

Memorial journey 2011: 10th – 13th June 2011

Our next memorial journey to White Russia takes place from 10th to 13th June (Whitsun) 2011. We will be visiting, among other places, the history workshop and Jama (both in the former Minsk ghetto), Maly Trostinec and the memorial site at Chatyn. Our flight leaves Vienna at midday on 10th June 2011 and we return in the early evening of 13th June 2011. The itinerary will be similar to that of 2010, of which Stefanie Jeller's report is attached. If you are interested, please get in touch soon by sending an email to waltraud.barton@IM-MER.at and we will be pleased to send you further information.

How much is it likely to cost? About €450 for the direct flight from Vienna to Minsk and back (we are trying to get a favourable group tariff from Austrian Airlines), €50 per night for bed and breakfast, plus €10 for a visa. We have applied to the Austrian Republic's Future Fund, the National Fund for Victims of National Socialism, and the Austrian Foreign Ministry to cover the remaining expenses (transfers in Minsk between the airport and the hotel and vice versa; a bus to take us to Chatyn, Maly Trostinec, etc; guide; translator; etc).

Memorial journey 2010

Report by Stefanie Jeller, correspondent for the Catholic Press

Minsk, 26th May 2010. Minsk, the capital of White Russia, is only a 2-hour north-easterly flight from Vienna. From an Austrian perspective, that probably feels like the edge of Europe, but geographically Minsk lies in the centre of the continent. In the historical consciousness of most Austrians, Belarus/White Russia is also a blind spot. Does anyone know that, during the Holocaust, between 1941 and 1942, ten transports, each carrying 1,000 Austrian Jews, travelled from Vienna to Minsk, and that the deportees were murdered in the Minsk ghetto and at the Maly Trostinec extermination camp? There were only about 20 survivors, and one sole woman is still alive today.

Until recently, there was nothing in Minsk by which to remember the 9,600 slaughtered Austrian Jews but, since 18th September 2009, there has been a memorial stone, erected by the Republic of Austria, with the inscription: "In memory of the 9,600 Austrian Jews who were murdered by the Nazis in the Minsk ghetto and in Maly Trostinec between 1941 and 1944." The memorial stone was put up on the site of the former Jewish cemetery, a park in Suchaja Street, next to five other memorial stones for the Jews deported from various German towns (Hamburg, Cologne, Bremen, Bonn).

Opposite the park, in which a few Jewish gravestones remain, is a "history workshop" in an old stone house preserved from the era of the ghetto: it is a joint German-White Russian venture for research and education. "We waited a long time for this stone," says Kuzma Kosak, the "history workshop" director. "We wanted it above all because of the vast number of Austrian deportees."

Waltraud Barton (50) of Austria made a fundamental contribution to the erection of the Austrian memorial stone. She did some research into the life of her grandfather's first wife, Malvine Barton (born Jewish in Vienna in 1878, left the Jewish community in 1913, had a Catholic marriage ceremony in 1914, was baptised a Protestant in 1934, got divorced in 1938, and was deported to White Russia on 17th August 1942). "What disturbed me," says Waltraud Barton, "was that, in my family, we always heard the same old sentence: Nobody knows what became of her." In the course of her research, Waltraud Barton approached the Austrian Foreign Ministry

with a petition. Leonid Lewin, Jewish artist and leader of the association of Jewish communities in Belarus, was finally asked to create a memorial stone.

Christian-Jewish mourning ceremony

In the form of a memorial journey at Whitsun 2010, 17 people (relations of Holocaust victims, supporters of the petition and journalists) set out for White Russia and, on 23rd May, they took part in an interfaith mourning and wreath-laying ceremony in front of the Austrian memorial stone. The ceremony was opened by Leonid Lewin; Robert Gerschner, ambassador and press attaché from the Austrian Embassy in Moscow; and Sima Margolina, former prisoner in the Minsk ghetto and now an advisory member of the White Russian association of former Jewish detainees in ghettos and concentration camps.

“Mrs Barton wanted representatives of different faiths to be invited to the ceremony,” explained the leader, Viktor Balakirew from the directorate of the International Education and Meeting Centre “Johannes Rau” in Minsk. Because, of the 10,000 Austrians abducted to Minsk, there were members of the Jewish faith and members of various Christian denominations. Today it is the responsibility of the religious representatives to do everything in their power to prevent anything of the kind ever happening again.”

“The second world war robbed an enormous number of people of their lives,” said Olga Stockman, minister of the Protestant Lutheran community “Salvation.” When we ask our Lord why He created the world like this, why people destroy each other, we don’t get an answer. All we can do is mourn for these people and bow our heads. And we, who represent the generation that lived through the horrors of war, must do everything to raise our children in a spirit of hatred of war.”

The Russian Orthodox priest, Oleg Schulgin, also spoke of our “ultimate responsibility” to do everything we can “so that nothing like this happens again.” He said the Creator had given us all free will, and “we should employ this freedom for the honour of our neighbours and for the honour of God.” Rabbi Grigorij Abramovich spoke of the “power of time over man,” and said that, at the same time, man – through memory – has power over time. The ceremony ended with the Jewish Kaddish. A good 70 people took part, predominantly elderly ladies including White Russian survivors of the Minsk ghetto.

