

Survivor returns to a changed Austria

By ABBY WEINGARTEN
CORRESPONDENT

Returning to Austria 70 years after catastrophe was bittersweet for **John Lampel**.

The Vienna native, once known as Johann Lampel, lived happily in the capital city until his 18th birthday, when the Nazis invaded.

The members of Lampel's middle class family, who owned a men's clothing store called Kleider Lampel, were among the Jewish victims.

So when the Austrian Parliament invited Lampel back this year, in an educational attempt to bring Holocaust survivors into the classroom, he brooded.

"They were trying very, very hard to make us forget about the past," Lampel said. "They wanted us to feel more at ease with the people in Austria."

He decided to accept, and became one of 200 survivors from all over the world to participate in the project "A Letter to the Stars," marking the 63rd anniversary of the liberation of the Mauthausen Concentration Camp.

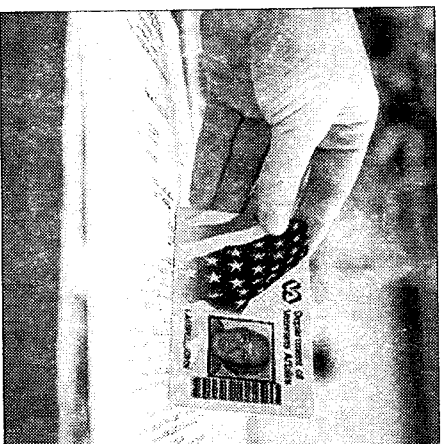
But this trip, his third back to his home country, was months in the making. A year and a half ago, the Austrian Embassy in Washington, D.C., helped organize a biweekly e-mail correspondence between Lampel and Austrian high school student **Cornelia Gleitsmann**.

When Lampel flew into Austria, it was Gleitsmann's class he visited, and he stayed from May 1 to 8 at the Parkhotel Schonbrunn.



STAFF PHOTOS / JEREMY FIELDS

John Lampel of Sarasota became one of 200 survivors from around the world to participate in the project "A Letter to the Stars," honoring the 63rd anniversary of the liberation of the Mauthausen Concentration Camp in Austria.



ABOVE: John Lampel's VA card. He joined the U.S. Army in 1940, a year after fleeing to America from France. He served until 1944. **LEFT:** Austria's "A Letter to the Stars" event came 70 years after the German invasion.

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"I actually felt much better going there this time. The people were extremely friendly," Lampel said. "I didn't see any anti-Semitism there. It was a different atmosphere."

The memories of anti-Semitism he associated with Austria ran deep. Even during elementary school in the mid-1920s, he recalls, his teacher made him sit in the "Judenbank," a section reserved for Jews. After March 13, 1938, when the Germans took over Austria, the exploitation became unbearable.

"We Jewish kids were harassed almost day and night to perform miserable and humiliating tasks," Lampel began, "like clean the streets with toothbrushes and fix pot holes with cement barehanded."

In August of 1938, Lampel and his father unsuccessfully fled to Switzerland, and then to the French border town of Belfort, but they were trapped

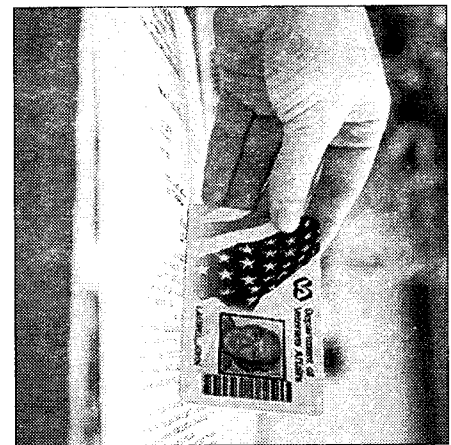
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when Hitler's forces invaded France via Belgium.

By May of 1939, Lampel and his father were sent to a French forced labor camp, where half of the victims died. After a year, Lampel's papers came through to grant him access to the United States, and he said good-bye to his father. His father was considered a Czech citizen and with the American quota for Czech immigrants met, he was forced to stay behind. With his mother and sister, Lampel took the S.S. Champlain to New York. He later learned that his father was executed.

