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TRACING JEWISH FORCED LABOUR IN THE KAISERSTADT – A TAINTED TOUR OF VIENNA | 1

Tourist Sites and the Memory of the Holocaust

“Willkommen in Wien! In Wien ist alles etwas gemütlicher!” (Welcome to Vienna. Everything is a bit more comfortable in Vienna) are typical Viennese slogans. Vienna is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Europe, and over the last two decades commemorating the Holocaust has also become a tourist attraction, albeit after much social and political struggle. The most notable sight is the Holocaust monument, *Mahnmal für die 65,000 ermordeten österreichischen Juden und Jüdinnen der Shoah*, in the Judenplatz. The monument, initiated by Simon Wiesenthal, was unveiled in the year 2000. So nowadays there are visible traces of the Holocaust in Vienna, although fewer than in Berlin, Budapest or Warsaw. However, there are not many reminders of a later chapter of the Holocaust, in 1944–45, after most Viennese Jews had been deported – the arrival of Hungarian Jewish forced labourers. They far outnumbered the about 6,000 Viennese Jews who mostly lived in mixed marriages and were still in the city. The Hungarian forced labourers were highly visible all over Vienna, with their yellow stars and often wooden clogs. They were in the factories, on public transport and on the streets clearing rubble, which was needed almost everywhere. Only a few plaques at Haidequerstrasse, Lobgrundstrasse, Tempelgasse/Ferdinandstrasse, Bischoffgasse, Malzgasse and Hackengasse commemorate the Holocaust, even though the *Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies* (VWI) has already identified more than a hundred sites. | 2 The publication *Topographie der Shoah* employs the hermeneutics of urban historiography and makes visible the sites where Jews were persecuted between 1938 and 1945 and the sites of destroyed “Jewish” Vienna (Hecht et al. 2015). It presents the city as an entity that is “contaminated” by its past. | 3 This article offers an

unconventional tour of Vienna. We will see the same places that appear on every tourist itinerary, but looked at from the point of view of the Hungarian Jewish forced labourers. We will demonstrate that we are not exaggerating or trivialising the memories of the survivors, because they themselves usually look at Vienna as visitors when reporting their memories.

Arrival

At the end of June 1944, about 15,000 Jews were brought to Strasshof near Vienna from four Hungarian ghettos: 564 from the Baja ghetto, 6,641 from the Debrecen ghetto, 5,239 from the Szeged ghetto, and 2,567 from the Szolnok ghetto. ¹⁴ In the Strasshof camp, a “slave market” was opened to meet the demands of Austrian entrepreneurs who urgently needed manpower in their factories and farms. Deported families – mainly mothers, children and grandparents – were forced to work in Vienna and in Lower Austria on farms, in trade, and in particular in the war industry, for example, in construction companies, bread factories, oil refineries etc. Most of them had previously lived in small towns and villages in eastern Hungary. For them, even the four Hungarian towns where they had been held were big cities. Vienna was not only huge, but the deportees had often heard about its famous sites. Éva Eisler, who was deported to Strasshof when she was 15 years old, remembered her arrival the following way:

“While we were travelling it got dark. It became night and we had no idea where we were taken. Suddenly we saw, as a miraculous sign, the Prater’s big wheel. We were relieved: they are taking us to Vienna or to its neighbourhood.” ¹⁵

Tours of Vienna

1. Prater

The Prater provided a good landmark for the Hungarians, who sometimes had to get around the city alone, to orientate themselves. Chava Unger (born Éva Ruttkai in Budapest, 1931), who was raised in the Jewish orphanage of Szeged, remembered ¹⁶ how when she was 13, in 1944, she and other girls from

