

ASPECTS OF VIENNA

by Samuel L. Blumenfeld

The first disappointment one encounters in Vienna is that its main street does not run along the banks of the blue Danube. As a matter of fact you can see the most important things in Vienna without ever seeing the Danube. Besides one must pass through the Russian sector to get there and so it becomes a matter of little importance whether one sees the river or not. Another disappointment is that Vienna is not exactly what The Third Man would have you believe. Every street is not dark and lonely, nor filled with intrigue. It is not surprising that Vienna on the surface, at least, seems to be ^a rather normal city, where mothers bundle up their children when it is cold and where an ice show will attract a tremendous horde of teenagers. But what is important for the visitor to Vienna is that this is an occupied city on the other side of the iron curtain. After having read so much about the famous iron curtain one would imagine that the sun no longer shines behind it. However, the Viennese believe that what they see is daylight on their western island deep in the red sea. As a matter of fact one seldom sees traces of the occupation other than the High Command buildings and their flags, the variety of information or propaganda centers, and

the occasional soldiers--French never, Americans and British almost never, Russians hardly ever.

The occupation is at present in its "Leseraum" stage--each power having its own information center and reading room piled high with books and magazines. The Viennese take great pleasure in them, and the rooms are always filled until closing time. Each center seems to have its own special clientele and, of course, reading matter. The French room attracts many women who come supplied with sheets of tracing paper to copy out the fashions from the thick Parisian magazines. In the Russian room you find people comfortably installed for the entire afternoon, drifting through typical large-format Soviet magazines filled with retouched pictures of the great white father and his smiling workers. The British room attracts older gentlemen and serious students because of its comfort and gentility, and the American room, piled high with everything from the Minneapolis Times-Herald to Esquire is filled with loafers, briefcased gentlemen and hausfrauen. One suspects the American room to be the most successful of all because of its good location (Kärntnerstrasse and the Ring) and enormous variety of reading matter. The Russian room is a distance off the main thoroughfare, up a flight of stairs, and therefore attracts the small group who ~~wh~~ knows where to find it. Whether these reading rooms accomplish much in the way of propagandizing and winning souls, one cannot say. But they are comfortable, full of interesting things to look at, and warm places to relax and loaf educationally.

Vienna otherwise seems occupied with tidying itself up, rebuilding its bombed buildings and going about in its old relaxed way. The Viennese are a rather harmless looking species and one is easily tempted to imagine them as having been the victims rather than partner-instigators of the

of the last war--but that's the way it seems on the surface.

For the westerner Vienna is of particular interest because it is a city in which both sides of the story--or perhaps three sides of the story are being told--the German side, the Russian side, and the Western side. Again there is much disappointment. There is no German side to speak of. They prefer to have nothing to do with the past ten years, or as in the film Herrliche Zeiten (Heroic Times), hold their leaders responsible for most everything. The latter film was more or less a summing up of the first half of the twentieth century, a documentary as seen from the point of view of Berlin. Conveniently enough for our comparison, the French have done the same thing in a very candid film entitled Le Siècle a 50 ans. This film, contrary to the German one, makes no attempt to spare the truth, and particularly that of 1940, so that the average Frenchman is made literally to squirm in his seat. The German version, however, spends most of its yardage dwelling on the good old days, then gets itself into the first World War by sheer inertia or osmosis, loses it because of its leaders (the emphasis is always on the leaders) and portrays events leading up to the Second World War principally by following the path of Hitler's territorial annexations. At each annexation the commentator asks the same question: "Was sagt ausland?" and the next scene becomes a string of Florida bathing beauties, or something else to that effect, implying that Ausland must have given some kind of tacit approval or was never concerned in the first place. All of us auslanders, however, who remember the headlines of those years equally remember the noise that followed each one. However, continuing through this Berlin focus one skips from 1939 to 1945 (with no mention of anti-semitism at all--as if it never existed) and explodes into a silent view of the ruined Reichstag and a mild plea for a United States of Europe.

So the past fifty years are made to seem least offensive to sensitive Germans (who had most to do with the offense), and the blame, if any, is placed on the leaders who never seem to keep their promises.

This film, although highly edited as history, was nevertheless showing to packed houses sold out days in advance, indicating somewhat how much these people want to know some kind of truth. They ^{are trying to find} ~~still do not under-~~ ^{stand} ~~stand~~ what they did that could have brought them to such complete ruin.

