



ST. ANNA REVISITED

By SANDOR & RON VANDOR

Ventura & Malibu, CA.
2009

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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 by Elisabeth Weinhandl.

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Archives: Front cover and number 3.

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Elisabeth Weinhandl: numbers 1, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15.

Sandor Vandor: numbers 4, 5, 8, 16, 17 and 18.

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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 „Holle“ 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 Vandor. He's one of the few who survived that horrible inferno. Sandor Vandor 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 Vandor 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.

Foreword 2

The story of Sandor Vandor 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 Vandor 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 Vandor. 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 Vandor 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 Vandor 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 Vandor himself was finally able to experience his psychological liberation.

Although Sandor Vandor'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 Kutschenitz, 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 any more, 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 camp in St. Anna am Aigen the sanitary conditions were disastrous and because the slave laborers couldn't wash themselves, they soon get lice. Part of the Jews came to a camp tent near the construction-site of the tank ditch. There they've been 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** the terminally ill people were shot by their guards. One day (supposably 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 demolition 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 48 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, Prãbichl (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 4th, 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 Vandor (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 Vandor 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 2 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 30th 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 fire fighters, 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 south-east corner of Austria, between St. Anna and Bad Radkersburg, at a length about 12 – 13 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 30th. 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 it's 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. In briefly: steel plate base carries two yellow triangles representing the original six-pointed star being torn apart into two pieces. Also rotated the star 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 riffle 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 worked 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. We started e-mail correspondence with each other in the middle of February. Through those e-mails I communicated in vivid minute details of my slave labor experiences in St. Anna of the year 1945. We have established times and places of historical relevance.

Travel plans were coordinated and set for mid June of 2005. Since my son, 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.

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 Two. This is my recollection of this incredible journey.

FLY TO VIENNA

First impressions of Vienna: like going back in time. There is so much history here. Across 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. The rest of our journey will not be so black and white; it will be filled with gray areas.

We board a train at the Südbahnhof (the South train station) for a four-hour ride across Austria's picture-postcard landscape. In Fehring, we are met by Mr. Franz Josef Schober, driven to St. Anna am Aigen and waste no time retracing the steps of history.

A short while later, we meet Mayor Josef Weinhandl, his wife Elisabeth and their 12 year old daughter Stefanie. The mayor tells us that we are honored guests of the town.

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 conversations where his barracks were referred as in the schoolhouse. 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?

MIDDLE SCHOOL

What a day!

The first day after arrival, we are taken to visit the middle school where the mayor joins us. We meet the headmaster and four teachers who speak English. They show us a student exhibit on three easels where Sandor Vandor's story is proudly displayed. As we arrive, I overhear kids whispering, "*That must be Sandor Vandor!*" 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. 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.

After lunch, with the mayor and his wife (who is doing all the translating), 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. With the mayor's help, we identify the place where Apu believes he spent the last few days of the war. The locals call it "The Granite Barracks."

During World War Two, 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 250 Jewish slave laborers who were marched to the Austrian border. 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 "Panzergräben" (Panzer = tanks, Gräben = trench) -- 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 barrack 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 60 years later, he has decided that it is time he said thank you.

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 essence of our visit to Sankt Anna am Aigen was to express my thanks to the local citizens that their mothers and aunts had defied the German laws against providing food to the starving Hungarian–Jewish Forced Laborers including my friend and comrade Gyuri and me. With those brave acts, they saved my life by giving enough food sustenance for me 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 detail 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

back yard, 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, may be 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, than what did we climbed over? So, I never lived in that building.

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!

