REGION OF AWARENESS
Mauthausen - Gusen - St. Georgen

TUNNEL SYSTEM
"BERGKRISTALL"
REMEMBERING FOR THE FUTURE

We live in a region that bears great responsibility. We keep historic facts in mind. We don’t want the past to repeat itself.

Unemployment, the economic crisis, injustice and poverty as well as the consequent fears and concerns of the people provided a significant basis for the spreading of the totalitarian, inhuman and murderous system of National Socialism throughout Europe.

Human rights were violated, whole groups of people were persecuted, tortured, forced into labor and brutally murdered, just because they had different opinions (for example socialists or communists but also Christians). People who looked different or suffered from disabilities were systematically murdered by the National Socialist machinery of death. Jews, Roma and Sinti were the most affected victims.
The municipalities Mauthausen, Langenstein and St. Georgen/Gusen work together with the Association of Municipalities and support association "Region of Awareness Mauthausen – Gusen – St. Georgen".

The most important goals are to work in the following terms:

- In awareness of the historical burden our region has to carry due to the construction of extermination camps during the time of National Socialism.
- In the effort to reappraise this historic burden through the pooling of the human and economic resources of the region as well as to make the public in the region and beyond aware of the developments and the gruesome crimes committed at the time.
- In the expectation to achieve an overall increase in critical and responsible awareness among the regional and general public.
- With the objective of contributing to the humanization of society and the objective of preventing such terrible developments from taking place in the future by providing information about regional incidents in the past and the creation of a critical and observer awareness.

(extract from the statute)

Program of the Region of Awareness

Fostering awareness and more: The local population is dealing with the past (especially with the period of National Socialism), the present and the future by taking part in workshops and discussion groups, and by engaging in forms of interactive learning.

Establishing an annual symposium for human rights in the region within a network comprised of experts, interested people and institutions in a national and international context.

This learning region is exemplary for other regions. Through initiatives and projects, we set current examples of a positive shaping of the present and future.

Living democracy: Through forms of living democracy, different groups of the population can take part in the shaping of their local area.
The "Bergkristall" tunnel system in St. Georgen/Gusen is one of the biggest structures the National Socialists constructed in Austria. From 1944 to 1945, nearly 45,000 m² of bomb-proof production area were built by prisoners of the concentration camp Gusen II under gruesome conditions and at the cost of thousands of lives.

Under the code name "Bergkristall", the tunnel system served as a production site for fuselages and wings for the fighter jet "Me 262" which were produced on an assembly line under conditions of strictest secrecy. Furthermore, key technologies necessary to manufacture special components were kept safe from air raids in St. Georgen/Gusen.

The project had already been planned by the Air Force of the German Reich before 1944 and was subsequently carried out at the beginning of the year 1944 by exploiting prisoners of the Gusen concentration camp. The reason for choosing this location may have been the fact that the SS had already been using a sandpit in St. Georgen since 1939. Other factors contributing to this decision may have been the presence of smaller beer cellars in the area, the infrastructure the SS had already built in St. Georgen and Gusen at the time, the successful cooperation between "Messerschmitt GmbH Regensburg" and the SS-owned "German Earth and Stone Works" (Deutsche Erd- und Steinwerke GmbH - DESL) from 1943 onwards as well as the relative proximity to the concentration camps Mauthausen and Gusen.

The realization of the project "Bergkristall" led to the additional deportation of thousands of concentration camp prisoners to Gusen who were, from May 1944 onwards, housed in the camp Gusen II under most primitive and inhumane conditions. The dirty barracks were often crammed and posed a high risk of infection. Thousands of people quickly died because of the hard work in the tunnels, due to malnutrition, sleep deprivation, the lack of hygiene and the brutality of the guards and prisoner functionaries. The prisoners worked in round-the-clock shifts. Typically, after an eight to twelve hours work shift the prisoners would, often only for the purpose of getting some rest, be brought to the Gusen camp in open carriages via the SS-owned railway that had been running between the Gusen concentration camp and the tunnel system "Bergkristall" since 1943, constantly driven by the dogs of the SS and the beatings of the kapos.

The first tunnel commando of prisoners was formed on January 2, 1944. June 1944 already saw over 3000 prisoners of the concentration camp Gusen working below ground.

The construction of these tunnels and the brutal exploitation of the prisoners are also responsible for the fact that the number of victims in the Gusen camps ultimately exceeded that of the Mauthausen concentration camp. Approximately 3000 prisoners of the camp Gusen II were brought to the infirmary camp in Mauthausen after having become incapable of working in the tunnels and were left there to die. Among them was Marcel Callo, a young Frenchman who was later beatified.

The concentration camps Mauthausen and Gusen and the tunnel system "Bergkristall" highlight the spatial extent of the former concentration camp system in this area of Austria. They also reflect the area’s wartime transformation from a center of the granite industry to a center of the armament industry. Nevertheless, the main objective always remained the extermination of human beings.

"Bergkristall" and the concentration camps Mauthausen and Gusen I, II & III were liberated on May 5, 1945. The planned collapsing of the underground factory by means of controlled detonations, and thus the extermination of thousands of prisoners, was eventually not carried out. The tunnel system fell into the hands of the American liberators and was immediately sealed off in order to resume production in case of a continuation of the war. It was only after it became clear in early summer 1945 that the Americans would have to leave the region north of the river Danube that the most important machinery was quickly brought to the other side of the Danube, to the city of Linz, in order to prevent the Soviet Union from having access to it."
From autumn 1945 on, "Bergkristall" came under the influence of the Soviet Union. Until 1947, nearly all of the operational equipment was dismantled and subsequently taken away from St. Georgen/Gusen. In autumn 1947, the Red Army attempted to destroy the tunnel system with the help of aerial bombs. Although this did not lead to the complete destruction of the tunnels, the facility was substantially damaged. In the following years this resulted in the partial collapse of the tunnel system in several places, with the consequent craters gradually filled up by the local population. Because "Bergkristall" had been constructed during the war without any official permission, and because Austrian officials did not show any interest in reappraising history, questions of ownership, responsibility, and accountability were left unanswered for decades.

