

Back to Vienna

Through the eyes of three former Austrians

Vienna – 70 years on

George Vulkan

The first week of May was a moving, memorable period for many former Austrians. Some 250 of us had been invited to Vienna to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Anschluss as well as Austrian Holocaust Memorial Day, which marks the liberation of Mauthausen. The lobby of the Park Hotel in Schönbrunn became a centre for exchanging reminiscences, not only of the horrors of the Nazi time but also of the earlier pleasures of childhood and teenage years.

The visit was superbly organised by a team of young non-Jews from 'Letter to the Stars', an organisation dedicated to establishing contacts between survivors and present-day students as well as remembering individual victims of the Shoah.

The highlight of the week was our attendance at a special session of parliament, which included speeches by leading politicians, readings and music. We were then escorted by schoolchildren to the Heldenplatz for a truly moving commemoration. In the presence of pupils from over 200 schools, and numerous other participants, the proceedings were opened by the President of Austria and were followed by dramatisations, music and – most important – by survivors telling their stories.

On Friday we attended the evening service in Vienna's main synagogue, followed by wonderful Shabbat meals in the adjoining Alef Alef Restaurant or the Chabad Centre.

Another event was the dedication of a memorial in the 9th District to those deported from there. We also visited *Stolpersteine* set in pavements in front of houses from which relatives of those attending had been deported.

Contrasting with the sad memories, we joined the Vienna Jewish community in celebrating Yom Ha'Atzmaut in their impressive new Hakoah sports centre. It was wonderful to see there so many young children with their parents.

Throughout the week, the dedication with which the people from 'Letter to the Stars' looked after us was outstanding and many new friendships were established. As we said our 'Auf Wiedersehens' in the VIP lounge at the airport, we felt that their work and that of many schools is achieving a great deal

in showing that the new generation of Austrians is far removed from the evils of the Nazi time and the post-war period of amnesia.

'No to racism'

Martha Blend

This concludes the article which appeared in last month's issue of the Journal.

It was a beautiful day in May. I was sitting on a bench in the Schönbrunn Park when a middle-aged woman asked me the way to the Tiergarten. I told her, adding: 'Really I'm a visitor to this country.' 'But you speak good German,' said her husband. 'Yes,' I replied, 'I was born here.'

It was my fifth trip to Vienna. The first I have described in a previous issue of this journal as a painful experience, finding the places I had known as a child but none of the people. The second time was different: I was invited back for the launch of the German translation of my book *A Child Alone*. The next two occasions were sponsored by the Jewish Welcome Service and included an opportunity to speak to schoolchildren.

This time I had come as part of the 'Letter to the Stars' project. There had already been memorable events: in 2003 20,000 people released 80,000 balloons in memory of the departed; in 2004 there was a memorial ceremony at Mauthausen; in 2005 25,000 people, including 15,000 schoolchildren, brought white roses to the addresses of deported Viennese citizens.

This year, there had already been meetings between students and some of us former refugees at the Austrian embassy. When we arrived we were taken to the grand Schönbrunn Park Hotel. There were speeches of welcome and a traditional Austrian meal of gulash and Kaiserschmarren.

The next day we were taken to the Belvedere Palace, which houses the largest collection of works by the Austrian painters Klimt and Schiele. We saw a copy of the famous gilded Bloch-Bauer portrait by Klimt – the original has been returned to its Jewish owners, from whom it was looted by the Nazis. In the evening there was a synagogue service, then a traditional Jewish meal of soup with dumplings and chicken served in a handsome new community centre. At the weekend we were left to do

whatever we wished.

Monday was the 'big' day. At the parliament building, the Vice-Chancellor and other prominent Austrians spoke acknowledging the country's willing participation in the Holocaust and pledging themselves to work to improve attitudes towards minorities in the future. A searing item was the showing on a screen of the names of a select group of Jewish children killed by the Nazis.

At the Heldenplatz, the scene of Hitler's triumphant appearance after the Anschluss, we were surrounded by children from schools which had elected to take part in the scheme. Some survivors told their stories, and there were more speeches from government officials, some dramatic performance and music. Finally, there was a line-up of teenagers whose T-shirts spelled out the message 'No to racism'. We were invited to look around the Heldenplatz where there was a vast display of messages we had sent, written on placards, and hundreds of drawings and paintings by schoolchildren from all over Austria. We were impressed by the efforts made by the younger generation to understand the past and, hopefully, to avoid repeating its mistakes.

