

From Austria to the Arctic

3rd District (Liesing), Fridtjof-Nansen-Park

Austria and the Arctic: other than beginning with the same letter there would seem little else to connect these two places. Yet at two separate locations in the Austrian capital can be found monuments to two highly individual characters who made their names in the frozen wastes of the Arctic Circle.

Our first polar traveller is the Bohemian artist Julius von Payer (1841-1915) whose simply inscribed, monumental headstone can be found close to those of the great composers in Simmering's Central Cemetery (Zentralfriedhof).

In 1872 he set sail with the grandly-named Austro-Hungarian North Pole Expedition aboard a three-masted schooner called the Admiral Tegethoff. The ship was under the command of Captain Karl Weyprecht and was named after the much-celebrated Austrian admiral who had beaten the Italians at the Battle of Lissa (Tegethoff's monument still stands at the end of Praterstrasse in the 2nd district of Leopoldstadt).

The expedition's stated aim was to discover a navigable North East passage through Arctic waters north of Russia and to eventually reach the Pacific. It was an ambitious plan but one whose goal was ultimately unattainable. The ship became locked in ice north of Novaya Zemlya and would never see free water again.

Drifting slowly northwards with the pack the crew happened upon a group of islands in the Barents Sea that they named Kaiser-Franz-Josefs Land after Kaiser Franz-Josef I of Austria (1848-1916).

It was not until two years later that the captain finally gave orders to abandon ship and that they began the long and arduous journey back to civilisation. Making use of the lifeboats from the Tegethoff the exhausted crew eventually made landfall on the Russian coast. It was during this journey that artist von Payer gained inspiration for numerous oil paintings completed on his return to Austria, notably the haunting *Nie Zurück* (No Return) that now hangs along with other memorabilia from the journey in Vienna's Museum of Military History (Heeresgeschichtliches Museum). Other artefacts from what is also sometimes referred to as the Weyprecht-Payer Expedition can be found at the top of the stairs in Vienna's Natural History Museum (Naturhistorisches Museum).



Our second hero of the polar seas famously said, "*Man wants to know, and when he ceases to do so he is no longer a man*". He is the Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930) whose bronze head, by Viennese sculptor Professor Hubert Wilfan, can be found in the little-known Fridtjof-Nansen-Park far out in the 23rd district of Liesing.



Remembered by many for his daring Arctic adventures it was actually his immense body of humanitarian work that brought Nansen the Nobel Peace Prize.

He was born near Oslo and soon followed his mother's passion for the great outdoors by becoming an expert skier. Aged only eighteen he broke the world record for one-mile skiing. At school the young Nansen excelled in the sciences as well as drawing and at university he majored in zoology. However, it was a trip on an Arctic-bound sealing vessel (The Viking) in 1882 that triggered not only a taste for adventure but also an interest in the world of polar sea and ice.

Aged only twenty Nansen spent six years as zoological curator at Bergen Museum during which time he hatched an ambitious plan to cross the Greenland ice cap, the world's largest island. In 1888 his party of six set out, enduring temperatures as low as -45°C and climbing to a height of 9000 feet above sea level. They became the first Europeans ever to penetrate Greenland's unknown interior and in doing so pioneered the use of skis in polar travel. In no time Nansen was planning a second Arctic trip, this time to prove his revolutionary theory that a current carried the polar ice from east to west.

Deliberately freezing his ship the Fram (Forward) in sea ice off the Siberian coast in September 1893 his ideas were proved correct when the vessel re-emerged 35 months later in open water near Spitzbergen. Nansen was not on board however, having made a bold but unsuccessful attempt on the North Pole, over-wintering on Franz-Josefs-Land on his return. As a result of the trip Nansen was the first to prove that the Arctic Ocean was in fact very deep and to demonstrate the influence the sea has on land climate.

By 1908 Nansen had become Professor of Oceanography at Oslo University but was also now acting as Norway's ambassador in London, his leadership skills having been recognised by those outside scientific circles. With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 Nansen became increasingly interested in international political affairs. From 1920 until his death he was the Norwegian delegate to the League of Nations, a body that he fervently believed could improve the lot of mankind. His first task was to repatriate half a million POW's, many held in Russia, who had fought for Germany and her allies. A year later he was appointed the League's administrator of its new High Commission for Refugees. His famous "Nansen Passport" was eventually recognised by 52 governments and enabled hundreds of thousands of refugees without passports to be repatriated and resettled. In 1921 the Red Cross asked Nansen to organise relief for millions of famine-stricken Russians: he may have saved some 22 million in total! In 1922 he undertook the world's greatest mass exchange of peoples by repatriating 500,000 Turks living in Greece in return for a million Greeks forced to flee military defeat in Turkey. Finally, in 1925 Nansen attempted to save the remnants of the Armenian race from extinction, a task later taken up by the Nansen International Office for Refugees. It is little wonder that in 1922 Nansen was given the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition for his unstinting devotion to alleviating the distress of the homeless and the hungry. It is typical of the man that he not only donated his prize money to charity but that he also gave up his own ambition to be first at the South Pole, allowing

fellow countryman Roald Amundsen to use his old boat the Fram to undertake what would be his own successful attempt. The determined and resilient features seen today on the little bronze head of Nansen in his modest park in Vienna reflect well the indomitable yet humble determination of both Nansen the brave explorer - as well as Nansen the great humanitarian.

Text © Duncan J D Smith 2004. Read similar articles in his forthcoming book Only in Vienna - A Guide to the Hidden Corners, Little-Known Places and Unusual Objects of the City on the Danube

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.
This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.