



# ST. ANNA 2005

By SANDOR & RON VANDOR

2024

## PREFACE

The Nazis wanted to annihilate every Jew on this planet with various methods of killing. For starters, the Jews were rounded-up and

### *DEHUMANIZED.*

Jews were stripped of their dignity and humanity by placing them in special segregated cramped confinement, such as ghettos, and brick factories, and transporting them to the killing grounds, packed in sealed railroad freight cars and/or forcing them on a death-march. There are no words in any dictionary to adequately describe the Nazi cruelty applied against the Jews.

My mother was rounded-up and forced into the ghetto and the brick factory. Within a short timeframe, she was also sent on a crowded train ride to be killed in the gas chamber of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp.

And me: I was forced on a death-march for 5 days to reach a brick factory, a way station, where I was readied for work.

At age 19, it was to make me work, expending all my physical energy until I dropped dead. The

### *PEOPLE WERE WORKED TO DEATH*

by forcing them to exert 3000 or more calories daily. While providing an

### *EXTREMELY*

### *LOW CALORIE DIET*

with food rations of only 200 - 250 calories a day, to cause acute weight loss, In less than 3 months, I lost 1/3 of my body weight. Also, with

### *NO PERSONAL HYGIENE ALLOWED*

a sure way to induce a life-threatening epidemic. In my case, it was fleck-typhus.

And despite it all, the brave local population helped us with food supplements. Among them the undeterred *Princess of Light* was shining:

## Sixty-Years Later



Upon a time 'twas nineteen forty-five,  
I'm on the road to the abyss in the dark.  
At the crossroad Maria appeared as a Princess of Light  
Also, Martha as Maiden at her right.  
With magical food, she illuminated the way back to life.  
Despite all her good deeds, she nurtured doubts.  
Sixty-years later, I traversed land and sea.  
We yearned for a reunion, and we met again.  
While clutching her hand, Martha and I oversee  
Her tears were washing away all the remaining doubts.

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English translation of the original German text of Foreword 1, 2 and 3 also the glass tablet of Memorial for Peace and the Supplement by Elisabeth Weinhandl.

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Trench sketch on page 21

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## **FOREWORD 1**

### **„I’ve never seen the sun“**

In St. Anna am Aigen there is a small area named „Hölle,“ German for „hell.“ It’s a lonesome spot and only one single family had lived there aside from the other villages. Their house was named „Höllprassl“. When I was a child, I never thought about the special name of that region, situated nearby a strictly- monitored border, which was not easy to cross. After many years, I learned that the temperature in that valley is so high because the sun is burning there like hell. During World War II, the area earned its name in another way. The area known as „Hölle“ actually became hell for many people. We know that on the very spot there was a camp for Jewish forced laborers and many of them were shot. You cannot imagine that deep suffering. The elderly people in our region report that the earth upon the mass graves still moved after a few days. A veritable hell.

A few years ago, I met a man, who came back to St. Anna am Aigen. His name is Sandor Vador. He’s one of the few who survived that horrible inferno. Sandor Vador says that he is alive because local people gave him food. And he reports on that spot where the sun was shining so intensely, „I’ve never seen the sun “. That’s how dismal that place had become for him. Now that man comes back to the place of former atrocities to say thank you to the people who saved his life. Sandor Vador became a sun himself, who gives us light and warmth and thus placably enlightens the dark side of our history.

Auxiliary Bishop Dr. Franz Lackner

### **Note:**

On Nov 2013, Dr. Franz Lackner was ascended to be the Archbishop of Salzburg.

## **FOREWORD 2**

The story of Sandor Vador is intrinsically tied to the history of the community of St. Anna am Aigen. His return soon turned out to be a fortunate coincidence of fate for the people who witnessed WWII over the post-war generation to the generation of today's young people who will create our future.

Sandor Vador put the reflection of the bitter past into a new perspective. During the war there were quite a few local people who risked their lives helping forced laborers like Sandor Vador. After so many years he pointed out that he still was very grateful for their selfless help and courage and that not only gruesome things have happened. With his acknowledgement Sandor Vador helped us to come to terms with our past, of which many people still avoid talking about.

You have to admire Sandor for not jumping to conclusions and not being prejudice, despite experiencing terrible things during the war. From his approach to the past we can learn that although it is not always easy to deal with our involvement in WWII, not only horrible things happened. His visit especially had a deep impact on one person. All her life the feeling of guilt for not helping enough during the war haunted Maria Lackner. Only the reunion with Sandor Vador was able to free her from this guilt, as he showed her that it was her help and courage that gave him the possibility to start a wonderful family. With his return to St. Anna am Aigen, Sandor Vador himself was finally able to experience his psychological liberation.

Although Sandor Vador's story ultimately had a good ending, it should be a reminder for us never to forget the things that happened during WWII. We should take these experiences and awareness and integrate them in a positive way to create a better future for all of us.

Josef Weinhandl  
Mayor of the Marktgemeinde St. Anna am Aigen

### **FOREWORD 3**

Due to the disastrous military condition of Hitler's Germany, in the summer of 1944, preparations were made for defending the border of the German Reich. The border region of the Southeastern part of Styria, near the river Kutschenitza, was also included in the defense line, which was called „Reichsschutzstellung“ or „Südostwall“ (Southeastern Wall). They began building the constructions in mid-October. The section of the defense line of that region became known as „fortification V“. The leader of this section was the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party)-section leader of the comprised counties Mureck and Feldbach, also the territory ranging from Radkersburg to Mogersdorf (at that time the Burgenland county Jennersdorf was part of the county of Feldbach). The subsection V/3-St. Anna am Aigen was situated in the southern part of that section of fortifications.

The projected line of fortification was built mostly by hand with primitive means. Along with conscripted civilians, members of the NS-formation (SA, HJ etc.), Volkssturm, prisoners of war and foreign workers also imprisoned Hungarian Jews (who were not deported to Auschwitz in 1944) were forced to do that fortification work.

In consequence to the quick advancement of the Soviet army the fortification work, already near the final completion, was cancelled at the end of March 1945. In the following days of April, the fortifications that were built by thousands of people, turned out to be grossly useless for military purposes.

As of January 1945, in the subsection of fortification V/3-St. Anna am Aigen there were about 400 Hungarian Jews. They were mainly accommodated under degrading conditions in the parish center of St. Anna am Aigen. They were accommodated in the former elementary school (today's shoe store Rindler), in the clubhouse (theatre, parish rooms) and in a building, that doesn't exist anymore, next to the Lippe department store. Some of the Hungarian Jews were also accommodated in wooden barracks in the so-called „Hölle“ (hell) between Deutsch Haseldorf and Aigen (near Kramarovci) and temporarily in a tent camp.

The leaders of the subsection of fortification V/3-St. Anna were a senior School Principal Johann Müller an NSDAP-**Ortsgruppenleiter** from Mettersdorf, along with Dr. Hans Gerscha the **Ortsgruppenleiter** of St. Anna am Aigen. They belonged to the political leadership and were responsible for the assignment of the Hungarian Jews in the vicinity of St. Anna am Aigen. The Jewish slave laborers were guarded by SA, Ukrainians and temporarily by members of the Second SS-**Baubataillons** „Kama“ (Croatian **Waffen-SS**). They treated the slave laborers very often barbarously and with frequent heavy beatings.

In St. Anna am Aigen, the Jewish slave laborers were partly forced laborers of the Hungarian Army. Alongside with them there were a great many of Jews assigned, who have already worked since summer 1944 in the **Gau** Groß-Wien as slave laborers. Among them included were some women too.

The Jews were mainly deployed for the construction of the **Panzergraben (tank trench)** from the fields of Aigen to the Höllwiese (meadow named hell), next to the border of today's State of Slovenia. There they had to work very often on inhuman conditions. Lasting for months the Jewish slave laborers had to dig a tank trench, 2 kilometers approximately in length with 4.5m in width and 5m in depth. (The **Panzergraben** was already insignificant in the final battles of the war in 1945 and in November 1947 it was filled up again with a mechanical earthmover.

The food for the Jews was quite insufficient. From the local people they sometimes got food secretly, which made survival easier. On the one hand that support showed the brave humanity of the local people, on the other hand it showed an unusual great extent of free movement the slave laborers were able to do. In the middle of March 1945, the **Abschnittsleiter** of the section of fortification V-Feldbach came to St. Anna am Aigen, because of the complaint that Jewish slave laborers got frequently to the surrounding villages begging for food. He took the persons in charge to task and lined up the Jews in St. Anna am Aigen for a head count. Some were missing therefore they were searched immediately. Those Jews, who were taken up were incarcerated in the community's detention place, where they were maltreated badly.

In the camps in St. Anna am Aigen the sanitary conditions were disastrous and because the slave laborers couldn't wash themselves, they soon got lice. Part of the Jews came to a camp tent near the construction-site of the tank ditch. They were deloused. All the same the Jews in the vicinity of St. Anna am Aigen got epidemic typhus, due to the insufficient hygienic conditions. The typhus epidemic was about to spread out. Presumably under orders of the NSDAP-**Gauleitung** their guards shot the terminally ill people. One day (supposable on February 13, 1945) 41 ill men were taken in a lorry to the woods near Deutsch Haseldorf; they were shot there and buried in a mass grave. The executions were carried out by an SS-commando from Feldbach, the leader of the subsection and the NSDAP-**Ortsgruppenleiter** of St. Anna am Aigen had to block the road.

At the end of March, a few days before the abandonment of the fortification work, seven Jews fled from the camp, in retaliation ten other slave laborers were shot and also apparently buried in the mass grave near Deutsch Haseldorf (it was opened in 1948 and the remains of 51 Jews were carried to the Jewish cemetery of Trautmannsdorf near Bad Gleichenberg; six Hungarian Jews, who died during the fortification work and who had been buried for the time being at the cemetery of St. Anna am Aigen were carried to Trautmannsdorf in 1950).

Some of the Jews, who were taken from Greater Vienna to St. Anna am Aigen were sent back again to Vienna, just before the completion of the fortification work. The others had to go on working until the abandonment of the fortification work in St. Anna am Aigen. At the end of March, they were forced to go to Gnas, together with the other Jewish slave laborers. From there they started to go on the death march via Gleisdorf, Graz, Präbichl (where many of them became victims of the infamous massacre) to Mauthausen.

A number of critically ill persons were left in the barracks of Aigen (near Kramarovci). On April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1945 an ill Jew went from that camp to the nearby village of Deutsch Haseldorf to fetch some food for his comrades. The very next day the Russian soldiers had reached the barracks in the "Hell", the Hungarian Jews were liberated and a few people, who were able to go, went back to Hungary by foot. The dead and the dying people were left in the barracks.

Sandor Vador (born in 1925), who came from the Hungarian city of Rákospalota (today part of Budapest), was forced to join the Jewish work battalion of the Hungarian Army in May 1944. During the first months of the year 1945 he had to work as a slave laborer at the fortification in St. Anna am Aigen. In this book the eyewitness Sandor Vador describes hauntingly the memories of his assignment and his struggle for survival.

Franz Josef Schober



## **INTRODUCTION**

For eleven months between 1944 and 1945, I was in forced labor camps. The last two months were the hardest to endure. We were building fortifications for the German army in the vicinity of a small village in Austria: Sankt Anna am Aigen. In June 2005, I revisited St. Anna am Aigen, the first time since liberation on April 5, 1945.

I lived 57 precious years with my wife Anna. Mentioning the holocaust in our conversation was a daily occurrence for those 57 years. We talked about the bad things the Nazis inflicted upon us. We mentioned untold times the good deeds done for us by individuals during those times. But the wrongs committed against us were so overpowering that we hardly recognized the good deeds that benefited us. The wrongs dwarfed the good deeds. We couldn't find adequate words to express the wrongs. Anna repeatedly reminisced, about the extra sweater that the "brutal female beast" (the SS camp commander) gave her while saying "*You little Angel.*" I told innumerable times how the people of St. Anna am Aigen and the neighboring villages gave me food and that food sustained my life. I mentioned it endless times without registering deeply enough the need to acknowledge that they deserve a THANK YOU.

On another project I inserted in the text the following two short sentences:

*"Sankt Anna am Aigen, a little village. Was my life spared there to be a life partner for Anna?"*

Those two short sentences stared at me from the screen of the monitor. The black letters on white paper reflected back that acknowledgement was needed...

## **ACTION 1**

In early January of 2005, I wrote a letter to the Mayor and the City Council of Sankt Anna am Aigen, expressing my thanks for the food the villagers gave to me and to my fellow inmates.

Mayor Josef Weinhandl sent me a warm answer. From that I found out that on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2005, a new traveling, mobile memorial statue was to be unveiled on the village main square. The statue and the unveiling service were to commemorate the slain Hungarian–Jewish Forced Laborers, who were killed by the SS Forces in and around their community close to the end of WW II. What coincidence! My letter arrived 10 days before that memorial service. That letter became the beginning of a chain of correspondence culminating in a revisit to Sankt Anna am Aigen, to personally express my thanks to the citizenry of the villages of the Marktgemeinde Sankt Anna am Aigen for the brave, heroic, humanitarian acts of aiding and abetting Hungarian–Jewish Forced Laborers including myself.

In 1945, St. Anna/Aigen and the neighboring small villages – Aigen, Klapping, Plesch, Risola, Jamm, Waltra – were independent, little villages ranging in population from 80 – 450. Now they are incorporated into the Marktgemeinde Sankt Anna am Aigen and the population is about 2000 people. The church, the municipal offices, police and volunteer firefighters, the elementary and middle schools, the bank, post office, general

store/department store combination, regional doctor's office and other shops and stores are located in St. Anna am Aigen. The church is on the south end while the school campus is located at the north end of the village. The distance between the two places (less than 2 km) can be covered with an easy stroll of ten minutes.

Mayor Josef Weinhandl is efficiently and successfully leading his municipality in the right direction. The people like him and rewarded him with reelection. He grows elderberries and blueberries. He is about the same age as my son Ron. That puts his birth year into the mid 1950's. In other words, he was born about ten years after the end of World War II. He is passionate about unearthing the truth about the circumstances of the wartime involvement of his village sixty years ago.

The Nazi high command dreamt of building reinforced fortifications to stop the advancement of the Red Army. A segment of that fortification was designated for the southeast corner of Austria, between St. Anna and Bad Radkersburg, at a length of about 12 kilometers. On that stretch they put 2500 – 3000 Hungarian Jewish Forced Laborers to work. I was one of them. The local citizens were also ordered to pitch in with manual labor, the young and not so young had their work assignments. In that area there were 800 to 1000 especially brutal SS troupes let loose to kill Jews. They killed my comrades by the hundreds. Children from the villages in their preteens witnessed some of the atrocities.

The Mayor is passionate about bringing those events into the open. He organized the memorial service of January 30<sup>th</sup>. About 250 people, a sizable crowd based on the total population, attended the service, held on the Church Plaza. The "Remembrance Mobile", a traveling memorial sculpture, dedicated to the memory of the slain Hungarian Jewish Slave Laborers and created by the artist Christian Gmeiner, had its first showing in St. Anna am Aigen in Styria. Dignitaries and witnesses made speeches. The Memorial Service caused consternation and awakened old memories.



1. Remembrance Mobile

The Nazis commanded the Jews to wear a six pointed yellow star with one point directed upwards (the Star of David) affixed to their outer garment at all times. The artist Christian Gmeiner created the statue of “Remembrance Mobile”, communicated his views by way of symbols, objects. A steel plate base carries two yellow triangles representing the original six-pointed star being torn apart into two pieces. The star is rotated 90 degrees, such that the upward pointing corner now pointing side-ways. Interpreting the symbols gives the impression that the artist is showing the partially destroyed Jewish people in an upside-down world, or at least a side-ways turned world.

Mayor Weinhandl delivered the keynote speech, emphasizing that history should be seen the way it was.

During the service some of the witnesses also made comments. Freely translated from archival data, brief samplings of those comments are:

The poor emaciated Jews were accommodated in the schoolhouse. In the morning, they had to go to work on the trenches, where for a short period of time, as an onlooker, I was also present. One would be beaten with the rifle butt, just for the sheer virtue. There were men and women. The population was not allowed to give them anything to eat. We were threatened that we would be taken to the concentration camp if we give something to the Jews to eat.

*Alois Ulrich, former mayor of St. Anna.*

I saw many dead Jews lying behind the barracks in the (Höllgraben) Hell Valley. Also, among the dead ones, were people that still moved. We heard the shots when Jews were shot. Lucky were those who were shot well and were dead. The earth was still moving over the people half dead, sometimes for days.

*Frieda Neubauer*

The Jews used the ground outside the schoolhouse as a toilet with a plank facilitated. No one was allowed to go into the toilet inside the house.

*Maria Baumgartner*

We were all boys, around 12 years of age and approached the area of the ditch to observe the works on the tank trench. Several children were looking - we were curious. We saw a lot of people working there - certainly a few hundred.

*Johann Weidinger*

The Mayor introduced my letter to a local historian, Franz Josef Schober. He already published scholarly papers of the maltreatment of Hungarian–Jewish Forced Laborers by the Nazis. Presently he is working on a book manuscript of the history of the – above-mentioned – southeast-Styria-Slovene borderland including details of the atrocities committed by the Nazis during WWII. We started email correspondence with each other in the middle of February. There were times when we exchanged emails on a daily basis. Through those emails I communicated in vivid minute details of my slave labor experiences in St. Anna of the year 1945. We established times and places of historical relevancies. Besides the lengthy, detailed texts, I sent him in the email attachments geographical sketches, maps of the places of interest I have constructed from memory. He sent maps to me through postal services. Thus, we compared notes.

Travel plans were coordinated and set for mid-June of 2005. During four months of frequent email exchanges, lots of historically important questions were answered and many lingering thoughts were ironed out. I started the trip on Friday, June 10 from Ventura at 12:00

noon, driving to Malibu. My son Ron joined me in the travel. He kept me company and diligently recorded details of the events. I went to Malibu solo and left as duo. Left Malibu at shortly after 2:00 PM to LAX airport. Take off time 5:50 PM Friday, to London LHR airport. Arrival – 8 time zones later – at 12:00 noon. Change plane and continue at 3:05 PM to Vienna VIE airport. Arrived – 1time zone later – at 6:15 PM local time. Retrieved our baggage, passed through passport control, obtained taxi and reached the hotel close to 8:00 PM. The elapsed time was 23 hours. It was worth it!

Since Ron and I traveled together and he recorded the daily happenings, I will let his voice (using different font) also be heard. Therefore, I will intertwine this story with his narration. Hopefully that will add some extra texture and color to this complex work. Writing or rewriting true history is a complex work. Emotions in life saving events are definitely complex issues.

In June of 2005, my father, Sandor Vandor (I call him "Apu"), and I embarked on a remarkable journey to a place where an amazing piece of Vandor family history was made -- St. Anna am Aigen -- a small, peaceful town in Austria, near the border with Slovenia. Had it not been for the remarkable kindness and generosity of the people of St. Anna, Apu would probably not have survived World War II. And, by extension, had it not been for their kindness, we would not be here today.

## **THE BACKSTORY**

Here is the backstory in brief (told in greater detail in Apu's memoirs):

During World War II, Apu was drafted into the Hungarian Army and forced to work in a labor battalion (Jews were not allowed to carry weapons). In late 1944, he was selected to join a group of about 150 Jewish slave laborers who were taken in a death march from Szőny (near Komárom) to Sopron at the Austrian border of Hungary. There, they were turned over to German command. The laborers were taken to the town of St. Anna am Aigen and housed in barracks. Each day, they were marched by German soldiers to a work site and ordered to dig a massive trench system called a "Panzergraben" (Panzer = tank, Graben = ditch) -- a ditch for tanks. The Germans were building defensive fortifications along the Austrian border to slow down or stop the advancement of Russian forces. From late January until early April of 1945, my father lived in a barracks and worked on the trenches.

The work was hard. Food was scarce. Breakfast consisted of a piece of bread and a brown liquid they called "coffee." No lunch. Dinner was a bowl of liquid they called "soup." It quickly became apparent to my father that if he did not find additional food to eat, he would eventually grow weak, get sick and quite possibly starve to death.

The daily regimen was as follows: Get up, breakfast, assemble in the courtyard, be counted, and be escorted by soldiers to the work site. At the work site, in groups of 10, the workers were told how

much they had to accomplish each day. They were essentially left unguarded while they worked. When they finished, they could return to the barracks. The quicker they finished, the quicker they could go back to rest. They were allowed to return unsupervised but had to check in and be counted to make sure all had returned. If the group finished early, once they were checked in, they had some free time before dinner.

You might ask: if they were unguarded during the day and allowed to return to camp by themselves, how come they didn't attempt to escape? My father says that it was safer to stay. As laborers they were given shelter and some minimal amount of food. If they were caught wandering the countryside, they would have been shot on sight. Where would they go? Who would help them? There was too much uncertainty in trying to escape.

One day, while walking to the work site, my father noticed several packages of food left by the roadside. He didn't get one because there were too many laborers and not enough packages. But he took it as a sign that the locals were friendly. So one evening, after arriving back at the barracks and checking in, my father and a buddy found a corner of the compound hidden from the guards, jumped the fence and ran to the nearest village. They knocked on a door and asked for food. And they were given food. They managed to sneak back into camp before dark.

After that, my father and his friend would sneak out of the compound occasionally to get food. Not every day. But every few days. My father and his friend never went to the same place twice. Each time they would go to the next nearest village. Usually, they were given apples (which were abundantly grown in the region and are apparently still grown today). My father would trade the apples with Ukrainian laborers for tobacco (which was easier to keep in his pocket and less likely to be stolen from him at night). Then, each day, my father would trade some of the tobacco with the Ukrainians for extra rations of soup. When he ran out of tobacco, he and his buddy would sneak out again for more apples. The Ukrainians were slave laborers too. But because they were not Jews, they were treated a little bit better by the Germans. The Ukrainians controlled the apportioning the meals to the Jews. The soup, which my father was given as his normal ration, was nothing more than liquid. But the soup he was able to trade for with his apples and tobacco actually contained cabbage and potatoes. It came from the bottom of the pot. The Ukrainians were connected with the kitchen, would eat from the bottom of the pot while Jews were normally given only liquid from the top of the pot.

Each time my father and his buddy snuck out of camp they risked their lives and the lives of the good Samaritans that helped them. Had German soldiers caught Apu, he likely would have been shot. It was illegal to help Jews, so if the villagers who helped them had been caught, they likely would also be killed. Amazingly, not only did the residents of St. Anna give my father food, but also no one ever "tattled" on them. No one turned them in. There was a conspiracy of silence to help the Jews. Apu believes he owes his life to these kind people. And sixty years later, he has decided that it is time he said thank you.



## **CONTACT**

Though he is eighty years old, my father is quite Internet savvy. He goes online and "googles" St. Anna am Aigen. A miracle of modern technology, this small village with less than 2,000 inhabitants has just created its own municipal web site, thanks to the village's progressive-minded Bürgermeister or mayor. My father sends email to the mayor.

Several days later, a Mr. Franz Josef Schober, a local part-time historian, contacts him. After several more email exchanges, my father receives a letter from the Mayor inviting him to come visit St. Anna am Aigen. We begin planning the trip.

## **SATURDAY JUNE 11th**

First impressions of Vienna: Like going back in time. This is a very old city and the buildings show it. Lots of dust and soot everywhere. But there is also a sense of so much history here. Across the street from our hotel, there is an old church, surrounded by scaffolding. Half of the building is pitch black. The other half is pure white. The white half had just been cleaned. The black half has collected years of air pollution. There's no way to know when the Church was last cleaned.

We check into the Hotel Regina. This is an old, but charming hotel -- one of three run by the Kremsliner family since the early 1900's. There are family photos in one of the public salons. Our room is small, but comfortable but everything is dimly lit. Apparently, electricity is expensive. The date of the hotel's last renovation: unknown. But it would appear that the last time they fixed things up was when they put private baths into the rooms by carving out a corner of each guest room.

## **SUNDAY JUNE 12th**

In the afternoon, we board a train at the Südbanhoff (the South train station). We are on the Vienna to Graz express. In Graz, we will change trains, catching a local to Fehring. The trip takes

almost four hours. Austria is not a small country, but you can travel from one end to the other in a few hours by train. In contrast, New York to LA by train would take a week! On board the train, Elizabeth Schober, Mr. Franz Josef Schober's daughter, meets us. She is going home to spend a few days with her family and will act as a translator for part of our trip. The view from the train window: picture-postcard villages. Farms and more farms. Miles of green. Beautiful homes right out of The Sound Of Music. We climb a mountain and imagine what it must be like when it is covered with snow.

In Fehring, we are met by Mr. Schober and driven to St. Anna am Aigen, about 25 minutes away and we waste no time retracing the steps of history.

### **FIRST STOP: THE OLD SCHOOLHOUSE**

The old schoolhouse is a significant building because it is believed this is where Apu was housed while in St. Anna. Apu recalls being told his barracks were in the schoolhouse. The villagers know the schoolhouse was taken over by the Germans and used as barracks for laborers. These are known facts. Arriving at the old schoolhouse site, we walk around. At first, my father accepts that this is the place where he was kept. But there are discrepancies; things about the building and the surrounding topography don't match his recollection. Still, a lot can change in 60 years.

The schoolhouse, just steps from the town church, is a two-story structure. But my father distinctly remembers the barracks he was in had only one floor. The Church across the street has been here for hundreds of years. With its spire reaching high up to the sky, it is the most prominent building in town. Yet, Apu doesn't remember the church as having been next door to where he stayed. Upon further study, Apu announces he is now convinced this was NOT where he was housed. Later, we will actually be able to see inside the old schoolhouse, confirming without a doubt that this is not the place. We have a mystery: where were the barracks where Apu was kept?

Mr. Schober drove us directly to the Old School building of St. Anna. For me it was a totally strange building. I don't remember ever seeing that building before. I was told that over the years the building had minor restoration and regular maintenance, which is probably what contributed to my confusion. For sixty years, I had believed that we were housed in the school building. Also, there are ample documents in the archives indicating that Hungarian-Jewish Forced Laborers were housed in the school building. I did remember that I was in a single story building and this structure was two stories high. I had doubts. Are we in the right village? Are we in the right country? Are we in the right universe? Or this is just a nightmare? Or a diabolical trick? Or is it just a mirage?

Next we are taken to the Schäffman's house. This will be our home for the week. There are no hotels in St. Anna. But there are

several "guest houses" which are really nothing more than private homes, which have an extra room to rent. There is a sign outside the Schöffman house that reads: Zimmer. We're told this means room to let. The Schöffman's have outfitted an upstairs room with a private bath. It is quite comfortable. A short while later, we meet Mayor Josef Weinhandl, his wife Elizabeth and their 12-year-old daughter Stefanie. We chat, sitting around the kitchen table, with Elizabeth Schober translating. It turns out that Mrs. Weinhandl also speaks English quite well, which will prove to be most useful to us later.

Wine is served. It is locally produced. This is the Schöffman's "house" wine, produced from the vineyard they own. It is a Riesling, which Apu (who knows a thing or two about wine) says is quite good. St. Anna is a farming region. Grapes are one of the major crops today. The local wines are an important part of the local economy. There are several vineyards with wine-tasting cafes called "Buschenshanks." There is a wine-tasting business in the center of town called The Vinothek, which stocks wine from all over Austria. We learn that tourists come for wine tasting on the weekends. They sit at the Vinothek, have a snack and sample different wines from the region and beyond. We saw many such visitors leave with cases of wine to take home.

The mayor tells us that we are honored guests of the town that our accommodations are completely paid for. It turns out that the good citizens of St. Anna, who refuse to take our money, will also pay for most of our meals.

Dinner is at the nearby Gasthaus Wolf, one of two restaurants in town that are open. They are combination restaurants and pubs. Their menus are essentially the same. Fried or grilled meats, potatoes, vegetables, salads.

Austria is perhaps best known for its wiener schnitzel. Schnitzel is a big part of the menu. After dinner, before dark, Apu and I take a quiet walk. The streets are completely deserted. It seems they roll up the sidewalks after six o'clock.

## **MONDAY JUNE 13th**

What a day!