her orphanage were taken to a paint factory in Floridsdorf (21. Christian-Bucher-Gasse 35, W. Megerle Lackfabrikanten und Rivalinwerke). Children had to work in the factory, rolling paint barrels and carrying heavy bags. Éva's job was to carry the paint samples to the factory laboratory, where they were compared with the desired colour. One day during the winter of 1944–45, the Jews working at the factory were taken to be disinfected somewhere in the city. There was an air raid during the disinfection process and the Jews ran out of the building and threw themselves on the snowy ground. Éva somehow got lost and found herself alone, surrounded by bomb craters. However, when she looked up, she saw the big wheel of the Prater overhead. She lay there for a long time, because air raid went on till dawn. Éva then made her way back to the factory on foot and by tram, where people helped her to find Floridsdorf. The others were already back. The big wheel of the Prater had once again served as some kind of a sign, a known point to orientate by in the narrative of a survivor recounting one of her most frightening experiences as a scared and isolated teenager. Another testimony also involves the Prater, in an unexpected way. Jardena Katzin (born Teréz Leipnicker in Békéscsaba, 1937) was deported to near Vienna with her parents and brother, and 20 other relatives. At first, the family was engaged in agricultural work in Franzensdorf. From there, in September 1944, they were taken to Vienna to the Kissler & Hermann wood processing plant (10. Davidgasse 95). Shortly before the city was liberated, Kissler, the head of the factory, took all the children to the Prater and on the big wheel. 17

2. Schönbrunn 18

Hungarian Jewish forced labourers also worked in Schönbrunn, the summer residence of the Habsburgs. During the summer of 1944, there was a Wohnlager (12. Bischoffgasse 10) in a school near the palace housing 585 Hungarian Jewish slave workers, including many families with small children. The adults were either taken by construction companies to work on bomb-damaged buildings or to the Siemens factory (21. Siemensstrasse 92). Between 10 and 12 children – all of them aged under 12 – were regularly

taken to Schönbrunn to do gardening. They were often given sandwiches by local mothers who taking their own young children to the park. Jeshajahu (Ernő) Wiesner, who was born in 1933 in Debrecen, usually worked with the adults. Sometimes, however, he was taken gardening with the children's group. In his testimony, he not only remembers the sandwiches, but also that they sometimes even played a little with the Viennese children in the palace park. The mothers frequently asked the young forced labourers why they were not in school. | 9

3. The City Centre

In most cases, Hungarian Jewish forced labourers in Vienna worked under Austrian foremen. Haja Genzel Rubinstein, who was born in 1927 in Makó, was deported from Szeged. | 10 She was housed with her family in a school at No. 32 Schrankenberggasse in the 10th district and transported on an open lorry to the Wienerwald every day to cut down trees. One day, the driver, a native Viennese, took the group to the city centre and showed them the major sites: the Opera building, the Hofburg, etc. He also showed them Mayerling in the Wienerwald, where Archduke Rudolf had committed suicide in 1889. Thanks to a driver proud of his city, Jews who had been deported from Hungary and forced to do hard physical labour, were able to become tourists for a while on their way to "work".

4. Zentralfriedhof (Vienna Central Cemetery)

Jewish Hungarian forced labourers, mainly children, also worked in the Vienna Central Cemetery between 1944 and 1945. About 40 children would be taken to the cemetery by tram – on a separate tramcar – every day from their camp in a school at No. 11 Hackengasse in the 15th district. In the cemetery, they had to cut back bushes, collect fallen horse chestnuts and leaves, and look after the graves. There was a crematorium there where bodies were burned all day long. The children saw this very closely. One of them, Simcha Schiffmann, who was born in 1932 in Debrecen, reported in his 2005 interview in Israel that the nightmarish picture of the burning bodies (raising

themselves, almost sitting up with the heat) is still etched in his mind and he cannot get rid of it. |¹¹

Getting around Vienna

In the winter of 1944, the Nazi authorities brought most of the forced agricultural workers into the capital. Some were taken to a camp at Schloss Laxenburg, where they were housed in the servants' quarters. From there, they were assigned to various factories and workshops.

Jichak (Miklós) Grün, who was born in 1934 in Debrecen, was taken to Laxenburg with his family. The adults worked in the factories, but he was usually left in the camp during the day. He remembered his life in Laxenburg as follows:

"I remember that both my mother and my brother were bringing food home from work. Nevertheless there was no food in the camp itself. We were eating sugar-beet and things that we found and stole from the neighbouring fields. We were living on these. In Laxenburg I was sent to the baker to work as a child servant. I couldn't speak German. But I managed to steal something each day. I hid the bread rolls, which I took home, in the leg of my trousers. This did not last long because the kneading bowls were running out. And I did not understand when the baker told me to bring some more kneading bowls. He became nervous, beat me very hard and never wanted to see me again. Thus the bread roll-acquisition came to an end too." |¹²

