentration camp, where you spent almost two years. You came with your son. How did you experience it back then?

He forced it on me a little. I didn't want to see it myself. When I came and saw it, I didn't say anything. Only my son started asking me questions: Father, where are the barracks? Father, where is the crematorium? Where is your famous Messerschmitt commando? But when I saw beautiful houses and villas with clean streets, I really didn't know what to say to him.



Stanisław Zalewski at the visitor centre in Gusen in April 2022

You are almost 100 years old. You are very committed to spreading knowledge about these terrible times. You meet young people and travel around Europe, giving lectures. What can I wish you? I know you would like to see the Gusen camp transformed into a real memorial site like Auschwitz.

For me, a place of remembrance – and it can't be a memorial – is when someone who wasn't in the camp enters the camp and immediately feels like a concentration camp prisoner. Something like that can be created. After all,

there are amusement parks. For example, if hell is depicted there and a person enters, they feel like they're in hell. That is also the perception you should experience.

You spent two years in concentration camps...

600 days, to be precise. In prisons and camps. I'm counting the arrests, the time in Pawiak Prison, the interrogations in Szucha Alley, and the imprisonment in Auschwitz and Mauthausen-Gusen. It was exactly 600 days. At first, I didn't believe it myself, but I counted it several times. I believe in paranormal phenomena. And this is a certain signal for me. For example, when I took part in the last underground mobilisation, I met my mother in the courtyard. She asked: – Where are you going, Stachu? And I, jokingly: – Oh, that doesn't matter, Mom. I won't be back for another two years, the war will already be over by then. After exactly 2 years and 52 days, I returned to the same place. I counted it with a calendar in my hand. When my mother died, she was 52 years old. She was fatally injured by a fragment of an artillery shell during the Warsaw Uprising.

Unfortunately, she did not live to see your return.

Well. I was my mother's unwritten favourite child. And I had this brown suit. She carried it with her when the family was away during the uprising. She always said: – When Stachu comes back, he must have something to wear. Unfortunately, when I came back, the suit stayed, but I didn't wear it. It was only after several years that I somehow managed to put it on.

Your mother and brother did not survive. But you survived, also thanks to them. The thought that you would return from the war and see them again, gave you the will to survive.

That's how it was...

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Stanisław Zalewski in the barrack of the Auschwitz concentration camp in April 2022

THE WARSAW GHETTO

Four weeks after the German invasion of Poland, the capital, Warsaw, was occupied. Until 1939, the largest Jewish community in Europe lived here with over 350,000 people, which was around 30 percent of Warsaw's population. Immediately after the occupation, the German units began to terrorise the Jewish population with coercive measures. Compulsory identification with armbands, severe restrictions on freedom of movement, and the arbitrary confiscation of property were just some of these. Violent attacks by the SS and police units against the Jewish population were also part of the programme.

As early as November 1939, the German occupiers declared parts of the city centre, which were predominantly inhabited by the Jewish population, to be a 'restricted area'. On 2 October 1940, Ludwig Fischer, governor of the Warsaw district, issued the order to establish the ghetto. From 16 November 1940, over 450,000 people were crammed into an area of just over three square kilometres, which made up around 2.4 percent of Warsaw's surface area, and isolated from the rest of the city. On average, around 7.2 people lived in one room in the ghetto.

Not only the Jewish population of Warsaw but also Jewish people from other areas of Poland and from Germany were interned here. Members of the Sinti and Roma were also imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto by order of the authorities and the police. The non-Jewish residents of the district were forced to leave their homes beforehand, and some of them were moved into the rooms vacated by the Jewish population.

A three-metre-high, 18-kilometre-long wall was erected around the ghetto. Many residents of the ghetto lost their livelihoods and had to perform forced labour in ghetto-owned factories and private businesses. Due to the lack of supplies, the residents were forced to sell their private assets for food. Later, the destitute people tried to smuggle goods over the wall. For many, this was the only way to survive. Daily life in the ghetto was extremely cramped, characterised by surveillance, terror, hunger, and epidemics. The living conditions were catastrophic. Between November 1940 and July 1942, it is estimated that over 80,000 people died as a result of the unbearable living conditions.



