

by Duncan J. D. Smith

November 1st is *Allerheiligen* (All Saints' Day) when Western Christians honour deceased relatives who (they assume) have made it to heaven. Since the early Middle Ages they've adorned family graves with candles and flowers, bringing light and colour to cemeteries darkened by the onset of winter. On this day, Vienna's Zentralfriedhof is a remarkable sight.

A single burial ground

As Vienna's burgeoning population spilled beyond its city walls in the late 19th century, the exurban cemeteries commissioned by Emperor Joseph II a century earlier became health hazards, and were cleared. In their place a single burial ground – the Zentralfriedhof – was laid out in the outlying district of Simmering. Fittingly, it opened for business on *Allerheiligen* 1874.

Designed to service an imperial capital of two million inhabitants, the cemetery was enormous from the start. Most Catholics rejected cremation preferring what they referred to as a *Schöne Leich* – a beautiful corpse. To avoid the horror of premature burial, customers could request a string be attached to the finger, which they could wiggle and ring a bell above ground! The writer Arthur Schnitzler opted instead for a stiletto blade that would pierce his heart and finish the job.

Various religious confessions

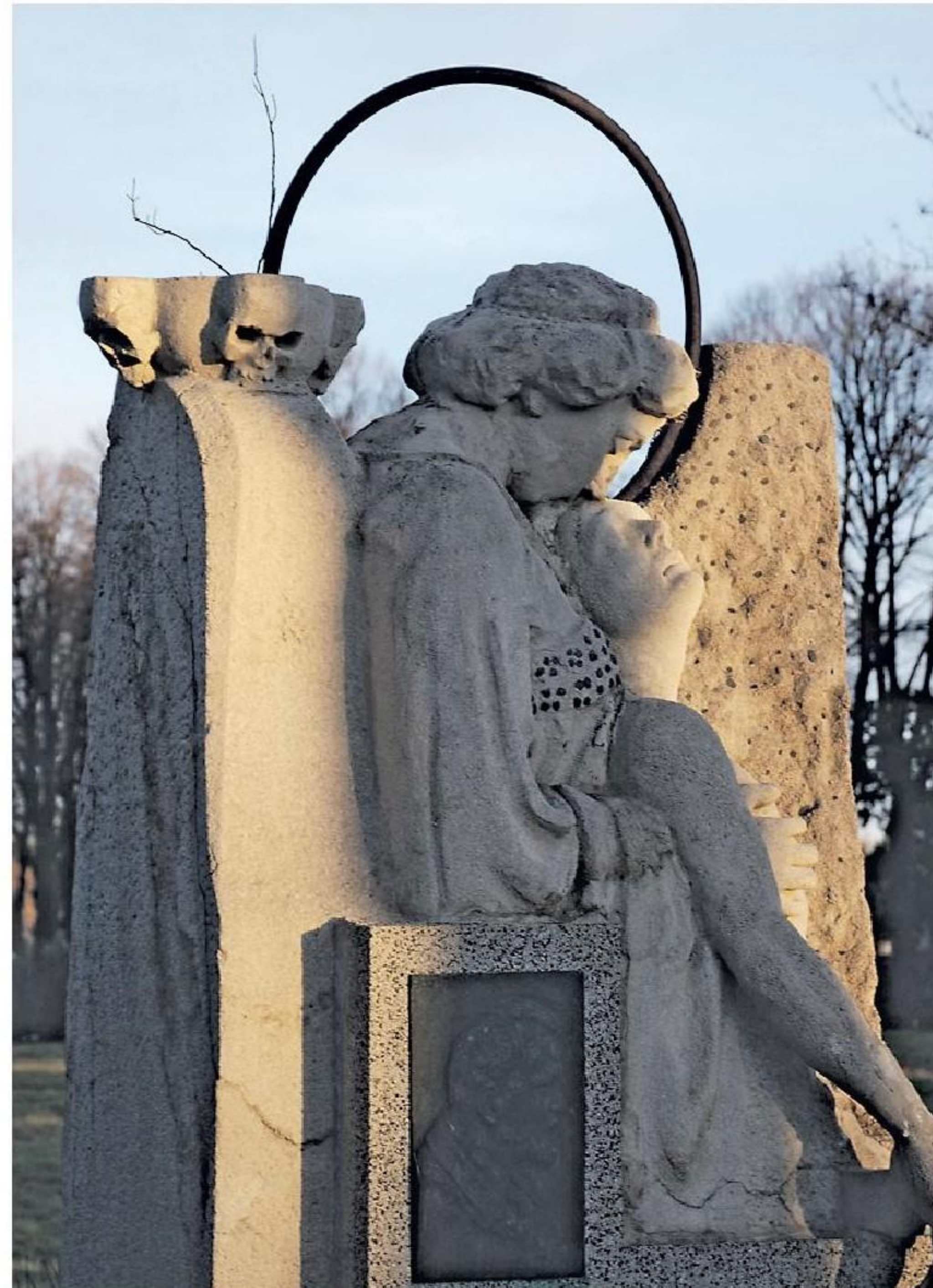
One of Europe's largest cemeteries, the Zentralfriedhof sprawls across 240 hectares. It is so vast that it requires a separate tram stop outside each of its three main gates, and its own bus route inside the cemetery. Within its perimeters there are three million burial sites – almost twice the city's current population – and it is teeming with wildlife, too, including a herd of deer.

