

## LETTER FROM VIENNA

By Alexandra Starr

# Trapped in a Golden Age

**F**in-de-siècle Vienna may have flowered and faded more than a century ago, but the era remains a ubiquitous presence in the city today. Even if you do not visit the Belvedere Palace to see Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*, simulacrum of that embrace will accost you from posters, notebook covers, and café menus. Emerge from the subway, and in all likelihood the sign announcing your stop will be the handiwork of fin-de-siècle architect Otto Wagner. The Café Landtmann menu will not just let you know the price of a black coffee, but also inform you that Sigmund Freud was once a regular patron. Karl Kraus, Austria's H. L. Mencken during the early 1900s, declared that the streets of Vienna are "paved with culture." His aphorism holds true today—and the culture is tattooed with the words and images Kraus dissected a century ago.

The fin-de-siècle fixation is, to be sure, played up for tourists. But it is not just for foreign consumption. The Viennese apex of modernized thought and art, which began in the 1860s and arguably lasted through World War I, is enshrined in the national consciousness. Gustav Mahler may have had a stormy tenure as the general director and conductor of Vienna's Imperial Opera (he was forced out in 1907 after a decade), but last summer the *Wiener Staatsoper* schedule was a virtual homage to the composer. The Museum Quarter, which holds the majority of the city's Egon Schiele expressionist paintings, is a meeting point for the city's hipsters; during the warm months you can spot kids on skateboards beneath banners of the Viennese artist's portraits. Tourists may dominate the weekend

crowd in the Belvedere Palace galleries, but Vienna's dozens of museums wouldn't stay afloat if locals didn't religiously attend special exhibits and revisit the collections.

The fact that the Viennese—indeed, Austrian—identity is so interwoven with the fin-de-siècle epoch has more than aesthetic implications. When culture is largely defined as the appreciation of a body of art, literature, and music that flourished decades ago, the national patrimony becomes something not just to take pride in but also to protect. Vienna can feel like a living museum rather than a modern metropolis. And while some residents lament the relentless looking backward, many of Austria's policies seem bent on maintaining a version of the country that doesn't look so different from its glory days.

The desire to freeze a society in time, rather than to allow it to change and innovate, has helped cultivate a xenophobic streak in the central European state. At least, it seemed that way to me last spring when I was living in the city, researching immigration practices. Austria makes it very difficult for a foreigner to settle within its borders; its legal restrictions are some of the toughest in Europe. In conversations with the Viennese, I was struck by how often even young people defended this draconian approach. Aside from concerns about immigrants taking advantage of the country's generous welfare benefits, the rationale for the keep-them-out policy centers around Austria's small population (just a little over eight million) and the fragile national culture. "If we let people pour in, we would lose our identity," one historical researcher said to me. "We would be overrun."

Austria is hardly the only country loath to accept foreigners. It is perplexing, however, that a country so enamored of its permissive fin-

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↪ Alexandra Starr was a Milena Jesenská fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna last spring.

de-siècle incarnation would cling to such an exclusionary view. Sipping coffee at Freud's old haunt and admiring Klimt's gold-flecked paintings, the Viennese may preserve a *surface* that looks a lot like the turn-of-the-century city. But the modern Viennese do not embrace the values that made the creative outpouring possible. The artistic pioneers of the late 1800s weren't hidebound by tradition; instead, they were committed to embracing risk. And the city that created groundbreaking art, literature, and music was not homogeneous. Quite the opposite: it was a mix of outsiders—Jews, Czechs, and Hungarians—who created and financed advances in an extraordinary culture. "Diversity and immigration made that age possible," Bernhard Perchinig, an analyst at the Institute for European Integration Research, told me.

Glance over some of the names of those who comprised Vienna's turn-of-the-century intelligentsia, and Perchinig's theory holds up. The revolutionary thinkers Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Wittgenstein were both Jews, as were the writers Stefan Zweig and Arthur Schnitzler. Mahler was a Bohemian Jew. The expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka was Czech on his father's side. And while the era's two superstar painters—Klimt and Schiele—were Austrian-born and not Jewish, Vienna's Jewish bourgeoisie underwrote their work. It is not an accident that Klimt's most famous portraits were of Jewish women. His paintings often hung in the parlors of Jewish homes, at least until the onset of World War II.

