

This past Sunday, I visited the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, with our Vav, Zayin and Shevet Achim (6th-9th grade) students, parents, and teachers. It was a powerful, emotional, and important experience. Rabbi Gordon and I framed the trip before we left, mentioning how many of us have personal connections to those who were impacted directly by events during the Holocaust. My grandfather's family came from the German town of Leipzig, one of the places that had its Jewish community completely wiped out. In fact, the 1933 census showed 11,000 Jews living in Leipzig, 4500 in 1939, and, after the last 3 transports to Auschwitz and Theresienstadt concentration camps, only 53 survived Theresienstadt. The Leipzig synagogue was destroyed on Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, in 1938. A memorial now stands in its place, with 140 bronze chairs lined up, as you can see in this picture.



While my grandfather and great uncle were born in Leipzig, my great grandfather and my grandfather's other siblings were born in Lodz, Poland, another city where the Jewish community was destroyed. They left Lodz in 1905 during a time of great political and civil unrest, with Poland pushing back against Russian rule.

As we walked through the permanent exhibit, on the top floor, there was a bridge connecting the sides of the exhibit, with glass windows that are etched with the names of Jewish communities that were wholly or partially destroyed during the Shoah, listed by country. I stood by the window with the name of the city of Leipzig facing me, as I waited for our families to continue on through the exhibit. I thought about how lucky my family was, leaving Leipzig a few years before these events unfolded. In fact, my great grandfather returned to Leipzig in 1937 to have surgery, because those were the doctors "he trusted." The story our family tells is that the Nazis were starting to round up Jews in Leipzig, where the Nuremberg Laws of purity were being enforced. The doctor caring for my great grandfather helped him

to leave Leipzig before he could be taken away. He returned to New York in 1937 on the ship Queen Mary, and he died in December of 1938, just a few weeks after Kristallnacht. At that point, all his family had already left Leipzig, and were living in New York, New Jersey, and France. My great uncle, Herman Berlinski, or Uncle Menna as we called him, was the family member who went to France. He was a composer of organ music, and I like to think that his connection to music comes from the great tradition of music in Leipzig. He served in the French Foreign Legion and then went on to come to the US in 1941 with his wife, Sina, herself an accomplished pianist. I often think of him and Aunt Sina when I am song leading and leading services. Here is a picture of my Uncle Menna.



Before we boarded the bus to the museum, we also encouraged the families to think about how we as Jews have been impacted as a community by these tragic and traumatic events, and how we as human beings have a moral obligation to learn about these events and speak out when we see anyone targeted by hate and injustice. And, finally, Rabbi Gordon reminded us of the Bolton Street Synagogue connections, through the beautiful stained glass window in our lobby, created by a synagogue member who lived through Kristallnacht, and through the bequest of Agi Rado, a member of BSS who survived the Holocaust. When she died in 2019, she left funds to the synagogue specifically for Holocaust education in our religious school. It is Agi's gift that made this program possible.

I asked the families to share with me what kind of impact this trip had on them. Here are some words from Vanessa Pickler, one of the parents: "...it brought perspective and deep gratitude and appreciation for things that I normally either fret about or get anxious about. When I think about doing something new, for example, it naturally brings anxiety. But when I shift my attention to what it was like to be stripped of all humanity and put in the jaws of such horrendous torture and deaths we saw in the museum, I am able to feel a qualitative shift to the anxiety. It allows for feelings of aliveness and appreciation that I have the opportunity to do these things! I also feel some duty (that is welcome) to live life fully in honor of all those who did not get the chance to do things, both benign and out of the ordinary. It totally changes the anxious things to exciting things."

Our Vav and Zayin students will now embark on a project to create a Holocaust exhibit for the congregation that will open on Friday evening, April 28 and be available on Sunday morning, April 30. As they explore, learn, plan, and create, they carry on the vital task of honoring those who came before, those who perished and who survived. I hope you will mark your calendars and join us.