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Seventy years ago, Austria expelled its Jewish citizens. This year, they were welcomed back as part of a moving Holocaust education project. **Lexi Landsman** speaks to the Australian survivors who made the difficult voyage back.

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Erwin Lamm made the difficult voyage to his hometown Vienna, in Austria, to take part in the project. Photo: Peter Haskin

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THERE was silence as thousands of Austrians held a candle-lit vigil in Vienna's Hildenplatz Square earlier this year on the 70th anniversary of the Anschluss – the annexation of Austria into Hitler's Third Reich.

They lit 80,000 candles in memory of the total number of Austrian Jews and other victims who lost their lives as a result of Nazi rule.

Called the Night of Silence, it was in stark contrast to the tone and atmosphere that marked the very same square 70 years earlier when, on March 12, 1938, thousands of Austrians welcomed 105,000 Nazi stormtroopers, who marched into the country and formally declared political union, or Anschluss, with Germany.

Sydneysider Dr Susanne Freeman would have only have been one year old at the time, but that declaration of annexation would quickly change the rest of her life, as

it did for the 200,000 Jews then living in Vienna.

The Anschluss would eventually lead to a chain of events – including Kristallnacht and the rise of fervent anti-Semitism – that culminated in World War II.

The following year, then two years old, Dr Freeman had her first experience of vehement anti-Semitism. "I was living in Vienna and playing in a park sandpit when other children began throwing stones at me and yelling anti-Semitic remarks," she says.

She was forced to leave the sandpit, and months later, she and her family were lucky to escape Austria and find refuge in Australia.

The event has always been poignant to her, but this year, it came to carry a whole new resonance when Dr Freeman received a letter from a group of 13- to 15-year-old school students from a school in Wels, in northern Austria.

They had found Dr Freeman's name on a list that contained the names of the 2500 living Jewish people from Austria, who had survived Nazi terror in concentration camps, in exile, or in hiding.

Sitting in her living room, while operatic music plays on an old tape recorder, Dr Freeman delicately pulls out the two original letters – one has colourful signatures of the students at the bottom and the other has a photograph of them.

After correspondence back and forth, the students sent her an invitation to return to Austria to be one of 250 Austrian survivors from around the world to take part in an Austrian-wide school history project called Letter to the Stars: 38/08.

The aim of project, involving thousands of students from 200 Austrian schools, is to give students the chance to learn from a living witness of history, and to meaningfully

commemorate the murdered victims of the Holocaust.

The entire cost of airfares and accommodation for 250 guests and their companions was sponsored by the Republic of Austria, members of parliament, public institutions, and large corporations.

Dr Freeman accepted the invitation, and travelled with her husband Ronald back to Vienna from May 1-8 this year. They were among several Australians invited to attend – including Gertie Rothschild, Erwin and Else Lamm from Melbourne, and Dr Edith Weisberg, Peter Klimp and Fred Heilpern from Sydney.

"I was very emotional about going because I knew 80,000 Jews from Vienna had been killed. I was one of the lucky ones to get out, and eight of our close relatives didn't. I've always felt a survivor's guilt," Dr Freeman says.

She – like many survivors – has often felt anger at the debate about whether Austrians were victims or willing accomplices of the Third Reich. Up until 2000, Austria never paid any compensation to Jewish victims, unlike Germany.

"The fact that Austria, which perpetuated all these terrible things, had done an about-face and come to terms with it and recognised it and not only admitted their guilt, but pledged to teach their children, was a very, very significant thing for me," she adds.

AT the core of the Letter to the Stars project is the idea that stars cannot be extinguished, in the same way that the past cannot be erased.

This year's Letter to the Stars event included a special ceremony dedicated to child survivors at parliament on May 5 – the anniversary of Mauthausen concentration



Dr Susanne Freeman went back after 70 years to the same park sandpit, where she had her first experience of anti-Semitism.

camp being liberated and also Austria's National Commemorative Day against Violence and Racism.

"We cried the whole week – it was terribly moving. Here we were in parliament that had 70 years expelled us – the symbolism of it was incredible," Dr Freeman says.

During the week, survivors attended the main commemoration at Heldenplatz Square, where the Austrian chancellor and president welcomed them. When the survivors arrived in the square, thousands of schoolchildren rose, clapping. It was there, 70 years earlier, that thousands had gathered to welcome the Third Reich.

"We all just cried. In the periphery of the square, there were trees that had been fixed with individual panels that detailed the lives of every survivor in attendance and the relatives they lost. Can you imagine how I felt, how I cried?" Dr Freeman says, her voice edging on tears.

Before she left Vienna, Dr Freeman visited the same sandpit she had been expelled from at the age of two, and took a photo of herself sitting there, 70 years on, to show her 97-year-old mother, who could not make the voyage.

"It was a real emotional experience for me. I sat there and I thought again about those who didn't get out, who suffered terribly in the war, and I still think that could have been me. I don't think I'll ever be completely over it."

