

The Adolf Gallia House

The building which starts on Vienna's Stubenring, stretches around the Lueger-Platz, and continues on the Biberstrasse, has always been known for its ground-floor café. When the celebrated cyclist Maxime Lurion opened this café following the building's completion in 1903, a poster by the artist Emil Ranzenhofer promoted its "Café Grill", Club Room, American Bar, Ladies Salon, Bowling Alley and Dance Floor which, the *Neues Wiener Tagblatt* reported, had all been fitted out with "exquisite luxury". Since 1905, when Lurion moved to London and the café became the "Prückel", it has grown ever more renowned and appreciated because so many other Ringstrasse cafés have closed. Yet for me its building has very different associations and significance as the home of my great-great uncle, Adolf Gallia, and his wife Ida.

The connection might seem remote. What significance might there be in the home of a great-great-uncle, a house once owned by one's mother's mother's father's second oldest brother? The answer, in part, is that when Adolf achieved spectacular success in Vienna in the late nineteenth century, after studying law, specializing in intellectual property and becoming a pivotal figure in the gas and electric lighting companies of the Austrian scientist Auer von Welsbach, he did not just make his own fortune, but shaped that of many other members of the family, with consequences extending not just across generations but also

across continents. The beneficiaries of Adolf's success included not only his younger brother Moriz, who was my great-grandfather, but also my grandmother Gretl, my mother Anne and to some extent even my brother Bruce and me, both born in Australia in the 1950s.

The annual editions of the Viennese street directory *Lehmann* reveal Adolf's success. It is a journey which starts with Adolf renting ever bigger apartments and larger legal chambers at better addresses. He begins in the Naglergasse in the First District in the early 1880s; moves to the Goldschmiedgasse, close to the Stephansdom; goes next to the Dorotheergasse, still in the First District; then tries the Maximilian- or Rooseveltplatz at the bottom of the Ninth District between the Votivkirche and the Schottenring. Finally, in 1902, Adolf and his wife Ida buy the corner block on the Stubenring and erect their own building there, which is largely rented out, but also houses Adolf's legal chambers and Adolf and Ida's apartment. After they move to this building late in 1903, when Maxime Lurion also opens his café, they never move again. Although they have no children, Adolf and Ida occupy the most prestigious apartment on the first floor or "Nobelstock", which stretched along the full length of the building on the Stubenring and almost the full length of the building on the Lueger-Platz.

The scale of this building, designed by the Viennese architect Jakob Gartner, who was a member of the extended Gallia family, never ceases to amaze me. Gartner's typical

formula, when he had secured commissions from members of Jewish families such as Adolf, who achieved great success under the Habsburgs, was to give expression to his clients' new wealth and status by following the traditional schema of the Palais with facades which were as monumental as possible. Yet Gartner also introduced some Secessionist elements so that his patrons would appear to be embracing progress too. This "gemässigte Moderne" or "moderate modernity" is also apparent in the surviving ceilings and wall decorations of Adolf and Ida's apartment – above all, in Ida's ovoid boudoir, the apartment's most beautiful room, which had its own corner balcony offering spectacular views on the dome of the Karlskirche and the spire of the Stephansdom.

This immense wealth – and manifest delight and pride in it – was combined not just with liberal if not socialist politics, but active political engagement expressed above all through Adolf's support for *Die Zeit*, the Viennese weekly magazine which became a newspaper in mid-1902, supported by two million Kronen in new capital, with the goal of providing daily, independent, radical social and political commentary. Like Auer von Welsbach, Adolf became a shareholder and board member, with Adolf also serving as the company's deputy chairman. The diaries of the critic, essayist and dramatist Hermann Bahr, who was one of *Die Zeit's* editors, reveal that he was in frequent contact with Adolf a year later and was eager for some form of assistance which, in June 1903, Adolf appeared unwilling to give. But

it may be that a meeting between Bahr, Auer and Adolf that July had a different outcome as Auer and Adolf were soon “rumoured to have given *Die Zeit* a third million”.

The building on the Stubenring comes to life in the diaries kept by my grandmother Gretl. The apartment was where, having first seen Puccini’s “*La Bohème*” at the Hofoper, the eighteen-year-old Gretl would spend New Year’s Eve at the end of 1913 and dance the tango with her younger sister Käthe. The apartment was also where, having become engaged in 1915 to a young Viennese architect called Norbert Stern, whose mother was very close to Ida, Gretl would have her most spectacular engagement party, which would see Ida use for the first time her newly acquired set of “*Flora Danica*”, the celebrated, hand-moulded, hand-painted porcelain decorated with Danish plants made by “*Royal Copenhagen*”. The “*Café Prückel*” was where, as Gretl’s engagement with Norbert almost immediately fell apart, his mother met Ida while Norbert went upstairs to consult with Adolf in his chambers and discuss what they should do.

This house would pass out of the family after Adolf died in 1925, followed by Ida in 1929: the last memories of the family apartment would come from my mother Anne, who was most struck by a white bear rug – head and all – underneath the grand piano in the salon. In her will, Ida instructed that the house be sold as part of dividing the bulk of her estate between twenty-four nephews and nieces, with my grandmother Gretl the biggest beneficiary, receiving almost

one-tenth of the estate. In 1932, the house was acquired by the “Gesellschaft der Autoren, Komponisten und Musikverleger” or “Society of Authors, Composers and Music Publishers”, which would soon place its initials “AKM” over the front entrance on the Stubenring. Yet one sign would remain that this building had once been home to the Gallias. Over the back door on the Biberstrasse, which had been the address of Adolf’s legal chambers, are his initials “AG”.

These initials – almost certainly pretentious, even boastful, in origin – are what matter most to me about this building known usually as the home of the “Café Prückel”. These initials matter to me because of what happened to members of my family from 1938. While some would survive, such as my grandmother Gretl, great-aunt Käthe and mother Anne, who escaped Vienna immediately after Kristallnacht, others did not, such as Adolf’s nephew Louis, who had worked with him in the legal practice on the Stubenring and, aged sixty at the time of the Anschluss, was unable to secure a visa. By mid-1940, none of my branch of the Gallias would be left in Vienna, but Adolf’s initials would endure. Of no meaning and no interest to almost all passers-by, these initials are for me the one small sign on Vienna’s streets that this city was once home to my family.