

Jewish Vienna

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My Vienna

Robert Schindel

I My Vienna is one great blood-letting joke. There is no more comical city than Vienna, not even Tel Aviv. The comedy of this city climbs up a spiral staircase leading into the heart of the Viennese corpus right down to a murky prehistory, winding around a non-existent backbone in order to make its way out through the mouth in the form of a melodious burp, only to disappear immediately back into the compliance of the Viennese. Hence monstrosities accumulate and pile up in the form of tiny little jokes only to embed themselves in the inhabitants once and for all.

I have lived in this city on the Danube and on the Wien since I was four months old and I learnt to laugh from the word go.

The first gale of laughter shot across my bows held the story of the Jewish kid who was hidden from the Gestapo's clutches by resourceful nurses at the heart of National Socialist public welfare. There in the nursery the black-haired, not precisely nose-free, infant lay among the blonde angels and was simply Franzos, whose parents were forced into hard-labour and then died during a bombing raid—whereas his real parents were Jewish-Communists who were sent to Auschwitz. He lay there next to the little Viennese cherubs and, like them, was afraid of the chunks of iron that frequently fell from the sky. And where did he lie? Not just in any old NSV nursery in Vienna whence he, along with the others, was carried down to the air raid shelter

of a night-time, but in Leopoldstadt, in the heart of the pre-war Jewish city, in the centre of the Matzos Island, a place the Viennese henceforth christened “glass shard island”. Here, unnoticed by Hitler, the infant yelled his way to freedom.

Even in pre-history Leopoldstadt was the place the Jews settled. Back then the suburb was known as “Im Werd”. However, that ur-cosy Kaiser Leopold the First threw all sixteen thousand one hundred and sixty Jews out of the city and thereafter called the district Leopoldstadt in honour of himself, in order to make an example of the blood-letting joke. Like clockwork the Jews made their way back, astonishingly they were given permission, until they comprised sixty percent of the district. But by 1944/45 there was only me and a couple of dozen others who had not been discovered in their hiding places. I continue to live in Leopoldstadt today.

Forty-nine times the guest was thrown out of the inn through the door. The fiftieth time, however, he came in over the roof. That’s what Jaroslav Hašek’s *Schweijk* says. The second gale of laughter contains love for this city. Whether emerging out of the earth or down from the clouds, the ghosts return to Vienna in the form of their corporeal offspring.

Not so long ago the Minister of Culture of the time, Rudolf Scholten, invited Billy Wilder, who was on a brief visit to Vienna, to his flat. He also invited several other people who would be allowed to listen reverently to the nearly ninety-year old jokester’s anecdotes. I was aware that this was not the first time that Wilder did or had to do something like this because a kind of secretary threw a constant stream of kindling at him so that his anecdotes would not fizzle out. The old man found it completely exhausting, whereas we were all holding onto our bellies and getting stitch. Verily he chased us up and down the century and Scholten’s flat was reverberating under the shaking and giggling at whose heart, like in the eye of a laughter storm, no small level of sadness was palpable. Yet the secretary was mer-

ciless, and we would probably be still sitting there and laughing as we followed the long life of the ur-Wiener Wilder if the old gent had not suddenly turned to me to ask what was happening with the football team, Admira. By chance I'd ended up sitting next to him and had noticed him eyeing me up between anecdotes. Here is an intellectual Viennese Jew, Wilder thought, he must know something about football. And Billy Wilder was not one to make a mistake about these things. "Good God, Admira," I looked at him astonished. "Misers the lot of them. I'm an Austria fan." "All Jews were Austria fans" he said. "I was the only one who wasn't."—"Instead?"—"Well, Admira."—"What! Admira?" I looked at him astonished, "Why on earth did you do that?" In a flash we entered into a passionate discussion of football. Schall and Vogelt sat down at our table whilst the others began to recover from their laughter pains and divided up into little discussion groups. Wilder spoke with great warmth of the footballers, he recalled them all precisely, and I gathered my scant knowledge of those years from the depths of my being and threw footballers' names at him in the same way the secretary had thrown him kindling for his jokes. Finally, he recounted a story, exclusively for me, although I already knew it because Torberg had recounted it, but I didn't tell him that:

Before the war there was a Jewish football team, Hakoah. They played quite well, especially for Jews. And so it came to pass that the bloody Jews ended up tipping the scales. If they could only beat Admira, then Rapid would be champions. Rapid was, and still is, the team with the most supporters in the city, and at that time those supporters could stand the Jews even less than was the norm. Now, however, the Rapid supporters decided to venture into enemy territory—Jedlersee, to be exact, on the other side of the Danube—to yell at the local team Admira, in other words, to cheer for Hakoah. And what words slipped out of the mouths of the Rapid supporters and rose up the twisting staircase of history? "Here we go, here we go, hoppa—Mr Jew!" The

A Brief History of the Viennese Jews

Klaus Lohrmann

Anyone who walks through Vienna with their eyes open, particularly through Leopoldstadt or the city centre, will soon notice that Jewish life and Jewish culture is not simply past history but a vital part of the city today. Alongside the social and cultural facilities and events organised by the Jewish Community Vienna (Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien), this historical evidence plays an important role in inviting a conscious confrontation with the past, thus forcing the onlooker to respond. In fact, there is more to the history of the Jews of Vienna than a series of persecutions, but the tragedy of these events nevertheless plays a prominent role. This guide contains three parts: it recalls the various eras of Jewish life in Vienna, it interrogates the frequently cruel relationship between Christians and Jews, and finally, it highlights contemporary Jewish life in the city which will hopefully evolve in the future without violent interruption.

Beginnings.

The history of Viennese Jewry in the Middle Ages extends from the end of the 12th century until their banishment and the destruction of the community in 1420 and 1421. A number of figures important to the whole of Jewry lived in Vienna in the late 14th and early 15th centuries in particular. After a lingering start in the 13th century, the community grew rapidly and after 1360

became one of the most important Jewish centres in Europe, although it should be remembered that at this time the role of the Jews in France was minimal, and the Jews had been banished from England altogether.

The first Jew to settle in Vienna—around the year 1190—is thought to have been a man named Schlom (?–1196). He was mint master to Duke Leopold V (1157–1194) and it was his job to obtain silver to make coins. His services became superfluous, however, when England paid a huge ransom in silver for the release of King Richard the Lionheart (1157–1199).

Schlom owned property in Vienna: he built the first synagogue in the city in the Seitenstettengasse (mentioned in records in 1204) and had a vineyard close to Vienna. In 1196, he and fifteen members of his household were murdered by roaming crusaders.

The Emergence of the Community.

After Frederick II (1194–1250) and the Babenberg Duke Frederick the Quarrelsome (1211–1246) had settled their differences, the latter issued a Jewish charter (“Judenprivileg”) on 1st July 1244 affording protection to the Jews and threatening anyone who abused this with draconian punishment. The conditions for granting this privilege mainly covered mortgage and loan regulations and were obviously designed to stimulate lending. It is not clear, however, whether the charter was meant to encourage immigrants or whether it was aimed at Jews already living in Austria.

In any event, the major influx of Jews into Vienna did not start until the 1270s and 1280s, although there are records of Jews living in Krems and Wiener Neustadt in the 1250s and 1260s. At the same time, Itzchak bar Moshe (1180–1260), also known as Or Zarua and one of the most important rabbis of the 13th century, is thought to have lived in Vienna around 1260. The presence of such an eminent scholar would indicate that the community

was already of some importance. Isaak bar Mosche's most famous work, *Seed of Light* ("Or Sarua"), was a comprehensive ritual codex that dealt in detail with civil law and the development of rabbinical scholarship in Europe.

Synagogue on Judenplatz.

It is not easy to put an exact date on the origins of the synagogue on Judenplatz. It must have been built after the removal of the ducal court, initiated by Ottokar II Přemysl (1230–1278), from what is now Platz Am Hof to the new residence at Widmertor, the heart of the present-day Hofburg. By 1276, King Rudolf I (1218–1291) was already residing in the new premises; it is therefore fairly certain that the second Viennese synagogue was built in the 1270s.

The earliest mention of the "Schulhof der Juden," the area in front of the synagogue, is in 1294. This area—today the site of the memorial—was presumably taken from the land belonging to the ducal court.

Thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

By the time the Habsburgs came to power in Austria in 1282, the Jewish community in Vienna was already beginning to develop rapidly. Like its Christian counterpart it was an oligarchy, with just a few leading families exerting a decisive influence over religious, legal, economic, and social affairs. Until 1340 the key leader of the community was Lebmann, known as Marlevi Ha-Kohen (?–1314), and his descendants, who are thought to have originally come from Bohemia or Moravia. After this time, David Steuss (?–1388) and his extended family took over this function.

There was plenty of room for the community to grow. Contact with the duke of Austria was maintained by so-called "Juden-

meister”—people familiar with Jewish law, in some cases with rabbinical training, or were rabbis themselves who the duke would occasionally call upon for advice. The Judenmeister whose names are known came from a circle of leading families. Although there is no official mention of a council of Jewish elders like the ones in the cities of the Rhine or in Nuremberg, the three rabbis who in 1338 promised the citizens of Vienna a lower interest rate must have formed the heart of the Jewish council. The existence of other functionaries such as the “Zechmeister” (guild master), cantor, clerk of the court or bath superintendent, reveal a well-organised community.

The “Zechmeister” were the precursors of the Christian Brotherhoods or guilds and were called “Zechen der Juden” and had a wide range of social and ritual functions. In fact, the life of the Jews and Christians in the city were not dissimilar since many social and welfare tasks in the Christian community were also frequently carried out by different brotherhoods or guilds.

The Jewish community also had access to other facilities, including a cemetery outside Kärntner Tor, which had to be expanded at the time of the plague in the mid-14th century, a hospital with a plethora of functions from managing the poor fund and looking after the sick to accommodating travellers, several ritual bath houses including one for women on Judenplatz, and the Wunderburg mikvah on Tiefer Graben.

There were also bath houses that in a profane way served hygienic and social purposes. As early as the 13th century theologians had attempted to prevent Jews and Christians from bathing together as a means of restricting social contact between the two religions. These attempts were initially unsuccessful. It was not until 1360 that the Jewish community purchased a bath house outside Kärntner Tor, followed by a second one sometime later in present day Kleeblattgasse, on the edges of the Jewish quarter. Prior to this time the Jews had presumably used the public baths.



Inner City

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Jordan House

1., Judenplatz 2

Jordan House, the oldest building on the square, still retains its medieval façade. It is named after its first Christian owner, Georg Jordan (?–1517), who built the house in 1497 to replace an older building. He was also probably responsible for the relief showing the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan that can be seen on the façade. A closer study of this apparently innocuous medieval relief reveals a Latin inscription referring to the expulsion and burning of the Jews in 1420/21: “The flooding of the river Jordan cleansed bodies of pestilence and evil. Everything dissolves that is hidden and sinful. Thus did the flames of hate rage through the entire city in 1421 and punish the terrible crimes of the Hebrew dogs. Just as the world was cleansed by the Flood, so did the raging fire mete out punishment.”

Here the events of the first banishment from Vienna (the Gesera) are put in the context of religious salvation that interprets the expulsion and persecution of the Jews as a purification. The “terrible crimes” refer to the accusations levelled by the Catholic Church against the Jews for centuries. Apart from the assertion that they had killed Jesus, Jews were also accused of ritual murder, host desecration and of poisoning wells, all of which led to terrible reprisals and were used as a model to explain the Gesera of 1420 and 1421.

After long discussions about the responsibility of the Catholic Church for the persecution and annihilation of Jews, the Archdiocese of Vienna decided in 1998 to affix a plaque on the house at Judenplatz 6 admitting the Church’s complicity in the medieval persecution of the Jews and the Shoah.



The bronze statue of Lessing by Siegfried Charoux (1896–1967) looks out over Judenplatz.

Lessing Monument

I., Judenplatz

A statue by Siegfried Charoux of the poet Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) was erected on Judenplatz in 1935 and was destroyed by the Nazis in 1939. Charoux created a second monument to Lessing, which was unveiled on Morzinplatz following his death in 1968 and only moved back to its original site in 1981.

Lessing visited Vienna in 1775/76 during a journey to Leipzig, Berlin, and Dresden and had an audience with Emperor Joseph II. In his plays he portrays the spirit of the German Enlightenment and advocates that the Jews should be tolerated. One of his supporters and a friend was Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), the founder of the Haskala or Jewish Enlightenment, who is immortalised as the main protagonist in Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*. Although the work did not premiere in Vienna until 40 years after its original publication, here too Lessing can be said to have influenced the city's intellectual climate.

