

The Jewish Traveler

VIENNA

By Maxine Silverstein

It had been many years since I had been to Austria, so I was very excited when I found out that my Prague trip this past summer would also include four nights in Vienna.

In Vienna, you practically inhale nostalgia. Known for its waltzes and pastries, this city is very elegant and charming. Where else can you still buy postcards of Emperor Franz Joseph or books on the Hapsburg Empire of 100 years ago? But like other Jewish communities in Europe, 60 years after the fall of the Nazis, Vienna for some may no longer be a popular place for Jewish settlement.

Some feel the Holocaust actually began in this capital. Here lived the art student Hitler, who became insane with the idea that he had to murder Jews; and this city, say some commentators, is "the cradle of modern political anti-Semitism." Only within the last few years has Austria acknowledged for the first time that Austrians were responsible for crimes against Jews. The country has passed legislation setting up a National Fund that provides token sums to Austrian Jews who suffered as a result of Nazi rule.

Vienna's Jewish population consists mostly of Eastern European refugees from the Holocaust era and their children, returning expatriates who lived abroad during World War II and Iranian Jews seeking asylum. The Viennese Jewish population is also elderly: more than half the population is over 60 years old. The senior citizens are single, or if married, without extended families. Today about 90 percent of the Austrian Jewish community lives in this capital city of 1.6 million, although small Jewish communities exist in Salzburg, Linz, Graz and Innsbruck.

The Jewish sites are well worth visiting. Located in the city center, the Jewish Museum (Judenplatz Museum) and the Stadtempel Synagogue (Vienna Synagogue) can be visited with a single purchased ticket. Security is incredi-



Gary Silverstein at the entrance to the Jewish Museum in Vienna.

as a link between Jews and non-Jews, also serves as a window on the rich but lost world of Viennese Judaism. The ground floor houses two permanent exhibitions. The first displays Jewish objects of worship, while the second illustrates Vienna's Jewish history. I found the most interesting exhibition to be on the fourth floor, where a room called the Schauderdepot (depot expo) is given over to hundreds of religious objects recovered after the Holocaust. This floor resembles the back room of an antique shop. The library in this museum tops all of those in other Jewish museums throughout Europe. It preserves 25,000 volumes in German, Hebrew, Yiddish and English.

Also within the Judenplatz area is the Memorial to Austrian Holocaust Victims. Unveiled in 2000, the reinforced concrete cube resembles a library of 7,000 volumes turned inside out. The doors are locked and the books face inward. The base of the memorial has the names of the places where 65,000 Austrian Jews were murdered by the Nazis.

Today Vienna has 15 synagogues, but the only surviving synagogue from the pre-war era is the Vienna Synagogue (Stadtempel), which also houses the community Jewish offices. The synagogue was damaged during the war and reopened in 1963 after extensive renovations. The synagogue has limited visiting hours and very heavy security due to a 1982 terrorist attack. The Stadtempel was designed like a small theater or Italian-style Baroque opera house. The spectacular round sanctuary has the look and feel of a Reform temple, but it is an Orthodox congregation with a separate gallery for women. We found our tour to be very interesting, and we were so glad that we had visited this remarkable synagogue.

Vienna also has several Jewish bakeries, a kosher restaurant and kosher supermarket. Most are located in the Judenplatz area. We found some very good restaurants and some fabulous bakeries for Viennese pastries. Huth, a contemporary restaurant near our hotel was excellent. We dined outside, which was a delightful treat.

Plachutta, a traditional restaurant, was very formal and known for its boiled beef. The beef was served like soup and was very interesting. Don't miss Julius Meinl, a fabulous gourmet grocery store located in the Stephansplatz, the main shopping area. I found the shopping to be expensive but found wonderful buys on Austrian shoes and traditional Austrian clothes.

An added challenge to our trip was President and Mrs. Bush were staying at our hotel on our last night in Vienna. The security was mind-boggling! Only 50 lucky guests were allowed to stay, and we were two of them. We had to leave our hotel two hours early to pass through the added security in the area to get to the airport on time.

I enjoyed my visit to Vienna. I found the city to be formal and very old world, but also quite charming. ☆

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Maxine Silverstein in the Stadtempel.

ble, and you will need to bring your passport in order to enter these Jewish sites. Vienna was the site of the world's first Jewish museum in 1897, and this current museum was opened in 1990. This museum, whose purpose is to act