Speech

Christian Pichot-Duclos

Grandchild of a former French prisoner in Farge concentration camp

It is an emotional moment for me, but also an enormous honour, to be able to speak to you today, to speak to you on behalf of a generation - the first, in fact - which never knew the men who were deported here to die. People of my generation have a rather privileged position concerning the tragic events that took place here - we arrived in this world too late to suffer from them as did our parents, but not too late to be profoundly and intimately touched by them.
Depending on the country, the town and the families most closely concerned by the process of deportation, the experience must have been so different that it would be illusory to believe anyone could speak for such a generation. But all of us share the loss of someone, someone beloved of our fathers or mothers or aunts, and for whom the sudden and brutal removal of a loved one in such inhuman circumstances simply turned their lives upside down.

I was born some 10 years after the death of my grandfather and the only image I have of him, with his bright clear eyes, comes from the same photograph that I found at my grandmother's and in the homes of my uncle and my aunts. I was born into an Auvergnate family where it was not considered appropriate to give vent to one's emotions, especially in front of the children. The family was, and still is, extremely reticent when it comes to broaching the delicate subject of personal grief.
Time is a good healer, and when I was of an age to understand the history of these events, the pain endured by the family had sufficiently dissipated for them not to overburden me with it, not to allow to appear any rancour towards an hereditary enemy, even though, for many family members, in their heart of hearts, never really made any distinction between the Nazi fanatics and the German people, or between the land of Goethe and Hitler's regime. With my sister and cousins, we were the children of the new-found peace and prosperity,

and our existence proved sufficient to banish the horrors of the past, an existence that was comfortable for us and was certainly salutary for our parents.
Our generation lacked for nothing. It was, and frankly still is, very difficult to imagine the dramas and deprivation of the war, and even more to understand the suffering of the men who here were deprived of everything. When, as children, we asked questions, the answers were usually very evasive. Sometimes a sudden silence would interrupt the conversation and the livid look of my father seemed lost in the past. The wounds were, and still are, wide open.
We had to avoid broaching the subject of family drama head on, each one of us using a subtle artifice to get attention. For me this was through studying the history of the Second World War, and by reading the memoirs of Raymond Portefaix, Henri Joannon or Serge Landes, and the discovery of the implication of remembrance evoked by Jean and Roger Cassagne. This was not so much to get to know more about my grandfather, but more to satisfy my historical curiosity, to have a greater understanding of such horrors. But we are always a little more affected than we would have thought when it is the father of our own father (even if we did not know him) who, alongside his companions in misery (whose children we know), was starved, worn down, and beaten to death, in what Henri Joannan has described as the "the cursed prison".

A whole lifetime separates us from this tragedy and for several years now, successive commemorations have fortunately been more peaceful, just like our generation. In both France and Germany, commemorations are changing. As proof, the presence of Frieder and Britta, German citizens but living among us in the Auvergne, who join us for each commemorative ceremony, something which would have been inconceivable just a few years ago. As proof also, the memorial that we had placed at the House of Remembrance in Neuengamme in 2012, or the German authorities' presence in Murat in 2014, the first such presence since the tragic events. No-one who was present will forget the emotion that gripped both families and the official French and German delegations alike, when Mr. Christian Weber, the president of the Bremen parliament, addressed everyone from the

very spot where our families were herded together before being deported.
We are today again gathered together, this time in Germany, to inaugurate the Memorial to the Valentin bunker, this concrete cathedral, the base of the *Kommando* who cost so many citizens of Murat their lives. Among them were:
Pierre AVRIL, the father of Maurice
Pierre CASSAGNE, the father of Jean and of Roger, the grandfather of Olivier
Jean DELPIROU, the father of Marie-Thérèse
Gabriel GEORGET, the father of Arlette
Marius HIVERNAT, the grandfather of Marc
Norbert LANEZ, the grandfather of Raymond
Jean LEVET, the father of Geneviève, the grandfather of Nadine
Jean and Marcel RANCILHAC, the father and uncle of Michèle

And among them was also my grandfather.
He was a respected family man, father to two sons aged 9 and 18.
He was also the elder brother to 4 sisters who worshipped him.
He was a pastry-cook in the square next to the church, as was his father and as his elder son would become.
His trade was to make cakes that you would want to eat even when you had eaten your full.
Here, he died of starvation.
He spent his winters sweating before the wood oven that heated the whole house.
Here, he died of cold.
He could cycle for 100 kilometres to stock up with tobacco from his sisters' tobacconist store. Here, he exchanged his meagre pittance for a few cigarettes.
Here he was just a number, 3,862, a man without a name, which is why today I am overjoyed to be able to pronounce his name in this place: Emile PICHOT-DUCLOS, my grandfather, who died on the 12th of December 1944, who died with his comrades, under fire, from cold, hunger and fatigue. He was only 41 at the time, and his grandson has already outlived him by some 20 years.

This Memorial stands witness to the important process of remembrance that your country has embarked upon since the end of the Second World War. It has been the work of many years and it has been essential for our two countries, now reconciled, together to draw the lessons from the sombre past in our common history, for so long a story of antagonism. Together we are the proof that the ideological ideas that certain human beings are not men cannot win against the force of two nations united together for peace.

To conclude, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks for the honour that you have afforded me in allowing me to speak to you today, in the name of all the families of those deported from my country.
Thank you for this very moving ceremony. If there was any need to justify the building of this Memorial, I would advance one single reason, doubtless the most important, that it has provided some form of flesh and blood to that unknown and distant grandfather and to all those men that we never knew, who suffered and died here.