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Preface: Zeitbrücke after 20 Years

Returning to Washington

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Zusammenfassung

20 Jahre später – Die Rückkehr nach Washington verbindet persönliche Erinnerung mit gesellschaftspolitischer Reflexion. Zwanzig Jahre nach seinem Gedenkdienst am United States Holocaust Memorial Museum kehrt der Autor des Buches Zeitbrücke namens Stefan Stoev mit seinen Söhnen nach Washington zurück. Die Reise wird zu einer Begegnung zwischen Vergangenheit und Gegenwart und eröffnet einen intergenerationellen Dialog über Holocaust-Erinnerung, historische Verantwortung und die Bedeutung von Menschenrechten. Zugleich reflektiert der Text aktuelle Herausforderungen wie politische Polarisierung, Populismus, Krieg, Migration und Klimakrise. Zeitbrücke steht dabei als Metapher für die Verbindung von Generationen, Kulturen und historischen Erfahrungen. Erinnerung erscheint nicht nur als Rückblick, sondern als Verantwortung und Grundlage für die Gestaltung einer demokratischen und menschlichen Zukunft.

Schlagwörter: Gedenkdienst, Intergenerationeller Dialog, Historische Verantwortung, Holocaust

Abstract

20 Years Later – Returning to Washington combines personal remembrance with socio-political reflection. Twenty years after completing his commemorative service at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the author Stefan Stoev returns to Washington with his two sons. The journey becomes an encounter between past and present and opens an intergenerational dialogue on Holocaust remembrance, historical responsibility, and the significance of human rights. At the same time, the narrative reflects on contemporary challenges including political polarization, populism, war, migration, and the climate crisis. Zeitbrücke serves as a metaphor connecting generations, cultures, and historical experiences. Remembrance is presented not merely as a reflection on the past, but as a responsibility and a foundation for shaping a democratic and humane future.

Keywords: Holocaust remembrance, intergenerational dialogue, historical responsibility, Holocaust

Zeitbrücke: A Journey Through Time

It was a sunny day in March 2026 when I arrived in Washington, D.C., with my two sons, Theo and Emil. Theo, the older of the two, was turning 20 that year, while Emil was 14. The city I had first encountered two decades earlier as a young Austrian commemorative-service volunteer welcomed us with the familiar charm of spring. The cherry blossoms of the Cherry Blossom Festival painted the streets in delicate shades of pink, while the air carried a mixture of anticipation and melancholy.

It was the second term of President Donald Trump, and the political atmosphere in the United States was tense. Yet for me, this journey was above all a return to the places that had shaped my life.

The journey began at a house at 15th Street and Corcoran. As we stood in front of the brick house at the corner of 15th Street and Corcoran, I was overwhelmed by a wave of memories. This was where I had moved into my first apartment in Washington in 2004—a small, modest flat on the third floor that, at the time, looked more like a construction site than a home. The rusty pipes, the broken toilet, the tiny kitchen—I had renovated all of it with my own hands, trying to create a small sense of home for myself. Back then, I was a young Austrian, far away from everything familiar, searching for meaning and a sense of responsibility. Theo, who was looking curiously at the façade of the building, asked, "Dad, did you really live here for a whole year?" I nodded and told him about those first days: how I had arrived with two heavily packed suitcases, how the heat and humidity of Washington had initially overwhelmed me, and how, little by little, I found my way around this unfamiliar yet fascinating city. Emil, the younger of the two, was more interested in the stories about the Amish families whose craft shops we had passed on our way there. "They live like they did 200 years ago!" he exclaimed excitedly. I smiled. Yes, the United States was a country of contrasts—between tradition and modernity, poverty and wealth, hope and despair.

The house on 15th Street was more than simply a place to live. It was a symbol of a new beginning. Here, I had learned to live independently, made my first friendships in Washington, and begun to understand the history of the Holocaust not merely as an abstract body of knowledge, but as a living memory. As we continued walking, I showed my sons Dupont Circle, just a few minutes away. "This is where we used to sit with friends, talk, debate, and laugh," I told them. "And over there, in that direction, is Georgetown—one of Washington's historic neighborhoods." Theo, who was already developing a keen interest in history, was

fascinated. Emil, meanwhile, had a more practical question: “And where can we get the best ice cream around here?”