Why Austrians misconstrue the origin of their fin-de-siècle culture is murky, but the country's role during World War II is certainly part of the explanation. Austria had a long history of anti-Semitism even before the Anschluss, the 1938 annexation by Nazi Germany. (An Austrian by birth, Hitler, for example, admired Viennese Mayor Karl Lueger's verbal fusillades against Jewish residents when the future *führer* lived in Vienna in the early 1900s.) It's therefore not surprising that many Austrians were

sympathetic to Nazi notions of racial purity and nationalism. After Austria joined the Third Reich, a number of Hitler's countrymen vigorously participated in the Holocaust. High-ranking Nazis like Adolf Eichmann grew up in Austria; under his supervision 170,000 Austrian Jews were stripped of their jobs and fleeced of their possessions. Before the outbreak of the war, some 65,000 Jews were able to flee (after giving up almost everything they owned). For the most part, those who remained were slaughtered in concentration camps. Today, only an estimated 7,400 Jews reside in the country.

Austrians never had to deliver a comprehensive public accounting and repentance for this stained past. For Cold War geopolitical purposes, the Allies pronounced the country "Nazism's first victim" after the war. The former members of the Third Reich seized on that appellation with gusto, drawing grumbles from

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some of Nazism's *true* victims. "The Austrians are brilliant people," Jewish Viennese émigré and Hollywood director Billy Wilder is often quoted as saying. "They've made the world believe that Hitler was German and Mozart an Austrian."

Wilder didn't have to stop there. While Freud and Kokoschka are now among the innovators claimed as cultural royalty, they were forced to flee to England to save their lives on the eve of World War II. (Kokoschka was deemed "degenerate.") The composer Arnold Schönberg decamped to Los Angeles, and novelist-playwright-biographer Stefan Zweig had already escaped from Austria to Great Britain. Jews, who had paid for and patronized so much of the city's innovative art, were essentially expunged from Austrian soil. Given that so many of Vienna's impressive creative citizens and their benefactors were ruthlessly persecuted, some historians have questioned whether modern-day Austria can legitimately claim Vienna's fin-de-siècle movement as its own.

The city's fin-de-siècle strutting does have a shameless streak. But to be fair, Vienna's institutions and ethos did play a role in nurturing

one of the most extraordinary creative moments in modern history. Then, as today, appreciation for the arts was at the core of the city's identity. Viennese coffeehouses didn't just keep patrons caffeinated; they also allowed intellectuals to intermingle and stay culturally attuned. Perhaps more important, most of these men stood apart from Viennese society but were nonetheless eager to gain recognition, and that made for a potent alchemy. Alienation is often a spur to creative expression. When these artists found existing norms of painting, literature, and social thought too confining, they pushed the boundaries.

Today, the Viennese continue to patronize the coffeehouses and avidly peruse the newspapers' swollen arts sections. Many of the Austrians I met during my three-and-a-half-month stay in the city made a point of alerting me to a lecture on Freudian psychology or sharing their opinions about the current hot-ticket theater production. There's no question that Vienna is still steeped in the arts. But so often participation in the prevailing cultural life entails revisiting some aspect of the Golden Age.

Martin Prinzhorn, a professor at the University of Austria and an independent art critic, says that looking back has been a part of the country's makeup since the end of the First World War. "There is a modern arts scene in Vienna, and it has produced interesting work, particularly in the last decade," he explains. "But nostalgia can suck the air out of Vienna's artistic space. The newer artists are oftentimes overshadowed by what was produced in the past."

**F**in-de-siècle Vienna was infatuated with contemporary artists, not former generations of creative pioneers. In his memoir, *The World of Yesterday*, Stefan Zweig remembered how in pre-World War I Vienna esteem for artistic movers and shakers cut across social classes. The day the city's most prominent theater actress died, even the Zweigs' cook dissolved into tears. "This old, semi-illiterate cook had never once been to the fashionable Burgtheater," Zweig recounted, "but a great national actress was the collective property of the entire city of Vienna, and even an outsider could feel that her death was a catastrophe."

When artists are treated as demigods, it is understandable that ambitious young men ache to join their ranks. Given that foreigners and Jews were never completely integrated into high Viennese society, it's not so surprising that their sons and daughters were particularly eager to establish a toehold in creative realms. For one thing, some of the more formal career paths were essentially off-limits. Freud once aspired to a military career but opted against it partly because Jews could not serve as officers in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

There were few formal barriers to becoming a novelist or artist. Achieving prominence in these spheres, moreover, offered entry to a rarified world. *The World of Yesterday* describes how every young writer dreamed of having a play produced in one of Vienna's prestigious theaters because it guaranteed a "sort of life-long nobility. . . . One virtually became a guest in the Imperial household." In the Vienna of a hundred years ago, passersby didn't comment on spotting a minister-president, but the sight of an actor or opera director on the Ringstrasse would set people buzzing.