The Warsaw Ghetto, archive material from the Institute of National Remembrance

In 1942, Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer SS, ordered the so-called 'resettlement' of the ghetto's population. This meant deportation to extermination and labour camps. The first deportations to the Treblinka extermination camp began in July 1942 as part of the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question', as the National Socialists called it. By the end of 1942, the majority of the ghetto residents had been deported and murdered.

Between July and September 1942, around 250,000 to 280,000 people were deported from the ghetto, and far more than 10,000 residents were murdered during these deportations in Warsaw itself. Between 35,000 and 60,000 people remained in the ghetto at this time.

THE UPRISING IN THE WARSAW GHETTO

On 28 July 1942, the Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa (Jewish Fighting Organisation, ŻOB) was founded by mostly young men and women. The aim of the resistance organisation was to fight against the ongoing deportations. Initially, the organisation only carried out isolated actions, such as arson attacks on German warehouses. Under the leadership of 24-year-old Mordechaj Anielewicz, the ŻOB revived as a rallying organisation for the Jewish resistance groups in the ghetto from November 1942 onwards. Marek Edelman, a youth functionary, was also on the management committee. At the end of 1942, the ŻOB had around 500 members. Through contacts with the Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa, AK), the fighters came into possession of a few weapons, mainly pistols and explosives.

On 18 January 1943, the ŻOB put up armed resistance against the Germans' attempt to carry out further deportations. The ŻOB suspected that the plan was to dissolve the ghetto. The SS deported a total of 5,000 people by 21 January and over a thousand people were killed in the ghetto, but because the Nazi occupiers were surprised by the resistance of the Jewish population, they stopped the evacuation of the ghetto. Encouraged by this success, the members of the fighting organisation began constructing underground bunkers and hiding places, as they feared the deportation of the remaining ghetto population. This was planned to begin on 19 April and was to take place three days later.

On the morning of 19 April, shortly before the start of Passover, SS units marched into the ghetto. Under Anielewicz's command, the insurgents began fighting with grenades, some of which they had made themselves. The insurgents pushed the surprised Germans back to the ghetto walls on the first day. On the third day of the uprising, the SS began to systematically burn down the ghetto and blow up bunkers and buildings in order to break the resistance. Despite the German troops clearly outnumbering the few hundred fighters, the ghetto population maintained the resistance for nearly four weeks. There was also organised resistance in other ghettos (e.g., Bialystok, Minsk) and concentration camps (e.g., Treblinka, Sobibor).

The ŻOB command bunker was located at 18 Miła Street, where Anielewicz and other ŻOB leaders committed suicide on 8 May 1943 due to the steadily worsening situation. Marek Edelman managed to escape through a manhole and go into hiding in Warsaw. He fought against the National Socialist occupiers once again in the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 and was one of the co-founders of the free trade union Solidarność in 1980. Until his death in 2009, Edelman was probably the most important contemporary witness to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. On 16 May, the SS destroyed the large synagogue in the ghetto as a symbolic action. The SS brigade leader, Jürgen Stroop, was in charge of the demolition and recorded the events in a report. 'There is no longer a Jewish neighbourhood in Warsaw!' was the title of Stroop's report. By that day, the SS and police units had killed over 56,000 people or transported them to extermination camps. A few were still able to hide or flee.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is of enormous significance because it symbolised the armed resistance of Jews against the Nazi terror regime. The fact that oppressed people fought back despite the hopelessness of their resistance still characterises Jewish self-image today.

Source: bpb.de

THE AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU CONCENTRATION CAMP

The Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp was established in mid-1940 in the suburbs of the Polish town of Oświęcim, which had been annexed to the German Reich. The Germans gave the town the name 'Auschwitz'. As the camp's expansion progressed, Auschwitz-Birkenau became the largest mass extermination centre in occupied Europe, where the Nazis murdered the majority of the deported Jewish people in gas chambers. The Auschwitz concentration camp became a worldwide symbol of the Holocaust/Shoa, genocide, and terror. Red Army troops liberated it on 27 January 1945.

