

Contemporary witness Anna Hackl

Festival of Joy 2023

Anna Hackl, maiden name Anna Langthaler, was born in Schwertberg in Upper Austria in 1931. She and her family took in two Soviet soldiers that had escaped their imprisonment at the concentration camp and sheltered them at their home from the SS until the war ended. Today, she regularly visits schools and other educational institutions to talk about her experience, thus actively contributing to preserving the Nazis' atrocities in collective memory and to conveying them to young people.

On the night of 2 February 1945, at freezing cold -8°C , more than 500 Soviet prisoners of war tried to escape Mauthausen Concentration Camp. About 400 prisoners managed to leave the campgrounds. Following that, the SS called upon the police, the SA, and Hitler Youth, but also upon civilians to participate in the proclaimed "hunt" and to either kill the prisoners or return them to the concentration camp. Countless civilians participated and supported the SS, thus contributing to the murder of more than 500 people. Only eleven Soviet prisoners survived the "Mühlviertler rabbit hunt", as the Nazis referred to this war crime, and their survival was thanks to the help of farmers families and civilian forced labourers who took the refugees in and provided for them, just like the Langthaler family did.

To Maria Langthaler, Anna Hackl's mother, it was clear that she would not participate in the atrocities encouraged by the SS, quite the contrary; after the first arrests of escaped prisoners, she decided, "If one of them comes to our house, we'll help him." Not showing civil courage in a situation like that was out of the question for Anna Hackl's mother.

The following day, the two escaped prisoners, Nikolai Zimkolo and Michail Rybtschin, arrived at the family's farm and begged for help. Maria Langthaler gave them shelter and provided for them together with her family. With that, she took responsibility for the refugees, and she risked her family's life, as Anna's father had put sole responsibility on his wife after the SS threatened to kill everyone who helped the refugees.

Even when the SS was on their way to the Langthaler family's farm, Anna, then 13 years old, managed to run home in time to warn everyone and hide the two prisoners under the straw heaps in the barn, thus preventing them, and also her family, from getting arrested.

Risking their own lives, the family provided for Nikolai Zimkolo and Michail Rybtschin for three months, until they were able to return home after the end of the war. Neither the people of the village, nor the SS could find out about the refugees hidden at the farm; and even after the Langthaler family had a photo taken with Nikolai Zimkolo and Michail Rybtschin after the end of the war, they received threats in the mail.

When Maria Langthaler visited Nikolai Zimkolo and Michail Rybtschin 19 years later in Ukraine, she learned that thanks to her and her family's help, Nikolai was the only one of eight children in the Zimkolo family who survived the war.

For many years now, Anna Hackl has been telling her story in schools, with the aim of raising awareness among young people for the atrocities committed by the Nazis, but also to show them just how necessary it is to practice civil courage and to help whenever help is needed. With her commitment

and her tireless appeals to stand up to any tendency of history repeating itself as well as her fight against oblivion, Anna Hackl is doing indispensable work because she contributes to these values being passed down and preserved. After all, it must be “prevented that comes this far again, and to monitor who is in charge.” She asks the young people with whom she shares her experience:

“Take care of our beautiful Austria, and safeguard democracy. You don’t even know how lucky we are. And do remain vigilant, as these things happen so fast. It happened really fast back in the day. It’s up to all of us to make sure these horrible things don’t happen again.”

For her and for her mother’s work, Anna Hackl received, among others, the human rights award of Upper Austria and the Decoration of Honour in Gold for Services to the Republic of Austria.

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