



These two buskers are a fixture in Bruno Kreisky Park

Photo: Andiy Korinny

The people we see every day become part of our world

The Beggar in the Park

by Andiy Korinny

There are a few days in the middle of spring when the first sunny days have already faded in the dozens of parks across the city of Vienna, along with the first flowering of the pink-white magnolia and cherry blossoms.

But the real warm season is still to come. On weekends in particular, these parks are lively places when the weather is clear, full of reading and pick-up football, boisterous children and their kerchiefed mothers and quiet conversations of the elderly. They are almost empty, though, on the raining weekdays, when only the dog owners slowly walk stooping among wet trees and benches, poised to clean up after their pets. On such days, the air here smells of new growth and wet animals, the damp wood chips in the flowerbeds.

The Bruno Kreisky Park is one of these small parks, and I cross it twice a day on my way to the office and back. It lies in the corner of five districts, bordered with Schönbrunnerstrasse, Margaretengürtel, the U4 line and the Wien Fluss. The eastern exit of the U-bahn station Margaretengürtel goes five meters around an electronic information stall and through a bicycle path straight to the

main lane of the park, which is only 100 meters across in this direction.

In the early evening as I go home from my office, I usually meet a peculiar person exactly at the same place where I have met him hundreds of times before during the last two years. Honestly, the encounter is nothing special – he is just a beggar, and I don't even know anything about him.

Today he took several newspapers from the box at the entrance of the station, spread them on the floor next to the elevator and sat up on this pile at the edge of a puddle, crossing his legs in the way nomads do. His hair is dark and grey. He has a brown wrinkled face shaven at least a week ago, a dirty brown jacket, which could hardly protect him from the rain, jeans, white tennis shoes and a shiny new uniform cap with the insignia of the "ÖBB S-Bahn." In front of him, there is a plate with several coins on it and in his hand, he has a little pipe, in which he is blowing the only tune he can. Hundreds of times per day and hundreds of days per year, he plays the *Waves of the Danube*, which is certainly the most famous Romanian waltz tune.

He is not too old, maybe around fifty and he

Demand for bespoke fashion still has a place in a changing city

Vienna Made to Measure

by Duncan J. D. Smith

Vienna's retail landscape is changing rapidly, especially around Graben, Kohlmarkt, and Kärntnerstrasse. Venerable old stores, such as the clothier Braun & Co. and photographer Siegfried Wachtl, have recently been ousted by global brands. Perhaps in a decade or so the city centre will be no different to that of any other other European capital?

But all is not lost. In amongst Gucci, Cartier and H&M there are still some traditional family firms, where for over a century hand-crafted suits, hats and shoes have been made for the sartorially select.

Fit for a Sultan

A fine example is Knize at Graben 13, which has been tailoring bespoke men's suits for over one hundred and fifty years. The company was established in 1858 by the Czech tailor Josef Knize. The present shop was opened in 1913, its marble frontage and panelled interior a pristine example of the work of Austrian modernist architect Adolf Loos.

The intriguing crests either side of the name (one emblazoned with a crescent moon, the other with a scimitar-wielding lion) recall that Knize once supplied dress uniforms to the Sultan of Turkey and the Shah of Iran respectively. And while the name of Knize may no longer pack the same punch as Savile Row, the end result is more than a match for any of the custom suit made in Mayfair. Knize produces around a hundred each year, using cloth imported from Italy and England, each suit taking ten days and seven thousand stitches to make. A thousand more are made-to-measure an-

nually from a standard-sized base pattern. Not for the faint-hearted the best of them sell for around five thousand Euros each.

Sixty hours of labour

Around the corner at Bräunerstrasse 4 is one of Vienna's oldest bespoke companies. Rudolf Scheer & Söhne have been making shoes since 1816, and from 1878 onwards some were worn by the emperor himself. Such royal and imperial patronage explains why the phrase K. u. K. Hof-Schumacher is proudly displayed in gilt lettering on the frontage. In the window below are displayed row upon row of wooden forms known as lasts, around which hand-crafted shoes are created.

The shop appears much as it must have a hundred years ago, with its elegant ground floor waiting room in which one could hear a pin drop. Around the wall are pairs of shoes and boots, their perfect shine reflecting the elegant light fittings. At the back a creaking wooden staircase leads up to a first floor fitting room. This is where the shoes are made, mostly from calf leather, with each pair requiring three fitting sessions and around sixty hours of labour. Much of it is done in monastic silence. The finished product will set the client back at least three thousand Euros, so it's reassuring to know that all shoes come with a lifetime guarantee.

Good enough for Brad

The same production standards but in a very different setting are to be found in the Mühlbauer millinery studio at Seilergasse 10. This company may have been making hats the old-fashioned way

by R. S. Hughes

People have different methods of marking the changing of the seasons. British nature writer Richard Mabey says he has two specific 'seasonal rites of passage' to which he is sentimentally attached: seeing the first swifts of the year over the parish church from his study window, and walking in a particular corner of his own wood on the day when the young beech leaves unfurl over the bluebells – "an experience that, with the sunlight filtering through the semi-translucent new leaves and the bluebells rippling underfoot, is like walking underwater."

