



The Wexner Foundation Electronic Beit Midrash Parashat Vaera

Reflections on Travels through Central Europe

By Laura Lauder

Laura Lauder is a venture philanthropist and political junkie. Her passion is Jewish education and leadership development. In 2002, she founded a new initiative in recruiting and training Jewish Day school teachers, called DeLeT: Day School Leadership through Teaching, inspired by the Wexner Fellowship model. She can be reached at laura@lauderpartners.com

This summer, WH Alumna Laura Lauder, from San Francisco, traveled to Central Europe with Jewish singer/songwriter and Wexner faculty member Debbie Friedman to visit the Jewish schools funded by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation and to visit 3 cities with a Nazi and Communist past. Following are excerpts of Laura's reflections. She can be reached at laura@lauderpartners.com

Debbie and I were set to make our journey for 9 days, 3 days in each city: Prague, Vienna and Berlin. Was Debbie up for the high energy level of this trip, and play concerts, which can be so exhausting for her? Was Laura ready for the ultra-Orthodox Rabbis who ran most of the schools? Was Debbie ready to talk politics non-stop with everyone Laura met, and was Laura ready to slow down enough to experience the spiritual side of each Jewish community, and the horrors they'd faced in the last 60 years?

With these questions in the back of my mind, we set out in Prague...The Jewish quarter of Prague is one of the most frequented by tourists of any part of the city. And the Jewish Museum there, run by the gracious, soft-spoken and great intellect Leo Pavlat, has been thriving. Unfortunately, Hitler provided the extraordinary collection of Judaica – the largest in the world outside of Israel – over 8000 individual pieces. There are 16 buildings/locations that are former synagogues, a burial house, a 15th Century cemetery, and many houses. Some speak of Hitler's confiscation and preservation of all this Judaica before he sent Czech Jews to the camps as his attempt to create a museum to an extinct race. Leo disputes this theory as a myth. But the Precious Legacy collection, which traveled to the US during the Czech communist era (thanks to Mark Talisman), was a testament to the vibrancy of life here not that long ago.

Debbie and I went immediately to the Lauder Community School in Prague, a K-12 School with about 350 kids. Not too dissimilar from our Community Day Schools in the US. I was delighted with this surprisingly familiar format – and Debbie eyed an excited audience of casually dressed, 10 – 17-year olds. She was ready! With her guitar plugged into an amplifier in the gym, she rocked the house – the kids loved her music and cheered for more. She beamed, and the kids gave us flowers. Then we took tours of the classrooms, each class prepared songs and art for us, and we presented them with a stash of Debbie's CD's. Debbie's such a rock star.



That night at a dinner with Leo and other representatives of the Jewish community in Prague, I sat next to Tomas Kraus, head of the Jewish Federation of the Czech Republic...Tomas tells the interesting story of negotiating in the early 1990's with the new government over transferring ownership of the huge Judaica collection and all the Jewish buildings/museums/synagogues to the Jewish community. The government wanted to treat it like church property, which remains government owned and controlled – war restitution hadn't been set up yet. (Germany handled this immediately after the war – but the Communist-controlled countries ended up waiting until after the fall of the Iron Curtain to deal with restitution – sadly.)

Amazingly, representatives of the Israeli government showed up in 1990 and demanded that the treasure trove belonged to the Jewish people, and should be moved to Israel. 150,000 Czech Jews had been transferred through Terezinstadt, and the majority was killed in death camps in Poland. Their property can only belong to the greater protector of Jewish life, and that is Israel. Kraus couldn't believe that he had to negotiate against the Israelis, and it's what finally drove the Czech government to leave the lot of the holdings in the hands of the Jewish community in Prague – the moral and national pride issue of local ownership! And, it began the restitution process for many of the 1200 Jews left in Prague today to begin claims of restitution.

