



Austria used to teach its children it was a victim of Nazi occupation, but years of activism have transformed this country to confront its past, celebrate its achievements and educate for the future

• BARRY DAVIS

When you visit Vienna, you are immediately struck by its beautiful baroque architecture, wide tree-lined boulevards and sprawling parks. This is clearly a city that was once at the epicenter of something big, which still manages to exude a sense of majesty even though the Austro-Hungarian Empire fell apart a century ago.

Any day of the year, there is a multitude of cultural events on offer. The Musikverein hosts classical concerts on a daily basis, while the Konzerthaus is possibly the city's most eclectic of cultural hubs, proffering a rich mix of classical and contemporary music, jazz, world music, children's events and lectures. The latter venue's wide-ranging artistic lineup seems to be something of a leg-

acy of the cosmopolitan nature that is definitively central to the nodal point of any empire.

As an imperial capital, Vienna naturally attracted immigrants from across its broad hinterland, including a large number of Polish Jews. Several of my own antecedents originating from Poland gravitated to Vienna's Second District, where my mother was born. She fled on what was probably the first Kindertransport rescue consignment of children, to Britain, in December 1938.

"Most of the Jews who lived in this area originally came from Poland," explains Walter Juraschek, a seasoned Jewish Vienna tour guide. Juraschek points to the brass nameplates dotted all around the quarter; these are commemorative cobblestone-sized plaques – in German they are called *stolpersteine*, or stumbling blocks – which contain basic details of Holocaust victims.

The skeletal data do not give passers-by much to go on, which according to Canadian-born, Cambridge University-educated historian Joseph Pearson, is precisely the point. "It is not what is written [on the stolpersteine] which intrigues, because the inscription is insufficient to conjure a person," Pearson once noted. "It is the emptiness, void, lack of information, the maw of the forgotten, which gives the monuments their power and lifts them from the banality of a statistic."

The historian hit the nail on the head, and the dispersed Holocaust monument – there are also stolpersteine in other places, including in dozens of towns in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Hungary – which was initiated by German artist Gunter Demnig, indeed evokes the interest of passersby. A non-Jewish, German-born Vienna resident friend of mine was even moved to name her daughter after Dora David, one of the Jewish victims noted in the memorial.

BEFORE WORLD War II there were around 185,000 Jews living in Vienna, of whom only around 25,000 survived. But the input of these Jews from the Austrian capital to culture, science and other fields is inescapable. Gustav Mahler and Arnold Schoenberg were iconic figures of the classical music world, while Sigmund Freud and Viktor Frankl found international fame in psychiatry and psychology.

That is something of which Dr. Andreas Mailath-Pokorny is keenly aware and, in his capacity as executive city councillor for cultural affairs and science for the Vienna Municipality, does his best to keep Jewish contribution to life in Vienna uppermost in the city's psyche.

"For us, my generation for example, we come from a completely different angle because we were born into a situation where nobody talked about the atrocities and the Nazis," notes the 55-year-old. "Even today, I discover things that I could never have imagined. Just yesterday I heard a feature on



the radio about the Mauthausen concentration camp [established in Upper Austria shortly after the Anschluss and operated until the end of World War II], and I am very much into the culture of remembrance. We are trying to do many things in Vienna, to talk about and find out things, and of course restitution."

That, of course, is a welcome departure – particularly if one considers how long it took the Austrian government to admit to being a willing and highly active collaborator with Germany during the Shoah. The teenage son of a friend of mine, who originates from Slovakia but attended high school in Vienna, recently told me that his history textbooks still portrayed Austria as the first victim of Nazi Germany. This is an image that was steadfastly maintained by the Austrian authorities long after the war.

It was only in June 1991 that chancellor Franz Vranitzky made the first binding statement in the Austrian Parliament concerning the participation of Austria and its citizens in the crimes of the Third Reich. And this past January, the Vienna Municipality issued the Vienna Declaration for the Fight Against Anti-Semitism – which, says Mailath-Pokorny's media spokesman Daniel Benyes, underlines the city council's "strong relation with the Jewish community, which is an important part belonging to Vienna."

The declaration delineates that "the City of Vienna is pursuing its responsibility in the fight against anti-Semitism with active and diverse activities, such

as the promotion of events of remembrance, the annual Festival of Joy at the Heldenplatz on May 8 and implementation of the 'Washington Agreement,' with its provisions addressing the restoration of Jewish cemeteries and restitution." The declaration also calls for anti-Semitism to be monitored, as well as "reviewing educational programs and materials for anti-Semitic content and complementing them with topics on Jewish history and Jewish life in Vienna."

RUTH BECKERMANN is doing her best to ensure the Austrian public, and foreign visitors to Vienna, know just how happy Austrians in general were about the Anschluss, and how Jews were increasingly denigrated and hounded.