After breakfast at the Schöffman's, my father and I go for a quiet walk about town, strolling down what passes for Main Street in St. Anna. A stretch of only about a quarter-mile that is home to a post office (which doubles as the local telephone exchange), a bank, a small police station (with apparently just one police car), a restaurant, general store and shoe store (we'll learn more about the general store later). We end up back at the old schoolhouse, just steps from the town church. The schoolhouse (now empty) is a two-story structure. But my father distinctly remembers the barracks he was in had only one floor. The yard around the schoolhouse is small.

My father asks: where could they line up 150 men each day to be counted? The Church across the street has been here for hundreds of years. With its spire reaching high up to the sky, it is the most prominent building in town. Yet, Apu doesn't remember the church as having been next door to where he stayed. Upon further study, Apu announces he is now convinced this was NOT where he was housed. Later, we will actually be able to see inside the old schoolhouse, confirming without a doubt that this is not the place. We have a mystery: where were the barracks where Apu was kept?

Yesterday (Sunday) afternoon, as we arrived in St. Anna, our first stop was to visit the Old Schoolhouse. I had doubts and I didn't know what to do or what to think about it. After a good night sleep and a satisfying breakfast, Ron and I went back to the Schoolyard for a second look.

The major element in our visit to Sankt Anna am Aigen was to express my thanks to the local citizens that their mothers and aunts defying the German laws provided food for the starving Hungarian–Jewish Forced Laborers including my friend and comrade Gyuri and me. And with that brave acts saving my life by giving enough food sustenance to survive until the day of liberation.

So, when Ron and I went back to the Old Schoolyard for a second look, I observed every piece of stone with critical eyes. I had vivid memories. My life was spared in St Anna. It is plausible that one will remember in minute details of a once in a lifetime event: surviving. So, I looked, and nothing clicked. The two stories were definitely out of place. The building was not “L” shaped as I remembered. The geography of the surrounding landscape was entirely different. After spending a fairly short time, I was able to declare confidently that I was not housed in that place; I had never been there.

The village of St. Anna is built on a small flat mesa on the top of the hill. The hill at the backside of our fenced campus – looking east – continued sloping down to the lower level. Once I considered climbing the backside part of the chain-link fence of our yard because it was well out of the general view. But we pulled this out of consideration because we felt that the slope of the ground was a bit steep. Here in the old School's backyard, instead of the slope there was a foot and a half to two feet thick stone retaining wall holding the mountainside and dropping down approximately 8 feet to the next level. That wall was not a recent addition. Looking at that wall one would estimate that was constructed at least 100, maybe 200 years ago. It didn't add up. For sixty years, I was to believe that we were quartered in the School Campus, in converted classrooms. I was never in that building! Then, where was the building in which we have resided, our “home”, in St. Anna?

The parsonage, the adjacent building on the south side of the old schoolyard was another two-story building. Between the schoolyard and the parsonage there was not enough room to put the chain link fence in place. But the chain-link fence was the most important element in the story. If the fence was missing, then what did we climbed over? So, I never lived in that building.

We walk back to the Schöffman's. It is just before 9:00am -- rush hour in St. Anna am Aigen. And yet, there is no traffic. Just an occasional passing car or delivery truck. What a quiet, peaceful place.

During our walk, we see no one. But apparently, people see us. Because later, when we were picked up by the mayor's wife, Mrs. Weinhandl, asks how we enjoyed our walk! Somehow, word of two strangers walking about town had gotten back to her within minutes if not seconds. This is what happens in a small town; there are no secrets. My father realizes that when he and his buddy used to sneak out of the camp for food, villagers must have seen them. Still, they kept the secret! They were fully aware but kept the secret from the Nazi sympathizers.

The Mayor set the agenda for the day. Knowing his turf, he set our schedule very cleverly. The first item was to visit the local elementary and middle schools. Originally, I was thinking of appearing before the City Council and during the Council Meeting I will address the elected officials as representatives of the people and thank them for the goodness of the inhabitants toward my comrades and me in 1945. But the Mayor set this excellent venue for me: visit classes of student's in the middle school and tell my story to them, in their classroom, during their history classes. What an effective, brilliant idea!

9:00 am. We are taken to visit the middle school where the mayor joined us. We meet the headmaster and four teachers who speak English. They show us a student exhibit on a bulletin board where Sandor Vador's story is proudly displayed. As we arrive, I overhear kids whispering, "That must be Sandor Vador!" My father's like a rock star! They clearly know who he is. We are treated like honored guests. Apu gives a talk to two 4th grade middle school classes. The students are 14 years old. The students listen attentively and politely and ask good questions. We meet a teacher whose mother is 85 years old. Mrs. Maria Lackner was 25 in 1945 and remembers giving apples and bread to laborers. Her story is also told on one of the easels, alongside my father's. We hope to meet her.

So, we went to the School, to the "new" School. A sprawling campus, it seems much larger than the needs of a small village. The entrance is in the center between two wings. The administrative offices are in the middle. To the right are the corridors and classrooms for the 1 through 4 elementary grades. The corridors and classrooms for the middle school – 5 to 8 grades by our USA designations, but their description is 1 to 4 Middle, – are in the left wing of the building. Cleanliness and orderliness are evident in the campus. It must be a pleasure to study in such an environment.

For introduction we have meet the Principals and teachers. By the way, there are two Principals or Headmasters with two faculties. One set of faculties for the Elementary and another set for the Middle School. They knew about our presence in the village and the reasons for being there. Students with their teacher's help made preparation to greet us. On the corridor of the Middle School wing, leading to classrooms, they set up an exhibition of three large easels chronicling my intended visit with related historical facts. We reviewed this



exhibition with teachers and with students in intimate small groups. Shortly after I presented my "thank you" speech to two separate classes of 8 graders (14 year old's) in their history classes. Approximately 20 pupils attended in each of the two classes. I thanked the newest generation for their grandmother's, great grandmother and great aunt's good deeds. For the students, it was a learning experience within a very rare moment. And for me it was a very special, indescribable happening. With the City Council meeting it would have been a carefully choreographed formal event, period. Facing young adults in their formative years, it was anything but formal. It was very encompassing, intimate meeting between a group of youngsters and me. They made an indelible impression on me and I believe that I made great impression on the students. From sixty years back, from a difficult era of the history of their villages, somebody suddenly appeared in their School, in living color and made oral testimony of the bravery and moral standing of their foremothers. MY LIFE WAS SPARED IN SANKT ANNA AM AIGEN. The students were listening very attentively and followed up with excellent, lively questions.

After visiting the school, my father proclaims:

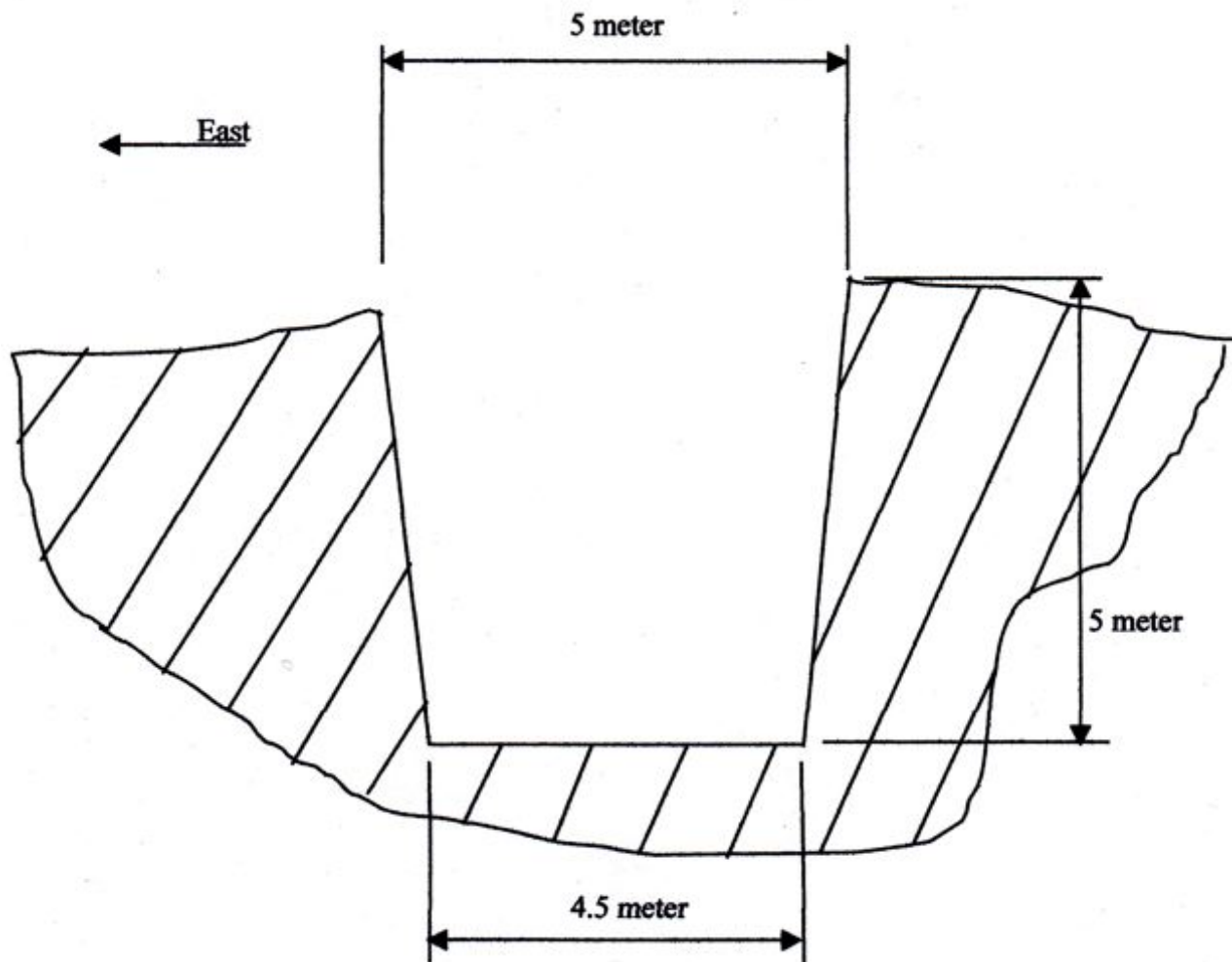
"Mission accomplished!"

We had come to St. Anna to say thank you and we did.

To groups of students, Apu passed on the story of the heroic measures taken by their grandmothers and great aunts. He passed on the story to a new generation so that it would not be forgotten. In just one morning, we have fulfilled the major goal of our trip.

The mayor and his wife take us to Gasthaus Wolf for lunch, which is the big meal of the day in this part of the world. Businesses open early (typically 8:30am), close from Noon-3pm, and reopen from 3-6. People eat a big meal at lunch, then take a break. Dinner or supper is usually a lighter meal.

After lunch, with the mayor and his wife (who is doing all the translating now), we go exploring. We see what's left of the trenches that were dug during the war. Portions still exist, deep channels running through the woods and fields. We learn that local townsfolk were also forced to help dig the trenches. My father remembers seeing locals walking along a parallel road carrying farm implements. He always thought they were going to work their fields. Now we know they were also forced to help dig the trenches. In effect, they were slaves too. Also, with the mayor's help, we will identify the place where Apu believes he spent the last few days of the war. The locals call it "The Granite Barracks."



Cross section of the trench we had to dig.  
Looking south direction.

According to the records in the archive – by Mr. Schober's summation – the length of trench we created was approximately 1800 m. And that length will fit in with the volume of dirt we had to move. The sketch in the above shows the cross section of the trench. In February and March, with wintry soil condition, a group of 10 laborers had to complete 1-meter length of trench every day. We were working on that stretch of Panzergraben for 60 days.

Over 60 years the ground rehabilitated itself and only a short, partially filled segment remained for a reminder. The photograph fixed this reminder for future viewing.



2. The camera is looking due south.

I descended into the ditch on my free will. I felt differently than in 1945, while hauling out the dirt to create the ditch. I felt the freedom.

With the mayor and his wife, we explore the fields where the "infirmary" barracks used to be. There are basically two sections where there were barracks: one is called the Hölle (German for hell) the other is named Schuffergraben. The Granite Barracks were in the Schuffergraben area. We are shown several spots where the locals discovered mass graves. Today, corn is growing in these fields, which are oh-so-close to the border with what is now Slovenia. We visit the border, which is mostly unguarded, and cross freely back and forth over the border. A few days later, while driving by the same spot, we notice guards at the border. It's an intermittent thing. Freedom has come to this small corner of the world...part time.

In one cornfield, the mayor picks up a red brick. He explains that whenever the field is plowed, the plow kicks up one or two bricks buried in the dirt. The brick is believed to be from the foundation of one of these infirmary barracks, perhaps the one my father was in, perhaps not. But certainly, from one of the buildings used by the Germans at that time. The locals called this "the granite barracks," because of that stone foundation. We break off a piece of that brick to take home.

Here at the cornfield, I realized that the infirmiry barracks was the compound of the so-called Granite Barracks. We also learned that the late afternoon the day of liberation the bluish colored larger building was dynamited, blasted to the ground and the wooden structures were torched. The flames were visible in the early evening and the smoke; odor from the burning buildings was very much felt in Aigen, which is less than 2 km away.

Here at the cornfields recalled from my memory of the events that put me in to the "Granite Barracks".

Toward the end of March 1945, many of us became ill with fleck typhus and we were separated from the rest of the company and walked to another barracks, outside the village of St. Anna am Aigen. We were walking and every one of us had a buddy, a comrade or two helping us along to our destination. Gyuri was my buddy, my comrade to help me. (For additional details please see the chapter entitled GYURI.) South of the village, some distance away, we arrived at a camp mostly consisting of wooden constructed barracks. The "infirmiry" barracks were empty and we the sick became the new tenants. About 45 very ill Forced Laborers. I believe that the combination of sick infected with fleck typhus came from both the Lippe Warehouse group as well as from the Kramarovci Schoolhouse and probably from other groups. The barracks were occupied before but were orderly when we took up residency. We didn't know who the occupants were before. We were left there to die. We were not guarded (there was no need for guards anyway, we weren't in any condition to run away), not supervised, not medicated and not fed. I remember once I was toasting some moldy bread and ate it. I don't know where the bread came from. Also, I don't remember who kept stoking the fires in the small potbelly iron stove. And just the same, I have no idea of who removed the dead bodies in timely intervals, as they were not alive anymore. People were dying left and right.

Late in the afternoon, of the fourth of April, I vividly remember laying on the bunk bed and looking out the window, I saw a German soldier was busy setting up a machine gun on the "parade ground" in the meadow. I knew that the machine gun would be aimed at us, the sick Jewish Laborers. By that time, it did not faze me a bit. Then another soldier came on a bicycle, they had a very brief discussion and the first soldier packed up his machine gun and both left in a hurry. Next morning, we found ourselves liberated by the Red Army. I was liberated in total stillness. Nobody announced that we were free. No living soul came to our compound to announce anything. On the other hand, our camp consisted of a couple of wooden barracks with a number of dead bodies inside. Also, some people actively dying and in their last hours or minutes before taking their last breath. And may be 6 – 7 of us were still alive. Barely alive. The Red Army passed our barracks either during the night or early in the morning of April 5. They passed by our barracks without one single gunshot. I got up in the morning, just the same as the previous mornings. Went outdoors. And in the distance, near the road, I saw Russian soldiers leisurely strolling by. The time could have been between 7 and 8 in the morning. I told this new revelation to others. I had to get up and go. Go home! Do not waste any more time! I immediately formed a small group of 5 comrades and left the infirmiry compounds and headed east, toward Hungary.

I said, "barely alive." For the last 9 days before liberation I did not have any fluid intake. Not one drop. That fact, by itself, could put a human very close to death. For about 53 days, the nutritional value of food served contained about 210 calories per day. Help from the local people provided me with about 440 calories per day. With a total daily 650-calorie intake I lost "only" 45 Lbs. about 1/3 of my body weight and I survived. Yes, I was barely alive.

I said: barely alive. Ten days later, on April 15, I met my father and he described our reunion in his book "Amerikai Üzenetek":

*"...And one ailing, startlingly skinny, quivering skeleton, staggered towards me: My Son!"*

Here in the cornfield, the mayor gave us a piece of brick. One piece of brick from the many pieces that are scattered around. A piece of brick, a physical evidence from the Granite Barracks. And with that piece of brick, Mayor Weinhandl handed me psychological liberation also.

Here at the cornfield, I saw the topography of the field and realized that the infirmary barracks was part of the so-called Granite Barracks.

In the Hölle there was one building where the Prassl family lived. That building was completely isolated. There were no connecting roads built to make easy passage to the building from any of the roads passing nearby. The family, parents with four children lived there, tended their household and their animals. Regularly, they walked back to their home by passing the granite barracks. The granite barracks were the homes for Jewish forced laborers. The German soldiers knew about the family, and they let the family live in peace. That created the situation where a local family lived practically amongst the compound of slave laborers. They must have had intimate knowledge about the condition of the slave inmates and their movement schedules. The very sick laborers from St. Anna were moved to the wooden barracks to live out their last hours or days before dying or killing them. I was among them. Without guards, without any personnel caring or watching us, which was in full view of the Prassl family. They were very generous, helping people. Could it have been that the mystery person who stoked and kept the fire burning in the stove in my room, could have been the mystery person who left the moldy bread, loaded with penicillin, came from the Prassl family? The answer is: I don't know. The circumstances are pointing in that direction. But later I learned that Maria Lackner reported in her eyewitness testimony that the Nazi commander withheld requisitioned food from the Jews until full spoilage. And the already spoiled food was thrown to the trash heap. Căzilia told me that the spoiled food included moldy bread. Two oxen-pulled carriages full of spoiled bread. Now I know where the molded bread came from.

On the day of liberation, when I started to walk towards Hungary, towards home, did I ask for direction from the Prassl children? Again: I don't know. I am in doubt that I will ever know the answer.

Here at the cornfield, I was standing very close to the ridge, which was on the edge of the horizon in my sight line from the bunk bed. The ground was flat where we were standing and the north – south road was running about 50 meters west from us. Therefore, I could not possibly see the road from my place of the bunk bed. The window of my barrack building was about 15 meters below the level of the ridge where we were standing. But the Germans knew that was their getaway road.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1945, probably less than 15 laborers were still alive in various serious ends of life conditions. How many survived the day? How many died within hours after the liberation? I couldn't tell. But here on the cornfield I "saw" the Granite Barracks and from the compound we were heading south and after a short distance, maybe 100 – 120 meters, made a left turn to the road and heading east. We walked on foot. We walked-till about 4 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon. The total distance we covered was about 3 km. Yes, three kilometers. It was a huge accomplishment for a day's worth of walk. And that describes our physical condition for that day. Then we found a company of Russian soldiers camping there. They had kitchen and field hospital. A Russian intelligence officer interrogated us. The intelligence officer was very friendly, gave us advice and instructions as to what to do and how can we reach our goals to our home cities. Then we were fed and provided place to sleep. Next morning, after breakfast and with food packages in possessions we were on our way to reach the railroad line, which brought Russian war supplies to the front. To recap: On the 5<sup>th</sup>, walking 3 km, sleeping in Russian encampment. On the 6<sup>th</sup>, walking maybe 5 km, sleeping under the stars. On the 7<sup>th</sup>, walking another 4 km or so, reaching the railroad line. I never left the railroad car



until we reached a station in the suburbs of Budapest. Along the way we parted from the others as they each reached a destination in their mind."

There on the cornfield it was established that the Russian encampment was on a meadow in the next valley east at Kramarovci/Sinnersdorf, which was just about 3 km away. By the way, Mr. Schober's research showed that the railroad station at Mackovci was 12 km away from the Granite Barracks. Therefore, we could have reached the station by walking via Kramarovci - Jurij - Grad/Gornja Lendava.

Here at the cornfields, I repeated the steps I had made on the morning of April 5, 1945, when I was started to walk east, toward Kramarovci, toward Hungary. And on a little bridge I was freely straddling my two feet over the border marking line between Austria and Slovenia.

By now we have firmly established that the Granite was the sight of the "infirmary" where I my last few as a slave laborer. But where did we reside in St. Anna in 1945? I searched my memory and typed the following notes: The school compound was surrounded by chain-link fence about 2 meters in height or may be a bit shorter. From a sixty-year's distance; I am estimating that the frontage was about 35 meters long and the backside was definitely shorter. The sides running in the east-west direction were 50 meters long. And may be the southeast corner of the fence was somewhat rounded or irregular to follow the outline of the included structures. The frontage with the double swing gate was on the West Side. The double swing gate opened toward the yard and fully opened to about 7 meters, which was amply wide enough to allow two horse drawn carriages passing through at the same time, one in and one out in opposite way. In the buildings within the compound the Ukrainians were housed in the classroom toward the front. The additional classrooms served as "living quarters" for the Jewish laborers. I was imagining that the kitchen was in the rooms somewhere in the back. Also, auxiliary buildings and sheds were adjacent to the east and to the south side fence. Any activities between the auxiliary buildings and the fence were hidden from the general view. Gyuri and I climbed over the fence in those generally hidden places.

I am certain that people did not reside in the structures to the immediate south of the school compound. I don't remember ever seeing anybody over there while we went on our excursions. The structures had no fence around them, and it was easy to trespass. Also, the structures provided excellent cover for us in both leaving the place and coming back. Especially when we returned from our food "shopping" tours. We were able to assess the general situation in the schoolyard without exposing our presence by playing hide-and-seek among the structures. That way we were able to choose the proper timing to climb back into the compound. Sorry, but those were not the times for sightseeing. So, I didn't pay too much attention for the purpose of the neighboring building structures. But I am glad that those buildings were there, and we welcomed the protection they gave us. We took advantage of the unique geographical combinations on the ground. (I have still used the "school compound" as reference name because lacking any better name yet.)

While the Mayor picked up red bricks from the cornfield, Mrs. Weinhandl was busy receiving calls on her cell phone. The time was just shortly after the students were dismissed from their classes for the day. To their mothers the student's told their experiences about the today's "history class" and my saying of THANK YOU. The calling mothers had very supporting opinions, which Mrs. Weinhandl conveyed to us.

Later in the afternoon, Mr. Schober and his daughter join us, and we revisit the same sites again. Afterward, the mayor and his wife go home, while Mr. Schober takes us to Bad Gleichenberg (a nearby Spa resort town) about 20 minutes away. There, we sit in an outdoor

cafe and sip Diet Coke (called Coca-Cola Light in Austria) as the sun begins to set.

Our first full day in St. Anna and we have met with the school children and found the site of the infirmary barracks. One big mystery remains: Where was the barracks where Apu was housed before he got sick? He is now sure the old schoolhouse was not the place! Who knows what tomorrow will bring?

## **TUESDAY, JUNE 14th**

Dawn breaks early here. It is light by 5:30am...and stays light till past 8:30pm. It appears that I am allergic to something in the air (possibly from the corn fields). I suffer from watery and itchy eyes and vow to seek antihistamine, but the nearest pharmacy is in Bad Gleichenberg and we will not get there again until tomorrow. Something much more important will occupy our time today.

We have planned a day of sightseeing with Mrs. Weinhandl (she wants to show off their local attractions), but instead my father asks her to drive around the local villages looking for clues to the mysteries:

- Where did my father sleep while in the labor camp

- After sneaking out of camp, which route did he take while searching for food?

- Which houses did he visit?

I feel like we've become detectives from a TV series. We drive along a road, which leads from St. Anna directly to a small village called Risola. Then Plesch, also Klapping. Then another small village, Aigen. Four small clumps of houses, all in a row, all next to each other. The township of St. Anna am Aigen is actually made up of these smaller villages. Taken together, the population is less than 2,000.

My father recognizes these places. He was here. This is the route he traveled looking for food. This was where he found kind-hearted people. We pass a house along the road where we are told that the woman of the house used to leave little loaves of bread on her windowsill for the laborers to find.

In the car, my father begins to remember more. One memory trigger another. He begins to describe a unique style of architecture that he remembers from one of the villages. Sure enough, when we get to Aigen, there are houses in that style.

## **BACKSTORY: AN EGG SANDWICH**

My father snuck out of camp several times in the winter of 1945 to search for food. But one such adventure stands out in his memory.

It was a house in Aigen, with that unique style of architecture. Inside the house: a young woman, perhaps around 25 years old, with light brown hair. Not blonde. Not dark brown. When my father and his buddy showed up on her doorstep, they were quickly ushered inside and

given a fried or scrambled egg sandwich. When you're used to no food or a precious apple, an egg sandwich stands out in your memory as something very special. My father remembers there was another girl in the house, perhaps around 16. Also, light brown hair. And there was a man.

Seeing a man in the house was very unusual because all the local men had been drafted. Except for German prison guards and soldiers, there were no men around St. Anna in 1945. They were all fighting as conscripts in the war. Outside the old schoolhouse and across from the town church, there is a memorial to all the local men who were killed in the war. They fought on the side of the Germans, but they didn't have a choice.

Could we find this special house, the house where a kind young woman gave my father an egg sandwich? Could we find a single house where a woman helped Jews while the men folk were off fighting on the side of the Nazis? 60 years later, did it still exist? And would anyone still be there to thank?

## **TUESDAY JUNE 14th CONTINUED**

We knock on one door. "1943" has been inscribed in the cement steps leading up to the house. We know this is the type of house my father remembers visiting. There is simply something unique about its style. It has clearly been around since then. Could this be the house? A silver-haired woman lets us inside. The mayor's wife serves as translator. Going from room to room, we are given a tour. Alas, my father proclaims, this is NOT the house. The layout of the rooms doesn't match his memory. We continue on our journey and continue to drive around the streets of Aigen.

A few minutes later we stop at a house with the name Lackner printed above the door. Mrs. Weinhandl explains that this is the home of Mrs. Maria Lackner, the 85-year-old woman whose daughter we met at school. She is the woman whose story is told in the same bulletin-board exhibit as my father's. For 60 years, she has told how she gave food to the Jews. For 60 years, my father has told how he received food from kind-hearted women in these villages. Could they be telling the same story? Were they remembering different parts from the same script? We are about to find out.

We knocked on the door, unannounced. Mrs. Lackner was taken by surprise. First, she needed to change into a nicer housecoat. Then, we were invited in. For about an hour, my father and Mrs. Lackner exchanged memories, with Mrs. Weinhandl doing all of the translating and me recording it on video. It is getting close to lunchtime. We agree that we need to come back. Mrs. Lackner suggests we do so when her two daughters are available to help with the translation (it turns out Mrs. Lackner has another daughter and she is also a teacher at the school). We say goodbye and drive directly to the school to find Mrs. Lackner's eldest daughter. We locate her, Mrs. Căzilia Kikelj.

It is agreed that we would all meet again that afternoon at the Lackner's house in Aigen.

But first, lunch at the Gasthaus Fischer -- more grilled meats and salads. Apu tries the Hungarian Goulash, which he says isn't quite as good as my mother used to make. The break gives us time to digest more than just the meal. We digest what we have seen and the people we have met.

## **THE FORMAL MEETING**

3PM: We return to Mrs. Lackner's house for our formal meeting. We are joined once again by the mayor and his wife. This time, we have an appointment. We are expected. Mrs. Lackner is all dressed up in a beautiful suit. Her daughters serve artfully sculpted sandwiches of ham and cheese. And we are served homemade apple cider. Another memory is triggered. At the house where my father was served the egg sandwich, he was also given homemade apple cider to drink. Sixty years later, they are still serving apple cider. More talk. More stories. Mrs. Lackner's eldest daughter Căzilia does most of the translating now. My father remembers being ushered into a veranda at the "egg house." Căzilia reveals that their house once had a veranda but has since been remodeled. More memories: The young woman with light brown hair. Căzilia reveals that her mother, the now 85-year-old Mrs. Lackner, was 25 at the time with light brown hair. My father remembers the other girl who was a young teenager. Căzilia reveals there were several young girls around -- the elder Mrs. Lackner's cousins. One was 16. Her name was Martha (we would meet her the next day). And what about the man in the house? My father remembers that he sat in an easy chair in the next room. Did not get up. Seemed to be disabled. Căzilia reveals that her uncle was in the house, recuperating from a spinal injury received in the battle of the war. He had only one leg!

