



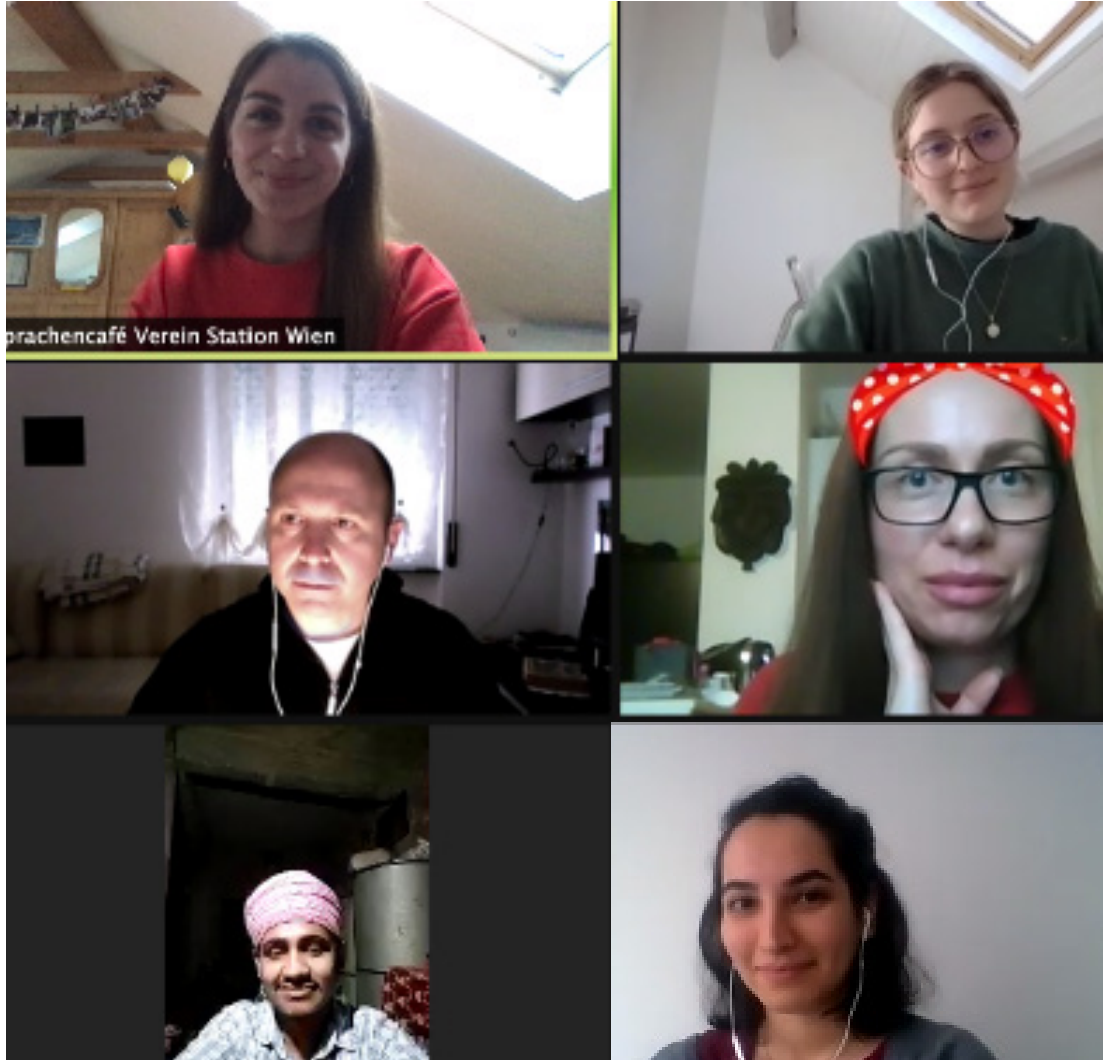
Traveling Through Languages

Vienna's *Sprachencafés* teach through social interaction, knowing full well that the key to learning any language is speaking it

by **Emma Hontebeyrie**



Whether in person or online, language cafés are a fun way to learn, with the fluent helping beginners in a casual atmosphere.



PHOTOS FROM LEFT: MICHAEL MICHELMAYER, STATION WIEN

Learning German is never easy – but it helps to know that you’re not alone. I only fully understood that when I entered the language café online room: Seven faces popped up on my screen – Algerian, Bulgarian, Italian, Indian, French, Greek and Austrian, all smiling, getting together virtually and ready to speak German. And, in fact, I was stunned by the smoothness and enthusiasm of the discussion on my screen, with the fluent patiently correcting the beginners, teaching useful phrases for everyday situations.

A *Sprachencafé* (language café) brings people with various origins and backgrounds together, all bound by an eagerness to interact in a certain language in a way that is easy and fun. Breaking the hierarchy of a conventional classroom, native speakers share their mother tongues as everyone enjoys learning together. “Everybody has an equal part in the conversation and is an equal partner,”

attests Anna Schwendinger, who coordinates the Station Wien *Sprachencafé*.

With 37% of its nearly 2 million people born abroad, Vienna is a linguistic melting pot, counting 604,599 non-Austrian citizens and about 400,000 who use English as their lingua franca. “It is an opportunity to learn something new and to get in touch with other cultures,” says Valentino De Rogatis, founder of Vienna Tandem *Sprachencafé* Language Exchange Facebook group.

