

## Stones Fill the Void: Visiting Jewish Vienna

by: Irene Shaland

*...memory is the key-word which combines past and present, past and future... (Elie Wiesel)*

We are in the city of the dead. On a sunny April day surrounded by noise of the big city – cars speeding, trams clunking, people hurrying about their mid-day business - we are talking to ghosts, some 65,000 of them, the murdered Jews of Austria. This is Leopoldstadt, Vienna's Second District, and we are following the *Steinedererinnerung* or Stones of Remembrance. These are brass plaques, 3 ¾" by 3 ¾", placed either on buildings or on the ground, often in blocks of four, often with an adjacent explanation plaque, and always with names. Each name is accompanied by a date of birth and a date of deportation. One explanation plaque reads: "For the many people who were murdered whom nobody remembers."

Without remembrance, Italian author and Auschwitz survivor Primo Levy says, there is no future. In Leopoldstadt, the victims are remembered. They have their names back. They talk to us once again because the stones fill the void. All we have to do is to follow their path and listen to their stories.

### Following the stones

Don't look for the *Steinedererinnerung* in your guidebook: the murdered Jews of Austria have neither a Rick Steves nor a Frommer. And Vienna, basking in its Baroque and Art Nouveau splendor, would rather have you waltzing from Schönbrunn to Sachertorte's shops, not searching out the shops and synagogues of long-gone Jews.

I believe that the Holocaust victims' destiny was, for the most part, determined by three factors: the degree of control the Nazis had in the region, the history of Jews there, and the actions of the locals. The latter is where the Viennese truly excelled: their inventiveness and viciousness turned the city of Mahler and Freud into the city of "Hitler's willing executioners." <sup>1</sup>

### A no entry land

Until recently, for me, Vienna was a "no entry" land. My husband and I, world travelers and art lovers, could describe every Titian and Bruegel in the Kunsthistorische Museum and the location of every Klimt in the city, but for a long time an invisible barrier stopped us from seeking out real Vienna. At the center of my mental Vienna, the embodiment of refinement and sophistication, there was always the image of a 1938 photograph I saw, in the US Holocaust Museum, of an elderly Jewish man, bearded and bespectacled, crouching in the street scrubbing the pavement with a toothbrush. The crowd around him was laughing.

Vienna is by no means the only European city where the "final solution" was successfully carried out. However, the delight the Viennese took in humiliating, torturing and killing their Jewish neighbors surprised even the Germans. The people in that laughing crowd – or their parents – voted the rabidly anti-Semitic Karl Leuger mayor of Vienna five times between 1897 and 1910 and Hitler credited him as a major influence on shaping his views on race.

The flourishing Jewish community of Austria<sup>2</sup> was all but obliterated during World War II. At first, Austrian Jews were lucky: unlike Germany, Austria had exit avenues open for a while and almost two thirds of the country's Jews left. Those who stayed died wretched deaths at places like Theresienstadt and Auschwitz. One Vienna resident, Sigmund Freud went to London with his family; his two elderly sisters stayed and perished.



Vienna Holocaust Memorial on Judenplatz symbolizes a dead library: the doors are locked and the books face inwards.

After the war, Austria's official position was that the country was the very first victim of the Nazi's aggression. One reason this fiction went unchallenged was because Austria had no Nuremberg-like trials for crimes against humanity.

### **The survivors**

The rebuilt Jewish community of Vienna is small and for the most part consists of Eastern European immigrants. Austrian officials were not interested in inviting survivors to return. Their shops and businesses had changed owners, university chairs and medical practices had been taken and, as some admit today, many a Vienna apartment still has furniture and art objects "borrowed" from Jewish neighbors. So why bother?

