



Summer 2010

ZACHOR

VANCOUVER HOLOCAUST EDUCATION CENTRE

STOLPERSTEINE: PAVING A PATH TO REMEMBRANCE

BY DODIE KATZENSTEIN

Dodie Katzenstein (right) and Gunter Demnig (left) at Wiesbaden ceremony, 2009



Five years ago, I found a box of letters and began a journey into the past. (Zachor, November 2006). The letters, written by my grandparents, record their desperate struggle to escape Germany and join their son --my father-- in America. Their efforts failed. My grandfather, Leopold (Leo) Katzenstein, died in Sachsenhausen on August 17, 1942. My grandmother, Dorothea (Dora), for whom I am named, was murdered in Auschwitz on January 23, 1943.

My father immigrated to the US in 1936 at the age of 28. Later, he rarely spoke about his life before the war. Finding the letters years after his death, I wanted to learn more. In 2005, I traveled to Wiesbaden, his hometown, and to Berlin to meet a cousin who then translated the letters and guided my search for information. Last fall, I returned to Germany for the third time in four years. The occasion was a ceremony to dedicate stolpersteine (memorial stones) at 42 Wilhemstrasse, steps from Wiesbaden's elegant state theatre and opera house. This had been my grandparents' address.

Literally, stolperstein means "stumbling stone" --a stumbling block or obstacle. The play on words conveys the objective of the 10 x 10-centimeter concrete, brass-topped cubes, set into the pavement at the last known residence of individuals who perished in

the Holocaust. Each stone bears the inscription *Hier wohnte* (Here lived), followed by the person's name, birth date, date of deportation and place of death; the German word *ermordet* (murdered) makes an unequivocal statement of accountability.

Berlin-born artist Gunter Demnig conceived the Stolpersteine project in 1993, partly in response to Germany's construction of large, formal Holocaust memorials. Demnig's small stones encourage pedestrians, passing in the course of their daily routines, to make a personal connection with an individual who once lived at that site. His premise: acknowledging the loss of one human being among millions speaks louder than a massive monument.

Installation of the first stones generated controversy. Munich's Jewish community protested that walking on the names of the dead showed disrespect. Elsewhere, homeowners feared drawing unwanted attention to their property. Despite initial qualms, over 23,000 stones have been placed in more than 500 European locations. The majority of stolpersteine honour Jews, but the stones also commemorate Roma and Sinti, non-Jewish dissidents, homosexuals and other subjects of Nazi violence. The project now extends to Austria, Hungary, the Netherlands, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Poland, Ukraine, Italy and, later this year, to Norway and Denmark.

The 95-euro cost of a stolperstein usually is funded by a community organization or school, often as a class project. My grandfather's stone was sponsored by the Wiesbaden Masonic Lodge. I had not known that Leo and many other German Jews belonged to the

Freemasons, whose members, considered to be politically liberal, became targets of persecution. I sponsored my grandmother's stone, the 300th to be placed in Wiesbaden.

Wiesbaden, one of Europe's oldest spa towns, is now a city of 300,000 within commuting distance of Frankfurt. Much of its once-thriving Jewish community of about 3000 left the city after the destruction of synagogues, homes and businesses during Kristallnacht. Those remaining could not escape; over 1500 were deported to concentration camps. I was invited to Wiesbaden by the Aktives Museum Spiegelgasse (the Active Museum of German-Jewish History in Wiesbaden), or AMS. The AMS defines itself as "not a museum in the usual sense of the word" but as a centre for anti-racism education based on Holocaust awareness. AMS administers the Stolpersteine project in Wiesbaden and also sponsors exhibits, archives, a library, survivor testimony and school programs, all highlighting "the significant historical role played by Jews in the spiritual, cultural and economic development of Wiesbaden." <http://www.am-spiegelgasse.de/>

Throughout our visit, my husband and I and were treated like celebrities. We met with AMS staff and volunteers, mostly non-Jewish, and with Gunter Demnig, who personally installed my grandparents' stolpersteine. We were honoured guests at the dedication ceremony and at the official mounting of displays about Leo and Dora in a town square. A sizeable group of people attended these events, and both were reported in the local media. Our host, Inge Naumann, a retired teacher and AMS volunteer, expressed gratitude that we had travelled all the way from Vancouver, and my cousin from Berlin, for the occasion. "Too often," she explained, "there is no family left."

Inge had searched the AMS archives, uncovering details that enriched my knowledge of my grandparents. I learned that Leo had been arrested days after Kristallnacht and sent to Buchenwald. Released two weeks later, he returned home to find locks barring entry to his pharmaceutical factory. I learned that Dora was held captive for three days near the destroyed synagogue before her deportation, along with 400 others, to Theresienstadt on September 1, 1942. I saw detailed records with the names and photos of those deported with my grandmother that day. Our hosts also showed us the cemetery where my grandfather's ashes are buried. (A Gestapo agent had returned Leo's ashes to Dora, forcing her to pay for them.) And we saw the original building of Leo's confiscated factory, now transformed into a private international school.

We were impressed by Wiesbaden's strong commitment to Holocaust remembrance. The city donated the 19th-century building, formerly a kosher hotel in the old Jewish quarter (Speiegelgasse), that houses AMS offices, and it funds much of the organization's 200,000-euro annual budget. Wiesbaden also allocates permanent space in the city hall (Rathaus) where visitors can use a touch screen to link photos and biographical information with each stolperstein in the city. A new Rathaus exhibit opened April 15 featuring my grandfather and several other residents who made significant contributions to Wiesbaden's business and professional life. Titled "And then they were gone..." it chronicles "the fate of Jewish fellow citizens persecuted and murdered under Nazi tyranny."

Germany's changing demographics, however, create new challenges. Many young people, especially recent immigrants, know little about the country's dark history. Current AMS initiatives focus on countering racism among young Germans. Youth coordinator Hendrik Harteman says acceptance of cultural and religious differences is crucial to Germany's increasingly diverse population. He sees the stolpersteine project as a valuable teaching tool: "We say 'Look, this place you pass every day when you go to school-- we'll show you how

to find out the meaning of this place and the story that lies behind it.' We start with the youth and accompany them into the past. Our message is that tolerance and respect for human rights must be lived today. All our programs aim to encourage personal responsibility, to show that you as a young person can do something [to promote change] in your own surroundings."

My own journey into the past is not complete. It is no longer possible to uncover the whole story about the grandparents I never met. But I find comfort knowing that Leo and Dora's names are firmly planted in the place they once called home. I hope that those who pass by 42 Wilhelmstrasse will notice the shiny squares in the pavement and will understand that they represent real people --my grandparents-- and the lives they lost.



Stolpersteine "stumbling stones" in memory of Leopold and Dorothea Katzenstein