

"Exactly 65 years ago in this small town ... some 600 people anxiously awaited release from nearly three weary years of internment. ... After a week or so of constant air raid alarms in Wurzach and heavy gunfire which gradually grew nearer, on Saturday 28th April, 1945, at 12.45 ..., a large tank was sighted coming over a ... hill on the outskirts of the town, the Leprosenberg. Fortunately for everybody, the local officials had decided to surrender without a fight, and these men proceeded towards the oncoming tank.

...Many internees were gazing eagerly from the windows of the Schloss, which had been their "home" for so long, and not knowing what would happen next. Suddenly, a shout went up as the first tank proceeded down the road, and, followed by numerous others, they rumbled into the main streets. As the first tank reached the main gates of the camp two French officers stepped out and up to the barbed wire which had held the internees prisoners for so long. They inquired who these people were, and on being enlightened that they were British civilian internees from the Channel Islands declared that they were now free.

Only those who have been through such experiences can know the great happiness felt on such an unforgettable occasion.

As the large tanks, armoured cars and lorries continued to pour into the village, the internees made their way out of the camp. At first the troops, many of whom were Moroccan and North Africans, eyed them with natural suspicion, especially as they cheered and welcomed their arrival, but a little explanation in their best "school-day" French brought smiles to their faces. The internees were delighted to see a tank named St. Malo, because this conjured thoughts of places near their homes in the Channel Islands.

By evening many French troops were billeted in the larger houses and the French flag hung from top-storey windows. From the smaller houses of the townspeople hung the white flags of surrender, and for many this must have meant release from Nazi oppression. That night many of the internees went to bed and offered a prayer to the Almighty God for a safe deliverance from captivity and the local people for a peaceful occupation of the town. "

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I should like to use this occasion to commemorate some other people who are not represented here today. One of them is Irvin van Gelder who many of you met 5 years ago when we met for the 60th anniversary and whose friendliness won the hearts of all of us. He had come to Wurzach in the autumn of 1944 together with 70 other Jewish prisoners from the concentration camp in Bergen-Belsen - nearly starved and very ill. The internees who were horrified by what they learned about the situation in German concentration camps took them in and shared their rations with them. One of them died of exhaustion only one day after their arrival. In 2005 Irvin said: " Wurzach was paradise for us. I was born again here." He died last summer at the age of 84.

I would also like to commemorate the prisoners of war, a big group of who had stayed in the Schloss before the internees, and a smaller group who stayed in a small camp next to the Schloss until the end of the war. At least two of them were shot here - the name of one of them is on that wall over there, just above the names of the internees who died here in Wurzach. And we should also remember the forced labourers from Poland and Russia. Two of the them, young Polish men, were murdered by the Gestapo only a few days before the end of the war. Several hundreds of Russian labourers were concentrated in the Schloss after the departure of the internees in order to transport them back to the Soviet Union - often against their will because they were afraid of what was awaiting them there.

So let us not forget: The 28th of April, as later the 8th of May, meant liberation for Germany as well- although many Germans didn't understand it at that time. They only saw defeat and the beginning of occupation. They had yet to learn that this day meant liberation from the oppression of the Hitler regime for all of Europe and Germany.

We are grateful that we can commemorate this day together with you as friends. We are truly grateful for this wonderful friendship which has developed from those ill-fated beginnings nearly 70 years ago, but we should never take this friendship for granted and remember that we must cherish and cultivate it and fill it with life.

I would like to conclude this with the words of Joan Coles: "On this anniversary, it would seem fit and proper to remember those members of the internee community who are resting here in the cemetery of Bad Wurzach."

