



By Silke Ruprechtsberger
 English translation by
 Craig Eldon Reishus
 Photos: Tosca Santangelo

Nearly seven decades after the Nazi reign of terror, the people living in the Mauthausen region are searching for an identity beyond the stigma and on the other side of repression.

Mauthausen, 26th of April. The afternoon sun extends a lovely invitation for an early spring outing. Indoors at the *Donausaal*, a community events center, the organizational consultant Alfred Zauner tries to hide his nervousness. He says, “We have no idea how many people are going to show up.” But his worries are soon dispelled: the rows quickly fill, and almost every seat in the house is taken.

Some one-hundred people have gathered, young and old, women, men, all of them citizens of Mauthausen, Langenstein, and St. Georgen/Gusen – communities surrounding Linz where during the Nazi reign innumerable concentration camp prisoners were treated as slaves, tortured, executed.

Hope Blossoms Amidst the Nazi Ruins

Zauner says, “Many from this region have lived for decades in a state of repression and collective shame. They also carry the burden of being viewed by visitors to the region as the descendants of the perpetrators.”

Today, some seventy-five years following the *Anschluss* – the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany – the people of the region are searching for an identity beyond the stigma and beyond repression. *Bewusstseinsregion Projekt* (“The Regional Awareness Project”) invites area citizens to build, from the ruins of the past, a new future based on universal human rights. For the first time, during this

Donausaal gathering, concrete ideas and possible solutions are being explored in a public forum.

Historical landmarks must be livable

The process began thanks to a major conflict: a few years ago, when the people of Langenstein wanted to tear down the last of the concentration camp barracks, the National Heritage Agency (BDA) issued a strict demolition ban. To keep things from escalating, the BDA organized a round table discussion between representatives from victim protection groups, local community members, historical experts, and both federal and provincial Upper Austria authorities. The meeting's focus was to explore different perspectives regarding what to do with the the Nazi-era sites; those present reached consensus on establishing a broad public participatory process which began at the end of 2012 with the launch of local councils.

Alfred Zauner was called in to head the project. "Historial landmarks must be liveable," he says. "We will know in the future if our project has been a success, if someone from Mauthausen traveling abroad, when asked about their hometown, can reply: *Yes, we have an appalling past. But we have learned from all we have been through, and*

The Regional Awareness Project

How do people deal with a region's dark past?

The citizens of Mauthausen are exploring participatory awareness and human rights.

Information:
www.bewusstseinsregion.at



we have created something new."

An Alpbach for Human Rights

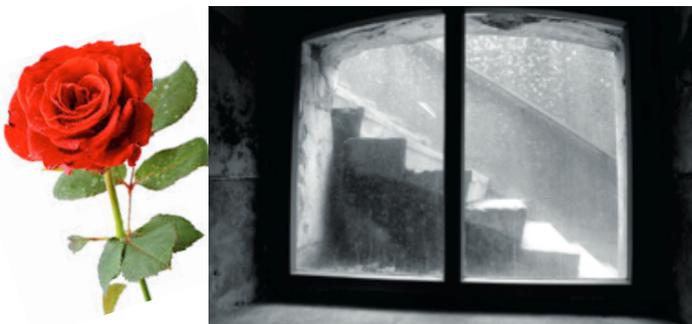
To involve local residents, the Project team worked closely with three citizen councils drawn from all ages and from the entire region, using the *Dynamic Facilitation* method as developed by the American Jim Rough. Thirty-seven individuals were selected from the population at large by a random-number generator, and invited to engage in a creative process over the course of day and a half. There they explored perceptions, expectations, and fears concerning the *Bewusstseinsregion Projekt*, as well as proposing and developing possible solutions.

Martina Handler, one of the two trained facilitators working with the Mauthausen councils, is delighted by the strong motivation she has witnessed: "I was especially impressed by how many of the young people involved came forward, and how much they know about the past." Also contributing to the idea-mix are four resource groups composed of experts in business, regional development, arts, and sciences.

The results are impressive, a palate of ideas stretching from a memorial rose (*Gedenkrose*), planned to bloom in local gardens, to cultural events, interpretative media folders, and a memorial

lawn. Erich Wahl, the mayor of St. Georgen, dreams of one day creating an “Alpbach for Human Rights”, a prestigious forum with learning workshops, school projects, and symposiums, that will positively strengthen the region's identity. For these ideas to become a reality, a regional office, seeded by public funding from the federal government and the European Union, must first be realized.

Naturally, plenty of unresolved questions and potential conflicts remain. In St. Georgen, a spirited discussion is underway concerning a planned sculpture in the church square commemorating the life of priest and educator Dr. Johann Gruber (“Papa Gruber”), one of the concentration camp's many casualties. It is also unclear whether, and to what degree, people from the region will be included each May in the annual Mauthausen Concentration Camp Commemoration Ceremony – to date, area natives have been almost totally uninvolved.



“I believe the dam has broken,” says Albert Langanke, who for many years was the previous Secretary General of the International Mauthausen Committee. Langanke hopes that thanks to the efforts of the younger generations, the people of the region and those belonging to the victims’ associations can now understand one another more readily.



Optimistic Spirit of Renewal in Donausaal

The excited dialogue at the Donausaal gathering (“Our communities are much more than their painful past”) and the pro-active statements of the citizen councils (“We can make a difference”) reveal that the number of those who would simply like to bury the past is shrinking, that the traditional collective silence regarding the region's Nazi past has been replaced by a constructive critical dialogue. This is an important sign, especially at a time when in Upper Austria right-wing extremist violence is on the rise.

Peter Menasse, working as communications consultant for the Bewusstseinsregion Projekt, remarks: “It is important to know how things ended, and to commemorate the victims. But it is also important to think about how it all began, and what it takes for people to not fall over like dominoes with regards to human rights. I see this as a profound opportunity.”