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM): A Place of Remembrance and Transformation

Our next stop was the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. As we approached the imposing building, I once again felt that strange mixture of reverence and unease that had accompanied me during my first visit in 2004.

At the time, I had worked there as a commemorative-service volunteer in the Historical Research Department, under the direction of Dr. Peter Black, and had been part of a team dedicated to researching and documenting the history of the Holocaust.

In the twenty years since my service, the museum had continued to evolve. The permanent exhibition had been modernized, while new technologies—including interactive survivor testimonies and virtual reality—offered visitors more immersive ways of engaging with history.

Yet the heart of the museum remained unchanged: the Hall of Remembrance, with its eternal flame and the names of the concentration camps. I remembered sitting here many times during my year of service, reflecting in the silence of this limestone-framed space.

Theo was particularly moved by the children's exhibition “Daniel’s Story,” which tells the story of an eight-year-old boy who survived the Holocaust.

“It’s almost like a diary,” he whispered.

I nodded.

Yes, in a way, that was precisely what it was.

And that was also the purpose of this place: to ensure that the stories of the victims would not be forgotten. Emil, however, was fascinated by the flags of the liberating armies, which stood in orderly rows at the entrance to the museum. “They look like soldiers,” he said. I explained to him that each flag represented an army that had participated in the liberation of the concentration camps—the Americans, British, Soviets, French, and others. “This was a moment when the world stood together to put an end to injustice,” I added.

As we walked through the exhibitions, I found myself thinking about the many Holocaust survivors and witnesses to history with whom I had worked during my

time there. Hedi Pope, who had told me about her escape from Vienna. Charles Stein, who had been forced to flee the Nazis as a medical student. Gerald Schwab, who had served as an interpreter during the Nuremberg Trials. And Felix Yokel, who had told me about his life in Laa an der Thaya and his escape to Palestine. "Of all the survivors and witnesses with whom we worked on the book 'Zeitbrücke' back then, not a single one was still alive," I had noted in my brief report in 2026. It was true. Most of them had died over the preceding two decades. Yet their stories lived on—in books, in archives, and in the memories of those who had known them.

Zeitbrücke – A Bridge Between Generations

During my commemorative service in 2004–2005, I decided to document my experiences in a book. Zeitbrücke – Generationskontakte, Geschichtseinblicke, Freundschaften (Time Bridge – Intergenerational Encounters, Historical Insights, Friendships) was intended to be more than a collection of reports. I wanted it to serve as a platform for communication between generations. My aim was to connect the voices of Holocaust survivors with the questions, reflections, and experiences of young people like myself.

The idea took shape during my time at the USHMM. I had met so many remarkable people—survivors, historians, and volunteers—and I felt that their stories deserved to be preserved.

Several encounters were particularly formative:

My conversations with Dr. Peter Black, who supported me not only as my supervisor but also as a mentor.

My friendship with Vadim Altskan, a colleague in the archives with whom I spent countless hours discussing history, art, and politics.

My encounters with Austrian émigrés, including Susanna and Felix Yokel, who welcomed me as if I were a member of their family.

I still remember the moment I first met Felix Yokel. He was one of the many Austrian Jews who had been forced to flee the Nazis in the 1930s. His life had been an extraordinary journey—from Laa an der Thaya to Prague, then to Palestine, and eventually to the United States.

Yet despite all the hardships he had endured, he had remained a person of great warmth and humor.

"We never completely lost our connection to Austria," he had told me at the time. "Even though we had to leave, the country remains in our hearts."

His words deeply moved me. They were also one of the reasons I decided to write the book.