Haja Genzel Rubinstein chopped wood and carried heavy logs in the Wienerwald. |¹³ Hikers often passed them. Some women secretly pushed bread and cold meat into their hands, but this was stopped after some of the Jews started to ask for food take back to their children in the camp. Then the guards forbade them to approach the hikers. Mirjam Herstik, who was born in 1935 in Kiskunhalas, talked about the same thing, but from the point of view of a child who remained in the camp at No. 32 Schrankenberggasse in the 10th district all day, waiting for her mother and sisters to come back from their work in the Wienerwald:

“The only thing we were asking from them was whether they brought any food with them. My mother had a real talent for acquiring food. They were in the woods where hikers were passing by. They were having picnics. My mother was not embarrassed to approach them in German and beg for some food. There were good people among them who took something out of their baskets: a bread roll, a piece of cookie. My mother always brought something. Always. And we knew it, so this was our first question. We were already waiting for them to come and bring something. Because we were very hungry, very hungry. We were little children who were hungry and had nothing to do.” 114

Relations between Hungarian Jews and the Viennese

It is interesting how the mental image of Vienna that the Jews in the Hungarian provinces had had based on cultural-historical influences mixed with their imagination and/or real travel experiences became juxtaposed with the image of Vienna that emerged from their experiences as deported forced labour. As seen from the above quotations, their enforced presence in Vienna triggered earlier images, pieces of memories and knowledge. Obviously, later information about the city may get mixed up in the testimonies given much later in life, but their basic attitude towards Vienna is shaped by their experiences there, coloured by their previous knowledge and expectations of the city. All this does not mean that the Hungarian Jews developed deep contacts with the Viennese. On the contrary! Our research with Éva Kovács indicates that contacts between them remained limited and accidental during the time – less than a year – when the Hungarian Jewish forced labourers were visible in the city. In addition to the language problems and physical segregation, the main reasons were social status, and to an extent the internal hierarchies within the forced labour communities themselves. The Hungarian Jewish forced labourers looked like strangers and beggars to the Viennese. Research shows the Viennese people were more compassionate and generous towards the Hungarian Jews than they had been earlier towards the native Jews of Vienna. As Michaela Raggam-Blesch stated:

“There are striking differences in the recollections of Viennese and Hungarian Jews, particularly regarding contact with the Viennese civilian population. While acts of kindness or support are central in the autobiographic texts of Hungarian Jews, they are mentioned to a much lesser degree in those of Viennese survivors and are usually presented as an exception in an environment that had suddenly turned hostile to them. The traumatic experiences following the Anschluss to Nazi Germany in March 1938 and the humiliation and the sudden loss of rights that followed were too deep-rooted. Overnight, neighbours and friends had turned against them, and denunciation was a constant threat.” (2015: 22)

Some Viennese people did indeed extend some help to the Jews from Hungary, but not merely out of helpfulness and generosity to Jews. Firstly, they thought that the presence of the Jews from Hungary was only temporary, unlike that of the Viennese Jews; and secondly, the Hungarians, unlike the Viennese Jews, did not threaten the social positions of the native Viennese people: the forced labourers were very clearly in an inferior position.

István Gábor Benedek describes another way the forced labourers were helped. He was seven years old when he was taken with his mother and older brother in the summer of 1944 to a village near Vienna called Gerasdorf to do agricultural work. ¹⁵ The deported families were transported to different places each day to do whatever needed. One day his mother and his brother, Pál, were taken to work at a baker’s. When his mother was sent back to help clean the house, she gave the baker’s wife some good advice about cleaning rugs, and the woman began to be interested in the identity of this other woman who had been sent to work for her. It emerged then that Mrs Benedek was the wife of the chief accountant of a big flour mill in Hungary, and her husband had frequent business dealings with the Anker Company in Vienna. The woman verified the information at Anker, and then began to help the Benedek family regularly. She invited them to her house and gave them food, and gave good shoes to the mother, and a warm winter coat and toys to István. These gifts helped the Benedeks survive. The fact that they were not starving and had good shoes and warm clothes was extremely important