Jews in the Middle Ages

The first official record of Jews in Austria goes back to the Raffelstetten Tolls from the year 904. At the end of the twelfth century there is mention for the first time of a Jew living with his family in Vienna. His name was Schlom and he worked as mint master for Duke Leopold V. He was murdered in 1196 by knights on their way to the Crusades.

In order to settle anywhere in Europe Jews required the permission of the ruler, who would guarantee them protection on payment of a special levy. In 1238, Emperor Frederick II extended a modified version of the general laws applying to Jews to those living in Vienna. In 1244, the Babenbergian Frederick the Quarrelsome granted the Jews of Austria a new privilege, establishing the legal basis for the large-scale settlement of Jews near the Babenberg residence around today's Judenplatz. Unlike the 17th century ghetto, where the Jews were forced to live in a small area, the medieval Jewish quarter was populated on a voluntary basis.

Towards the end of the 13th century the Jewish quarter had a synagogue, kosher butcher, ritual bath house, and hospital. The existence of these essential facilities attracted further Jews to Vienna. The community very quickly evolved into one of the most important in central Europe and produced several scholars whose reputes spread well beyond Vienna. Among them was Rabbi Itzhak bar Moshe, also known as Or Sarua ("Seed of Light") after his most famous work, which even today is considered an important component of rabbinical literature.

Throughout Europe Jews were highly restricted in the professions they could exercise: the only work available to them was moneylending and commerce, along with the professions vital to community life such as rabbi, baker, shopkeeper, or doctor.

By the beginning of the fifteenth century the situation of the Jews had steadily worsened. Antisemitism and economic



In 1421 around 200 to 300 Jews were burnt alive on the Erdberger Gänseweide.
Contemporary woodcut.

interests resulted in the first Viennese Gesera (banishment) in 1420/21. A fire in the Jewish quarter and subsequent plundering considerably reduced the tax base of the Jewish community. The anti-Jewish mood came to a head with the campaign by Duke Albert V against the Hussites—the first dangerous opposition to the Catholic Church. The Jews were accused of collaborating with the enemy and threatened with forcible baptism. Members of the community who refused to be baptised barricaded themselves in the synagogue and committed suicide in autumn 1420. The surviving Jews without means were banished and the wealthier ones were publicly burnt alive in March 1421. The destruction of the Jewish quarter marked the end of Jewish life in Vienna for around one hundred and fifty years.

Judenplatz Museum

1., Judenplatz 8

The Judenplatz Museum is located in the so-called Misrachi House. Its opening coincided with the unveiling of the memorial by Rachel Whiteread in 2000. As an outpost of the Jewish Museum Vienna, it is dedicated principally to the history of medieval Jews in Austria.

At the same time as preparations were being made for the competition to design a memorial, in 1995 archaeological excavations began to uncover the remains of the medieval synagogue. The initial findings led to protracted discussions as to whether the remains of the synagogue were better suited as a memorial, since medieval anti-Judaism was a precursor to modern antisemitism and ultimately of the Final Solution.

A compromise was finally reached that enabled Rachel Whiteread's memorial to be erected on the historical site and the archaeological remains to be accessible to the public. The excavations can be seen in the basement of the Judenplatz Museum; the museum offers information about the excavations and the history of Viennese Jews in the Middle Ages. The museum breaks new museological ground: synagogues and the medieval Jewish quarter are reconstructed digitally, different aspects of medieval Jewish life are accessible via four interactive stations by means of the latest computer technology.

Finally, some of the remnants found during the excavations are also on show, together with a model of the synagogue and Jewish quarter. The core of the museum is formed by the remains of the synagogue, which was destroyed in 1421.

On the ground floor, visitors can also consult a database compiled by the Documentation Archive of Austrian Resistance containing the names of the 65,000 Austrian Jews who were victims of the Shoah and providing information about the historical background to the Holocaust. Exhibitions are changed regularly and are shown in other rooms on the same floor.