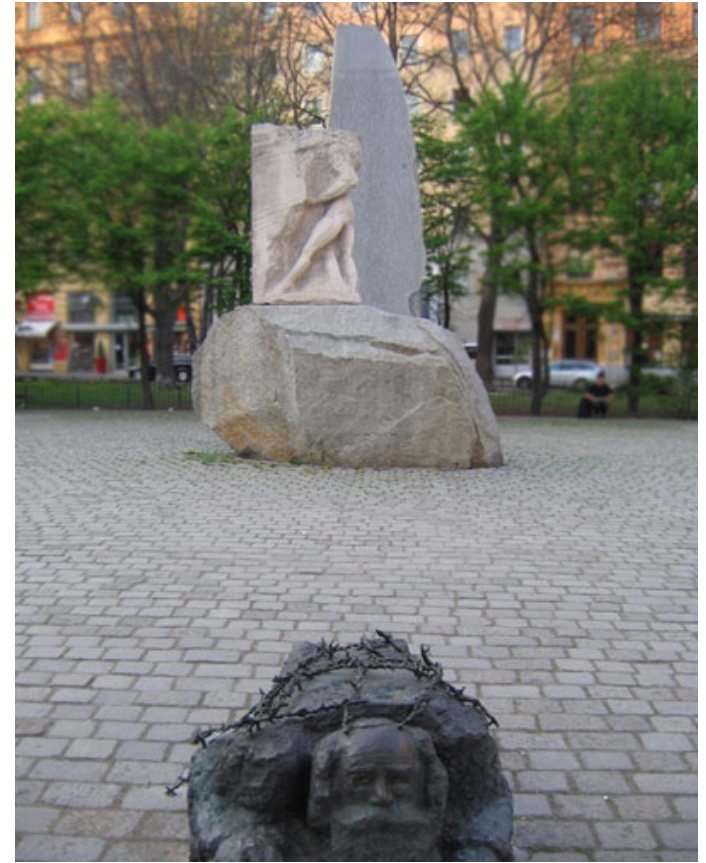
And the Austrians didn't, until July of 1991, when the Austrian government issued a statement acknowledging that Austria had taken part in the atrocities committed by the Nazis. To showcase its regret, the government even reconstructed a synagogue in Innsbruck (1993) and a Jewish Library in Vienna (1994): both had been burned in 1938. Unlike Germany, which continues its "journey of conscious" into the painful past, Austria's half-hearted efforts in reconciling its historic accounts continue to overshadow the Jewish history a visitor might want to explore.

If you follow the tourist route of Jewish Vienna, you'll probably start with the **Monument against War and Fascism** at Albertinaplatz. The monument's four free-standing sculptures are meant to be thought-provoking, but without an explanation their symbolism can be difficult to decipher. One statue, with its head buried in the stone, is a metaphor of either entering the underworld, like Orpheus, or of hiding away from reality. Another is a declaration of human rights etched in stone. The split sculpture, called the Gates of Violence, is dedicated to all victims of violence. The murdered Jews of Austria are commemorated by a bulky, hunched-over figure, which, as you might see when *you* hunch over it, is a bearded man with a toothbrush. A piece of barbed wire, stretched across his back, is not meant to remind you of extermination camps: it's to warn you or your dog against using this kneeling Jew as a bench or toilet.

Even when I found out that this monument was literally built on top of human bones – beneath it is a cellar used as a bomb-shelter where everyone was killed during the Allied bombing - its emotional impact was still lost on me.

The "tourist's" exploration of Jewish Vienna usually continues to the **Judisches Museum** in the Palais Eskeles, near the Mozarthaus. Founded in 1896 – which makes it the oldest institution of its kind in the world<sup>3</sup> -- the Judisches Museum is dedicated to the contributions the Jews of Vienna made to the arts, science, medicine, philosophy, politics, and music. "Remove the Jews from Vienna's history," writes Hellmut Andics, "and what is left is a torso."<sup>4</sup> The museum's Max Berger Judaica collection is certainly worth seeing, as is the museum's take on history, through multiple holograms that provide insights and comments. While the museum's intent isn't to focus on the tragic end of this brilliant community during the Holocaust, if you wend your way up to the top floor's viewable storage area, you will see objects, scorched by fire and broken (some showing the footprint of a boot). These objects weren't collected; they were brutally torn from their synagogues and households – all destroyed – in 1938.

The Judisches Museum has a partner, the **Museum Judenplatz**. A faceless modern building with bunker-style narrow corridors, this museum exhibits the excavated ruins of the city's 13<sup>th</sup>-century synagogue and focuses on the medieval Jewry. Opened in 2000, on one of the most charming squares in today's central Vienna, it's where a medieval Jewish ghetto used to be. There, the first Jewish community of Vienna, regarded as the leading and most learned among German-speaking Jewry, was annihilated: burned at the stake,



Monument against War and Fascism: one of its four free-standing sculptures commemorates the Jewish victims of Nazi atrocities.



tortured, expelled. The few who barricaded themselves and their families in the synagogue were burned alive. The year was 1421 and Archduke of Austria Albert the Fifth needed money. A 15<sup>th</sup>-century plaque praises this “great pogrom.”

The Jews murdered in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century are also commemorated on Judenplatz by the first and only **Holocaust Memorial** in Austria. Inaugurated the same year as the Museum, the memorial was built by (non-Jewish) British artist Rachel Whiteread and is a reinforced concrete cube that symbolizes a library turned upside down: the doors are locked and the books’ spines face inward. Around the memorial’s base are the names of the concentration camps to which the 65,000 Jews who were unable to leave Austria were deported.