when the family was deported to Bergen-Belsen from Vienna in the winter of 1944. These stories further support our interpretation that the local people did not see the Hungarian Jewish forced labourers as equals. Mrs Benedek's pre-war social status together with the business connections – which fundamentally changed the relationship between the two women – came to light only by chance. We know precious little about contacts between the Jews who remained in Vienna and the Jews who were deported to Vienna. Based on the sources, we think that besides hospital staff and a few social workers who worked for the remaining Jewish community of Vienna, the Hungarian Jewish forced labourers did not meet local Jews. This seems logical, as the approximately 6,000 remaining Viennese Jews could only move around to a very limited extent. The fact that most of the Hungarian Jewish forced labourers arrived with their families (usually without the men of military age) and the families often also knew one another, created an inner society with a structured division of labour, and a limited but real sense of communal and religious life. There were family members, usually the elderly, who stayed in the camps and tried to care for the children and even organise educational activities for them. Based on the post-war testimonies analysed so far, we can state that the forced labourers tried to reproduce their earlier communal life as far as it was possible in the camps. As to religious life, we can see in the testimonies that rabbis, cantors, and/or elderly men took responsibility to perpetuate religious life among the deportees. These inner structures reduced the deportees' need for regular outside contacts.

Conclusion: The Cultural Image of Vienna among Hungarian Jewish Forced Labourers

As a consequence of the lack of real contact between the forced labourers and the people of Vienna, paradoxically, Vienna remained the city of their earlier tourist and imagined experiences to the Hungarian Jewish forced labourers, the unreal city of cultural and historical dreams. Many of them kept projecting this positive cultural image and generalised their positive experiences, even the very small ones, accordingly. Rivka Weisz, who was born as Herstik

in 1934 and grew up in Kiskunhalas, described the Wienerwald to the interviewer of her 2008 testimony in Israel with the following enthusiastic words: “Wienerwald. You know, the forest of Vienna. Johann Strauss, the waltzes, music. Beautiful, beautiful forest.”¹⁶ The projection of the mythical, ideal, cultural image of Vienna over the real Vienna of the 1940s is mainly responsible for the fact that many survivors talk enthusiastically about the residents of Vienna, even though the real help provided by locals reality cannot be compared with their sufferings. The survivors very rarely remember actual dialogues or real contacts with Viennese people. Very tellingly, we have not yet found in the testimonies any story about escape or offers of shelter if anyone did escape. On the contrary, Éva Eisler, for example, said escape was impossible because the lack of potential shelters. She called attention to this, even though her story includes an important instance of receiving help – food – from Viennese people:

“In mid-January there were significant snowfalls and the whole team was assigned to shovel snow at the Danube Bank. We got shovels and we had to shovel the snow to the Danube. The city’s street-sweepers oversaw us and demanded fast work so they did not have to work. At this time my cousin and I managed to escape and we were hiding under the stairway of a bombed house, because we were freezing. After a while one of the residents came home. S/he got in the elevator and came back to us with milk and bread with butter. S/he gave us food and drink and told us to put the milk bottles to the elevator. Her/his activity was lifesaving for us since we were cold and soaking wet. Outside there was minus 15 degrees and the cold wind was blowing.”¹⁷

So Eisler, who was still wearing summer clothing (in which she had arrived from her home town) and wooden clogs, was clearing snow instead of the Viennese street sweepers guarding them. She was lucky enough to find shelter for a while and received unexpected help from a Viennese resident. Her conclusion, however, was: “We had some opportunities to escape, but there was nowhere to go. It was better to go back to the camp and stay together with the family.”

Afterword

We have recently noticed that the classical *Bécs* guidebook to Vienna, which was the most widely used guidebook during the Socialist regime in Hungary, was written by a former forced labourer, Mária Ember, then a teenager, who had been deported from Hungary to Strasshof. She published it in 1978, four years after publication of her Holocaust memoir-novel, *Hajtűkanyar*. In Ember's memoir Vienna plays a crucial part, both as the real city and as an idea. However, her Vienna guidebook contains no reference to the Holocaust or the Jews deported there from Hungary as forced labour. She wrote one of the best Holocaust memoir-novels about the Jews of Hungary in which Vienna features prominently but she wrote a guidebook to Vienna in which the Holocaust is absent and Vienna's context is its glorious past and high culture. The guidebook's Vienna is the Vienna of Strauss, the waltz, the Prater, Schönbrunn and Sachertorte and not the Vienna she experienced as a forced labourer.

