

# Vienna, Austria

## Festival of Joy

By Tom Kirvan

### COMMEMORATING FREEDOM AND REMEMBRANCE

Each year in Vienna, the blossoms of spring give way to a deeply meaningful cultural event known as the Festival of Joy on May 8.

Unlike many seasonal festivals focused on entertainment alone, this annual gathering blends celebration with solemn remembrance, marking the end of World War II in Europe and the liberation from Nazi tyranny. It has become a defining spring event in Vienna's cultural calendar, drawing thousands to the historic Heldenplatz – otherwise known as “Heroes' Square” – in the heart of the city.

The Festival of Joy takes place every May 8, the anniversary of the unconditional surrender of the German Wehrmacht in 1945, which officially ended the war in Europe. The ceremony typically begins in the early evening, around 7:30 p.m., and runs for a couple of hours on Heldenplatz, a square steeped in historical significance.

At its core, the festival is a free, open-air event that combines music, speeches, and symbolic acts of remembrance. Highlights include:

- A major orchestral concert, most often performed by the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, featuring works that underscore the ideas of freedom, peace, and unity. In recent years that has included a much-celebrated performance of Beethoven's “Ode to Joy” – an anthem of European unity with deep historical resonance, originally composed in Vienna in the 1820s.
- Speeches by contemporary witnesses, historians, and public figures that reflect on the significance of May 8 and the lessons of history. In 2025, for example, Holocaust survivor and journalist Paul Lendvai addressed attendees.
- Educational activities in the weeks leading up to the event, including guided tours explaining the historical context of the date and the relevance of the venue. These tours are open to the public and especially geared toward young audiences.
- Live broadcasts and online streaming to allow audiences around the world to take part in the festival.

The festival is organized by the Mauthausen Committee Austria (MKÖ) in cooperation with partners such as the Jewish Community of Vienna and the Austrian Ministry for Culture and the City of Vienna.



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### HISTORY AND MEANING

The Festival of Joy began in 2013, born out of a desire to shift the narrative around May 8 in Austria. Prior to that, Heldenplatz, the symbolic square outside the Hofburg palace, was sometimes used for controversial and revisionist commemorations by extreme-right groups.

The inaugural Festival of Joy created a positive and unifying alternative: a public, joyful, and respectful commemoration of liberation and freedom that honors the struggle against totalitarianism, as well as the victims of Nazi persecution.

The event's name reflects both the "joy of liberation" from oppression and the solemn duty to remember those who suffered. Each year's festival is framed with a distinct theme, such as civil courage, law and justice under tyranny, or "Never Again," underscoring the ongoing relevance of historical memory in contemporary society.

Though relatively young as a festival, the Festival of Joy has grown steadily in public appeal and cultural significance. Early editions drew thousands, and in anniversary years, attendance and international attention have swelled.

The festival draws a broad audience: local residents of Vienna, tourists visiting the city, school groups, history enthusiasts, and families looking for a meaningful cultural experience. The combination of live music, public speeches, and accessible, open-air gatherings contributes to its appeal as both a civic and cultural event.

Its broadcast reach – nationally on ORF III and internationally via streaming – further amplifies its influence, enabling people around the world to witness Vienna's commemoration of peace and remembrance.

### ECONOMIC IMPACT

While the Festival of Joy is free to attend, it generates a notable economic impact for Vienna, particularly in the context of spring tourism:

- Increased tourism and hospitality revenue – May is already a vibrant travel month for Vienna, and the festival enhances that appeal. Visitors attending or planning their visit around the festival contribute to hotel bookings, dining, and cultural tourism in the city's center.
- Extended stays and secondary tourism – Guests arriving for the festival often explore Vienna's other May cultural offerings, such as the Vienna Spring Festival and other seasonal events, which results in higher overall spending in local shops, museums, and performance venues.
- Support for local vendors and services – Crowds gathering in and around Heldenplatz boost demand for food and drink services, pop-up cultural merchandise, and related hospitality services in Vienna's 1st District and surrounding neighborhoods.

Though more modest and focused on cultural tourism rather than large commercial expenditure, the event's effects are clear: increased foot traffic, media attention, and enhanced international profile for Vienna as a city of historical reflection and cultural vibrancy during the shoulder season of travel.

The Festival of Joy stands out among Vienna's rich spring calendar as an event that combines celebration with historical consciousness. It marks a profound moment of reflection on Europe's past while simultaneously inspiring hope for the future. By inviting locals and visitors alike to Heldenplatz each May 8, the festival ensures that the lessons of history, and the value of peace and freedom, remain alive and resonant.

Image credit: Hakuna.Mazaza. (2018 May 8). Vienna, people visiting the Fest der Freude on Heldenplatz in Vienna [Photograph]. Shutterstock. Retrieved April 29, 2026 from Shutterstock