As I stood there, the memory of another memorial, the memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, came to mind. There, hundreds of black concrete slabs, varying in height, on the sloping field, created the uneasy, troubling experience of going through a surreal necropolis that had lost touch with humanity.

There in Vienna, I understood the idea behind the “dead” library – the books cannot be read because the People of the Book are dead – but I didn’t feel the emotional impact I’d experienced in Berlin. (Ironically, a statue of Gotthold Lessing, the 18th-century writer and philosopher, stands nearby, a reminder of the enlightenment and humanism of Germanic culture.)

From the Judenplatz one can follow the Seitenstetngasse to the **Stadttempel**, the only Viennese synagogue not destroyed during Kristallnacht. The reason it still stands goes back to the year 1781. In that year, Emperor Joseph II issued his Edict of Tolerance. The edict allowed Jews to build synagogues in Vienna, but it prohibited them from being free-standing, from looking like a synagogue, and from having an entrance on a main thoroughfare. So in November of 1938, the Nazis did not burn the Stadttempel out of fear that the entire block would go up in flames. In 2002, the Stadttempel unveiled its own memorial with victims’ names engraved on rotating slate tablets. **Across the River**

To truly experience victims’ stories you have to leave Judenplatz, where no Jew has lived since the 15<sup>th</sup>-century, and go across the river to Leopoldstadt. In this Viennese suburb, Theodor Herzl lived, Sigmund Freud spent his youth, and composers Arnold Schonberg and Oscar Strauss were born. Leopoldstadt was a Central European strong-hold of Zionism and Chassidism where Viennese Jewry created a vibrant, cultured life. The Nazis turned it into a ghetto from whence the Jews of Austria were sent to concentration camps and death.

In today’s Leopoldstadt, their lives, culture and suffering are recognized, acknowledged, and made visible through the efforts of the Path of Remembrance Society, founded by Dr. Elizabeth Ben David-Hindler in 2006. Throughout the neighborhood the Society has placed brass plaques called the Stones of Remembrance, that contain information about Jewish institutions, organizations and individuals who were victims of the Holocaust.

Says the chairwoman of the Society, Dr. Ben David-Hindler: “Our wish is to keep alive...the memory of Jewish life...as well as to give back – symbolically – a place in the home city to those who were expelled and murdered.” (Dr. Ben David-Hindler’s project was inspired by “stumbling stones,” *Stolpersteine*, a project originated in Germany by artist Gunter Demnig to commemorate the individuals deported and killed by the Nazis.)



Jewish religious objects scorched by fire during the Kristallnacht at the Judisches Museum

With a map sent by the Society, you too can follow the Path of Remembrance. Most people begin at the place where Leopoldstadt Synagogue was and then stroll the neighborhood's streets searching for places where Jewish theaters, charity organizations, social clubs, and coffee houses – the world of Jewish intellectuals and artists, shopkeepers and politicians – once stood.

In the middle of busy Nestroyplatz a plaque commemorates Bernard and Adele Sachs. The building they once lived in no longer exists, but the couple were passionate theater lovers and they used to cross the square on their frequent trips to the theater. Kurt Sachs, their surviving son, placed the plaque where he knew his parents walked often, happy and young and full of life.

The Path of Remembrance is the only true memorial that attempts to bring closure to the painful memories of the Holocaust in Austria. The Society's hope, notes Dr. Ben David-Hindler, is "to contribute to the healing of a deep wound."

To become part of that healing process, when you plan a visit to Austria, request the Society's map and brochure (<http://www.steinedererinnerung.net/>) or contact Dr. Ben David-Hindler at ([info@steinedererinnerung.net](mailto:info@steinedererinnerung.net)).

(Endnotes)

- 1 Daniel Goldhagen's controversial book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (Alfred Knopf, 1996) explores, what he calls, the virulent "eliminationist anti-Semitism," as part of a German/Austrian identity that made mass persecutions and murder of Jews a national pastime.
- 2 According to the Austrian Jewish Community statistics, in 1938, 206,000 persons of Jewish extractions had been living in the Austrian capital; one out of ten people was Jewish. Less than 2,000 survived the camps. Practically, no one returned.
- 3 The museum was closed of course in 1938 and not reopened until 1989.
- 4 Hellmut Andics, a journalist and a writer (1922-1998) wrote his *Die Juden in Wien* (The Jews in Vienna) in 1988.



Stop #1 on the Path of Remembrance: The plaques on the place of the Leopoldstadt Temple destroyed in 1938 commemorate "all Jewish people for whom Leopoldstadt used to be home"