The book was divided into several chapters, each exploring different aspects of my commemorative service and my work at the USHMM:

- Active Remembrance – On the significance of cultures of remembrance and the role of commemorative service.
- A 360° Tour Through the Museum – An insight into the work of the Historical Research Department.
- Commemorative-Service Volunteers Have Many Friends – Accounts of encounters with survivors and émigrés.
- What a Person Knows of Themselves Is Their Reflection – Personal reflections on confronting the past.
- Journey into the Past – Reflections – Stories of survivors I had come to know.
- Connections – On the relationship between history, politics, and personal engagement.
- Returning to Austria – Reflections on returning home and passing on what I had learned.

Each chapter contained not only my own observations but also contributions from survivors, colleagues, and friends. In this way, the book became a mosaic of perspectives—a collage of memories illustrating how the past continues to shape the present.

The Role of Art and Culture

It was particularly important to me to include the cultural dimensions of my time in Washington. I had not only worked there; I had also visited art exhibitions, participated in discussions, and formed friendships with artists. One of them was Kurt Heinrich, a former Viennese who worked as a chemist but was also a passionate painter in his spare time. Kurt and I shared a special connection: we both loved art, and we both felt a deep connection to Austria. One day, we decided to organize an exhibition at St. Thomas Parish Church. Kurt presented several of his works, while I contributed some of my own drawings. The exhibition was a success—not merely because the artworks were well received, but because it created a bridge between generations and cultures. "Art can be a language that goes

beyond words," Kurt once told me. And that was precisely what I wanted to capture in Zeitbrücke: the idea that memory is transmitted not only through facts, but also through emotions, stories, and creative forms of expression.

As I walked through the USHMM with my sons in 2026, I often found myself thinking back to the words I had written in Zeitbrücke. In particular, I remembered a sentence by Christoph Meran, which appeared in the book's foreword:

"Commemorative service sharpens our sensitivity to every form of discrimination and exclusion and encourages resistance to dangerous political movements."

These words seemed more relevant than ever.

At a time when populism, nationalism, and xenophobia were once again gaining ground, it was more important than ever to remember the lessons of history.

Zeitbrücke was therefore not merely a personal reflection on the past. It was also a call to responsibility.

The Political Landscape in 2026: Trump, Iran, and the World

As we left the museum, we saw a large crowd gathered on the National Mall. A demonstration by supporters of Reza Pahlavi, the son of Iran's last Shah, had assembled there. Tensions in the Middle East had escalated again in recent years, and members of the Iranian diaspora were using the opportunity to call for democracy and human rights in their homeland.

The United States under President Donald Trump was (and is still) a country of extremes (Mühlbauer/Lakitsch 2024). On the one hand, his policies had strengthened the economic position of many Americans—the unemployment rate was low and the stock markets were thriving. On the other hand, his polarizing rhetoric had deeply divided American society. The Black Lives Matter movement had regained momentum, while debates over racism, immigration, and social justice dominated public discourse. Theo, who had already developed an interest in politics, asked me: "Dad, why is Trump so controversial?" I tried to give him a neutral answer: "He has reached many people who feel that they are not represented by the political establishment. But his way of conducting politics has also fueled many fears and conflicts." Emil, who was less interested in politics than in the protests taking place around us, asked: "And why are they protesting?" I explained that the demonstrations concerned the future of Iran. "Reza Pahlavi is

the son of the last Shah. Many Iranians hope that he might offer a democratic alternative to the current regime."

In the twenty years since my commemorative service, the world had changed profoundly: Europe was grappling with the rise of right-wing populist parties and with the question of how to address migration and integration. The Middle East remained a powder keg—the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continued to simmer, while Iran remained at the center of international tensions. Asia had continued to develop economically and politically, while Africa continued to struggle with poverty, conflict, and climate change. The climate crisis had become one of humanity's most urgent challenges. Yet despite all these changes, certain constants remained: the power of remembrance, the importance of human rights, and the necessity of learning from history.

We were invited to dinner at the home of Vadim Altskan and his wife, Ljudmila. Vadim was one of the people I had met during my commemorative service and with whom I had developed a deep friendship. At the time, he worked in the International Archives Department at the USHMM and was an expert in Eastern European history. When we entered his home in Alexandria, Virginia, it felt as though time had stood still. The same bookshelves, the same conversations about history and politics, and the same warm smile with which he welcomed us.

