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# Jewish Vienna

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# My Vienna

Robert Schindel

## 1.

My Vienna is a bleeding joke, a wound that won't heal. No city is funnier than Vienna, not even Tel Aviv. This city's chuckle climbs up the spiral staircase found in Vienna's very core, which leads down to the dim and distant past, winding around a non-existent spine; up the staircase out of the trap into the day in the form of a melodious belch, to be immediately consumed again in the ear canals of the Viennese. Monstrosities pile up and accumulate in minute joke-particles, embedding themselves forever in the flesh of the inhabitants.

Since I was four months old, I have lived in this city on the Danube and the River Wien and I have learned this laughter from the very depths.

The first fit of laughter that shot my way carried the story of the little Jewish boy who the clever nurses hid from the clutches of the Gestapo in the midst of the National Socialist public weal. There lay the black-haired, not really button-nosed infant among the blonde angels in the nursery and was called simply Franzos, whose parents, forced into hard labor, had died in a bomb attack (while his real, Jewish, communist parents were taken to Auschwitz). There he lay, next to the little Viennese sweethearts and like them, feared the iron scraps that every so often rained from the sky. And where did he lie? Not just in any old NSV1 nursery in Vienna was he carried, like all the others, into the bomb shelters each night, but in Leopoldstadt. Here, in what had been the heart of the Jewish quarter before the war, in the center of the Matzo island that the Viennese now christened glass-shard island, the infant, unnoticed by Hitler, howled onwards to liberation.

Leopoldstadt had already been an area of Jewish settlement in the dim and distant past. Back then the suburb was called "Im Werd" (island). But the extremely easygoing Emperor Leopold I threw all sixteen hundred seventy Jews out of the city and named the area henceforth Leopoldstadt, in his honor; just to open up and keep the joke bleeding. The Jews proceeded to go precisely there, right back

where, astonishingly, they had been permitted to return, until they comprised seventy percent of the district. But in 1944/1945, it was just me and a few dozen other clandestine Jews that hadn't been discovered. I still live there today, in Leopoldstadt.

Forty-nine times the guest was thrown out the door of the pub; the fiftieth time he came back in through the ceiling. Thus describes Jaroslav Hašek's "Schwejk." The second fit of laughter carries the love of this city. From out of the earth or out of the clouds, ghosts returned to Vienna in the shape of their carnal offspring.

Not long ago, former Minister of the Arts Rudolf Scholten invited Billy Wilder, who was in Vienna for a short visit, to his apartment. He also invited a few people who were thus allowed to listen reverently to the anecdotes of the nearly ninety-year old jokester. I saw that this wasn't the first time that Wilder had done or had to do this kind of thing. A secretary of sorts tossed him endless kindling to keep the anecdotes going. The effort tired the old man considerably, while we, the company, held onto our bellies and the cramps in our sides. He truly toured up and down the century and Scholten's apartment shook under the fits of laughter, at the center of which was a definite sense of—no meager portion of—sadness, in the eye of the storm of laughter, as it were. But the secretary was merciless and we would probably still be sitting and laughing today following the long life of the "Urwiener"<sup>2</sup> Wilder if the old sir hadn't suddenly turned to me and asked how things were going for Admira, the soccer team. As chance would have it, I had been seated next to him and I noticed that he had been studying me from time to time between the jokes. That is an intellectual Viennese Jew, thought Wilder, he must know something about soccer. And Billy Wilder was not one to make a mistake about this type of thing. "What?!, Admira," I answered, "You Nebbish. I'm an Austria fan." "All the Jews were Austria fans," he said, "but not me." "Then what?" "You got it, Admira." "Admira?" I gasped, "How did you ever get that idea in your head?" Agreeing and disagreeing, the two of us dove into an intense discussion of soccer. Schall and Vogel<sup>3</sup> sat down at our table while the others, recovering from their fits of laughter, dispersed into small groups and conversed. Wilder spoke warmly of the soccer players, remembered them in great detail and I searched my memory for the bits of knowledge I had about those years, tossing the names of soccer players at him the way that the secretary had tossed him kindling for his jokes. In the

end, he passed a story on to me, exclusively, that I knew because Torberg had already told it, but I didn't let on:

Before the war there was the Jewish soccer team, Hakoah. They played quite well, especially for Jews. As it turned out, the damned Jews would be the ones to tip the scales. If they beat Admira, then Rapid would win the championship. Rapid was, and still is, the team with the most fans in the city, and these fans couldn't stand the Jews any more than anyone else could back then. But now the Rapid fans ventured out into enemy territory, to Jedlersee—to the other side of the Danube no less—to cheer against the local team, Admira, and thus to cheer for Hakoah. With what cheer did this joke creep up the spiral stairway of history and abduct the mouths of the Rapid fans? "Go, Go. Go get 'em—Herr Jew!" The Jews rewarded them for it, they beat Admira, Rapid won the championship, and Wilder was in tears. Then he went to Berlin and left for Hollywood before it was too late.

