

VIENNA- April 30- May 7, 2007

Report by Maximilian Lerner
Additional comments by Lenore Lerner

For fifty years after World War II Austria took the position that they were the first occupied country and nothing Germany did was their fault. Only fifteen years ago, their then Chancellor Vranitzky made a speech reminding the Austrians of the million or more of them who greeted Hitler enthusiastically at a rally on the Heldenplatz, the major square in Vienna after the annexation of Austria to Germany in March 1938, and the many Austrians who were high functionaries in the German war against the Jews. Since then, the Austrian government has finally admitted Austria's guilt, the Holocaust is being taught in schools and there are monuments and tablets all over Austria to remember what happened.

Five years ago, three young men – Andreas Kuba, Josef Neumayr, Markus Priller – founded “A Letter to the Stars” to help Austrian students remember. Check out www.lettertothestars.at.

“A Letter to the Stars” is an independent non-profit contemporary history project in Austria. So far, over 45,000 Austrian students have participated. They have worked to research and document the histories of the murdered victims and to find meaningful ways to commemorate the Holocaust.

In April 2007, 33 students and several teachers from the organization visited New York. I gave a tour of the Museum of Jewish Heritage in German to the half of the group whose English was not quite good enough, and one of my colleagues took care of the other group in English. One of the students, Lia Boehmer spent the next day with us, visiting our home and then getting a tour of New York City from us.

In 2008 over 200 schools throughout all of Austria invited about 170 survivors and their companions to spend a week in Austria in commemoration of the seventy year anniversary of the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany. A number of public institutions have contributed to the cost of the project. The collective name for the survivors used by the Austrians is “Geschichtszeugen” – witnesses to history.

On Thursday, April 4, 2008, there was a reception at the Austrian consulate in New York. (*We met several New Yorkers who would be traveling with us.*)

Sixteen guests left Dulles on 4/29, eighty six came from JFK – half on 4/29 and half on 4/30. We went on Austrian Airlines on Tuesday, April 29 leaving JFK at 5:40 PM.

I had been in Email contact with a teacher, Karin Brettleker, who organized our visit to my old school, the Akademische Gymnasium. (Check out www.akg-wien.at and click on Schulrundgang on the left to get a tour of the school, click on weiter to continue). The Akademische Gymnasium is the oldest and most prestigious high school in Vienna. It just celebrated its 450 year anniversary, about 150 of those years in the present building.

When I applied to the school in 1934 after four years of public school, I had to pass written and oral exams to be admitted. There were parallel classes – 1A, 1B – 2A, 2B etc. with the B class all Jewish. The pretext for this was two hour religious instruction per week.

When schools reopened after the Anschluss, all Jewish students were sent to the assembly hall and our German teacher, Professor Hans Schmidt informed us that we were expelled and that Jews are no longer entitled to an education. We were then made to scrub the sidewalk – which we had polluted for so many years, according to Schmidt – with toothbrushes and water. Some of our teachers, who were Jewish, scrubbed alongside their students. Forty percent of the student body was Jewish and was expelled that day.

We were picked up on arrival in Vienna on Wednesday morning, April 30 and taken by bus to the hotel – a very comfortable hotel near the Imperial Palace in Schoenbrunn convenient to subway and streetcar lines.



Park Hotel Schoenbrunn

From the beginning we were treated royally by the team from Letter to the Stars. Several of them were always seated at a table in the hotel lobby, always available to us. (*They were young, enthusiastic and very helpful.*) We were given free tickets to all public transportation and free museum passes.



Some of the team from Letter to the Stars.

When I was a child, an operetta “The White Horse Inn” was extremely popular. I had found on the internet that a revival was playing on the Saturday afternoon of our stay and had ordered tickets. Even though it was in German, I thought Lenore would enjoy the music and dancing. (*And I did, in spite of not knowing German!*) On our first day in Vienna, Wednesday, we took the subway – the U Bahn – to the center of town – a fifteen minute ride – walked straight through the heart of the city, picked up our theater tickets, and returned. This was enough after a night on the plane. We dined in a very nice restaurant near the hotel.

