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THE JEWISH STATE

The Newspaper for Central New Jersey's Jewish Communities

Opinion & Commentary:

Remembering Austria 70 years later: A family trip

By Renee Balaban

June 6, 2008

We left for Vienna, Austria on April 30 to be with more than 400 Holocaust survivors and their families from America, Argentina, Australia, England, and Israel to participate in Austria's "National Commemoration Day Against Violence & Racism in Remembrance of Victims of National Socialism".

The trip to Austria was the most life-altering experience my family and I have ever had. It was a time to talk about lost years and lost family; it was a time to help educate the youth of today regarding Austria's participation in the Holocaust and the evil done to so many people; it was a time to meet new people, make friends, and visit with our families.

We started with a gala banquet the evening of May 1. On May 2, we went to the Seitenstetten Gasse Synagogue for Friday night services. This synagogue was the only one in Vienna not set on fire, since a large area of Vienna would have been destroyed with it. The Seitenstetten Gasse Synagogue is the most gorgeous synagogue I have seen in a long time. The service and choir were wonderful. It was emotional for my mother, because she was confirmed there 73 years ago, and for my aunt, because my uncle and his brother were bar mitzvahed there so many years ago.

One of the survivors handed the rabbi her prayer book that she used while attending the synagogue as a child. She wanted the synagogue to have it on display depicting her return, as well as the prayer book. It was very moving.

The next day was a free one and we went to Kravsko in the Czech Republic where my grandmother was born and the first time my aunt returned in 70 years. We wanted my aunt to see her grandparent's home and business. Our family members were the only Jewish people in the town.

The lady who lives in one of our houses looked out the window to see who drove up. I realized she was the same person I saw the very first time I visited Kravsko a number of years ago. When asked, she wouldn't let my mother or aunt into the house. As we left the town, we stopped at the castle that was owned by an Italian count who visited with my grandfather and great-grandfather a few times a week to have a little schnapps and discuss politics.

May 5 is Austria's National Day against Violence & Racism and in Memory of the Victims of National Socialism. All 400-plus people involved in the project "A Letter To The Stars" were invited to a special session of Parliament. It was unbelievable. The president of Parliament apologized for the hatred and injustice done to us and

dedicated the special session of Parliament to the children who perished in the Holocaust. After the program and a children's orchestra played music, the lights dimmed, a dark screen was lowered, and in white script, the names of children who died flew across the screen in all directions. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

After we left the Parliament building, we walked through the park to Heldenplatz where Adolph Hitler proclaimed he annexed Austria for Germany. The park was full of plaques with stories, prayers, and information about the lives of the survivors and families. We walked through crowds to get to the stage and seating area reserved for us. My mother was asked to speak to the 10,000-plus people in attendance. First the President of Austria and other dignitaries spoke and then the survivors.

My mother's theme was about tolerance, education, and the need for peace in the world. She challenged the youth of today to achieve peace and tolerance in their lifetime. Then she dedicated her speech in memory of our family who perished in the Holocaust. At that moment, she became emotional, and my aunt stepped forward and read the names of our families who died in the holocaust: Family Diamant, Family Gutman, Family Loebel, Family Reich, Family Schwartzbart, Family Katz, Family Sofer, Family Lipper, Family Balaban, Family Ellinger, Family Leib, and so forth. The emotions were overwhelming.

Afterwards, we headed up to my mother's pen pal's town called Zwettl in the Austrian forests and mountains. The scenery and buildings were breathtaking.

(Some background: When the "A Letter To The Stars' program was introduced into the high schools throughout Austria, some of the students were to research people who didn't survive the Holocaust. They held memorial events and wrote a book in their memory. Another group of high school students were asked to research and find a pen pal. Melanie Katzenschlager decided she wanted a pen pal born on October 13 -- the same day as she was -- and that's how she found my mother. Melanie sent my mother a letter explaining the program and "the rest is history.")

We arrived in Zwettl and stayed at a lovely castle converted into a hotel. The castle had a museum attached dedicated to the Free Masons Organization. There were many displays including a glass showcase showing the medals of the Jewish Masons who died during Crystalnacht with pieces of the broken glass in the case. The other side of the castle had an unbelievable church attached to it. If nothing else, Austria preserves its historic buildings and history.

The next morning my mother, aunt and Mrs. Jellinek, the pen pal for the incoming freshman class, and us drove to Melanie's high school. The three ladies spoke to the students regarding their lives before, during, and after the Holocaust. The students were riveted. There were very unusual and disturbing questions asked and answered. When everyone returned from a break the teacher asked if the students would like to hear from the second-generation Holocaust survivors. Without a word the students stood up, picked up their chairs and turned them around to listen to us who were sitting in the back of the class. We told them of our feelings about lost families and how our parents had to learn a new language and struggled to achieve a life in America. I told them that they must not let intolerance, hatred, and murder happen again anywhere in the world.

In the evening the ladies spoke again to the mayor, Town Council, teachers, sisters, and the community. Once again unusual questions were asked. One question that will stay with me my entire life was when a young woman stood up and said, "My grandmother and grandfather are Nazis, my mother and father are Nazis but I named my daughter Judith and son Aaron after the Jewish Bible." A round of applause broke

out when she sat down. We felt that she was telling us that she broke the chain of beliefs in her family.

No matter where we went, we were treated with respect and warmth. We realized that many people had no idea about the Holocaust and everyone was amazed at the stories they heard. Many of the survivors who came to Austria spoke at various schools and communities.

We met so many people, stayed in so many hotels, and feel that we made only a very tiny dent in educating the public about the injustices done to us -- a very tiny dent in explaining that misinformation was given to the citizens of Austria during the Holocaust. "A Letter To The Stars" is a beginning in education. Seeing a live survivor and hearing his/her story is the first step to understanding; it must continue and it starts at home.

The following day, we drove to a town called Weitra where 50 people and four generations from America, Austria, Israel, Chile, and the Czech Republic joined together for a family reunion. It was wonderful. We thought there was only a handful of us left, but we found more family and more generations who are rebuilding new families on the ashes of the Holocaust.

It is our responsibility and generations that come after us to support the nation of Israel, to support the growth of the Jewish population, and to fight for the right of our existence. Never Again!

Renee Balaban and her mother, Suzanne Balaban, live in Monroe. This article is a follow-up to her April 25 column describing the family's preparations for the trip.