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Where are they now? The first Jess Schwartz grads

JOSH SAYLES
Staff Writer

Jess Schwartz Jewish Community High School opened its doors in August 2001 as the Valley's only Jewish high school.

Since then, the school has undergone two name changes - first Jess Schwartz College Prep, and now Jess Schwartz Jewish Community Day School - a move from Temple Chai in Phoenix to the Ina Levine Jewish Community Campus in Scottsdale, and a merger with The King David School to form the area's first K-12 Jewish day school.

Jewish News recently spoke with some of the first Jess Schwartz grads, who received their diplomas when it was still known as Jess Schwartz Jewish Community High School, to find out what they've been up to for the last several years.

Ruthie Storch

Jess Schwartz, '05

Bryn Mawr College, '09

Though her paternal grandmother had fled Hamburg, Germany, in 1939, history major Ruthie Storch had no intention of studying German in college.

Then, one summer, she took an internship at the Museum of Jewish Heritage - A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York City.

"(I) ended up working in the

Holocaust museum world and really enjoyed that, and when I realized that was what I wanted to do, I spoke to a European history professor of mine," says Storch. "She told me that if I was serious about Holocaust studies and the Holocaust museum world, I couldn't have a career in that unless I started studying German."

Storch didn't study abroad during college and upon graduation was looking for ways to improve her German. She took a job with the Masorti Movement - outside the United States the Conservative Movement is known as Masorti - as an American shlichah (emissary) in Berlin. Her 10-month stint began in October 2009; she plans to return to the U.S. in August.



Ruthie Storch, Jess Schwartz Jewish Community High School Class of 2005, visits the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. She is living in Germany and working for the Masorti Movement as an American shlichah (emissary) until August.

Photo courtesy of Ruthie Storch

Her job with Masorti has three main responsibilities, she says. She works as an assistant to an English teacher at a Jewish day school in Berlin. Additionally, she teaches at a nearby Sunday school that she and others helped to found with a local German rabbi.

"There's really not much here for Jewish students to receive a Jewish education (if they) aren't in day school," says Storch. "There's no such thing like the Hebrew schools we have in America - there's just not that culture here."

Her other major responsibility is to visit the Jewish community in Weiden, a small town in Bavaria six hours away by train, one weekend each month.

"A majority of the (Weiden) Jewish community is Russian because in the '90s (Germany) had large waves of Russian Jewish immigrants, and (now) there are Jewish communities scattered throughout all of Germany in random places, like Bavaria," says Storch.

"When there were thousands of Jewish immigrants coming in, (the government) couldn't put them all in a major city like Berlin or Munich, so they established communities in the middle of nowhere."

Storch says she does Jewish educational programming with the Weiden youth because "there's no day school down there, no Hebrew school, nothing. Most of these kids don't have bar and bat mitzvahs, and they can't read Hebrew. It's been an extremely rewarding experience."

In addition to her work with Masorti, Storch has been traveling to Hamburg to conduct research on her grandmother's family. Her grandmother, she says, died when Storch's father was very young, and there is no one left to tell the story of how her family escaped from Nazi Germany.

"I've been able to go into the archives and confirm how they survived and how they managed to escape," says Storch. "Because the Jews of Hamburg had to declare everything that they owned to the (Gestapo), I've actually been able to find out everything my family owned ... and the addresses of places they lived and worked. I've gone back to see those places."

Because, as a young girl, her grandmother kept a journal in which she wrote about some of her friends, Storch has also been able to research those friends, though she says hasn't found any survivors. She was, however, able to track down the sister of one of her grandmother's friends and meet up with her in Hamburg.

"It was wonderful to make this connection," says Storch, who hopes to write a book from her research in Hamburg.

"I was drawn to Hamburg because my family's from there and it's a beautiful city, but there's so much rich Jewish history there and there hasn't been much written on it. I just really enjoy doing research and learning about the Jews of Hamburg."