Thursday was May 1, a major worker’s holiday in all of Europe. We took the U Bahn to City Hall and watched some of the parade, then walked to the new Museumquartier – a collection of several museums – and visited the new Leopold Museum. Architecturally, the Museumquartier is very interesting – imperial stables have been converted and new buildings added. We spent a lot of time in the new Leopold Museum which is primarily devoted to nineteenth and twentieth century Austrian art, with particular emphasis on Klimt and Schiele. (*Needless to say, I loved the Leopold*

Museum.) We returned to Hietzing (the district where our hotel was located) and visited the imperial gardens of Schoenbrunn briefly.

That evening there was a reception for all the “witnesses to history”. By then, groups had arrived not only from the U.S. but also from Argentina, Australia, the U.K. and Israel. Each participant was entitled to bring one companion, but a number brought children and grandchildren at their expense, so that there were well over 400 plus the members of the Letter to the Stars organization and other guests. Fortunately, the ball room of our hotel could hold so many people. To our pleasant surprise, Lia Boehmer was there with her parents whom we had a chance to meet. (*Lia’s parents were lovely. They were very welcoming and extremely charming.*) There was champagne, food, welcoming speeches and a great intermingling. (*Even though I didn’t understand the speeches, I could feel the sincerity and warmth with which they were spoken.*)

Several film makers came around to interview some of the guests, and one of them interviewed me – the first of many interviews.

One of the staff members, Brigitte Lendl, had graduated from the Akademische Gymnasium twenty-five years ago. She showed me a book which had been issued for the 450 year anniversary. In it I found the names of all my teachers. I also found that Director Marcus, who had been director of the school since 1924, had been replaced by the Nazi Professor Schmidt in 1938. Schmidt was dismissed in 1945 and Marcus returned for two more years. We, the students, had always assumed that Marcus had Jewish blood, and we had seen him during the scrubbing of the sidewalk. I am glad that he survived.

On Friday morning, those of us who had chosen to do so were picked up by bus and taken to the great Belvedere Palace, which is a wonderful museum. There high school students had prepared a presentation of twelve of the works of art, and we visited the rest of the museum on our own. (*I was standing next to a member of our group looking out at the marvelous gardens of the Palace. He turned to me and said that he and his twin brother were taken to the gardens by their nanny every morning when they were young and that they played in the stone walkways.*)



Belvedere Palace



Bobbie and Gerry Watkins

We had met another couple, Bobbie and Gerry Watkins – in the Leopold Museum, and decided to spend the rest of the day together. Gerry left Vienna on a Kindertransport after the suicide of his father and wound up in Australia with his mother. He spent his life in the Australian diplomatic service all over the world and now lives in Los Angeles with Bobbie.

We took the streetcar from the Belvedere to the Radetzkyplatz and walked past the public school I attended from the age of six to ten.



Kolonitz school for boys.

We then walked down the Loewengasse to my old apartment at number 39. Then we wandered down to the Danube Canal where I used to play in the park as a child and from there took a very long walk into the center of town. Near the main square at St. Stephen's there is a small sandwich place Gerry's father used to take him to, and we had lunch there and then visited the building near the Graben where Gerry used to live. (*The restaurant is called Trzesniewski. Not easy to pronounce!*)