"Stefan! You're finally back!" he exclaimed, embracing me warmly.

Then he looked at my sons.

"So these are the young men! Theo and Emil, right? You have a wonderful father."

Ljudmila had prepared a traditional Russian dinner: borscht, pelmeni, and blini. As we ate, Vadim told us about his current projects. He was still working at the USHMM, although now in an advisory capacity.

"The archival work continues," he said. "Every year, new documents come to light, and we have to preserve them before they are lost."

We talked about the old days—about the picnics in the gardens of Dumbarton Oaks, where we often painted with his sons; about the long discussions about history and art; and about the projects we had worked on together at the museum.

"Do you remember the translation project for the museum guide?" I asked.

Vadim laughed.

"How could I forget? You and Christoph corrected the German version until it was perfect. Bruce Tapper was thrilled."

Bruce Tapper, another close friend from that period, had been a Senior Editor in the museum's Publications Department. We had worked together not only on translations but also engaged in many philosophical discussions about the meaning and significance of remembrance.

"He once told me that history consists not only of facts, but of the stories of the people who experienced it," I told my sons. "And that is precisely what I wanted to preserve in Zeitbrücke".

Vadim was not only a historian but also a lover of art. Several paintings hung in his living room, including one by Kurt Heinrich, the Austrian émigré with whom I had once exhibited my work.

"Kurt once told me that painting was a kind of therapy for him," I recalled. "After all the horrors he had experienced, painting gave him a way to express beauty and hope."

Theo, who enjoyed drawing himself, was fascinated.

"That's almost like me! When I draw, I forget everything around me."

I smiled.

"That's exactly how it was for Kurt. And for many others I came to know."

As the evening came to an end, I realized just how deeply this friendship had evolved over the years. Vadim and Ljudmila had been more than colleagues; they had become mentors, friends, and almost family.

"We have experienced so much over the past twenty years," Vadim said as we said goodbye. "But one thing has remained unchanged: the importance of remembrance. As long as we remember the past, as long as we pass on the stories of those who are no longer with us, their voices remain alive."

The Next Generation: Theo and Emil Discover Washington

The following day, we decided to explore Washington from a different perspective. Theo was determined to visit the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, while Emil was more interested in wildlife and wanted to see the National Zoo.

At the Air and Space Museum, Theo was in his element. The Wright Flyer, the Apollo 11 command module, the Space Shuttles—all these exhibits sparked his curiosity.

“Dad, imagine what it must have been like when the first human landed on the Moon!” he exclaimed excitedly.

I told him about the technologies developed during the Second World War and how some of them were later used in space exploration.

“But we must not forget that many of these developments were also connected to the Holocaust,” I added. “The rocket technology developed by the Nazis was later used by both the Americans and the Soviets in their space programs.”

Theo was visibly impressed.

“That’s crazy. Something terrible led to something amazing.”

I nodded.

“That shows how complex history is. It cannot simply be divided into good and evil. There are always many layers.”

Emil, by contrast, was fascinated by the pandas, lions, and elephants at the National Zoo.

“They’re enormous!” he exclaimed as we stood in front of the elephant enclosure.

I took the opportunity to tell him about the threats facing endangered species.

“Many of these animals are at risk of extinction because their habitats are being destroyed. This is also one of the consequences of climate change.”

Emil listened attentively.

“And what can we do about it?”

“We can live more consciously, waste less, and work to protect the environment,” I replied. “Just as we work to protect human rights.”

That afternoon, we visited the Capitol, the seat of the U.S. Congress. Theo was particularly impressed by the architecture and the history of the building.

“This is where the laws governing the country are made,” I explained. “But democracy cannot be taken for granted. It must be defended again and again.”

We talked about the 2024 election, in which Trump once again ran against Joe Biden—and won.

“Why did so many people vote for him?” Emil asked.

I tried to give him a balanced answer:

“Some people feel that they are not represented by traditional politics. Trump speaks to their fears and hopes. But politics is complex, and not all of his solutions are necessarily good for the country.”

Theo, who already had a better understanding of political relationships and dynamics, asked:

“And what does this mean for the future of the United States?”