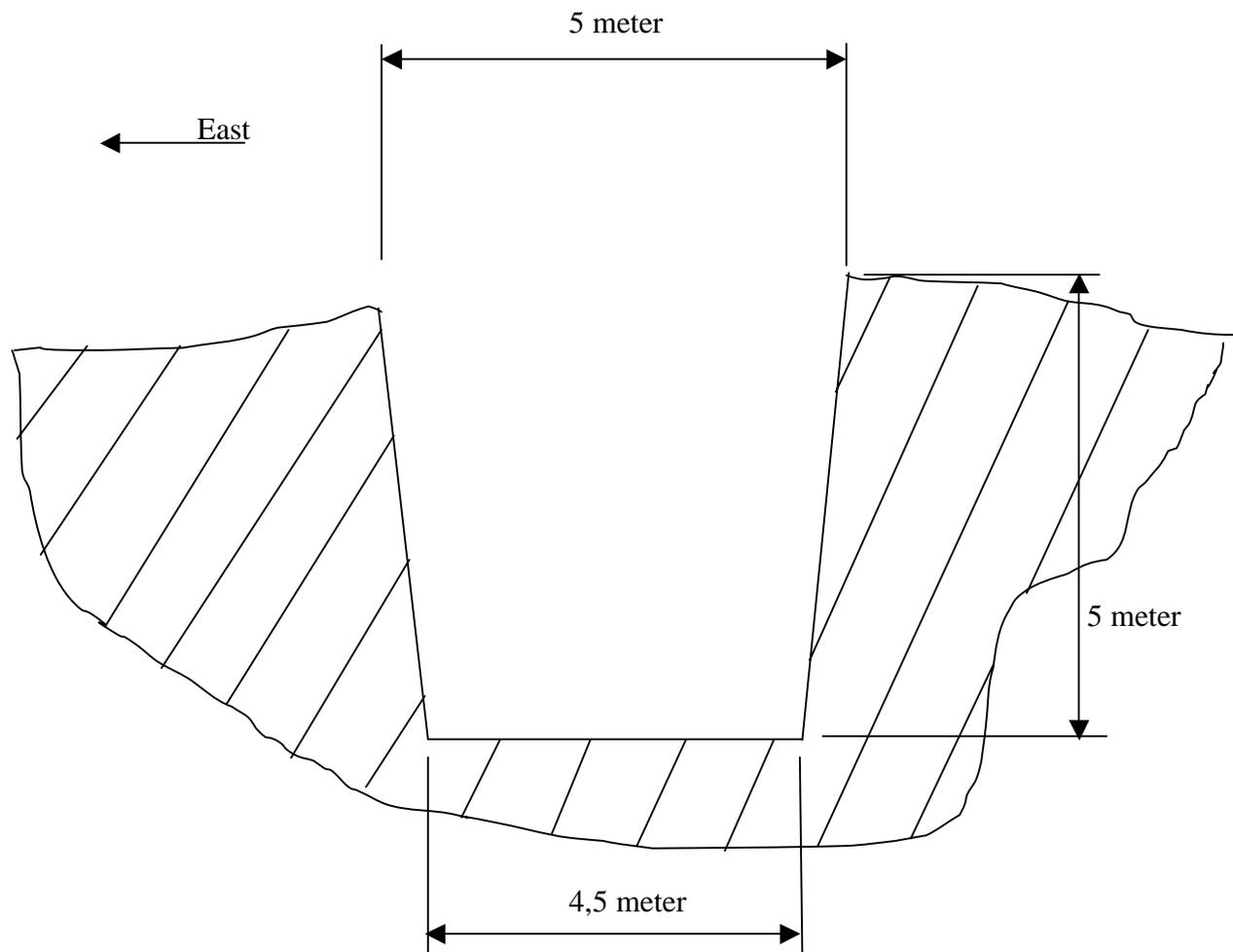
So, we went to the School, to the "new" School. A sprawling campus, seem much larger than the needs of a small village. The entrance is in the center between two wings. The administrative offices are in the middle. To the right are the corridors and classrooms for the 1 through 4 elementary grades. The corridors and classrooms for the middle school – 4 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 met the Principals and teachers. By the way, there are two Principals or Headmasters with two faculties. One set of faculty 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 olds) in their history classes. Approximately 20 pupils attended in each of the two classes. I thanked the newest generation for their grandmother's, great grandmothers 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.

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, east is on left and west is toward right.

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, therefore left is east.

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 cornfields I have realized that the infirmary 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 I am recalling from my memory of the events that put me in to the "Granite Barracks".

Toward the end of March, 1945 about 40 of us became ill with typhoid (Fleck-typhus) and we were separated from the rest of the company and walked to an another barrack, out side 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 distant away we arrived to a camp mostly consisting of wooden constructed barracks. The barracks were empty and we the sick became the new tenants. The barracks were occupied before but was 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 guard anyway, we weren't any condition to run away), not supervised, not medicated and not fed. I remember once I was toasting some moldy bread and eat 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 any more. People were dying left and right.

Late in the afternoon, of the fourth of April, I vividly remember that lying 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 solders 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 infirmary compounds and headed east, toward Hungary.