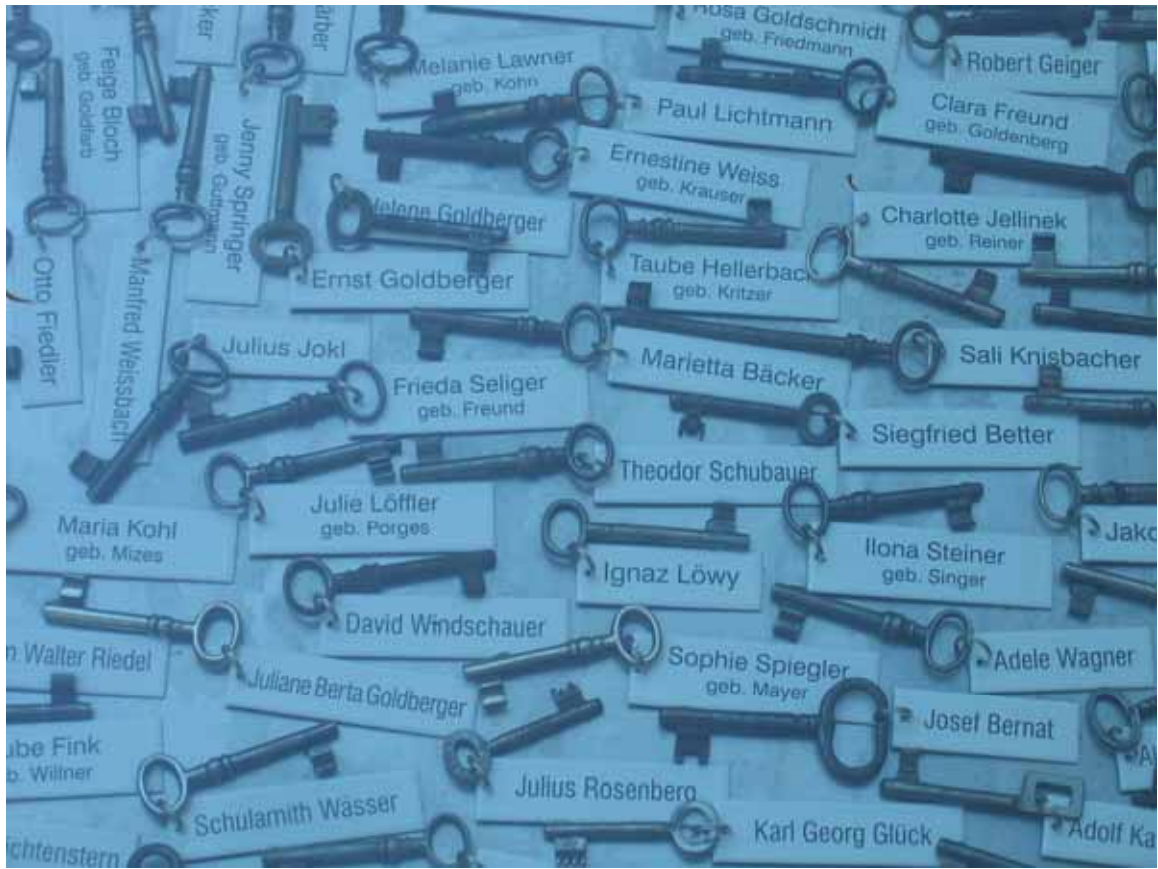
We returned to our hotel quite tired, and rested until we were picked up by bus and taken to the Stadt Temple in the Seitenstettengasse – the only synagogue in Vienna which survived. In order to attend services we had to pass through a metal detector and show our passports. This is an orthodox temple, Lenore and all the ladies were upstairs separated from the men downstairs. (*I must admit that I didn't enjoy sitting with the women upstairs.*) There was a very nice choir who sang a cappella, and the Rabbi gave his sermon in English. I do not care for a service in which I cannot sit next to my wife, but considering the historic background, I felt our mere presence there quite moving.

Some of our group, who were orthodox, had moved into a hotel in walking distance of the synagogue for Friday night – Letter to the Stars was most accommodating – and they had Shabbat dinner in the restaurant adjoining the synagogue. The rest of us were taken by busses to the Lauder Chabad House in the second district – the district which before the war had the greatest concentration of Jews in Vienna – and where my grandparents had lived. There we had Shabbat dinner and the local Chabad leader led us in Yiddish and Hebrew songs. It was quite late by the time our busses brought us back to our hotel.