An unforgettable week

Paul Samet

This year, the 'Letter to the Stars' project, set up about five years ago with government support, invited over 250 survivors and their companions for a special one-week visit to Austria. There was to be a commemoration at the Austrian parliament on the day of the liberation of Mauthausen. Many of us had been invited to speak to school throughout Austria. For me, this entailed a visit to the school across the road from where I had lived – and where I had been expecting to go when I reached the age of 11.

It was an emotional visit. All who went had lost family members. That so many were prepared to come from many parts of the world (the USA, Australia, Canada, Argentina, Israel and, of course, the UK) was impressive in itself. That these survivors were prepared to support the Austrian drive to stamp out racism and persecution was equally impressive. For many there were reunions with long-lost friends. The

Selbstverteidigungskurs der 5. Klasse



Anfang des 2. Semesters bekamen wir Besuch von Joseph Klotz von der Autobahnpolizei. Er brachte uns an zwei Dienstagnachmittagen das Wesentliche der Selbstverteidigung nahe. Wir lernten gefährliche Situationen zu umgehen, im Falle eines Angriffs zu reagieren und mit traumatischen Erlebnissen klar zu kommen. Außerdem zeigte er uns die verschiedenen Geräte, die Angreifer auf Abstand halten sollen: Stinktierserum, ein Schlüsselanhänger mit Alarmsirene usw. Nach diesen zwei Nachmittagen waren wir jedenfalls abgehärtet und vorbereitet für die große „böse“ Welt.

MIRIAM HÖLZL, 5.



Menschen für (viel zu kurze) Zeit teilnehmen durften. Unsere besuchten sozialen Einrichtungen: Behindertenwerkstätte der Caritas Bludenz, Flüchtlingshaus Amina in Bregenz, Werkstätte der Lebenshilfe Hörbranz, Schulheim Mäder, Rotes Kreuz Bregenz, DOWAS Bregenz (Ort für Wohnungs- und Arbeitssuchende) Krankenhaus der Stadt Dornbirn, Heilpädagogisches Zentrum des Fürstentums Liechtenstein.

TATJANA GABRIELLI,
REBEKKA ROSE, 5.



A Letter To The Stars

„Wähle die Menschlichkeit!“, das ist die zentrale Botschaft, die uns Frau Martha Raviv bei ihrem überwältigenden Vortrag in unserer Schule mitgab. Frau Raviv ist Holocaustüberlebende und wurde von uns, 6. Klasse, im Zuge des Projektes „A Letter To The Stars“ eingeladen. A Letter To The Stars ist ein österreichweites Projekt der Institution „Lernen aus der Zeitgeschichte“. Jedes Jahr werden verschiedene Projekte für alle österreichischen SchülerInnen veranstaltet. Jede Schule kann sich Anfang des Schuljahres anmelden und aktiv teilneh-

Hanover at the age of eight. Klaus was encouraged to keep a journal. In it he mentions his friend Ernst Rudolf.

Ernst's father Adolf was the brother of my grandmother Ellen (née Reiss). He was an engineer and scholar who had fought bravely during the First World War. Sadly

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deported with her mother to Auschwitz, where they died later that year. Ernst Rudolf arrived in the Netherlands in September 1938, a few months after Klaus. At first they

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prevailing attitude was a determination that events like the Holocaust must never be allowed to happen again.

The session in parliament was a sombre affair, with speeches by senior politicians stressing that Austria had learnt from the past. Displaying the names of many children during the

session was a chilling experience. All of this was broadcast live on Austrian television. Later, we had a more relaxed, but no less emotional, project session in the Heldenplatz, where several survivors spoke about their experiences and their hopes for the future. A very clever item was an excerpt from the Charlie Chaplin

film *The Great Dictator*, showing the scene in which the barber/dictator look-alike makes an impassioned speech for tolerance, democracy and respect. This had been dubbed into German, in a good imitation of Hitler's oratory – but the words were totally different. An unforgettable week.