In the decades after the war, there were various proposals for finding a new use for the heavily damaged tunnel system, such as a subterranean power station, a large civil defense bunker, or a nuclear waste disposal site. Apart from a mushroom farm and the removal of sand from where it had fallen in at the blasting sites, however, none of these were ever realized.

In remembrance of the concentration camp prisoners who were deliberately worked to death under most gruesome conditions in the course of this underground project.

BERNARD ALDEBERT, GUSEN II,
PATH OF SUFFERING IN 50 STATIONS


Only in the year 2001 did the Republic of Austria legally succeed to “Bergkristall” and subsequently sign it over to the federal real estate company (BIG). But because in the 1990s houses had been built above parts of the tunnel system, in 2003 and 2004 the BIG began to partially fill the tunnels to ensure the stability of the houses. In 2009, a large part of the remaining tunnels was filled by the BIG once and for all. From this moment on, there have been extensive efforts to make the surviving tunnels of St. Georgen accessible to the public as a memorial site.

In May 2010, former prisoners of the Gusen concentration camps were officially allowed to visit the “Bergkristall” tunnel system for the first time since the end of the war.
Testimony of a survivor of the forced labor in the tunnels:

Bernard Aldebert describes the work in the tunnels: “I worked in the shovel commando for a long time. I am behind the drillers, the men with the jackhammers. Sometimes there are three or four jackhammers at the same time. The noise is deafening. The sand flows out of the rock like a torrent, it floods everything. If you stop shoveling only for a split second, heaps form immediately.

Civilians work with us, or rather they urge us on, add their brutality to that of the kapos. Some of them are good, humane, some of them are bearable, and others are terrible.” Most of them are Austrians.

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Testimony of a civilian:

A St. Georgen resident who was 13 at the time of the liberation in 1945 recalls: “Gradually, larger and larger groups of camp prisoners came in their camp clothing. They looked pitiful. Ragged clothes, their shoes were worn out, the winter had been hard for them.

Well, sometimes we, the children, threw some food for the prisoners over the camp fence. That must have been a feast for those poor people. There was another method: When we visited our grandmother, we inconspicuously dropped some apples on the way. We were incredibly glad to have given them something more.

The end of the war: Sunday, May 5th, 1945, around 8 a.m. I will never forget this day. After the liberation of the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp, the survivors were finally free. Suddenly, some of these prisoners came armed into our room. Look at that, they had only come to thank us for everything we had done for them.”

Testimony of a student from St. Georgen:

“Most of them are Austrians.

Well, during school time, when there was an air raid warning, we hid in the tunnels.

The miners from Hallstadt were there and they were showing the camp prisoners how to build a tunnel. We had to study, there in the tunnels, and we weren’t thrilled at all, right. Reading and, you know, some questions our teacher asked. And then we sat down on a conveyor belt and rode back to where they were working. Didn’t say anything, though, not the camp prisoners and the SS rarely went in there anyway.”
“It is not true that you cannot learn from history. The Second Republic of Austria has learned from the mistakes of the First Republic.

The Second Republic is not perfect – democracy is also based on the understanding that social conditions will never be perfect. But this republic has a stable democratic foundation: the agreement that democracy is, relatively speaking, the best political system we know, and the awareness that democracy has to be protected – from its enemies.

These enemies are those very same people who still promote ludicrous constructs of race, who fabricate biological inequality; who nurse their racism – oblivious to the fact that science has long ago disproved the existence of races. The Republic of Austria exists because “we” – the citizens of this republic – did not lose the Second World War but were and still are, objectively and as beneficiaries, on the winners’ side.”
VISITOR INFORMATION:

**Tunnel System “Bergkristall”:**
The tunnel system can be visited only on a few days of the year, if you are interested, please contact us. Phone: +43 7238 2269-51

**Gusen Memorial**
Georgestraße 6, 4222 Langenstein

March 1st – October 31st:
Monday - Sunday: 9:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
November 1st - February 29th:
Tuesday - Sunday: 9:00 a.m. - 3:45 p.m.


**Audiowalk Gusen**
www.audioweg.gusen.org
The Audiowalk Gusen deals with the history of the concentration camps Gusen I & II.

Booking:
Mobile: +43 664 526 71 14 (Tuesday - Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 11:59 a.m.) or email: bernhard.muehleder@mauthausen-memorial.org

**Mauthausen Memorial**
Erinnerungsstraße 1, 4310 Mauthausen

March 1st – October 31st:
Monday - Sunday: 9:00 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.
(Last admission 4:45 p.m.)
November 1st - February 29th:
Tuesday - Sunday: 9:00 a.m. - 3:45 p.m.
(Last admission 3:00 p.m.), Closed on Monday,
Closed on Dec. 24th - 26th, 31st, and January 1st.

Booking of educational offers:
Phone: +43 7238 2269-35

**Food and Accommodation**
www.st-georgen-gusen.at/gastronomie
www.langenstein.at
www.mauthausen.info

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