

*Excellencies, honored guests, students, friends, ladies and gentlemen,*

This year, we celebrate the 80th anniversary of the end of the war in Europe and, after the capitulation of Japan, the end of the Second World War. This year also marks the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz Birkenau.

Soldiers of the *1085 Tarnopol Rifle Regiment*, led by the Jewish Ukrainian Red Army officer, Anatoly Shapiro, were the first to enter the camp around 3 o'clock in the afternoon on that Saturday, the 27th of January 1945. They were stupefied by the images of the horrors that unfolded before their eyes.

"I had seen many innocent people being killed; I had seen executed people... But I was still unprepared for Auschwitz", Anatoly Shapiro wrote years later, after he finally left the Soviet Union for the USA. Antisemitism there had been rampant for years and years and he was persecuted for being Jewish. In 2006, a year after his death in New York City, he was declared *Hero of Ukraine*. Many of the troops that liberated Auschwitz, Birkenau and the outer camps that belonged to Auschwitz, were composed of recruits from the Ukrainian Zhytomyr and Lviv regions.

The Holocaust story should be told and retold, making the world aware of its lessons. But Anatoly Shapiro only became aware of the magnitude of the Shoah after he had left the Soviet Union.

The end of the war signaled the return of civil society in many – but not all –European countries, the founding of the United Nations as a replacement for the failed League of Nations, and the beginning of the end of colonialism, in short: a new era full of humanitarian optimism, engulfed parts of the world.

But in this day and age, remembering the end of the war in 1945, forces us to look at how it all had begun in 1939. The similarities that the years leading to the greatest war in the history of mankind, bear with our times, are frightening. With the Weimar republic, Germany remerged from the battlefields of France as a viable democracy, a true civil society with free press, an independent judiciary system, and political parties from the left to the right. But the revival of a liberal German state turned out to be temporary and democracy was able to kill itself in more or less legal ways. The same can be said of the short-lived period of Russian democracy after the fall of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union never recognized its own crimes against humanity and against its own citizens. No perpetrator was ever convicted; no independent historical report was ever accepted and lies about history explain why Anatoly Shapiro only learned about the enormity of the Shoah at the end of his life, living in the United States of America.

In our world today, a distant memory of Chamberlain's 'Peace for Our Times' can be heard again, free press is threatened, and in many parts of the world – sad to say, also in Europe – the *Trias Politica*, the foundation of a free society, is under siege. Great empires and powers behave like they have always behaved and consider the world around them as their legitimate claim of sovereignty. Again, the United Nations, like the league of Nations before it, seems to be more and more defenceless and helpless as an organisation that was supposed to bring justice and peace among the peoples of the planet.

The first time we spoke to Oleksandra Matviichuk, our laureate, she excused herself for being "frozen" as she described the expression of her face on our computer screen. Just ten minutes before our call, she had received the news of the death on the battlefield of another dear one. But as she has said in an interview with Amnesty International: "I cannot permit myself now to lay down my work and mourn. That's why I have closed a part of my heart. When I will have time to mourn, I will return to that frozen part of my soul."

Oleksandra Matviichuk studied law and got her degree at the *Taras Shevchenko University of Kyiv*. Thereafter, her seemingly normal and comfortable career took an abrupt turn during the protests

against the corrupt president of Ukraine, Yanukovich. He violently suppressed peaceful demonstrators who demanded the strengthening of democratic principles and a civil society, where rule of law would guarantee individual freedom. Oleksandra Matviichuk became involved as a civil rights lawyer with *Maidan SOS* and the *Centre for Civil Liberties*.

After Yanukovich was ousted and fled the country, Putin attacked by starting a proxy war on the eastern regions of Ukraine, resulting in the self-declared so-called independent People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

By then the Centre for Civil Liberties had also started to document cruelties and Russian war crimes in the occupied Ukrainian territories. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Oleksandra and the Centre for Civil Liberties took on the massive task of documenting the thousands and thousands of war crimes committed since then. "Every victim", she has stated, "deserves to have a name and the ones who have committed these crimes should be held accountable." The thousands of files they have established will serve, eventually, as evidence against Putin and those with him who are responsible in an international tribunal.

For her work within the Centre of Civil Liberties, Oleksandra Matviichuk has received much world-wide recognition. In 2022 the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize, highlighted the importance of the work that she and the Centre for Civil Liberties undertake in making the free world aware of the dangers that threaten not only Ukraine but also our own democracies.

Freedom should never be taken for granted. It requires daily vigilance, and the fight to protect the institutions that make our civil society. By supporting Ukraine in its struggle against a cruel dictator, by making sure he will not achieve his goals, we might deter those who would like to follow his example.

If there is one thing that dictators like Putin fear most, it is truth. It is therefore that a sophisticated system to promote lies, has become the foundation of the Russian society, a perfect copy – by the way – of the same system that managed to hide the Soviet Union's crimes for over seventy years. Most probably, part of the Russian population has a more or less clear idea of the crimes and misdemeanors committed in Ukraine but the consequences of speaking out can be terrible. The other thing that Putin fears is his own people. Dictators run the risk of being ousted by popular uprising. In this days and age information can get through to the most remote corners of the world, even in Russia. It is therefore evident that work of the Centre for Civil Society and Oleksandra Matviichuk's mission to provide testimonies of crimes against humanity and war crimes to be presented before a future tribunal, coincides with the mission of the Auschwitz Never Again lecture of the Dutch Auschwitz Committee: Never forget and may the names of those who perished be a warning for all of us today.

Oleksandra Matviichuk deserves our support to further this universal message. We feel honored and thankful that she has accepted the nomination for the *Annetje Fels-Kupferschmidt Award*, named after one of the only 970 Dutch Jews to have survived Auschwitz Birkenau extermination camp and lived to tell the world what has happened to her and the one hundred and two thousand murdered Dutch Jews. By nominating Oleksandra Matviichuk and the Centre for Civil Liberties, the 20th *Nooit Meer Auschwitz lezing* is as urgent as ever.

— *Hans Fels Kupferschmidt, May 2025*