



I had seen photos of the St. Ottilien Benedictine Monastery standing grandly above the gardens and fields around it and viewed it not as a place of worship for Christians, but for a brief time, a sanctuary for afflicted and healing Jews. This conversion was forced. The Monastery had become a military hospital for the Nazi war machine; the older monks were condemned to work in the fields and the younger ones were shot if they refused to join the army. Only after the Nazi's defeat and appropriation by the Americans did it become a treatment and rehabilitation center for Jews vomited out of the forced labor and concentration camps. There were Germans who staffed the hospital at the beginning. They were forced out or angrily left to be replaced mostly by Jews, but also by a few Germans, like Erika Grube, who felt it was their duty to heal others. It was where my father, recovering from the amputation of his arm in a car accident, and my mother, recovering from Typhus and appendicitis, met. They had survived, he from the killing of his parents in Hungary, forced labor camps, and finally from Dachau and she from forced Soviet evacuation in Poland, to Siberian labor camps, and Azerbaijan. My mother was in a "kibbutz" just outside of St Ottilien before she was hospitalized, my father in another DP camp.

I had read about this monastery in *Surviving the Americans: The Continued Struggle of the Jews After Liberation*, Robert L. Hilliard's memoir, an American GI who had helped in the recovery of victims of the Holocaust. My father's forlorn face was in a photo in the book about patients at St. Ottilien. I discovered a website for St. Ottilien:

<http://dphospital-ottilien.org/stories-from-about-patients-residents/>

Our family had saved other photos of that time, notably one where he was smiling, standing next to a woman whom I presumed was his nurse. I can't be sure she was the nurse to whom he may have owed his life. Depressed after surviving one devastating event after another, he confessed to me many years after that he was inconsolable recovering from his injury. He says a nurse spent days with him, often through the night, encouraging him. My father also told me of a German military surgeon who, compassionate in his own way, had spent some time with him and "ordered" him to recover since he did not want his surgical efforts to go to waste. He did not identify the surgeon.

This “nurse” in the picture with my father, is still unnamed, a co-worker of Erika Grube, the woman featured in a section of the website.



This woman may have been working with or under Ms. Grube who was not a nurse but a physical therapist who had fallen into her vocation during the war because, as a struggling artist, there was no need for her other talents. She left some sketches of skeletal former inmates at St. Ottilien, which are posted on the website <http://dphospital-ottilien.org/photographs/>. I cannot imagine how she felt taking care of these people—was it out of duty, guilt, or just the satisfaction of caring for other human beings? I didn’t know because her story had been largely lost but for the bits and pieces my father told me.

So I felt compelled to visit the monastery to see the place where my mother and father met and pick up clues as to what it must have been like for them and Ms. Grube. On a tour through Germany, we were scheduled to visit Munich, so I contacted Fr. Cyrill Shaefer, the webmaster and archivist for St. Ottilien. He was gracious enough to give me a tour. He was unable to identify the woman standing with my father or find out what had happened to her.

Besides the links to the website above relating to Erika Grube and her artwork, Fr. Cyrill was able to tell me a bit more about her and provided this translation of her experiences at St. Ottilien:

### PLEASE INSERT MS. GRUBE’S MONOGRAPH HERE

**Grube, Erika:** Was ich am Ende des Krieges in St. Ottilien erlebt habe (What I experienced in St. Ottilien at the End of the War), in: Renner, Frumentius: Der fünfarmige Leuchter. Beiträge zum Werden und Wirken der Benediktinerkongregation von St. Ottilien, vol. 3, St. Ottilien 1990, p. 103-111



In addition to the translated memoir Fr. Cyrill gave me, I photographed this plaque translated from the German:

THIS MEMORIAL PLAQUE COMMEMORATES MRS. ERIKA GRUBE, WHO WORKED AS A MOVEMENT THERAPIST IN ST. OTTILIEN FROM MAY 1945 TO NOVEMBER 1947 AND TREATED COUNTLESS FORMER CONCENTRATION CAMP INMATES THERE DURING THIS TIME, WHO WERE TAKEN TO THE FORMER DP HOSPITAL ST. OTTILIEN AFTER THE LIBERATION.

THROUGH HER TRAINING AT THE ACADEMY IN MUNICH AS A LITHOGRAPHER, SHE WAS ABLE TO DEPICT THE EVENTS IN THE MONASTERY IN MANY DRAWINGS IN MOVING PICTURES.

SHE DIED IN 2007 AND HER MOST ARDENT WISH WAS A MEMORIAL PLAQUE THAT REMINDS NOT ONLY OF HER, BUT ALSO OF THE MANY JEWISH VICTIMS.

I HAVE NOW FULFILLED THIS WISH FOR HER

David Stopnitzer, 2021

(Mr. Stopnitzer, the son of Holocaust survivors, was born at St. Ottilien and lives in Munich)

Afterwards, from what I was told by Fr. Cyrill, Ms. Grube never married. She was described as unattractive and strong-willed, although I can't believe that the patients who benefitted from her care would have thought so. An unfortunate reaction to a vaccination in the 1970s left her disabled. She needed cared for the rest of her life and died in 2007.

As I toured the compound, I saw only clean renovations, the buildings that held the wards now schools and travelers' residences, some for African refugees. They are spread out between grass

and gardens and greenhouses in the shadow of the Neo-Gothic chapel that rises above it. I can only imagine the process almost eighty years ago that took the 6,100 Jewish patients that came through the hospital from near death and despair to healthy lives. That included my parents. St. Ottilien was the place where they met and their lives were reborn.

As much of a miracle, there were 431 Jewish children born there. The maternity ward now is a



gallery for local artists and a meeting room.

A small cemetery for the 73 Jews who died in the hospital adjoins the Christian cemetery. The neatly kept tombstones have the dates of their deaths, but for many of them, not their birthdays or where they came from. Some of the inscriptions on the tombstones have been worn away. Fr. Cyrill has been hunting for some skilled masons who could decipher and inscribe the Hebrew letters, to bring the words back.

The stones have been moved away from their gravesite. Buried in haste, the dead were left in peace with no families to claim them, perhaps most of them killed or lost as well. Only three of the dead were moved by their families to the US or France. Grass grows over the graves and is well maintained.



While my parents were waiting to emigrate to the US, I was born outside of St. Ottilien in Lagerlechfeld, a DP camp at a converted Luftwaffe base near Augsburg, not far away. Afterwards, the DP camp was a military prison. It then reverted to a military airfield. Everyone in post-war Germany was flexible in recycling places for their needs, including Jews.

I saw no point in visiting my birthplace, but St. Ottilien stands as a working memorial. To me it echoes the Chanukah phrase: “Nes Gadol Haya Sham’ --‘A Great Miracle Happened There’” because for all who passed through St. Ottilien in those days, it was the miracle of rebirth helped by people of strength and unselfish good intentions, Jews and Gentiles alike. After almost eighty years, the identities of many who did their good deeds are obscured and elusive.

I would hope that this story can give some encouragement to those who saw that even out of the devastation the war brought, we could give thanks to the basic good deeds of good people, as I saw at St. Ottilien.