It's now been several months since the event, and in that time, Dr Freeman says she's come to have "a definite feeling of closure".

"It's still very emotional for me. But I strongly feel [the third generation] cannot bear the guilt of their grandparents. There is a real, genuine feeling of wanting to make amends and we have to accept that and move forward."

ON the eve of Rosh Hashanah last week, Erwin Lamm was struck by a fond memory of celebrating the Jewish new year with his family in 1937.

"I was thinking to myself: in 1937, we prayed in Vienna and we had no idea that a year later everything would be in hell," the 87-year-old says from Melbourne.

"I remember times weren't happy anymore by then, but even so, we didn't know it would be the last time. There were some who had the vision, who could see how bad it would be, others thought eventually the winds would simmer down."

But things only got worse, and it was the last Rosh Hashanah he would celebrate with his family.

His home city became a place of fervent anti-Semitism – synagogues, Jewish shops and homes were desecrated. Fear was rife, Jews were constantly taunted, their belongings confiscated and many were subject to humiliating experiences. One such event still



Dr Susanne Freeman and her husband Roland, speaking to students at a school in Austria.

haunts Lamm today.

"I was caught and I had to scrub the streets; it does not mean you wipe graffiti off or someone damaged something – it was a dehumanising activity because there is no purpose in it. What reason would there be to wipe George Street?"

At the same time, Lamm recalls people he knew from around his neighbourhood being arrested and killed, some disappearing. His cousin's husband had gone missing, and when she went to the local police station to see if they knew his whereabouts, they asked for 20 shillings in exchange for a box with his ashes. "You can't say [the Nazis] behaved liked animals, because animals didn't behave as bad as that."

Lamm had three siblings – two brothers and a sister. Shortly after Hitler's invasion, he, his parents and younger nine-year-old brother Felix fled across the border to Czechoslovakia.

When Lamm turned 17, in 1938, a rabbi of the Orthodox community in London managed to secure thousands of UK-entry visas for rabbis, cantors and Jewish educators and Lamm – having studied at a yeshiva – was lucky to receive one.

"My parents were happy that I could go, that they could send me out and away from the danger," Lamm explains.

They parted ways, and Lamm could not have foreseen it would be the last time he would ever see them. He learned later that they were killed at Auschwitz concentration camp in 1944.

Lamm was only in London for seven months before he was interned for being viewed as an "enemy alien" and a risk to British security, and was among thousands who were forced onto the transport ship *Dunera* and taken to Australia.

His sister and her Hungarian husband had moved to Melbourne before the war began. He was reunited with her soon after his arrival in Melbourne, and later with his older brother Herbert, who had survived the war in hiding and later immigrated to Australia with his wife.

So this year, when Lamm was invited to take part in the Letter to the Stars project, it came with mixed feelings. On one hand, he says the project appealed to him, in that Austria was finally not "hiding and twisting the past", but rather recognising their part in past events and attempting to make amends.

But on the other hand, Lamm didn't agree to go under any false pretence that he would find forgiveness or resolution within himself.

"Nothing can close the fact that my parents and my little brother of 15 were killed in Auschwitz. You can never forgive and you can never forget, but at least you can meet people who can say we were wrong, and we can't do anything about it, but not to justify it and deny what has happened."

But the project did have its positives. He's kept in contact with the children he met – many writing regularly to him. He pulls out a package he received that morning with the first pages of their school newsletter about the project.

He then reads aloud – translating German to English – a letter personally addressed from the Austrian Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer: "We, the Austrian society, are aware of the historic responsibility for the injustice that has happened to you. We would like to show you the new Austria that has taken the lessons from history and has distanced itself from every type of anti-Semitism."

So now, days into the Jewish new year of 5769, Lamm says, like everyone in the world, he's wished for a happy and healthy year "that is better for us and our families, and for Israel".

"You say to yourself, one doesn't know what the future will bring. In 1937, we had no

idea what it would bring and how it would affect millions. All you can do is hope for the very best, for all your wishes to be fulfilled."

Letter to the Stars projects

ON May 5, 2003, 15,000 students released 80,000 balloons, that encased letters to the victims of the Shoah, while survivors placed stones on a balcony from which Hitler had made his speech on annexation.

In memory of Kristallnacht, Jewish and non-Jewish Austrian students laid sheets of paper in the streets of Vienna containing the names of the 80,00 victims of the Holocaust.

In 2004, students planted seeds for 100,000 victims of Mauthausen concentration camp and every summer the field blooms in remembrance of the victims. In 2004, 20,000 Austrians released hundreds of white doves as a symbol of peace.

In 2006, 80,000 white roses were placed symbolically behind a barbed-wire fence and more than 100 survivors accompanied the students to the homes of victims and attached roses to their doors as flowers of remembrance.

Enquiries: www.lettertothestars.at

Below: Memorials created by Austrian students for the lost families of the visiting survivors.






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plan your party.

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your celebrations directory