

## Presentation to The Vienna Review Salon, March 2013

### “The Stones of Vienna”: *Forgotten Armenian Treasures & Monstrous Monuments*

Contrary to popular opinion, most travel writers spend their winters in their rooms, tapping away on their keyboards, and not on paradise islands dangling their feet in the surf! So it’s a pleasure to be released for an evening courtesy of the good people here at *The Vienna Review*.

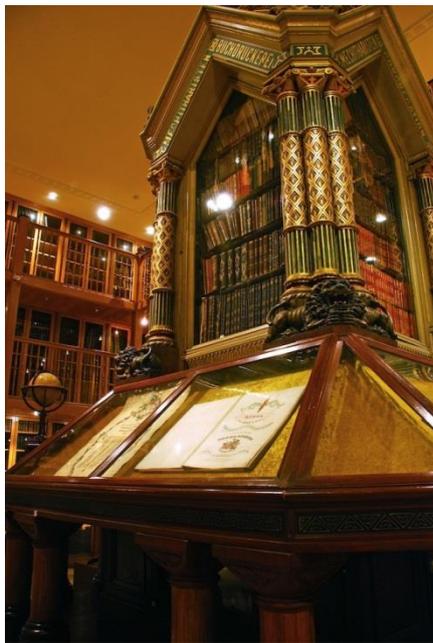
The concept behind my monthly half-page series for the paper – called *The Stones of Vienna* – is much the same as that behind my travel guide series, the “*Only In*” Guides. Namely, to encourage readers to stray off the beaten track when exploring the city, and in doing so to escape the crowds, gain a real sense of history, and ultimately take away a more indelible memory. Along the way, especially if they get lost – and I don’t spoon fed them with the directions! – they might meet a local or two, and the resulting interaction is surely what travel (as opposed to tourism) is all about. The only real difference is that for *The Vienna Review* I focus very much on the built fabric of the city.

So, in a nutshell, the purpose of my column is two-fold:

- 1) The excitement of enlightenment, and
- 2) The comfort of strangers

Both come nicely into play in my latest two articles:

#### *Forgotten Armenian Treasures (February 2013)*



In the February issue, I finally unravelled the mystery of what lies behind the great wooden doors on Mechitaristengasse, just behind the Volkstheater. I’ve often wondered about the name, too. Anyway, just before Christmas last I noticed the doors open and upon entering I was introduced to one Father Vahan, a charming Armenian priest. He explained that the Mechitarists are an Armenian order who found refuge in Vienna under the Habsburgs after being ousted from Trieste by Napoleon.

A fascinating tour of this little-known monastery followed, which I’ve described in my article, although space didn’t permit my describing an unexpected highlight. In one darkened room Father Vahan revealed to me nothing less than an ancient Egyptian mummy in its sarcophagus! Apparently, a diplomat from Cairo left it as a calling card in the 1920s. With these sorts of stories in mind perhaps you can understand why I call my

book *Only in Vienna!*

We finished the tour at the very top of the building, in the library, listening to some effecting Armenian music and scrutinising ancient manuscripts that smelled of garlic (the old monks used garlic in their ink to keep the moths away!). Father Vahan then offered me a farewell drink: a glass of the local brew the monks make in the cellar. When I was asked to say a few words tonight I was told “no visual aids necessary” but I couldn’t resist bringing the bottle. This is Mekhitarine, a secret recipe from 300 years ago containing 42 herbs and 11 exotic fruits. Anyone feeling brave is very welcome to try it!

## Monstrous Monuments (March 2013)



But before you do I'd better say a few words about this month's piece for "Stones of Vienna". It concerns the Flak, or anti-aircraft, towers, that bear silent witness to the role of Vienna in the Second World War.

The towers are unmissable: two in the Augarten, two on Mariahilferstrasse, and another two in the Arenbergpark. I visited them all for the piece, and found the experience a lot less cosy than the Armenian Monastery. These concrete colossi – I'm sure you've all seen them – were built using forced labourers at a time when the tide of war was turning against Nazi Germany. Similar towers were built in Berlin and Hamburg, all three cities considered to be of special strategic importance.

The idea behind them was to create an impenetrable triangle around the city centre, with each pair of towers (an attack tower commanded from a smaller communications tower)

controlling the skies above. Ultimately they failed, as the liberation of Vienna arrived on the ground, but the towers did serve a more useful function as air raid shelters and hospitals in the meantime. What few today realise, and it's a chilling thought, is that had the war been a success for Germany it was planned to clad the towers in black marble, and inscribe on them the names of those troops who fell in the service of the Führer.

My interaction with strangers on this piece came from an unlikely quarter. At the top of the attack tower in the Augarten is a great crack down one side. I'd long believed that it resulted from Red Army efforts to demolish the tower, as they did in Hamburg and Berlin. But no! I received an email from a reader who told a very different story, and I'd like to share it with you:

*"Dear Mr. Smith*

*My mother said that she was responsible for the explosion in the tower in the Augarten in 1945. She and some of her friends detonated abandoned ammunition stored in the tower, and she was blown down the stairs. She had to be hidden from the Soviets who were occupying this section of the city. She had to hide for some time until she recovered because her mother feared reprisals, not just from the Russians, but also the local Viennese, as the Soviets were threatening locals into giving up saboteurs. My mother was five or six at the time. It was the story she told me when we visited the tower when I was a young child. She's no longer alive, but I thought you might be interested."*

Interested I certainly was, and the letter goes to show that sometimes urban legends ultimately win out over official histories.

That wraps it up for me this evening. Thanks for listening, thanks for reading, and thanks especially to *The Vienna Review* for letting me do the writing. It's very much appreciated and it enables me to explore further the fascinating fabric of Vienna, my adopted home.