Most of us are familiar with the heart-rending still photographs of Jews being forced to scrub the sidewalk in Vienna in 1938. Beckermann's art installation, self-explanatorily titled "The Missing Image, Vienna 1938" – currently in place in Albertinaplatz, opposite the Albertina museum and the Austrian Film Museum – shows a side to the harrowing event that has never before been viewed. The Missing Image incorporates a film footage add-on to Austrian sculptor Alfred Hrdlicka's "Memorial Against War and Fascism" monument, which has had a permanent berth in Albertinaplatz since 1988.

Hrdlicka's imposing stone sculpture is augmented by a bronze figure of an anguished prostrate man, signifying a Jew being forced to clean >>

AN ICONIC image from the Holocaust of Viennese Jews made to sweep the streets of the city.
(Wikimedia Commons)

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A GENERAL view of the Mauthausen concentration camp. (Dominic Ebenbichler/Reuters)



the sidewalk. Beckermann's work shows Austrians standing around, watching the humiliated Jews washing the stones, with some smiling and others clearly laughing out loud.

Beckermann, a Jewish-Viennese filmmaker and author, says she was not entirely enamored with the Hrdlicka creation from the outset, but had to wait quite a while – in fact around 17 years – to do something about it. At the time, she felt the work was being used to try to whitewash the Austrian war record slate.

"It was a way of preserving the idea of Austria being the first victim of Nazi Germany, and anyway, the figure of the Jew with the beard, which I presume is supposed to show an old Orthodox Jew, lying on his belly with a brush in his hand – you can't clean the floor like that. It was stupid and also, at the beginning, people thought it was a bench – so they sat on it."

To prevent the latter from happening, the authorities laid barbed wire across the figure's back – but, says Beckermann, that only served to compound the conceptual difficulty. "The barbed wire stopped people from sitting there, but did that mean the Jew was in prison or was he being baptized, like Jesus? The whole thing was bad."

Beckermann was inspired to set the situation right when she caught a glimpse of the aforementioned footage at a screening of amateur film material at the film museum across the road from the monument. "All of a sudden, I saw these five seconds of film," she recalls. "We have photographs showing Jews cleaning the pavement, but there was no film footage. When I saw those five seconds I thought, here is the counter-shot to the [figure of] the Jew, and I will use the material and show it here [in Albertinaplatz]."

Beckermann does not like the idea of her installation completing the original sculptural work in the square, and says she sought to change the whole artistic and mind-set milieu. "Let's say I wanted to reconceptualize it," she declares, adding that while Austria has moved on in recent years and officially no lon-

ger views itself as suffering at the hands of Nazi Germany, she feels there is still some way to go.

"The grandchildren of the perpetrators [the people laughing in the art installation film footage loop] never show up," she recounts. "One woman wrote me and said that one of the men on their knees might have been her father – it's always the families of the victims [who respond]."

Beckermann says the image of the Jews put to humiliating menial work by the Austrians is a particularly chilling event for her. "The Jews were not forced to clean the pavement because of laws made by the Nazis. It was the spontaneous idea of Viennese anti-Semites, which happened in many parts of the city."

So, it would appear that the problem of Austria's acceptance of its Nazi past persists to a degree? "There is the problem of shame, not denial," asserts Beckermann. "But no one protests against an installation like this. That's also progress."

WOLFGANG SCHMUTZ might well beg to differ.

The 37-year-old Schmutz is a former member of the guide pool and educational team of the Mauthausen Memorial. He recently claimed that not enough was being done at the site of the former concentration camp to disseminate information about the Holocaust, and that the Austrian government needed to make greater efforts to ensure young Austrians are educated about what went on at Mauthausen during World War II, and that tourists from non-German and non-English-speaking countries can take in all the information available at the site.

"In a country reluctant for decades to acknowledge responsibility for Nazi crimes, public awareness of contemporary responsibility is symbolically high, but not factually," Schmutz detailed in a paper he recently issued. "This is valid for Austria as such, and particularly its focal point of remembrance and learning at the former concentration camp Mauthausen." Schmutz also says that

the post of education director at the site was allowed to lapse for two years, and argued that the education budget at Mauthausen could do with a significant increase.

Dr. Barbara Glück, director of the Mauthausen Memorial, feels Schmutz is being economical with the facts. "The educational department is exclusive at the memorial. It is a really great, unique development," enthuses the 30-something Glück, who has been at the helm of the remembrance facility for the past decade.

The memorial caters for more than 200,000 visitors a year, including numerous school groups who are, naturally, an important consumer sector for Glück and her staff. In the coffee-table-proportioned publication *The Concentration Camp Mauthausen 1938-1945*, 66-year-old president of the Mauthausen board of trustees Kurt Scholz notes that "when our parents



went to school, history teaching ended at the First World War, and the situation has changed dramatically over the years. Our children, by contrast, are growing up in a school system that considers a visit to the Mauthausen Memorial an integral part of every young person's civic education."