“That is a good question,” I replied. “The United States is a country of extremes—but also a country of possibilities. Much depends on how people respond to these tensions.”

That evening, as we sat in our hotel, I reflected on the past twenty years. So much had changed—in the world, in my life, and within me. And yet there were constants that had remained.

One of the most important things I learned during my commemorative service was that remembrance is not only about the past; it is also about the future.

As long as we remember the victims of the Holocaust, as long as we pass on their stories, we can help prevent such atrocities from happening again.

In Zeitbrücke, I had written:

“The significance of the past for the future lies in recognizing the connections between them.”

Those words seemed more relevant than ever. At a time when misinformation, populism, and hatred were once again gaining ground, it was more important than ever to remember the lessons of history.

When I undertook my commemorative service in 2004–2005, I was a young man searching for meaning. Twenty years later, I was a father seeking to pass on to my sons the values of tolerance, compassion, and responsibility.

Theo and Emil had grown up in a very different world from the one I had known. They were familiar with smartphones, social media, and artificial intelligence—things that had not existed during my youth.

And yet the fundamental questions of life remained the same:

What does it mean to be a good person? How do we deal with difference? How can we create a better future?

A New Chapter: Passing on the Memory

Before leaving Washington, I visited the USHMM one more time. This time, not as a commemorative-service volunteer, but as a father who wanted to explain the significance of this place to his sons.

In the Hall of Remembrance, we lit a candle—for the victims of the Holocaust, but also for all those who continue to suffer from oppression, war, and injustice today.

"Why are we doing this?" Emil asked.

"Because we have to remember," I replied. "Because we have a responsibility to make sure that something like this never happens again."

Zeitbrücke had been the story of my time as a commemorative-service volunteer. But what if, twenty years later, I were to write a sequel?

A book that would incorporate not only my own experiences, but also the perspectives of my sons. A book about: How the world has changed—and what has remained the same? How the memory of the Holocaust is passed on today? How the next generation confronts the challenges of our time?

I thought about the survivors and witnesses to history I had known—Hedi Pope, Charles Stein, Gerald Schwab, and Felix Yokel.

They were no longer alive, but their stories continued to live on. And it was our responsibility to pass those stories on to the next generation.

I told my sons:

"You have seen and experienced a great deal over the past few days. But the most important thing is not what you have seen, but what you take away from it."

Theo, looking thoughtful, asked:

"And what is that supposed to be?"

"That you understand that history is not simply something written in books. History lives within us—in our memories, in our decisions, and in our responsibility."

Emil, still fascinated by the elephants at the zoo, asked:

"And what can I do?" I smiled.

"You can remain curious. You can ask questions. And you can always remember that every person has a story—and that these stories matter."

Twenty years after my commemorative service in Washington, I returned to Austria with a deep sense of gratitude. Gratitude for the experiences that had shaped me. Gratitude for the people who had enriched my life. And gratitude for the opportunity to pass these experiences on to my sons.

The world had change, but the fundamental values of humanity, tolerance, and responsibility had remained the same (see also the fundational principles of critical peace studies in: Mühlbauer/Moegling 2026). And it is up to us to keep them alive.

Zeitbrücke had not merely been the title of a book. It was a metaphor for what we all must do: build bridges—between generations, between cultures, and between the past and the future. And I knew that this bridge would continue to be built—by Theo, Emil, and all those who come after us.

Excerpts from "Zeitbrücke" – A Selection of the Most Influential Contributions

To better understand the context of my trip to Washington in 2026, I would like to summarize some of the most important passages from "Zeitbrücke" here. These excerpts illustrate how deeply the experiences during my commemorative service shaped my life—and why returning in 2026 was such an emotional experience.