On Saturday morning we went to the Kunsthistorische Museum – the principal museum where the Habsburgs displayed their immense collections of art. Then we wandered through the city again and wound up at the theater to see a wonderful performance of “The White Horse Inn”. The “deus ex machine” was the old Emperor Franz Josef, and when he appeared the audience was asked to get up and sing the old imperial anthem, God save the Emperor. It was a lot of fun. (*I agree.*)

Sunday we went to the Liechtenstein Palace to see the art collection amassed by the Lichtenstein family. On the way, in the square near the Serviten Church, there was a remarkable monument to the Jews who had lived in the neighborhood and had disappeared. (*It was extremely moving.*)







Liechtenstein Palace

Then we went to the Albertina, another one of the great Museums in Vienna, where they had a great Kokoschka collection as well as many wonderful 19th and 20th century paintings. (*A truly wonderful collection.*)

Monday was the big day. We were taken by busses to Parliament for a special memorial against racism. It felt odd to sit in the seats of Austrian lawmakers. There were speeches and music, and names of Jewish children murdered in the Holocaust were read out. And this was done in the Austrian Parliament in the presence of over four hundred Jews who had been the Austrians victims! (*Once again, I could FEEL the emotion here.*)



After the session in Parliament we walked to the Heldenplatz, accompanied by volunteers from Letter to the Stars. This is the biggest square in Vienna, near the Hofburg, the imperial palace in the center of town. A gigantic equestrian statue of Prince Eugen of Savoy is in the center of the square and at one end is the balcony from which Hitler spoke to millions of cheering Austrians in 1938. A stage had been set up, and in front of it seats for our group with our names in alphabetical order. About five thousand students from the provinces had come in, plus the students from the schools in Vienna and many adults – we were later given an estimate of 7,000 in the audience. Not a million, but a respectable number. It did not seem to us that there were that many, but it is a huge square.

First the President of Austria and then the Chancellor addressed us. There were musical interludes and presentations by students. And in between, six or seven of us had been asked to speak to the students for no more than one or two minutes. *(What an exciting and intensely moving experience this was!!! Max was fantastic! He got a resounding burst of applause.)*

This was the biggest audience I had ever spoken to, and it was strange to speak in the same square as Adolf Hitler to the descendants of people who had stood there listening to him.

This is what I said – freely translated from the German:

“Seventy years ago I was expelled from my school, the Akademische Gymnasium, and from my homeland. Then came the war – and then fifty years of the great silence.

But what you have done in the last few years gives me hope that Anne Frank’s belief in the goodness of mankind is not erroneous.

But I remind you of the warning of the philosopher Burke:

For evil to succeed it is only necessary that good men do nothing.

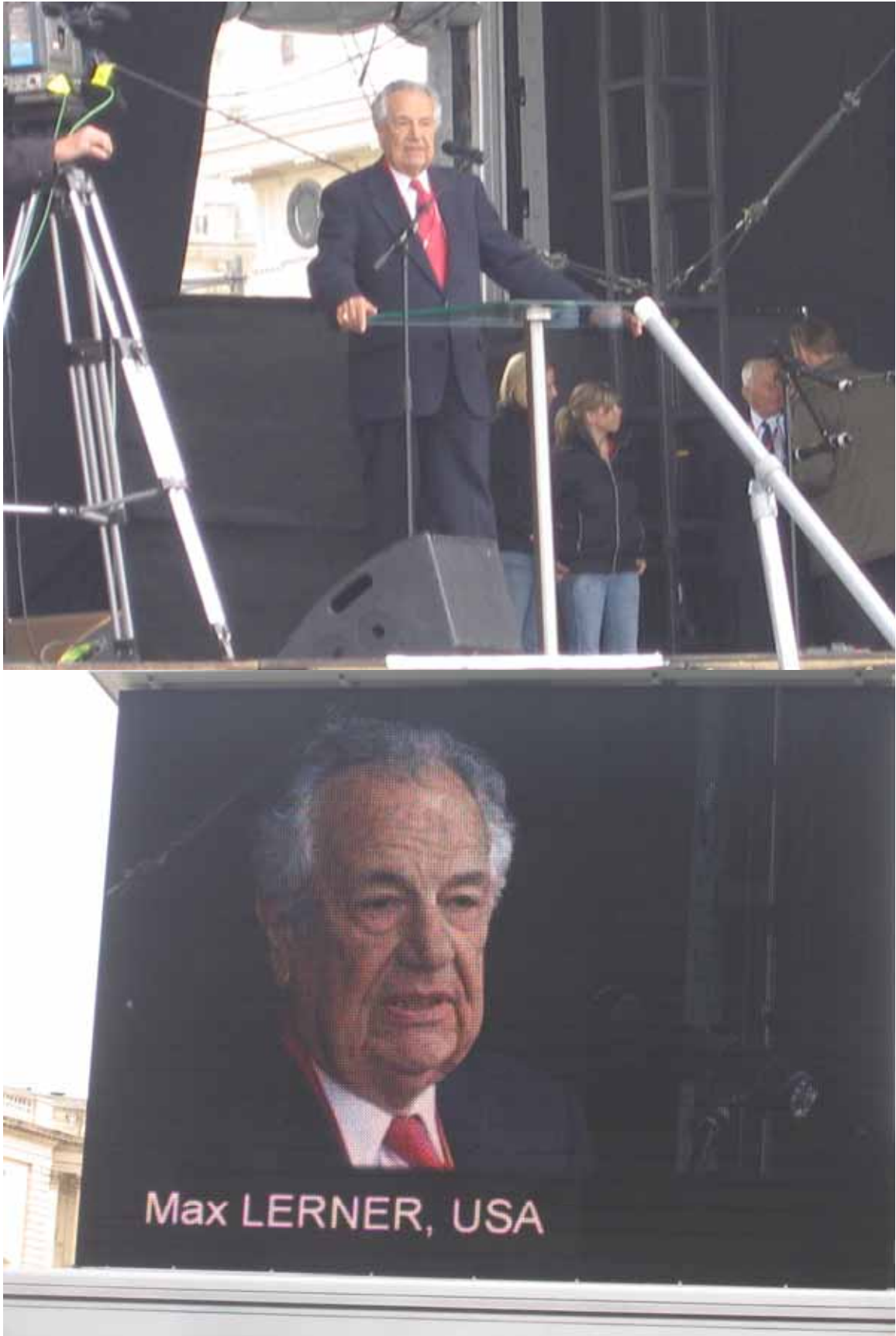
I repeat:

