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Travel

Vienna revisited

Despite the rise of the far-right in Austria, the city has much to offer Jewish visitors **By Robert Hersowitz**

I LAST visited Vienna in January 1979. It was mid-winter, dark, cold and hardly conducive to the atmosphere normally associated with the city of Mozart, Strauss and the Blue Danube. I remember the sombre drive from the airport to the city as we passed several cemeteries with their black marble headstones shrouded in the foggy wintry light. Perhaps my expectations were formulated on the biased perceptions of a post-Holocaust Jew. Sadly, most of my prejudices were validated during that visit. Somehow the older generation still seemed to control things in those days. I remember seeing men dressed in green loden overcoats and women attired in their uniform tweed suits and tyrolean fedoras strutting about and drinking coffee in the cafés around Stefan Platz. Many of the people we met came across as dour, unhelpful and unfriendly. All this connected me to Vienna's dark past, the Anschluss and the 63,800 Austrian Jews who were murdered by the Nazis and their Austrian accomplices.

Fast forward 38 years to September 2017, when my wife and I visited the city. This was my second visit and it could not have been more different. Modernity, technology, a new generation and good weather had transformed Vienna into a very different place.

We deliberately planned an itinerary that would include the Jewish sites and on our first day we visited the Jewish Museum (housed in the Palais Eskeles) on the Dorotheegasse. From the moment we entered the space it was clear that the Museum's director, Danielle Spera, and her Austrian colleagues had done a magnificent job. A former ORF television journalist and media celebrity, Spera was born to a Jewish father and a Catholic mother. She attended a private Catholic school and then in her mid-20s converted to Judaism. Today she describes herself as leading a traditional Jewish life, observing Shabbat and all the religious hol-

idays. Her vision for the Museum was: "to open up the museum to the public, to create a space where fears and prejudices were dispelled and non-Jews could experience both the traumatic past and the vibrant present of the Austrian Jewish community."

In this regard, she has definitely succeeded. During our visit, the museum was quite crowded with people lining up to get in. The majority of visitors were non-Jewish German speakers. The trendy kosher Café Eskeles was crammed to capacity ironically reflecting the theme of a current special exhibition: "Kauf Bei Juden" (Buy by Jews).

This exhibition pays tribute to the contribution made by Austrian Jews to the retail industry. Its title is a play on words from the Nazi period where signs were put up all over the city warning people NOT to buy from Jews. Throughout our visit we were aware of the "openness" of Jewish life in present day Vienna. During my first visit everything Jewish seemed hidden away and furtive. There was only one kosher restaurant and a snack bar attached to the Synagogue. Today there are 15 synagogues, five kosher restaurants offering excellent fare and attracting both Jews and non-Jews. The popular Hop On/Hop Off bus tour audio commentary makes specific mention of the fact that "many Orthodox Jews now live in Vienna and go about their business in the newly refurbished Carmelite Market district." From where we sat on the bus there were no Jews to be seen, but then, later on, when we wandered through the neighborhood near Taborstrasse with its modern refurbished buildings we passed kosher shops, bakeries and saw quite a few Jewish folk (including Hasidic Jews) going about their business.

There are Jewish walking tours and a synagogue tour almost every day in the city. We signed up for the walking tour led by a young Jewish fellow called Stefan. Once again to our amazement, most of the people

on the tour were German-speaking gentiles. The tour was conducted in German and English. We visited the site where the notorious Gestapo Headquarters once stood. Before World War II the building housed the elegant Jewish-owned Metropole Hotel. The Nazis confiscated it and turned it into the largest Gestapo Headquarters outside of Berlin. Many Jews and dissidents were interrogated, tortured and sent to their deaths from the building. It was bombed and destroyed by the Soviets during the war. Today there is a memorial made out of boulders that were taken from the infamous stone quarries of Mauthausen concentration camp. Adjacent to the site facing the Donaukanal is an apartment building where Simon Wiesenthal once lived and worked.

It has taken the Austrian government and people too many years to accept responsibility for the way Austria treated its Jews, our guide told us. Antisemitism is not new in Austria and its roots go back as far as the Middle Ages. Stefan explained that when Simon Wiesenthal succeeded in gaining permission to build a Holocaust Memorial in the Judenplatz, he also persuaded the authorities to excavate the ruins of an ancient synagogue that was buried beneath the site. The result of his efforts is now visible in the incredibly well reconstructed permanent exhibition in the second Jewish Museum in the Judenplatz. The ancient synagogue formed a central point in the medieval Jewish ghetto and very much resembled the Altneu Synagogue in Prague. The exhibit documents the horrors endured by the community during that period culminating in the burning of 200 Viennese Jews in Erdberg by Duke Albrecht V, in 1421, who expelled the Jews from Austria. Some 300 years later the Empress Maria Theresa, the mother of Marie Antoinette, continued the tradition of Jew hatred and expulsion.