The cemetery has always served the burial needs of Vienna's various religious confessions. In

STONES OF VIENNA

From a Schöne Leich to Ehrengräber, the Viennese obsess about death: A look at the Zentralfriedhof gives insight

A City for the Dead: Wien Deals with the Deceased



Autumn sunshine illuminates a gravestone at the Zentralfriedhof Photo: Duncan J.D. Smith

addition to Protestants and Jews there are distinct burial areas for Mormons, Buddhists, Russian Orthodox Christians, and Muslims, the latter facing towards Mecca. There are thematic groupings, too, of which the graves of Austria's composers always draw a crowd (Beethoven and Schubert were actually relocated here to encourage visitors to the new cemetery). More poignant are the fields of crosses of the war dead, the floral tributes for stillborn babies, and the memorial to those who donated their bodies to medical science.

Vienna's 'great and good'

Just inside Gate 2 there are several hundred Graves of Honour (*Ehrengräber*) reserved originally for Vienna's "great and good". Many are now long forgotten, which seems a pity since they include the indomitable lady traveller Ida Pfeiffer, the inventor of the soup kitchen Josef Edler von

At the Zentralfriedhof: the fields of crosses of the war dead, the floral tributes for stillborn babies, and the memorial to those who donated their bodies to science.

Kühn, and Siegfried Marcus, who pioneered the internal combustion engine.

Elsewhere there are many more lives worth discovering: Suez Canal engineer Alois Negrelli and Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, designer of the world's first fitted kitchen; Ludwig Köchel, who classified Mozart's work, and Ludwig Bösendorfer, piano manufacturer to the stars; and one shouldn't forget the grave of Dominik Bauer, the cemetery's very first grave digger. Also buried here, albeit in an unmarked grave, is Hitler's half-niece, Geli Raubal, who shot herself in Munich in 1931.

Schloss Concordia

Any tour of the Zentralfriedhof should conclude at the Old Jewish Cemetery inside Gate 1. The graves here represent the first time Jews were buried in the same Viennese cemetery as Christians. The difference in their current

condition, however, is a stark reminder of the persecution of the city's Jews under National Socialism. Most of the headstones, even those of Freud's parents, have been abandoned to nature.

It's a sobering but necessary experience, and when it's over the nearby Schloss Concordia offers welcome refreshment. Occupying a former mason's workshop, this eccentric restaurant is most atmospheric during winter, when its candlelit tables mirror the myriad lanterns flickering in the cemetery across the way. ◇

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