For evil to succeed it is only necessary that good men do nothing.

I entreat you, always be the good men and women who will do something.

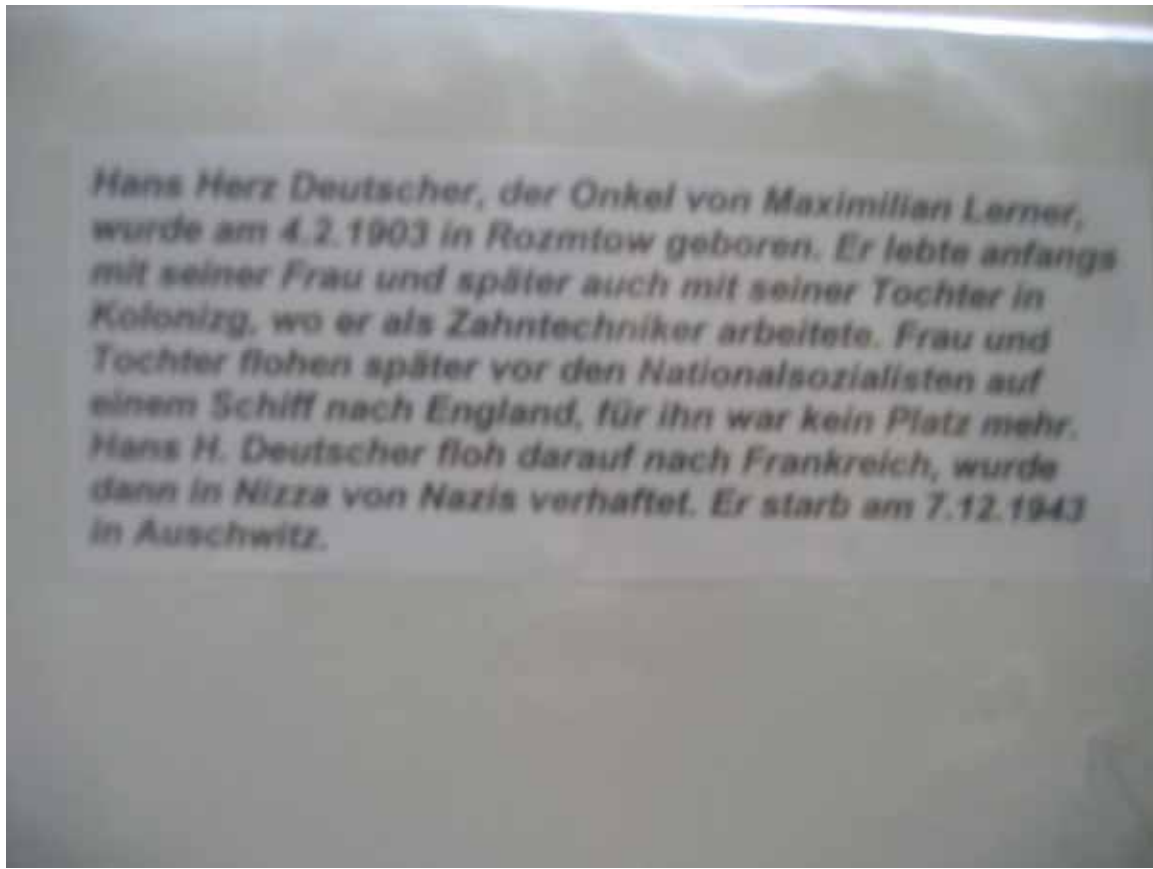
Thank you.”