It was not until the 1820s, during the reign

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of Emperor Franz Josef, that the Jews were allowed to build the Stadt Tempel on the Seittengasse. In compliance with the Patent of Tolerance, it had to be built with a discreet façade that would not show that it was a synagogue to the outside world.

Our next stop was a short walk away to the elegant Stadt Tempel where the tour was led by Mali, an Israeli woman in her late fifties. She was extremely knowledgeable and very proud of the 8,000 strong Jewish community made up of religious and secular Jews. She explained that the synagogue was not destroyed by the Nazis because the building housed the Jewish community administrative offices (Israelitische Kultusgemeinde) containing details of every registered Jew in Vienna. She also told us the miraculous story of the 20 or so Torah scrolls that were saved by the non-Jewish *shamash* (Beadle) on Kristallnacht.

Despite its dark past, Vienna today is a city that welcomes Jewish visitors. In addition to the 8,000 Jews registered at the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde, there are apparently at least another 4,000 unregistered Jews, many of whom are Israelis or émigrés from the Russian Confederation living in the city.

One of the most popular venues for young Viennese “millennials” is the Tel Aviv Beach on the Donaukanal. This summertime beach bar was first opened in 2009 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the founding of Tel Aviv. It offers food and drinks, films and cultural events, plus the added benefit of sandy beaches, all in the middle of Vienna giving locals an insight into Israeli food and culture. There are also numerous eateries scattered around the city offering shwarma, humus, falafel and Israeli delicacies, which have become extremely popular with the locals.

For art lovers no trip to Vienna is complete without a visit to the Belvedere Palace, which houses incredible collections of masterpieces painted by Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele and the pro-Jewish Oskar Kokoschka. In recent years the Belvedere was the center of a controversy involving Nazi stolen art. The famous Klimt painting of the Jewish heiress, Adele Bauer Bloch used to hang there. It is now exhibited at the Ronald Lauder Neue Galerie for German and Austrian Art in New York. The intrigue and subsequent court case led to the making of the movie, “The Woman in Gold,” starring



The Holocaust Memorial on the Juden Platz

Helen Mirren.

Our final stop before leaving Vienna was a visit to Freud’s house on Berggasse 19 just off the Schottenring. It has been turned into a museum with many of the original artifacts and furniture now on display. These were sent back to Vienna from London by Anna Freud (Freud’s daughter) after the war. The Freud house in which the famous psychoanalyst lived with his wife, children and sister-in-law recreates the atmosphere of Vienna before the Anschluss. In one of the rooms there is a continuous screening of a series of home movies narrated by Anna Freud including chilling scenes taken by the Freuds of nearby Swastika bedecked streets where 250,000 Viennese welcomed Hitler at the Heldenplatz. After Freud and his family fled to London, the apartment was expropriated by the Nazis and used as a transit location for rounded up Viennese Jews who were then sent to the death camps.

Vienna’s reputation among many Jews of my generation has been somewhat sullied by its past. I understand those who do not want to go there; nevertheless, the city has undergone considerable ‘rehabilitation.’ The strange irony is that modern Zionism has its roots in the antisemitism that Herzl witnessed and experienced in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and elsewhere prompting him to write “Der Judenstaat,” a pamphlet published in Vienna in 1895. All of this is documented in the Jewish Museum, which proudly exhibits a beautiful portrait of Herzl painted in oils by Jewish artist Wilhelm

Wachtel in 1930 with the inscription in Hebrew – *Im atem rotzim ain zu agada.*

Ever since 1986 when Kurt Waldheim was exposed as a former Nazi and prevented from being elected as president, Austrians began to reexamine their past, slowly coming to terms with the fact that they were largely complicit in aiding and abetting their so-called “Nazi occupiers” whom they welcomed with open arms. This seems to have made an impact on younger voters who are partly responsible for electing Europe’s youngest leader, 31-year-old conservative President Sebastian Kurz, a man who personifies the progressive values of 21st century Millennials. Ironically, Kurz may be forced to form a coalition with the FPO far-right party.

Commentators suggest that the far-right gained momentum because of the refugee crisis, a phenomenon that is sweeping across Europe. The Austrian Jewish community has been trying to dissuade Kurz from doing this despite the fact that FPO leader Christian Strache told his party in 2016 that antisemitism “was a crime against humanity” and that “if Israel as a state is threatened and ceases to exist, that is the beginning of Europe’s downfall.”

In the meantime, the capital Vienna “waltzes on” with its new generation of progressive citizens who thrive and flourish and welcome visitors. For the time being the city is well worth visiting for its art, architecture, music and cafés and very rich Jewish heritage. ■