Could this be the place? Could this sweet and gentle 85-year-old woman be the one who treated my father to an egg sandwich? Nothing is certain, but the circumstantial evidence is strong. Too many coincidences. Still, my father is not entirely sure.

For 60 years, Mrs. Maria Lackner has told her story of how she helped give food to the laborers, but now she reveals something we find shocking: that for 60 years she has actually felt guilty. Guilty that she did not do more to help the Jews!

In the afternoon visit I was shown photographs of Maria Lackner dating back in the 1940's. I was seeing pictures of her wearing different flowery printed house dresses, showing her light brown hair even though that the prints were in black and white. I sort of recognized her to be the young lady in question. While sitting around the table, Mrs. Lackner, her two daughters Căzilia and Mary, Elisabeth Weinhandl the Mayor's wife, Ron with his video camera

and me. I started to explain the purpose of my trip and I told her: I was doing hard labor with very little food provided. I was hungry. The simplest basic necessities were denied from us. We had no water. Not for drinking, not for hygiene. The law of no abetting the Jews was on the books and strictly enforced. But local citizens braved and defied that law. Showed higher moral values to help other human beings and helped the Jews. Gave them food. I received lifesaving nourishment. With the food I got a little optimism also. Without food the outlook was starving to death, with the question of how soon death will come? With food, I felt that I might survive.

We, Jews received food from many actively participating members of the community, while the rest of the community silently approved, because nobody reported anybody to the authorities. Nobody got hurt. Then Mrs. Lackner revealed that they had the support of the community and they knew who the Nazi sympathizers were, and they were kept in the dark. And she said that she was young, fearless, was not thinking about consequences, but acted her role, bucking the German laws, with a good conscience. And this statement perfectly meshed with my recollection of the episode, which was deeply embedded in my mind: *The second or third house on Main Street. Modest house on the left side of the street. Windows facing the street. A heavy solid door portal in brownish color. I knocked. A young girl maybe 12 or 14 years old, with light color hair, probably not blonde but light auburn, opened the door. Behind her, an older sister, may be 20 to 23 years old, grabbing my arm, pulling me inside and also pulling Gyuri inside. Her hair color was also light. She was about my height - or may be 1 cm taller or shorter. In a brief conversation I told her the reason for our visit. She went into the kitchen and a short time later reappeared with two scrambled-egg sandwiches, one for Gyuri and one for me. She insisted that we eat the sandwiches right there, inside, before leaving. She also gave us a glass of apple cider and put a couple of apples into our rucksack. (We had one rucksack with us.) The young lady acting her fearless, brave role and grabbing my arm pulling me in and also pulling Gyuri in to inside the house. This act was etched in her memory also!*

I continued with saying that she was rewarded with two daughters who chose for themselves, one of the most noble profession, teaching young children, giving them knowledge. The parents of the future generation entrusted their children to the sisters, Căzilia and Mary for their education and part of their upbringing. And this is the mother's joy.

When Maria Lackner expressed her desire to invite us (Ron and me) again into her house, her daughters worked on it to make the reunion a success. Thanks for them. And to keep up with her mother's practices, food was on the table this time also. In 1945 it was two hastily made egg sandwiches with apple cider to drink, this time it was artisan-sculpted open faced ham-and-cheese sandwiches with apple cider to drink.

In the Lackner house, apple cider was served regularly, all year around, for more than sixty years.

We hear stories of how many local residents helped Jews by giving them food. We hear about a woman who used to throw food over the fence of the compound where my father was housed. Once, she was caught by the Germans and told if she did that again she would be killed. Did she stop? Not exactly. She didn't throw food over the fence anymore. She left it for laborers to find in nearby bushes. Another woman used to leave her home every day and walk into town with two small loaves of bread under her armpits. These were smuggled to laborers. We're told there were Nazi sympathizers among the local population. So,

this conspiracy to help the Jews is all the more amazing because those involved had to keep not only the Nazis in the dark, but also their own neighbors. Later, in discussions with a historian, Dr. Eleonore Lappin, we would theorize that the local priest might have played a role in the conspiracy, perhaps by organizing the people.

The town of St. Anna am Aigen and its neighboring villages are made up of extremely devout Catholics. Now we know that there were many Catholic priests who were NOT sympathetic to the Jews. In fact, some openly collaborated with the Nazis while others simply turned a blind eye to the atrocities. But perhaps the local priest in St. Anna preached a higher set of moral values. That all life is sacred, even Jewish life. We tried to visit the local church, but it is under renovation. What part did the local priest play in the heroic acts of these women? Sadly, it remains a mystery.

While we were rehashing the past and helping ourselves with the delicious refreshments, Mayor Weinhandl joined us. He kept his fingers on the pulse of our agenda. While he was attending his official duties of governing the *Marktgemeinde*, he always knew exactly where we were in any given moment and was able to plan his days or hours with that knowledge and meet us where we were. He found us without requiring any unnecessary search for our whereabouts.

And there is still the mystery of the barracks: where was my father housed in St. Anna? During the discussion, Apu draws a diagram of the barracks compound on a small piece of paper. The building he draws has an L-shape. Single story. Large rooms. Big courtyard where the laborers could assemble. Several outbuildings. All surrounded by a chain-link fence. The fence is critical because it is not square or rectangular. It angles in and out around the property. Mayor Weinhandl and Mrs. Lackner begin an excited discussion in German. After a few minutes, Căzilia translates. They believe that Apu's drawing is of the old Lippe Warehouse (a portion of which burned down two years ago). We will need to visit the Lippe House soon. We say goodbye to Mrs. Lackner and her daughters begin the short drive back into town. It has been another eventful day, to say the least.

I made a quick sketch on the top sheet of a stack of notepaper, the size of about a half a post-card. The Mayor immediately recognized that the sketch I drew was of the old Lippe Warehouse. Before we left St. Anna for our return trip to the USA, Mayor Weinhandl gave me a disc of digitized pictures, (and another piece of the psychological liberation) old photographs of St. Anna and vicinity. After arriving home, I played Sherlock and kept looking those pictures and I found a very interesting photograph. The view is the skyline of the village downtown,

looking west from the valley east of the village. A view encompassing from the Church northward about 10 houses, including the old Lippe house. Clearly showing the back fence, in about the original 12-meter length with an auxiliary building of the southern neighbor of the enclosed compound.



3. The chain-link fence at the east side of the Lippe property.

Even though, I kept saying that I was billeted in the school building, but this picture vindicated me.

### **WEDNESDAY, JUNE 15TH**

June 15<sup>th</sup>, Wednesday morning, we had our breakfast, on Mrs. Schäffmann's patio. The patio is covered with trellises full of running growing grape vines. I was soaking up the view. From the patio looking east, the valley lit by the morning sun came into view. Beautiful view. Seeing the different patches of green, the color of the different vegetation's. The orderly rows of sections of the grape vines made the view more inviting. For added texture: a patch of earthen color highlighted with straw colored yellow stubs remained from the previous harvest. Slowly undulating meadow, with mountains on the edge of the horizon suggesting another valley beyond. Idyllic place. Beethoven's 6<sup>th</sup> symphony "The Pastoral" came to my mind. Beethoven's music describing a beautiful set with a lush meadow. While the shepherd tends his flock, singing birds are flying around. Then a storm breaks out, a summer shower with lightning and thunder. And after the storm the tranquil rejuvenating peace. Santa Anna and the surroundings are in a peaceful place in a beautiful setting. Then the storm during the war breaks out. I was in the eye of the storm. And after the storm came the tranquil peace. In June 2005, I saw that tranquil peace. I felt that tranquil peace. I saw the butterflies flying with their

fluttering wings. I met people whose generosity, during the storm, made possible that subsequently I was able to enjoy that tranquility. After the storm, I was able to spend 57 very precious years with Anna. My wife Anna and St. Anna are interconnected. Quoting from "We Couldn't Cry":

*Sankt Anna am Aigen, a little village. Was my life spared there to be a life partner for Anna?*

The answer is YES. Now I know what I saw and what I felt in that tranquility.

I know that the storm during the war produced a different "lightning and thunder" for the inhabitants of St. Anna and the surrounding villages. The big "storm" claimed tens of millions of lives. Brutal barbarians, the Nazis, set up shops in the peaceful area of St. Anna and vicinity and killed hundreds if not thousands of Hungarian Jewish Forced Laborers. Today grown up people who were children in 1945, were witnesses to the atrocities and are telling their stories for the new generation. When I was in St. Anna in June 2005, I saw the war memorial at the Church Square. The middle section contains the list of names for the fallen during World War I. The two sections on the sides have the names engraved in marble of who lost their lives during World War II. 127 names of the lost young husbands and sons. The population of St. Anna and vicinity numbers about 2000. What percentage of the population had to die needlessly for Hitler's war? How many widows and orphans and grieving parents were left behind?

By now we know the number of the victims of World War II, from the different villages:

	<u>dead</u>	<u>missing</u>
Aigen	10	6
Jamm	22	14
Klapping	8	3
Plesch	21	13
Risola	4	3
Waltra	<u>17</u>	<u>6</u>
St. Anna am Aigen total	82	45

The people of St. Anna rebounded after the war, continued their lives living fully. And they live in an idyllic, beautiful place. Anna and me, we also rebounded, created our new family. With daily remembrance of our struggles and losses in the holocaust, we still lived an extremely precious life together. In 2005, I revisited St. Anna, where my life was spared. I met with people whose generosity is the same as their mother's, who helped me to survive. Mayor Josef Weinhandl and his wife Elisabeth are leaders among them.

A busy day is planned. After breakfast, Mrs. Weinhandl, the mayor's wife, finally convinces us to do a little sightseeing. After picking up my antihistamine, we drive through the beautiful rolling countryside for about 30 minutes to get to the Castle Riegersburg. This is an immense brick and stone edifice sitting on top of a big mountain at the edge of a sheer cliff. From a distance, it appears that the Castle simply grows out of the mountaintop. We learn that this place has never been conquered and it is easy to see why. It has an ideal defensive position. If you wanted to attack the place, first you'd have to climb to the top of the steep mountain. Then, you'd



have to get past the moat and through the heavy wooden drawbridge. Just like in the movies.

But the castle visit is the prelude to the most important business of the day.

At 11:30 am, we are back at the school of St. Anna am Aigen to meet once again with Mrs. Lackner's daughter, Mrs. Kikelj. Remember, she is a teacher at the school. Another teacher also joins us. Apu is here to give the school a unique gift: "Vandor's Math Exercises," a series of textbooks my father authored.

When my daughter Mollie was in 3rd grade, she had a trouble with math. I asked Apu, who is a mechanical engineer, to help her. In response, he created a math exercise program for 3rd graders. In the years since, Apu has expanded the program to include 1st through 6th graders. And he has given these books to teachers in several schools in Ventura, California. "Vandor's Math Exercises" has proven to be quite successful in helping young people understand the logic of math. Now, as part of our visit to St. Anna, he has arranged to give the program to the schoolchildren here as a way of saying thanks for the kindness of their grandmothers and great aunts. This is very important to Apu. And the teachers receive the material with great interest and enthusiasm.

The preparation of any trip requires some work. Besides getting the travel documents in order, one might think of what gift or special memento would be appropriate to present the host with. In front of my eyes the two little sentences were appearing constantly: "Sankt Anna am Aigen, a little village. Was my life spared there to be a life partner for Anna?" Preparing the trip to St. Anna, was forcing me to face a dilemma. If my life was spared there, then any ordinary present will not be sufficient. The present had to be special.

Yes, I developed Vandor's Math Exercises. The tutorial material is my own creation. The fruit of my intellectual work and it is very special to me and I found worthy to be a special gift.

I presented my gift to the local school for the advancements of the math studies of the students. Two teachers were assigned to receive my gift. Besides their German native language, both teachers spoke English also. Although one of the teachers had a better command of the English language than the other one and her name is Căzilia Kikelj. Căzilia is one of the daughters of Mrs. Maria Lackner. Was it by design or by sheer coincidence that among 14 teachers, Maria Lackner's daughter, Mrs. Kikelj was designated to receive Vandor's Math Exercises in the name of the school?

1:00 pm. Over lunch, reporters from two newspapers interviewed my father. To each, he reviews how the local citizens of St. Anna am Aigen helped save his life.

2:30 pm. Dr. Eleonore Lappin, who has been studying the history of the Nazi occupation of Austria, joins us. She has been communicating with Apu via e-mail for several months. Now, she has come from Vienna to finally meet him in person and to visit some of

the historical sites with him. Mr. Franz Josef Schober also joins us, once again. After lunch, the mayor takes us to The Lippe House.

## **THE LIPPE HOUSE**

St. Anna am Aigen is not a very big place. You can walk from one end of town to the other in less than ten minutes. As I've said, there's a post office, a bank, police station and The Lippe House. For generations, The Lippe family have run the grocery store, dry goods (clothing, linens), hardware, building and garden supply. Basically, it's a modern-day General Store.

Mayor Weinhandl goes inside and returns with Mr. Lippe, the grandson of the man who owned the business in 1945. My father begins to describe the shape of the building where he was housed.

Key to this memory is the chain-link fence that surrounded the compound, a fence, which followed an unusual pattern because the property was not exactly square or rectangular. As my father describes this fence, Mr. Lippe begins to nod in agreement and say "Ya. Ya." It quickly becomes apparent that the building that burned down two years ago, the building used by the Lippe family as their warehouse, was the building where my father was housed. Apparently, for use as a barracks, the Germans commandeered the warehouse building, with its large open rooms. The space was equipped with wall-to-wall wooden bunk beds in two tiers. Apu slept on the upper tier. To his left was Gyuri and to his right another comrade slept and no space between bodies. A hanging light bulb and an iron stove completed the furnishings.

After discussing the details, my father is certain this is the place. This is significant because we are now rewriting the local history. The locals know there were laborers kept in the old schoolhouse. And they know there were laborers housed in another building a few doors down (now replaced by a sleek, modern office complex). But they did not know the Lippe Warehouse was also used as barracks. It is just a few doors down from the old schoolhouse along the same main street. Now, it makes sense: there were laborers in all three buildings! The schoolhouse was the main headquarters, but my father's bunk was in the Lippe warehouse. The Lippe courtyard was large enough to accommodate lining up 150 men. The fence, with a large double gate to allow the loading and unloading of horse-drawn carriages, is the wire-link fence my father and his buddy used to climb over to sneak out for food. The mystery has been solved! Mr. Lippe agrees to search for old pictures, and we agree to come back on Friday morning.

Let just pause for a moment and reflect on a mystery:

The first group of Hungarian Jewish Slave Laborers were housed in the Old School building. People generally remembered that event, because their children did not go to the school for learning. The second group of Jewish Laborers was housed in the Kino, the movie house, which also had a stage suitable of live performances. It was in the people's memory that during those times no movies or stage performances were shown. But generally, who will remember that Jewish Slave Laborers occupied a warehouse for two months? The only ones would remember would be the ones who tossed food packages over the fence. Those brave souls are not alive anymore.

In the evening, we all visit a Buschenschank -- a wine-tasting bar that also serves food. We sample several bottles of excellent locally produced wine. There are many toasts.

### **THURSDAY, JUNE 16th**

At breakfast, Apu announces that he wants to visit Mrs. Lackner again. During the night he decided that there were simply too many similarities in their stories. He now believes she is the woman who served him that egg sandwich. Can we prove this beyond a reasonable doubt? No. But I point out that it doesn't matter. For Apu, Mrs. Lackner represents all the good people who gave him food. She is a symbol. And for Mrs. Lackner, my father represents all the laborers she gave food to. He is not the first survivor to contact the people of St. Anna. Others have written to the mayor. But he is the first to ever return in person. The first to come back specifically to say thank you. Apu's visit has brought back many memories for Mrs. Lackner. Now he has decided there is one more thing he has to tell her. Mrs. Weinhandl agrees to make the arrangements.

During the morning, we visit various historic sites with Mrs. Weinhandl, Dr. Lappin and Mr. Schober. Most interesting is a deeply wooded area where we are told Jews were buried in a mass grave. Mrs. Weinhandl points out that the grass growing here is different from the grass growing anywhere else in the region. A thick, hearty grass that grows tall and almost has the rigidity of bamboo. This grass doesn't grow anywhere else, she says. She calls it Judengrasse. Now the idea that a burial site for Jews who fell victim to wartime atrocities should be marked with a special grass seems mystical. It stretches the bounds of credibility. And yet, as we drive around the region the rest of the day, I try in vain to spot a similar type of grass growing somewhere else. I can't. It would appear that type of grass is truly unique to that one spot where there is a mass grave of Jews.

And that special place inspired Ron to express his thoughts in poetic form:

## A Blade of Grass



4. The canopy



5. Juden Grass

I am a blade of grass,  
Where no grass is supposed to grow.  
The soil beneath my feet, cool and moist,  
Rarely warmed by the sun.  
Surrounded by trees,  
I live my life under the canopy,  
In the shadows of history.

I am a blade of grass.  
I do not live alone.  
I am but one of hundreds of individual blades of grass.  
We are a small but hearty community.  
There is no other grass just like us.

I am a blade of grass.  
You will not find grass like me in the next field.  
Not in this town.  
Not in the next town.  
Not anywhere else for miles around.  
Our community of grass is unique.  
We are truly one-of-a-kind.

I am a blade of grass.  
Oh so different from my many cousins.  
Nothing like Ditch grass.  
Not nearly as tall as Nut grass.  
Or as random as Saw grass.  
Not at all neat and trim like Blue grass.  
They just call me Juden grass.  
I only grow here in this one spot.

I am a blade of grass.  
Deep in the heart of Europe.  
Deep in the Austrian countryside.  
Deep in the woods where the sun rarely shines.  
Where history lurks like an ever-present fog.  
A mystery no one can explain.  
A blade of grass where none is supposed to grow.  
Except Juden Grass.

I am a blade of grass.  
The ground upon which I stand is special.  
Unlike any other soil around.  
A place not on any map.  
Known only to the locals.  
Rich with memories.  
The bones of history.  
They call me Juden Grass.

I am a blade of grass.  
Living in a holy place.  
At once forgotten, then touched by God.  
This land has soul.  
This land has many souls.  
And lots of Juden Grass.

I am a blade of grass.  
Marking a desolate stretch of wood.  
A wood that hides a deep secret.  
Soil that carries a curse.  
Hundreds buried deep beneath my feet.  
A mass grave.  
That's why they call me Juden Grass.

I am a blade of grass.  
One of hundreds of blades of grass,  
Where no grass is supposed to grow.  
A mystery of science.  
A marker of history.  
A final resting place.  
The unknown victims of the holocaust.  
People discarded.  
Covered with dirt to bury the crime.

I am a blade of grass.  
I live my life under the canopy,  
In the shadows of history.  
The dead beneath my feet,  
Reaching up through the dirt,  
Fingers of grass clawing for the sky.  
Reaching for the heavens.  
A life reborn in mine.  
Though I am just a blade of grass.



After lunch, another reporter interviews Apu. She takes pictures of my father shaking hands with Mayor Weinhandl in front of the war memorial. And she comes with us as we return to the Lackner house. Once again, Mrs. Lackner insists on serving us food. Yesterday: those delightful little sandwiches. Today: scrumptious cakes and fresh strawberries. And Mrs. Lackner's niece, Martha Zöhrer, joins us. In 1945, she was 16 and was in the house with Mrs. Lackner and the one-legged man. More memories are exchanged, but my father has something important to tell Mrs. Lackner. He wants her to know that he now believes he was in this house. He now believes that she is one of the women who gave him food. Also, Martha Zöhrer was the young girl who opened the door for the strangers and spied on the street before the strangers left the house. And he tells Mrs. Lackner that she has no reason to feel any guilt. That without her kindness, he might not have survived. The very fact that he is sitting in her house today is proof that she has nothing to feel guilty about. I point out that Apu went on to marry my mother and start a family of his own. That my brother and I each have children. And that Apu's granddaughter Stacey has just given birth to a baby girl, Abby Rose. The kindness of Mrs. Lackner and the other women of St. Anna have now yielded three more generations. "See what one apple can do?" I said.

Beneath the tears, there were expressions of gratitude from Mrs. Lackner. I truly believe a weight has been lifted off her shoulders. My father's visit brought back a flood of memories for her. But it has also brought her peace.

Later, recalling the picture-taking event with Mrs. Lackner, Martha and me, I composed the following poem, with photo number 6 incorporated:

## Sixty-Years Later



Upon a time 'twas nineteen forty-five,  
I'm on the road to the abyss in the dark.  
At the crossroad Maria appeared as a Princess of Light  
Also, Martha as Maiden at her right.  
With magical food, she illuminated the way back to life.  
Despite all her good deeds, she nurtured doubts.  
Sixty-years later, I traversed land and sea.  
We yearned for a reunion, and we met again.  
While clutching her hand, Martha and I oversee  
Her tears were washing away all the remaining doubts.



## SECHZIG JAHRE SPÄTER

Vor langer Zeit, man schrieb das Jahr neunzehn 'fünfundvierzig,  
Befand ich mich auf dem Weg an den finsternen Abgrund.  
Am Scheideweg erschien mir Maria als eine Prinzessin des Lichts  
Mit Martha, dem Mädchen an ihrer Seite.  
Sie zauberte etwas zu essen hervor und erleuchtete mir damit den Weg zum Leben.  
Trotz ihrer guten Taten hegte sie Zweifel.  
Sechzig Jahre später überquerte ich einen Kontinent und den Ozean.  
Wir sind uns wieder begegnet mit all unsrem Sehnen.  
Während ich ihre Hände drückte, konnten Martha und ich sehen,  
Wie all ihre verbliebenen Zweifel von ihren Tränen hinweg gewaschen wurden.

The German version of the poem created by Elisabeth Weinhandl and presented here.  
For additional details please see the chapter entitled LIBERATION.

Before completing this manuscript, the poem SIXTY-YEARS LATER was published  
by PavelHaus as a freestanding poem in the anthology SIGNAL winter 2007/2008 edition.

**"magical food"**      My world revolved around the daily food intake of 1/2-liter  
of nondescript zero calorie brown liquid and another 1/2-liter low calorie gray liquid, plus a  
small piece of bread. Then an egg sandwich would be the most scrumptious, luxurious feast  
one could ever dream of. And it was followed by a tall glass of golden clear apple juice with  
a taste better than the not yet created best Champagne.

## **FRIDAY, JUNE 17th**

Breakfast again on the patio. Small talk with Mrs. Schäfmann, similar to the morning greetings as before all the other mornings, but this time I have added a few short sentences. I described the natures' beauty as it comes to view on the patio in this sunny morning. Also forecasting that we will have today a beautiful day. While talking I am also gesturing with my hands. She doesn't understand English, not even one syllable that I said. In reply, she gestured toward the horizon saying: Ein schöner Tag! (A beautiful day!) I couldn't argue with that. Then I helped her to transfer back the leftovers and the dirty dishes to the kitchen. With a "Danke" she thanked me for helping and I replied with "Danke schön", thank you (very much) for the breakfast.

Soon Elisabeth Weinhandl arrived. We put all the baggage into the trunk of the car, and then came the emotional goodbyes.

It is time to end our visit to St. Anna and return to Vienna. But first, we must return to Mr. Lippe to see if he's found any old photos. He hasn't, though Mayor Weinhandl will find one later that clearly confirms Apu's recollections. But Mr. Lippe has brought a gentleman named Leo to meet us. Leo is also in his 80's. Before the war, Mr. Lippe explains, Leo worked for his grandfather. We learn that it was Leo who built the fence! Here, standing before us, is the man who built the wire-link fence that figures so prominently in my father's memory that it helped us pinpoint the exact site where he was housed 60 years prior. Leo was not around in 1945 when Apu was there. He had been drafted and was fighting in the war, fighting for the Germans. But today, he wanted to shake my father's hand and wish him well. This journey is full of surprises.

(Leo was fighting the war for Germany in Africa. But luckily for him, in the early time of the fighting, the British captured him as a prisoner of war. In the wartime he was held in P.O.W. camp in Egypt.)

As we are packing our bags into Mrs. Weinhandl's car for the drive to the train station, Mrs. Kikelj pulls up suddenly. In a quick break between classes, she decided to race over to say one more goodbye. With tears in her eyes, she thanks us for our visit and promises to try my father's math program. I sense that this was her way of saying thank you to us for helping lift the burden from her mother's shoulders.

At the train station, Mrs. Weinhandl tells me that in less than a week, she feels like I have become her brother and Apu is like a grandfather to her. Apu jokingly says: "why not like a father!" At 80, my father is far from old. He handles the rigors of travel better than me.

## SATURDAY, JUNE 18th

Back in Vienna we visit the hospital where I was born days after my parents fled Hungary during the revolution in 1956. My mother was 9 months pregnant. And with their not-quite-ten-year-old son in hand, they snuck across the border to Austria while being shot at by border guards. But that's another story. Tomorrow, we fly home to L.A.

My first trip to Austria happened in early 1945, in a death march, escorted by a brutal, specially trained, Hungarian military police attachment.

The second trip to Austria was in a family setting in a not quite usual travel way and time. The time was in 1956, during the Hungarian revolution. For a brief period of time, the border between Hungary and Austria was open, free to cross.

Hundreds of thousands of people took the opportunity to flee from Communist Hungary to freedom in the West. We as a small family were among them. The family composed of my wife Anna, my son David, Anna's cousin Elizabeth, Elizabeth's friend John and me. On November fifteenth, we traveled by train from Budapest to the Austrian border. We traveled by railroad on the Budapest, Győr, Sopron, Ebenfurt line. On the train we learned that the shorter distance between a Hungarian village and an Austrian village would be at Kópháza to Deutschkreutz. So, we left the train at Kópháza station and crossed the border by foot, to the Austrian village of Deutschkreutz. We were welcomed with great hospitality by the local Austrian people. From here we went to Vienna to obtain traveling papers to the United States of America. On December seventh, we were standing ready at the Vienna airport to continue our trip to the U.S.A. when nature called and Anna had to be rushed to the hospital, where she gave birth to Ron. After a short delay, on December twenty-first, we embarked to make the overseas trip. We arrived in the U.S.A. on the twenty-second of December. And we greeted the New Year of 1957, as residents of Brooklyn, NY.

On Saturday, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005, we met Dr. Lappin's husband, Dr. Peter Eppel, he is curator of the Wien Museum in Vienna. He was busily working to create an exhibit in the museum to commemorate the influx of Hungarian refugees and their lives during and shortly after the Hungarian revolution in 1956. The exhibit is slated to open late fall of 2006, on the 50th anniversary of the 1956 events. With Dr. Eppel we talked about our personal experiences during our stay in Austria. I promised to him that I would send artifacts for use in the exhibition, which I did. This contact led to further correspondence between us.

Sunday, June 19<sup>th</sup>, we flew back to America. In one short week we revisited some of the utmost important places in my life's history. We met with extraordinary people with whom we forged new relationships.