Of at least 1.3 million people deported to the Auschwitz camp complex, around 1.1 million were murdered. Out of the over 5.6 million Holocaust victims, racial persecution led to the murder of approximately one million Jews in Auschwitz-Birkenau. There were also around 160,000 non-Jewish victims, including Sinti, Roma, and Poles who were also racially motivated, as well as male homosexuals because of their sexual behaviour. Around 900,000 of the deportees were murdered in the gas chambers immediately after their arrival. A further 200,000 people died as a result of illness, malnutrition, abuse, and medical experiments, or were later selected as unfit for further forced labour and murdered. The countries of origin of most of those murdered were Belgium, Germany, France, Greece, Italy, Yugoslavia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Romania, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary.



View of the gate of the Auschwitz concentration camp, archive material from the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau

Today, the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum preserves or restores many parts of two large concentration camps to their original state. They are part of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, a Holocaust memorial and Jewish cemetery on the site of the two former concentration camps I and II, which is open to the public. This museum is also a memorial site, an international meeting place, and a Holocaust research centre. UNESCO has declared Auschwitz-Birkenau, the German National Socialist Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940–1945), a World Heritage Site.

Source: auschwitz.org

THE MAUTHAUSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP

On 12 March 1938, the 'Anschluss' ('Annexation') of austrofascist Austria to the German Reich took place. Two weeks later, the National Socialist Gauleiter (regional head) of Upper Austria, August Eigruber, announced to an enthusiastic audience that his Gau would have the 'distinction' of building a concentration camp. The location chosen was the town of Mauthausen on the Danube. Political opponents and groups of people labelled as 'criminal' or 'antisocial' would be imprisoned here and forced to work in the granite quarries. On 8 August 1938, the SS transferred the first prisoners from the Dachau concentration camp. During this phase, the prisoners, who were all Germans and Austrians and all men, had to build their own camp and set up operations in the quarry. Their daily lives were shaped by hunger, arbitrary treatment, and violence.

In December 1939, the SS ordered the construction of a second concentration camp just a few kilometres from Mauthausen. The Gusen branch camp officially went into operation in May 1940. After the outbreak of the war, people from across Europe were deported to Mauthausen, which gradually developed into a system of several interconnected camps. During this phase, Mauthausen and Gusen were the concentration camps with the harshest imprisonment conditions and the highest mortality. Prisoners at the bottom of the camp hierarchy had barely any chance of surviving for long. Those who were ill or 'useless' to the SS were in constant danger of losing their lives. In 1941, the SS started to construct a gas chamber and other installations at Mauthausen for the systematic murder of large groups of people.

During the second half of the war, the prisoners, who now included women for the first time, were increasingly used as forced labourers in the arms industry. In order to accommodate the prisoners where they worked, the SS established several subcamps. Newly-arrived prisoners were transferred to these camps from the main camp. More and more, Mauthausen itself became a camp where the sick and weak were sent to die.

Since the prisoners were now needed for their labour, living conditions improved for a short time. From the end of 1943 onwards, inmates were also deployed in the construction of underground factories, for example, those in Melk, Ebensee, and St. Georgen an der Gusen. The murderous working conditions that prevailed at these sites soon led to a dramatic rise in the number of victims.

Towards the end of the war, the Mauthausen concentration camp became the destination for evacuations from camps near the front line. Tens of thousands of prisoners arrived on several large transports. Overcrowding, lack of food, and rampant disease led to mass death among the prisoners in the final months before liberation.

On 5 May 1945, the US Army reached Gusen and Mauthausen. Some prisoners were in such a weakened state that many still died in the days and weeks after liberation. Of a total of around 190,000 people imprisoned in the Mauthausen concentration camp and its subcamps over the course of the course of seven years, at least 90,000 died.

Source: mauthausen-memorial.org

THE GUSEN BRANCH CAMP

While planning for the Mauthausen concentration camp, the SS also acquired granite quarries in Gusen, which lay a few kilometres away. The camp permanently housed the first prisoners in April 1940. Originally conceived as a branch of the Mauthausen concentration camp, Gusen had a capacity of around 6,000 inmates, making it larger than the main camp in Mauthausen. At first, the SS transferred mainly Polish and Spanish concentration camp prisoners from Mauthausen to Gusen. Similar to Mauthausen, the majority of the prisoners initially served as forced labourers in the quarries. In particular, in the years 1940–1942, the prisoners were killed systematically in their thousands, or they died as a result of the murderous conditions. In 1941, the number of deaths in the Gusen branch camp was several times as high as in Mauthausen.