Christoph Meran's Foreword – The Significance of Commemorative Service

The idea of creating a guide for Austrian commemorative service volunteers in the United States, which Stefan Stoev has realized with this publication, is excellent. His interviews with contemporary witnesses, compiled with great dedication, and his diary-like accounts convey a strong urge to preserve, process, and pass on what he has experienced. The approximately fourteen-month civil service that young Austrians undertake at various Holocaust memorial sites around the world—carried out with great commitment and limited financial means—is among the most formative experiences in the lives of these young volunteers. During my seven years as a staff member of the Austrian Embassy in Washington, D.C., I had the opportunity to meet five successive commemorative service volunteers who served at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. My encounters with them demonstrated that personal contact with contemporary witnesses and survivors of the Shoah, and learning about their individual stories, was a far more profound experience than a

purely theoretical engagement with the documentary materials of the Holocaust could ever be. (Stoev, 2005)

Christoph Meran emphasizes here what I experienced myself during my service at the USHMM: encounters with eyewitnesses are irreplaceable. Books and documents can convey facts—but the human dimension of history, the emotions and personal accounts of lived experience, can only be conveyed through direct contact. This realization led me to shape "Zeitbrücke" not as a dry academic treatise, but as a collection of living stories.

My first Meeting with Dr. Peter Black – A Mentor for Life

In April 1993, the Holocaust Museum in Washington opened its doors for the first time. Later that same year, cooperation with the Austrian Commemorative Service began, and shortly thereafter, the first commemorative service volunteer, Anton Legerer, officially began his civilian service in Washington. Today, twelve years later, I am the eleventh commemorative service volunteer to work—like all my predecessors—in the Historical Research Department under the direction of Dr. Peter Black. Dr. Black has been responsible for the commemorative service volunteers at the Museum since 1997. In a conversation we had together, he spoke about his experiences with and friendships with the volunteers: "I first met Helmut Prochart, the first commemorative service volunteer, shortly before he returned home," he recalls. "At that time, our department was still very small. There were no international research projects yet, and only a few staff members worked in our area. The Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies had not yet been established, and we were a small team. The commemorative service volunteer was therefore an important member of the team, contributing to both academic research and administrative and organizational work. (Stoev, 2005)

Peter Black was not only my supervisor, but also an important mentor. He showed me how to combine historical research with human empathy. His approach to working with eyewitnesses—respectful, compassionate, yet scientifically rigorous—had a profound impact on me. When I returned to the USHMM in 2026, I often thought back to his words: "History is not only what is written in the archives. It lives in the people who experienced it.

Meeting Hedi Pope – "I Saw Him, Hitler, When He Marched into Vienna"

Hedi Pope has worked as a volunteer at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington since 1993. Every Friday, she works at the Information Desk. One day,

while I was speaking German with a visitor at the desk, a woman standing in the background suddenly joined our conversation. That was how I first met Hedi. She approached me and said, "I saw him—Hitler—when he marched into Vienna." We spoke briefly about Austria, her hometown of Vienna, and the GEDENKDIENST program. (Stoev, 2005)

Hedi Pope was one of the first eyewitnesses I met in Washington. Her story—the escape from Vienna, the loss of her parents, and her new life in the United States—showed me how diverse the experiences of survivors were. Not all of them had been imprisoned in concentration camps. Some had fled, rebuilt their lives, and created new futures—and yet they carried the scars of displacement with them throughout their lives. When I walked through Washington with my sons in 2026, I often thought of Hedi. "After all, they ONLY threw us out of our homeland," she had said at the end of our conversation. Those words deeply shook me at the time. They revealed something fundamental: trauma is not only what one has suffered, but also what one has lost.

Gerald Schwab – From Refugee to Interpreter at the Nuremberg Trials

Gerald Schwab has been working for several years as a volunteer in the Historical Research Department at the USHMM in Washington. It was there that I had the honor of meeting him. Gerry, as he is known by his friends and colleagues, was born in 1925 in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany, under the name Gerd. In 1944, during his naturalization process in the United States, his military papers were issued, and he changed his first name to Gerald. Together with his family, who came from Breisach am Rhein, he moved briefly to Basel in 1933. His father was a businessman by profession and worked in several countries. Gerd's family then lived for some time in France, in the small town of Saint-Louis (St. Ludwig), near the Swiss border, where young Gerd attended school until the family moved back to Germany in mid-1935, settling in the city of Lörrach. (Stoev, 2005)

Gerald Schwab's story is an example of the complexity of refugee experiences during the Nazi era. He was not a conventional Holocaust survivor in the sense of having been imprisoned in a concentration camp—but his life was nevertheless profoundly shaped by persecution and flight. His work as an interpreter at the Nuremberg Trials showed me how important language and communication are in confronting and coming to terms with crimes. When I visited the exhibition on the Nuremberg Trials at the USHMM in 2026, I thought of Gerald. "We tried to be fair,"

he once told me. Those words have remained a powerful reminder to me: even in the darkest of times, there are people who stand up for justice and truth.

