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Rosenbaum finds closure on family Holocaust deaths

By Paul Haist

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Retired Brig. Gen. Fred M. Rosenbaum of Portland has found a little bit of closure around the Holocaust and what happened to some of his family in Europe during World War II. Rosenbaum, who was born in Austria, escaped the Holocaust as part of the kindertransport, a program that enabled some 10,000 European Jewish children between the ages of 5 and 17 to find refuge with host families in England.

The first transport left barely six weeks after Kristallnacht, Nov. 9, 1938, and continued until the outbreak of war on Sept. 3, 1939.

Rosenbaum's mother put him aboard the first kindertransport train to leave Vienna in 1938--a long train ride followed by a boat ride across the English Channel to safety and survival. Before mother and son went to the train station that day, they visited the mother's parents, the boy's grandparents, Philipp and Gisela Weiss.

"My grandfather placed his hands on my head and blessed me," said Rosenbaum. That was the last time he saw his maternal grandparents. They did not get out of Europe.

Rosenbaum stayed with two families in England and also at an Anglican boarding school until both his parents also found their ways, separately, to England and the family was reunited.

Later, they came to America where Rosenbaum, when he became old enough to serve, enlisted in the Army and was sent as an infantryman to the South Pacific.

In all the years since World War II, Rosenbaum remained unaware of the fate of his maternal grandparents, except that he knew they had not survived.

"I knew they were killed, but I didn't know how or where," said Rosenbaum.

After the war, Rosenbaum remained active in the military for some 30 years, advancing to flag rank in the Air National Guard, while also building a successful career in the insurance industry. It was his many years of military service, including volunteer service beyond his retirement, that led finally to his learning recently of his grandparents' fate.

About a decade ago, Rosenbaum explained, the Oregon National Guard was asked by the Pentagon to serve as a liaison agency to the Austrian army. Rosenbaum was one of three senior officers assigned the task of working with the Austrians. He has made several trips to Austria in this capacity, working closely with an Austrian brigadier, Norbert Furshenhofer.

Rosenbaum and Furshenhofer became close friends over the years.

About a year ago, Rosenbaum inquired of his friend whether he might help him discover the fate of his grandparents.

Furshenhofer agreed to look into the matter.

About five weeks ago, when he was again in Vienna, Rosenbaum met his friend, who provided him with German World War II-era documents, at least some of which he had found in the Austrian Resistance Archive.

The documents provided a grim account of Philipp and Gisella Weiss's last days.

There was a "Receipt in Reference to the Assets of Jews." There, the clerically meticulous Nazis recorded that they had taken a gold chain, a gold wedding band and a watch from Philipp Weiss. Two other documents, one for the husband, one for the wife, recorded that they were deported to Minsk on Nov. 28, 1941.

Photocopies of pages from the book "Expulsion and Extermination: The Fate of the Austrian Jews, 1938-1945" reported the fate of the Nov. 28, 1941, transport to Minsk.

Upon their arrival, they were shot to death.

Rosenbaum has a letter from Gisella to all her children written on Nov. 11, 1941. It's one of a collection of her letters he and four of his cousins, all Gisella's grandchildren, compiled in a family book some years ago.

"I don't want to grieve you and I don't want to complain; I'd rather tell you something pleasant, but unfortunately that subject is not available to us," wrote Gisella.

"You may stay reassured we won't lose our courage, we will continue to fight, and our prayer is that God will grant us the strength to do so. We'll have to get out of this apartment; again we will have to move in the middle of winter, but God will help us," she continued.

Seventeen days later the Nazis murdered her and her husband in Minsk.

"In your whole lifetime, you never get over this," said Rosenbaum.

To help give some closure to this part of his life, Rosenbaum has arranged for the installation of a plaque in memory of Gisella and Philipp Weiss at his synagogue, Congregation Beth Israel.

He thought the plaque would be ready in December. At that time he will ask his Torah study group at Beth Israel to say kaddish with him at last for Gisela and for Philipp--Philipp, who blessed his young grandson whose life was then saved.

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