Remembering Maly Trostinec

An important point in the memorial trip’s programme was the journey to the former extermination camp at Maly Trostinec, only a few kilometres south of Minsk. Unlike the site of the concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Maly Trostinec has no museum. “There’s practically nothing there, they wanted to forget it,” says the White Russian guide, Tatjana Paschkur. The reason: The Stalinist régime also carried out mass killings here. In the early days of the war, inmates of Minsk prisons were already being murdered here.

Today, a wood, a waste disposal site, a few rural timber houses and some new apartments stand on the spot where, from 1942 onwards, Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners were made to farm the land, and mass shootings of Jews from the Minsk ghetto took place. From August 1942, the transports were routed along especially extended railway tracks towards Maly Trostinec. On arrival, the Jews – who had been promised a new start in the East – had their suitcases taken away

from them. To avoid panic, receipts were handed out. Then – often to the accompaniment of the latest pop-song – they were shot or murdered in gas wagons. From October 1943, measures began to cover it all up: a crematorium was set up, which functioned until the end of June 1944, and in the last days of June alone, before the liberation by Soviet troops, they cremated 6,500 people in a barn. White Russia claims the official number of victims to be 206,500 (thus the largest extermination site after Auschwitz, Maidanek and Treblinka), but that number probably includes the various places of execution in the area surrounding Minsk. The actual number of victims in Maly Trostinec is closer to between 40,000 and 60,000.

“Everyone has a name”

Most of the 10,000 deported Austrians died in Maly Trostinec. Nine out of the ten transports out of Vienna went direct to Maly Trostinec. At a fork in the road near the waste disposal site, on the spot where the mass executions took place, there is today an unassuming memorial which was put there by the White Russian opposition party, the Popular Front. On the trees behind, participants in the memorial journey hung yellow cards with the names of those for whom they mourn: Malvine Barton; Viktor, Rosa and Herta Ranzenhofer; Betti and Alexander Himmelreich; Elsa Bienenfeld; Kurt von Redlich.

Around the trees they scattered flower seeds and told life stories about those who had been murdered. One participant from Israel laid down stones, inscribed with the names of her Viennese Jewish grandparents, Julius and Regine Feldschuh, recited a prayer and quoted from a Hebrew song: “Every person has a name. A name given to him by God, by his father and mother. A name given to him by his destiny, by those who loved him and those who hated him. A name given to him by death.”

The third largest ghetto in Europe

At a meeting with the White Russian contemporary witnesses Maija Krapina (75), Frieda Reisman (75) and Rimma Galpirina (72) in the premises of the “history workshop”, the memorial journey participants learnt details of life in the Minsk ghetto that existed from July 1941 to October 1943, the third largest ghetto after Warsaw and Lvov [Lemberg]. About 100,000 people died there: “The ghetto,” says Reisman, “consisted of a few guarded streets, without water, without wood, without food, streets on which people lay each morning dead from hunger and with distended stomachs, and where the children looked like old people. We knew where we had to hide, when we dared to ask for food and when not.”

During the mass executions, the ghetto dwellers hid in a so-called “Malina,” a hole they dug for themselves in the house. On one occasion, Maija Krapina’s little sister was crying in her mother’s arms. “Someone stuffed a bread crust in her mouth; she suffocated.” “It took some time before we were allowed to talk about our experiences in the ghetto,” said Reisman. From the 1990s onwards, and with the independence of White Russia, the survivors began to write down their stories. In the “history workshop” meetings, they were to learn that “our memories are worth something,” says Galpirina full of gratitude.

“We must look forwards”

A memorial stone stands today at the former execution site in the Minsk ghetto, the “pit,” and on it you can read the word “Jew” (Soviet war memorials do not normally mention nationalities, the “peaceful Soviet citizens” are all remembered the same). In addition, the artist Leonid Lewin has designed a sculpture for the “pit” – “The final way.” It is a group of bronze figures representing the shadows of those who file down the steps to the pit.

Lewin has created fifty memorials in White Russia and other now independent countries of the former Soviet Union. In January 2010, an exhibition in Berlin was dedicated to his life’s work: “You can’t live by only looking back, you must look forwards,” says the 75-year-old multi-talented artist, who lost his mother in the war at the age of 7. When asked whether he could envisage creating a memorial for the Austrian Jews in Maly Trostinec, he said that was a question for Austria’s conscience.

Organization “Initiative Malvine”

Waltraud Barton of Vienna returned from the journey full of energy. She founded the organization “IM-MER” (Initiative Malvine – Remembering Maly Trostinec). After the trip, she said: “Precisely because I was here, I can no longer talk only of Malvine. The people who were murdered here have a right for their names and dates of death to be known: if no picture, then at least the names. When I saw the list of murdered Germans in the history workshop, it became even clearer to me: There are 10,000 Austrians whose names are recorded nowhere.”

Of the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust, 800,000 died in White Russia. Generally speaking, the number of World War 2 casualties from the White Russian population is without equal: Every third person died. The national memorial at Chatyn, which the participants on this memorial journey also visited, is in remembrance of 600 villages burnt by the Nazis and their local collaborators (so-called police).