Date: Saturday, 8 May 2021, 11:00 a.m.

Occasion: Commemorative event marking Liberation Day

Venue: Soviet Military Cemetery, Grahlplatz

1 Welcome:

On behalf of the Chair of the City Council (SVV), Rainer Pickert.

Guests of honour:

Harald Pohle, Chair of the Prignitz District Council and Member of the State Parliament (MdL)

Dr Sabine Kramer, Second Deputy to the District Administrator, Prignitz District

Pavel Rubtsov, First Secretary of the Embassy of the Russian Federation

Dmititrii Plakov, Second Secretary of the Embassy of the Russian Federation, accompanied by his wife

Mr Pogosjan and Mr Stepanjan, Perleberg Veterans' Association

Musical accompaniment:

Brass ensemble of the GAG, directed by Heiko Leu.

2 Speech:

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends and guests,

Last year marked the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. By that time, the coronavirus pandemic had already reached us, and we were able to hold our commemorative event only on a very small scale. A video message helped us bring our remembrance to the people of Perleberg and beyond the city limits.

This year we can gather in a somewhat larger group, even though the coronavirus restrictions still prevent us from holding our commemorative event in the usual way. In fact, we had planned much more. We would dearly have liked to hold a commemoration with a Russian band and many guests, but unfortunately that is still not possible today. Even the customary vodka with a bacon sandwich must be omitted.

But today we can admire the new appearance of our memorial. I am very pleased to be standing here with you at our newly

renovated military cemetery. The cemetery has been located here on Grahlplatz since 1948, and a total of 91 people were buried here. Only 26 of them are known by name. With financial support of €214,000 from the Ministry of the Interior and Municipal Affairs of the State of Brandenburg, and expert assistance from the Prignitz district, we were able to complete this long-planned project in 14 months. Under the direction of the Wieck architectural firm, 24 of the 32 small gravestones were replaced, and the slate plaques were restored wherever possible. All gravestones were placed on newly made, solid bases. This has given our military cemetery a new appearance. Two new name plaques bearing the names of the known fallen soldiers now complement the site. In addition, the individual gravestone to the left of the entrance was completely restored. The enclosure was completely renewed, and at the centre the obelisk with its golden star shines with new splendour. For this, special thanks go to the Embassy of the Russian Federation, which provided €15,000.

A new addition is an information stele with texts in Russian and German, greeting visitors as they enter the military cemetery.

Texts in Russian were very important to us, because the bilingual information symbolizes that we are confronting our history and expressing respect and gratitude to our Russian friends.

It has become a matter of course to organize our commemoration on Liberation Day together with representatives of the veterans' association and other guests, and it should remain so. Even though the culture of remembrance is practised quite differently in Germany and Russia, one thing unites us:

The joy at the end of the war on 8 May 1945. The end of a war that originated on German soil and brought unspeakable suffering to the peoples of this earth.

By attacking Poland in 1939, Germans started the Second World War. Driven by racial fanaticism and the aim of destroying democracy, they committed war crimes and mass murder. The government controlled the German people through propaganda and initiated the nationalist genocide, the Holocaust.

And what about responsibility? Who bears it? How long is it borne?

I say: the German people bear the responsibility, and we shall bear it forever.

- We bear responsibility for ensuring that history does not repeat itself.
- We bear responsibility for ensuring that this dark chapter of German history continues to be examined.

This includes, in particular, teaching our children and grandchildren about history and having student projects, such as the participation of the Gottfried Arnold Gymnasium's "School without Racism – School with Courage" working group in the statewide campaign "Mark Sites of Atrocities – Remember People".

- We bear responsibility for remembering the 60 to 70 million victims.

The victims of the war included civilians and soldiers.

And this year I would like to place the soldiers of the Red Army at the centre of our commemoration.

Here in this military cemetery rest 91 Soviet soldiers. We know the names of 26. The identities of 65 soldiers remain unknown.

I invite you to look at the history of the war from a new perspective with me today. For in my view, coming to terms with history also means looking at the war from more than just a German perspective.

Just as good communication works only if we dare to change our perspective, a change in perspective can also help us come to terms with history. And it can help make a new beginning easier. For the end of the war also brought with it a new departure. Former enemies had to learn to treat one another with respect in order to advance reconstruction. Soviet soldiers helped with this, too.

