

Dear team of "A letter to the stars", July 25/0

I am happy to answer your request for my reactions to your invitation of spending one week last May as your guests in Vienna.

Let me say first how deeply impressed I am by the nobility of the two journalists Josef Neumayer and Markus (his last name escapes me and I must ask him to forgive me) who, as I was told, are the founders of this extraordinary project. Their efforts and their dedication in a country where many were not yet ready to appreciate the purpose of their work, eventually led to support across the board from Austrian officialdom to the Cardinal of Vienna. It is their remarkable achievement to have helped steer official Austria in a different direction, respectful of truth and honesty after so many years of having evaded these two precious values.

For many months before my departure for Vienna

you had been in contact with me and in New York City I had met Veronika Gisberg the organization's representative selected to come because of her outstanding work, and because she was from the Stubenbastei where I had been a Gymnasiast until the Nazi takeover. My feelings and expectations before leaving for Vienna were therefore nothing but positive. It was clear from our first meeting in April 2007 and her visit with us some months later that Veronika was an admirable young woman representing an admirable project. On arriving and staying in Vienna, my feelings were never disappointed and really exceeded expectations. I found all members of the project to be wonderful.

I knew I was going to be asked to speak to students at my Gymnasium and gave much thought to what I was going to say. As a retired university teacher, I am used to facing students, and knew what I wanted

to stress: to treat all human beings with the same consideration and dignity. Nazism has taught one fundamental lesson after its horrors: the fact that everyone is entitled to the same human rights, an issue particularly important now, at a time of more open borders and the mingling of nationalities, religions and races. A mere reading of the Vienna telephone book with its many Czech, Polish and Hungarian names, should make Austrians aware that they are a mixture of nationalities.

The teacher at the Stubenbastei, Elisabeth Bruck, whose students I spoke to, was extraordinarily kind and friendly, in great contrast to several of my previous visits to Vienna when I couldn't get anyone at the Stubenbastei to take notice of me much as I tried. Ms. Bruck took me and Veronika to lunch, gave me a fine book, an informal history

of the Stubenbastei, and had gone to great lengths making xerox copies of a booklet produced during the year of the school's Nazi takeover, as well as of the grades of all the students in my class, 6a. Unfortunately they turned out to be copies of the wrong class. I should really like you to have my quite mediocre grades for the record but the best way to get them would not be to copy the 6a class, before the end of which Jewish students had already been separated to the Sperlgymnasium and then been expelled, but to copy the grades of 5a, 1936/37.

You ask about my feelings after my return to the States. I have had nothing but the best feelings since my return from this visit. I walked around my old neighborhood a lot. We lived on Salzgras 14, not far from the

Börse, Concordiaplatz and Maria am Gestade and I had known from previous visits that our apartment house had been bombed and rebuilt, but I didn't know before that it now belongs to the Universität für angewandte Kunst, which was a great surprise. Also for the first time, I saw the address am Tiefen Graben where, next to a still existing hotel, my father once had his small business for a few years.

All this, of course, brought back memories, particularly retracing the steps on my way to school, past the Hohe Markt to the Tuchlauben, the Heiligentkreuzerhof, the Basilisk Haus in the Schönlaterngasse, and finally the beautiful little square with the Universitätskirche (Jesuitenkirche) and the old former university building, now an academy.

My thoughts during these walks went something

like this: at last much - I hope most - of Austria has decided to face its past honestly, which to me is the most crucial issue. The events at the Parliament and on the Heldenplatz were touching and impressive, and confirmed the thoughts I just mentioned.

Not to forget one memory: on the way from Parliament to the Heldenplatz we passed the Theresienstempel in the Burggarten in front of which I remember as a twelve year old to have taken a picture of my mother. Also, on the way to the magnificent Liechtenstein palace I passed the huge Kaserne im Alsergrund where my mother had often taken me on walks. Vienna in May was particularly beautiful during my visit.

Another event that jogged memories: as part of religious instruction at R.G. Stubenbastei, we sometimes went to services on Saturdays at the Seitenstettentempel. During the Nazi

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period the inside of the synagogue was completely destroyed, which I saw because we had to go there for some documents as I recall. The outside was left intact probably because destroying it would have left an ugly gap in the street's facades. Though I am not religious at all, I always wanted to see the inside after the war. On several visits to Vienna I found the synagogue shut and inaccessible, obviously not restored for perhaps more than fifty years. I thought this indicative of Vienna's and Austria's shameful attitude to their recent past. But this time, during my visit I found the Seitenstettentempel restored inside with the help, I hope, not just of the Jewish Community but also of the city of Vienna, though I don't know this. The service in the old days could be described as somewhere between Reformed and Conservative, containing as it did, a lot of German as well as Hebrew.

But now it was quite Orthodox, no German at all, and a congregation possibly of Russian Jews who had fled the Soviet Union. No matter what the service, it was good to see the synagogue alive again, and no apparent hostility surrounding it except some curiosity. I hope I am right about that.

All in all, the experience was both deeply moving and elating! It was enhanced by being shared with Peter Weiss, a fellow refugee from Vienna who is a good friend and a committed human rights attorney in New York.

I am looking forward to hearing from you, and staying in touch especially also with Kimberly Harris. My best wishes to you all,

P.S. I just got Markus' last name:
Triller. Still, my apologies to him
and to Andreas Kuba.

Eric Krutz