



NEWS RELEASE

Traveling to honor his Austrian ancestry

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American Airlines travel privileges helped Jonathan Heiser remember family persecuted during the Holocaust

There is one person Jonathan Heiser credits for his love of his Austrian heritage: his late paternal grandmother, or Oma, Krista Siegmund.

“What really caught my interest in my Austrian ancestry was the love, time and effort Oma gave each one of her grandchildren,” said Jonathan, Manager on Duty in Crew Scheduling at American Airlines. “She spoiled us with the most loving kindness that could inspire any kid.”

That inspiration has led Jonathan to use his American travel privileges to explore and honor his family history, one characterized by unspeakable tragedy and unimaginable resilience.

Jonathan Heiser’s Oma, Krista Siegmund (center), with her grandparents Alfred and Beatrice Hlawatsch, shortly before they were deported to the Theresienstadt Ghetto.

Scars of the Holocaust

While Jonathan grew up hearing his grandmother’s stories about the beauty of the idyllic Austrian countryside, he also learned about the horrors she and her family faced during World War II.

Oma was only 2 years old when the Nazis invaded her corner of then Czechoslovakia. Her Jewish grandparents were forced into the Theresienstadt Ghetto and later murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Her father was forced into the Nazi army and later captured as a Soviet prisoner of war. Oma then spent years in hiding with her father’s Catholic relatives, while her Jewish-born mother fled the country, ultimately escaping to the United States.



Jonathan recalls his grandmother's stories of this time in her life: Food was scarce, air raids were a common fear, and when the family tried to flee to a family home in the Austrian countryside, they were captured and held at a refugee camp for months.

During World War II, Helene Siegmund (right) hid her daughter, Krista, Jonathan's Oma, with Catholic family. She feared her Jewish parentage would make her and, consequently, her daughter targets for Nazi persecution.

Seeing Austria through Oma's eyes

In 1951, a 15-year-old Oma boarded a Pan Am flight from London to New York to reunite with her mother and start a new life in the U.S. Fifty-three years later, her grandson used his American travel privileges to fly to Austria for the first time and encounter his family's past.

In Lofer, the Austrian village where Oma hid during the war, Jonathan explored the home that had been in his family for generations, churches that had played important roles in Oma's life and other sites he'd heard her describe. He also connected with distant cousins, some who remembered caring for his grandmother.

"I had goosebumps," Jonathan said. "Oma's love for Austria was so amazing. When I got there, it was very emotional, and the family was very open and kind, as if we had known them for years."

Honoring a legacy

Jonathan lost his Oma in 2019, but his love of Austria has continued. That year, the Austrian government amended its citizenship laws to offer dual citizenship to descendants of those persecuted by the Nazis.

When his application was accepted in September 2021, Jonathan used his travel privileges to fly to Washington, D.C. and receive his official citizenship and apply for his Austrian passport.

In 2021, Jonathan Heiser used his American Airlines travel privileges to fly to DCA and visit the Austrian Embassy, where he received his Austrian dual citizenship. In 2019, Austria began offering dual citizenship to descendants of those persecuted by the Nazis.

Jonathan Heiser visits the Shoah Wall of Names Memorial in Vienna in 2021. Just to his left are the names of his great-great-grandparents, Alfred and Beatrice Hlawatsch.

In 2021, Jonathan learned the Shoah Wall of Names Memorial honoring the lives of Austrian Jewish victims of the Holocaust had been completed in Vienna. While on a trip to watch the Austrian national soccer team, he stopped to visit the wall.

"I knew if my Oma was still alive, she would have wanted to see it," Jonathan said. "I was determined to visit the wall while I was there."

Jonathan scanned the 65,000 names until he landed on those of Beatrice and Alfred Hlawatsch, his great-great-grandparents.

"What was so odd and beautiful about this visit is my nose actually bled when I touched their names," Jonathan

said.

More family history to explore

Jonathan remains in touch with his family in Austria and is already planning future travel, including to the Czech Republic, where both of his parents have roots. While there, he hopes to continue honoring Oma's legacy with a visit to Terezin, where the Theresienstadt Ghetto was located.

Knowing the impact his travels have made on him, Jonathan encourages all team members to use their travel to connect with their ancestry.

"I am grateful for my travel privileges, as these were very special visits that I will never forget for me and my family," he said. "Oma absolutely shared her love of Austria and the beauty of it with me, and now I can say I've experienced it for myself."