

# Vienna's street of memories

## LETTER FROM VIENNA



MICHAL LEVERTOV

**T**HE CROWD GATHERED on a chilly April afternoon on Servitengasse seemed just the right audience to participate in an opening of another of this Viennese street's trendy bars or cool shops.

But the 300-strong group are here for the launch of a monument commemorating the street's former Jewish inhabitants, in a project called *Servitengasse 1938*. This initiative, by present-day residents, to trace the fate of their home's original occupants has developed into an endeavour with the mass participation of academic, artistic and even municipal bodies.

"Four years ago, my wife searched Auschwitz lists for Jewish relatives of mine when she came up against a name of a victim whose home address was 6 Servitengasse, Vienna," says Peter Koppe, who lives at that address today. "This made us wonder how many Jewish people lived in the street, who they were and what was their fate."

Five of Koppe's neighbours at No 6 joined the search. When they wanted to place a memorial plaque on the building's wall, "the landlord refused, so we stirred up some public atten-

tion". The campaign resulted in a compromise — the plaque was set just nearby the building — but the story resulted in a joint project between academics and local municipalities.

The findings were intriguing: in March 1938, just before the Anschluss, 381 of Servitengasse's 689 residents were of Jewish descent. Half of the street's 24 houses were owned by Jews and so were 61 of the 111 shops. Of this lively community, 132 people were sent to ghettos and concentration camps, 148 escaped Austria, and the fate of almost 100 is still unknown.

Charles Kurt, from Houston, Texas, who was born at No 6, had tried to visit his family's flat 20 years earlier, but the people who lived there did not let him in. Servitengasse 1938's efforts to enable him to visit his childhood home, he says, "changed my life".

As a young girl, Felice Schragar and her mother escaped Austria just after Kristallnacht. In 1971 she visited Vienna with her family and was let into her former flat. The family's books were still there, and Schragar, who now lives in New York, asked for a couple of editions which were especially dear to her. "The woman gave me the books," she recalls, "and then claimed: 'But we paid you for the apartment!' which was obviously ridiculous."

Art student Julia Schultz, 28, won a competition to design the memorial with her plan for a glass-covered recess in the pavement, filled with old keys, with the name of each of Servitengasse's former Jewish residents attached to them. "I was always interested in the history of Austria's Jewry," she says. "Evidently, our generation shows more interest than that of our parents, who did not even dare to mention the subject."