

“The June ceremony was a beautiful experience for me“

Interview Q & A for Helena Štumarová and her students in Třešť
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What is your profession?

I am a neuropsychologist in the Washington, DC area. I evaluate patients with neurologic disorders such as head injury, stroke, dementia, Parkinson’s disease, tumors, and epilepsy. Our assessments provide diagnostic impressions and treatment recommendations. I love my job. It is gratifying to help people understand their symptoms better and learn to cope with them.

Are you married? Do you have any children? Are they interested in your family history?

I am married. I do not have children of my own, but my husband, Don, has two sons and six grandchildren from his first marriage and they give us great joy. We also have a close relationship with my sister, Elizabeth, and her husband and two daughters who live in Southern California. Elizabeth, as well as Eva, my father’s niece, and Margit, the widow of his cousin, Frank Meissner of Třešť, have all assisted me in researching the family.

Do you practice the Jewish religion?

My father’s parents were Jewish and my father had a bar mitzvah in Brno in the 1930s, but he became an atheist. My mother’s ancestors were also Jewish, but she was raised a Protestant in Vienna by her mother who was a devout Christian. We always celebrated Christmas and Easter (my mother’s favorite holiday), and I still do.

However, although I was not raised in the Jewish religion or with Jewish traditions, I want to honor my Jewish heritage.

Do you like the Czech Republic?

My family had deep roots in the Czech Republic before the war. My father’s ancestors went back many generations in Bohemia and Moravia, and my mother had Czech ancestors as well. As a result of my research on the family, and my visits since 1996, I now have friends in Prague, Brno, and Třešť. These experiences and contacts have given me a strong personal connection to the country in addition to my ancestral history.

Each time I visit the Czech Republic, I try to see and learn something new. Two examples among many: Last year, I toured [Zlín](#) where I viewed the town’s functionalist architecture from the 1920s and 30s, and learned about the vision and humanity of Tomáš Baťa. I have also visited [Ivančice](#) where Ivancice some of my mother’s ancestors came from. The great Czech artist, Alfonse Mucha, was also born there, and I was able to tour his birthplace and the museum that describes his early life.

When did you visit the Czech Republic and Třešť for the first time? Did you like it?

In the 1990s, after the Velvet Revolution and the end of Communism, my father (who was living in California) reclaimed most of his parents' pre-war properties in Brno and Třešť. In 1996, he visited Brno, his birthplace, to view the properties and decide what to do with them. That was the first time he had returned to his country since 1938. My mother, my husband, and I accompanied him, and that was my first visit to the Czech Republic.

In 1999, my parents, my husband, and I returned to the Czech Republic – this time accompanied by my sister, Elizabeth, and her family. We visited Třešť for the first time during this visit.

My father's life was shattered by the war. Throughout his childhood in the 1920s and '30s, he often visited his mother's family in Třešť, and was particularly close to his grandfather, Albert Grunberger (named Bobeš by his grandchildren), and his Uncle Hilbert Grunberger, who ran the family factory in Třešť. Bobeš and Hilbert often visited my father and his family in Brno. Although my father and his parents and sisters escaped Czechoslovakia, Bobeš, Hilbert, and six other members of my father's family in Třešť remained and were tormented and murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. Another maternal uncle in Brno and his son who lived in Prague, as well as most of my father's paternal relatives in Prague were also persecuted, deported and killed during the war.

As a result, my father never wanted to come back to Czechoslovakia, and rarely spoke of his childhood there. It was only after the end of Communism, the restoration of democracy, and the chance to reclaim the properties that had been stolen from his family, that my father returned.

When did you start to become interested in your family history?

I became particularly curious about my family history after inheriting an apartment house in Brno, built by my father's parents just before the war. This was the only property belonging to my grandparents that my father kept, and he and my husband, together with the building manager in Brno, worked hard to renovate it after years of neglect. The building now belongs to my husband and me and has never stopped being a place of residence and business since its completion in 1938.

I have written several essays describing my experiences researching my family and the history of the apartment building. The first of these essays, "Return to Brno" (Navrat do Brna), describes our family's first trip to Brno in 1996, and what happened afterwards.

Have you had any experiences with the UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM in Washington?

The U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington has assisted me greatly in my research on the fates of my relatives and the builders of the apartment house in Brno. I have visited the

museum many times and am indebted to their librarians and other staff for locating the information I need in their vast databases. One of the librarians, Michlean Amir, also had relatives in Třešť!

Where did the idea of placing Stolpersteine come from?

I have known about the Stolpersteine since this remarkable memorial project by the German artist, Gunter Demnig, was first publicized in the 1990s. The first memorial stones my husband and I ever saw were during our visit to Brno in 2013. However, it was not until I read an article in the New Yorker magazine called [“The Last Trial,”](#) published in February 2015, that I began to think about the Stolpersteine for my family. In the article, the author, Elizabeth Kolbert, discusses the laying of a Stolperstein by Mr. Demnig for her great-grandmother in Berlin.

When did you have the idea to put the Stones in Třešť?

Last summer, I asked the archivist at the Jewish Community Center in Brno about how to make arrangements for the memorial stones to be laid for my family. I was put in touch with Barak Selinger from the Jewish Community, and we exchanged e-mails in which he explained what information was needed for each individual. Over the next year I gathered that information (e.g., name, birthdate, name before marrying, date and place of deportation, date and place of murder). He then made the arrangements with the officials in Třešť and Brno. The stones, laid in Třešť and Brno, were inspired by Mr. Demnig’s Stolpersteine, but produced in Brno, are slightly bigger (15x15cm), and are called Kameny zmizelých.

The ceremony in Třešť on June 6 was an amazing experience for me. I was deeply honored by the presence of Rabbi Kliment, who gave the blessing; Mr. Hynk, the mayor; Ms. Šťastná, the representative of the Department of Culture of Třešť; Mr. Veselý, the interpreter; my friend, Jan Morkus, who has done a lot of research about the family’s factory in Třešť; and Mr. Selinger. The classical music at the ceremony, provided by a pianist and two violinists, including Mr. Hynk’s remarkable young son, was particularly wonderful. I was also delighted to see Helena Štumarová and some of her students there. I had met Helena and her students during previous visits to Třešť and Jihlava. They have done extraordinary work in researching this aspect of the town’s history, and their interviews of the last remaining witnesses of the deportations from Třešť in May 1942 are documented in two books so far.

I have shared my experiences and pictures from that day with my family and friends in the U.S. and Europe, and all are impressed with how thoughtful and moving the ceremony was.

Do you like the project about the Jewish cemetery that the students are preparing with Miss Štumarová? Are you interested in this project?

I do not know anything about this project, but would like to learn about it!

My first visit to the cemetery was during our first visit to Třešť in 1999. My father could not manage the steep slope of the cemetery due to a stroke, so he stayed in the car in front of the entrance while the rest of us wandered around looking for familiar names on the tombstones. I often wonder how he felt waiting for us there alone with his memories.

Among my father's ancestors buried in this cemetery are his grandmother, Veronika Grunberger (Bobeš' wife), who died in 1931, as well as her parents, Adolf and Rosa Metzl, who died in 1919 and 1887, respectively. I visit their gravesites every time I am in Třešť.