

THE GRÄTZL



Diners at Café der Provinz on Maria-Treu-Gasse enjoy peaceful Josefstadt Photo: Lauren Brassaw

Grätzl /'grɛ:tsl/ noun (Viennese dialect) a neighbourhood in Vienna contained by subjective boundaries and a coherent identity

Romancing the Eighth

by Ana Tajder

Josefstadt is where old Vienna is hiding. While the 1st District is filling up with tourism, shopping, dining and expensive apartments only diplomats and Eastern European millionaires can afford, old Vienna is retreating into its 8th District. Located between the City Hall, Parliament, the University and Burgtheater on the inner side and the 16th district with its headscarves and kebab shops and on the outer, Vienna's smallest but mostly dense populated district has become the "Burg" of the Viennese *Bürgertum* (bourgeoisie).

There are gentleman in Loden coats and feathered hats walking their dachshunds, spacious old cafés, blocks of "Kreisler" (tiny local stores) and courtyard *Heuriger* (traditional wine-taverns) – all wedged in and around the tall, elegant and perfectly renovated apartment buildings in the early 19th century Wilhelminen style and a baroque surprise here and there.

You will see elderly Viennese ladies in their fur coats, coiffed hair and black patent shoes mingling in front of "Theater an der Josefstadt", the

oldest theater in Vienna, on Josefstädterstraße, district's main street, just across from the apartment of Austrian president Heinz Fischer. He feels so at home in the Josefstadt that he refused to move to the presidential residence in Hohe Warte. But the only sign of the august presence is the photo of him and his wife, signed with a "thank you", hanging over the meat counter in the supermarket next door. The president is low key, just like his district.

You will have to read between the lines here, absorb the atmosphere, imagine a fireplace burning in an *Altbauwohnung* (old apartment) and try to hear Hans Moser's singing voice in the hum of the district. But start with the following:

On late afternoons, sit on a bench in Schönborn Park, just behind the baroque Palais Schönborn, where the ethnographical museum is located, and watch low sunlight creating shadows among old Viennese houses. Schönborn is a lovely little baroque palace filled to the brim with old antiques (they have a whole Tyrolean wooden living room), old skis and other things that have witnessed centuries of life in this coun-

try. The museum feels forgotten, as if you have just discovered it and hesitate to tell anyone else, lest it be spoiled. Visit on snowy afternoons, when it is dark and cold outside, and you can look out of the window into that beautiful park covered in snow.

Walk up Laudongasse: Between Florianigasse and Lederergasse you will find Melkerhof, a huge apartment complex from the *Gründerzeit* (19th century). From the outside, this is a typical old Viennese building, perfectly renovated with its original yellow color. Its big green wooden doors are normally locked. But if you're lucky and someone is just entering or forgot to lock the doors, you will enter a courtyard of enchantment. The buzz of the city will disappear in its three inner yards protected by facades hanging with ivy. Old pebbles on the ground soften your step. Find the yard closer to Laudongasse with its beautiful roses, benches, a fountain and a wall plaque describing the history of the Melkerhof.

In the evenings, walk down Lenaugasse, quiet and empty and filled with warm light from gas lanterns in the Viennese version of a Parisian twilight. Then walk further up the Florianigasse and peek into its many restaurants. Here you will hear Vienna breathing in its most intimate and fullest senses.

Gastronomically, Josefstadt will offer you excellent traditional treats and novelties. Café Hummel and Café Eiles are two of the finest of Vienna's legendary coffee houses. For a younger version, not by age but by style and menu, visit Café Florianihof on Florianigasse. Through its large windows you will see the pretty Amtshaus, where many Viennese couples, and all foreign couples, are married before the Standesbeamter – who among all in the Viennese civil service seems to truly love his job. The same cannot be said for the organist who manages to play only one of his three tunes while sleeping off the night before.

The Josefstadt has plenty of original Viennese food to offer: Schnattl, Fromme Helene, Blauensteiner, Piaristenkeller, although watch out, this last tends to be touristy. On warm evening enjoy a glass of wine or dinner in front of Piaristenkirche "Maria Treu", a beautiful baroque church – either pizza from Sessante, Austrian food from Maria Treu Café or from Piaristenkeller. This is a rare atmosphere for Vienna – a true Italian piazza.

There are two secret gardens in Josefstadt. One is the "Weinstube" in Piaristengasse, which has managed to stay undiscovered by being marked only with a green lantern on its façade. On summer afternoons, the tiny but extremely romantic garden (including a wooden pavilion) will be filled with local artists and intellectuals. The menu is simple, the best of home cooking.

For more choice, go to "Zum narrischen Kastanienbaum" in Strozsigasse – located below a "Burschenschaftler-Bude", a fraternity house. So on a Friday evening, you can have a romantic date under the huge chestnut tree, with the soundtrack of jolly fraternity members singing and slamming their mugs against the table. Memorable and bizarre.

Because of its closeness to the university, fraternities are Josefstadt's secret ingredient. Their headquarters are not easy to identify, except for "Gothia" in Schlößelgasse, which has a German flag hanging from its façade, or "Teutonia" in Strozsigasse, which has been attacked with paint balls. But if you live in Josefstadt, you will meet "brothers" in their uniforms, most of them young and confused, going to their meetings. A great touch to the authentic atmosphere.

As a contrast, and a balance, there are many true bohemians living in Josefstadt. The district has its share of cabarets, jazz clubs, and tiny theaters, most important of which is the English Theater on Josefgasse. Students mingling around the university have inherited apartments in the Josefstadt and now share with other students. This wave of young locals has brought a surprise to the old establishment: as "Altbürger-tumlich" as it is, Josefstadt became the second district that voted for a Green district government. But apart for a few bicycle routes, not much has changed.