In early July, after returning home from the Austrian trip, I wrote a letter to Mayor Josef Weinhandl:

*My extraordinary trip had come to its conclusion and I am back home again. Your leadership in organizing the daily activities of my visit to St. Anna made my trip very successful. During my very brief stay in St. Anna I was able to see that you govern your town with a wink of an eye, with a slight movement of the arms, with motion in body language just like the great conductors getting the 100-plus members of the philharmonics to play in harmony and create a memorable musical event.*

*Most every leader who commands great performances has an equally great and loving spouse for advice and support. You are blessed with a loving and caring wife.*

*My father was successful; he had my mother, a loving, caring and supporting wife. My sons reached and maintain top positions in their chosen fields. They have loving supporting wives.*

*I was successful in engineering. Anna was that kind of wife.*

*I am successful in my volunteer job in the clinic where Anna was treated. The doctors and the nurses treated her with love and with the utmost care. I am successful because I feel that the love of my departed wife is still surrounds me there.*

*During my stay in St. Anna, being in your company, any time a local citizen came over to discuss something with you, I felt the respect you received as a ray of light. I felt the edge of that beam brushed away just at my side.*

*With your help I was able to thank the local citizenry for their extraordinary generosity and humanity toward helping the Hungarian–Jewish Forced Laborers, including me, in the early part of the year 1945.*

*During the photo session in front of the WWII memorial, you and me, we shook hands without words. I looked in your eyes; you looked in my eyes. Silently I expressed my gratitude for your tremendous efforts to unearth NAZI atrocities and -- in contrast -- the good heroic deeds your people exhibited toward the oppressed Jews. Your eyes acknowledged my gratitude and pledged the continuation of the unearthing process to record the historical facts of your "Marktgemeinde" versus the NAZI madness. (Instead of handshake I would have hugged you, but I was afraid of creating embarrassment.)*

*Thanks for your gracious hospitality,*



7. Handshake with the Mayor

## **SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP**

After returning to Ventura from the trip to St. Anna am Aigen, I also wrote a letter to Elisabeth Weinhandl, the Mayor's wife. In part of the letter I wrote:

*When I was in St. Anna in last June you expressed – at the Fehring railroad station – that I made an impression on you. Told that it feels like Ron became your brother and it feels like I would be your grandfather. I am not immune of being impressed; I received an impression myself. With your guidance I was able to find a living person – Maria Lackner – who participated as an active member of an exclusive group, who saved Jewish lives, including my life. With you acting as my hostess, translator and tour guide you revealed that your generosity is matching with any member of that exclusive group. From the discussion of the very few people whom I met in a shortened week I spent in St. Anna, I found that the trait of generosity was passed on from mothers to children and you and your husband received a good dose of it. I feel that in you and in your husband, I gained new members to my extended family.*

Elisabeth Weinhandl and me, we are regularly exchanging correspondences. After the Austrian trip, when I got back to America, I went to see my first great granddaughter. Also participated in her naming ceremony. Elisabeth Weinhandl, through e-mail, asked how the naming ceremony was. In my answer, I told her that it lasted about 20 minutes. Paula, one of the new grandmothers, was tearing for 20 minutes and found a shoulder, her husband Ferenc's shoulder to cry on. For twenty minutes I was wiping my glasses because my Shoulder is not here anymore.

She writes about their lives in general. How the extremely hot weather is impeding the blueberry harvest. Lamenting whether the too much rain might damage the elderberry crops. Writes that she resumed singing in the choir after the previous soreness in her vocal cords were improved. She writes about the harvest of the elderberries and the presentation of the elderberry juices. She writes about their family lives and occasional illnesses, just like family members exchanging notes. We have discussed their weekend visit in a Hungarian town Pécs. And naturally, we had a lengthy email exchange prior their trip to Budapest with the highlight of the trip, seeing a performance of the Csárdásfürstin an operetta by Emery Kálmán. Anna's parents and grandparents were always humming the music from the Csárdásfürstin. Also, while visiting in Burgenland where they were enjoying an outdoor performance of Verdi's opera Nabucco. Ever since that occasion I am regularly playing on my harp a rendition of the Hebrew Slaves Chorus for the delight of the patients of the oncology clinic. I write about important events in my family, also about my volunteer work in the oncology clinic. I know the names of the members of her family. As a reciprocal, she knows my close family members by their names.

We have exchanged gifts since I came back from my trip to St. Anna. Also exchanging holiday greetings. She is still helping me collect missing information that I feel will enhance and make somewhat more complete this summary. I hope we will both cherish this newfound close friendship.

I wish to put this newfound closeness into a special kaleidoscope and contemplate the view. The grown-up male population of the villages was away from home, fighting Hitler's war. The food was scarce. And from the little they had, the women folks were the givers of the nourishments, which I received during the excursions I made after climbing over the fence of the camp. Those women, while they risked their own and their family's lives, treated me with nourishing food. Those women were the Weinhandl's generation grandmothers and great

aunts. Therefore, Elizabeth Weinhandl and the Mayor Josef Weinhandl are following old family traits. Let's view the relationship between Maria Lackner and me through the same kaleidoscope. Maria Lackner was only 25 years old girl. She treated me especially well, while putting herself and her entire household in danger. And ever since her good deeds she was yearning to meet at least one whom she helped. She carried her good deeds with a bad conscience that she did not give enough. I was one who received nourishing food from her. With my reappearance her two daughters, Mary and Căzilia were able to witness that their mother was shedding that burden off her shoulders. The Lackner's and I are also in close contact. This closeness was demonstrated in the previously detailed goodbye scenes at the Fehring station between Elizabeth Weinhandl and Ron and me, also at the Schăffmann's house between Căzilia and me.

## **SUMMARY**

I traveled to Sankt Anna am Aigen, foremost, to say THANK YOU for giving me lifesaving food, which helped to sustain my living until the liberation. Also, possibly to meet with people who were residents of the villages in 1945. And to revisit the places and sights where I was sleeping, working, begging for food. Accomplished all within five brief days.

For sixty years I was in the belief that the place where I got my daily ration of food and the room where I was sleeping was in the School Building. At the very moment of my arrival to the village of St. Anna I was questioning the validity of the notion that the School Building served as sleeping quarters for me. In two days, we found that the Lippe warehouse was our bed-and-breakfast place. The notion that I was housed in the School Building became a nagging question. Where did I have the idea that I was sleeping in the School Building?

While I was summarizing the Austrian trip of June 2005, Dr. Lappin, Mayor Weinhandl, Mrs. Weinhandl, Mr. Schober and I kept the e-mail correspondence alive. Over the times, I kept writing in our correspondence, seemingly unrelated episodes of my slave labor experience. Those episodes seemed unrelated, because, sixty years later, I couldn't place them in the proper prospective. In May of 2006, almost a year after the trip, Dr. Lappin, while reading one of my e-mails, spotted a key element, which enabled her to put a new idea on the table. Archival data proved her correct. Placing the puzzle pieces in the proper order the scenario sounds as follows:

As slave laborers, we were working in the bombed-out oil refinery of Szőny, Hungary. The time was Christmas day of 1944. Regular workers from local villages were off, they celebrated the holiday. But holiday or not, the German army wanted the oil. The refinery was idle while the crude oil was still arriving through the pipelines. The pipelines were tapped with spigots and the crude oil were loaded into 55-gallon steel drums. This job was given to us, a contingency of Jewish forced laborers. We had to fill the drums and rolled them up onto the German trucks. Dirty, slippery and hazardous job, as such stayed in my memory. Two or three days later we had to evacuate the camp. We received a new contingency of guards. They were brutal MP's, specifically trained for the job. Death-march toward west.

We followed the direction from Szőny, Komárom, Győr and Sopron. And from Sopron to Austria. Marching daytime corralled in nighttime. Whoever needed to step out from the marching column, for whatever reason, was shot on the spot. While marching toward, near Sopron, we were ordered to stop on the roadside before reaching the city. We were ordered to empty all our pockets and our backpacks on to our blankets. They confiscated practically all our personal belongings. To demonstrate their aim that they will take all our belongings,

they randomly selected two of our comrades and shot them by a firing squad, before our eyes. This charade was on the pretense that they attempted to hide something in their pockets. This charade was just for warning. They confiscated almost everything, except the clothing on our back, not even a spare to change. We were allowed to keep the blanket. Also, we were allowed to keep our identification papers in our pockets, the empty backpack with our mess kit and canteen, toothbrush and my Gillette safety razor for shaving. We had to shave daily, but water to wash up was denied. From there on we traveled lightly. I remember that toward the end of that journey, we were shoveling snow in downtown Sopron. The last Hungarian stop was the Steiner Brick Factory, in Sopron at Aranyhegy Street 1.

It seems that the Brick Factory served as a way station, as a concentration camp. When we arrived, there were already several hundred Jews in the camp. If my memory serves me right, I saw Jewish women also. There were daily selections to form slave labor companies and ship them out. When we arrived, we were just mixed in with the other inmates. If I remember correctly, that was the time when Gyuri and I were separated from the other comrades whom we befriended earlier, in Szőny. We slept one or maybe two nights in the brick factory and we were selected with a new group to be sent to another camp.

While researching the location of the brick factory, I found that Hungarian Jewish Slave Laborers were buried in mass graves in the Steiner Brick Factory proper. Also, I found that the Steiner Family lived in central Sopron and not in the impressive house in the factory grounds.

The railroad tracks for the Győr-Sopron-Ebenfurt line are on the other side of the road, some distance away from the road.

This Brick Factory is one of the key puzzle pieces, which Dr. Lappin pulled from the archives. In the last sixty years, the brick factory was constantly lurking in my memory, but I couldn't place it in the proper perspective. The connecting links were missing.

From the Brick Factory we were transported – by foot – to another way station camp (already in Austria proper) for delousing and processing for further shipment. This march was the shortest daily march since we left Szőny. We accomplished that march in about four to six hours.

For the delousing process – I believe – we were in a fairly large estate winery. The building was surrounded with ample number of trees in a well-kept area. Inside in a large hall there were wooden tubs, built like the vessels were used in the wineries to crush grapes and to keep the just pressed grape juice prior transferring to wooden barrels for fermentation. The size of the tub: about 4 or 5 meters in diameter and the side would be just about less than 1 meter high. I estimate that each tub's capacity was well over 1,000 liters. All our body hair was shaved, and then we had to take a short bath in batches, using the same water. About 15 of us were in a tub at one time. Soap was provided. Our personal belongings were treated in steam ovens.

From that winery, we moved to St. Anna. We might have traveled by railroad, in boxcars, from a nearby railroad station to near St. Anna, probably to Fehring station. I also have a rail travel in my memory, which I couldn't place. We weren't too many people, may be 150–160 of us; we were not squeezed in the boxcars like sardines. We had room and the doors were not locked shut.

We arrived at St. Anna on foot – by the middle of the afternoon – and escorted to our sleeping quarters at the Lippe warehouse. We settled in. I looked around and besides my friend Gyuri, I saw new faces, none of the old comrades were present. The new comrades were mostly young men, similar to my age. We were all Hungarian–Jewish Forced Laborers. We all spoke Hungarian. I didn't know that in St. Anna there were already two other groups of Hungarian Jews housed in two separate locations, although geographically in very close

vicinity. They arrived much earlier to St. Anna. The first group was housed in the School Building. The second group was settled into the Kino. The third group, us, ended up in the Lippe warehouse.

The next morning, we were escorted to the work site and groups of ten were formed to work together. My group of ten was constant through out of the next two months and Gyuri was a member of the group. We worked together. We spoke Hungarian among ourselves. We trusted each other in our work. We worked together harmoniously, if one can use the word "harmoniously". In our conversation the school building as "our housing" was mentioned numerous time daily. I did not know that eight persons from the ten lived in a separate building than Gyuri and me. I assumed that we all lived at the same place but in separate rooms and that way we met only at the work site. The name of the School Building entered in my memory from the work site conversations.

Another aspect came up in those e-mail exchanges:

Before shipping us to St. Anna, in late January or early February of 1945, we went through a delousing process in the winery. How come that in just six short weeks, me and other comrades from the Lippe warehouse group, were infected by fleck typhus? From where did we get the lice and the illness? Dr. Lappin collected survivor's testimonies. And from those testimonies it is known that some of the inmates were already recuperating from fleck typhus when they were evacuated from the Kino building in late March 1945. The first group was housed in the School Building, the second group slept in the Kino and the third group, us, we lived in the Lippe warehouse. Minimal hygiene was denied from all of the three groups. They were there much longer already. They were infested with lice and infected with fleck typhus. Since our daily liquid intake was only about 1 liter, we were severely dehydrated and with a weakened immune system. We were commingling and working together. Thus, spread the lice and the disease between us. That way I was able to catch the fleck typhus in a very short time.

During my visit in October 2010, I found out that another small group of about 60 Jewish Forced Laborers were combined with my group to work on the same Panzergraben. We were billeted in St. Anna and they were housed in the School Building in the nearby village known then as Sinnersdorf (today: Kramarovci). My group of 10 laborers consisted of 8 from the Sinnersdorf School, plus Gyuri and me. We talked daily about the school building where "we" lived and that's how I picked up that I was in the school building. We comingled, put our overcoats in one pile during working hours and I believe that was the way to be infested with lice and infected with fleck typhus. An assessment by historians indicates the fleck typhus infection was prevalent at the Sinnersdorf group.

Later in 2010, I found information about a former Jewish Slave Laborer, Charles Dévay. His age: 1 year older than me. He lives in Toronto, Ontario. He's very hard of hearing and also has dementia. By this time, he had no recollection of where he was when he was in the forced labor camp. But previous testimony put him with the Sinnersdorf/Kramarovci group. He had fleck typhus at the same time as me. He was in the infirmary barrack at the same time as me. The Russians also liberated him and most likely he was one of the survivors of my little group who walked away from the "Hölle" on April 5, 1945. And this dovetails with the fact that I had fleck typhus at the same time.

Accompanied by Ron, we traveled to Sankt Anna am Aigen, and said THANK YOU for giving me lifesaving food, which helped to sustain my living until the liberation. We learned more details of the fate of the Hungarian Jewish Forced Laborers, – including myself – in Sankt Anna am Aigen of 1944-45 years. We found the place where I was billeted in my St. Anna stay from February – March of 1945. We found the place where the infirmary barracks – locally known as Granite Barracks – was standing in early April of 1945, where I was taken to wait for the death to come. We brought home a piece of brick as a souvenir from the Granite



Barrack. We met with the lady – Mrs. Maria Lackner – who gave me lifesaving food while being a fearless young woman participating in bucking the Nazi system and helping Jews. We met with Maria Lackner with a photographer present, who in a great photograph captured a wonderful, tearful, unimaginable historical moment in Maria Lackner's and in my life. We met people whose generosity is just as great as their mother and grandmother's generosity was. We experienced elations, which one can experience only once in a lifetime. We wrote and rewrote a small part of history. We accomplished a lot.

On 18 July 2005, shortly, after arriving home from the trip to Austria, I submitted a petition with supporting material, to Yad Vashem, testifying the heroic, lifesaving good deeds of Mrs. Maria Lackner. On 17 March 2007, Yad Vashem sent a letter of recognition to Maria Lackner. In that letter Yad Vashem expresses thanks and appreciation to Maria Lackner for her humane act, which helped the victims to survive during the Holocaust. Her humanitarian deed at a time of great sufferings of the Jewish people will remain enshrined in Yad Vashem's records so that it will inspire future generations.

## **GYURI**

Gyuri and I were in the same age group. I was born in May; he was born in June of the same year. We both lived in Rákospalota. We were childhood friends and joined the Hungarian Army labor battalion the same time in the same center in May 1944. We were together; we helped each other until the evacuation order came on/or about March 27, 1945.

Since I had become ill with fleck typhus and hardly able to walk, Gyuri escorted me to the infirmary barrack in the Hölle and said GOOD-BYE. He thought that he would never see me again. He was evacuated, and in a forcible death march, taken to Mauthausen concentration camp. He was liberated in Mauthausen and returned to Rákospalota. His mother and his sister Klára also survived the Auschwitz concentration camp. In 1949 Gyuri, his mother and by that time married sister and his brother-in-law immigrated to Israel.

Later, in 1965, Gyuri immigrated to America and settled in California. After we, my family, arrived in America in 1956, we settled on the east coast, in Brooklyn, NY.

Gyuri regularly, once a year, visited his mother and his sister in Israel. Every time Gyuri traveled to visit mom and sis he took a stopover in New York and visited my family and me. Gyuri passed away in 1980.

## **LIBERATION**

During the first two weeks in April of 2007, Elisabeth, Josef and Stefanie Weinhandl were my guests in Ventura. Within a short time, span of two weeks we realized that we had an exceptionally good time together. Mainly because over the shorter than two years' time – via correspondence – we developed a relationship with mutual respect and love. And now if you look back and observe the “Handshake with the Mayor” picture again, you can see already the beginning of a friendship; it was written on our faces. Next day, after the Handshake with the Mayor, at the Fehring station Elisabeth Weinhandl, in her farewell to Ron and me said that she feels like Ron had become her brother and I am like a grandfather to

her. I guess, because she experienced her part of my mental exhilaration during those five short days we spent in St. Anna. And the relationship between the Weinhandls' and I started budding.

But let's go back in time a bit with an abbreviated version of my arrival to Budapest in April 1945, from the original description in "We Couldn't Cry".

Right after my arrival in Budapest I went to Rákospalota. I headed home; to the home I left to answer the call-up order. I went to the place where my parents, my sister and I were living before and that we called our h-o-m-e. But I found strange people living there. I went into a next-door neighbor's – the Sas family – apartment to inquire about the situation. The Sas family greeted me with open arms. They fed me, prepared a bath for me in a bowl shape large washbasin. I unceremoniously undressed and stepped into the bath. Mrs. Sas washed me off like a midwife bathing a newborn. While I was bathed the clothing, I wore at arrival and all other flammable belongings I brought with me were burned. After the bath, Mrs. Sas showed me a wicker-basket with some clothing. I realized that the clothing was mine. I recognized that my mother had folded those items. I recognized her specific way of folding the clean laundry. Then came a brief explanation. They told me as much as they knew about what happened with my family.

Thus, I started my liberated life.

Viktor E. Frankl was writing from a psychiatrist's view about his experiences in the concentration camps. He advocates that every liberated inmate after the liberation should go through a psychological liberation also. The aide of his writing and my own experiences enables me to express my thoughts in the following:

I wrote in the "We Couldn't Cry", as well as in this work, that on every single day of our 57 years together, Anna and I discussed some aspect of our lives during the holocaust, our losses, and our experiences in the camps. We got married about one year after the liberation from the camps. Two years after Anna died, I traveled to revisit St. Anna where my camp was located in early 1945. That puts my revisit about 60 years after liberation.

For sixty years I lived a liberated free life without being completely liberated. The Red Army liberated me physically. The Red Army cut the chain of the shackles the Nazis forged on my legs. But I dragged the loose chains around with me for 60 years.

During my revisit to St Anna, Mayor Josef Weinhandl showed me where the campus was located, which served as my place of housing. He took me to the site where I was forced to dig trenches. He also took me to the spot where the infirmary barracks were, where I faced the German machine gun, where I spent the last 7 or 8 days before the liberation. The Mayor's wife, Elisabeth Weinhandl facilitated the reunification with Maria Lackner who gave me life sustaining, nourishing food in 1945.

With those actions, sixty years after the physical liberation, the Weinhandl's handed me a psychological liberation. With their loving kindness, Elisabeth and Josef Weinhandl cut off the chains and trimmed the anklet of the shackles to be much lighter. Since coming home from St. Anna, that loving-kindness has further blossomed into a loving close friendship.

In "We Couldn't Cry" Anna reminiscing about her liberation and wrote the following:

*Now comes the question: I am here, but did I really survive? Bodily, I'm here, but my mind is always wandering back to those horrible experiences. Those experiences are forever within me. On every passing day those memories are coming back. Haunting.*

The arrival day to St. Anna on Sunday June 12, I had doubts. Are we in the right village? Are we in the right country? Are we in the right universe? Or this is just a nightmare? Or may be a diabolical trick? Or it's just a mirage? The Weinhandl's erased those doubts. They took me to the physical locations where I experienced the nightmarish existence in 1945.

Clutching Maria Lackner's hand was real. Her tears washed away her own doubts and like dew, moistened the oasis where I received my psychological liberation.

While observing the photograph depicting Maria Lackner's tears on her cheek, I wrote a poem to express my thoughts with words. Elisabeth Weinhandl started to translate it to German. Via e-mail we have sent the poem back and forth numerous times until the present format took shape. We created the poem. In the process I changed English words to better suit the German expressions and she created new German expressions to better suit the English text. Thus, the creation of SIXTY-YEARS LATER became a cooperative product of two persons. Thank you, Elisabeth! I know that these acknowledgements usually are the subjects of Forewords, but this is not a usual story.

Viktor Frankl's words imply that one should seek professional help for psychological liberation. My help came from lay people whom had nothing to do with professional psychology. The Weinhandl's are unique, loving, caring people from the right part of the world. Anna was also surrounded with loving people and still she questioned her own physical and/or the lack of her psychological liberation. I didn't phrase my question in such form I had just lived my life with raising the questions silently. The Weinhandl's were born and raised in the specific location where I was subjected to inhuman treatment as a slave laborer, in St. Anna/Aigen. Where the Nazis set up killing-grounds to slaughter Hungarian Jewish Forced Laborers. Where their grandparents risked their own and their family's life while bucking the Nazi trend and helped and saved Jews. And they live now in a tranquil place where they set out to shine some light on the dark pages of the Nazi history and the Nazi atrocities' effect on humanity. With those attributes they are uniquely set to file away the anklet of the shackles the Nazis forged on my legs. With loving-kindness they keep filing day after day and I feel the shackles lighter day-by-day Anna wore her tattooed number from Auschwitz to the grave. I am destined to continue to wear – by now – a much lighter “anklet.” Thus, living a freer life, which enables me to “construct” an imaginary memorial monument to Anna. In part of the construction of that monument I am making music with my harp. In part of that music I'm frequently playing a melody, which recalls an event, a picture often discussed between Anna and me. A picture depicting my mother serving a Sabbath midday meal to her husband and her two children while enjoying that melody playing on the radio in late January of 1944. The music was Antonin Dvorak's Symphony No. 9 “From the New World” and the melody is the Legend from the Largo movement. And that music is a shining jewel, a very integral part of the monument for the memory of Anna. For the year 2007, I received the prestigious “Volunteer of the Year” award from the Ventura County Medical Resource Foundation. The people who nominated me for the award – I'm almost sure – based their nomination on observing the construction in progress and visualized the “imaginary” memorial monument.

## **PARALLEL**

In 1944-45 Maria Lackner with other local villagers was ordered to provide physical labor to the Nazi war effort. She was digging trenches sometimes. Other times she had various work assignments. All work with no compensation. One day while working, she noticed that allocated food was commanded to be thrown to the trash heap rather than have the Jews eat it or provided to the villagers who themselves were having food shortages. Those acts had a dehumanizing effect on the local citizenry, including Maria Lackner.

For fifty-seven years every single day, Anna and I discussed the horrors and personal experiences of the holocaust. About the same time Maria and Josef Lackner had daily discussions of Josef Lackner's endurances of the thirty-nine months he spent in Russian Prisoner of War camps. All three of us were freed, liberated from our respective camps. Anna and me, like Phoenix rose from the ashes, combined our lives as married couple and started to rebuild our life by building our own new family. Maria and Josef married and built their own family.

From the "script" I was frequently reciting that a young woman gave me life sustaining, nutritious food. From the same "script" Maria Lackner recited frequently that she gave food for the Jews, but she didn't give enough. She carried that thought as a heavy burden on her shoulders. I was one of the recipients of her food. For her I was one whom she perceived to have given less than adequate amount of food. Sixty-years later, another player appeared on the stage, - the stage of life – her name is Elisabeth Weinhandl. Elisabeth facilitated the reunion between Maria Lackner and me. With that act Elisabeth helped to lift the burden from Maria's shoulders. Also, with that act, Elisabeth handed me personal psychological liberation, helped me in my effort to achieve total "rehumanization". Elisabeth's act on the stage helped Maria to fully regain her "rehumanization" and enable her to live a happier life. Elisabeth's act on the stage helped me to define another reason to continue my life.

## **NEUHAUS AM KLAUSENBACH**

Mr. Franz Josef Schober published a summation of his research work in the Signal edition, winter 2006/07, under the title "Eine Begegnung." The focus of the investigation is centered in a village named Neuhaus am Klausenbach. The village is about six kilometers north of Sankt Anna am Aigen. In the article he is detailing the work in 1944-45 of the local priest Father Stephan Berger who allowed the parsonage to be used as an infirmary to treat sick Jews with fleck typhus. Furthermore, he entrusted his own sister, Theresia Berger to care for the sick Jews. And while she cared for the sick, she herself caught the disease, which claimed her young life at age 45.

On the same page the Signal he is writing about Rosa Freißmuth, who in her General store, in Neuhaus am Klausenbach, right under the nose of an SS man who also happened to be in the store, helped a young Jewish laborer whose father was stricken by the illness and was running a high fever. She gave the boy bread and medication. Mr. Schober also writes that Rosa Freißmuth repeatedly helped Jewish Forced Laborers with food and medications. Furthermore, she hid Jews near her store, behind snow covers and saved their lives. For her bravery, Rosa Freißmuth – posthumously – was honored by Yad Vashem, which declared her a Righteous Among Nations. Her name will be forever inscribed in the Wall of Honor.

While the catholic priest Stephan Berger, his sister Theresia Berger, General store owner Rosa Freißmuth and numerous other local citizens laboriously helped and saved lives of Hungarian Jewish Forced Laborers in Neuhaus. At the same time, lesser-documented but just as brave citizens of St. Anna and vicinity were helping to save Jewish lives, including my life. Maria Lackner gave life-saving food to my comrade, friend, others and me.

In the chapter THE FORMAL MEETING Ron reports "*...in discussions with a historian, Dr. Eleonore Lappin, we would theorize that the local priest might have played a role in the conspiracy, perhaps by organizing the people.*" Now the hard question: Was there any cooperation between Father Stephan Berger and the Priest in St Anna, Josef Nöhrer? Did

they coordinate their lifesaving efforts? Were they cut from the same fabric or did a superior direct them? Could it be possible that Father Berger had influence over the flock in St Anna? Did the parishioners interact between the Neuhaus parish and the one in St Anna? The answer is: we do not know. During various discussions we learned the following from Căzilia Kikelj: The inhabitants in the area of St. Anna are highly devout Catholics, steeped in the tradition of charitable giving – helping other people (in Judaism we call that *tzedaka*). Mary Gruber remarked that her father, Josef Lackner, while he was in a Russian prisoner of war camp, received food supplement from a Russian woman whose son was in a German camp for prisoners of war. And she was helping Josef Lackner in the hope that a German mother will help her son endure his predicament. Other mothers in St. Anna entertained similar thoughts. Maria Haarer states that the area is a border region where strangers in need frequently show up and generations grown up with the giving, helping tradition. All-and-all we can safely deduce that the citizens in that corner of Austria, overwhelmingly bucked the Nazi trend to eradicate Jews from the word, to kill them all. Those brave people acted in concert to save Jews. They provided them with food and other help, as much as they were able to do. With those acts they proved that the Austrian people, despite being under Nazi rule – by that time – over six years, were able to reach much higher moral values while risking their own lives, saving Jews as best as they could. Their humanitarian role should be acknowledged.

## **ACTION 2**

In April of 2008, I returned for another visit to St. Anna/Aigen. I was greeted, awakened by newer memories. While we were digging the trenches in 1945, during hard work, there was no time for socializing talk. But I was told by comrades to watch out not to get into trouble and to not commit any infraction. They warned me that the punishment for any minor infraction would be very severe. And it was described: I would be punished, let's say, by receiving 20 lashes. I would be tied to a tree and a volunteer from the Ukrainian group would mete out the 20 lashes. Another Ukrainian would do the counting. At the eighteenth or nineteenth lash there would be a very vocal disagreement about the actual count. One would say that it was only sixteen; another would say it was only seventeen lashes. Eventually a settlement would be reached by starting from zero and promising to count better the second time around! Imagine a punishment of 50 or 60 or even more lashes. The practice was to have the punishment meted out in public. It added more drama to the spectacle. The victim was tied to a linden-tree at the Church Plaza, opposite to the War Memorial Monument. Tied to the tree without any cushioning cloth, bare or barely wearing anything. The lashes had to be applied to the skin. In 1944-45 the linden tree was about 40 years old with ample girth. That created even more suffering for the victim. Isaac Newton's Third Law of physics says: Any force exerted to a non-moving body, will have a reaction force in equal value but in opposite direction. It means that a blow of force on the victim's backside immediately created an opposite force on the victim's front side. Since the victim's body was propelled forward, his body received the opposite blow from the linden tree. And the not so smooth tree barks were instrumental to enhance the pain. Also, any involuntary jerking motion of the body inflicted more and more pain. The crying out and the grimaces on the face of the victim added to the circus-like atmosphere for some of the spectators.

Let's step back for a minute. A victim tied to the linden-tree to be punished. Imagine the terror in the victim's mind. Bare or barely wearing anything before public eyes is terrifying enough – If you go to a doctor's office you are intimidated just from the thought of getting

undressed. Here, the victim's clothing is stripped off leaving him standing there without any protection around the body while hugging the tree. There is no way to move away from the oncoming danger, nowhere to hide for protection. The terror sinks in: what blows will my body have to endure and how would it endure? Only the blow of the lash will be strong enough to break that terror. No matter how strong the blow of the lash will be, only that blow will break the terror in the victim's mind by registering a momentary survival. And the cycle will start immediately.

About sixty-years later, lightning struck that very same linden tree and the tree was dying. There was nothing left but to cut down the tree. An artist, a sculptress, Roswitha Dautermann created a beautiful statue out of the tree. A singular Christ-like figure, 6 meters tall and with arms stretched to 4 meters wide. From waist down the statue represents a traditional rendering of the Crucifix. The feet of Jesus are nailed to the upright member of the cross. From the waist up, the figure represents the body of Christ and the cross as in one piece, as if the cross is melted into the upper body of Christ. In my interpretation, Ms. Dautermann is conveying that Jesus – a Jew – was suffering while crucified to the cross. In 1944-45 the linden tree bore many bound, suffering Jews. The tree felt the blows that those tortured Jews received. The linden tree soaked up their spilled blood. The tree did not want to be a cross again and the tree melted into Jesus' body. With the outstretched arms and the almost defiant face, the tree is declaring I've had enough suffering, let be peace and contentment.

The unveiling ceremony for Ms. Dautermann's sculpture was held right after the conclusion of the Sunday service in the Church where the topic of the sermon delivered by Father Mario Debski was Maria Lackner's role in my survival.

I was present at the unveiling ceremony.

After the unveiling of the Christ statue, the following Friday afternoon, a musical combo entertained the residents of the local nursing home. The members of the combo were three leading ladies from the community and me:

- Elisabeth Weinhandl, the wife of the mayor, voice and guitar.
- Gabi Wahlhütter, retired teacher, wife of a previous school principal, voice.
- Maria Trippl, teacher, the wife of the school principal, voice and guitar.
- Sandor Vandor, voice.

We were singing popular German songs.

I was singing a song of another Linden Tree, the song titled "Der Linden Baum", which is tied to the fame of the Austrian composer Franz Schubert. Elisabeth Weinhandl accompanied me on her guitar. For me this became another venue to say THANK YOU for the elderly, by singing a warm melody.

In November of 2007, a group of 14 Catholic Bishops from Austria were visiting Israel as guests of the Israeli Government. The Bishop, Dr. Franz Lackner, was one of them. The feeling of the awe in visiting Yad Vashem planted a seed in Bishop Lackner's mind. The bishop's portfolio contains Catholic Youth Development. He was already thinking of a theme for the "72 Hour" project (72 Stunden ohne Kompromiss) that his youths from the Graz-Seckau region would participate in the fall of 2008. From Jerusalem, he phoned Cousin Mary, Maria Lackner's daughter to invite me to participate in his project. I signed on immediately without knowing much about the upcoming project. Later, we discussed the project in person. That personal meeting took place within a Sunday family lunch. Shortly after the unveiling ceremony of the new St. Anna Christ Statue, members of the Lackner family, Mayor Weinhandl's family and I were present at the family lunch. The project was revealed: build a memorial monument for the slain Hungarian Jewish forced laborers, in the killing ground, in the Hölle, within the context of the 72hour project and with youth participation. After discussing the project, I confirmed my participation.

The artist, sculptress, Roswitha Dautermann joined our discussion for creating the Memorial Monument.

In the afternoon we all went to see the site. We visited the Höllgraben and the Schuffergraben. At the Schuffergraben, Maria Lackner, with a youngish brisk walk and exhibiting familiarity with the area, pointed to the exact location where the wooden barracks that was my home for a few days once stood. And that confirmed that my memory was correct.

The next two paragraphs inserted about the Wurzinger family were written by Elisabeth Weinhandl.

However, we still had to find a suitable spot for the Monument. After exploring the vicinity for a while, a majestic oak tree attracted our attention. That tree was old enough to be a witness to the inhumanity of the cruelties that had happened in that area, just three months before liberation. And it was standing at the roadside, where many cars were passing by on their way to cross the nearby border to Slovenia. So, there it was, the most appropriate place for the Monument for Peace.

As the mayor knew the owners of that piece of land, he approached the Wurzinger family with his intention. They liked the idea of raising a monument on their property right away, because it was very important to them that those atrocities should not sink into oblivion. In addition, the Wurzinger family wanted to support the group of young people who volunteered to build the Monument for Peace within the 72 Hours Project.

Roswitha Dautermann, the Austrian artist and sculptress who created the St. Anna Christ Statue, came up with the ingenious design for the Memorial Monument. Twenty-two young people (ages 15 to 20) participating in the 72 Hour Project of 2008 built the Memorial Monument. I put the corner brick in place.

Let me describe the Monument:

The freestanding four brick columns are suggesting the four corners of a majestic building in ruin. Once upon a time a building was the depository of The Bill of Rights. The Nazis discarded the Bill of Rights and they left the building in ruin. The depository was rebuilt, and in the construction, brand new bricks were used. But randomly interspersed among the new bricks one can observe odd, old, used bricks. You can easily recall that in the Schuffergraben the wooden barracks, where I was staying in the last 8 or 9 days before liberation was burned down and the brick building was blasted away in the afternoon of April 5<sup>th</sup>. Ever since, bricks from that building are still on the field. Mayor Josef Weinhandl single handedly collected bricks and brick pieces from the field and those were built in, randomly dispersed into the four towers. A new, reborn Bill of Rights, in four tablets, each in a different language – German, English, Hebrew and Hungarian – was placed in the ruins of the “old housing.” And each tablet concludes the declaration of the Bill of Rights with the Hebrew word **שָׁלוֹם** – meaning - PEACE.

As a visitor enters from north to south into the inner space of the Monument, the visitor's eyes are drawn to two tablets, prominently placed along the south inner wall. One of the tablets, entitled “Sandor Vador,” contains a brief testimony about my life in 1944-45 and the extraordinary heroic efforts exhibited by the inhabitants of Sankt Anna am Aigen in helping the Jewish Forced Laborers. And that tablet commemorates the community of Sankt Anna

am Aigen with all the righteous inhabitants (see photograph below). The other tablet has the title of **Mahnmal für den Frieden** (see photograph and text description below).

The setting has a large tree with a big enough canopy to protect the new Bill of Rights. The big canopy resembles the canopy of trees protecting “A Blade of Grass.”

The young people erecting the monument were fulfilling the artist’s vision to build the monument with new bricks to show that the new generations are upholding the principals of the new Bill of Rights. By randomly putting old bricks, from a dynamited barracks within the structure, the artist is saying that members of the older generations, who were living in a misguided society, are also welcomed members of this new society because they are also upholding the new Bill of Rights.

Roswitha Dautermann, the artist, created the symbolic space for the depository of the new bill of rights. She created a room, a space that has symbolic volume. The height of the walls is about the same as the height of the chain-link fence, which surrounded the campus of our barracks at the Lippe warehouse. The length, width and height of the inner space defined by the 4 corners are two and a half cubic meters. If you recall the sketch in the MIDDLE SCHOOL chapter, the area of the cross section of the trench, the Panzergraben, multiplied by the length of one meter is about 25 cubic meters. That equals the volume of space, which had to be created by excavating and moving earth by ten forced laborers daily. The daily quota for one slave laborer was two and a half cubic meters.

A mature oak tree and a newly created lamppost define the axis of the monument. An east – west road cuts through the north – south axis of the monument. The lamppost is placed just north of the road. Toward the top of the lamppost an inner space is created to house a solar powered lamp inside, glowing with flaming red, like an eternal light. All four sides of the lamp space are covered with etched panes of glass, glowing in flame red. In the darkness of the night, it seems like the glowing eternal light is suspended in the air. Glowing, but not disturbing the serene countryside. The traveler’s headlamps will make the monument visible during the night. Etched with the word peace in four languages, German, English, Hebrew, Slovenian, FRIEDE, PEACE, SHALOM, MIR. Sending the message of peace to the four corners of the world. And the name of the monument became “Mahnmal für den Frieden” -- Memorial for Peace.

The southern side of the lamppost looks over a narrow pathway designed for a single person to walk, in a place where a single person was compelled to walk the end of the road, the “final Journey”, the “letzten Weg”, before the grave. The pathway is paved with rough-hewn volcanic rocks because that road was not “smoothly” paved. It is a pathway designed for a single person to walk and contemplate the horrors of the past.

In the front of the oak tree a burned and glazed ceramic cube is placed, suitable to sit on. A narrow pathway for a single person to walk through the brick columns to reach the glazed ceramic cube, where one can sit and review the monument and contemplate. The ceramic cube formed and burned similarly like a single piece of brick, a unit for a larger structure, perhaps much like a human being is part of a larger structure, the society. The ceramic cube, viewed within the entire structure of the monument, is relatively small in size, but represents a huge, significant symbol: local people whose actions demonstrated humanity amidst the barbarism. A sizable portion of the population of St. Anna and vicinity risked their own and their family’s lives, bravely, heroically bucking the Nazi trend and helping the Jews.

Two wooden benches, one on the east and one on the west side of the oak tree, are provided for the visitors’ comfort.

I sat on one bench and contemplated:  
People erect Memorial Monuments – as the name “Memorial” implies – to keep the memory of victim’s past for future generations. This Memorial for Peace Monument was erected to



memorialize the slain Hungarian Jewish Forced Laborers killed by the Nazis. This very impressive Monument eloquently expresses that thought. Every detail symbolically provides the deepest thought about the horrors those people were subjected to and the many who were brutally killed. Those people were my comrades. I survived! The local citizens helped people like me to survive. Maria Lackner was active in my survival. The ceramic cube is to commemorate the bravery of the local citizens for future generations. As a living survivor, I was able to testify that during the reign of the darkest horror of recent history, here in St Anna and vicinity, there were still good people helping the downtrodden. My THANK YOU note put light on the noble mission of the local citizenry. My quest to loosen the chain and lighten the anklet the Nazis forged on my legs helped me shine the light on the heroic brave acts of the locals in 1944 – 45.

Then I contemplated a bit more:

Would the single person's pathway, paved with roughhewn volcanic rocks, be *the road to the abyss in the dark* and could the ceramic cube mark the spot where *Maria appeared as a Princess of light with Martha as Maiden at her right*? The local citizens helped not only me but also many others to survive. The ceramic cube represents the numerous, nameless, brave souls who helped Jews to survive.

The Peace Memorial sits on an agricultural land. Surrounded by budding plant life and growths. You sit on the commemorative stone, next to the matured oak tree, deep under the canopy of the tree. And contemplate about the genocidal killings and a Peace Memorial. And ponder about rampant destructions versus budding lives. You keep looking and your eyes wander and eventually will draw to the word **friede (peace)** a beacon emanating from the light post. *"With its light, it should bear in remembrance of the dead, but with the word "Peace" on the glass it should also be a "Light of Aspiration" on the way into the future."* (Quotation from the "Mahnmal für den Frieden" glass tablet.)



8a. Memorial for Peace, view from the Commemorative Stone.  
The camera is looking due north.



8b. **friede** – Peace

The Austrian people are speaking out. They are dealing with their history. The religious leaders like Bishop Dr. Franz Lackner and Father Mario Debski, are preaching the right moral values. The municipal leaders, like Mayor Josef Weinhandl, are leading in the right direction. The artists, Christian Gmeiner and Roswitha Dautermann are communicating the right messages. Historians, Dr. Eleonore Lappin and Franz Josef Schober collected and published facts. Elisabeth Weinhandl interviewed eyewitnesses, searched the archives and wrote the German version of the epilogue to this story, (While my grandson, Jacob Vandor, son of Ron Vandor, wrote the English version of the epilogue). Citizens of Sankt Anna am Aigen: Alois Ulrich former mayor of St. Anna, Frieda Neubauer, Maria Baumgartner, Johann Weidinger were eyewitness speakers at a remembrance service. The students and their teachers in the Josef Krainer Grenzlandschule spoke out with their exhibited easels. Young people who volunteered to work on the Memorial for Peace in the Hölle were speaking out loud and clear with their actions. And the world is listening.

### **MARIA LACKNER**

My grandson Jacob – Ron's son – accompanied me on my trip to St. Anna in the spring of 2009 for the dedication ceremony for the Memorial for Peace monument (the "Mahnmal für den Frieden"). While in St. Anna, he visited Maria Lackner and he experienced awe. He

contributed this chapter. We also visited and talked to eyewitnesses, which inspired him to write the EPILOGUE for the English version. Let me introduce another font style representing Jacob' voice.

**Maria Lackner** is a saint and is also personally responsible for me being alive today, perhaps even more so than my father and mother. She was the righteous one who saved my Grandfather's life by giving him food when he needed it most.

Maria Lackner's mother as well as her mother-in-law, Zázilia Lackner were members of the Third Order (Ordo Franciscanus Saecularis, in the USA; Secular Franciscan Order). They were helping the Jewish Forced Laborers by providing them with food, whenever they could. For them helping the needy and praying a lot every day was part of the RULES. It was part of their lives. Maria Lackner was raised in that way in her childhood. The good deeds of Maria Lackner went on day after day, it's amazing!

The Jewish prisoners worked in an area of St. Anna known, even to this day, as the Hölle or hell. It is a hot and forbidding place; no one would want to go there. Maria Lackner was also digging trenches, not tank-trenches, but running-trenches for about 15 weeks! She made other regular visits to the Hölle for picking up food supplements. She saw what the Nazis were doing to the Jews and knew it to be wrong.

There was a kitchen in the Hölle to feed the Nazi soldiers in charge of the Jewish prisoners who slaved there. The food was better with more substance, with occasional meat there as opposed to the other kitchens feeding the slave laborers. The German soldiers lived in what was known as the Granite Barracks. Later, the Jews were housed there, and at the end of the war, the barracks were dynamited and burned down. Local farmers still dig up old bricks from these barracks when the plow their fields.

Since 2005 when my grandfather revisited St. Anna, he reunited with Mrs. Lackner and has since become great friends and visited with her on numerous occasions to reminisce on their rare experiences in 1945.

During the dedication for the MEMORIAL FOR PEACE Mrs. Lackner was sadly hospitalized and unable to attend. Her presence was greatly missed. My grandfather and I visited her in the hospital at Feldbach. She sat in the hospital bed, with her frail body propped up in a seating position. I saw her as a very pleasant lady, almost saintly looking. Her smiling face and kind words left an indelible mark on me.

In that hospital room I felt that she saw me as one of her own grandchildren. During the dedication ceremony, when my grandfather recited his poem SIXTY-YEARS LATER, we hoped that Mrs. Maria Lackner, 25 km away in Feldbach, "would hear" his recital.

Sometime after her hospitalization, Sonja acquired Mrs. Lackner's goats. My grandfather visited St. Anna am Aigen again. During his stay in St. Anna, he met with Sonja and she gave fresh excellent goat cheese to my grandfather. It was made from the milk of Maria Lackner's goats; my grandfather enjoyed it very much. Once again Maria Lackner was feeding my grandfather.

The last time my grandfather saw Maria Lackner it was early in the evening on Saturday October 23, 2010, in an intimate family setting at the Lackner house. My grandfather played harp music for Maria Lackner's enjoyment. After the musical interlude Mrs. Lackner and my grandfather – one more time and for the last time – clutched hands. They embraced with love and gratitude just like they had after the

sixty years reunion but this time her touch was light as a feather, warm but without vigor.

Four weeks later, on Saturday November 20, 2010, a warm and sunny afternoon, in Maria Lackner's bedroom they were playing "CHANT Music for Paradise" by the Cistercian monks of Stift Heiligenkreuz in Austria. Căzilia, her oldest daughter, was holding her dear mother's hand, and Maria Lackner peacefully drew her last breath. Her body was interred in the family plot at the local cemetery of St. Anna an Aigen, a peaceful hillside memorial overlooking the verdant orchards. She joins the bodies of her in-laws Josef and Zăzilia Lackner also her loving husband Josef Lackner.

Maria Lackner passed away, but her legacy and spirit remain very much alive.





9. Lackner family gravesite

Just as before in this work the change of font style meant to change the narrator's role between Ron and Sandor. So please let me change the narrator role from Jacob to Sandor and squeeze in some thoughts here.

Mrs. Maria Lackner was *the Princess of Light* when I approached the great *abyss in the dark*. Her nourishing *food illuminated my way back to life*. For sixty years she lived a very productive satisfying life with her loving family. She shared a life with her beloved Josef. Nurtured their children to grow and blossom as educators (my son Ron is an educator also). She harvested the apples to make cider, collected the eggs her hens were laying. These were the manifestation of meaningful, satisfying life. As a young woman, toward the end of the WWII, she defied all the dangers, risked her life --and the lives of her family by helping the helpless to survive, giving them forbidden food. (I was one of the helpless). She didn't know whether her brave acts were successful or not and that became a damper in her life. She was afraid of finishing life with that uncertainty. *Sixty years later*, in 2005, while she still had time, I reappeared. *We met again*. Her eyes were wet. *Her tears were washing away all the remaining doubts*. The uncertainty vanished from her mind. At the same time my life was also changed. I became aware of who was instrumental to spare my life in 1945. The righteous inhabitants of Sankt Anna am Aigen helped Jews to survive, and Maria Lackner had a very special, personal role in helping me survive. I became vocal, telling the story of ST. ANNA 2005. I am still telling the story to eager audiences (You may read some detailed results of the lectures in the chapter "Guest Reflections"). Maria Lackner and I met numerous times during the five years following 2005. Each time was a refreshing reunion between the two of us and reconfirmation of the 1945 event. We rejoiced the occasion to be with each other's company again – and – again. On the evening of Saturday, October 23, 2010 we met once more and, for the last time, clutched hands while her eyes said good-bye and her face radiated satisfaction. Four weeks later she closed her eyes with fulfillment.

Every day at my work, I play a piece of music based on "CHANT Music for Paradise" by the Cistercian monks. That music can be listened by the ears, by the heart, by the bones, by the blood. And that music will keep the special relationship between Maria Lackner and me alive for an additional length of time.

St. Anna is sometimes known as the "**Styrian Bethlehem**". Styria is the state in Austria where St. Anna is but the reference has nothing to do with a newborn baby and wise men. Rather, an amazingly disproportionate number of St. Anna's children grow up to become clergy. (As of today's, count: 36 priests, – among 1 Cardinal and 2 Archbishops – numerous nuns and religious educators.) Simply put, people of god, of love, of the good way, are born and raised there. It is a simple, beautiful place, with primeval forests that smell of antiquity. It is an ancient land; one can feel history in the dirt of St. Anna's tilled fields. And as long as people have lived in St. Anna, in this Bethlehem of Austria, they have lived by the book, or by the RULES and always will.

Some of the righteous inhabitants of the local communities, whose names are mentioned in this work, listed with their ages at 1944-45 also the communities where they lived. Their ages between 15 and 62, young adults to mature adults, are representing the cross section of the local society. They helped the Jewish Forced Laborers. They did their



righteous work open with fully understanding the probable consequences. They enjoyed the support of their families and neighbors. Their society was righteous.

	<u>Age</u>	<u>Community</u>
Zäzilia Lackner	62	Aigen
Anna Dunkl	55	St. Anna
Anna Legenstein	54	Hochstraden
Theresia Berger	45	Neuhaus
Anna Schlögl	45	Jamm
Theresia Legenstein	43	Sichauf
Maria Lackner	25	Aigen
Sister Lina	23	Annaberg
Maria Haarer	18	Waltra
Martha Zöhrer	16	Aigen
Frieda Neubauer	15	Risola

Just a note: Zäzilia Lackner born in 1882, died in 1971 was the mother-in-law of Maria Lackner. Anna Legenstein born in 1891, died in 1989 was the mother of Maria Lackner. They were both members of the Third Order.

When I was eighteen years old, I traveled with my Grandfather to Austria. We spent three weeks around the Austrian border with Slovenia, visiting with old friends, meeting new people, and enjoying new experiences.

During World War II my Grandfather worked as forced laborer in a Hungarian Army Jewish labor unit. Towards the end of the war, with the Russian advancement on Germany's eastern front, my Grandfather's unit was transferred to the Nazi army, and moved to a small Austrian town, St. Anna am Aigen. He slaved there for the remainder of the war, digging trenches designed to stop the impending Russian tank advancement into Austria, and he would have died there as well were it not for the awesome kindness and basic humanity of the people who lived there.

There was a concentrated effort on the part of the Nazis to kill off the Jews, and my Grandfather's group was no exception. The Nazi leaders in St. Anna am Aigen and the surrounding area were determined to starve, disease, or work my grandfather to death. And they almost succeeded. But the righteous people of St. Anna defied the draconian brown shirts, and actually made a concerted effort to feed and save the Jews. My Grandfather was one of the few Jews to survive and this is his story, the story of the righteous ones, and my story as well.

In many ways St. Anna am Aigen has not really changed much in the ensuing years. But as new generations have come to leadership, a society that was repressive and sometimes even regressive concerning the Holocaust was replaced by civic leaders who were both curious and determined to find out what had happened in their hometown during World War II. This is their story, too. Their effort to try and discern what had happened in St. Anna am Aigen. They realized that if you do not understand your past, you cannot move knowingly into the future.

Thanks in large part, and this is a huge understatement, to the determined and angelic efforts of Mayor Josef Weinhandl and his wife Elizabeth Weinhandl, with whom we stayed while in St. Anna, my Grandfather and I were able to meet with and interview many of the righteous people in and around St. Anna. And over a few bottles of excellent local wine and boxes of cookies, they told us their stories.

**Sister Lina** (Graz) was a young nun, member of the "Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception" teaching order "Schulschwwestern Eggenberg" before the war broke out. The anti-religious Nazis quickly shut down the school and sent the nuns who were teaching packing. Sister Lina was forced to find domestic work with a family in St Anna. When the Jewish forced laborers walked past the front of her house every morning, Sister Lina would throw apples through the window towards the marching Jews. Once an SS officer caught an apple. He went into the house to investigate, but he found only a young maid polishing shoes while singing nursery songs, busy at work. Sister Lina was warned frequently, by her friends and family, not to help the Jews because she was going to bring trouble upon herself and her family, she could be shot to death. Despite the warnings, she continued her apple crusade. One day, she met two Jewish slave laborers. She instructed them to follow her, and she led them to her mother's house in Risola. Invited the two Jews inside the house and fed them bean salad. With that act she implicated her mother in the "crime" feeding Jews in their home. A simple kindness that showed great courage.

We met in 2009 at the facility of HLA Schulschwester Graz - Eggenberg. She was at age 87, after her retirement, still active in her mission to teach and care for a group of kindergartners.

On Nov. 11, 2013, I visited Sister Lina again. She still lives in the same HLA Schulschwester complex. We had a very pleasant meeting and reminisced about the past. I also snapped a picture. Her face and her being radiate goodness and fulfillment!



10. Sister Lina at age 91

Another story involves **Maria Haarer** from Waltra of the Township of St. Anna am Aigen, whose son is now a prominent member of the St. Anna community. Eight or nine Jews came begging for food at her house. A police officer arrived to conduct some business while she was slicing bread for the Jews. She was frightened to be caught red-handed and expected to be punished. But the policemen went about his business. When the policeman left, he said, *"I didn't see anything."* Maria continued slicing bread to feed the starving Jews. She was 18 years old in 1945.

In the "72 Hours" project to build the **Mahnmal für den Frieden**, Memorial for Peace Monument, Maria's granddaughter Franziska Haarer was one of the youth participants.

**Ferdinand Legenstein** from Sichauf (Township of St. Anna/Aigen), another prominent community member, told me stories from when he was 11 years old. He remembers that every time his mother **Theresia Legenstein** went to St. Anna, she always carried one or two loaves of bread under her arm with her for the Jews. She was 43 years old in 1945. Mrs. Legenstein passed away in 1978 at age 76.

**Frieda Neubauer** from Risola (Township of St. Anna/Aigen), can still feel the aches from working in the trenches. She was 15 years old. Three weeks on, one week off. She had to provide her own food while working, did not receive food or help or even the basic tools to dig with. Yet, in the midst of war, in the face of hardship she still regularly deposited small food packages at the panzer graben for the Jews.

On certain days Mrs. Neubauer had to show herself in one barrack at the Hölle to update her workbook of the hours she worked at the fortification job. On one of those visits she noticed something behind the barrack. Many human corpses were stacked up in a pile, including some people still alive. The whole piles of bodies were buried in a mass grave near Deutsch-Haseldorf. Later and in the days that followed, she visited the mass grave and the earth was still moving.

**Imre Weisz.** After coming home from the ceremony to dedicate the Memorial for Peace Monument in St. Anna, I received a call. The man on the other end of the line spoke with the same heavy accent as my Grandfather. He asked for "Sandor Vandor, Sandor Vandor" so I gave him my Grandfather's cell phone number and thought nothing of it. I later learned that this man was Imre Weisz, another former slave laborer, who also received life-sustaining food from the villagers near St. Anna. He was born in 1928 in Mezótúr, Hungary.

Together with his family, during the sweltering summer of 1944, he was moved from Mezótúr to the ghetto of Szolnok and from Szolnok to Austria. They were forced to work in a factory on the outskirts of Vienna. He was later moved to St. Anna am Aigen. He was housed in the school building on the upper floor. Two levels of bunk bed were built in, the men packed in like sardines in a can. He vividly remembers the stairs to go up and down to and from the room, a challenge every day.

In the mornings they left the school compound for the work site, walking past the steps at the side of the church. They were working on digging running trenches

(not the panzer graben but schutzengraben). For their group of ten the daily quota was to create 35 cubic meters of trench space. They were served a midday meal and there was more solid substance in their meals. Often times they would have finished the quota for the day, however they slowed down to be present when the meal was served very late in the day. After some time being treated as less than human, you do what you can to survive, even if that means actually working longer. Besides the trenches they were also forced to work on other fortification jobs.

Even with more meals served than my grandfather's group, Weisz was still hungry and very much in need of food to supplement his meager diet. He, like my grandfather, also visited neighboring villages to beg for food. He often received apples. Many times, the apple came with an apology from the kind-hearted villager, saddened that they didn't have enough to feed themselves and this was all they could do.

To this day he remembers the names of some of his comrades; also, the SA supervisor's name was Wagner, a name burned into his consciousness.

During their time in St. Anna, they were moved from the school building to a spot outside the village, into an unfinished wooden barrack with just a tent as cover. This happened in late February or early March because he remembers that snow covered the grounds.

While they were housed in the tented barrack, a few people, members of one family, escaped from the barracks. For collective punishment, the Nazis shot ten of the oldest members of their company. (Mr. Schober noted this episode in the Foreword 3.)

These Jews were moved from St. Anna to Mauthausen in a death march in late March of 1945, ahead of the approaching Russian army.

Imre Weisz was later liberated from Mauthausen. He provided eyewitness testimony to Dr. Eleonore Lappin who is the foremost historian on the subject of Jewish life in Austria.

In the **FORMAL MEETING** chapter one can read the following statement:

"We hear stories of how many local residents helped Jews by giving them food. We hear about a woman who used to throw food over the fence of the compound where my father was housed. Once, she was caught by the Germans and told if she did that again she would be killed. Did she stop? Not exactly. She didn't throw food over the fence anymore. She left it for laborers to find in nearby bushes..."

On Nov 1, 2011, Elisabeth Weinhandl and Sandor Vandor met with **Mrs. Johanna Fischer** (of St. Anna Am Aigen). During a brief discussion she revealed that **Anna Dunkl** (of St. Anna Am Aigen) was the name of the lady "who used to throw food over the fence of the compound where my father was housed." Johanna Fischer personally knew Anna Dunkl and she vividly remember of that episode. Anna Dunkl was born in 1890. Lifelong resident of St. Anna am Aigen. Passed away in 1985 and interred in the cemetery of St. Anna am Aigen.



11. The gravestone of Anna Dunkl

To conclude, let me introduce one of the glass tablets of the **Mahnmal für den Frieden** Memorial for Peace Monument (Photo and English translation).



12. "Mahnmal für den Frieden" glass tablet.

In 2008, the Catholic Youth of Austria performed the "72 Hours Without Compromise" project. Initiated by Sandor Vándor, the community of St. Anna am Aigen headed by Mayor Josef Weinhandl, as well as Auxiliary Bishop Dr. Franz Lackner, the Memorial for Peace was constructed to commemorate events in Sankt Anna am Aigen at the final phase of World War II.

The monument is built in an area called "Hell," on the actual ground where barracks stood during the war in which eight Jewish people were burned.