But the strange love of the exiled for those who have exiled them; is it rooted in this sense of home, in embracing the Viennese and Jewish jokes, although the one has laughter in the eye, and the other death?

In any case, I became and still am a fairly good soccer player. We played on the field in Prater, the Jesuitenwiese—the field would have to be called Jesuitenwiese, wouldn't it—and the words "Go get 'em, Herr Jew" accompanied me throughout my childhood.

## 2.

How does this person get off coloring our Vienna as so Jewish and at the same time representing it as so anti-Semitic?

Our Vienna was always a cozy city. And we always liked Herr Tennenbaum from the council flats. A contented, fastidious, fine man he was, and then he took off for America; let the sun beat down on his belly in Florida, or somewhere like that, while bombs were raining on our heads. After the war he came back, peeved because we bomb victims didn't play the humble servant as much as he wanted us too, and so he left again. What the hell were we supposed to do about it? You bastard, before the war everyone could live here as they wanted. You don't understand the prejudice against the Jews. We Viennese don't hate the Jews like that. It was never meant personally;

it was just customary, just like against Ziegelböhm,<sup>4</sup> against Krawodn,<sup>5</sup> that was all in the family. But Adolf spoiled all the fun of telling Jewish jokes. Since then, no one is allowed to say anything against certain circles or you are immediately branded a Fascist. What do you know anyway about the Viennese soul? It's only natural that you could never understand it.

We have always been apolitical, remember that! And before you take off and foul your own nest, do yourself a favor and look around at your compatriots and what they're doing to the Arabs. You've been an Austrian from birth? Hmm, yah, according to your passport, well nowadays anyone can become an Austrian in no time flat.

A Viennese like me? Don't make me laugh. Don't tell me... your ancestors come from Brünn? Really? Your ancestors are from Brünn? Well, then, know what? Let me invite you for a glass of wine. No offense meant. You know, well, I'd believe in a second that you're a Schlawiner.<sup>6</sup> But a true Wiener? Look at that, anything's possible...

### 3.

Very different characters flitted through my Viennese childhood. I grew up next to the park, the Prater, and, as I already mentioned, we played football there; which was not allowed. "Tschif, der Praterschas,"<sup>7</sup> we'd say when we could see the Prater guard cycling by in the distance. We'd pick up the ball and play handball because that was allowed. The Praterschas (da Brodaschas) guarded and sorted through every tuft of grass and was almost as feared as his brother in spirit, the Kinderverzahrer,<sup>8</sup> who, too, had an intimate relationship with tufts of grass, but also with dimly lit cellar stairways. He was the mythical figure of Viennese childhoods.

The adult world of the fifties emitted two alternating tones and thereby orchestrated our upbringing: whining and spitting in the hand. It was the music of the war and reconstruction generation. Just a minute ago they were shooting and now they were spitting into their hands and starting to rebuild; a minute ago they were shouting "Heil Hitler" and now they were complaining that they had been tricked by a demon seducer. This complaint about the sacrificed generation blended together with a "Go get 'em Austria." The tightly-wound, conservative Christian thirties wanted—in the mask of the

fifties—to do penance for what the beautifully gruesome forties had done.

What was unique about my Vienna was that the actors moved from the stage to the auditorium without making much of a fuss and then claimed to have always been sitting there in the audience. By doing so, they simply continued what had been a long established tradition: the Viennese are, by profession, observers. They have always sat in the front seats of the great world theater. From there, they gawked at the Thirty Years' War the same way as at the revolutions that were going on in faraway France, of which they officially knew nothing.

The Congress of Vienna blended directly into Biedermeier house music.

When I say the Viennese, naturally I don't mean the majority of the Viennese in the outer lying districts, who, like the lower classes, of course didn't have much choice in the matter and were ruined in these and those wars. I don't mean the nameless proletarian and semi-proletarian Viennese imprisoned in misery, who remain hidden until the present day by the bombastic Biedermeier screen. I mean the petite-bourgeoisie, along with the middle classes, the cleverly weepy spectator class that left an even stronger mark on this city than the battling workers and students of 1884 or even those of 1934.

That cliché would truly come to life—the cliché of the Wiener that the Schrammel boys created from the music of Strauss and Lanner.

Now, this Wiener—a mixture of block warden, low-life, and minstrel singer in the vineyard taverns—sat in the gallery and spit on the stage of our childhood. This spittle, spit alternately into his own hands and then into the face of his offspring, represented the new values that were the democratic Austria.

Vienna was moving along very democratically. No one missed the two hundred thousand Jews back then. Okay, so there were no more writers, artists, or scientists, and no readable newspapers anymore, but who needed them anyway? You were just natural, rooted in the earth, among your own people—average, but arrogant. Reconstruction of my city was a huge success under these conditions.

And nonetheless, my Vienna was still a Jewish Vienna although back then I did not at all want to be a Jew. That was the third fit of laughter, into which even I sometimes fell. In Vienna, one gets to know laughter from the very depths: and also death.