But who were these Soviet soldiers?

What did they experience during the war years?

How did they live after the war?

I wanted to be able to answer these and similar questions. And so I began searching for documents or books that describe the Second World War from the perspective of a Soviet woman or a Red Army soldier. This research proved difficult, but I found what I was looking for.

Under the title “Deutschland Tagebuch 1945–1946” (“Germany Diary 1945–1946”), the private diary entries of a Red Army soldier were translated into German and published for the first time. These are the writings of the Jewish officer Wladimir Gelfand, who commanded a mortar platoon during the Second World War. After the unconditional surrender, Gelfand remained in Germany as an occupation officer. At the end of September 1946, he returned to Dnepropetrovsk, studied, and became a teacher.

Wladimir Gelfand died at the age of 60 as a result of a contusion suffered during the war.

The diary begins with an entry dated 13 January 1945:

“We are in quite a mess, as they say. There is literally no escape from the enemy. He keeps raining shells down on us without pause and seems to be preparing major operations. … Grit your teeth, Ivan! He gave us a pounding today. The mortar table was completely covered in fragments, but everyone survived.”

Despite a fierce battle, everyone was still alive. Saving one’s own life while taking the lives of others: that defined the soldiers’ everyday existence. Added to this were the cold and shortages of food, clothing and warm shelter. The soldiers were plagued by vermin. Descriptions of everyday life as a soldier can be found in the diary. Gelfand also provides insights into the organization of the army. His writings include drafts of reports to his commander. They allow the reader to sense what morale and discipline were like in the unit.

And in between there are even short stories. For Wladimir Gelfand wanted to become a writer. So the entry of 30 January 1945 is hardly surprising:

“No one forbids us to take from the Germans and destroy what they previously stole from us. I am extremely satisfied. Only the senseless uproar caused by Captain Shikin and especially Karpienka displeases me. Yesterday, for example, Rybkin smashed a bust of Schiller and would probably have destroyed Goethe as well if I had not snatched him from that fool’s hands, wrapped him in rags and put him away. Geniuses cannot be equated with barbarians, and to destroy their memory is a great sin and a disgrace for a civilized person.”

Gelfand was one of those educated soldiers who, despite all the suffering they had endured and the acts of war they themselves had committed, did not lose their self-respect or their respect for the enemy. Gelfand gives us glimpses into his family by recording letters that he sent to his mother, father and other relatives.

For me as a German, it is now even easier to imagine how the Soviet people must have felt.

I was particularly curious about the entries for 8 May 1945. In his notes for that day, the Red Army soldier describes entering Berlin. At first glance, his remarks about the new army clothing issued in Berlin

and his description of the steam baths seem unusual. On closer examination, however, these details are entirely understandable, since Gelfand had complained in earlier entries about the disastrous sanitary conditions and completely filthy clothing. He also wrote a letter to his mother that day. He told her not to worry because he was not in danger.

For 10 May 1945, the diary provides THE historic note:

“Yesterday morning, the unforgettable happened. The Germans agreed to complete, unconditional surrender. The newspapers reported it briefly but solemnly.”

This therefore provides evidence of why 9 May is celebrated in Russia. The surrender was signed on 8 May shortly before midnight Berlin time, and thus in the early hours of 9 May Moscow time.

There are no entries in the diary about victory celebrations on that day or the following days. Perhaps the author once again lacked paper, or simply did not get around to recording the events.

We shall never know what really happened, but the diary allows us to imagine how Soviet soldiers experienced the final days of the war and the first days and weeks of peace.

Some of the Red Army soldiers were still very young when they were called up for service. They bravely confronted their opponent – the German Wehrmacht. They marched hundreds of kilometres westward with their units to defend their country and liberate it from the occupiers.

They were victorious and brought about Germany’s surrender.

For this they deserve our thanks!

We remember all the fallen soldiers of the Red Army with respect!

Moment of silence

During a moment of silence, let us now commemorate liberation from National Socialism, genocide and tyranny. We expressly include the victims of all nations in our remembrance.

3 Further proceedings:

(1) Pavel Rubtsov, First Secretary of the Embassy of the Russian Federation

(2) Musical performance

(3) Kamo Pogosjan, Perleberg Veterans’ Association

(4) Musical performance

(5) Farewell