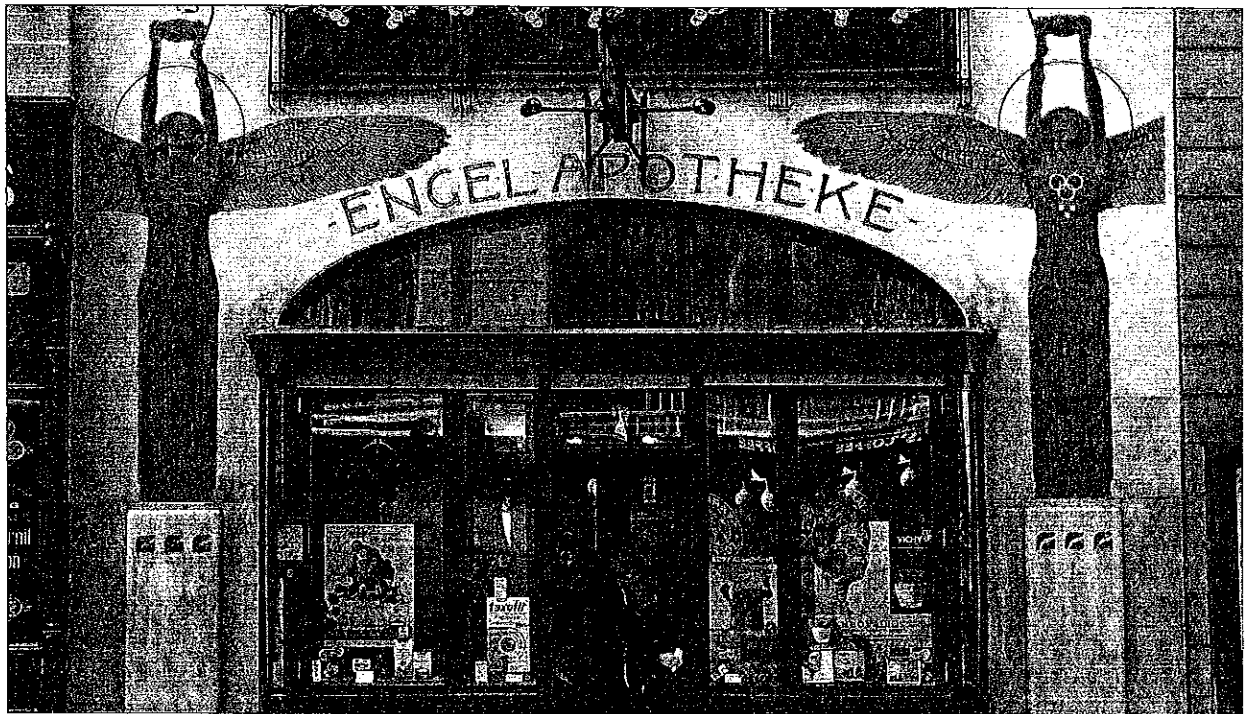
Aside from providing an environment that exalted artistic accomplishment, Viennese institutions supplied creative young people with unusual opportunities to prepare for and hone their crafts. The city's gymnasiums (elite secondary schools) could be pedagogically stilted, but the curricula produced graduates well versed in Western history, philosophy, and literature. Notably, Jews constituted a disproportionate portion of these schools' enrollments. According to the historian Steven Beller, Jews accounted for 10 percent of Vienna's population, but they made up about one-third of the gymnasiums' student bodies.

More important than the formal education system was Vienna's informal university: the coffeehouse. As American cultural historian Carl Schorske describes in *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, the intelligentsia in Paris, London, and Berlin didn't mingle much. Vienna's coffeehouse culture, in contrast, nurtured a cohesive creative class. Zweig recalled the long hours he spent in wood-paneled cafés as integral to his development as a writer. The witty aperçu was highly prized in these settings;

relaxed chats, or even deep personal conversations, were not the purpose of these social circles. But if the occasional barb made the gatherings uncomfortable, it also prodded these men (they were, almost without exception, men) to become more daring and accomplished thinkers and artists.

It wasn't just in coffeehouses that these innovators crossed paths. Dip into the history of the era, and you may be convinced you're reading about an extended, dysfunctional family. Consider this particular series of associations: Gustav Mahler and his wife, Alma, saw Freud for

for example, changed significantly during his personal crisis, which marked the period when he established himself as an atonal pioneer. It wasn't, of course, just the fraught relationships that proved formative. Schönberg regarded Karl Kraus as an inspiration—Kraus who, from the pages of his newspaper *Die Fackel* (The Torch), launched a four-decade campaign against everything he considered hypocritical and artificial in Austrian society. "I have learned more from you, perhaps, than a man should learn, if he wants to remain independent," the composer confided to his literary counterpart.



