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In Memory of Gertrude Schneider

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Professor Dr. Gertrude Schneider passed away on 7 September 2020. “With the passing of Gertrude Schneider we have lost a wonderful woman, journalist and historian, survivor of the Riga ghetto and several concentration camps. Baruch Dayan haemet. Our thoughts are with her family”, says Hannah Lessing, Secretary General of the National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism, in tribute to the deceased, who united fate and vocation in such an unparalleled way.

Gertrude Schneider was born on 27 May 1928 to Pinkas Maier and Charlotte Hirschhorn in Vienna, Ottakring. In 1938, after the “Anschluss” of Austria to the German Reich, she was expelled from school for being Jewish, and the Hirschhorn department store that her family ran in Vienna's Felberstrasse was demolished. Gertrude, her parents and her younger sister Rita, two years her junior, were evicted and forced to move into Jewish “collective apartments”; in February 1942 they were deported to Nazi-occupied Latvia. There, in the Riga ghetto, the 14-year-old documented the brutal realities of ghetto life in her diary. In 1943 the family was deported to Kaiserwald concentration camp and in 1944 to the concentration camp in Stutthof. Following a period of slave labor and after surviving a death march, Gertrude Schneider, together with her mother and sister, lived to see the liberation in March 1945 and returned to Vienna. There they received the news that their father had died in Buchenwald concentration camp one day before the liberation.

In 1947 Gertrude emigrated to the USA with her mother and sister. She caught up on her school-leaving certificate, and went on to study mathematics and history. In 1973 she received her doctorate from the Graduate School of the City University of New York (CUNY) – the subject of her doctoral thesis was “The Riga Ghetto, 1941–1944”.

Despite all that had happened, Gertrude Schneider remained attached to her home city of Vienna. Within the scope of the policy to offer re-naturalization to Nazi victims, in 1994 she regained Austrian citizenship, which – in the words of the then Mayor of Vienna, Michael Häupl at the award ceremony – had been “taken away by history”.

In her work, Gertrude Schneider united the historical examination of the Shoah with her personal experiences and memories – as demonstrated by her compelling book “Journey into Terror”, in which she combines her experiences as a young surviving eyewitness with the precise work of the historian. In an interview she once said about her experiences in camp: “It is not persecution, it became a part of who I am”.

Gertrude Schneider dedicated her book “Exile and destruction. The fate of Austrian Jews 1938-1945”, published in 1995, to the fate of Austrian Jews in the Nazi ghettos and concentration camps. Thanks to her, the fates of the few survivors of Maly Trostinec – the camp near Minsk to which almost 10,000 Austrian Jews were deported – became known and were documented for posterity.

Gertrude Schneider was always active as a surviving eyewitness. Her conversations with school students in 2013 at the Democracy Workshop held by the Austrian Parliament at the time travel workshop “Annexion 1938” will be especially remembered, as will her impressive commemorative speech in 2017 at the annual ceremony marking the Day of Remembrance against Violence and Racism in memory of the victims of National Socialism, held in the historic chamber of the Parliament in Vienna. In her speech she described “Expulsion, threats, impoverishment, deportation to a diabolical world, to ghettos, labor camps, concentration camps, death camps, whether by shooting or by gas, and at the end of the war the bloody death marches – I lived through them and survived them all; that is why I am here today, because I am one of the last. I had also promised my beloved father. Write down what is important, he said when he gave me a diary on Friday 27 May 1938, my tenth birthday. It is your duty! You, my dear listeners, who invited me to be here, are helping me to fulfil my father's wish on this official Austrian day of remembrance, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

However, one of Gertrude Schneider's heart's desires will no longer be fulfilled – a desire she expressed two years ago to Kurt Yakov Tutter, the initiator of the Shoah Wall of Names Memorial currently under construction in Vienna's Ostarrichi Park: “Kurt, I am old and sick, but now I am living for just one dream: that I can travel to Vienna with my daughter to see my father's name engraved on the memorial walls when the memorial is complete. Then I can bid farewell to this life.”

Gertrude Schneider will not live to witness the opening of the Shoah Wall of Names Memorial, but the name of her father will be immortalized on one of the stone tablets. And the memory of his daughter Gertrude will also be preserved – as she said herself on the Day of Remembrance in 2017: “My books will continue to speak when the last witnesses fall silent.”