Presumably, a trip to the memorial is an eye-opener for Austrian teenagers,



MEMORIAL STONES called 'stepping stones' or 'stolpersteine' outside homes that belonged to murdered Jews. (Leonhard Foeger/Reuters)



AUSTRIAN PRESIDENT Heinz Fischer listens as the daughters of an Austrian Resistance fighter killed by the Nazis speak during a ceremony in Vienna. (Barry Davis)

but could also possibly trigger a quest for information of a more personal nature – which could lead to shocking revelations. Several years ago, I met a group of 11th-graders at the Zwi Perez Chajes school in Vienna, who enlightened me about life in Austria as Jewish youngsters. It transpired that one of the students had a non-Jewish father, and that the teenager had recently discovered his paternal grandparent had been a member of the SS. It was, of course, a distressing discovery for the teenager.

Glück feels that young Austrians are keen to learn about their nation's not-too-distant past, and are not wary of unearthing possibly painful information. "I think they want to get the right information," she avers. "I think things have changed. When I talked to my mother, she was afraid because her father never spoke about that time. He was in the army, and I think it was such a horrible experience for him that he wanted to forget everything. My mother thought he didn't talk about it because maybe he was in the SS. But I think that the third and fourth generations would like to have clear, serious information, to know just what happened."

That goes for Glück, too. "I am the third generation; I am not responsible for what my grandfather did, but I would like to know about it. When I was in school we didn't learn anything about the Holocaust. We have to know about these things, to make sure it never happens again."

WHILE HOLOCAUST education in Austria appears to be improving, the

president of the Jewish community of Vienna, Oskar Deutsch, insists there are still plenty of burning issues to be addressed.

"When I was elected president three years ago, I did not think that rising anti-Semitism would be my main challenge. It has been the biggest challenge here for the last eight or nine months."

Deutsch attributes the latter to the growing number of Muslims in Austria, which he says has augmented the "traditional right-wing anti-Semites." He also reveals that Israel's policies sometimes provide him with a headache or two, but that he does not feel duty-bound to adopt an official stance in that area. "My heart is in Israel and we have to defend the Israeli people, but we do not have to be the lawyer of the State of Israel."

Meanwhile, Susanne Trauneck is more interested in providing hospitality services to Jews who were forced to leave Austria before World War II; over 130,000 Austrian Jews were expelled by the prewar National-Socialist regime. Trauneck is the secretary-general of the Jewish Welcome Service Vienna, founded in 1980 following an initiative of then-mayor Leopold Gratz and city councillor Heinz Nittel, together with Leon Zelman, a survivor of several concentration camps including Mauthausen. The incumbent mayor of Vienna also serves as president of the Jewish Welcome Service.

Survivors, as well as members of the second and third generations, are catered for with an all-expenses-paid



A SPECTATOR takes a picture of the illuminated Burgtheater during the Vienna cultural festival last year. (Leonhard Foeger/Reuters)

visit to Vienna and other various Holocaust-related locations around Austria, funded by the Vienna Municipality. "Leon Zelman traveled around the world and he met people who came from Vienna and had good memories of here," explains Trauneck. "So he decided it would be good to somehow allow them to come back to see the way Vienna and Austria are today."

Now that Austria has officially owned up to having been a principal perpetrator of Holocaust crimes, presumably that makes life a little easier for Trauneck, and anyone looking to ensure the country's recent dark past is not forgotten. Yet Trauneck says that logic is somewhat flawed.

"It is a double-faced situation. On the one hand, we have a young generation which is very much involved and interested in Holocaust education, a generation of teachers, educators. But on the other hand, you have the reality of politics. The civilian society is more accepting of the Holocaust than the political side."

That did not seem to be the case, at least on a grand official level, at the Festival of Joy concert which took place on May 8, the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. It was not only the date that was significant, but also the venue. The free event, which attracted a crowd of around 15,000 and was attended by many ambassadors and Austrian heads of state – although Oskar Deutsch was unable to be there as it took place on Friday evening – was symbolically held

at Heldenplatz. The large square is overlooked by the grand Baroque-style Hofburg Palace, which formed the backdrop for Hitler's Anschluss speech in March 1938.

"The image of this vast crowd of people at Heldenplatz Square in March 1938 is a wound which does not heal," maintained Austrian Vice Chancellor Reinhold Mitterlehner in his address prior to the May concert. The lengthy speaker roster also included Chancellor Werner Faymann; President Heinz Fischer, whose parents-in-law were Jewish; and Mailath-Pokorny.

There was also a highly emotive appearance by 77-year-old Helga Emperger, who took the stage together with Fischer. Emperger's mother Maria Peskoller was executed by the Nazis in December 1944, on her daughter's 16th birthday, because she helped the partisans in Carinthia in southern Austria.

The rendition of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, complete with enormous choir, by the Vienna Symphony Orchestra was stirring; but the most emotional moment of the evening took place when it was announced there were several Holocaust survivors in attendance – and the entire audience rose to its feet to applaud the dozen or so survivors. It was the longest applause of the evening. ■

The writer was a guest of the Vienna City Council. For more information about the Jewish Welcome Service Vienna: www.jewish-welcome.at



A MEMORIAL plate with the name of the Holocaust victim Dora David. (Barry Davis)