

The New Righteous

Austrian youth serve the memory of the Holocaust abroad



Stefan Felser, 19, of Austria, is an intern at the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre. Photo: Paloma Friedman

Paloma Friedman

In 2005, the United Nations passed Resolution 60/7, which officially marked January 27 as the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp. The resolution states that the UN must take action to “mobilize civil society for Holocaust remembrance and education, in order to help to prevent future acts of genocide.”

On Tuesday evening, the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre and Museum held a panel discussion to mark the fourth International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust. The theme of the conversation was the defense of human rights as a form of Holocaust commemoration, to ensure the promise of “Never Again.” Leading the discussion were Holocaust survivor Thomas Strasser and three young people actively working to promote human rights. Strasser, an 82-year-old Czech Jew whose life was saved by Raoul Wallenberg, said commemorative days like these are especially important as the number of people who have witnessed the Holocaust first-hand continues to dwindle.

Another panelist, Stefan Felser, is helping to fulfill the UN’s mandate. The 19-year-old came from Salzburg, Austria to Montreal to intern at the Centre under the cadre of the Austrian Holocaust Memorial Service (AHMS).

The AHMS, or *Gedenkdienst*, sends young Austrians to Holocaust-related institutions as an alternative to the six-month military service compulsory for all Austrian men. *Gedenkdienst*ers work all over the world, in places as remote as Melbourne and Shanghai. The New York Times reported in 2007 that “of the roughly 40,000 Austrians who are of draft age each year, 30,000 do the military service, 10,000 perform civic services and 25 are accepted into a Holocaust remembrance program.”

Historian Andreas Maislinger founded the AHMS in 1992 after he volunteered at the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum. He modeled the program on its German equivalent, Action Reconciliation. According to its website, the purpose of the *Gedenkdienst* program is “to recognize Austria's part of the collective responsibility for the Holocaust and the responsibility of each and every one of us to ensure that it ‘never again’ happens.”

At the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre, the only one of its kind in Eastern Canada and New England, Felser has helped redesign the museum’s visitors guide, revamp the centre’s website and maintain the Oral History database. He also collaborates on the Bar and Bat Mitzvah Remembrance Program, which pairs a Jewish child planning their coming-of-age ceremony with one who died in the Holocaust before their bar mitzvah to honour the memory of the child.

“What I enjoy most about my job is seeing people appreciate my work. Learning about the Holocaust is a very important thing. To not forget the history and to not make the same mistakes again, that’s what history is good for, in my opinion.”

Before arriving in Montreal, Felser was concerned about how Jewish people would react to an Austrian working in a Holocaust museum. “I was actually surprised at how warm the welcome was.”

The centre has accepted about a dozen interns over the last decade. However, when the program first started, there was resistance to accepting Austrian volunteers, especially among survivors. “They had been the oppressors. But as soon as the first [Austrian] came, there was contact at the human level,” says Alice Herscovitch, the Executive Director of the Centre. She describes Felser as “amazingly mature.”

“He’s not your typical 19-year-old in terms of focus and drive and commitment to something foreign and difficult,” she says.

While Felser he returns home, he will join a growing percentage of the Austrian population that is not afraid to talk frankly about the Holocaust. Last year marked the seventieth anniversary of the Anschluss, in which Austria was annexed by Germany. Approximately 62,000 Austrian Jews died under the Nazi regime. Felser notes that the tone of the commemorations had changed in recent years.

“People have finally accepted the fact that they also hailed when Hitler came. Before, it used to be different. Before there were a lot of people who said we were overrun by Germans. Finally they accepted the fact that they voted for it, even though the vote was kind of fake.”

During the discussion, one man asked whether Austrian students are taught about the Holocaust with a sense of guilt. Felser replied that while it is an obligatory part of the curriculum, he did not learn about it with a sense of shame.

“We’re not taught that ‘Your grandfather fought there and is therefore guilty.’ That just offends people. They will shut down, and that leads to nothing.

“Austrian people are not the same as they were sixty or seventy years ago. Besides, I wasn’t born at that time. I’m from a completely different generation.”

At that, the room broke into a burst of applause.