As part of the growing use of concentration camp prisoners as forced labourers in the arms industry, in 1943, two large arms companies moved parts of their production to the Gusen concentration camp. Steyr-Daimler-Puch AG, the largest arms company in the 'Ostmark', now produces guns here, and the Messerschmitt GmbH company, a major aircraft manufacturer in the German Reich, makes aeroplane parts. For prisoners assigned directly to arms production, conditions improved, and for a time, mortality in the camp sank.

As early as late 1943, the SS started to use prisoners to dig tunnels in the surrounding mountainsides. The intention was to provide bomb-proof sites for factories being put out of operation by Allied air raids. At the start of 1944, the SS initiated a giant underground construction project in St. Georgen an der Gusen, a few kilometres from the Gusen concentration camp: the tunnel complex with the code number 'B8' and the codename 'Bergkristall'. The purpose of this project was to safeguard the production of Messerschmitt Me 262 fighter jets from air raids. Up to 6,000 concentration camp prisoners worked on the construction site at any one time. Construction continued around the clock, and, under massive time pressure, the prisoners were subjected to constant abuse. Mass production of aircraft fuselages and parts went into operation as early as autumn 1944. By the end of the war, around eight kilometres of tunnel covering an area of around 50,000 square metres had been built.



Recreated scene of the first entry of American soldiers in Mauthausen, probably 7 May 1945;
Photo: US National Archives and Records Administration, Text: Mauthausen Memorial

To house the prisoners needed to build the tunnels and later work in aircraft production, the Gusen concentration camp was extended in March 1944, and a new part of the camp, 'Gusen II', was created. Many survivors remember the living conditions in this camp as the most catastrophic of any they had experienced. At least 8,600 prisoners were murdered in the Gusen II camp or died there as a result of the living and working conditions.

On 5 May 1945, American soldiers liberated the Mauthausen and Gusen concentration camps. Around 25,000 prisoners were found alive in Gusen. And many, many dead. Around two thousand more prisoners were so weakened by disease and malnutrition that they died immediately after liberation. In total, more than half of the more than 71,000 prisoners from at least 27 different nations died in Gusen, including at least 13,000 Poles.

Between 1938 and 1945, around 190,000 people from more than 40 different nations were imprisoned in the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp system and its satellite camps. At least 93,000 people died there, including 25,308 from Poland, 15,056 from the former Soviet Union, 8,753 from the German Reich, 7,592 from Hungary, 4,749 from Spain, 4,266 from France, 4,247 from Italy, 3,840 from the former Yugoslavia, 2,938 from the Czech Republic, and 1,346 from the Netherlands.

The Gusen I, II, and III camp complexes were largely destroyed in the years following liberation. In the 1960s and 1970s, a housing estate was built on the site of Gusen I and Gusen II. Individual surviving concentration camp buildings were and are still used commercially or for residential purposes.

Thanks to the efforts of former prisoners, the remains of the crematorium were saved, and a small memorial site was opened in Gusen in 1965. It was not until 1997 that it received the status of an official memorial site of the Republic of Austria and was thus placed under legal protection.



Liberation Ceremony in Gusen in May 2017, Photo: Awareness Region

In 2001, the so-called Committee of Persons was convened, and a visitor centre was established in 2004. Today, there are only scattered architectural remains in the region, which were placed under monument protection in 2016.

In 2021 and 2022, significant plots of land were purchased by the Republic of Austria. In March 2022, the official start for further development of the Gusen Concentration Camp Memorial Site was finally announced. This is an opportunity to create a new, truly European memorial site with the involvement of all stakeholders.

Source: mauthausen-memorial.org

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Austrian Broadcasting Corporation ORF, Vienna
Awareness Region, Mauthausen
Federal Archives, Berlin
Gusen Memorial Committee
Institute of National Remembrance, Warsaw
State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau
Telewizja Polska S.A., Warsaw
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D.C.
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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum | gift of Julien Bryan Archive
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum | gift of Niklas Frank and Erika Noebel
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum | gift of Hadassah Rosensaft

Film funders and supporters (in alphabetical order)
AIRBUS
Anantara Palais Hansen Vienna Hotel
Cineplex International
Future Fund of the Republic of Austria
National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism
Office of the Upper Austrian Provincial Government
Polish Institute Vienna