When the event was over, students from the various schools collected their “witnesses to history”. This is when I met the teacher, Karin Brettleker, with whom I had corresponded, another teacher, and my class. The students had prepared posters using information I had given them about my uncle Herz. They had researched my 1938 class and made a poster showing my fellow students at that time. *(The students were so happy to meet us. Obviously, they had worked very hard to produce the posters and collages they displayed.)*



We spent some time with the students and confirmed our appointment to visit the school the next day. Then another interviewer drove us around Vienna and filmed me at the school and at my old apartment. We rang the bell and the super allowed us into the building, but I did not have the nerve to ring the bell of apartment 2A where we had lived. We wanted to go to the Pool club – the Stadion Bad in the Prater, of which I have many memories, but it had started to rain very hard, so after some fruitless attempts to find the place in the rain, we gave up and the interviewer drove us back to our hotel.

Tuesday morning, we went to the Akademische Gymnasium.



First we were received by the Direktor and offered coffee and cake.



Then the students gave us a guided tour of the school, with a student who spoke good English next to Lenore. And finally we spent two hours in a classroom where I told them my story and answered many questions. It was a very moving experience, and I was pleased with the caliber of the students. Of course, today, the school is part of the public school system, it is coed and there are no exams necessary to enter, but the curriculum still emphasizes the classics, Latin and Greek, and I understand, is quite difficult.

The students had prepared for our visit and had done a lot of work. After our conversation, we went outside and I showed them where I had scrubbed the sidewalk. (*I believe this really hit them hard.*)





The experience at the school was very moving for me. (*And ,I believe, very meaningful for the students.*)

We had one more task before leaving Vienna the next day. I had promised the Boy Scouts an interview. After leaving the school, we stopped for lunch, then wandered to the other side of town where the interview would take place.

On the way, we walked past the Judenplatz where there is a monument to the murdered Jews in form of a block of unopened books. Underneath the Judenplatz we visited an excavation of a synagogue. In 1421 the Jewish community of several hundred souls were all burned at the stake, the synagogue was destroyed and some of its stones were used to build the University. But we are still here.

While the cameraman set up, a man of my generation came over and immediately explained to me that he was not a war criminal, that he had spent his army days in Bucharest arranging vacation trips for the soldiers. I did not believe him, and I despised and hated him as I hate all Nazis and their supporters. The new generation of Austrians may be good people, but their grandparents and great grandparents certainly were not.

In 1938 Austria had a population of six and one half million of which 185,000 were Jews. 70,000 were murdered, the others spread all over the world.

Today, Austria's population is eight million and there are between ten and twenty thousand Jews, most of them relatively recent arrivals from the East.

We returned to New York on Wednesday, May 7. The great gift that I received was that I do not have to hate today's Austrians any more. *(The gift that I received was the opportunity to take part in this adventure. I felt humbled by the experience and very privileged to be born in the U.S.)*