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Events & People

"I have an obligation to inform you about the Nazis"

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Simon Gronowski is small and energetic, speaking mostly through English interspersed with his mother tongue, French. He speaks eloquently to the crowd. There are a lot of people here. Extra chairs even had to be brought in to the Members' Salon as so many showed up.

The event was organised by German MEP Jürgen Klute and was held in the Members' Salon Room 4 on 21 May.

Simon Gronowski was eleven years old when the train that was taking himself, his mother and his sister from a prison cell in Mechelen to the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau camp was hijacked by three brave Belgian men.

231 Jews on board the train escaped in what Gronowski claims is the only event like it in Belgian history.

Eleven-year-old Gronowski was told to jump off the train by his mother. "If I had known that she wouldn't follow," he said, "I wouldn't have jumped."

Gronowski's mother and sister were later gassed to death at Birkenau. He owns letters that his sister wrote to his father from the camp, but says that to this day he cannot look at them.

He ran to a nearby town, where he was intercepted by a Belgian police officer. "I am a good person," the policeman told Gronowski before allowing him to pass. Gronowski spent the next seven months hiding with Catholic families until the war was over. "They treated me as one of their own," he said.



He remembers extraordinary details about his journey. The morning that the Nazi soldiers broke into their little hide-out, he recalls the steaming coffee, bread and jam on the breakfast table. "I didn't realise that I had been condemned to death," he said. "I didn't understand anything."

Gronowski only began to tell his story sixty years after the war had ended. "If I had constantly talked about these tragic events, I would have become depressed," he said. "I wanted to live for the present and the future, for the joy and the friendship! But now I speak." His mind was changed by the Belgian man who was in charge of the historical society of the tiny rural town where Gronowski jumped off the train that fateful night.

"It's my duty to testify! And anyone who hears this witness will be a witness in turn. I wish to thank the heroes who risked their lives to save me."

He spoke about forgiveness and redemption. He spoke about his unlikely friendship with a man who once worked as a sixteen-year-old guard in one of the concentration camps.

He said that he does not blame the children of the Nazis. He is emphatic that the German people as a group are not responsible. He compares it to blaming Jewish people for the death of Jesus Christ. "Am I guilty of it?" he cried, jumping to his feet.

"I am an optimist," he replied when questioned about the emergence of extremist and fascist movements in many parts of Europe today. "I believe in the goodness of human people."

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