



Out and About
Journeys Completed or Contemplated

by Pam Mandel

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from my pocket a pebble

Abandoned cemeteries, with their silent stones, are the places, the objects she feels most compelled to visit.

We have walked down a very quiet street to a dead end. There's a retirement home here, and some non-descript apartment buildings. All the grit and glamour of Vienna is behind us; this location makes no sense. But we are in the right place; we know because my husband asks at the front desk. You must walk through the lobby and out into the quiet courtyard, and there you will find Vienna's oldest Jewish cemetery. Well, the oldest *remaining* one, at any rate.

Established in 1540, the cemetery holds elaborately carved headstones — and pieces of headstones — some moved here when they were recovered from their not-quite-hiding place in Vienna's Central Cemetery. The stones are carved with Hebrew texts, elaborate scrolls; some of them have the traditional symbol of raised hands; some have the Star of David. They are placed in random order; it's hard to tell which stones are in their original locations and which have been placed here, in this private garden, away from the bones they're meant to define.

A different time, also Vienna. The stones are covered in ivy; they lean at haphazard angles. Some are small and delicate, but many are bold and tower over my head. We are alone, and then a woman appears, her finger held to her lips. She is stalking the deer that graze this neglected part of the cemetery; perhaps she's the one who's thrown kibble on the pathways — such paths that remain. We don't ask, and I'm angry. I turn away; this is not a petting zoo.

The headstones here sing of wealth and pride, some of them are family

sanctuaries, the black granite stamped deep with names of families that are gone now. There is no one here to clear the vines away, to place the pebble that signifies a visit. The deer bolt, and I go back to reading the names out loud.

Once more, in Graz, a smaller city, south of Vienna. We are wandering the old city with family and come across a tombstone placed high in a wall. There's a tour guide standing in front of the stone, and I can hear her telling her charges — in English — that no one knows why the stone is there.

"Nonsense," I say, the words spill out of me; I'm as surprised as anyone. "It's here because the Nazis — this city was a hotbed of Nazism — used the headstones from the Jewish cemetery as construction materials. They used them to pave roads and build government offices. It belongs in a cemetery, but the Nazis decided Jewish headstones made perfectly acceptable building materials."

I cast my eyes around for another stone, finding one that will fit in my hand. I stand on my toes to reach, and I balance the pebble as best I can on the exposed top edge of the tombstone. The guide is angry with me for correcting her in front of her customers, but I am angrier still.

"Graz was filthy with Nazis," I say again. "We know exactly why this headstone is here."

I have visited other sites with Jewish roots too. In Spain I wandered the immaculate streets of former Jewish quarters, imagining the world collapsing around the Sephardic families as the Inquisition forced them to choose

between refugee flight or certain death. In Germany, I entered empty synagogues built after World War II, Israeli guards out front thrilled to speak English with me, thrilled to take me inside and show me this new temple they're charged with protecting. In Belgium, I found a Jewish deli, very much a living place, on Sukkot — the Jewish harvest festival, families having their festive seasonal lunches in the dining area. But abandoned cemeteries, with their silent stones, are the places, the objects I feel most compelled to visit wherever I travel.

I walk past the stones and try to sound the words in my mouth, but I can't read Hebrew, not really. I run my fingers over the words I can't understand. I carry pebbles in my pockets and leave them for the Jews that were here, people who fell in love and fought and ate bread and told stories to their kids, and then, they weren't here anymore, their lives erased in hate and fire. I draw lines between the letters on the stones and the letters I will write about these places after I visit them.

I am just one person. A very uneducated Jew, my politics are so liberal, my Hebrew so poor, I like bacon on my grilled cheese sandwiches, and I married outside the tribe. This is the one small thing I do that ties me back to these other lives, these people with whom I share something, even though I'm bad at defining what it is we share.

I stand on my toes to place a stone on an ivy-covered monument or on a story I can't read just in case someone else comes afterward and knows what it means. ♦