“Together we we still have much work to do!”

Visit program 2022 for the children and grandchildren of persecuted Frankfurters

"Together we still have much work to do!", with this appeal for the future, Wendy Schmelzer summed up the conclusion of her visit during her speech at the final reception in Frankfurt's Römer. She was part of a group of children and grandchildren of former Frankfurter citizens who were guests in the former home of their parents and grandparents from 8th to 15th June at the invitation of the City of Frankfurt.

What motivated the children and grandchildren of former Frankfurters who had to flee during the Nazi regime to take part in the city's visit program?

Group of visitors in front of the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt am Main, photo: Angelika Rieber

Many participants had grown up confronted with silence about the past and had learned little from their parents or grandparents. Others grew up with stories from Frankfurt. However, it was important for everyone to get to know the stamping grounds of their ancestors in Frankfurt and outside, the residential addresses, the former school, the workplaces and shops that the parents and grandparents once owned, the graves of the grandparents and great grandparents, the places of origin of the ancestors and much more. These places either evoked memories of what their parents and grandparents had told them, or enabled encounters with what their parents had not told them.

The project Jewish Life in Frankfurt supports this search for clues, researches archives for the visitors and accompanies them during their stay.

A complete program had been prepared for the guests. Of great importance were the two get togethers at the beginning and at the end of the visit program, which gave them the opportunity to introduce themselves to each other and to share their experiences during their stay in Germany.

In this way, they were able to identify similarities with the other participants, but also to see differences which affected both the stories of escape and the handling of the experiences of persecution in the individual families.

Angelika Rieber, Chairwoman of the Jewish Life in Frankfurt project, welcomes the guests, photo: Vivian Simon

On the city tour guests were given an overview of the city today. The afternoon of encounters, which the project Jewish Life in Frankfurt had invited them to, made it possible for them to get to know representatives of the schools with whom they prepared the discussions which would take place later on. They also met the volunteers who assisted them in their search for clues and helped them to find contacts.

Guests and representatives of schools in conversation, photos: Angelika Rieber

The visit to the bunker the following day was particularly interesting for those whose ancestors had lived in Frankfurt's Ostend (East end) and belonged to the Hirsch community.

A detour to the Kindertransport monument, which was inspired by Renata Harris and initiated by the Jewish Life in Frankfurt project, was particularly moving for the Melwyn and Danny Kalman brothers, because their father Hans was able to flee with his brother Erich on a Kindertransport, as was Renate Adler.

Melwyn and Danny Kalman at the Kindertransport Monument, photos: Angelika Rieber

In the evening, the guests attended the Sabbath service in the West End Synagogue, where many of the ancestors had received their bar mitzvah.

At the weekend and beyond the focus was on the personal search for clues not only in Frankfurt, but also in the places of origin of the ancestors, who had mainly been drawn to the Main metropolis at the turn of the century.

Susan Merzbach had decided to go to Wickrath, where her great grandfather once owned a leather factory. The visit to the Jewish cemetery in Offenbach was a highlight for her, as she was able to locate many graves of her Merzbach ancestors there.

Susan Merzbach (center) at the Jewish cemetery in Offenbach, photo: Michael Beseler

Susan and Carrie Berman traveled to Mannheim, where their grandmother's family came from. Frederico Lubelski, the only participant in the group of visitors actually born in Frankfurt, was accompanied by his two sons and daughter to Langsdorf, where he grew up with his grandfather, with whom he was able to follow his parents to Argentina in 1939.

Frederico Lubelski with his children Claudia, Alejandro and Gabriel as well as the mayor Nargess Eskandari-Grünberg and Cilli Kasper-Holtkotte, who had worked for the Lubelskis and accompanied them; photo: Bernd Georg

Hedy Ciocci made use of the visit to Frankfurt to travel to Hemsbach an der Bergstrasse, where her mother had grown up. Vivian Simon experienced the contrast to the pulsating big city in Schwanheim, a suburb which still maintains its village like structure. It was there that her father experienced the first years of his childhood. Her grandmother worked as a dentist in Schwanheim, one of the first women in this profession, until her license from the health insurance authorities was withdrawn in 1933.

Rick Eis traveled to Bingen, where his father's family came from (http://www.juedisches-leben-frankfurt.de/de/home/biographien-und-begegnungen/biographien-a-f/maurice-eis.html).

And Carol Windecken visited Windecken, her grandmother's place of origin (http://www.juedisches-leben-frankfurt.de/de/home/biographien-und-begegnungen/biographien-t-z/herta-und-karl-wolf.html).

The siblings Wendy and John Schmelzer had a full program waiting for them during their visit to Frankfurt. They found their way to Offenbach, where their father grew up and their grandparents had owned a large clothing store. Visiting the former synagogue, where their father had celebrated his bar mitzvah, was a particularly moving moment for them. In Hanau, a few days later, they walked in the footsteps of their great uncle Fritz and great grandmother Jeanette, who was later deported to Theresienstadt. The visit to Wehrheim left a lasting impression. All Jeannette Hirsch's five children were born there. Seeing that the Hirsch family had been rooted in Wehrheim for generations broadened their view of a part of German-Jewish history that they had not previously been aware of. Their image of Germany had previously focused solely on persecution during the Nazi era.

The Schmelzers with members of the Wehrheim Historical Society in front of their grandmother's birthplace in Wehrheim, photo: Angelika Rieber

Wendy and John Schmelzer were also keen to see where their mother Marianne Ehrenfeld had grown up and been to school in Frankfurt. http://www.juedisches-leben-frankfurt.de/media/familie_ehrenfeld-enfield.pdf

Seeing the places where their parents had grown up as well as the homes and workplaces of their grandparents and great grandparents, connected and deeply moved the participants of the visit program to the history of their ancestors in Germany. "Many of us - including my brother and myself - had arrived having only vague information about these deep connections and roots. The day trips of discovery have been profound. Perhaps, in my case - like so many of yours - even life altering", said Wendy Schmelzer in her closing speech.

Laying of Stolpersteine for families Ballestero / Lichtenberg and Oppenheimer, photos: Angelika Rieber

For the members of the Oppenheimer family, Ballestero and Lichtenberg, the participation in the laying of stumbling stones for their relatives which had been specially scheduled during the week of their visit was particularly touching. Many members of the visitor group also participated in the ceremony and were encouraged to consider applying for stumbling stones to be laid for their families who had once been based in Frankfurt.

The highlight of the week for many of the guests was the discussion with the students. Almost all visitors took the opportunity to report on the life and escape stories and the fates of their family members, conversations which gave them a feeling of hope for the future.

„We also met with Frankfurt's wonderful high school students and their teachers who have added such an important dimension in letting us share with them this essential element of their country's history - and of our family history so that they - the students - can begin to consider the personal and political choices they will make.They are the future."

Wendy and John Schmelzer during their speeches at the final reception in Frankfurt's Römer, photos: Susan Merzbach

And yet there are still serious worries about the increasing incidence of antisemitism and the threats to democracy. They call on all of us to be vigilant and to work together for human rights and democracy.

"Together, we still have much work to do!"