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

"...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 are scattered around. A piece of brick, a physical evidence from the

Granite Barrack. And with that piece of brick, Mayor Weinhandl handed me a psychological liberation also.

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

Here at the cornfields I was standing very close to ridge, which was on the edge of the horizon in my sight of 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 5th of April 1945, probably less than 20 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, may be 100 – 120 meters, made a left turn to the road and heading east. We walked on foot. We walked to approximately 'till 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 advise 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 5th, walking 3 km, sleeping in Russian encampment. On the 6th, walking may be 5 km, sleeping under the stars. On the 7th, 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 of Kramarovci/Sinnersdorf, which was just about 3 km away. By the way, Mr. Schober based on his research; he placed the railroad station 12-km away from the Granite Barracks.

"I found out that there was 1945 a railroad about 12 km away in the east from the barracks in the area "Höll" via Kramarovci - Sv. Jurij - Grad/Gornja Lendava – Mackovci" – Mr. Schober informed me.

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 Barracks were the "infirmiry" where I spent the last few days of as slave laborer. But were 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 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 student's 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 Gleichberg (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 Gleichberg 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 triggers 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 12. 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. Lockner'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 home made apple cider. Another memory is triggered. At the house where my father was served the egg sandwich, he was also given home made apple cider to drink. 60 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 12. 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 life saving 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 may be 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 - 54 inches 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 in to 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 everyday 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 through 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.

June 15th, Wednesday morning, we had our breakfast, on Mrs. Schäfmann's patio. The patio is covered with trellises full with running growing grape wine. I was soaking up the view. From the patio looking east, the valley lit by the morning sun came in to view. Beautiful view. Seeing the different patches of green, the color of the different vegetation's. The orderly rows of sections of the wine grape 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 6th symphony "The Pastoral" came to my mind. Beethoven's music describing a beautiful set with lush meadow. While the shepherd tending his flock, singing birds are flying around. Then a storm breaks out, a summer shower with lightening 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 whom 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 did I saw and what I felt in that tranquility.

I know that the storm during the war produced a different "lightening 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 of 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. Just glancing at the side panels, I estimated that about 130 names were engraved. The names of the lost young husbands and sons. The population of St. Anna and vicinity numbers about 1800. 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 were rebounded after the war. Continued their lives living fully. And they live in an idyllic, beautiful place. Anna and me, we 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.

WEDNESDAY JUNE 15th

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 St. Anna am Aigen's school 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, than 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 student's. Two teachers were assigned to receive my gift. Besides their German native language, both teachers spoke English also. Although one of the teacher had a better command of the English language than the other one and her name is Cäzilia Kikelj. Cäzilia is one of the daughters of Mrs. Maria Lackner. Was it by design or by sheer coincidence that among 14 teachers, Maria Lackners 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 sights 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, the Germans for use as a barracks commandeered the warehouse building, with its large open rooms. Equipped the rooms 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 was 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 was 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 have remembered who tossed the 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 sights 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 12 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 to 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:

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 me 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 AFTERWORD.

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

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 good-byes.

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 brutal, specially trained, Hungarian military police attachment.

The second trip to Austria was in a family setting in 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 were open, free to cross.

Hundreds of thousand people took the opportunity and flee from Communist Hungary to freedom to 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, Eberfurt 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 resident's of Brooklyn, NY.

On Saturday, June 18th, 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 19th, 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, 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 chords 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 of 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 Cäzilia were able to witness that their mother were shedding that burden off her shoulders. The Lackners and I are also in close contact. This closeness was demonstrated in the previously detailed good-bye scenes at the Fehring station between Elizabeth Weinhandl and Ron and me, also at the Schäffmann's house between Cäzilia and me.

SUMMARY

I traveled to Sankt Anna am Aigen, foremost, to say THANK YOU for giving me life saving 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 me kept the e-mail correspondence alive. Over the times, I kept writing in our correspondence, seemingly unrelated episodes of my slave labor experiences. Those episodes seemed unrelated, because, sixty years later, I couldn't place them in the proper perspective. 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 pipe lines 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 fermenting. 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 near 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 to 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 in to the Kino. The third group, us, ended up in the Lippe warehouse.

The next morning we were escorted to the work site and group of ten's 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 short of six weeks time, me and other comrades from the Lippe warehouse group, was 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 about 1 liter, we were severely dehydrated also with 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.