You can enter the monument only singularly by yourself to emphasize the prisoner's forsaken and forlorn conditions. Four columns symbolize the volume of the tank ditch the prisoners had to dig out daily. Old bricks from the barracks were built in the columns.

Standing within the columns, one can read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in four different languages, even though as of this day the observance of these rights is not universal.

The path leading up to the monument symbolizes the daily walk of the prisoners. Sitting on the commemorative stone next to the tree, one can look through the columns to the lantern. With its light, it should bear in remembrance of the dead, but with the word "Peace" on the glass it should also be a "Light of Aspiration" on the way into the future.

The monument was built by the youth of the rectorate of St. Anna am Aigen:

Thomas Maitz, Gerhard Schuster, Wolfgang Maitz, Wolfgang Hirtl, Kevin Pörtl, Philipp Triebel, Manfred Lamprecht, Christoph Breznik, Hannes Hopfer, Dominik Schmerböck, Thomas Hackl, Mario Gangl, Lisa Breznik, Kathrin Maitz, Claudia Maitz, Verena Penitz, Melanie Neubauer, Franziska Haarer, Michele Legenstein, Selina Nistl, Stefanie Weinhandl, Julia Großberger and the community workers Helmut Maitz, Josef Sorger and Karl Truhetz.

**Artist: Roswitha Dautermann**

## ADDITIONAL PHOTOS



13. Mayor Josef Weinhandl delivering the keynote address on Jan.30, 2005 at the “Remembrance Mobile” service.



14. Walburga Beutl, second president of the Styrian parliament, at the podium addressing the assembled guests.





15. From left to right: Mag. Friedrich Weingartmann, priest of St. Anna, - Christian Gmeiner, the artist who created the statue of Mobile Remembrance, - ÖKR Alois Ulrich, former mayor of St. Anna, Maria Baumgartner contemporary witness, Josef Weinhandl, mayor of St. Anna - Frieda Neubauer, contemporary witness - Walburga Beutl, second president of the Styrian parliament



16. From left to right: Mag. Friedrich Weingartmann, priest of St. Anna –Frieda Neubauer, contemporary witness - Josef Urbanitsch, mayor of Frutten-Gießelsdorf, a neighboring community



17. Sandor Vador, in front of the easels, while Ron Vador is taking pictures.



18. Roswitha Legenstein teacher showing the Maria Lackner story to Sandor Vador. Sandor's son Ron is behind the camera.





19. Johann Weidinger, contemporary witness, plowed field in the Schuffergraben, uncovering bricks.



20. "Cornerstone" positioning Thursday (OCT 23, 2008) morning by Sandor.



21. First brick in place.

The assembly of eager, young people is ready for the 72 Hour Project task to build the Friedens Mahnmal.



22. Red bin with old bricks





23. Random placed old brick



24. Friday (OCT 24, 2008) morning, visiting dignitaries at the 72 Hour Project site.





25. Grouting



26. The 72 Hour Project is in progress.





27. Saturday (OCT 25, 2008) midday, the monument was built well within the 72 hours.  
Some of the participants of the 72 Hour Project with Sandor Vandro.

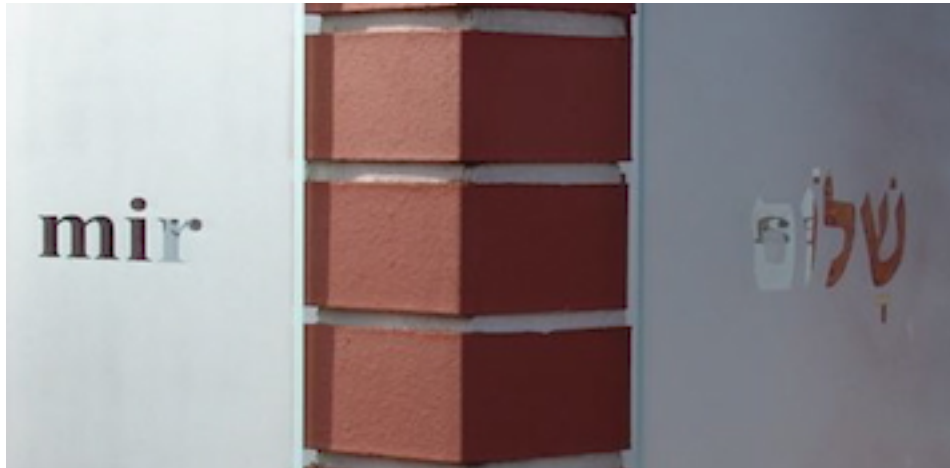


28. Bishop Dr. Franz Lackner, artist Roswitha Dautermann and some of the participants of the 72 Hour Project





29. View of the Memorial for Peace. The camera is looking due south.



30. PEACE towards the four corners of the world.



31. Commemorative stone next to the tree with contoured top inviting the visitor to sit on it and contemplate.



32. View of the Memorial for Peace. The camera is looking due east.



# Allgemeine Erklärung der Menschenrechte

## PRÄAMBEL

Da die Anerkennung der angeborenen Würde und der gleichen und unveräußerlichen Rechte aller Mitglieder der Gemeinschaft der Menschen die Grundlage von Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Frieden in der Welt bildet, da die Nichtanerkennung und Verachtung der Menschenrechte zu Akten der Barbarei geführt haben, die das Gewissen der Menschheit mit Empörung erfüllen, und da verkündet worden ist, dass einer Welt, in der die Menschen Rede- und Glaubensfreiheit und Freiheit von Furcht und Not genießen, das höchste Streben des Menschen gilt, da es notwendig ist, die Menschenrechte durch die Herrschaft des Rechtes zu schützen, damit der Mensch nicht gezwungen wird, als letztes Mittel zum Aufstand gegen Tyrannei und Unterdrückung zu greifen, da es notwendig ist, die Entwicklung freundschaftlicher Beziehungen zwischen den Nationen zu fördern,

# Universal Declaration of Human Rights

## Preamble

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people, Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law, Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,

# הכרזה לכל באי עולם בדבר זכויות האדם

הואיל והכרה בכבוד הטבעי אשר לכל בני משפחת האדם ובזכויותיהם השוות והבלתי נפקעות הוא יסוד החופש, הצדק והשלום בעולם.

הואיל והזלזול בזכויות האדם וביזוין הבשילו מעשים פראיים שפגעו קשה במצפונה של האנושות; ובנין עולם, שבו ייהנו כל יצורי אנוש מחירות הדיבור והאמונה ומן החירות מפחד וממחסור, הוכרז כראש שאיפתיו של כל אדם.

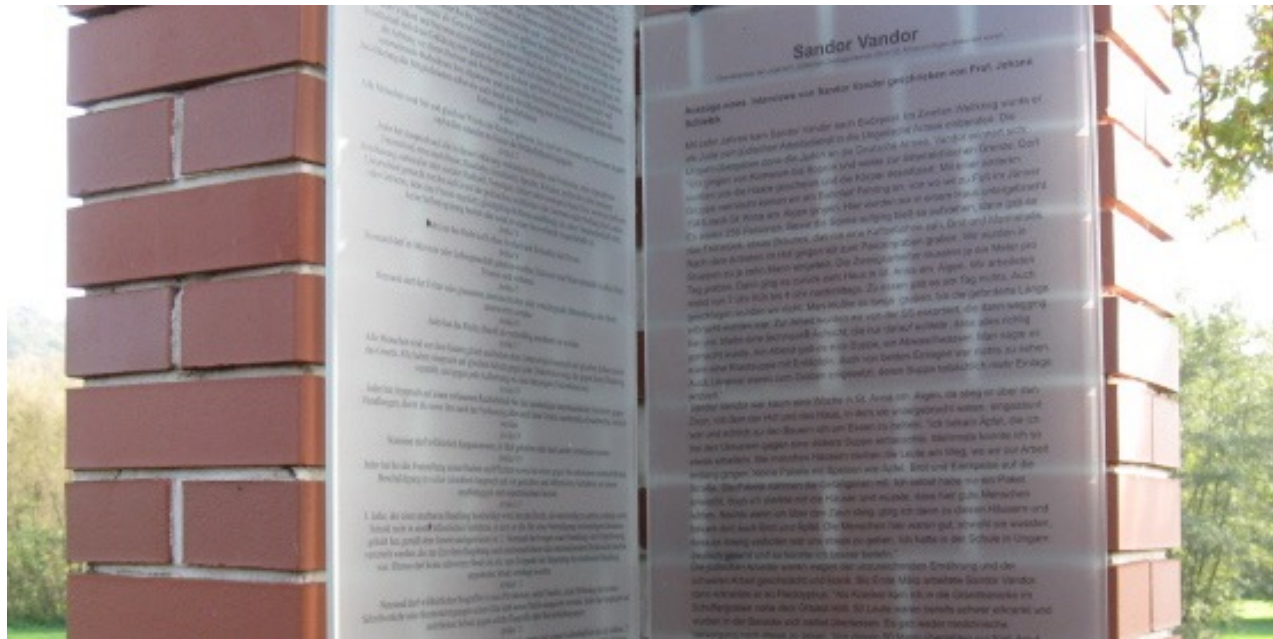
הואיל והכרת חיוני הוא שזכויות האדם תהיינה מוגנות בכוח שלטונו של החוק, שלא יהא האדם אנוס, כמפלט אחרון, להשליך את יתרו על מרידה בעריצות ובדיכוי.

# Az Emberi Jogok Egyetemes Nyilatkozata

## Bevezeto

Tekintettel arra, hogy az emberiség családja minden egyes tagja méltóságának, valamint egyenlo és elidegeníthetetlen jogainak elismerése alkotja a szabadság, az igazság és a béke alapját a világon, Tekintettel arra, hogy az emberi jogok el nem ismerése és semmibevevése az emberiség lelkiismeretét fellázító barbár cselekményekhez vezetett, és hogy az ember legfőbb vágya egy olyan világ eljövetele, amelyben az elnyomástól, valamint a nyomortól megszabadult emberi lények szava és meggyozódése szabad lesz, Tekintettel annak fontosságára, hogy az emberi jogokat a jog uralma védelmezze, nehogy az ember végső szükségében a zsarnokság és az elnyomás elleni lázadásra kényszerüljön, Tekintettel arra, hogy igen lényeges a nemzetek közötti baráti kapcsolatok kifejeződésének elmozdítás, Tekintettel arra, hogy az Alapokmányban az Egyesült Nemzetek népei újból hitet tettek az alapvető emberi jogok,

33. Bill of Rights, in four tablets, each in a different language, German - English - Hebrew - Hungarian



34. The "Sandor Vandro" tablet

At the dedication of the Memorial for Peace, Ms. Andrea Kainz directed the local Weinland Choir – including me as guest member of the choir - singing songs with the theme of "Peace."

Geopositioning location of the Friedensmahnmal:

Latitude: 46° 48' 22"

Longitude: 15° 59' 35"

That is on Sinnersdorf Weg 100m east from Angerweg, or  
on Sinnersdorf Weg 50m west from Weinberg-Schulzfeld Weg, or  
on Sinnersdorf Weg 150m west from Austria–Slovenia border.

## VISITING GERMANY

For sixty years, my views and my feelings toward Germany were upside down. As I mentioned before: for 57 years Anna and I talked about our holocaust experiences daily. Rehashing the sufferings with a heavy dose of herd mentality built up hate inside me against Germany. Hated everything German. I have boycotted German products. Built up hatred, which created self-inflicted harm. After my visit to St Anna in 2005, thanks to Josef and Elisabeth Weinhandl that view and feeling started to turn to the right direction. My life was spared in St. Anna. I received food supplements from the inhabitants of St. Anna. With the Weinhandl's help, I learned that a lot of people were risking their and their family's lives. They were all German-speaking people; belonged, by annexation, to the German Reich. They didn't see us as Jews. They saw us as hungry, suffering human beings. They helped. I found out that they had to do the same hard work for the war effort as us Jews. They had food shortages and still gave us food supplements. From 2005 the Weinhandls treated me as a member of their own family with loving relations. And changed my views and feelings about everything German to the right side up. The hate against the German people, which was inside me disappeared and I feel relieved. I can travel to Germany. I can purchase German products. From 2005 the first couple of flights I took from Los Angeles to Vienna, I made connections at other than German airports. Later, for the sake of convenience, I switched and started flying from Los Angeles to Graz on the German airline Lufthansa. In October 2010, with the Weinhandls, we visited their daughter in Regensburg, Germany. And I felt fine in Germany. As a matter of fact, I had a triumphant feeling: Hitler wanted me to die. It was a matter of minutes and they almost killed me. Instead, Hitler is dead, and I am walking freely in his "sacred Aryan land".

*With hate, there is no freedom.*

Love is an ingredient to get rid of hate. I introduced my story on the website:

### Beyond the Holocaust: A Life of Thankfulness and Love

Predating the 2010 Regensburg visit, there were 2 events or encounters.

One: Anna and I were vacationing in Switzerland in 1972. I was the Chief Engineer at the company I worked with. We had a very close business relationship with a German company located in Ebingen, Germany. About 20 minutes' drive from the Swiss-German border. My boss asked me to make a courtesy call to that company. To maintain a good company-to-company relationship I had to oblige. Anna and I visited the company, had lunch with them and drove back to Switzerland that afternoon to make our visit as short as possible. I chalked that up as a necessary business trip.

The other event: In 2003, early in the time of my volunteer experience. He was a white haired male patient somewhat younger than me. He was curious about my accent and asked from where I came from. I told him I was from Hungary. He told me that he is from Germany. Boisterous feelings came up within me. Did he fight Hitler's war? It felt like something rammed me at my breastbone. Since I was already a "professional" volunteer, I treated him with the same courtesy and attention as I treated any other patients. I offered and served him a

cranberry juice cocktail, a very refreshing sugary drink and he felt better. I did my job without any hesitation.

I can add a more recent episode. The time is 2013-14. A lady (let's call her Helga) approximately my age, was born in Germany and lived in a small village in the middle of the country. At age 19, she married an American soldier, a career soldier stationed in Germany. They lived there about 8 years and they had 3 children. Then, they moved to the USA and lived in the USA happily ever after. Now she is a widow. She is receiving caring treatment as a patient of our clinic.

For the last ten years I was a "professional" volunteer. I served the patients regardless of gender, race, language or national origin.

Helga and I always had an easy conversation. Many times, we talked about food. Once she said that for a festive occasion, she prepared a side dish of red cabbage. The red cabbage is a kind of national side dish in Germany. I asked her how she made it? She described her cooking method. My mother and my wife Anna also made red cabbage dishes in our house. And I compared the ingredients Helga used versus my family's "secret" ingredients. I found that she made her red cabbage side dish without caraway seeds. Caraway seed provides a very good herbal flavor. It is also a powerful digestive aid that helps eliminate gas. I told her that she should use **kümmel** - the German name for caraway seed. Because I used a German word in connection with a culinary experience, my stature - in her eyes - grew immediately. Three weeks later Helga told me she made red cabbage with kümmel.

I do my best to make her treatment days as bearable as possible.

Two days, on November 8 and 11, 2016, I visited Munich, Germany, like one is visiting a city in any other country.

Three significant male members of my circle are having 60th birthdays in 2016:

Archbishop Franz Lackner, in July.

Mayor Josef Weinhandl, in November.

My son Ron, In December.

To celebrate his own 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, Archbishop Lackner made a pilgrimage on the **Route of Santiago de Compostela**. A four-week long walk of the 800km length of pilgrimage road. To honor his achievement, I visited St. Jacob's Plaza in the centrum of Munich.

In celebration of the Mayor's birthday, Elisabeth and Josef Weinhandl, their daughter Kathrin, her husband Martin and I went to the theater in Munich to attend a performance of the musical show "The Dance of a Vampire" We also did some sightseeing in the center of the city and sampled local food and BEER.

In the year 2010, I stepped on German soil with a triumphant feeling. Now, in 2016, I visited a bastion of learning, the **Theresien-Gymnasium** in Munich. I told my story to an audience of students and their professors. This event was the crowning of the triumphant feeling.

## **VICTIMHOOD**

I have changed my thinking and changed my stance.

In Bakersfield, CA, the annual Observance Day of Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Memorial) was on April 27, 2014. Members from three denominational Jewish congregations assembled at Temple B'nai Jacob. I had the honor to deliver a personal testimony of my survival.

For nine years preceding the Bakersfield event, besides the thankfulness, I dwelled on the harshness of life as a slave laborer in my lectures. For my speech in Bakersfield, I emphasized that my life was saved by the braveness and the generosity of the inhabitants of St. Anna am Aigen. For sixty years, I was made to believe that I was a victim. I was led to believe that the whole world was against me because I am a Jew. We were certainly persecuted. Six million of us perished. The world didn't like us; they let the killings go on. But who could have imagined the magnitude of the killings? In the summer of 1944, in Auschwitz, the Nazis killed approximately 400,000 Hungarian Jews in approximately 40 days. My mother was among them. 10,000 Jewish people were gassed and cremated daily. These are mind-boggling numbers. An evil regime did commit the largest genocide in the history of mankind with the best-organized, most efficient killing factories.

Six million Jew were killed, but three and a half million survived. In most of these cases, it was gentile people who made it possible for Jews to survive. For example, in round numbers, 25,000 individuals received "Righteous Among the Nations" honors. That number reflects only the cases that were made available to Yad Vashem and passed their strict and rigid criteria. The Danish people, the whole nation, rallied to save the Danish Jews. They lost just 60 out of 7,800 Jews. Another example: in Bulgaria 100 percent of the Jewish population was saved.

Yad Vashem lists 107 people in Austria and 587 people in Germany as Righteous Among the Nations. Among those plus additional numbers were numerous individuals, Nazis and not Nazis, saving Jews. One of them was Oskar Schindler and another one was a "Little Schindler," namely Fritz the Tailor in Ocinje, Slovenia. Both operated similarly. Both wore Nazi uniforms all the time. Schindler employed and saved 1200 Jews. Fritz employed and helped one Jew to survive; his name was Tibor Weinberger. Tibor was 19 years old, a Hungarian Jew, member of the Jewish Forced Laborers group billeted in the Schoolhouse of Kramarovci. He was slated to dig trenches (panzer graben) with my group. But by profession he was a tailor par excellence. Apparently, Fritz had enough influence that he could commandeer Tibor to work in his tailor shop rather than digging trenches. So, every morning Tibor walked – un-escorted – from the Schoolhouse of Kramarovci to the tailor shop in Ocinje, a distance about 1 kilometer. He created beautiful dresses and suits for the elite ladies and gentlemen of the village and neighboring villages. Mrs. Fritz served mid-day meals every day for the family. Tibor was invited to the table with the rest of the family and they ate together like family. Satisfied customers expressed their satisfaction for the well-fitted clothing Tibor created by bringing him home-baked cakes and cookies. Tibor was well fed and had the physical strength to survive the grueling death march from St Anna to the Mauthausen Concentration Camp, where he was liberated. Mrs. Florence Weinberger, the widow of Tibor, provided me with details. Also, in 2010, at the St. Anna – Ocinje area I talked to people who remembered the lone Jew walking daily from the Schoolhouse to the Fritz's Tailor shop.





35. The building in Ocinje at 2010, where Fritz Tailor Shop was in the 1940's.

For sixty years, I lived as a victim. My life was saved by the brave, generous inhabitants of St. Anna am Aigen. I asked the question before: what made many of the villagers want to help the "victimized" Jews? Various reasons were mentioned before; no need to repeat. But I would like to dwell a bit on three thoughts:

1. **Lehman Brothers.** Ferdinand and Alois Lehman, two brothers were uncles of Mayor Josef Weinhandl. The brothers were close in age. Ferdinand was born in 1920 and Alois was born a little over a year later in 1921. The brothers lived in Plesch.

In 1934, around the time when Chancellor Dollfuss was assassinated, a fight broke out between two local groups of young men in downtown St. Anna. The Lehman brothers and their friends loyal to the slain Chancellor fought against a group of young Nazis. The fight was much more serious than a fist-fight.

Then came the "Anschluss," when Germany annexed Austria to be part of the German Reich.

Ferdinand had an accident with a machine that involved his right arm. Medical mistreatment of his injuries ended in amputating his right arm. After losing the right arm, he took a job at the post office as letter carrier.

Alois was recruited to the German army and was fighting Hitler's war. In 1942, at age 21, he lost his life at the front.

In the meantime, Ferdinand was in a dire psychological condition; No right arm, a souring love life, and the news of losing his brother pushed him to commit suicide. The family lost two sons.

I mention this just to give a taste of how local people were thinking about the Nazis and demonstrated hatred against the Nazis.

2. In the chapter, WEDNESDAY, JUNE 15<sup>TH</sup>, I am listing the numbers of the *dead* and *missing* victims of World War II, from the different villages. Tallied 127 citizens lost from the total population of 1800 in Sankt Anna am Aigen. It is a huge number. To prove the point, I am using approximate numbers: Let assume that 50% of the population were male and the same percent were female. Divide the 900 males in three age groups. First, ages 0-19.

Second, 20 – 40. And third, 41- and above. Also, assume that they are equal in size. Every able-bodied man had to serve in the army, Hitler's army. Now let's compare: 127 lost out of 300. A huge 42 % loss, but if you say that there were less than 300 able bodied, than the percentage of the lost men becomes much higher. Anyway, just think of how many eligible bachelors and young husbands that community lost? Were they victims?

3. Could it be that the inhabitants of St. Anna and vicinity felt that they were victims themselves without talking about lost sons and husbands? They were occupied and annexed by Germany. They spoke the same German language as the Nazi Germany, but had different social cultures with energetic independence, which did not fit into the Aryan Theory and Nazi Political Platform. Perhaps they too felt (consciously or subconsciously) victimized. Then it is plausible that one victim who does not live under the same restraints as the other, will gather all the braveness and generousities to help the other, helpless victim

Sixty years later, people helped me to get out of the rut. People in St. Anna am Aigen, the Mayor and Elisabeth Weinhandl and the reunion with Maria Lackner, and others helped me to elevate myself out of the groove. A **victim** is ***an unfortunate person who suffers from adverse circumstance***. In my case, the part of the adverse circumstance was the dehumanizing life, years before leading to and during the Holocaust.

*People who were victimized or made to believe they are victims cannot be free unless they shed their victimhood.*

My wife and I survived the Holocaust. Even though we had a beautiful, loving life together, the psychological effect of our persecution was with us always. After she passed away in 2003, the psychological effect became my burden singularly. Shortly after her departure, to shed my victimhood, I engaged in two distinct activities. One: I started my volunteer work at the Oncology Infusion Center in 2003. From the beginning, my goal was and still is to *make the patients feel better*. I jumped into that work with full body and mind. I do help the patients feel better. I kept feeling better also. The other: Talking about my life story, with the emphasis on the Holocaust and the aftermath. Specifically: A Life of Thankfulness and Love. Writing, "talking" to my keyboard. I've come to realize that talking about my story puts me on the path to ease the pain of her departure, as well as the persecution inflicted on me before and during the Holocaust. In a short 2 years after Anna died, I embarked on a journey to revisit the place where I was in Forced Labor Camp, St Anna am Aigen in Austria. Where my dehumanizing culminated. As per Dr. Viktor E. Frankl, the cure to shed victimhood is in the process of "rehumanizing". I started to receive the rehumanizing "therapy" in 2005, while revisiting St. Anna. The combination effect of the rehumanizing "therapy" and the achievements in my volunteer work gradually made me feel much freer than before. But would I ever totally shed the victimhood? Would I need to shed the victimhood completely? I was persecuted. But in the case of victimhood, what would be a tolerable and/or desirable stage, which would enable me with a life worth living, which would help me to effectively and innovatively continue my present chosen "profession" of *helping patients to feel better* and always improving my delivery method of the story of ST. ANNA 2005? Talking about the past makes the victimhood lose weight in modest increments. It will be constantly smaller, but seemingly will stay in the memory, as a manifest.

For sixty years, I lived as a victim. For fifty-eight years Anna lived as a victim. We had children and we raised our children, with the awareness that we were victims. We, Anna and



me, weren't the only ones to raise "survivor's children". The survivors in general raised their children, as they were victims. We created a whole generation of the "children of the holocaust survivors". A library is full of books written about the survivors' children busy dissecting the effect of being the children of survivors. But strangely, I didn't find any good answer of how to remedy that situation? We, the survivors are getting older. Our children are in their prime. I believe it is not too late to talk about it. Let's make their life somewhat better. And that will make our remaining life also better.

Dr. Viktor E. Frankl titled his book *Man's Search for Meaning*. Dr. David Servan-Schreiber in his book *The Instinct to Heal*, advocates volunteerism to find meaning. Both doctors were pioneers in their psychology and neurology fields. Dr. Frankl survived Nazi concentration camps when published his book. Dr. Servan-Schreiber lived with an incurable brain tumor when he authored his tome. I came home from a Slave Labor Camp "barely alive". With Anna's help, I rebuilt my life. After she died, I became involved in volunteerism. I shed my victimhood, and, in my work, I create an atmosphere where a cancer patient for a time will feel better. And that makes living worthwhile.

## **DEATH MARCH**

The death march, two simple words, appears in this story earlier, in the **BACKSTORY** chapter. It is mentioned only a few times in the written part of the story but reemerges every time I make a presentation. It has significance.

Death march, a mode, was colloquial part of the Nazi cruelty, where the human civilization has not yet created words to adequately describe it.

Wikipedia describes the **death march** as a forced march of prisoners of war or other captives or deportees in which individuals are left to die along the way. It is distinguished in this way from simple prisoner transport via foot march. Death marches usually feature harsh physical labor and abuse, neglect of prisoner injury and illness, deliberate starvation and dehydration, humiliation and torture, and execution of those unable to the marching pace. The march may end at a prisoner-of-war camp or internment camp, or it may continue until all the prisoners are dead (a form of "execution by labor", as seen in the Armenian genocide among other examples).

Dr. Viktor Frankl coined the word *dehumanization*. Humiliation is part of dehumanization. The inmate required to participate in a death march, is forced to give up individuality and to follow orders without thinking. In a death march, you follow orders, or you will be executed.

Case in point: My group of Forced Laborers were required to participate in a death march from Szöny to Sopron in Hungary, (approximately 85 miles, about 137 km). Walking 5 days. The human body is functioning whether you walk or rest. The death marches were also used as the most effective way to strip your humanity, to be *dehumanized* in the shortest time. You have to answer nature's call. If you step out of the marching line, you will be shot to death. If you let it go to your pants, your humanity has been taken. Five days of marching created ample time to be *dehumanized*.

The death march is the fastest and cruelest way to be *dehumanized*. If you choose suicide by the captor's bullet, you die. If you choose to live,

*you will strip your own humanity, down to animalistic level.*

The psychological effect of the death march kept lingering with me for many years after liberation. Though the war ended in 1945, I was still seeking medical help in the mid 1960's. I got help, but not with 100 percent efficiency. In 2005, I revisited St. Anna am Aigen, where my life was saved in 1945 and my *rehumanizing* therapy got started earnest. This is where I achieved great improvement. I am telling my stories in regular intervals. My audiences are mostly German speaking students. Translations are always provided by Elisabeth Weinhandl. When the subject turns to death march, she translates not only my words, but many times my thoughts also. Thank you, Elisabeth for that therapy.

### **GUEST REFLECTIONS**

Various Schools and organized seminars are inviting me to give a lecture during their study of the Holocaust. As a survivor I am telling my story; the story of the villagers of Sankt Anna am Aigen, to student and grown-up audiences in the USA, as well as in Austria. I usually maintain the format of lecture plus "Question & Answer" period.

### **AND YET**

I was invited to visit the R. J. Frank Intermediate School in Oxnard, CA. On May 26, 2011, I told the story of ST. ANNA 2005 in six different eighth grade English Language Arts Honor classes. We started in the classroom of Teacher Kristin Jensen Storey. She listened to my story and, very helpful way, participated in the "Question & Answer" period. Ms. Storey was inspired by the presentation and the subsequent discussion of ST. ANNA 2005 and minutes after her class was dismissed, on the spot, she composed the poem AND YET. In an artistic condensation she created a short poem as an essence of the story of ST. ANNA 2005. At the end of the day I left the school with the poem in hand. A teacher, Professor Mag. Barbara Oberascher at the school BORG Bad Radkersburg in Austria translated the poem AND YET to German (UND DENNOCH). I embraced that beautiful poem and incorporated it into my lectures. Usually, a participant from the audience will recite the poem in the English in the USA and both English and the German versions in Austria.

