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## Holocaust survivor from Park Ridge finds comfort in sharing story with German hometown

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PARK RIDGE — Ernest Haas, 90, still has nightmares about the atrocities he witnessed as a child in his native Germany as the Holocaust unfolded before his eyes.

He watched with horror on the night of Nov. 9, 1938 — Kristallnacht — as synagogues burned to the ground and smoke billowed from the rubble of Jewish-owned businesses in his small village in southeastern Germany.

He remembers being rounded up by SS soldiers, living in a ghetto with his family and hearing of his mother's death in a Nazi "gas wagon."

Perhaps most vividly, he remembers waving to his older sister Ilse through barbed wire at a labor camp — the last time he would ever see her.

The horrors and heartbreak were almost too much for Haas, who, weakened by typhus and pneumonia, weighed just 80 pounds when he was liberated by Russian soldiers in 1945 after he was forced on a death march toward a camp near The Baltic Sea. But decades later he continues to find comfort in the students and educators at Ostendorfer-Gymnasium, a high school in his hometown of Neumarkt — the same school his sister attended.

In 2004, a teacher at the high school, Helmut Enzenberger, asked three students to find out as much as they could about Haas' sister. The students tracked down Haas, who by then had retired after a successful career in banking and real estate, at his home in Park Ridge. The correspondence rekindled a connection with his hometown that had been severed more than six decades earlier amid the horrors of the Holocaust.

Enzenberger used Haas' first-person accounts of his wartime experience to enhance the lessons he taught in classes on German history, and the students adapted his family history into a play.

"I was pleased that someone was interested because there are still Nazis around," Haas said. "The teacher, Helmut Enzenberger, has support of other teachers and the very strong support of the school's director; each year she says, 'We cannot forget.'"

In 2007 Haas overcame his initial apprehension and returned to Neumarkt to see the play. It was the first time he had seen his hometown since 1945.

The play, "The Last Letter," features a young girl reading letters from her family that she found tucked away in her home. The girl asks her neighbors and relatives about the letters, which lay bare the horrors that Jews faced during the Holocaust.

At the end of the play, the students set up a single chair under an overhead spotlight in the center of an empty stage, Haas' wife, Myrna, recalled. This represented "Ilse, who is not there anymore, and while the spot is empty, the light she had remains," Myrna Haas said.

Enzenberger said this week that he asked his students to learn more about Haas' sister and to write the play not only to make sure their story was not forgotten, but also to teach them about the "incomprehensible" horrors of the past to make sure they are not repeated.



TARIQ ZEHAWI/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Though still having nightmares, Holocaust survivor Ernest Haas celebrated his 90th birthday in June and received many birthday cards from Neumarkt, his hometown. He now lives in Park Ridge.

"It was an unforgettable experience for all of us when Ernest and Myrna Haas made the long trip over the pond to Neumarkt to see the musical for themselves," he said in an email. "With that trip, Ernest and Myrna built an everlasting bridge of friendship, respect and appreciation. ... Ilse and the story of the Haas family is to me solely a matter of the heart. I feel a duty to it. I see in it a part of my life's purpose duty."

The play was inspired by a postcard Haas and his family sent to his younger brother Walter, who had left for the United States in 1941, when he was 14 years old, Myrna Haas said. It was the last correspondence the family had with Walter before Haas' parents and sister were killed.

"The play was very moving," she said. "It's really telling people not to forget what happened. From that time on, the school has learned about the history of Jews in that town, and at the same time these young people are trying to come to grips with their history. Even though it's painful to remember the memory, it's important because there are Holocaust deniers to this day."

Enzenberger said teaching this subject matter has helped Germany to become a more tolerant country that learns from its past and uses it to build a more peaceful future.

"I cannot comprehend what happened back then, and I sympathize with them as if they were my own family," he said. "I believe that is also what my schoolchildren would like to convey: humanity, love and zest for life. ... Through [Ilse's] story, they can learn what incomprehensible abominations the Nazi regime committed against the Jewish citizens of our town. That way, Ilse's story will not only be 'not forgotten,' it will also become a foundation from which an attitude of respect, esteem and courage can grow and mature."

While the play is no longer performed at the school, Haas continues to be touched by the students who performed in the play and younger ones who have enrolled since. This June 1, he received 183 birthday cards from students and former students in Neumarkt wishing him a happy 90th birthday — all of them inscribed with personal messages.

"I sent a video back thanking them for the cards because some of them asked me to personally answer back — but I can't send 183 letters," Haas said, laughing.

Ostendorfer-Gymnasium has a hallway where the names of 43 Jewish residents who were murdered in the Holocaust are listed, Haas said. But it also includes a life-size photo of his sister Ilse, he said. An inscription next to the picture reads: "The will, the freedom and the dreams of life were stolen from you. We will not let you be forgotten. Your names will remain."

Last year, Myrna and Ernest Haas were invited back to the school, where a large ceremony was staged in his honor. The school's 2,500 students lined the hallways, and 43 small white stones were inscribed with the names of the Jewish residents of Neumarkt who died during the Holocaust. Haas' still has the stones bearing Ilse's name and those of other family members in his home in Park Ridge.

The town of Neumarkt also named a pathway through one of its parks Ilse Haas Way in 2007, he said.

All of these tributes honoring his family and those who died in the Holocaust keep their memories alive, Haas said.

"The main driving force behind all of this was the school, and a lot of the young people there are very committed," he said. "It's positive to me that after these horrific experiences — that are unforgettable and I still have nightmares about — that there are people who really feel terrible about it and are trying to connect to me and my family, and trying and make something good out of it."

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