

Walls Became Windows

1865.

It was the time of the big change in Vienna. The fortress mentality, bred into the populace for centuries as the outpost against eastern invasion, was being traded in for openness and inclusion. Vienna was no longer a bastion but a window on the world. By imperial decree, the city's medieval walls had been razed, the *Glacis*, a no-man's land formerly separating the city and its suburbs, was being developed in one of the biggest, most grandiose real estate development schemes the world had yet witnessed. Emperor Franz Joseph officially opened the boulevard on May 1 of that year.

Meanwhile, my forefathers were battling seasickness and fleas as they voyaged across the Atlantic from Wales and Norway, making their way to the Midwest, where they settled for several generations. And then my immediate family later finished the journey, trekking all the way to the limits of the continental U.S. to a tiny beach town in Oregon.

I was raised in that sleepy hamlet. Its population of a few thousand from September to the end of May doubled during the summer months with Portland tourists flocking to the beach.

Just as the town's population was circumscribed by the seasons, so was its length and breadth delimited by a headland to the south, the peaks of the Coast Range to the east,

and the mouth of the mellifluously named Necanicum River to the north. The two miles between the southern headland and the river mouth were connected by a concrete walkway called the Prom. It fronted the town: ocean to the west and rows of delightfully lumbering old beach houses to the east.

The Prom was my introduction to traffic articulation in its most modest and fundamental form. I loved that Prom. As a youngster I rode my bike along it to golf courses where I caddied or mowed greens; I made up tales about the musty Victorian houses along its eastern edge – my first efforts at fiction.

The Prom also formed the top of a “T” with the town’s other main street, Broadway, a Coney Island paradise of bumper cars, a Ferris wheel, miniature golf, cotton candy stands, and arcades full of zinging and dinging pinball machines where our summer overflow crowds of tourists could be found thronging. Those carnival delights and the beach houses along the Prom delineated my architectural world.

Going away to college did little to broaden my perspectives: though large, my university and the town it overshadowed only multiplied in quantity, not quality, the grid of streets I had grown up on.

And then I was fortunate enough to go to Vienna my junior year.

It changed my life: it ruined me for the little Oregon town in which I had quite happily grown up, never under-

standing my older sisters' carping complaints of how dead the place was.

I resisted her at first. Vienna seemed so old, so monumental, so *Viennese*. But slowly on walking expeditions around the Ringstrasse, a boulevard of 3.5 miles circumference and broader even than the Necanicum of my youth, I came to feel a curious rhythm, a tingling sense of place, a kinship and desire for belonging. Vienna, my first urban experience, became my template for what a city should be.

This came about in stages. The Volksgarten was my first revelation, with its bowed roses, tied down and mulched in chilly late autumn against winter freeze, the garden's fountains boarded in cone-shaped hats. Yet the regal Dackels still pranced about its grounds in their knitted mantels as if it were eternal summer.

Buildings came next. The twin museums with their prizes inside – the Brueghels, one-third of the painter's surviving works; the Venus of Willendorf, at 25,000 years one of the oldest representations of a human figure; the butterfly collection! And the Opera with its tragic story of a mis-spoken comment by Franz Joseph resulting in the suicide of one of its architects.

These buildings, I discovered, had stories, just like the Prom houses I pedaled past as a boy. And what stories they were. Even buildings no longer standing had tales to tell, such as the Ring Theater on the Schottenring, where fire broke out during a performance in 1881, killing almost four hundred. Franz Joseph ordered an apartment house, the

“Sühnhaus” or “house of atonement”, built on the site of that theater, but it proved an eternally unlucky address. Freud lived there but moved out after one of his patients jumped to her death in the building’s stairwell. The Sühnhaus did not live much longer, either, destroyed in World War II. There was a silver lining, however: the invention of the fire curtain came about as a result of that 1881 disaster.

With the attention of an archivist, I painstakingly learned such stories for each section of this boulevard, the Ringstrasse. And these stories ultimately led me to the tail end of the Ringstrasse era, to the amazing renaissance of Vienna 1900. That culture and epoch created the modern sensibility through the works of such seminal artists, writers, and thinkers as Gustav Klimt, Oskar Kokoschka, Egon Schiele, Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos, Arthur Schnitzler, Sigismund Freud, Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, among so many others. Yet Vienna 1900, and the world it engendered, was also a breeding ground for such future tyrants as Trotsky, Stalin, and Hitler, all of whom also spent time in the city.

Just as I learned this peculiar double-sided nature of Vienna history, I also began to see the Ring itself in a new and more discerning light, its magnificent buildings often having more symbolic import than architectural functionality. The court theater, Burgtheater, was lyre-shaped as a tip of the hat to the origins of Greek drama, but its acoustics were so execrable that its auditorium had to be redesigned. The neo-Gothic Rathaus allowed scant light in for the func-

tionaries of city hall. The magnificent Court Opera cost six million gulden to build at a time when thousands were homeless, sleeping in warming rooms, sewers, and park benches.

Facts of history. But still the Ringstrasse beckoned me.

Later, living and working in Vienna long after my student days, those houses on the Ring and street junctions with the Ring took on personal connections. In the 1970s I worked in one of these elegant Ringstrasse houses, the former “Grand Hotel” on the Kärntner Ring adapted as the first home of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). When it opened its doors in 1870, that hotel had 300 rooms, 200 bathrooms, and was equipped with a telegraph office and steam-powered elevators. Thus, a century later, most of the offices of the IAEA were still neatly appointed with Belle Époque bathrooms. Decades after I worked there, the “Grand” once again opened as a 5-star luxury hotel. Points of the compass along that Ring also became meeting places: Schottentor, Karlsplatz, Schwarzenbergplatz. Each had its personal history now for me beyond historical ones: a chance meeting here, a sad farewell there.

And later still, the Ring – its physical self as well as the world and era it represents – would become a presence in both my nonfiction and fiction. I sent tourists on walking tours along its breadth. And now, residing thousands of miles away from Vienna, I relive my own years there by setting my fictional protagonist off on a stroll along the Ring from the “Hotel Imperial” to the “Kunsthistorisches

Museum” or on a wild nighttime fiaker ride over the boulevard’s uneven cobbles.

Thus, the Ringstrasse strangely informs and encompasses my life – a circle, not a line like the Prom of my youth. A continuity, not a simple destination. And I live with and enjoy its special irony: That walls once meant to keep out barbarians like me, demolished more than 150 years ago, were replaced with the Ringstrasse: an open, welcoming expanse beckoning me and a multitude of others to the city of dreams.