

VIENNA

'I want to come back again'

Some months ago, I was delighted to receive an invitation from the Jewish Welcome Service to spend a week in Vienna, the city of my birth, which we were forced to leave in 1939. This wonderful idea was the brainchild of the late Leon Zelman, himself a Holocaust survivor. He thought that Jews who had been persecuted and forced to flee should return to Vienna and spend time there as a period of reconciliation.

We were a group of 80 – 50 Viennese and 30 accompanying relatives. The majority were American, there was a large group of Israelis, and just eight of us were British. For all of us this was a unique opportunity to meet people whose early years had all been similar but whose stories of escape differed.

I was surprised and pleased that our hotel was in the Second District, where I had been born and where all my close family had lived. Our block of flats was no longer there: it had been bombed and replaced by an ugly post-war block. My grandparents' block was still standing, although refurbished and modernised. There was another surprise. The Second District was full of Jews – just it was in my childhood! There are three kosher restaurants, a bakery and two supermarkets. My husband had to go to synagogue every day as he was saying *Kaddish* for his mother. He had a choice of four synagogues but attended the Schiffshul, which had been my family's synagogue. It was no longer the proud edifice it had once been – the Nazis had burnt that – but a synagogue had been set up in the building next to the site, which had been the former administrative centre of the synagogue. There are many plaques in the Second District commemorating destroyed synagogues, schools and places where Jews had been rounded up for deportation. However, Mrs Timmerman, our guide on a wonderful three-hour tour of Vienna, said to us: 'I am not going to show you places of sadness – we want to replace that feeling and leave you instead with a sense of happiness.'

The trip did exactly that. On the very first evening, at our welcome dinner,



Susan Bryant from Florida (second from left) and Thea Valman (fourth from left) with headmistress and teachers in front of plaque at Bundesrealgymnasium Wien III, commemorating pupils and teachers expelled from the school by the Nazis

our group was made to feel very special by our hosts, Mr and Mrs Mariotti, Mrs Monica Van Loo and, particularly, Susanne Trauneck, Secretary General of the Jewish Welcome Service. This set the tone for the rest of our time in Vienna. At a subsequent *Wiener Jause* (Austrian tea) at the City Hall, we were movingly welcomed by the Deputy Mayor of Vienna. She acknowledged that our suffering could never be erased but told us of the Austrians' sincere regret for the events of the past and their empathy for our feelings.

I spoke of those events at an inner city school. Although I had been very young when we left, I recounted my bewildered childhood memories and my feelings of loneliness on reaching this country and being unable to communicate or understand English. Many of the children were themselves refugees from areas of conflict such as the Balkans and Afghanistan. One boy from Afghanistan said he knew how I had felt as he had experienced the same feelings when he had arrived as a stranger in Vienna. The school had a memorial wall with the 221 names of Jewish pupils and teachers who had been expelled in the Nazi era. One of the teachers at the school told me she was taking a group of pupils to the Jewish cemetery to clear the weeds from some of the old graves.

Our group too visited the cemetery. An example of how sensitive the Jewish Welcome Service were to our needs was that they had made detailed plans showing us how to find our relatives'

graves – a very difficult thing in that cemetery, where sections, rows and numbers are in no particular order and often not even marked. They had even brought a bag of stones for us: 'We know Jewish people like to leave stones on graves and there are none at this cemetery', said Mrs Mariotti.

We attended Friday evening service at Vienna's main synagogue in the Seitenstettengasse. This was the only synagogue not burnt by the – Nazis because of its proximity to other buildings and it has been restored to its former beauty. The Chief Rabbi of Vienna, Rabbi Paul Chaim Eisenberg, gave our group a particularly warm welcome.

On our arrival at Vienna airport, one of the English contingent had said: 'I left Vienna at the age of one and have never been back. I feel very nervous.' On our departure from the same airport, he was smiling. 'I want to come back again', he said. I think Leon Zelman had achieved his aim.

Thea Valman

LAST TRIP TO VIENNA? *continued*

to our amazement, the small band played a medley from *Fiddler on the Roof*, the theme from *Schindler's List*, and, most astonishingly of all, *Hava Nagila*; went to the Weisse Rauchfangskehrer, where I teased the waiter into allowing us to taste eight different Austrian wines – free – and, from what I can remember, the food was excellent too; and went to Vienna's oldest inn, dating from 1447, the Griechenbeisl. I ate lots and lots of Tafelspitz, Goulash, Wiener Schnitzel, Rostbraten, Strudel and (my wife's favourite) Palatschinken, with apricot jam. The best white wine I found to be Grüner Veltliner, the best red wine Blaufränkisch.

Will we ever return to Vienna? Who knows? I have done everything I needed to do. I don't hate the Austrians of today. Their parents or grandparents were probably Nazis but you can't hold this against their children. Perhaps we will return to Austria but next time we will, again, go the Salzburg Festival. Now this my wife really loved.

Peter Phillips