

2009-02-09 15:56:01 by Southern

Michael J. Jordan



Lenke Livia Jordan, shown approximately 15 minutes after her birth, is officially without a religion in Austrian records. (Michael J. Jordan)

HAINBURG, Austria

"Ich bin ein Israelitischer!" While it doesn't quite have the ring of John F. Kennedy's famous pronouncement in Berlin, it's a German construction that, surprisingly, I recently had to learn.

Last year I wrote an article about the ongoing obstacles to producing ethnic data to more accurately count Central and Eastern Europe's millions of marginalized Roma, aka Gypsies. The count would provide data detailing their miserable living conditions, with an eye toward creating better policies to improve their existence.

One reason many Roma refuse to identify themselves officially is that during the Holocaust, Nazis and local collaborators seized upon such personal census material to track down Jews and Roma in towns and villages and send them to concentration camps. Today, some Roma vow never again.

This resonates with me, a Jew whose family was deported from the Hungarian countryside during World War II.

But it was only after the birth this month of our third child that I tasted the self-identification dilemma firsthand.

My two sons were born in New York, but our daughter, Lenke, was born under more unusual circumstances. Her mother hails from Hungary, I'm from the United States. We now live in a third country, Slovakia. But Lenke was actually born in a fourth country, Austria -- the Austrian border is a stone's throw from our home in

Slovakia's capital, Bratislava.

The regional hospital in Austria's northeastern corner is located in the medieval city of Hainburg, along the Danube. Modest but well equipped, the hospital has several distinguishing features. Most doctors and nurses speak English, a calming influence for foreigners during the anxiety of pregnancy and delivery. They're also friendly, inevitably greeting you with the salutation "Gruss Gott!" -- Greet God.

Which leads to another notable: the crucifix in each room peering down on each patient. It's a public hospital, but if this were tried in the States, no doubt the administration would have a court battle on its hands. Old Europe is different, though. Even the Muslim family of the Turkish newborn down the hallway -- the matriarch bedecked in headscarf -- accepts that it's just the way it is.

Fine, I thought: I'm in no mood to pick a fight with my hosts.

Then came my visit to the Hainburg town hall for birth records to sort out the murkiness of Lenke's paperwork. "Gruss gott!" said the two women, inviting me into their empty office (crucifix on the wall). Things were going smoothly until the English-speaking one hit me with, "What is your religion? For example, I am Katholische. And you are ...?"

Momentarily stunned, I sat there. Was this necessary? Reading my face, the woman added, "You can leave it empty."

No, I calculated, I've got nothing to hide.

"Jewish," I said. But it didn't register.

Since I speak but a few words of German, I felt the need to get creative with my accent. "JOOO-ish." No connection. "YEWV-ish!" Still nothing. "You mean, Islamische?"

Then I remembered the Holocaust. "Juden. YOOO-den!"

My voice had grown louder, echoing off the walls. Yet the absurdity continued. They looked at each other, puzzled. Did I really have to utter the toxic term Judenrein to remind these Austrians? Hitler's homeland, after all, had welcomed the Nazis with unbridled enthusiasm.

The lead official finally reached for her procedural rulebook, turning to the page of recognized religions. And there it was: Israelitische. Yes, I'm an Israelite.

"Ich bin ein Israelitischer!" We giggled in triumph.

However, my ordeal wasn't over.

“And your wife? Her religion?”

Born Hungarian and nominally Catholic, my wife converted to Reform Judaism several years ago in New York. But would she want that proclaimed in Austrian records for eternity? Given that she was laid up back at the hospital, recovering from her C-section two days earlier, I should have left her alone. But I called anyway.

“Jewish?” I asked.

Her response was strident.

“Leave it blank. Yours, too,” she said. “This is no time for patriotism. Who knows what the situation will be like in 30 years? Or how this information could be used online.”

Since she’d just taken one for the team -- her third C-section, in fact -- I offered not much in the way of protest. But I did say, “It’s not a question of patriotism but of not being ashamed of who I am.”

Lenke’s birth certificate now includes the gaping blanks.

Later, as I told the story to my father -- who agreed with my wife’s rationale, since it was his grandmother, aunts, uncles and cousins who were deported to Auschwitz -- I wondered if the Roma who refuse to declare their ethnic identity are justified.

Have Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and others surrendered the right to ever again be trusted with such data?

Fool me once, shame on you. But fool me twice ...

[JewishTelegraphAgency](http://www.southernwolf.net/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1053)

<http://www.southernwolf.net/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1053>