Now 88, Lampel, a U.S. Army veteran and former clothing designer, lives in Sarasota with his wife of 65 years. Es-ther, and devotes his retirement to teaching students about World War II. In his prepared speech, he states: "We survivors understand that, for



ABOVE: John Lampel's VA card. He joined the U.S. Army in 1940, a year after fleeing to America from France. He served until 1944. **LEFT:** Austria's "A Letter to the Stars" event came 70 years after the German invasion.



John Lampel sorts through memorabilia, both from his time in Nazi-occupied territories and the recent commemorative event in Austria.

those who were not there, it is difficult to comprehend what we saw or to sense the terror we felt." He adds, "We rely heavily on you, the youth of this nation, to insure that the future generations understand why the events that took place during the Holocaust are important." Because of people like Lampel, they will.

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to store our baggage, which was locked up. We lost everything.

“We arrived in Zurich and aimed for the Jewish Federation Building. We were just about to enter when a Swiss detective arrested us. We were interrogated and treated horribly because we outsmarted the Swiss border guards. My cousin and I each spent the first night in solitary confinement, a cell full of lice and dirt. The next seven days we spent in prison for illegal entry to Switzerland. On the eighth day, they sent us by train and motorcycle at night to the French border town of Belfort. That area was known for having the Maginot Line. The Maginot Line separated France from Germany and the French thought the line was invincible, but were very mistaken when Hitler’s forces invaded France via Belgium.”

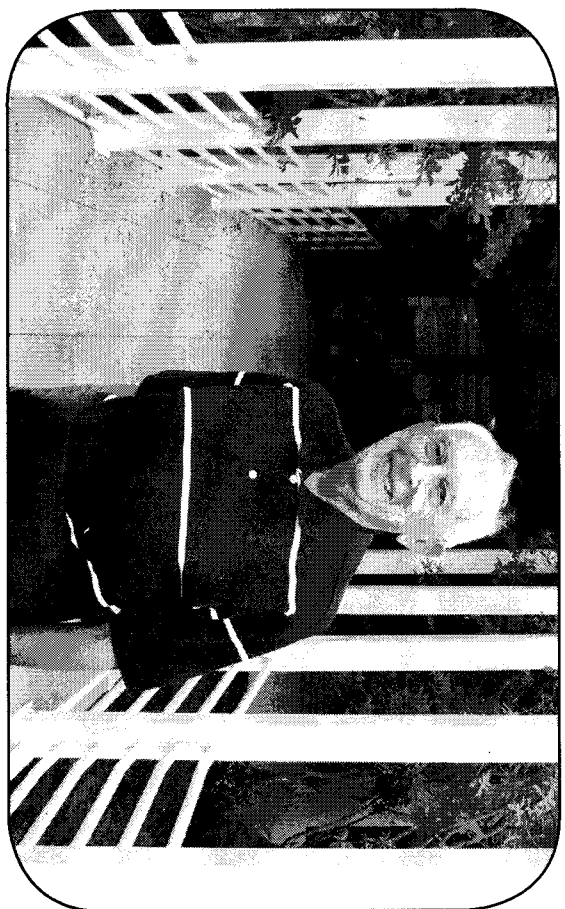
In France, John and his cousin were again arrested for illegal entry.

“We were declared vagabonds and put in jail for one month,” John continues. “During the trial, my cousin and I were handcuffed and in chains with terrible criminals. The mayor of Belfort, who happened to be Jewish, heard about our ordeal and upon our release from prison, we were set free and sent to Besançon. The Jewish community accepted us and put us up in a cold-water flat. In the winter, our water jug was frozen. I could not communicate with my parents for two months because we did not even have money for postage. The French police in Besançon were very hateful and

anti-Semitic. Almost every week, they wanted to send us back to Germany, but the prominent Ullman family interceded for us, and our stay was extended. In the meantime, I worried about my parents and sister and about their welfare. Mrs. Ullman was cousin to French President Léon Blum, and he secured a visa for my parents and sister to come to France. They arrived there in February 1939, with just their clothing — all their belongings had been confiscated. In May, 1939, I had to report with my cousin to a French slave labor camp, and my dear father, a month later.”

In the labor camp, John says, “There was a horse stable, no hot water and no heat. We cut stone with small hammers and fixed roads. Half of the people there died. We were given daily soup, some bread and about a quart of wine. There were no medical supplies. In May 1940, I was able to leave the camp because my papers to the United States had come through. I wanted to say goodbye to my father, but the camp commandant told me, ‘Leave now or we’re going to keep you here.’”

“That’s the last time I saw my father. ‘I left that labor camp for another in Bordeaux, where I stayed for a few days. On May 10, I left with my mother and sister on the steamship SS Champlain for the United States. Because my father had been born in Czechoslovakia and lived there for a short time, he was considered a Czech citizen, to whom the American quota was closed. We tried to locate him for a number of years and, through the efforts of Serge Klarsfeld,



John Lampel

we finally learned his whereabouts.”

Klarsfeld, a French Jewish anti-Nazi activist and researcher, published “The Memorial to the Jews Deported from France 1942-1944.” The book listed every convoy, including how many Jews were on each transport and how they were executed. John’s father, Gustav Lampel, was shipped on Convoy 19, Aug. 14, 1942, and was gassed upon arrival.

Life in the United States

Once John arrived in the United States — where his name was registered as John Lampel — he worked in a clothing factory and went to school at night to study English. In January 1943, he enlisted in the U.S. Army, becoming an American citizen after two weeks. He served more than three years in the army and, because

he was fluent in German and French, was put in charge of three German prison camps in upstate New York.

Esther and John met through cousins in New York and were married July 4, 1943, “at 12 [midnight],” Esther said. “We were afraid he might get shipped out.”

After his army service, John became a successful clothing designer — like his father had been in Austria. Among John’s honors are a key to the city of St. Louis, Mo., and one for Osaka, Japan. John and Esther made their way from New York to Baltimore, Md., Minneapolis, Minn., St. Louis, Mo., and Georgia, before finally retiring in Florida. They are the parents of one son, Geoffrey, and their late daughter, Ardenne Lampel Bonney.

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“On this day, let us resolve to stand firm in the face of discrimination, armed with the knowledge from our tragic past. Let us strive to build a future free from hatred and filled with hope for all humanity.”

“We survivors understand that for those who were not there, it is difficult to comprehend what we saw, to sense the terror we felt. We have accepted the responsibility, however, of preserving the memory of these painful events, of telling and retelling what we endured with our own flesh. We rely heavily on you, the youth of this nation, to ensure that future generations understand why the events that took place during the Holocaust are important. I hope and pray that these events are never repeated.”

“Remember that you heard this story from someone who was there and was a witness to these atrocities.”

Humble beginnings

As a young man, John Lampel did not discuss his experiences during the Holocaust, but now he has a lot to say.

During his visit to Vienna, Austria, in May, as part of “A Letter to the Stars,” Lampel told an Austrian high school class how he was forced to flee his Vienna home at the age of 18. He told them of the humiliations he suffered at the hands of Austrian and German soldiers – and even schoolchildren – and of his frightening imprisonment in Switzerland and a French slave labor camp. His father was taken from that camp and later perished in Auschwitz. John was not allowed to say goodbye.

Johann Lampel – as he used to be known – was born April 17, 1920, near Vienna, into a middle class family. His father owned a clothing store that employed a number of tailors and sales people, and he owned the building the family lived in.

At age 6, Johann entered elementary school. There were 30 students in each class. Even then, in 1926, anti-Semitism was prevalent. The teacher put the Jewish children in the Judenbank, a section of seats strictly reserved for Jews. Only two Jewish children were allowed per class. The teachers were very biased, and Jewish students had to study extra hard.

In spite of these school-related hardships, life for young Johann was pleasant. As a teenager, he attended exclusive summer camps in Hungary on Lake Balaton.

He made friends there and was invited by another camper and his parents to visit Budapest, the Hungarian capital. The boy, in turn, visited Johann’s family in Vienna. Johann also spent two summer vacations in Austerlitz, Czechoslovakia, where his cousins were landowners and farmers. Johann had fun taking care of the animals and roaming the fields.

The onslaught

All of those beautiful things ended



Holocaust survivor John Lampel and his wife, Esther, traveled to Austria to tell their story to students

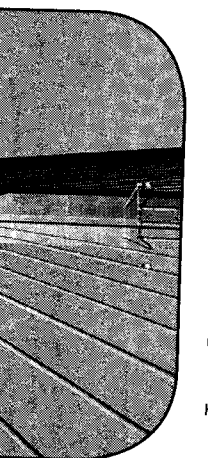
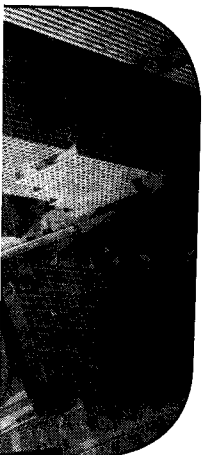
Photos courtesy of John and Esther Lampel

NORBERT



New York from the Twin Towers

Tampa Bay's Sunshine Skyway Bridge



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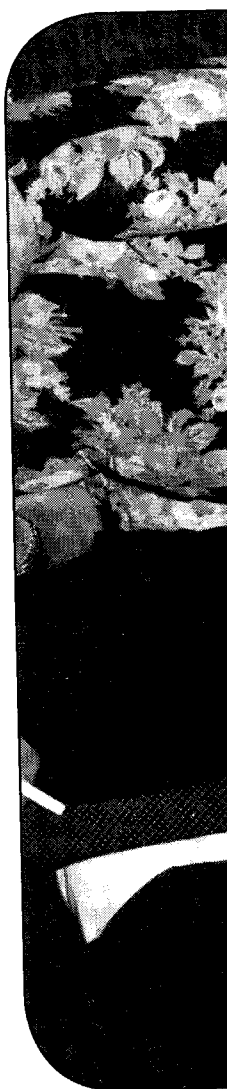
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Photos courtesy of John and Esther Lampel

suddenly March 13, 1938, when the Germans invaded Austria. John says he has never forgotten that day, when thousands of planes roared overhead and the Austrian population welcomed them with open arms of delight. A couple of days later, Hitler visited Vienna, and the Jewish population was told that any attempt to harm Hitler would mean every Jew would be hanged from the light poles.

How did they know who was Jewish? John explains: “Even before Hitler invaded Austria, every person and household had to be registered with the police, according to Austrian law, and religious affiliations were noted. The Austrian kids wore their brown shirts and the other Nazi swastika armbands. So the Jewish children stood right out. We Jewish kids were harassed almost day and night to perform miserable and humiliating tasks, like cleaning the streets with toothbrushes, fixing potholes with cement with our bare hands, etc. I could no longer attend school. I had to hide in movie houses, sometimes sleeping in the concierge’s bedroom.”

John’s parents were well liked because of their support for Christian charities. “On Aug. 13,” John describes, “my father got a phone call that I had to leave Vienna

to avoid being shipped to a concentration camp. My cousin, who was an attorney, also had to leave for the same reason, and my father asked him to take me along. We packed our bags and took the night train to Frankfurt-on-Main in Germany and a local train to Koblenz on the Swiss border. We had Austrian passports and tried to enter Switzerland legally.

“We were refused entry, and the German passport controller ripped out the passport page with the refusal – rendering the passport worthless. Being a lawyer, my cousin went to the court building in Koblenz and tried to secure German passports for us, but he was refused. They were afraid other Jews might ask for the same privilege. The judge told him to see a man at Gestapo headquarters who would tell us how to reach Zurich, Switzerland. The trick was we had to buy train tickets. The German train crossed a few towns in Switzerland and had to come to a cross-junction where the train stopped briefly for a bag exchange. We had to jump off the train then and wait for the Zurich express train, which stopped there also. Upon entering the German train, we had

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Area survivor shares Holocaust story with Austrian students

By Debbie Shulman
Jewish News Managing Editor

John Lampel of Sarasota has a motto: "Don't look back."

But on a recent trip to Vienna, he and his wife of 65 years, Esther, did just that. During the week of May 1-8, 2008, the couple traveled to Vienna to participate in the program "A Letter to the Stars 38/08."

A call from the Austrian embassy last year got the ball rolling.

"I knew I wanted to go," John says. "Why not?"

A Letter to the Stars originated in 2003 as a way to personalize the Holocaust for Austrian students by identifying, meeting with and learning from Austrian Holocaust survivors. The 2008 event, "38/08," commemorated the 70th anniversary of Austria's 1938 annexation to Hitler's Third Reich.

About 200 survivors from the United States, Israel, South America, the United Kingdom and Europe were invited to share their life stories with 20,000 Austrian students in the country's capital. The invitation capped a year of research by the students and their teachers on biographies of Austrians who were murdered during the Holocaust, as well as survivors of the National-Socialist regime.

John, 88, is one of those survivors.

He did not find it difficult to tell his story. He has spoken before groups of sixth-graders in Sarasota and is comfortable describing his war-time experiences. The high-schoolers in Vienna, however, "asked better questions," Esther said. Another difference: This time John spoke in his native tongue: German. Because the students had studied and prepared so thoroughly for their guests' visit, John says,

"They really welcomed us. They were very, very friendly and so interested in meeting us and learning about us."

The Lampels' host was 18-year-old Cornelia Gleitsmann. She prepared a report on John's life and presented it to her class, even recording it onto a CD for the Lampels to take home.

The long road to Vienna

It took about 30 years after the Holocaust for John Lampel to return to Austria, but the trip was brief.

Esther remembers that John did not talk about his flight from Austria, his imprisonment in Switzerland and year in a French slave labor camp, but the couple's son and daughter were curious about their father's childhood.

Up to that point, John says, "I didn't want to go back."

A meeting in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1968, and their children's curiosity inspired the Lampels to detour to Austria. But the visit was cut short due to the death of Esther's father and they flew home after just one day.

In 2003, the couple were invited by the Jewish Federation and the city of Vienna to return to Austria.

Their 2008 trip took on a larger scope. The Lampels were welcomed by the Mayor of Vienna and invited to a memorial convening of the Austrian Parliament. They, other survivors and tens of thousands of students met on Vienna's Heldeplatz



Esther, 17, and John Lampel, 23, became engaged in 1942 after meeting through cousins in New York

concept of prejudice and intolerance and show them how it can be recognized and stopped ... [Children] are going to be the leaders of our future world so they must learn their history, good or bad."

John said in his presentation to the Austrian high school students, "If you don't speak up when you see or hear



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Lessons learned

It is important for the dwindling number of Holocaust survivors to speak out, John asserts. In an e-mail to the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard* before his trip, he wrote: "I hope by my coming and speaking to these young people we can explore the



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concept of prejudice and intolerance and show them how it can be recognized and stopped ... [Children] are going to be the leaders of our future world so they must learn their history, good or bad."

John said in his presentation to the Austrian high school students, "If you don't speak up when you see or hear discrimination in the very beginning, it may be too late.

"We must understand that what happened during the Holocaust cannot be rewritten or erased. Instead, it must serve as a constant reminder that we must always remain vigilant in defense of human rights and dignity.

"The reason I, as a Holocaust survivor, talk about my experiences, is that they relate to not only the past, but also to the present. Today there is still a lot of prejudice in the world. Pro-Nazi organizations such as the skinheads, Aryan Nation, the KKK, and let's not forget the militia, we all know what their objectives are.