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Area prof's Vienna Project promotes Holocaust remembrance

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Spray painted text is stenciled into a sidewalk as part of the Vienna Project PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHRISTIAN WIND CAMBRIDGE – It started with the letters.

In 2004, Karen Frostig, an associate professor at Lesley University and a resident scholar at Brandeis University, inherited 69 letters from her grandparents. She had never met them; during the Holocaust, they had been deported from Vienna to Riga and eventually murdered by the Nazis in a concentration camp.

Frostig's father was luckier. The Nazis kicked him out of Austria in June 1938 and he made his way to the United States, where he met and married Frostig's mother. Like many Holocaust survivors, he never talked about his experiences. Frostig grew up knowing very little about the history of her father's family and how the Holocaust affected them.

“When people don't talk,” she noted, “it means the children don't know what happened.”



Karen Frostig Frostig reviewed other documents that her father had left her in 1991 along with the letters from her grandparents and managed to piece together much of the missing family history.

It turned out her father had been instrumental in keeping himself and six other Austrian refugees from being sent back to Austria.

Fulgencio Batista of Cuba happened to be on the same boat as the refugees, and Frostig's father slipped a note under his cabin door about their predicament. Batista intervened.

In 1999, Frostig began to contemplate the Vienna Project, as a way to memorialize victims of the Holocaust in Austria. She applied for and received Austrian citizenship, and she organized the project from 4,000 miles away, traveling back and forth between Boston and Vienna.

"It was a miracle this project happened," she said.

The project itself is a powerful piece of "public memory art," as Frostig describes it. In 2013, Frostig set up 38 "memory sites" in Austria, places where Holocaust victims had experienced some sort of aggression, resistance or rescue. At each location, the words, "What happens when we forget to remember" were spray painted in 10 languages, and a smartphone app displayed video of contemporary artists doing memory commentary and history interviews tied into each site.

The project closed in 2014 at the Austrian National Library, located in the Hofburg Imperial Palace, a sign of how the Austrian government eventually supported and embraced the project.

To make the project inclusive, Frostig went beyond explaining the stories of simply one group of victims, which is often how memorials in Austria work. As noted on the project website, "The seven different victim groups included Jews, Roma and Sinti, mentally ill and physically and mentally handicapped, homosexuals, persons persecuted on political grounds, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Carinthian Slovenians." Frostig did not want the acknowledgment of victims to omit anyone.

"I didn't want us to forget as we remember," she said.

She also wanted it to be clear that not all Austrians should be considered victims. “The Austrians have a habit of viewing themselves as Hitler’s first victims. It is called the ‘victim myth.’ Therefore, all mention of victims has to be qualified so no one can for a moment assume I include Austrian civilians in a memorial.”

Although the memorials at the sites were temporary, the project continues through the app, a website – theviennaproject.org – and a “memory map” of letters from victims, which is on display at the Jewish Museum in Vienna.

On Nov. 3, Frostig gave a presentation at the Cambridge Public Library about the relevance of the Vienna Project to those who live in the Boston area.

Former Cambridge Mayor Alice Wolf, who was born in Vienna and whose family fled the Nazis, hosted, “The Vienna Project: Building Inclusive Communities.” Brian Corr, executive director of the Cambridge Peace Commission, presented on the issues and challenges of building an inclusive community.

The Cambridge Arts Council gave Frostig a grant to continue her research and explore its relevance to the present.

“Inclusion was a major focus of the project, and is now an issue in our government and our election,” she said. Frostig discussed the U.S. debate over immigrants and the Black Lives Matter movement, and how they connected to her project.

Frostig noted how Europe is paying a great deal of attention to both the U.S. election and the upcoming Austrian election, and how populism is playing a role in each.

“There’s a corresponding regression in the U.S. and Europe about nationalism,” she said.

One of Frostig’s new proposals for the project is a permanent naming installation for a House of History, or Haus der Geschichte, in Vienna.

The Austrian Parliament approved the building in March, but the Naming

Installation is still under consideration. The proposed Naming Installation would replicate key elements of the Vienna Project, subscribing to representation of seven persecuted Austrian victim groups murdered between 1938 and 1945. However, the upcoming Austrian elections have disrupted the plans for the proposal.

“It won’t be clear what will happen until December,” she said.

Despite the possible setback, Frostig is optimistic.

“The Vienna Project is a tribute to Austria’s willingness to remember,” she said.