

## A moving week in Vienna

In the early autumn of 1938, Austrian Nazis forced our family, along with the other 400-500 Jews of Eisenstadt, to leave behind our homes and belongings. Eisenstadt, and indeed the whole of Burgenland, was to be rid of its Jews. We moved to a small flat in the 2nd District of Vienna until we left Austria early in 1939.

In February 2011, Gaston Mariotti of Jewish Welcome Service Vienna (JWS) invited my brother and me to visit Vienna from 27 March to 3 April as guests of the Viennese authorities. JWS, founded in 1980 at the initiative of the then mayor of Vienna and Leon Zelman, a Shoah survivor, is financially supported by the City of Vienna and the Austrian government, as well as by a number of major Austrian industrial and financial entities. Some of its objectives are clear and understandable, some less obvious. About 130,000 Jews were expelled from Vienna in the late 1930s and over 65,000 murdered in concentration camps. In 1945 only about 1,000-1,500 were left from the once flourishing Jewish community of Vienna.

Very few Jews who had been expelled were willing or able to return after the war, so JWS began to invite small groups to visit their former home city. Since 1989 thousands have accepted their invitation. It goes without saying that the entire exercise is tinged with a strong PR element designed to counter Austria's former reputation for anti-Semitism, yet there is a strong feeling that JWS is genuinely succeeding in building bridges, particularly in their activities concerning schools and young people.

I was not prepared for the fact that we were about 90 people from all parts of the world, with 55 coming from the USA, 20 from Israel, 2 from Argentina, 1 from Australia and 11 from the UK. Of these 90, only 40 were the actual ex-Austrians; the remainder were accompanying family. The outstanding group was the nine-member family of Stella Dubey from California, who came with three generations of supporters, from husband to granddaughters – a wonderful happy and lively family.

An introductory dinner in the hotel on the first evening was followed the next day by a guided city tour, in beautiful sunny weather, ending at the Vienna City Hall for a reception hosted by a member of the city council. On the following day, Wednesday, we were invited to a reception at the Bundeskanzleramt, where our host was Dr Manfred Matzka, Head of the Presidential Section. He addressed us in impeccable English, alluding to the pains many of us had suffered at the hands of Austrian Nazis, bidding us welcome back



The author and his wife Anita at the reception in the Bundeskanzleramt

to Vienna but not actually saying 'sorry'.

Wednesday evening, free of formal organised activity, became our private evening of culture – we went to see *Rigoletto* at the Volksoper, an excellent performance at affordable ticket prices.

It is unthinkable to visit Vienna without an evening at a *Heuriger* in Grinzing. Such an evening was organised for our group, many of whom were in good voice and remembered the songs their parents had sung in times gone by.

Friday turned out to be a busy day. A visit to the enormous Zentralfriedhof of Vienna had been planned, and the organisers had gone to great trouble to locate the graves of parents and relatives of the visitors.

The group were invited to the main Vienna Synagogue in the Seitenstettengasse for an Erev Shabbat service and dinner in the community centre. The synagogue was constructed in 1825-26. The luxurious Stadttempel was fitted into a block of houses and hidden from plain view of the street due to an edict by Emperor Joseph II that only Catholic places of worship could be built with facades fronting directly on to public streets. Ironically, this edict saved the synagogue from total destruction during Kristallnacht as it could not be destroyed without setting on fire the buildings to which it was attached. The Stadttempel was the only synagogue in the city to survive the war as the Nazis destroyed all the other 93 synagogues and Jewish prayer-houses in Vienna. Paul Chaim Eisenberg, Chief Rabbi of Austria, welcomed us and this was followed by the familiar tunes of the Kabbalat Shabbat service led by an excellent *chazan* with choir.

No official programme had been arranged for the Shabbat. Some went to synagogue, some went shopping, some went on the Danube or to the Prater with its iconic big wheel and some visited one or other of the superb Viennese museums. We strolled along the Kärntnerstrasse and the Graben in the warm sunshine, marvelling at the crowded streets and riches of the shop windows and wondering how this small

country had succeeded in achieving such a high standard of living.

Back home and able to take a more distant view of the week in Vienna, I tried to put my finger on what was the highlight for me. I concluded it was not the various ceremonies, or the sightseeing, or the excellent coffee and Sachertorte. What stands out absolutely clearly in my memory is the character of the people in the group – not only the 'survivors' but also those who accompanied them. There was a certain dignity which indicated a willingness to forgive but never to forget what happened to them and their families, and there were stories which should never be forgotten.

I spent some time chatting with Stella Dubey and her husband Michael and two granddaughters, 23-year-old Rachel and 14-year-old Jasmine. In March 1939, the six-year-old Stella arrived with her mother in Brooklyn, not speaking a word of English. Her mother found work in a local sweat shop and they struggled. Stella made progress, as so many refugees did, and eventually found Michael. She tells the story that some 20 years ago, she and Michael were on a business visit to Vienna and she felt the urge to visit the flat in the 2nd District which they had occupied as a family in 1938. They knocked on the door and found a young couple living there. They explained the situation, were invited in and treated most hospitably. The young Austrian lady suddenly asked why Stella and her mother had left Vienna. It turned out that this lady had absolutely no knowledge of the Holocaust or of the manner in which the Jews had been treated. It appeared that this aspect of Austria's past had simply been air-brushed out. I was interested to hear what Jasmine felt about this visit with her grandmother – what had impressed her most was the mental strength of the survivors.

Space does not permit me to go into detail on the many moving conversations I had during the week, such as the story of Professor Eliezer Robinson, a leading Israeli oncologist, or that of Edith Cord, now an American academic and writer, whose father and brother were betrayed to the Nazis by the French and murdered in Auschwitz, or that of Arthur Bergner who, at the age of 11, was already working for the Haganah, stealing ammunition from British soldiers in Palestine and who fought in five wars between 1948 and 1982.

These were just a few of the fascinating conversations we had during a very moving week which will remain in my thoughts for a long time.

Ernest Simon