Seasonal rites of passage don't have to be entirely natural. Since living in Vienna, my seasonal compass flicks from winter to spring with help from a number of semi-natural occurrences: The setting out of tables and chairs on Vienna sidewalks by the city's restaurateurs, the un-battening down of the hatches of the Donau Kanal's cafes and bars, and the proliferation of *Spargel*-themed menu cards, to name just three.

But the natural onset of spring is hard to miss too. One of the more noticeable natural phenomena in Vienna is the sudden profusion of wild garlic. Seemingly overnight, its lush green leaves flood the wooded areas of some of the city's parks, gardens and riverbanks, turning bare earth into a sea of green that undulates in the breeze.

On a recent trip to the banks of the Danube in Korneuburg, I joined dozens of Bärlauch pickers, stuffing leaves into collecting bags. An hour later, with the help of said leaves, pine nuts, olive oil, parmesan cheese and pasta, I was sitting down to a foraged feast. In our world of supermarkets and

is definitely not Austrian, because sometimes he disappears for a few weeks, which means he has to leave the Schengen zone for a certain period to come back soon. I suppose he is from one of the South European countries with a free short-term entrance to the EU. When he returns from his home country he is notably clean, dressed in a new jacket and it is quite clear that somebody has taken care of him.

Sometimes he sleeps sitting on the floor, but more often he smokes, drinks beer or cheap wine and communicates with his friends, beggars like him. The amazing thing is that the area I live in is not on any tourist routes and the people who walk in and out of the U-bahn station are roughly the

convenience foods, there's something very satisfying about providing a key ingredient oneself; something many Austrians seem to appreciate.

Spring also marks the return to the city of many species of birds that have wintered in warmer climes. One noteworthy returnee is the black redstart; a robin-sized creature with a rust-red tail, bold white wing patch and charcoal grey upper parts that winters south of Austria, predominantly in Africa and Asia. Though shy and flitting, this bird can't quite seem to resist human company, and from March onwards, it's a common visitor to the city, enjoying urban landscapes.

Not only is the species interesting for its appearance and behavior, in some regions it's also a sign of the times.

"The black redstart is a bird of inner city dereliction and economic depression," states *Birds Britannica*. According to the book, their *annus mirabilis* in the UK came in 1942, heavily assisted by the German Luftwaffe, which left swathes of the capital in ruin – perfect conditions for what is originally a rock-haunting species.

The black redstart, therefore, also raises bigger questions about what really constitutes a wild place, something that is particularly prescient to this column, given that it attempts to take note of the wildlife in and around a city, albeit one less derelict than many. "The inner-city wasteland in which the species thrives completely subverts our conventional notions about beauty in landscape... Uncared for, unmanaged and unintentional – it is, in a way, the nearest thing to true wilderness that we possess," *Birds Britannica's* authors write.

same audience everyday, which means somebody gives him money regularly otherwise he would go somewhere else. Once I saw an old lady call the police to take him away, but the next day he was back. When the subway attendants in yellow vests come by, he moves few meters out of the station, but comes back as soon as they leave.

I have become accustomed to his presence, so much so that when I see him now, I don't feel pity. Usually I don't even think of him, but sometimes his appearance turns me to contemplating on the vicissitudes of life, starting from the Russian proverb, "No one can be safe from poverty or prison" to the realization that this guy is the most famous person in my district.



Rudolf Scheer and Söhne have been making shoes since 1816

Photos: Rudolf Scheer

since 1903 but since 2007 they have been selling them in the most modern surroundings. The minimalist premises consist of little more than a white-washed room, with a small display of merchandise and a large mirror.

The hats themselves, of which an astonishing thirteen thousand are created each year, are manufactured in a second floor workshop near Schwedenplatz, where their flagship store closed in 2009. Here they are made in all shapes and sizes, mostly from rabbit fur felt, using a hundred-year-old steaming machine and traditional wooden moulds, over which they are stretched. One made to order costs around two hundred Euros and can be ready in a fortnight. Both Brad Pitt and Meryl Streep admit to having Mühlbauer hats in their wardrobes.

A thousand fabrics

Grandest of all, and perhaps the most traditional of Vienna's made-to-measure family firms, is Wilhelm Jungmann & Neffe at Albertinaplatz 3. The finest suit fabrics have been retailed here since 1881, in an oak-lined room worthy of any country house. Well over a thousand fabrics are available,

including not only Harris Tweed and cashmere but also vicuña fleece taken from Peruvian llamas!

Jungmann also displays its imperial and royal credentials, and their success accounts for the opulence still in evidence at the shop today. A roundel on the ornate ceiling represents an allegory of the silk trade. Of course the location was all-important, and being close to the Hofburg, the State Opera, and the Hotel Sacher (a preferred meeting place for the local aristocracy) was good for business. The shop's visitor's book reads like a Who's Who of high society, from the Empress Elisabeth and Baroness Mary Vetsera to Arthur Schnitzler and Thomas Bernhard.

Looking back, Vienna's bespoke shops have shown the same tenacity as Vienna itself. Both have survived world wars, changes in fashion, and competition from cheaper brands. In a fast changing world perhaps tradition really is something people like to cling on to. So long as they can afford it.

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