One of the 3 days visiting Prague, we mustered the courage to go visit the concentration camp about an hour away. The town of Terezin was a town then, and is a town today. Amazing that people could live then with the stench of burning bodies from 4 crematorium lines from 1942-44. And, that they can live today in apartments that were bunkers for murdered Jews and political dissidents. But Terezinstadt (German for Terezin Town) was the “country club” of the network of killing camps the Nazis controlled. Of the 150,000 mostly Czechs who came through these walls of red brick, originally built in the 1800's by the Austro-Hungarianians, only 38,000 died here, and most of sickness and disease. Typhus was rampant. Most prisoners here were sent on to Auschwitz. And so, there was some semblance of normalcy here – schools, the arts and literature “flourished”. The beautiful, new museum on the premises displays a massive collection of art by adults and children, of music and operas that were written (some of which continue to be performed in Israel), and of literary works. It was probably the hardest part of the tour – our eyes teared more uncontrollably at the beautiful children's art than even at the horrific iron crematoriums. And to think the art, plays and music pulled the wool over the eyes of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1944 when they visited here – or perhaps the Red Cross officials didn't want to really “see”...

On to Vienna

Our first priority was to visit the two Lauder schools in Vienna. A community of barely 7000 Jews in the country, many are new arrivals from the former Soviet Union. “They're from the “stans” i.e., former regions of the USSR that are predominantly Muslim, such as Uzbekistan, etc.,” George explained



referring to their beautiful dark eyes and skin. Rabbi Jacob Biderman welcomed us; he is a Chabad Rabbi he runs both schools: the PreK-8 400-student elementary school, plus the 150-graduate-student Lauder Business School. This magnificent school is in a small, beautiful, old Hapsburg palace that Ronald negotiated with the City to give to the School. How could there be a Jewish business school, run by terrific, non-Jewish, experienced business school faculty in a Hapsburg palace?? Ronald became close with the Mayor of Vienna while he was US Ambassador here. The long negotiation ended successfully, much to the great benefit of the 150 Business School students studying marketing, business law, and Jewish philosophy in relation to legal issues. There will be 200 students next year. Eighty-five percent are from the “East” – FSU and other Eastern European countries, and they live in the dorms. The 15% or so local Viennese students commute from their homes. The government covers about 5,000 Euros of the 16,000 Euro tuition for all students, and Rabbi Biderman fundraises for the rest.

The elementary school was equally as amazing. Another fabulous building after a long negotiation. The demand for space has grown so dramatically that the school is adding a top floor full of classrooms. While I am not traditionally a Chabadnik, I was deeply touched by Rabbi Biderman’s gracious and tolerant approach. We joined the boys and girls from the preK program (nearly 200) plus all the girls from grades 1-8 to hear Debbie perform. Once again, she rocked the house! The kids swayed arm-in-arm, or raised their arms high to swing them to the beat – and they screamed and cheered after every song.

From this high, we headed to the staid yet glorious world of Viennese art and theater...Viennese Secessionists were an amazing, avante garde group of painters, furniture makers, and fabric/dress designers. We saw the spot where, in the famous Belvedere Museum in the most famous Klimt room, hung “the Adele” herself. This is the now-world-famous painting of Adele Bloch-Bauer that Ronald (Lauder) had helped to be returned to the rightful Jewish owners in LA, and which he then purchased for \$135M. It hung briefly in the LA Museum of Modern Art after it left the Belvedere (after enormous controversy), and now hangs permanently in Ronald’s new German/Austrian art museum in NY, the Neue Gallerie on 86th and Fifth. Everyone we met knew the story of “the Adele”. It seems that the death of Waldheim a few weeks ago and the loss a year ago of “the Adele” are turning points in Austria’s progress toward its Nazi past.

I had to look into my mother-in-law’s street where she was born and lived for 2 ½ years before escaping Nazi-invaded Austria in 1938. Her parent’s store was on Landstrasse, near the corner of Hauptstrasse, and the house was around the back, one block behind. Today, this 3rd District neighborhood west of the Belvedere is a typical, middle-class, non-Jewish neighborhood, full of apartment buildings. The store is gone, and the memories are all that are left for dear Evie.



On to Berlin

Berlin was our last and final stop. We were apprehensive about coming to Germany – it would be the first time for both of us. 60 years later, what would we find? Neo-Nazis lurking? Squeaky clean buildings without a trace of the Nazi past? Anytime anyone said, “Yavolt!” I thought I would jump and pass out.

