

D'var Torah – Parshat V'ethanan August 5, 2017

by Jane LeGrange

Stolperstein, translated as “stumbling stone/block” is a cobblestone (3.9” on a side) with a brass plate on its top surface. The plate is inscribed with the name, birth date, date of deportation, and date of death/murder of a victim of Nazi persecution and extermination. Each stone starts with the words, “Here lived...”, and with these words, the anonymity of one Holocaust victim is removed.

The stolperstein stone memorial was started as an art project or installation by Berlin born artist Gunter Denmig in 1992 and as of January, 2017, over 56,000 stones have been set into the cobblestones in the ground in front of residences or places of business in countries across Europe, commemorating victims of the Holocaust. The original art project consisted of 55 commemorative stones embedded in Berlin sidewalks. The Stolpersteine are considered to be the world’s largest, decentralized memorial, one that is more powerful than any other museum or memorial.

In May of this year, our family travelled to Berlin to take part in a ceremony to be held on May 10th at 47 Momenstrasse in the Charlottenberg borough of Berlin, a ceremony whose purpose was to place stumbling stones in memory of my husband Doron’s maternal grandparents, Paul and Frieda Alexander and his aunt, Elizabeth Alexander.

More than a year before, we had been contacted by Judith Elam, the granddaughter of the family that lived in the apartment next door in the same building. She had come across the family history section of Doron’s website, where the address of his grandparents was recorded. She asked if we would be interested in placing Stumbling Stones in memory of

Paul, Elfreida, and Elizabeth Alexander, along with her father and grandparents. Our extended family all agreed, although left to our own devices, we would never have initiated such a ceremony.

We arrived in Berlin a few days before the ceremony. On our first day, we walked to the address to make sure we would know how to get there. Unlike a museum, which one can always decide not to attend, Stolpersteine are a memorial that invades everyday life. We were transfixed by the sight of one, three, six, or even ten brass plates set into the cobblestones in front of many of the buildings we were passing. At the sight of so many stones and knowing that they are representing only a small group from those that were deported to concentration camps, I was moved beyond any feeling I had ever had in viewing Holocaust museums. The stones are also reminiscent of Jewish graves that were desecrated and made into sidewalk pavement. Just as engraved stone from desecrated graves could be walked upon, the stones and the individuals they commemorate are exposed and vulnerable, sending the message of a story that happened and could happen again. Cambridge historian, Joseph Pearson writes that the power of the stones is in the missing information, saying, "It is not what is written which intrigues, because the inscription is insufficient to conjure a person. It is the emptiness, void, lack of information, the maw of the forgotten, which gives the monuments their power and lifts them from the banality of a statistic."

There were twenty people from our extended family coming from the United States and Israel, including one great-great granddaughter from Israel, all coming to attend the

ceremony on May 10th. The mayor of Charlottenberg spoke at the ceremony because the stone commemorating Elizabeth was the 3000th stone to be placed in Charlottenberg.

Probably because the mayor spoke, five different newspaper dailies interviewed some of the participants and wrote about our ceremony (in German of course). The current residents of the house paid for the stones and prepared a lunch for all the participants in the ceremony. We were even able to see the apartment where the Alexanders lived (now beautifully decorated) and even saw one original tile wall from the 1930s.

Paul Alexander, born in Prussia in 1870, earned a Ph.D. in chemistry in 1897 from the University of Leipzig, where he specialized in organic chemistry. In 1900, he married Elfriede Pinner Alexander (born in 1875) and they had six children together, born between 1901 and 1915, the oldest of which was a boy followed by five sisters. The youngest sister was Doron's mother, Ruth Alexander. Paul Alexander held numerous patents on processes for recycling rubber and started a company in the early 1900s, which made him a wealthy man. He lived with his family in a large house on a couple of acres of land in Berlin. His fortune, however, came to an end in the mid-1920s due to the price of new rubber dropping and the great inflation of 1923. The more difficult financial circumstances and the rise of the Nazi party in the 1930s lead him to sell the house in 1937 and move to 47 Mommenstrasse.

Meanwhile, between 1934 and 1938, five of the six Alexander children obtained visas to leave Germany; three sisters to Israel, and the boy and one sister to South Africa. The middle child, Elizabeth, who suffered from health problems and depression, was not able to obtain a visa.

In recent years, letters were found that Paul, Elfride, and Elizabeth had written to their children who had left Germany. The letters, which we donated to the Frankfurt Jewish Museum, were written between 1937 and 1939. They were transcribed by a volunteer from the museum archive, Karola Nick, who also spoke in the ceremony.

Frieda (12-12-1938) “The burning question is now what is to become of us... We would never have thought of emigrating if our possibilities for living weren’t gradually being taken away. Nevertheless, we aren’t letting ourselves be brought down. Don’t think that we’re constantly sitting around moaning.”

Frieda (01-21-1939) “All of you in South Africa and Palestine must surely see that we cannot abandon our Bethchen here... We are her parents as well as yours, and so long as we can keep ourselves more or less, we want to stick it out here with Elisabeth. As much as the prospect of seeing you all again tempts us, it is our duty to care for the child of ours who is in need of help as long and as well as we can. But it is very dubious, how long we will be able to do this. To get free of

the conditions here is also becoming more difficult every day. We are just always glad that you left on time.”

Elizabeth to Ruth (07-24-1939) “My heart does have some scars to show now, but they don’t disturb me in continuing to live; for I want to continue to live, even though I have no hope for myself as regards the future. My biggest wish is to be able to leave here and to come to you. There I would become entirely well and able to work...”

Paul to Ruth (07-25-1939) “But there is something else that can travel without a passport and visa, that can cross every border without fear of the border guards. This is our immeasurable, incredible and inexhaustible love. It is with you, with all of you, on every feast and every day of the week.”

The letters ended in September of 1939, at the beginning of the war.

In late July, 1942, the Alexanders were informed that they would be deported on August 4th. On August 3rd, Elizabeth jumped out of the window and killed herself. The Jewish community still functioned in 1942 and she was buried in the Jewish cemetery, and her grave can be visited today. Her parents were taken to Theresienstadt, where Paul died shortly after his arrival. Frieda was moved after a month to Treblinka, where she was murdered.

Today is the approximate date of the Yahrzeit of Elizabeth. Although the story of the Alexanders is tragic, I find solace in the fact that their

memories live on through their descendants, many of whom participated in the ceremony to install the stumbling stones. In today's Parshah, Moses tells the Israelites that God chose them because they are the smallest people. From Deuteronomy 7:7, "The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples. Moses points out that the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jibushites are all larger and stronger than the Israelites. In World War II, it must have looked like the Jewish people would be destroyed by nations much larger than them. In spite of the smallness and vulnerability of the Jewish people, the few people who left Europe and started over were able to make a difference. The philosopher, Nicolay Berdyayev, said "The survival of the Jews, their resistance to destruction, their endurance under absolutely peculiar conditions and the fateful role played by them in history: all these point to the particular and mysterious foundations of their destiny." As individuals, each of us has the responsibility to contribute, to make a difference in the lives of others. I thought of this when I looked at our group of 20 coming from the US, Israel, and Europe. Because the Jewish people is small, each individual is important and should be remembered as an individual. That is the message of the Stumbling Stones.

