



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier**  
**Speech at the memorial service for Roman Kent**  
**Berlin**  
**on 30 August 2021**

We have heard and read about the passing of Roman Kent in many tongues and in many places. In the German Jüdische Allgemeine newspaper, I read that those who survived the Shoah bade farewell to the President of the International Auschwitz Committee with deep Wehmut.

Wehmut, the word for a special kind of sadness in German, is one that is rarely used these days. It is without equal, as Roman Kent himself was. It has no synonym, no true equivalent. No German dictionary offers an alternative. It encapsulates so many different sentiments that it is impossible to pinpoint its meaning. Wehmut is a blend of sadness and pain coupled with yearning and melancholy. Perhaps you come closest to Wehmut if you think of it as a loving memory of something that is gone forever.

A loving memory of something that is gone forever – that is what I feel when I think about Roman Kent. That is how I feel when I think about the small boy he was when he was driven out of his home with his family and taken to Lodz ghetto. Lodz ghetto where almost a quarter of a million Jewish women, men and children were herded together in the most cramped conditions – the Jews of Lodz who were not able to flee from the approaching German troops in time.

Roman is ten years old. His father will starve to death in the ghetto, the family will be deported to Auschwitz and torn apart, his mother murdered. Roman, his brother Leon and his two sisters survive Auschwitz. The brothers survive a further three camps before being liberated by American soldiers on the death march from Flossenbürg to Dachau. One sister, Dasza, died of emaciation a short time after the liberation.

These are the milestones of a childhood. “We were all very happy”, Roman Kent said of the child he was, of the family he was born into.

When he is liberated in January 1945, this family has been destroyed, his childhood is over.

No-one can even start to imagine the utter despair a child would have felt in Auschwitz. And no-one can start to imagine how a sixteen-year-old survivor of this inferno would find his way back to a new life.

Roman Kent's son Jeffrey later describes his father's fate thus: "All survivors went through hell and no-one was spared. What could not be seen, heard, felt or done continues to exist in all of them. It separates them from us, who are not survivors."

It is an experience reflected in the accounts of many survivors of the Shoah: that the experience of the death camps, the watershed in the lives of survivors is not just a hiatus in the biography to be compared to losing a parent at a young age or losing one's home and possessions.

The watershed in the lives of those who survived Auschwitz is the liminal experience of the death camps, the experience of having encountered bestiality in humankind. Of having realised that Auschwitz was not the emergence of the monstrous in human form but that the bestial lurks in us all.

It is this experience that prompted Primo Levi to say: "It happened, therefore it can happen again." Warning about and talking about what happened in Auschwitz was something to which both Roman Kent and Primo Levi were dedicated; it was their life's work.

Roman Kent did manage to find his way back to a life. A new life in a different world. But Auschwitz remained an indelible part of his identity. No-one who survived ever had to "remember" Auschwitz; it was seared into them. We, those born later, need to be reminded of what happened. That is what Roman Kent did. He reminded us of Auschwitz. And, as President of the International Auschwitz Committee, he did so more powerfully than almost anyone else. For Roman Kent, it was important not to mince his words when he spoke about Auschwitz. People did not lose their lives there, nor did they perish, they were brutally murdered.

A few years ago, I met Roman Kent for the first time in his capacity as President of the International Auschwitz Committee. We had an intensive and very memorable conversation.

He knew about the abysses of humanity. He had seen and experienced them at first hand. But he was also a pragmatic, forceful champion of the rights and needs of survivors. He wanted to help them, to alleviate their suffering, to support them. And for many years he fought to secure financial compensation for survivors as treasurer of the Jewish Claims Conference. The survivors owe Roman Kent immensely. We all owe him a great deal.

Courage was for him the only option, the only way to survive and find the strength to remember. That was how Roman Kent put it and these words also served as the title of his autobiography.

Yet it is also Roman Kent's new home, the United States of America, that we have to thank for him and his story. As it did for so many orphaned children who had escaped the Shoah, the United States took him and his brothers in. It gave the survivors a home and an opportunity to build a new life. It provided them with a "home of the brave".

It is my hope that we too will display courage and in this spirit take Roman Kent's legacy forward. On the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, he said, "if we were to forget, the conscience of mankind would be buried alongside the victims". It is a legacy, a mandate that he assigned to all in government all over the world: that they should not sow fear, prejudice and hatred and should teach their children understanding and tolerance.

Roman Kent vested his hopes in young people, as did so many like him, including Esther Bejarano, who passed away just a few weeks after him. We remember Auschwitz, she once said, to change the world. The two shared the goal of helping coming generations to make the world better. It is my wish that these hopes come to fruition.

After all, we all need to understand that "hate is never right and love is never wrong", to use Roman Kent's words.

I remember Roman Kent with Wehmut, with deep sadness and huge gratitude. Germany, our country, will keep his memory alive. His legacy is for us a responsibility to oppose antisemitism and racism of any sort.

We want to perceive this legacy as Roman Kent passed it on to us and as Marian Turski worded it so poignantly, so emphatically, last year in Auschwitz, as an Eleventh Commandment: "You should never, never be a bystander."