

Personal reflection



SJM Guide,
Joel Hochberg,
outside his grandparents'
home in Vienna.

Jewish Welcome Service Vienna

I have always been hesitant to visit Vienna, the place from where my grandparents were sent to their deaths, and from where my mother survived Theresienstadt and Auschwitz.

But several years ago, my family commissioned a *Stolperstein* plaque - the brass memorial plate replacing a cobblestone - in front of my grandparents' old apartment. I wanted to visit and see this, to honour my grandparents and see where my mother had grown up.

Through friends, I heard about a program established in 1980 by the Viennese Municipal Council that had twice yearly brought Shoah victims (including those who had to flee Austria) to visit Vienna. The program is now also open to Shoah descendants, which is how I was able to apply.

The Jewish Welcome Service Vienna undertakes many roles from research to education, of which this program forms just one part. That said, the trip, airfares, accommodation and most meals were so very generously paid for by the organisation. Austria, at least at the governmental level, acknowledges that Austrians collaborated with the Nazis, and they face up to this fact.

The week-long activities in October this year were beyond expectation. We had guided tours through the old Jewish quarter of Vienna, and saw the rich Jewish history it held. We visited Shoah memorials such as the Wall of Names that lists the 65,000 Austrian Jews who were murdered. We also visited old Jewish cemeteries where many of the attendees found the names of relatives.

Tours of Vienna's major historic sites made evident how often a Jewish story was attached to them - such was the contribution of the community to Jewish life and culture.

Our group was hosted by several Austrian dignitaries, including the President of Austria. Sadly, all dignitaries referred to the terrorist attack of 7 October - it was unavoidable at this time - but they unequivocally stated their support for Israel and the Jewish people.

The organisation has a website for those interested in knowing more or registering for the program: www.jewish-welcome.at. **Written by Joel Hochberg.**