And it shouldn't. ◇

Grätzl Guide

Restaurant Schnattl
8., Langegasse 40, (01) 405 3400
Mon-Fri 18:00-24:00

Weinstube Josefstadt
8., Piaristengasse 27, (01) 406 4628
Mon-Fri 18:00-23:00

Zum narrischen Kastanienbaum
8., Strozsigasse 36, (01) 4050388
Mon-Fri 11:00-24:00
Sat & Sun 16:00-24:00
www.kastanienbaum.net

Café Florianihof
8., Florianigasse 45, (01) 402 48 42
Mon-Fri 8:00-24:00
Sat & Sun 10:00-20:00
www.florianihof.at

Österreichisches Museum für Volkskunde
8., Laudongasse 15-19, (01) 4068 9050
Tue-Sun 10:00-17:00
www.volkskundemuseum.at

by Duncan J. D. Smith

Concealed inside a courtyard behind the Stephansdom there stands a venerable Plane tree, where within living memory a sharp piece of iron could still be seen, piercing the bark from within. That, swore locals, was the sword of a medieval knight! Well, perhaps...

Into Another World

The Fährnichshof is one of Vienna's most charming courtyards. Best entered at Blutgasse 9, it's like chancing upon another world. The visitor is immediately confronted by a dizzying well of light flooding the balconies that layer the four-storey building. Such balconies are known as *Paulatschen* (from the Czech word Pavlač meaning 'open gallery'), used both to provide access and a place to hang out the washing.

A narrow passage leads to the main Fährnichshof, the Ensigns' Court, where local residents once assembled around their flag (*Fahne*) in times of unrest or danger. The present courtyard dates from the sixteenth century and was once part of a nearby nunnery of St. Nikolaus, for which the street Nikolaigasse is named.

Here in one corner stands the Plane tree, casting its dappled shade over the courtyard. Several hundred years old, it was originally protected from hungry horses by an iron fence. As the tree grew thicker, the fence broke and fragments of it became incorporated into the trunk. It's a prosaic explanation when compared with the knight's sword, but like all good urban myths there is also some truth behind the tale.

Protecting Pilgrims

On the opposite side of Blutgasse stands the sprawling twelfth century Deutschordenshaus, named for the Roman Catholic Order of Teutonic Knights. Like their contemporaries the

STONES OF VIENNA

Tracing Vienna's sordid past through the hidden Inner City

The Knights of Blood Alley

Knights Templar and the Knights Hospitaller, they were sworn to protect pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land, after the Crusaders had captured Jerusalem in 1099. Over the next century the Order also set about subjugating the pagan Baltic tribes of East Prussia, opening the area to German colonisation.

The Order acquired the Deutschordenshaus around 1200, with the Fährnichshof perhaps providing a secure refuge. It is tempting to think that the narrow passageway, which could have easily been defended, might be a remnant of the original structure. Certainly the lingering memory of the knights would be enough to give rise to the legend of the sword, plunged deep into the heart of the old Plane tree.

Bloody Histories

The name Blutgasse – Blood Alley – is another mystery. Between 1369 and 1411 this thoroughfare is documented as Khotgasse, or Mud Alley, referring to its unpaved condition. Not until 1542 does its bloody appellation appear for the first time, and three explanations have been put forward to explain it.

Some have suggested a link between Blut and the Old High German Bluoet, meaning a sacrificial offering, raising the tantalising possibility that an ancient pagan shrine was once

located here. Without excavating, however, it is impossible to be sure.

A second explanation dates to the reign of Rudolf von Habsburg (1278-1282), when two noblemen ambushed and beheaded some Viennese burghers here because they had voiced support for Rudolf's power rival, Ottokar II of Bohemia. The bloodied corpses were left at the scene, with the severed heads balanced on top of them. Rudolf himself is said to have passed by afterwards but let the perpetrators off lightly.

The third explanation concerns the abolition of the knightly orders in 1312. Serving monarchs as well as pilgrims, the knights



The courtyard of Fährnichshof as seen from Blutgasse 9 Photo: Duncan Smith

amassed enormous wealth. However Philip IV of France built up such a debt that he chose to suppress the orders rather than settle the bill. Accordingly Philip accused them of heresy, and obliged Pope Clement V into agreeing with him. Many knights perished on the street outside the Fährnichshof, thus giving rise to the name Blutgasse.

The Knights Today

Whatever the truth behind Blutgasse, the Teutonic Knights clung on to their power, and rumours of their hidden treasure, secret rituals, and continuing influence have fascinated ever since. They survived military defeat at the Battle of Tannenberg in 1410 and further suppression under both Napoleon and Hitler.

The Order today is a pastoral and charitable organisation, caring for those in need, especially in the former Communist countries and offering reasonably priced accommodation to travellers. But memories of the old days still linger, with the walls of the Order's Gothic chapel on Singerstrasse ablaze with coats of arms, and windows sporting the black cross that once adorned the knights' white cloaks. Best of all is the Order's treasury to the rear of the church, established by Grand Master Albert of Prussia in 1525. Pride of place goes to an incredible golden salt cellar festooned with fossilised sharks' teeth, which were believed to exude moisture should poisoned food find its way to the Grand Master's table, a potent reminder of just how powerful the knights of Blood Alley once were. ◇

The Treasury of the Teutonic Knights at Singerstrasse 7 is open Tue, Thu & Sat 10-12am, and Wed & Fri 3-5pm
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