ALL ROADS LEAD TO DEUTSCH

While apps like Duolingo or Babel have become increasingly popular, practice is still the most effective way to learn a language. One of the best ways is a “tandem,” a symbiotic tutoring exchange between two people, each teaching and learning from the other.

Three years ago, De Rogatis created a Facebook

LEARNING BY DOING

*Want to attend a language café
or start a tandem?*

Agenda Alsergrund

9., Gallleitgasse 8
0650 270 76 19
agendaalsergrund.at

Concordia Sozialprojekte

2., Hochstettergasse 6
(01) 212 81 49
concordia.or.at

Fremde werden Freunde

9., Garnisongasse 11
hallo@fremdewerdenfreunde.at
fremdewerdenfreunde.at

Hilfswerk Wien

7., Schottenfeldgasse 29
(01) 512 36 61
hilfswerk.at

Station Wien

5., Einsiedlerplatz 5/7-8
(01) 966 80 96
stationwien.org

VHS Deutsch im Park

This July in 5 parks
(01) 893 00 83
vhs.at/de/deutschimpark

Weltmuseum Wien

1., Heldenplatz
(01) 534 30-5052
weltmuseumwien.at

ONLINE

Sprachlernbörse Universität Wien

[sprachzentrum.univie.ac.at/
sprachlernboerse](http://sprachzentrum.univie.ac.at/sprachlernboerse)

Vienna Blabla Language Exchange

facebook.com/BlablaAustria

Vienna Tandem Sprachcafé Language Exchange

www.sprachcafe.wien.com
[facebook.com/groups/
tandemlanguageexchange.wien](https://facebook.com/groups/tandemlanguageexchange.wien)



A graduate of the program
Mama Lernt Deutsch proudly
accepts a goodie bag in 2014
at her commencement
ceremony.

group for tandems in Vienna that now counts over 13,000 members. “People can post their tandem adverts,” he explains, “but they are also looking for activity partners.” In the past, De Rogatis organized discussions in different languages, but “the events became bigger and bigger, to a point I couldn’t organize it anymore.” Now, several initiatives meet the need for interaction and education.

Station Wien is one of these. Located in the 5th district, the non-profit is particularly active, offering a *Sprachcafé* in collaboration with the Kontaktpool project, featuring open tables moderated by volunteers. Before COVID-19, they welcomed up to 120 per evening at their cozy premises on Einsiedlerplatz; moving online during the pandemic, they have continued to bring a wide range of people together to learn, particularly immigrants and refugees.

“The language café serves as a living room where everybody – regardless of first language, nationality or age – is welcome,” Schwendinger explains. Like other local initiatives, Station Wien has a little cafeteria that offers snacks, for which they accept donations. Everything else is free of charge with no registration required, making it exceedingly easy to join.

“Here, you don’t necessarily have to buy something, which is really important to us,” adds Katharina Kurzmann, project manager for the Kontaktpool.

NEW DYNAMICS

Virtual learning isn’t new, however. Even before the pandemic, many language cafés and tandems took place remotely, an important convenience for those with tight schedules. “People are looking more and more for online tandems,” De Rogatis attests. Such initiatives became even more vital over the last year, providing much-needed social interaction amid lockdowns and isolation. “What makes the online language café really appealing now is the need for people to meet in a group, to meet new people and to travel,” Schwendinger confirms. “More people want to get active as volunteers and engage in something meaningful.”

In addition, meeting online makes borders irrelevant, opening the gate to even more diversity. “Our Russian table is led by a woman who lives in Ukraine and the Italian table by someone from South Tyrol, which really enriches our language offer,” continues Schwendinger. While some miss the personal interaction at a place like

Station Wien, the online *Sprachencafé* now offers up to 15 languages every week, from German to Farsi. “That’s what makes it special,” one participant points out. “For me, it’s a way of traveling while staying in Vienna.”


In addition, Station Wien saw a shift in the gender balance. Previously predominantly male, the pandemic has inverted the numbers, so that two-thirds of participants are now women. “This might be because it’s easier to combine online meetings with care responsibilities,” Schwendinger guesses. Kurzmann agrees, seeing the shift online as a big plus for this underserved demographic. “Migrant and refugee women represent a target group generally excluded from German education courses due to child care responsibilities,” she said.

Conducted for the first time in 2007, *Mama Lernt Deutsch* tries to close that gap. The program offers free German courses up to the B1 level for underschooled migrant and refugee women while also offering child care during lessons. Since 2012, the program has been accredited with the Adult Education Initiative, which facilitates the acquisition of basic skills – a necessity in Vienna, where only 21% of women who have a third-country qualification and a child under 2 are profitably employed.

MORE NEEDED

Still, there is room for improvement – while remote cafés can be empowering, going online requires resources not available to all. “You cannot take it for granted that everybody has the technical knowledge and equipment to access remote learning,” insists Kurzmann.

Also, most organizations agree that more can be done, especially in a time where asylum applications are on the rise, increasing roughly 10% last year to 14,775. “Such projects are always beneficial for everyone living in Vienna,” Kurzmann emphasized, “and more would always be welcome.” Most initiatives receive support from the City of Vienna and the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF), but demand will always outpace supply in a multicultural metropolis like Vienna.

Before the pandemic, “our place was really crowded, showing the need for spaces where people can just exchange and learn from each other,” Kurzmann went on. Initiatives where locals and foreigners can exchange knowledge and languages are a must, and the price of inaction a luxury society can no longer afford. “As we must remember,” says De Rogatis, “integration is a two-way process.” 

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