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Remembering the first transport of prisoners to Auschwitz 80 years ago

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On 14 June 1940, the first transport carrying Polish prisoners reached Auschwitz concentration camp, which was under construction at that time. The International Auschwitz Committee (IAK), an association of Auschwitz survivors, extended an invitation to a memorial service in Berlin on the 80th anniversary of the transport. It was held under the motto “Remembering Yesterday, Responsibility for Tomorrow”.

Most of the prisoners on the first prisoner transport to Auschwitz were Poles, arrested while attempting to escape from occupied Poland and join Polish military units forming abroad. The 728, mostly young, men were taken from the *Gestapo* prison in Tarnow to Auschwitz camp on that 14 June. They were given prisoner numbers 31 to 758.

On the occasion of the worldwide commemoration of the prisoners of the first transport, Christoph Heubner, in Berlin the Executive Vice President of the International Auschwitz Committee, cautioned: “Especially in the present situation, in which racism and anti-Semitism are once again challenging the world, the commemoration of this day, this place and these people also reminds us of the inferno in which racism and anti-Semitism can end.

At the same time as the commemoration event in Berlin, a wreath-laying ceremony at the Memorial against Violence and Fascism by Alfred Hrdlicka in Vienna commemorated the first transport to Auschwitz.

Among the participants of the Vienna commemoration ceremony were the chairman of the Austrian Camp Community Auschwitz, a. Prof. Dr. Michael John, JKU Linz, the board member of the Austrian Camp Community Auschwitz and member of the IAK, Mag. Dr.in Herta Neiß, JKU Linz, as well as the Secretary General of the National Fund and board member of the IAK, Mag. Hannah Lessing. Christine Danimann, daughter of the resistance fighter and Auschwitz survivor Franz Danimann, who died in 2013, took part in the commemoration as a representative of the survivors and their families. Chairman Michael John explained the occasion being commemorated and passed on a message from the oldest member of the camp community, Erich Finsches.

Hannah Lessing in her closing words: “The fate of this first group of prisoners should be a signal and warning to us today. To be able to intervene in the early stages, you must first recognize them.”

The commemoration ceremonies were held across generations and countries to remember this first group of prisoners, who gave the world so many insights into the mechanisms of hatred, racism and mass murder and warned us against them.