Accompanied by Ron, we traveled to Sankt Anna am Aigen, and said THANK YOU for giving me life saving 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 of where I was billeted in my St. Anna's staying in 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 life saving food while being a fearless young women 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's 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, life saving 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 me 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 the “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.

Victor 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 Weinhandls’ 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 to 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.

Victor Frankl words imply to seek psychiatry 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 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 grand parents risking their own and their family's life while bucked the Nazi trend and helped and saved Jews. And they live now in a tranquil place where they set out to shine some light of 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 some times. 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 thrash heap rather than have the Jews eat it, or provided to the villagers whom themselves were having food shortages. Those acts had dehumanizing effect on the local citizenry, including Maria Lackner.

For fifty-seven years every single day, Anna and me discussed the horrors and personal experiences of the holocaust. About the same time Maria and Josef Lackner had daily discussions of Josef Lackner's endurance 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 life.

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 Nöhner? Did they coordinate their life saving 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. Although we know the following: The inhabitants in the area of St. Anna are highly devout Catholics, steeped in the charitable giving to- and helping other people. In Judaism we call that *zedaka* - charitable giving. Another version is that the area is a border region, where strangers need in help are frequently showing up and generations grew up in the giving, helping tradition. All-and-all we can safely deduct 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 out stretched arms and the almost defiant face, the tree is declaring: I've had enough suffering, let be peace with content.

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 Lindenbaum", 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 Austrian Catholic Bishops 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 "72hour" 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 definitely 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.

Maria Lackner reported in her eyewitness testimony that the Nazi commander withheld requisitioned food from the Jews. 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.

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 near by. 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, in my room came from the Prassl family? The answer is: I don't know. The circumstances are pointing in that direction. 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.

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 72hour 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 that 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 5th. 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.” 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 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 wasn’t “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 victims 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 rein of the darkest horror of recent history, here in St Anna and vicinity, there were still good people helping the down trodden. 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 rough hewn 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 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 Grenzlandsschule 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.

EPILOGUE

Written by Jacob Daniel Vandor

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.

Maria Lackner is a saint, and is also personally responsible for me being alive today, perhaps more so than my father and mother. She was the righteous one who saved my Grandfather's life. 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. Maria Lackner would nevertheless make regular visits to the Holle. 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.

Sister Lina (Graz) was a young nun in a cloister in Vienna 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 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 invited two Jewish slave laborers inside the house and fed them bean salad. A simple kindness that showed great courage.

Today, at age 87, she is still active in her mission to teach and care for a group of kindergartners.

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.

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 went to St. Anna, she always carried one or two loaves of bread under her arm with her for the Jews.

Frieda Neubauer from Risola (Township of St. Anna/Aigen), can still feel the aches from working in the trenches. 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 panzergraben 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 pile 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 Mezőtúr, Hungary.

Together with his family, during the sweltering summer of 1944, he was moved from Mezőtúr 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 everyday.

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 trenches (not the panzergraben 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.

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, 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, and always will.

The **Wurzinger** family from Aigen (Township of St. Anna am Aigen.) Mayor Josef Weinhandl asked the Wurzinger family for permission to build the Memorial for Peace Monument on their field. They gave their consent quickly. For them it is very important that those events should not be forgotten. Also, that field is very suitable for the memorial because the road that is slicing through the land is one that people frequently pass by. Another reason the Wurzingers agreed was that the family was eager to support the young people's project.

It is notable that six of the St Annian students who volunteered to build the Memorial for Peace came from Mrs. Gabriella Wurzinger's class at the Schloss Stein School of Fehring.

Since the project's completion, Mr. Andreas Wurzinger told Elisabeth Weinhandl that he often works in the fields in that area and that he has noticed that many people are visiting the Memorial for Peace Monument.

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

Memorial for Peace



8. "Mahnmal für den Frieden" glass tablet

In 2008, the Catholic Youth of Austria performed the “72 Hours Without Compromise” project. Initiated by Sandor Vandor, 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



9. Mayor Josef Weinhandl delivering the keynote address on Jan.30, 2005 at the "Rememberance Mobile" service.



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



11. 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.



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



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



14. Sandor Vandor, in front of the easels, while Ron Vandor is taking pictures.



15. Roswitha Legenstein teacher and Sandor Vandor facing an easel. Sandor's son Ron is behind the camera



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



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



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

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.

Victor E. Frankl, Man's Search For Meaning. Pocket Books, 1985.

Victor E. Frankl, The Doctor And The Soul. Vintage Books, 1986.