Several days later I went to see the Russian side at the Soviet Information cinema in a showing of The Fall of Berlin which I expected to be a clear, objective documentary about the fall of Berlin. That item (principally viewed by a very low class of Viennese) turned out to be a technicolored, all-inclusive propaganda epic in which every trick was used. Stalin turns out to be the great father god--not Christ, but the fatherly one before Christ--dressed epic and span in the whitest of uniforms with the calmest and wisest of looks. He is shown either pattering in his garden or carefully engineering the taking of Berlin (sitting alone at his big table in the Kremlin, with map and magnifying glass, humming the Volga Boatman--as incredible as that may seem). The other allies spend most of their time ^{prolonging} ~~holding up~~ the war by refusing to open a second front and threatening to make a deal with Hitler. The latter, by the way, is shown marrying Eva Braun in his bunker at the eleventh hour, to the music of Mendelsohn's Wedding March--a peculiar Russian slip. But they were so concerned throughout with Hitler's being Russia's enemy, it never occurred to them he might also be the enemy of many others.

So, one emerged out of that dark theatre with the notion that Russia had won the war singlehanded in spite of the allies' sabotaging, and only because the great white father himself was there to direct the works.

The appeal of the film is geared to its lowest common denominator, and judging from the applause and constant acclaim from the audience, it was highly successful. These, by the way, are the very same people who once cheered Hitler (they booed him this time). ~~They always~~ the ~~most cheering since~~ ^{who} They have the least to lose, *always do the most cheering.*

Nevertheless, while Vienna is at the crossroads of power propaganda, it also has its own story to tell. Its cathedral, Stephandom, is almost completely repaired after an endless job of chipping, and the Opera house is also being restored to its full glory. In the meanwhile the Opera holds its performances in a substitute theatre and puts on what might be considered by many as the best opera in Europe, however, with heavy dramatic accents. The opera collects Vienna's bourgeoisie and one sees here an important group of people, well dressed in the only way that appeals to them, as middleclass burgers. The Vienna Philharmonic is still a superb orchestra, led by Von Kempen and Von Karajan, the latter very dapper in his fur collared coat, collecting the cream of Viennese cultured folk who applaud with amazing vitality. They are the important group who belong to the West in spirit and tradition, and have the greatest contempt for the Russians. They include the older surviving bourgeoisie and the younger, clean students. Music is still the great moving force in Vienna, with its great Academy and constant reminders that ^{still} this is the city of Beethoven. Schubert and Haydn. Music is Vienna's only security, and judging from any of its concerts one would conclude that the city's most precious asset is its Wiener Symfoniker, of which the Viennese are fanatic in their love.

Johann Strauss is performed at the Volksoper with oppressive Hollywood extravagance which proves to have a dulling effect on the music. But the Viennese spare nothing when it comes to the old Waltz King

and they would rather let the streets go unpaved than not do material justice to Strauss.

Actually what Vienna now lacks is the great body of internationally famous names it once had. Freud, Reinhardt, Bruno Walter, Elizabeth Bergner, Kreisler and Tauber are all gone. Many of them were Jews, most of them left long ago. A very active element in Viennese cultural life were its Jews. They are no longer there.

But while Vienna is no longer a city of world shaking cultural influences, it is still the capital of Austria and produces the best in that small country. Von Karajan and Friedrich Gulda are two who are attaining worldwide reputations. The theatre performs the old classics and translations. Lessing, Schiller, Goethe, Verneuil, Shaw, Shakespeare are done regularly. Concerts specialize in mammoth works such as Mozart's Grosse Messe in B mol, the Missa Solemnis, or the Bruckner Mass. The main concert hall is a spacious, square room, highly ornate, with many busy cariatids and a host of angels in wild flight on the ceiling.

Thoughts about the future of Vienna leave one with strong doubts. Geographically it is still the great meeting place of Western and Eastern Europe. No doubt ^{it} that is now a disadvantage with Europe split down its center seam. But Vienna is so close to Budapest that goulash is also a Viennese specialty. The phone book has many eastern European names, and the city is a traffic center for the movement of iron curtain refugees, escapees and wanderers. There are also permanent Hungarian and Rumanian exhibits in the city. Culturally, however, its people are divided, the upper strata looking westward and the lower strata looking where the stronger magnet bids them. In the meantime one sees the city being slowly rebuilt, but not with

the fervor one finds in other countries. The Russian sector has been hardly more than swept. There is not the spirit the Berliners show in their divided city, or that kind of artificial optimism for the sake of optimism. Vienna is a city with many monuments of a lost monarchy-- a city once protected by a fatherly, whiskered emperor. Today there is no such protection for Vienna. The city's future, like the rest of Europe's, but only more so, hangs in the precarious limbo of world politics.

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