Remembering the Jewish Community of Vienna, Austria

Remembered by Larry Lencz

My father had always spoken of his love for Austria, and more specifically Vienna. "Wien, Wien, Nerdu Aline " (phonetic German), was sung in our home quite often. This was all in spite of the fact that my father and his sister had been fortunate to leave Vienna, in the fall of 1938, weeks before Kristallnacht!

Vienna was one of the cultural centers of Europe, in the arts, as well as academically. My father attended the University of Vienna medical school, and had been board certified as a urologist, shortly before he was to leave the city, for good. In the Spring of 1938, things became unbearable for many of the city's significant Jewish population, approximately numbering 200,000. On weekends, storm troopers dragged hundreds of Jews to the Prater, the woodland preserve to the east of Leopoldstadt on the Danubian Canal. In the shadow of Vienna's enormous ferris wheel, they forced elderly men to submit to beatings, to do endless calisthenics, even to eat grass. It has been reported that hundreds, even thousands of suicides occurred, that were never mentioned in the papers. The Joint American Committee for Protection of Minorities, sent a petition to President Roosevelt on March 30, 1938, demanding the non-recognition of Anschluss. Unfortunately, there was no response, and the United States and the free world stood silent.

After my father settled in Connecticut, he spent endless hours trying to get his parents out, as well. His efforts were to be rewarded in 1942, but two weeks before they were to come to America, they were taken away and killed. I only found out recently that my grandparents were taken, by train, to a small town outside of Minsk. There, they were
ordered to dig their own graves, and were shot and buried along with hundreds of others.

My parents took me to Vienna twice, both times before I was even Bar Mitzvah age. I got the chance to witness a revived Vienna, once again with a proud yet smaller Jewish population, remembering and celebrating their heritage. My parents took me to the apartment in which he was raised, and after explaining who we were, I was able to go in and see the room where my father was born. I visited the Gymnasium from which my father graduated, and while there, met up with a custodian who actually recognized him, thirty years later! I also met one of my father’s dear childhood friends, who cried on my father’s shoulder, asking for forgiveness for having served with the Hitler Youth Group.

As we pray during this solemn Yizkor service, I remember my dear parents and sister, and my grandparents who I never had the privilege to meet, Armin and Aurelia Lenz.

The small town outside of Minsk where Larry’s grandparents were killed was probably Maly Trostenets. Very little is known about the extermination camp there. The Germans destroyed all records, and there were almost no survivors. Most victims were shot upon arrival. At least 40-65,000 Jews were killed there, mostly from Minsk, but also from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. Many Soviet prisoners of war and Byelorussians were also killed there. In addition to shooting, mobile gas vans were used.

Recently the records of the Vienna Jewish community were found. Ultimately the community was use as a tool to get the Jews out of Vienna, first by emigration, then by extermination.