We didn’t find any of these scary notions – quite the opposite, actually. Here are a few stories:

I had emailed with the YPO (Young Presidents Organization) Germany chapter, and the sole German chapter member in Berlin, Killian, offered to give us a walking tour...Gingerly, we greeted him in our hotel lobby, a bit concerned about our first contact with a real German. For the next 3 hours, Killian regaled us with stories about how the west finally conquered communism, and he showed us all the regal buildings of modern-day Berlin – the “new” Reichstag with its magnificent, glass dome above the parliament floor (“for transparency of what goes on down there”.) The spectacular new “White House” equivalent, where the female President of the country, Angela Merkel, now resides. And the all-glass, modern Parliament offices (next to the Reichstag), along with the all-glass, modern train station that opened barely 3 months ago...Then, as if it were finally time, he stepped up to this tough issue and faced us. “You’re Jewish, aren’t you?” he questioned us innocently.

“Come inside Humboldt University,” he told us. “I want to show you something.” As we neared the top, all I saw was the balcony area overlooking the floor below, and old photos of old, white, gray-haired men lining the walls. “Do you know who these people are?” he asked quickly. “No...” “They are all the Nobel Laureates who went to Humboldt University. Look, there’s Albert Einstein over there.” Sure enough! A young Albert. Yes, Germany had a lot of Nobel Laureates – there must have been 70 or 80 photos.

“I’m showing you these pictures because you are Jewish, right? Well, the tragedy of Germany today is shown here – why? Because 80% of these men were also Jewish. And 80% of the 80% were either killed or fled the country. And that’s just what happened to the Jewish Nobel Laureates. This is the tragedy of our country – what we did to our scientists, our artists, our writers, our mathematicians, our inventors, and our business leaders. A whole 2 generations of leaders of civil society, wiped out or gone. And this is the great remorse of Germany today – due to the stupidity of the Nazis, we lost most of our best and brightest. It will take years and years to recover – for many, we never will emotionally recover. But at least we done much thinking, repenting and turning around – we now have laws against anti-Semitism, and any form of racism. And my generation says, Never Again.”

I was blown away. It was a most eloquent speech, and I was nearly in tears.



Over the following several days in Berlin, we had more of the same. Germans won't let each other forget the Holocaust. And, Berlin was the capital of the Nazi machine. So, Berlin is one of the most important places in which to remember.

We ventured to the Lauder Midrasha, or adult women's school. Run by a charming Canadian Orthodox Rabbi, Josh Spinner, we were greeted with warm hugs and great enthusiasm by a most extraordinary group of mostly Russian young women in their early 20's...Deb plugged in her guitar, the women gathered around us, and she began to hum a niggun, a melody, and the "kol isha", the voice of women, rose higher and higher. The tone was set – all the women followed Debbie, just like they followed Miriam in the Bible. Deb's "timbral" was her magical guitar and mesmerizing voice – and we captivated the women of this small school with beautiful melodies, sung arm-in-arm.

Energized by these wonderful women who studied Jewish text from women teachers, we decided to discover the major Jewish institutions in Berlin to memorialize the Holocaust. Both of them have been built in the last 5-10 years – and by famous architects. The famed Holocaust Memorial is strategically next to the Brandenburg Gate, and is a huge city-block in size. As we stepped out of the taxi to gaze out over the rows and rows of cement blocks, a rush of passion swept over us. It looked like thousands of coffins – millions – but now frozen in time, and permanent. These coffins were not to be sent underground to dismiss. And, while they were different heights, they were all the same size with no decoration or inscription. The millions of "unknown soldiers" in this horrific war of racism and Nazi domination. Deb and I stood, rather motionless, in the pathways between the blocks, staring at the lengths of the "cemetery", and watching how the ground undulated beneath us, feeling uneasy. Like a rollercoaster of emotion. Peter Eisenman, the famous architect, created an eerie feeling of the gross proportion of the massacre – and while it has been a controversial memorial as being "unfeeling" and "not particularly Jewish", we felt its power.

All in all, it was a tremendous trip. Deb and I laughed, cried, hugged, sang, exercised (each morning!) and ate (well!). I did a heck of a lot more sleeping, photographing (non-stop) and email (also non-stop, in the hotel rooms) than Deb. Debbie focused on absorbing, thinking, analyzing and enjoying. We were great traveling companions – we kept saying "Dayenu!" after each extraordinary experience. It would have been enough to come all this way, just for that! And indeed we'll have to get the "Dayenu Sisters" to try another part of the Jewish world sometime in the future.

To volunteer to write an upcoming electronic beit midrash, please contact Brigitte Dayan at bdayan@wexner.net