## **And Yet**

By Kristin Jensen Storey

Mr. Vandor shares his  
story with us.  
They murdered his  
family.  
They forced him to  
dig trenches.  
They almost succeeded  
in starving him to death.  
They...  
The Nazis.  
And yet there is  
no hatred in his  
voice.  
No anger in his  
eyes.

Mr. Vandor shares his  
story with us.  
They left food on  
the road for him.  
They answered their  
doors when he  
knocked.  
They kept him  
alive.  
They wish they'd  
done more.  
They...  
The villagers of  
St. Anna am Aigen.  
Good people.  
Some of them Nazis.  
Good people.  
Evil people.  
Good deeds.  
Evil deeds.

Mr. Vandor's heart  
is filled with nothing but  
gratitude.

What would the world  
be like if we all lived  
with his heart?

## UND DENNOCH

Deutsche Übersetzung:  
Mag. Barbara Oberascher

Herr Vandor erzählt uns  
seine Geschichte.  
Sie töteten seine  
Familie.  
Sie zwangen ihn  
Panzergräben auszuheben.  
Fast schafften sie es,  
ihn verhungern zu lassen.  
Sie...  
Die Nazis.  
Und dennoch  
ist kein Hass in seiner  
Stimme.  
Kein Zorn in seinen  
Augen.

Herr Vandor erzählt  
uns seine Geschichte.  
Sie legten Essen  
am Rand der Straße für ihn nieder.  
Sie öffneten als er an  
ihre Türen  
klopfte.  
Sie hielten ihn  
am Leben.  
Sie wünschten sie hätten  
mehr getan.  
Sie...  
Die Bewohner von  
St. Anna am Aigen.  
Gute Leute.  
Einige von ihnen waren Nazis.  
Gute Menschen.  
Böse Menschen.  
Gute Taten.  
Böse Taten.

Herrn Vandors Herz  
fühlt nur  
Dankbarkeit.

Wie würde die Welt  
aussehen, wenn wir alle  
ein Herz hätten wie er?

## **"Friedensmahnmal – Preis"**

## **Peace Memorial Award**

*"Friedensmahnmal – Preis" is a worldwide essay contest for students enrolled in grades 8 through 13. The 3 best German language essays will each be awarded a 100 Euro prize and the 3 best English language essays will each be awarded in US Dollars equivalent to 100 Euro prizes. Awards will be presented to the winners at the closing ceremony of the school year.*

*Essays created by students studying the Holocaust and inspired by reading the story of ST. ANNA 2005 either in English or in German are eligible for the contest.*

Eligible students in Austria submitted essays in German language, while American students sent in their essays in English. A jury evaluated all essays and voted for the three best in each language category. Three students in Austria and three in America were awarded with €100 or the equivalent in US Dollars for creating the best essays in German and in English languages.

### **Malibu Middle School**

Three students, eighth graders from Malibu Middle School, Malibu, CA were the winners of the contest: **Aaron Kagon**, **Jacob Kagon** and **Sarah Stipanowich**. Aaron and Jacob were 13 years old, Sarah 14 years old.

The students received their prizes at the Awards Night ceremony on May 17, 2011 in the auditorium of Malibu High School.



36. Sarah Stipanowich, Sandor Vador, Jacob Kagon, Aaron Kagon

Quoting from the essay of **Aaron Kagan**:

“...To sum everything up, I would love to thank Mr. Vandor for writing a breathtaking story. I am grateful he is still here to talk to youth and educate us about the holocaust. The most important lesson he has told me is regular people can make a difference in everyday life and when tragedy happens.

The people of St. Anna gave the highest form of *tzedaka*, the Hebrew word for “charity”, because they gave without wanting to be thanked or recognized for their goodness. In Jewish religion giving anonymously is the ultimate form of charity because you are giving from your heart without wanting to be given an award or be thought of as a celebrity of sorts. I am inspired to perform *tzedakah* as well and not so that others will be impressed. Community service is required at my school, yet I am inspired to do it because it is required of me by me.”

**Jacob Kagan** wrote in his essay:

“...I hope I can be as brave as Sandor was. I also hope that I can be as good as the people of St. Anna who help those in need. Hopefully, I will never be in a situation like this and hope a situation like the Holocaust does not happen to anyone ever again. The Holocaust was the worst period of mass human torture and murder in the history of the world. Unfortunately, we still have places on earth where evil people torture and murder other people. The only way to start eliminating torture and evil is one person at a time doing good work for the world...”

Quote from the essay **Sarah Stipanowich**:

“...As I began this essay, Anne Frank states that all people are good at heart, even the harsh Nazis who inflicted much pain on her mind and body. Mr. Vandor says, “I lived 57 precious years with my wife Anna. Mentioning the holocaust in our conversation was a daily occurrence for those 57 years. We talked about the bad things the Nazis inflicted upon us. We mentioned untold times the good deeds done for us by individuals during those times.” He can actually talk about those horrific times and try to think of the positive points, such as getting some food from some of the townspeople of Sankt Anna am Aigen and neighboring communities. These people risked their lives by giving food to Mr. Vandor, and the food sustained his life! His life story is one big adventure that is spreading around the world and teaching everyone to have hope, and always try to see the positive outlook. This is a true survival story about one man and his destiny to overpower evil and spread goodness through his teachings...”

## BORG Bad Radkersburg

Mag. Dorothea Kern-Wolf, project leader of the holocaust studies at BORG Bad Radkersburg invited me to tell my story in person to the students of her eighth-grade classes (12<sup>th</sup> grade in the American system). She also organized a field trip with her students to visit the FRIEDENSMAHNMAL memorial in St. Anna am Aigen.



37. Field trip photo

Her students participated in the essay contest. Three of her students won €100 prize each for best essays in German language. The winners were: **Nicolas Gombocz**, **Felix Reicht** and **Lisa-Maria Trummer**.



Mrs. Elisabeth Weinhandl presented the **"Friedensmahnmal – Preis"** to the award-winning students. The highlight of her presentation speech was:

*...(Friedensmahnmal-Preis) Monument for Peace Award... ...will be granted today for the first time. It was created for young people who are willing to look closely at the facts instead of taking the easier path of looking the other way.*

*"Come on, stop always talking about these things. It happened so long ago. How is it our concern?"*

*You hear that sentiment often when someone is about to rehash the horrible events of WWII...*

*... we should be aware of being among those who are happy to live in peace and freedom. And no one should dare to say that it's not his concern what happens in the world, I'm not able to change anything anyway.*

*Everyone is able to make some change, not necessarily in world affairs, but in his or her own community. Everyone can contribute something to make the world better. And you, dear prizewinners, you have already started by engaging in something. You have engaged in dealing with a part of one of the darkest chapters of our history...*



38. Lisa-Maria Trummer, Elisabeth Weinhandl, Felix Reicht, Mag. Dorothea Kern-Wolf, Nicolas Gombocz and Principal Dr. Eduard Fasching

Mag. Barbara Oberascher translated the winning essays from German to English.

Snippets from the essay **Felix Reicht** submitted:

*“...We are here! The monument is on the Slovenian border. It is creepy quiet. The cold November wind is going through my limbs. We are wading through dirty, torn soil...*

*...How might the prisoners have felt without good shoes, on dirty, torn ground and without warm clothes? The monument looks different than I have expected. It looks dreary. The memorial site is separated by a small road, which leads to the border. I am disappointed. My expectations were probably too high. My classmates feel similarly. Everything is grey. Bleak. Cold. We are holding on to a few impressions, taking some photos, reading the Human Rights, also the story of Sandor Vandor....*

*...There is an almost solemn quietness. An unreal feeling is getting hold of me. This quiet place is supposed to have been the site of such a tragedy. We are looking for what used to be the Panzergraben. “Maybe here? Or there?” We are leaving this sad place a bit helplessly. We are getting warm again in our cars. We are silent. Finally, the weekend! But I cannot really enjoy this thought...*

*...What we have experienced and what Sandor Vandor has told us about persecution, rescue and his return to St. Anna is staying in my mind, is solidly planted there. “*

Quotation from **Nicolas Gombocz** writing:

*“...From the car window I was able to see a monument. Would it be it? I assumed we have taken the wrong way! I am getting out, like all the others – within short time my shoes are covered with mud and dirt. I am thinking and reassuring myself with the thought that I have to be glad to have shoes at all, because the prisoners, who worked here more than 65 years ago, were definitely not equipped with such luxury...*

*...we took photos of the group for mementos. It is not quite clear where we have to go, and while we are asking for the way again I am thinking that we even have the luxury of going in a car. The prisoners, however, had to walk all the way.”*

Highlights from the essay of **Lisa-Maria Trummer**:

*“...On a cold, misty November day, late morning, we are on our way to visit the memorial site in St. Anna, which Sandor Vandor has told us about...*

*...The wind is whistling; it is grey and foggy. I would like to get back into the car! What power, energy and endurance did the prisoners have to summon when we think of the terrible living conditions in the labour camp, which Sandor Vandor has told us about...*

*...Near the Slovenian border there is the monument, which Sandor Vandor has described to us. It is unbelievable what people had to go through, what they had to endure, without good shoes, without warm clothes!*

*... Between us deep quietness prevails, nobody dares to speak loudly. I am becoming thoughtful and the fun I have just had with my friend Lilly is gone. I am thinking of what people had to endure at that time. However, they did not give up hope, as they wanted to survive. And although this hope was very little, they were clinging to it. I am thinking of the sorrow and pain people like Sandor Vandor had to endure. Therefore, I should not complain about my own life anymore.”*

These Austrian students compared their present day's life and tried to put themselves into my shoes, or to the shoes of a slave laborer. They compared their present day behavior to the action of a slave laborer of the past. In many respects the American students are thinking similarly as the Austrian student's despite of the geographical distance. They learned from history. We achieved our goal with this group. We are in contact with other students and striving to reach for more.

And soon we struck gold! Austrian students showed creativity and ingenuity. They challenged themselves to use different forms of expression in more than one language. They created higher-level commentary using such diverse media as poetry, music, and painting.

A student wrote poems in two languages: English and German.

A student wrote a song, including the lyrics and the music.

A student painted a picture and superimposed it with text. According to the saying "A picture is worth a thousand words", this picture is worth more than 1010 words.

### **Paldau Middle School**

Introducing the township of Paldau. With 2000 inhabitants situated in the Feldbach district in Styria, about 50 km east from Graz, also just a few kilometers north from Gnas. At the end of March 1945, the Nazis evacuated the Jewish Forced Laborers from the eastern border region. Individual groups were moved (by foot) to Gnas. There formed larger groups and escorted in Death March to the concentration camp Mauthausen. The geographic area had their share of infamy during a few days towards the end of WWII.

Mr. Franz Josef Schober added a Supplement, a recollection from his recorded historical data:

### **Supplement**

*At the abandonment of the fortification work at the end of March 1945, the Hungarian-Jewish forced laborer, Sandor Vandor was left behind in St. Anna am Aigen with other seriously ill and no longer marching capable Jews, in the barracks near Aigen, in the so called „Hell“.*

*His boyhood friend, Gyuri, still in a better physical condition, had to begin the death march, for marching capable forced laborers, toward the Mauthausen concentration camp. The evacuation of the exhausted Jews took place by foot and was organized by the often-brutal members of the „Kreisleitung“ (District leadership). The forced laborers, previously*

*having been employed of building fortification subsections in St. Anna am Aigen and Kalch, were driven in a brutal march nearby Bad Gleichenberg and Trautmannsdorf to Gnas. There, while during taking rest, three Jews died and the already half-starved Jews received some food, also some food from the locals and the death march continued via Graz and Präbichl (where many locals became witnesses of the terrible massacres) to Mauthausen.*

*There were several transportation routes so that the reconstruction of the various events is often very difficult. A large number of mass graves left behind along the routes of the death marches. After the war, a mass grave with 14 Hungarian Jews were also found in Paldau (situated southwest of Feldbach), as a reminder of the inhumanities and atrocities during those death marches*

*Franz Josef Schober.*

I visited the middle school in Paldau. Told my story to 13 – 14 years old students'. After my visit a poster was created by the teachers and their students. The text of the poster with one photograph appeared in the local paper, the PALDAUER GEMEINDENACHRICHTEN 2011, issue No. 04, the Christmas issue.

Jana Scheucher, student of the Paldau School, inspired by the story and wrote an acrostic poem. She is 13 years old. Her native language is German. Jana wrote the poem in English and wrote a companion acrostic poem in German. She submitted her work **A Poem for Sandor** to the Essay Contest and she was awarded by a **Friedensmahnmal-Preis**.

## A Poem for Sandor

By: Jana Scheucher

Some people risked their lives to help him.

Alone - his family was dead but

No anger in his eyes.

Daily fear and pain.

One by one they were gassed or shot.

Rich in good and bad experiences

Vigilant about whom to trust

Angry, to have lost many years of his life.

No need to feel hate.

Dejected, they were left behind in huts.

Only a few people who survived the long journey.

Ready for a new beginning.

,

So he has done!

Happy to have been given a second life.

Enough of the hard work and suffering.

Anxiety that comes back into his dreams.

Rich in love and gratitude.

The residents of St. Anna risked their lives to help him.

Only faith kept him alive.

Never lost hope.

Lost, alone and without family.

Yes, only his power and love strengthened him.

Feels gratitude in his heart.

Excited to come home in the end

Evil deeds, good deeds.

Longing for freedom and peace.

Say yes – no contradiction

Grateful for the help.

Responsible for the War: the Nazis

Always feels them in his heart.

Them..... the residents of St. Anna am Aigen.

Important to be able to forgive.

They wish, they had done more.

Unbearable but no hate in his voice.

Derogated and humiliated but still proud.

Every day they had to struggle to survive



And the German poem:

### **Ein Gedicht für Sandor**

von Jana Scheucher

**S**ie riskierten ihr Leben, die Menschen die ihm halfen  
**A**llein - seine Familie war tot  
**N**iemals ohne Hoffnung  
**D**ie Tage voller Angst und Schmerz  
**O**ft Sehnsucht nach Freiheit und Frieden  
**R**eich an guten und schlechten Erfahrungen

**V**orsichtig, den richtigen Leuten zu vertrauen  
**A**ber nur wenige Menschen haben überlebt  
**N**iemals Hass spüren.  
**D**ie Geknechteten im Lager zurückgelassen  
**O**hne Mitleid wurden die sie vergast oder erschossen.  
**R**esigniere nicht, sei stark.

,  
**S**o ist es geschehen!

**H**ass aus dem Herzen verbannen und vergeben  
**E**nde der harten Arbeit und des Leidens  
**R**eich an Liebe und Dankbarkeit  
**Z**ornig, viele Jahre seines Lebens verloren zu haben

**I**mmmer um Hilfe bemüht.  
**S**ie .....die Bewohner von St. Anna am Aigen  
**T**räume voller Angst

**V**erantwortlich für die Gräueltaten des Krieges: die Nazis  
**O**bwohl sie ihr Leben riskierten, halfen die Bewohner von St. Anna  
**L**iebe gab ihm Kraft und stärkte ihn  
**L**ebenslang Dankbarkeit im Herzen

**D**ankbar für die Hilfe.  
**A**ufgenommen und versorgt.  
**N**ur der Glaube hielt ihn am Leben.  
**K**einesfalls nur böse Taten- auch gute  
**B**ereit für einen Neuanfang  
**A**ufbruch in ein neues Leben  
**R**eich, an positiven Gefühlen im Herzen  
**K**ompromisslos das Ziel verfolgen  
**E**ndlich nach Hause kommen  
**I**mmmer noch stolz, trotz Demütigung und Leid  
**T**rost und Hoffnung lassen ihn vergeben aber niemals vergessen.

**BORG Bad Radkersburg**  
**Philipp Maier**

Philipp Maier on Nov 8, 2012 sent me a CD with the following note attached:

Dear Sandor,

I wrote this song after your visit at BORG Bad Radkersburg one year ago. I was fascinated by your positive attitude towards life and I really appreciate the fact that you still keep on visiting schools to tell your story which I think is so precious for every single student and every class you have visited. So, at the bus on the way home from school at the day of your visit I was thinking of the things you told us and I started writing the lyrics for this song (they contain a few lines of the poem "And Yet" because I liked them a lot – that's why I called this song "And Yet").

And now, here are lyrics of the song "And Yet" by Philipp Maier:

**And Yet**

dedicated to Sandor Vandor

19 year old labourer survived humiliation – and discrimination  
stood through times of thirst – and starvation  
the one he's dreaming of has gone to  
the world our friend's gone too,  
but it's his duty to tell us his story  
and what he's been through  
to prevent us from becoming like them too  
and encourage us to provide help if others need it too

Sandor shares his story with us  
they left food on the road – no matter he was  
a stranger from abroad  
they answered the door  
and a girl wishes  
she had done more

good people some of them Nazis  
good people, evil ones  
good deeds, evil deeds  
what would the world look like  
if we lived all with his heart

if we lived all with his heart

a step between prison and freedom  
a step to flee from fears  
a step between two worlds  
one of joy and one of tears  
a step for three people  
a step for sixty years

Sandor shares his story with us  
coming from America to visit our class  
to talk about the cruel times, he has passed  
-times of harsh labour – and arranged –  
arranged starvation  
he resisted as one of the last  
they the Nazis  
and yet there is no  
hatred in his voice no anger in his eyes

so  
if we lived all with his heart

(backgrounds: and wounds are sealed - and lacks are filled)

After a few brief email exchanges, we met, and I made a video clip as he was performing the song. The complete song runs 4:06 minutes.

Update about Philipp Maier carrier.

Right after graduation from BORG Bad Radkersburg, Philipp completed the civil community service, and in 2013 he entered the Anton - Bruckner University in Linz (Upper Austria) to study Jazz guitar. Philipp also studied composition. As of this writing in 2016, he is still a full time student. In the meantime, Philipp formed 3 bands for concert touring and recording albums. During winter break in February of 2016, with the band "The Girl and the Ghost" he performed in the cities of Mannheim, Möchengladbach, Hamburg, Magdeburg and Berlin in Germany. With the band "P.M. Love Explosion," Philipp performed in Graz and Feldbach in Austria. With the third band, "Kaiko," Philipp is creating a new album.

**BORG Bad Radkersburg**  
**Elisabeth Kolleritsch**

On the page immediately following the poem "**A Blade of Grass**" the first paragraph ending with Ron's remark:

**"See what one apple can do?"**

Elisabeth Kolleritsch created an acrylic painting of an apple (photo 39) and she added some words to it.



## **BORG Bad Radkersburg**

### **Graduation 2013**

During the Graduation Festivities on June 27, 2013, winners of the Friedensmahnmal Essay Contest received their awards. Professor Mag. Dorothea Kern-Wolf had the honor to present the prizes. To introduce the winners, she made a short but powerful speech. Here is the text of her speech in its entirety (translated from German by Kathrin Weinhandl):

#### ***People can be expected to know the truth!***

*Ladies and Gentlemen!*

*This thought of Carinthian writer Ingeborg Bachmann – “People can be expected to know the truth” – can be rediscovered in the quest of the Hungarian Jew Sandor Vador, who now lives in California. It is his wish to tell young people his story – as truthful and genuine as possible and without exaggeration and much pathos.*

*Sandor Vador was born in 1925 near Budapest. In 1944, at the age of 19, he was in a forced labor camp near St. Anna, where they were building anti-tank ditches (fortifications). Malnutrition, hard work, weakening of his health, and probably also the longing for his home and family were accompanying him for many weeks and months.*

*According to his own statement, Sandor Vador was only able to survive because of the people of St. Anna, who – in secret - consistently gave him food, especially apples. To this day he is grateful for that!*

*For many years the now 88-year-old Sandor Vador has been visiting schools in Styria to tell his story with admirable vigor. His effort to work with pupils is not motivated by the desire for retribution, but rather aims at reminding that ordinary people have experienced the extraordinary. This effort certainly deserves recognition and respect, as it is a clear message for future generations.*

*As part of his work as a contemporary witness, Sandor Vador founded the international Peace-Memorial-Award, which our school already won in 2011 with three essays. This year, we chose a different path – steering away from words and leading to other forms of expression. Thereby we are again among this year’s recipients. Elisabeth Kolleritsch from the graduating class won with her watercolor “The Apple”, as did Philipp Meier who graduated from this high school last year. He composed the music for the poem “And Yet”, dedicated to Sandor Vador by an American teacher. This certainly unusual response of young people is of course an honor for our school, where Sandor Vador has become a dear and welcomed guest.*

*People can be expected to know the truth!*

*A key objective of a contemporary History class will always be to take clear political positions and to make valid democratic-humane core values as the center of education. And it is also clearly and distinctly going to be about the request to always be guided by one’s conscience, and not the norms of a social system or a group.*

*In a contemporary History class, the basic social skills of students are encouraged when it comes to developing empathy for the segregated and persecuted, and to critically question the values of today’s society in regard to human core values. Also laying the foundations for an interaction of social skills and historical knowledge.*

*On behalf of Sandor Vandro, I will now hand over this year's Peace-Memorial-Award to Elisabeth Kolleritsch and Philipp Meier for their exceptional creative contributions.*

The awards were presented.

Professor Mag. Dorothea Kern-Wolf introduced Ingeborg Bachmann's speech entitled **"People can be expected to know the truth."**

Bachmann wrote a radio play about her troubled characters who lost their eyesight during WWII. The play entitled "Der gute Gott von Manhattan" (The good God from Manhattan) was broadcasted by the "Bayerische Rundfunk 2" radio station in Munich, Germany. In 1959 the play won a prestigious award. In accepting the award Ms. Bachmann wrote a speech entitled *Die Wahrheit ist dem Menschen zumutbar* (People can be expected to know the truth). In that speech Ms. Bachman said that – *the author is hoping to find the audience with open ears for the truth. Everyone wants to have open eyes to visualize the truth. Because people are expected to know the truth.* And the author is encouraged by receiving *praises and dispraises*. Ms. Bachman admonished the blind characters to *open their eyes, see and accept the truth*. Only open eyes will suffice to obtain any positive outlook for continuing some semblance of normal life.

Elisabeth Weinhandl had the honor of handing out the very first awards of the newly established "*Friedensmahnmal – Preis*" or "*Peace Memorial Award*" essay contest to the winners. Mrs. Weinhandl in her speech highlighted the same sentiment (see above in this chapter). I read Ingeborg Bachmann's acceptance speech and inspired me to make the following assessment:

I traveled to Sankt Anna am Aigen intending to meet with elected representatives at City Hall and thank them for the concerted effort of villagers in 1945 to help the Jewish Forced Laborers, thereby saving my life. At the very first meeting with then-Mayor Josef Weinhandl, it was established that my story was the truth because it perfectly meshed with local contemporary witness recollections. Trust was established between the local people and me. And that trust was re-emphasized by the spiritual leader, Bishop Dr. Franz Lackner, the civic leader Mayor Josef Weinhandl, and local historian Franz Josef Schober by contributing Forewords to this book of ST. ANNA 2005. The Mayor had a brilliant idea: instead of meeting in City Hall to deliver my "Thank You" to elected officials, I should deliver my "Thank You note" to the students during their History class in the local Middle School. I did that with the help of the best interpreter, the Mayor's wife, Elisabeth Weinhandl. Her presence at my side as interpreter heightened the trustworthiness of my words. I *found open ears*. The students soaked up my story like a thirsty sponge. After dismissal from classes the students flooded the township with their rare experiences; *their eyes were opened*. My eyes were opened also. Prior to my revisit of St. Anna in 2005 I didn't see; I wasn't aware of the magnitude of the efforts by the inhabitants to help the Jews. I started broadly telling my story about the villagers' and me, because *people are expected to know the truth*. And that was the time I started receiving *praises, my awards*.

With the help of Elisabeth Weinhandl, within two days Maria Lackner and I found each other and established by forensic evidence - where only the person present at the scene knows the details - in, which I was the recipient of the egg sandwich that she prepared for a hungry Jewish Laborer. Over the years, I visited her numerous times. We both enjoyed meeting again - and - again. Both Maria Lackner and I were simultaneously *rewarded* with



living a better life. Is there any *award* more valuable than a better life? On the last visit at October 2010, I played special music for her. While clutching our hands for the last time, she made an inventory of the past and reflected that she had fulfillment in life.

The township of Sankt Anna am Aigen built the "Mahnmal für den Frieden" -- Memorial for Peace -- a Monument to commemorate the slain Hungarian Jewish Forced Laborers. Artist and sculptress Mrs. Roswitha Dautermann designed the Monument. I helped erect the Monument. Inside the "Memorial for Peace" there are six tablets. The major theme -- The Universal Bill of Rights -- is on four tablets. The fifth tablet describes the monument and lists the names of the builders. On the sixth tablet, only my name is placed in prominent position with a brief description of how the righteous villagers saved my life when I was a Forced Laborer in St. Anna during WWII, the event that prompted my revisit to St Anna in 2005 to say, "THANK YOU". And that is a monumental *award*.

The author is writing the story but needs a publisher. Elisabeth Arlt of Pavelhaus took the story under her wing and guided it's publication at the website of Pavelhaus and the story flourished. And that wasn't the end of her involvement. Over time, she created a variety of venues for my story and introduced it to influential people who helped disseminate my story to an ever-broadening audience. That's the best *praise* any author can get.

I faithfully followed the "Weinhandl" model and kept lecturing students in their classrooms, mostly Middle -- and High schools, both in California and Styria. In the Austrian schools, Mrs. Weinhandl stood by my side as interpreter and with her presence vouched for the integrity of my story. I was *rewarded* with astounding results:

Students from Professor Kern-Wolf's class at BORG Bad Radkersburg were the first recipients of the "*Friedens mahnmal -- Preis*".

At Malibu Middle School in California, students received the *Peace Memorial Award*.

I visited the R. J. Frank Intermediate School in Oxnard, CA. One teacher, Ms. Kristin Jensen Storey *awarded* me with her poem "AND YET." After that event, when I lectured in other schools, during my presentation a student (or one occasion the professor) recited the poem. In Austrian schools, students recited both the English version of "AND YET" and the translated version: "UND DENNOCH."

At Paldau Middle School in Austria, my story and the poem "AND YET" inspired a young seventh grader, Jana Scheucher to write an acrostic poem entitled "A POEM FOR SANDOR" with a companion German language -- also acrostic -- poem EIN GEDICHT FÜR SANDOR. The title says it all.

Again, it is Mrs. Kern-Wolf's class at BORG Radkersburg. A graduating class student Philipp Maier took the poem "AND YET" and created a song. He composed the music and used the poem as a base to create the lyrics and kept the title intact-- "AND YET." I am at a loss for words. What adjective would you add to this *award*? Best sounding *award*?

And the sweetest *apple* ever given by a student to the teacher is the APPLE painted by Elisabeth Kolleritsch.

## ARGE

The "Weinhandl" model for lecturing students in their classrooms was extended to cyberspace. Elisabeth Arlt connected me to ARGE -- Jugend gegen Gewalt und Rassism -- Working Partnership for Youth Against Violence and Racism. <[www.argejugend.at](http://www.argejugend.at)>

This ARGE created, organized and set up a web teleconference "Online-Dialog" and recording sessions under the subject of "generationendialog".

On November 8, 2013, I had a session with 30 students in the library of BORG Bad Radkersburg. Also, we made a field trip to the "*Friedensmahnmal*" Peace Memorial at St. Anna am Aigen. Both events were recorded and streamed on the Internet via YouTube in four video clips. The following 4 links may provide access for viewing:

1. <http://www.generationendialog-steiermark.at/video/sandor-vandor-lagerleben-st-anna-am-aigen/>

Running time - 3:59 (min)

2. <http://www.generationendialog-steiermark.at/video/sandor-vandor-mahnmal-lager-st-anna-am-aigen/>

Running time - 4:32 (min)

3. <http://www.generationendialog-steiermark.at/video/sandor-vandor-ankunft-im-lager-st-anna-am-aigen/>

Running time - 4:30 (min)

4. <http://www.generationendialog-steiermark.at/video/lager-st-anna-am-aigen-befreiung/>

Running time - 5:02 (min)

On November 12, 2013, in the realm of "generationendialog" I was able to lecture a group of youth live in the auditorium of the Media Center of Styria in Graz while a group of students were listening some 35 km away in the auditorium of the City Museum at the Bruck an der Mur. A total of about 110 students were present at both venues. Their questions were transferred live to our auditorium. In that way, every participant listened to my story and participated in the "question & answer" period using the latest technology available involving cyberspace and YouTube. For viewing that event ARGE provided the links for accessing three videos approximately 25 minutes each with total viewing time of 75 minutes.

