

# An Austrian welcome

**The author and Bioscientist Dr Vivien Sieber shares her account of a recent trip to discover her roots.**

A lovely surprise popped into my mail box last September – an invitation from the Jewish Welcome Service (JWS) in Vienna to spend a week with them in November. Whilst I was delighted to be included on the tour, I was also slightly apprehensive.

My grandmother and father were Jewish refugees from Vienna. They had escaped to the UK in 1938 as penniless refugees. By the time I was born they had established new lives. My mother was English, nominally Christian, whilst my father was an atheist, my school Unitarian so I was brought up not belonging to any religion. I knew I was different. Traditions were different: food, family, talking – especially at the same time as everyone else. Christmas was traditional, turkey, red cabbage, vanillekipferl and grandmother complaining that Jewish families do not decorate trees.

Given my muddled heritage, joining a tour organised by the JWS was an opportunity to learn more about the wider history of Viennese Jews past and present, my family and myself. The generous programme was similar to the one Debra Barnes described (*AJR Journal* August 2022). We began with a welcome dinner, followed next day by a city tour and a reception at the City Hall, (Rathaus), hosted by the City Councillor



Vivien Sieber (left) during a reception at Vienna's Rathaus

for Culture & Science. The speeches stressed how Vienna acknowledged previous misdeeds but now welcomes Jews.

The following day we were privileged to have a private tour of the Jewish Museum; the young curator talked of Waldheim, who hid his Nazi past to become UN Secretary General and President of Austria, to open the discussion of Austria's role in the Holocaust. We saw another beautiful staircase on our way to the reception in the Federal Chancellery. Accompanied by spectacular cakes, speeches by the Federal Minister for the EU and Constitution, the President of the Jewish community, and Hannah Lessing, Secretary General of the Austrian National Fund, resembled those of the previous day.

On a cold damp morning we stood quietly by the "going nowhere" sculpture – two concrete lines disappearing into a dark box – the Aspang Railway Station Memorial that marks the terminus of the trains destined for concentration and death camps. At dusk I visited the Shoah wall with my husband. I thought of relatives, lost before I was born, and found their names amongst so many others. Light flowed gently up the seemingly endless catalogue of names, a stark representation of the slaughter.

Our walking tour of Leopoldstadt included an ordinary square that

had been the collection point where individuals were held before their final journey to the camps. A primary school now occupies the space, which was filled with the sounds of a racially diverse group of children happily playing. I realised that this was where my great-aunts Selma and Laura probably spent their last terrified hours in Vienna. We were told that bike-racks and plants pots placed over nearby Stolpersteine had only been removed grudgingly.

My grandparents married in the beautiful Seitenstettengasse Synagogue. I thought of them during the service (only the second I have ever attended) as daylight faded.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the tour was meeting organisers, guides and other participants from across the globe. Some were observant, others non-observant, a few were Kosher, most were not – ranging from religious, to secular Jews, to hybrids like me. Some had taken Austrian citizenship; others were in the process of applying for it. We talked about what we had learnt during the tour, not just of gruesome details learnt of close relatives during visits to the archive, but of our personal journeys. I am grateful to the JWS for the invitation and their hospitality. My apprehension was unfounded, I made new friends and am more aware of the complexities of Austrian Jewish descent.

Vivien Sieber is also the author of *Kino and Kinder: A family's journey in the shadow of the Holocaust*, published by I2i Publishing.



The Aspang Railway Station Memorial