

## **A journey into the forgotten past**

**In June, a group of 15 people flew on a memorial journey to the former Nazi extermination camp at Maly Trostinec in White Russia. Almost 10,000 Austrian Jews were murdered there. The fellow travellers journeyed to a place where virtually nothing is remembered about what went on at that time, and the journey symbolized their intention that the past must not be forgotten.**

The place in the forest is about 10 km from Minsk. Tall pine trees tower into the sky. All about is quiet apart from the chirping of lots of birds. It could be an idyllic place did you not know what happened here. Between 40,000 and 60,000 people were murdered in the woodland at Maly Trostinec, and almost 10,000 of them were Austrian Jews who had been brought here from Vienna. A small inconspicuous memorial, put here by the White Russians, is all that reminds you today of what took place here. Nothing else. Nothing larger – and above: no names.

### **To England with the ‘Kindertransport’**

The Austrian group that came to remember the Viennese Jews murdered here would like to change that. Jackie Young made the journey from London. Young was born Jona Jacob Spiegel in Vienna in 1941. He attaches a card to a tree with a piece of wire. On the card is the name of his mother, Elsa Spiegel. A sorrowful Jackie Young recounts, “I can’t remember my mother. I’ve never seen a photo of her. All I know is that she was deported here from Vienna and murdered.” Jackie was separated from his mother as a 6-month-old baby and taken to Terezin [Theresienstadt] where he was to remain for 2½ years. After that he went to England with a ‘Kindertransport.’ “It wasn’t until later that I found out I’d been adopted,” remembers Young. “I was told I was originally from Austria and I had no living relatives.” A few yards further on, the 82-year-old Otto Deutsch is securing cards with the names of his parents and sister to a different tree. They were also murdered at Maly Trostinec. Otto Deutsch is deeply moved as he recites the Kaddish, the Jewish mourner’s prayer, for his family. He has waited a great many years to visit the place where his family died.

The idea of affixing cards to the trees with the names of the murder victims was that of the trip’s organizer, Waltraud Barton. It is thanks to her commitment that the journey could take place this year for the second time. Barton also initiated last year’s trip in memory of her grandfather’s first wife, Malvine Barton. Malvine Barton, born Jewish, left the Jewish community early on in her life and was later baptized a Protestant. This did not save her from being deported to Maly Trostinec in 1942 and murdered.

### **40,000 – 60,000 dead**

Estimates vary of the numbers of dead in extermination camps. One commissioned estimate in 1944 spoke of 206,500 people murdered, but this total is probably representative of the whole vicinity in and around Minsk. What is certain is that between 40,000 and 60,000 people lost their lives in Maly Trostinec. They came by rail in transports from Hamburg, Berlin, Brünn or Terezin [Theresienstadt]. A total of 9,600 Austrian Jews were deported by train from Vienna to Minsk and then on to Maly Trostinec. Thus Maly Trostinec counts as the place where the majority of Austrian Jews were murdered. The woodland served as a place of execution, but the camp where the prisoners were forced to do hard labour was also part of the annihilation plant. The first train, carrying 1,000 Viennese Jews, arrived in November 1941. In May, June, August and September 1942, further trains followed at intervals of approximately two weeks. Each carried, in the main, 1,000 Viennese Jews. At the beginning the trains went as far as the Minsk freight station, but

from August 1942 they were routed directly into the extermination camp. The execution process always followed the same pattern. After they left the wagons, the arrivals had to collect on the grass, where their belongings were taken from them. The selection of those fit for work followed, and all the others were brought straight to the place of execution. Later, in a secret operation as they retreated from the Russian army, the Nazis tried to wipe out all traces of the massacre. They had the bodies dug up again and burnt them on huge pyres.

Several factors account for Maly Trostinec being little known in comparison with other places of annihilation like Auschwitz or Treblinka. "On the one hand, there were practically no survivors here, which makes it difficult to set any research in motion," says Claudia Kuretsidis-Haider, a participant in the memorial journey and an employee of the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance. On the other hand, the research policies of "official" Austria are grossly inadequate. But White Russia also had little interest in any research. The woodland at Maly Trostine had, you see, already been used for shootings before the war. "The Stalinist régime had already carried out mass killings here," says Tatjana Paschkur, the tour group's White Russian guide.

### **Appeal to Austrian officialdom**

Private initiatives to set historical research in motion are therefore all the more important. In the course of her personal research, trip organizer Waltraud Barton founded the organization "IM-MER: Initiative Malvine – Remembering Maly Trostine." During the 3-day trip, an interfaith service of remembrance took place in the square of the former Jewish ghetto in Minsk. In the presence of the press attaché from the Austrian Embassy in Moscow, Barton made an appeal to Austrian officialdom to erect a memorial plaque. It was at her insistence that the first step was taken last year, and a memorial stone was erected in Minsk by the Republic of Austria. There is still nothing at the actual place of execution to recall the Austrian Jews who were murdered there. "The people who were murdered here are entitled to have their names appear and be known," says Waltraud Barton. "It's essential to create a place where we can remember them appropriately." She wants an official monument in memory of the forgotten past. She and her fellow travellers have taken a powerful first step towards it by making the journey.