Susanna and Felix Yokel – Austria in Their Hearts

During my time in Washington, the Yokel family became especially dear to me. Together with Susanna, Felix, and the rest of their large family, I had the opportunity to celebrate various holidays and cherish many beautiful moments that have remained precious memories. On Saturday, April 23, Susanna and Felix invited me to celebrate Pesach (Passover) with them. That spring, several heavy rainstorms swept across the city. So much rain came through the ceiling of my apartment that it caused me quite a few headaches, along with the necessary repair work. (Stoev, 2005)

Despite their expulsion from Austria, they had never lost contact with their homeland. When I returned to Washington in 2026, I knew that Felix had already passed away. But his words—"Austria remains in our hearts"—continued to resonate with me. The unveiling of the memorial in Laa an der Thaya, which Felix helped organize in 2005, was an important moment of reconciliation. When I told my sons about it, they asked me: "Why is it so important to remember the expulsion?" My answer was: "Because only then can we understand what is at stake today. If we fail to understand the mistakes of the past, we may repeat them in the future."

Kurt Heinrich – Art as a Bridge Between Worlds

Meeting Kurt Heinrich was a great cultural enrichment for me. During our encounters, we talked about Austria, what life in Vienna had been like in those days, and what it is like today. But beyond history and geography, we also discovered another shared passion—the arts. Kurt Heinrich was born in Vienna on May 31, 1921. When his family moved to Hernals, Vienna's seventeenth district, he was still a child. The political circumstances forced the family to make arrangements to leave Austria. (Stoev, 2005)

Kurt Heinrich showed me how art can be a form of coming to terms with the past. After all the horrors he had experienced, painting offered him a way to express beauty and hope. Our joint exhibition at St. Thomas Parish Church was, for me, a symbol of how memory can also be passed on through creative expression. When I walked through the National Gallery of Art in Washington with my sons in 2026, I thought back to Kurt. "Art can be a language that goes beyond words," he once told me. And that is precisely what I wanted to preserve in "Zeitbrücke": the

understanding that history lives on not only through facts, but also through emotions, colors, and stories.

Final Remarks

The excerpts from “Zeitbrücke” demonstrate that the book was more than a documentation of my experience as a commemorative service volunteer. In retrospect, I understand it also as an expression of historical responsibility and an appeal to preserve the connection between remembrance, knowledge, and contemporary social responsibility. The testimonies of the survivors and eyewitnesses I encountered were not merely accounts of a completed historical past. They represented living forms of memory that continue to challenge the present and raise questions about how societies confront violence, persecution, displacement, and exclusion.

Returning to Washington in 2026, this dimension of the book became particularly tangible to me. Walking through the city with my sons, Theo and Emil, I realized that remembrance is not simply an act of looking backwards. It is also a social and intergenerational practice through which the meaning of the past is negotiated and transmitted to future generations.

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Author

Stefan Stoev, has a PhD Degree in information technology and economics, a master's degree in international finance and economics, a bachelor's degree in international economic affairs, and a Professional Degree in foreign affairs and linguistics. Between 2004 and 2005, Stoev served as Austrian Gedenkdienst representative at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. During this time he was engaged in scientific research at the Center for Advanced and Holocaust Studies, maintained contact to Holocaust Survivors and wrote on the book Time Bridge/Zeitbrücke. In 2008 he initiated the international Art project Pangaea in support of UNICEF. For his contribution to the promotion of arts and culture Stoev was honored in 2012 with the award of the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture.