

REPORT TO THE COMMISSION FOR THE PRESERVATION OF AMERICA'S HERITAGE ABROAD

Dedication of Holocaust Memorial in Trstice, Czech Republic
Submitted by Joan Ellyn Silber, Ph.d. , Member of the Commission

THE MEMORIAL

On April 10 , 2013, a Holocaust Memorial was dedicated, to honor the people of Trstice who hid a Jewish family of four, named Wolf, during the Nazi occupation and also to remember Jewish residents of Trstice who were murdered by the Nazis. The monument was established as a cooperative project by the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, the Czech Republic towns of Trstice and Olomouc, the Czech Republic Organization for Support of Burned Villages [villages and towns destroyed during World War II], and the Holocaust studies students of New Milford High School, New Jersey.



Dedication: June Chang, teacher; Bonnie Sussman, teacher; Eva Vavrecka, niece of Otto Wolf and husband Toni Vavrecka; Colleen Tambuscio, teacher and program coordinator; Dr. Joan Silber, Member of U.S. Commission for Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad; Shalmi Barmore, historian and group educator; Petr Papousek, President of Jewish Federation of Czech Republic



Night view of Memorial for Jewish citizens of Trsice who were murdered by the Nazis in Riga, Lithuania and in honor of the brave citizens of Trsice who hid the Wolf family during the Nazi occupation

The memorial is located in the main town square of Trsice, Czech Republic.



Memorial for Jewish citizens of Trstice who were murdered by the Nazis in Riga, Lithuania and in honor of the brave citizens of Trstice who hid the Wolf family during the Nazi occupation

The inscription on the memorial reads:

“When the Nazi Germans imprisoned and killed large numbers of the Jewish population of Europe, citizens of Tršice hid members of a Jewish family - Berthold, Ružena, Felicitas, and Otto Wolff - from 1942 until 1945 at great risk to their own lives.

Initially, this heroic act was done by Jaroslav Zdařil of hn. (house number) 172, František and Marie Zbořil of hn. 21, Ludmila Chodilová nee Tichá of hn.290 and Oldřich and Marie Oher from Zákřov of hn.1. As time went on many other citizens of Tršice learned of the hiding place and kept the secret.

This monument honors them and the memory of Jewish residents of Tršice Anna, Blanka, and Eliška Kornblüh who were found and sent to the Terezín camp on 26.6.1942, and then on 20.8.1942, to Riga, Lithuania, where they were murdered.

The Jewish community of Olomouc, the town Tršice, the Olomouc Regional Government and the Organization for Support of Burned Villages with support from the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad made possible by member Joan Ellyn Silber and by Sherman J. Silber”

RELATED MEMORIALS IN TRSICE

In Trsice, there are two other memorials related to the events surrounding the Wolf family --- one with 19 photos of young Czech men's faces, including Otto Wolf, each imprinted on a small white oval stone next to their name, remembering their brutal murder by the Nazis after capturing them on April 18, 1945 during a raid on the village of Zakrov.



Memorial for the 19 men of the Trsice area who were rounded up April 18, 1945 and murdered by the Nazis

Another memorial is in the damp, deep woods just outside of Trstice, above a shaded creek. The underground forest hiding place of the Wolf family is in the hillside immediately behind the memorial.



Memorial at site of Wolf family woodland underground hideout, just outside of Trstice, Czech Republic



Memorial in Woodlands marking the location of Wolf family underground hideout.

The English inscription on the woodlands memorial reads:

“Donated by students studying *The Diary of Otto Wolf* and the Holocaust in the United States.

New Milford High School, New Jersey

St. Thomas Aquinas High School, Kansas

Bishop O’Dowd High School, California”

BACKGROUND ON 2013 MEMORIAL AND DEDICATION

[Adapted from the Holocaust Study Tour website -- www.hst10.blogspot.com/2013/04/day-9-trsice.html as entered by June Johnnie Chang, Vice-Principal Midland Park High, NJ]

The Holocaust Study Tour is an annual experiential tour to Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland for high school students, coordinated by New Milford High, New Jersey, Holocaust studies teacher Colleen Tambuscio. Each year, students from two or three other high schools join this two week tour. In 2013, the students came from New Milford High, New Jersey with Holocaust studies teacher and trip coordinator, Colleen Tambuscio, from Midland Park High, New Jersey with Vice-principal June Johnnie Chang and from Bishop O'Dowd school, Oakland, California with Holocaust studies teacher Bonnie Sussman.

Annually accompanying the group and providing an in depth historical perspective as well as today's related challenges for the students' consideration, is historian Shalmi Barmore, past director of education for Yad Vashem and noted international lecturer/educator, particularly in the areas of Holocaust studies, Eastern European and Israeli history, and the Israeli political situation.



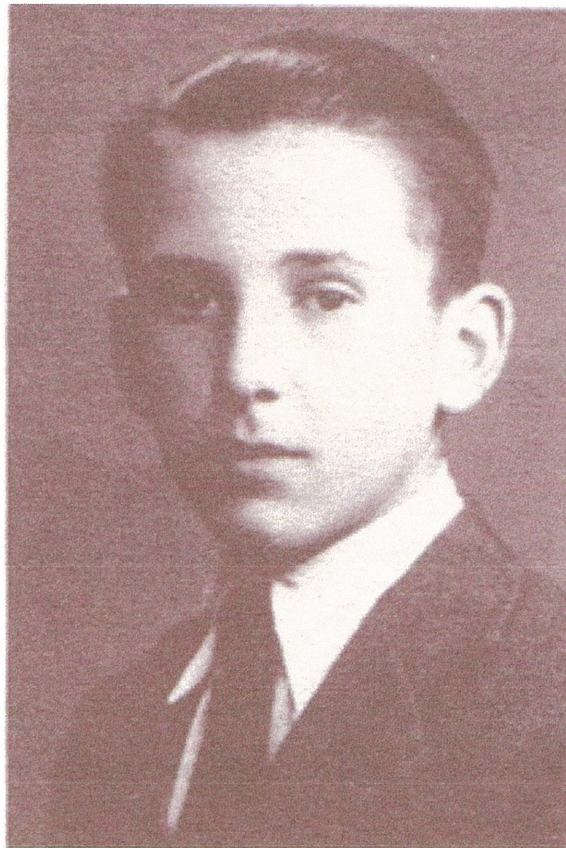
Shalmi Barmore with 2013 Holocaust Studies students.

Traveling with the group during the second week, was Dr. Joan Silber, as a member of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, who acted officially at the dedication of the Trsice monument on behalf of the Commission.



Dr. Joan Silber, U.S. Commission member, at Memorial dedication.

In preparation for the tour, the students read the book, *Salvaged Pages*, a collection of diaries written by young people during the Holocaust, edited by Alexandra Zapruder. One of the diaries was written by Otto Wolf of the Czech Republic, whose family hid from the Nazis in and around Trstice, Czech Republic.



Otto Wolf as young boy before the Wolf family went into hiding

In 2008, the study group first connected with Holocaust survivor, Milos Dobry of Olomouc, who showed them the Wolf family forest hiding area and introduced them to the mayor of Trsice, Leona Stejskalova. Over the ensuing years, with the help of Milos' grandson, Petr Papousek, leader of the Jewish Community of Olomouc and with the help of Mayor Stejskalova, they arranged for a memorial to be erected in the forest where the Wolf family hid, outside Trsice. Dedicated in 2012, the memorial was paid for by the students of three U.S. high schools : New Milford High School, NJ; St. Thomas Aquinas High School, NJ; and Bishop O'Dowd High School, Calif.

April 10, 2013, a memorial was dedicated in the town center of Trsice, sponsored by Dr. Joan Silber, of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad. This memorial was one of the direct results of an official memorandum that was signed in 2012, signifying cooperation between the Jewish Community of Olomouc and the organization for the destroyed Czech villages and towns of World War II, known formally as the Organization for the Support of Burned Villages. This memorandum was the work of the Holocaust Study Tour.

There were three projects that were to be completed from this 2012 memorandum:

1. A new memorial in Trsice, now completed as of this April 10, 2013 dedication.
2. A memorial in the woodlands outside Trsice, to the rescuers and their families that was dedicated in 2012.
3. A new museum in Trsice, yet to be accomplished, about this history, where the first artifact included will be the pen used to sign this memorandum.

DESCRIPTION OF DEDICATION DAY, APRIL 10, 2013, ADAPTED FROM STUDY GROUP BLOG:



Town Hall, Trsice Czech Republic

In Trsice we were joined by Petr Papousek [President of Jewish Federation of the Czech Republic] and Bruce Konviser, the *Global Post* reporter as well as Dr. Brezina [who lived in Trsice during the Nazi occupation] and his granddaughter. As we walked into the Town Hall, a former castle dating back to the 15th century, we were greeted at the entry, as we have always been, by Mayor Leona and her staff who offered us the traditional Czech greeting: bread dipped in salt and a little plum brandy, and several members of the Boy Scout troop who we had met last year and would be spending the day with us.



Entering Town Hall, Petr Papousek at doorway

Inside the building we were officially greeted by the mayor, who stood before a large traditional Czech wedding cake decoration which she thought we might like to see.



Mayor of Trsice, Leona Stejskalova

Dr. Brezina, who was five years old when the Wolfs went into hiding and never knew Otto Wolf, but met the surviving Wolfs after the war and had been to the hideouts, told his story, and then Mrs. Ohera, who was five years old at the time her family had provided food and shelter for the Wolfs and whose father was one of the 19 men rounded up and killed by the Nazis in April 1945, told of her memories.



Dr. Brezina and Mrs. Ohera relate their personal histories during Nazi occupation



Bruce Konviser [Global Post reporter], students, scouts listening to personal histories



Vistor's Book, Trsice

After we signed the official town records book for visitors, we headed down the hill to the restaurant where the town hosted a lunch for us, the Vavreckas [Eva Vavrecka's mother was one of the Wolf family members who was in hiding] and the Boy Scouts.



Dr. Brezina, Mrs. Ohera, Eva Vavrecka [Otto Wolf's niece] at lunch

As the time for the memorial unveiling approached, we left the restaurant and as we did so we noticed from every street, townspeople walking down the hill, up the streets, converging on that area which was the town square and site of the memorial. It was a wonderful and moving sight to see how supportive of the memorial the people of the town were as we all met and stood before the blanketed memorial.



Colleen Tambuscio and June Chang stand with Trsice townspeople during dedication.

The police had stationed a car at the end of the street and an officer redirected any cars from the other end of the street – though there is not much traffic in Trsice.

Petr Papousek opened the ceremonies with a history of the memorial project, and introductions of the visiting dignitaries: the Governor of Olomouc, the Senator from the area, the parliamentary representative, Mayor Leona and other mayors from surrounding towns. Our guide Ilona provided the translations for us.

There were several speeches from each of the officials. Petr then thanked and introduced the individual who made this memorial possible, Dr. Joan Silber, who spoke and thanked the people of the town for their bravery and resistance in the face of Nazi oppression. She also thanked the lead teacher of our group, Mrs. Colleen Tambuscio, for all of her efforts to bring about this memorial dedication. Eva Vavrecka was then introduced and she also thanked the people of Trsice for helping her family and for their continued efforts to keep the memory of her uncle [Otto Wolf], through his diary, alive.

After Dr. Joan Silber and the Governor of the Olomouc Regional Government unveiled the memorial, two of the Boy Scouts, standing before the memorial, read excerpts from Otto's diary.

THE STORIES BEHIND THE MEMORIAL, A RECOLLECTION BY JOAN SILBER

April 10, 2013, Trsice City Hall

The woman's hands were clenched tight, knuckles resting on her black trousers, holding back the decades of never to be resolved grief and helplessness, her beige button down sweater and long gray coat holding down the chill of the room and the story to be told. The man next to her had just finished relating his recollections of the period of the Nazi occupation, and it was her turn to tell the inexplicable horror the people of Trsice had survived. In front of them were twenty young faces from America where such sweeping and devastating scenarios would never be known nor understood and a small group of Czech Boy Scouts. They sat in the official City Hall room at the top of the winding staircase, with the gracious and attentive mayor, in her colorful coat, a reporter from Prague, cameramen, three high school teachers, an Israeli historian, and a member of the U.S Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad.

Mrs. Ohera's eyes were focused in the past and her voice was quiet and *almost* steady, with a light tremble, as she recounted that time in Trsice.

Shortly after the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia in 1939, Germany annexed the country as part of Nazi Germany and enforced the same decrees against the Jewish population

that they had established in Germany. An order was issued for a long list of Jews living in the Olomouc area to report in for transport. Transport --- the euphemism for being taken to concentration and extermination camps.

The Wolf family lived in Olomouc. The father, Berthold Wolf, a reasonably successful business man who was well-liked by his associates, sold hops in the surrounding area and over the years had established friendly relationships in the small village of Trsice, only 11 miles from Olomouc. As the Nazi regulations against Jews tightened, and news from elsewhere filtered in with inhuman, incomprehensible details, Mr. Wolf decided his family would be safer in a less visible location and purchased a fine home in the outskirts of Trsice.

As Mrs. Ohera continued, slowly and deliberately, the young American guests sat spellbound. Their usual playful smiles turned down into sad, contemplative thought. Their hearts opened to a world beyond comprehension. They were now witnesses to a story they could never deny.

They had already read the 15-year-old Otto Wolf's diary. They already knew that Otto's older brother, Kurt, had been studying medicine until just after the German's annexed Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1939. Immediately anti-Jewish decrees were enforced. Kurt fled and sought exile in the Soviet Union. In June 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union and six months later Kurt joined a Czech military unit formed to fight against the Germans in the Soviet Union. The family never again heard from nor about Kurt until after the War when they learned he had been killed in battle.

These same American students had already learned that in the summer of 1942, the Wolf family received a notice to report to Olomouc for deportation. They hired a cart and driver in Trsice where they were living at the time and loaded their suitcases to report in. When they arrived in Olomouc, they asked the driver to wait a short while with their belongings in order to check in with a local doctor. But they never returned. Instead they walked eleven miles through back ways to a field outside Trsice where they were met by a young local gardener, Jaroslav Zdaril [called Slavek] who had a crush on the Wolf daughter, Licie, and who took them to a hiding place about a half mile outside Trsice. This became the first of many secret places for this little Jewish family of four, for the three years from 1942 to 1945. Otto Wolf was 15 at the time they went into hiding, and he recorded the daily events from June 22, 1942 until he was captured. His sister, Felicitas, then continued the diary until the end of the war.

These four Wolf family members were cold, wet, often hungry, and frequently without contact with their protectors for days at a time, pestered by vermin and always in fear of discovery. As the weeks rolled by, many in the town had some awareness of a family being hidden. Some held hostile and resentful feelings towards them. Some few contributed to their welfare. No one informed the Nazis of their existence. Had they done so, they might have risked being subjected to severe questioning and severe harm or even death to themselves and their families. It was a nasty situation.

Discontent, difficult circumstances, and the fears of the protectors led them to move several times --- living with the family of their former maid, Maria Zborilova, with the financial assistance of their friend and dentist Mrs. Ticha, in and out of forest hiding places, and then in March, 1945, moving to the attic of the Ohera family in the nearby village of Zakrov.

And here is where Mrs. Ohera's telling becomes tense. In the last years of the war, there had been much instability in the area with active partisan activity in the forests. The Nazis and Gestapo tried to find and squelch the rebels, but they were difficult to discover. They determined to make a raid on the village of Zakrov, door to door. Mrs. Ohera was a young child of five at the time, but her memory was fresh as though it had all happened yesterday. Her voice caught in her throat, she continued --- the Gestapo burst into the Ohera's home, callously destroying the house, seizing her father and severely beating her mother and herself.

Otto Wolf saw them entering the house, and jumped out of the attic window, but landed poorly, and as he ran, he was discovered and caught. We do not know why he jumped -- perhaps he had hoped to divert the soldiers from his family in the attic or wanted to get away before they might have discovered them all. He was taken along with Mr. Ohera and 17 other men to a small shack where they were interrogated, tortured, some killed, most maimed, and stuffed inside the shack, though some say they were shot on the spot and burned where they lay. Mrs. Ohera told us that they piled wood around the outside of this shack and set it on fire, with many of the men then burned alive. None of the men gave out information that would lead to the harm of anyone else. They were all victims and heroes at once. And so the town, years later, erected the monument to the 19 men, including Otto Wolf.

Less than a month later, with the surrender of Germany, the War officially ended -- May 8, 1945. Mrs. Wolf, after hearing of the death of both of her sons, Otto and Kurt, suffered a massive stroke and eventually died in 1952. The father, Berthold Wolf, remarried. The daughter who was in hiding with them, Felicitas, married and

emigrated to the United States in 1968. She donated Otto's diary to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. *Her daughter*, Eva married a Czech businessman, Tony Vavrecka and they now live in Florida and part time in the Czech Republic. Both Eva and Tony participated in the dedications of the 2012 Memorial in the woodlands and the 2013 Memorial in the town center of Trsice.

Later, in the town hall, Mrs. Ohera held my hands tightly in her own and began to sob, and relate again to me how she was beaten, how they dragged her father out of the house, how they burned them all, and how they forced her to go to school the next day as if nothing had happened. Then she burst into a broad smile, swallowed twice, and told me she had made some delicious baked goods and had them put on the bus for the children when we leave Trsice. Immediately, she then showed me pictures of her grandchildren, living in Trsice.

In her eyes were the joys of today. And behind them, were the constant reminders of the horrors of years ago, ever present. It was and is important to tell these histories --- to no longer be helpless, but to reveal the Truths, to set fears aside and stand boldly, as heroes of the present.

Today our world continues to face genocides, mass murders, heinous crimes and abuses. No one of them, as Shalmi Barmore has taught me, can be measured with the Holocaust as a yardstick, yet each one, for the individual victims, contains a horror unimaginable. May we all be given the strength to stand without the debilitation of fear, to be as heroes in our own age.