In Vienna's first district, a 1902 drugstore façade with angels by artist Oscar Laske

marriage counseling. After Gustav's death, Alma became Kokoschka's lover. The so-called wild painter of the fin de siècle was a protégé of the architect Adolf Loos, who helped secure commissions for Kokoschka early in the painter's career. The two men socialized with Arnold Schönberg, who had a separate, painful connection to another prominent Viennese painter: Schönberg's wife, Mathilde, left him for the artist Richard Gerstl (who committed suicide in 1908 after Mathilde returned to Arnold).

These interactions and bed hoppings may seem trivial, but they left a mark on Vienna's cultural patrimony. Schönberg's compositions,

Loos encouraged Kokoschka's experimentation in a more concrete way: when sitters refused to buy the painter's portraits, the architect purchased them.

Unsurprisingly, Freud forged the broadest influence. His theories on the subconscious are, for example, glaringly present in Zweig's novella *Twenty-Four Hours in the Life of a Woman*, which details an elderly woman's unsettling encounter with a younger man. Freud himself discerned a kindred sensibility in Arthur Schnitzler, whose plays about bleak sexual exploitation and personal trauma convulsed Viennese society. "I have gained the impression," Freud wrote his fellow

doctor-turned-writer, “that you have learned through intuition . . . everything that I have had to unearth by laborious work on other persons.”

By the time Hitler marched into Vienna in 1938, Freud had become an international celebrity. In his 80s and suffering from cancer of the jaw, he did not heed early warnings to leave the city, confident that his advanced age and prominence would protect him. After the Gestapo arrested and interrogated his daughter Anna, however, the Freuds fled to London, vowing never to return to Austria or to Germany. “Like you, I have an indomitable affection for Vienna and Austria,” the doctor wrote to a friend. “But unlike you, I know her abyss.”

It was at the Café Landtmann that I read about *Our Vienna*, an exposé two Austrian journalists had published on looted Jewish property. Even the brief summary of the book made for intriguing reading. The synopsis detailed how many of the cultural landmarks I’d admired for weeks—like the Prater Ferris wheel, which is showcased in the 1949 film *The Third Man*—had been expropriated from Jewish families. Intrigued, my husband and I cut short our coffee break to search for a copy in an English-language bookstore.

While I knew the route, we made our way fitfully, because men in 18th-century dress interrupted us every few feet, flogging tickets to a classical music concert. They weren’t the only relic of an earlier age patrolling the streets. Horse-drawn carriages, or fiacres, clopped by, carrying photo-snapping tourists. When loudspeakers began blasting Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, it felt like we had entered a kitsch time machine. “Vienna: City of the Past” even had a soundtrack.

The costumes, music halls, and carefully marketed museums all help to cultivate a thriving tourist industry. But as my husband and I made our way to a less-trafficked part of the city, it occurred to me that the preserved-in-amber ethos came with a price tag. I had sampled many of Vienna’s creative offerings during my stay,



Mozart selling candy in Vienna

visiting museums and the opera and attending the occasional lecture. But aside from a small gallery show featuring the work of sculptor Franz West, everything I had seen and every subject I had

learned about dated from the past, and sometimes the distant past.

The publicly applauded version of the city’s history is, of course, airbrushed. When I asked for a copy of *Our Vienna* at the bookshop, I glimpsed the antagonism a more honest appraisal can engender. The bookseller, who had just been friendly to patrons seeking the latest Lonely Planet guide to Vienna, met my request with an icy stare.

“We do not have that book,” she replied.

“Could you order it?” my husband pressed, with a smile.

She shook her head: “Not possible.”

I never did track down a copy. The book I ended up re-reading compulsively was Zweig’s remembrance of the city of his youth. In *The World of Yesterday* he morosely speculated on what the future held for Vienna: “Only the coming decades will show the crime that Hitler perpetrated against Vienna when he sought to nationalize and provincialize this city.” Zweig never saw the postwar version of the metropolis; he committed suicide in 1942 in Brazil where he had moved the year before. But if he had lived to see present-day Vienna, he may have been puzzled as well as disillusioned.

Trappings of the culture Zweig was so immersed in are still present. The “spiritual supernationality” that he prized, however, is no longer in evidence. It could be that the city’s turn-of-the-century artistic productivity was the equivalent of a cultural comet: It is extraordinary for a movement like that to emerge once, and no one should expect a repeat appearance. Still, the Austrian preoccupation with its prior incarnation and fear of a more diverse society has lessened the odds of another cultural apocalypse. Vienna is still saturated in the arts, but the country’s most fearless, productive, and creative years almost certainly lie decades in the past. ❖