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- 1 This article is based on a paper, presented together on the conference of the Humboldt University, entitled "Urban Heritage and Urban Images: Imagineering Urban Heritage", Berlin, October 2015.
- 2 On the project see: <http://ungarische-zwangsarbeit-in-wien.at/>, accessed 3 November 2017. We mainly used testimonies from the following collections: late testimonies from the *Visual History Archives*, and *Yad Vashem Archives*; and early testimonies from the *National Committee for Attending Deportees (DEGOB – Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság)* collection of the Hungarian Jewish Archives. Short video clips of the VHA testimonies can be viewed on our webpage, together with brief summaries from the mostly Hebrew Yad Vashem testimonies. The DEGOB testimonies are available online, see: <http://degob.hu>, accessed 3 November 2017.

- 3 Quoting Martin Pollack: “This term is unscientific. I coined it myself. For me a tainted landscape is one that appears to be unremarkable from the outside but conceals something within. To put it plainly: If I start digging, something will be revealed. Something has been covered over and become part of the landscape. I find it hard to imagine untainted landscape today. That is not always pleasant. Wherever I go and stand, I often say to myself: Hopefully this landscape conceals nothing bad.” (“Dieser Begriff ist unwissenschaftlich. Ich habe ihn selber erfunden. Eine kontaminierte Landschaft ist für mich eine Landschaft, die nach außen hin nichts Auffälliges aufweist, die aber etwas verbirgt. Plakativ gesprochen: Wenn ich beginne zu graben, kommt etwas zum Vorschein. Etwas wurde zugedeckt, das zu einem Teil der Landschaft wurde. Heute kann ich Landschaft kaum mehr unkontaminiert denken. Das ist nicht immer angenehm. Wo ich gehe und stehe, überlege ich oft: Hoffentlich verbirgt diese Landschaft nichts Schlimmes.”) Martin Pollack: “Wo ich gehe und stehe”. Interview Mia Eidlhuber, *Der Standard*, 22. Februar 2014. <http://derstandard.at/1392685903291/Martin-Pollack-Wo-ich-gehe-und-stehe>, accessed 3 November 2017.
- 4 The data concerning the number of the deportees are provided by Edith Csillag, who was a deportee herself. She was deported from Mezőtúr to the Szolnok ghetto and from the ghetto to Strasshof. Thanks to her knowledge of German, she was assigned to office work in the camp. See her testimony in the Hungarian Jewish Archives (Budapest): DEGOB protocols, No. 3628).
- 5 A1517, Moreshet Archives, Givat Haviva, Israel.
- 6 O3/7418, Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem, Israel.
- 7 O3/12982, Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem, Israel.
- 8 The Schönbrunn Palace and its gardens have been part of the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage since 1996, and the place is the most visited tourist attraction in Austria.
- 9 O3/12564, Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem, Israel. On the topic see more: Testimonies of Eli Rosen, O3/7638, Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem, Israel.
- 10 O3/11538, Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem, Israel.
- 11 O3/5311, Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem, Israel.
- 12 O3/12953, Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem, Israel.
- 13 O3/11538, Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem, Israel.
- 14 O3/12457, Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem, Israel.
- 15 VHA/49300, USC Shoah Foundation Institute. On the camp in Gerasdorf see: Frojmovics, K., Kovács, É., Lappin-Eppel, E., Scheider, O. (2016). Das Lager für ungarisch-jüdische Zwangsarbeiterinnen und Zwangsarbeiter in Gerasdorf 1944 In Vojta, A., Mandl L. (Eds.), *Das „Judenlager“ Gerasdorf: Dokumentation eines Lagers, in dem Jüdinnen und Juden aus Ungarn .1944 zur Zwangsarbeit eingesetzt waren* Stadtgemeinde Gerasdorf bei Wien: Atlas Druck, pp. 19-53, see <http://www.gerasdorf-wien.gv.at/system/web/GetDocument.ashx?fileid=1253374>, accessed 9 November 2017.
- 16 O3/12974, Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem, Israel
- 17 A1517, Moreshet Archives, Givat Haviva, Israel