Monument to the Victims of the Holocaust

I., Judenplatz

The erection of a monument to the 65,000 Austrian victims of the Shoah was preceded by long drawn-out discussions. The catalyst was the fact that Alfred Hrdlička's (1928–2009) monument against war and fascism on Albertinaplatz, which depicted a Jew scrubbing the pavement, was seen by many as an eternal humiliation. In 1994, Simon Wiesenthal (1908–2005) suggested to Michael Häupl, mayor of Vienna, that a separate monument to the Jewish victims of the Shoah be erected. An international competition was held, and the jury selected a design by the British artist Rachel Whiteread. It consists of a reinforced concrete structure, the walls of which represent a library with the book spines facing inwards. On the plinth are the names of the locations where Austrian Jews were killed by the Nazis. Whiteread took the characterisation of the Jewish people as the “People of the Book” as the guiding theme for her work. The book signifies learning and the survival of the Jewish tradition despite the Diaspora and banishment. The motif also references the tradition of Yiskor books, or commemorative books, which record not only the lives of important figures but also the destruction of Jewish communities, and in this way act as memorials to the victims of persecution. The monument was unveiled on 25 October 2000 in the presence of Simon Wiesenthal and numerous politicians from the city of Vienna and was opened up to the public at the same time as the Judenplatz Museum.

Palais Arnstein

I., Hoher Markt 1

The Arnstein family was one of the most well-established Jewish families in Vienna and was mentioned in records as early as 1682. In 1795, Nathan Adam von Arnstein was ennobled for his

services to the state treasury. Despite his outstanding position in the court, he was still subject to the discriminatory regulations prohibiting Jews from purchasing real estate. An exception was made for this important financier, however, and he was able to purchase a small palais in an outlying district called Braunhirschen, which was entered as “Palais Arnstein” in the annals of what is now the 15th district. Today the only remaining trace is a street called Arnsteinstraße.

In 1796 the Arnsteins were only allowed to rent the palais on Hoher Markt, the site of which is occupied today by an unprepossessing apartment block built in the 1950s. Thanks to Nathan’s wife Fanny, the residence quickly developed into a centre for Viennese intellectual life. Her renowned salon broke through the barriers between the aristocracy, bourgeoisie, and tolerated Jews and permitted, at least in this confined circle, a certain degree of Jewish emancipation. Balls with as many as four hundred guests, literary evenings, and concerts made Fanny into the uncrowned queen of Viennese society. Even Emperor Joseph II, who counted her among his friends, was not averse to visiting her events personally. The salon reached its acme during the Vienna Congress when diplomats attending the Congress met there informally to exchange ideas. Even Prince Metternich, whose secret police monitored these meetings, attended her salon. In 1814, Fanny introduced a hitherto unknown custom from Berlin and erected Vienna’s first Christmas tree in her salon.

Henriette von Pereira-Arnstein (1780–1859) continued the tradition started by her mother. She was followed by other Jewish salonnières such as Josefine von Wertheimstein (1820–1894) and her sister Sophie von Todesco (1825–1895), who took over the leading role in Vienna’s literary and theatre circles in the second half of the 19th century.

Judengasse

It is not possible to work out quite when the Judengasse got its name. “Judengasse”, however, was the name of many sections of the main traffic artery of a Jewish quarter. After the Jews were driven out of Vienna in 1670 only individual families with a privilege from the emperor were allowed to settle down in a residence. Soon after the destruction of the ghetto, despite the small number of Jewish families settled here, various diverse projects re-emerged that allowed Vienna’s Jews to settle in a certain area.

In 1772, several Jews were forced to leave a house in the Kruogerstraße and to move into a new wing of the “Zum weißen Stern” on the Kienmarkt—the owner was Franz Anton von Sonnenfels (1735–1806), the brother of Josephs von Sonnenfels (1732–1817). It is probable that the name Judengasse goes back to the Jews who settled on the Kienmarkt.

From the second half of the 19th century until World War II, Judengasse was an extension to the so-called textile quarter, also known as the rag quarter. When the coercion to join a guild was lifted it became possible to enter the retail trade. One of the preferred branches of business for Jews was the textile trade that was centred around the Marc-Aurel-Straße and Salzgies.

In 1938 many businesses were “aryanised” and very few of the original owners returned after the Second World War. Today it is often only the names on the shop signs that are a reminder of their former Jewish owners.

A bargain basement in the Judengasse, 1920s.