Online-Dialog: Lager St. Anna am Aigen (1)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHEU6zEkoX4#t=126>

Online-Dialog: Lager St. Anna am Aigen (2)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pt0MS4q1TPM#t=28>

Online-Dialog: Lager St. Anna am Aigen (3)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY9IVJvtN6c#t=37>

## Visiting Austrian Schools – fall of 2014.

### **St Anna Middle School**

Sixteen students attended for 1 class-hour with lecture plus question–and–answer period. Five students commented that their grandfathers or great grandfathers were inmates of different POW camps during WW2. One student, Lisa Amschl, made a comment about her Uroma (great grandmother) who also gave food to the Jews. As she went home from school that day, she told her grandmother, Mrs. Margarete Amschl, of what they have discussed in the class. As a result of that conversation, she created and submitted the following write-up entitled "Brot für die Juden", in German and with the English translation „Bread for the Jews” by Elisabeth Weinhandl

#### **Brot für die Juden**

Meine Uroma Anna Schlögl wurde 1900 in Jamm 117, St. Anna am Aigen, geboren. Sie erzählte meiner Oma (geboren 1948) immer, was sie in den Kriegsjahren erlebt hatte.

Als sie im Winter zur Kirche ging, bemerkte sie, dass unter der Kirchenmauer gefangene Juden waren. Sie waren barfuß und bettelten um Essen. Jeden Sonntag, wenn sie zur Kirche ging, nahm sie Brot mit. Während der Messe schlich sie aus der Kirche und warf das Brot hinunter, denn es war verboten, den Juden Essen zu geben. Doch eines Tages hörte sie, dass die Juden weggebracht worden waren. Erst später erfuhr sie, dass die Juden ins Konzentrationslager gebracht worden waren.

Lisa Amschl, 10 Jahre

Margarete Amschl, Tochter von Anna Schlögl

Anna Schlögl (1900 – 1982), Erzählerin

#### **Bread for the Jews**

My great grandmother, Anna Schlögl was born in 1900 in Jamm 117, St. Anna am Aigen. She has always been telling my grandmother, who was born in 1948, what she had lived through during the war.

When she went to church in winter, she noticed Jews who were standing below the wall surrounding the church. They were barefoot and begged for food. Every Sunday when she went to church, she took some bread with her. During the service she sneaked away from the church and threw the bread off the top of the wall, because it was forbidden to give food to the Jews. But one day she

heard that the Jews had been taken away. Only sometime later she learned that the Jews had been taken away to the concentration camp.

Lisa Amschl, aged 10

Margarete Amschl, Anna Schlögl's daughter

Anna Schlögl (1900 – 1982), narrator

Some circumstantial thoughts about Lisa Amschl's submission:

The major south–north thoroughfare, Main Street of St. Anna originates from the Church Plaza. On the east side of Main Street, with even numbers, the first building is the parsonage. The second building is the "old" school building. For the Jewish Forced Laborers housed in the School Building it would not have been difficult to reach the area of the bottom of the Church Plaza wall because of the close proximity. Please recall Imre Weisz statements: His group was housed in the School Building up to late February or early March when they were moved to the newly built wooden barracks in the "Hölle" with the tented roof. That was the first move for that group of Jews, which fit to Lisa's note. *"Only sometime later she (Anna Schlögl) learnt that the Jews had been taken away to the concentration camp."* And that was in late March. The "wooden barracks," I named them "infirmary barracks," consisted of a number of wooden barrack buildings. One was the "tented roof barrack" where Imre Weisz was billeted before the evacuation. Later, just before the evacuation, his friends escorted Charles Dévay with fleck typhus to the "tented roof barrack". And I was in one of the wooden barracks where Gyuri escorted me.

### **BORG Monsberger, Graz and BORG Feldbach.**

Seniors (grade 12), about 40 students combined in 2 class hours for each event for a total of 3 events.

One girl asked the question: "Do you have any residual suffering from the events of 1944-45?" I answered: My mother was killed in 1944, shortly after arriving at the Auschwitz death camp. I miss her every day ever since. In normal times, she would have been dead some time already. And the grieving process after her death would have set in. But the way she was murdered the "normal" grieving was not permitted to set in and it feels like I'm still in the early mourning process. And I miss her. This probably will never be resolved.

Another (female) student asked how I felt in 1945 when us, the three survivors, my father, my sister and me, met the first time after survival. My answer was about the loss of a mother. Somewhat similar as the answer before.

During a former lecture at 2011 in St. Anna am Aigen Middle School, an eleven-year-old girl – she had valid reason to be concerned – asked the question: *"How did you feel when you found out that your mother was not alive?"* I was surprised to hear a question like that from a young person. With slight elaboration in essence I reflected in my answer that I missed my mother very much and I have missed her ever since. Apparently, she liked my answer. She demonstrated her feeling on the next day, when we met again on a relaxed occasion and she greeted me with an affectionate hug. By now she is attending classes in a high school and goes on living.

On three different occasions female students asked the same or similar questions from mixed audiences. Also Mrs. Elisabeth Weinhandl was observing that a few girls had teary eyes when I was answering the questions about my return to Hungary after liberation. Without my mother, I had no family life. Ditto for Anna; with the loss of her parents and grandparents, she lost her family life. Those questions and related answers demonstrated specific gender sensitivities.

In this narration of ST. ANNA 2005 I already used the expression of "barely alive" more than once to describe my physical condition at liberation. The same expression would also be valid to describe my mental condition after liberation. My mental comprehension was also "barely alive." I lived in a world of shades of gray, not in black-and-white. When I heard that my mother was murdered, I did not comprehend it in full depth. The grieving didn't set in. The loss of my mother has been extended for my entire life.

In 1945, when my father wrote the historical narrative "Amerikai Üzenetek" he gave an answer without anyone asking that question:

"Három test, három szív, három lélek olvadt egy nagy, egy boldog ölelésben. Három szempár könnyezte a jelent és siratta a múltat. A múltat, mely csak lebegett fölöttük, de meg nem szólalhatott. Nem köszönthette megmenekedett férjét, gyermekeit..."

My humble translation:

"Three bodies, three hearts and three souls melted together in one huge, one happy hug. Three pairs of eyes were shedding tears over the present and grieving for the past. The past was only hovering above them but rendered speechless. Unable to greet her survived husband and children..."

### **ACE Charter High School**

Friday, Feb 13, 2015. Elisabeth Weinhandl and I held a joint lecture about ST. ANNA 2005. Double sessions with double classes in a classroom with overflowing capacity. Standing room only, up to the doorway and beyond to the corridor. At the first session, the classroom was packed with more than 100 students, all seniors of the graduating class. I talked about my slave labor experiences in St Anna, including the hard labor with large calorie exertion, the meager calorie intake, the denied personal hygiene, and their devastating results. Elisabeth explained the helping actions of the local people. In her opening remark she said *"for 60 years the villagers have been avoiding talking about that horrible war with all its atrocities and they still have feelings of guilt, although many of them helped the Jews as much as they were able to. And then, in 2005, Sandor came back without bitterness and resentment to say thank you for saving his life in 1945. This way he helped our community to look at history from a different angle."* She cited names of women she personally knew helped Jews in those dark days. Two of them are still alive, the others have since passed away. She not only named the individuals, but described the different methods each employed, showing that each person can and will initiate personalized actions when it's needed. For many years, in my thoughts, I was searching for a leader who directed the natives to help the Jews. I detailed that in the chapter NEUHAUS AM KLAUSENBACH. But now in her speech, Elisabeth Weinhandl made it clear that each individual acted on their own, following their own

consciences. They decided for themselves how to help, how much and what they could provide, while at the same time openly showing fearless high moral actions.

Elisabeth also mentioned the names of Austrian students with especially great responses to my story. Some of the young people participated in erecting the "Mahnmal für den Frieden" ("Memorial for Peace"). Some wrote essays indicating how they were touched by the story of ST. ANNA 2005. And some are working on their graduation theses on the subject of my story. She closed her remarks with the following:

*"We are human beings with a freewill and thus it is always up to ourselves to make choices. It's not a matter of the circumstances but everyone's personal and moral decision which side one is going to take.*

*We should not forget the past and everyone should try to add his share of responsibility and awareness, so that something horrible like the Holocaust will never happen again."*

After the presentation, we switched to a Question & Answer period. At the very beginning of the Q & A, a student raised hand to offer a comment. While turning around and facing his peers with ample loud voice, he repeated Elisabeth's Gandhi-esque sentences: *"Everyone is able to make some change, not necessarily in world affairs, but in his or her own community. Everyone can contribute something to make the world better."*

A real live drama was unfolding in front of our eyes. And here let the teacher explain what's going on in an essay he wrote titled "Change."

## **Change**

Gandhi noted, "If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. ... We need not wait to see what others do". This quote comes to my mind when I reflect on the words of ACE student OE after he heard a testimony on the horrors of the Holocaust by survivor Sandor Vador and the ally Elisabeth Weinhandl. OE is not one to normally call for action, in fact, he has a learning difference that prevents him from communicating to others altogether. OE is a student who is ever-present on our campus but lost in the halls of the countless students who he normally cannot interact with. I see OE each morning before school, he is dropped off, he takes a seat on a nearby bench, and he sits and watches as other students around him go about their own social lives. OE is not shunned by the groups, but he is himself not comfortable within any of them. This sense of retreat within OE changed for a powerful moment on February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015. OE sat within the middle of a hundred or so students as he listened to stories of horror, triumph, and thankfulness. Then, like a bird released from a cage, OE stood before his peers and spoke to them. He spoke to most all of them for the very first time, but it was clear to me that what he had to say had a resonance within the student body as a whole. OE spoke and called on his peers not to change the World, but to look within each of themselves for change. He called on each student to fix whatever action or habit is current in each one's own minds and to look within to make sure the horrors of the Holocaust are never repeated. Over my career I have learned that sparks within students can come at any time, for OE, the actions described to him in light of such challenges sparked a voice within him. Where he takes this growth is anyone's guess, but he found his voice. A voice that all who were there know that he now has. A voice that he knows that he now has. A voice that was given wings by the words of a survivor.

John Middleton

Social Science Teacher, ACE Charter High School



At ACE Charter High School, the student with academic excellence also with rare interacting difficulty, OE, presumably found his **VOICE** by listening to the presentations of Elisabeth and me. In his very first vocal rendition, he called each student to action in the same style as Gandhi. Probably he already made up his mind some time during the presentation and hearing Elisabeth's admonition strongly triggered him to action. This wonderful event will be recognized, and Elisabeth Weinhandl will be the recipient of the *soaring voice award*.

## **THESIS**

When students are inspired to research history and then to follow up on someone's work, it is very flattering. It shows that the author found "open ears" and "open eyes." And he found those "ears" and "eyes" amongst the most precious audience, the students, the future leaders. Two graduating students, Valentina Robisch and Alexander Legenstein, from two different high schools, did their follow up. Both schools are in the geographic vicinity of St. Anna am Aigen. I visited their schools and made my presentations in both of their classrooms. To fulfill their graduation requirements for the 2014/15 school-year, both Valentina and Alexander chose the same subject and created their Academic Works.

**Valentina Robisch** studied at BORG Bad Radkersburg. In her thesis, she elaborated about slave laborers in St. Anna am Aigen during WWII, with my story in emphasis. The thesis, "Academic Work," exhibits her diligent research as well as her deep understanding of the subject. She dedicated a chapter for the bravery of Maria Lackner. Her thesis "Slave-labor in St. Anna am Aigen During the Second World War Through the Example of Sandor Vandro Contemporary Witness", was graded with the highest level: "A."

**Alexander Legenstein**, lives in St. Anna am Aigen and graduated from BORG Feldbach. He submitted the required thesis entitled: "The Circumstances of the Lives of the Hungarian Jewish Forced Laborers in and Around the Area of St. Anna During the Second World War." He completed his Academic Work on a higher level than required. Beside writing a concise story, based on readings and personal interviews, he also conducted in-depth research. He designed a questionnaire which he distributed to participating students. Alexander collected 65 completed surveys. He analyzed and drew statistical summations. From the survey he found that a large majority – 94% – of the students never received any information about Forced Labor during WWII. Never visited a Forced Labor site or camp. Never visited a Concentration camp. The subject is not in the realm of their curriculum. After observing the survey results, he became active to disseminate information about that subject. The thesis earned him a grade "A." The faculty awarded the highest grade available and they submitted his thesis to a statewide contest. That contest was fruitful and resulted in an award. The Historical Society of Styria bestowed upon him the prestigious Tremel Medal for his Exemplary Work about a historical event in Styria. The award ceremony was held in Graz on May 29, 2015.

## Las Colinas M S

On Monday, April 18, 2016, I made presentations to two double classes of seventh graders at Las Colinas Middle School in Camarillo, CA. Most of the attending students wrote me 'thank you' notes. Two of those notes are shared here. To publish the writings of Jessica and Maria (changed name), the School policy was strictly observed.

A student, **Jessica P**, was present at my lecture and apparently also read the story of ST. ANNA 2005. Jessica is 14 years old and attending Honor Classes. In a powerful poem, she commented about her fellow students' behavior during my presentation in a Bachmann-esque way:

### **Voices**

By Jessica P

#### Silence

So many ears straining to listen  
to a single voice  
A voice they tried to hide  
they could hurt it  
but they couldn't kill  
His single voice  
His single story  
How many were lost?  
Beginnings destroyed?  
Endings forgotten?  
How many voices have been reduced to echoes?  
How many people reduced to mirages?  
How many were there  
but now are not?  
Ghost are that remains  
Waiting  
Not to be remembered  
Not to be found  
but to be heard  
but to be seen  
All we have to do is open our eyes  
All we have to do is listen

The other student, **Maria H**, also 14 years of age, attending Honor Classes and was present at my lecture. The note Maria sent me is more like a very outstanding, personal letter:

Dear Mr. Vandor,  
First and foremost, thank you; not only for your speech, which was remarkable, but also for your hope. I hope this isn't too personal to mention, but I've had depression since I was a child, I spent a good chunk of my life obsessing over negatives. A while back, I decided to find the bright side in everything, so I could hopefully find it myself. However, history has always made that difficult. How am I to find the bright side from something as horrible as what you faced. Well your speech answered that question and as this question has been haunting for the better part of two years, I can sincerely say you changed my life. The way you see the people who imprisoned you, the way you say they just like any other person in the world, shows me that the bright of a situation isn't always in the situation but in the people it affected. You inspire me to be more forgiving and positive. So, your speech, while amazing, isn't what I'd like to thank you for, I'd would like to thank you for your influence, and spending your time bringing hope and positive lessons everywhere you go, even despite what you went through.

Sincerely  
Maria H.

Two years later, in 2018, as a response to my presentation, a student, **Timothy S.** wrote a poem:

### **New Beginning**

By Timothy S.

One day coming soon  
others are gone.  
You think what is happening  
is so, so wrong.

What did I do  
to deserve all of this?  
No matter how close I came,  
death will still miss.

And now it is over,  
you still have not died.  
Your heart and soul pumping  
just to stay alive.

Now that you are home  
you can start life again.

A Brand New Beginning  
nowhere near the end.

## The Autumn of 2016

### Theresien-Gymnasium Munchen, DE

In the year of 1918, the "*eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month*" a historical time was declared.

At the Invitation of Mr. Johannes Schittler, Professor of Social Studies of the Theresien-Gymnasium in Munich, Germany. "*Wir würden uns sehr freuen, Herrn Vador als Zeitzeugen am begrüßen zu dürfen!*" In translation: "*It would be a great pleasure for us to welcome Mr Vador, who is a contemporary witness!*" The invitation set the time.

In the year of 2016, at 11 o'clock of the 11th day of the 11th month, I entered to the office of Mrs. Gabriele Jahreiß-Walther, Principal of the Theresien-Gymnasium, to discuss the topic of the lecture I was to deliver at 11:45am. The meeting in the Principal's office was very warm. We entertained thoughts to put more effort to broaden our audiences for future lectures beyond the boundaries of the Theresien-Gymnasium. Later, the professor of the class, Mr. Johannes Schittler, joined the meeting. We continued the warm discussion with anticipation and we also met with other faculty members.

The first time I told my story of "St. Anna 2005" to school children in their classes, the event was initiated and organized by Mayor Josef Weinhandl. Eleven years later, this Munich event was facilitated by the Mayor's daughter Kathrin Weinhandl.

Thank you, Kathrin!

The audience: a combined class of about eighty 9th and 10th grade students, joined by 11 faculty members, including the Principal. As the students filed in the room, excitement, anticipation filled the air. Elisabeth and Kathrin Weinhandl were helping me to deliver a smooth lecture.

Successfully!

My audience, the students of the Theresien-Gymnasium in Munich, have had open ears. During the Question & Answer period they had very good questions indicating that their eyes were already open to see the truth.

To tell a story about yourself has psychological benefits also. I told my story on a "couch". No Freudian couch was ever designed so "ergonomic" as the "couch" at the Theresien-Gymnasium.

By the time my mother brought me to this world, the persecution of Jews in Hungary was already instilled into the governance of the country. I felt the antisemitism on my body and in my mind. At age 19, the Nazis wanted to kill me. I barely survived. And in the ninth decade of my life I traveled to Munich, Germany, telling my story of "A Life of Thankfulness and Love" of how the people of a small village in Austria provided help to the Jewish Forced Laborers – including me. Telling it to young students, the future leaders of their country.

It was a success!

The Nazism was born in Munich. Hitler lived in Munich. The Nazi leadership hailed from Munich or the suburb of Munich. They and their ideology have been dead a long time. In the year of 2016, I told my story to a roomful of German students. And that event became the crowning of my 11 years of telling my story to students and adults in 3 different countries.

The lectures will continue.

### **An evening with Retired Firefighters.**

The Retired Firefighters of St. Anna am Aigen organized and invited guests to attend an evening lecture session for Friday, Nov 26, 2016, in their clubhouse, with me as speaker. Sixty people attended (a sizeable attendance based on the area's small population). By a conservative estimate, 10 of them were born before 1940. The generation that started to use the slogan "We don't talk about those times." A generation that *Johann Weidinger* described: "...several children were looking - we were curious".

My talk was titled "A Life of Thankfulness and Love." Elisabeth Weinhandl, as always, did the translation. The audience – mostly male, only 9 females – had *open ears*. Based on the questions and the after-session discussion, they had *open eyes* also. Many of them could "talk about those times". Maybe with a hint of helpful proudness in their voice? It was a successful evening.

### **Trip to Austria, Fall 2017**

While staying in Austria in the autumn of 2017, I visited a number of schools, and delivered the same messages. And I received great responses in every classroom. The highlights were in three places: Salzburg, Rudersdorf and Fürstenfeld.

#### **Salzburg**

The Archbishop of Salzburg, Dr. Franz Lackner invited me to make a presentation at the Borromäum Catholic High School. The invitation was for Friday, Nov 17, 2017. The auditorium was packed with 105 – all male - students, along with the Principal, Dir. Mag. Winfried Penninger and faculty members. I took my place on a raised platform with Elisabeth Weinhandl. As we were about to start, the door opened, and the Archbishop entered. We greeted each other with a warm handshake and a big hug. After the greetings he took a chair on the platform at my right.



40. Archbishop Lackner, Sandor Vandro, Elisabeth Weinhandl

After being seated, the Archbishop made some opening remarks, emphasizing that his great aunt -referring to *Maria Lackner*- gave me lifesaving food. The Archbishop participated with other comments during the presentation, attesting to the fact that my lecture is a true story.

### Thomas König

We met Thomas König – from Burgenland – in Sichauf during my stay in the fall of 2016. He introduced himself as someone who is interested in and involved in Holocaust Studies. We kept in contact during the year and he continued to show more and more interest in my story. Shortly after my arrival in St. Anna, in October 2017, we met again. This time he introduced Walter Reiss, a TV personality with a deep involvement in journalism, anchorman, lecturer and this time as an active video photographer and producer. Walter interviewed me, live, in six venues.

Thomas arranged a classroom presentation for me at **NMS Rudersdorf** for Monday, Nov. 20, 2017. Walter Reiss was also invited. With the help of Elisabeth Weinhandl, I made my presentation as usual. After my lecture, Walter showed four of his video clips, in power point presentation:

*Front of the Lippe warehouse on Main Street, St. Anna*  
*In the ditch of the remains of the Panzergraben*  
*Front of the Lackner family house in Aigen*  
*At the Friedensmahnmal.*



We completed the presentation with a lively question-and-answer period. And before the class was dismissed I distributed an apple to each participant in the classroom, bearing the label of

**“An apple from St. Anna am Aigen  
It only takes an apple to create a whole family.”**

Thomas had the idea to give one apple grown in St. Anna to each student, plus an apple to each faculty present in the classroom. Elisabeth Weinhandl provided 65 apples from St. Anna am Aigen. Each apple had a label attached. The text on the label referring to the Kolleritsch Apple, photo 39. The labels were created by Mrs. Suzanne König, the wife of Thomas.



41. Apple from St. Anna

Thomas arranged another classroom presentation for me for Tuesday, Nov 28. at **NMS Fürstenfeld**. Walter Reiss was also present. The presentation was similar as in Rudersdorf. Besides faculty, principal Gerhard Jedliczka, the wife of the principal, Mrs. Gaby Jedliczka, head of the Museum's Association Fürstenfeld and reporter Veronika Teubl-Lafer were also present. She filed her report to the local paper "Mein Bezirk". Her article appeared in both the printed, as well as the Internet Editions attesting that my presentation was a success.



42. Principal Gerhard Jedliczka, Sandor Vador, Elisabeth Weinhandl, Walter Reiss, Thomas König, Gaby Jedliczka

Mrs. Jedliczka in collaboration with the Commemoration Initiative REFUGIUS invited me to be a lecturer in an event for adult audiences at the Pfeilburg Museum in Fürstenfeld. Made the presentation on November 15, 2018 with great success.

Since the war ended in 1945, the Austrian policy was -- and still is -- that "we don't talk about it" or as Elisabeth Weinhandl phrased at the graduation ceremony of 2011 at BORG Bad Radkersburg, "*stop always talking about these things. It happened so long ago. How is it our concern?*" We always talked about it and introduced and emphasized the righteousness of the Austrian women, by doing their best, way before the Viennese psychiatrist Dr. Victor E. Frankl pointed out "*...the world is in a bad state, but everything will become still worse unless each of us does his best.*" Without pointing to the bad and atrocities, one can't praise the good deeds. With contemporary witnesses we presented the good sides. Two different schools. Two different sets of students. Two independent reporters writing about the same experiences they had while observing the same enthusiasm as their set of students asked questions.

In the darkest hour of our time, the lights were still flickering. History did happen. Curious students will unwrap the facts.

Unwrapping the facts is already underway. Thomas König introduced me to Kurt Mayer, film producer, while they were filming scenes for the documentary: **Mauthausen vor der Tür – Todesmärsche**. I was interviewed by Mr. Mayer, which the crew recorded. Thus, I became a participant of the documentary. The film – 48 ½ minutes running time - was aired on **ORF3 TV** in prime time on Saturday 05/05/2018 at 8:00 pm. In the documentary, Austrian native contemporary witnesses reported observing the roads through the windows of their homes, where history put the horrible Death March in front of their doorsteps. The film proves that history did happen. Curious students can unwrap the facts.

## **ZOOM**

Thomas König on February 12, 2021, organized and directed a very successful ZOOM session for students and adults to facilitate my virtual lecture of ST. ANNA 2005.

## **PODCAST**

For 15 years, I told my story to live audiences. It did not occur to me that the story I was telling would have a deep psychological effect on some listeners. To illustrate, here are three examples:

1. November 7, 2011. A session at the Middle School of St. Anna am Aigen. An eleven-year-old girl, missing her mother, asked me: "How did you feel when you found out that your mother was not alive." I reflected in my answer that I missed my mother very much and I am still missing her ever since 1945. Apparently, she liked my answer. The next day, when we met again on a relaxed occasion, she greeted me with an affectionate hug, expressing gratitude.

2. February 13, 2015. Elisabeth Weinhandl and I held a joint lecture about ST. ANNA 2005, at the ACE Charter High School in Camarillo, CA. After the presentation, we switched to a Question & Answer period. At the very beginning a student raised a hand to offer a comment. While turning around and facing his peers with ample loud voice, he admonished his fellow students with Elisabeth's Gandhi-style sentences. He trumpeted the change of his own responses.

3. April 18, 2016, I made presentations to seventh grade honor students at Las Colinas Middle School in Camarillo, CA. One student, Maria, wrote a letter to me saying that I changed her life. Listening to my story helped her find a way out of a deeply imbedded psychological problem. She penned her thankfulness.

It was mentioned before that Mrs. Gaby Jedliczka organized an event for adult audiences at the Pfeilburg Museum in Fürstenfeld. The presentation was on November 15, 2018, with great success. It turns out that success was even greater than it first appeared. Sometime after the presentation Mr. Roland Knausz, a Dipl. Psychological Therapist – who was present at the Fürstenfeld venue – approached Elisabeth Weinhandl and offered to organize a session with adult audiences at the Tabor Museum of Feldbach. They agreed on a date for the autumn of the following year.

The presentation did take place on September 27, 2019. Roland used the presentation as tool for his Psychological Therapy. Seated in the audience were 7 of his clients. They were listening, taking notes, and asking questions, also receiving answers like anybody in the audience. Roland assessed and found appreciable improvements.

We cooperated in implementation:

In July 2021, I recorded my trailer for a podcast.

In August 2021, my audition for the Podcast was recorded, with real people (among them some clients of Roland's) in the audience, participating during the question-answer period.

To listen to the Podcast, click on the link:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/at/podcast/jugendwelten/id1577343284?i=1000534108539->

I believe that ST. ANNA 2005 is the first and only Holocaust related story, written by a survivor, where the narration has successfully been used as a tool to effectively treat certain psychological disorders. Professional Psychological Therapist, Roland Knausz, was the first to use my story as a psychological tool. After testing, assessing, and evaluating, we created a PODCAST to effectively reach his clients with appreciable success.

Was the sample size too small to make evaluation? Maybe. But it was promising enough to go forward and prove the point continuously in practice.

The message of my story, briefly: Positive thinking in a negative realm and risking life for obtaining food supplements, to survive.

With poetic words: Magical food by the Princess of Light, to avoid the remaining extremely short step to the abyss in the dark.

Symbolically: Photo 39, Apple.

In summation: Thankfulness and Love.

## **AFTERWORD**

The Nazis wanted to annihilate every Jew on this planet. For a starter they aimed to kill Nine and a half million European Jews. Six million were killed, Three and a half million survived. How did they survive?

A sizeable portion of them left Europe, prior to the second World War, to live in the other parts of the world. Many left with the aid of human help.

People in every country of Europe risked great dangers while actively helping Jews to survive.

Jews in concentration camps, labor camps, ghettos reached liberation while the clock was still ticking. I was one of those survivors.

Those brave people made a choice. So, did I. I went back to St. Anna in 2005 where I started to give lectures at schools.

The students I met, the future leaders, are seriously talking about the historical subject of Holocaust and deducting moral values. Besides having "open ears" with "open eyes", they find their own "pencils". They are members of an illustrious group of other students who built a Monument, wrote essays, created poems, penned a song, brushed an Apple, found audible voice, found inner peace.

I also found inner peace, and I 'm looking back to a life full of love and thankfulness.

## **APPENDIX**

Franz Josef Schober, Jüdisches Schicksal an der Grenze. SIGNAL (Jahresschrift des Pavel-Hauses, Winter 2005/06)

Franz Josef Schober. Eine Begegnung... SIGNAL (Jahresschrift des Pavel-Hauses, Winter 2006/07), p. 100ff

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