#### 4.

Death is much too serious an affair to grant the non-Viennese any spiritual competence in the matter.

“Death, that must be a Viennese man, just like love’s a French Madame. Who else, after all, leads you to heaven’s gate on time? Yes, only a Viennese could get that right” (Georg Kreisler).

The Viennese have a passion for theatre, especially when it is played out right in the midst of life. Here, every murder is, first and foremost, murderous theater, an event never to be forgotten. What, may I ask, is France with its Landru compared to our actors from Hugo Schenk to Adrienne Eckhardt (the meat grinder), Gufler, Engleder (the brick hammer), Bergmann, and back again. Bernhard’s Heldenplatz is discussed just as passionately as the murder of Ilona Faber at the Russian memorial. Forget politics; the event is what’s important. Where you’re from, where you’re going, what’s happening; a sensitive spectator does not have the patience for all that. Nothing develops for my Vienna; either it was already there or it never existed. With such a photographic memory, you rule over death.

Thus, in the fifties, Georg P. appeared with a pistol at the hospital where his wife was lying in bed, tore open the door, pushed the nurse aside and called, “Hedwig, pack up, we’re going to heaven.” She survived the attack; he sits by God in heaven.

And Wolfgang Ambros sings: “The Zentralfriedhof lives, with all of its dead.” It is possible to indulge beautifully under ancient trees in this huge gravestone park. Along the main street in Simmering are the first, second, third, and fourth gates; across the way are the gravestone shops, one after the other. One sells gravestones and used cars, or perhaps it is better to say used cars and gravestones. And if Vienna’s merry month, which is not in May, but November, hangs its mist over the righteous and unrighteous, then the millions of dead also feel it down into their haunches. The Wiener walks there, upright, under the barren branches, between the graves and the mist settles in his heart, and he feels the green gaze of death from out of the fog. “Yah, life is first a pleasure when you’re dead,” sings Arik Brauer, and that’s how it is for us, here at home.

Death is omnipresent in Vienna, it is the intoxicated father of Viennese laughter. Dying, however, the dramatic foreplay; that is a vineyard tavern, a wine bar and its music.

## 5.

You and your clichés! How should anything ever come of this city if even liberal writers stick to clichés. Or were you simply taken in by them? And what about red, socialist Vienna, you fool? Did you know that the first battle of resistance against fascism was fought in Vienna and the workers from Simmering were the most courageous? Forget the Zentralfriedhof. And the resistance to the Nazis by the Communists, Social Democrats, and Christians? Weren't they also Viennese? The Viennese who were against the Stalinists... the Viennese who were against the Americans... the Viennese for neutrality... against Neonazis. And the sixties generation, now they brought some fresh air into the city. Have you forgotten all that already?

Anyway, who even laughs anymore in Vienna? Budget cuts, corrupt politics, provincialism, who, may I ask, laughs? Not me, Herr Writer. The poor just keep getting poorer and the rich, richer; no wonder Haider has it so easy. He's the only one who laughs. And he's one of those Upper Austrians. They don't have any idea about Vienna. Are you even Viennese? You don't look it in the slightest.

Oh, I see. No, we have to have some respect. Okay, good, each to his or her own Vienna, please excuse me. But don't forget politics. The Viennese are, namely, not interested in politics. You say that you said that? I'm the one who's saying that! They execute politics. Back then? What do you mean "back then"? Always! All the time!

We need a new Vienna. Are you with us? Then simply forget everything! Let's begin! My Vienna and your Vienna could one day be our Vienna. No harm intended, comrade. By the way, can I invite you for a glass of wine?

## 6.

You tell a joke and the past comes back.

"In the council flats, where we lived, there was a Jew, a certain Tennenbaum. A nice guy otherwise, and they scribbled anti-Nazi slogans on the pavement, on the sidewalks. He had to wash it off, Herr Tennenbaum. No, not him alone. The other Jews, too. I brought

him there, so that he could scrub them off. The janitor watched and laughed. He always showed up for a good laugh.

After the war, he came back, Tennenbaum. So I meet up with him on the street and say, 'Good day, Herr Tennenbaum.' He doesn't look at me and so I say again, 'Good day, Herr Tennenbaum.' Again, he doesn't look at me. So I think: look at that, now he's mad." (Helmut Qualtinger: *Der Herr Karl*)

I like to tell of my Vienna, how it is formed in me, whenever I'm not there:

of the diseased chestnut trees, the lilacs, the Meierei<sup>10</sup> in the Prater, the cafés around which this city is built, of my Leopoldstadt, the solidarities and cliques, the battles for more justice and intrigues for a certain justice; one's own.

But the Viennese are the most evil people in the world and to quote Thomas Bernhard—the youngest saint of those who wanted to destroy him—the city itself is one single genius-destroying machine.

That's why, even under narcosis, Vienna is more dangerous than historical Chicago. Bloodless, with a slight hangover, you push yourself into the pit, but not without first taking an aspirin. You laugh and are emptied. You drink and die. You sing, and the people stand still. You tell a joke and the past comes back.