

**Researching Jewish history**  
**in**  
**Vienna's II District<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> The II District of Vienna is located on the northern bank of the Danaukanal. The region is also known as Leopoldstadt, named after the previous Austrian Emperor Leopold I.

Vienna...

It was a bright and sunny afternoon in Vienna after two days of watching the rain from the windows of Hotel Theater in der Josefstätter strasse.<sup>2</sup> Marlene and I decided to visit the II District across the Danube Canal from the Schwedenplatz along the "Ring."<sup>3</sup> The II District was the birthplace and previous home of our cousin, Kurt Mueller and his family, prior to the Anschluss.<sup>4</sup>

We exited the U-1<sup>5</sup> at Vorgarden strasse. At street level were many unexpected sights. Modernization (perhaps semi-modernization would be more accurate) had altered the appearance of the District. There were many buildings, much auto traffic, and crowds of people everywhere. The expected views of the Donnaukanal<sup>6</sup> and Reichsbrücke,<sup>7</sup> which were our first objectives, were not immediately evident to us.

With a few questions asked "auf Deutsch,"<sup>8</sup> of passersby, we were finally aimed in the correct direction toward the Handelskai.<sup>9</sup> Soon the beautiful and high spires of the Klosterneuberg Kirche<sup>10</sup> came into view. We knew that the Handelskai and Reichsbrücke, which spanned the Donnaukanal, were nearby.

We wandered along the park at the backside of the church to see where the railroad tracks paralleled the Handelskai. There stood the object of

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<sup>2</sup> Hotel Theater is located at Josefstätter strasse 22, Vienna, Austria

<sup>3</sup> The "Ring" of Vienna refers to the boulevard that surrounds the old central part of Vienna, which housed the Official Palace of the Austrian Emperors. The boulevard was constructed to provide a rapid means of transportation around Vienna's old city. It was built upon the site of the previous wall that guarded the city, and which kept out past invaders.

<sup>4</sup> Hitler sent his Nazi army to invade Austria on March 11, 1938. The Anschluss is the name given to the March 13, 1938 date that Austria was annexed to the German Third Reich.

<sup>5</sup> U-bahn #1 is one of Vienna's finest rapid subways. There are currently six subway lines coursing under the city.

<sup>6</sup> Canal that courses along the northern part of the old city of Vienna. It obtains its water flow from the Danube River nearby. This system provided much needed additional waterfront and access to the commercial traffic of Vienna.

<sup>7</sup> Bridge.

<sup>8</sup> In our limited German language.

<sup>9</sup> A street along the Donnaukanal (Danube Canal).

<sup>10</sup> One of the oldest churches in Vienna.

our trip, **Volkwohnhaus**, 210 Handelskai, Errichtet von Der Gemeinde Wein, 1928-1929.<sup>11</sup>

The grayish building had withstood World War II. It was much older, but intact. Apparently, it was still utilized for city housing of the district's employees. Previously planted trees and landscape had been replaced by a wide sidewalk and an adjacent 4-lane street that permitted heavy auto and truck traffic along the railway. The view of the Donnaukanal was blocked by moderate sized buildings and several shipping yards, which supported the marine traffic from the Danube River.

In 1928, Kurt's family had been eligible to live in an apartment in this Volkwohnhaus because Karl Mueller had been employed as a supervisor or manager of the power department of the II District. The family lived there until 1938, when they were evicted by the Nazis. Thereafter, and until the end of World War II in 1945, all of the civic housing apartments were reserved for Christian families only.

At the southeastern corner of this apartment complex was constructed a newer housing development named, **Wohn Gemeinde Wien**. It was built for the exclusive use of city employees in 1975.

With a city map in hand, we walked westward a few blocks to Enns-gasse 6,<sup>12</sup> where Kurt Mueller had been born. No longer were there Yiddish traders and markets. The ethnic appearance of this community was remarkable because it was quite diverse.<sup>13</sup> The principal language spoken was German, but frequently we recognized Turkish. Within two additional city blocks, the street complexion abruptly changed. Suddenly, there appeared many young women, who were wearing full headscarves and ankle-length skirts or trousers, a man with a beautifully tailored suit that included the baggy shalvar pants,<sup>14</sup> and several children, who were playing peacefully in the street. There were quite a few Middle Eastern carpet stores. A few businesses remained, which listed among their advertisements, textiles and hand-made goods. Perhaps those stores were remnants from the past days of the Yiddish' schmata traders.<sup>15</sup> We

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<sup>11</sup> A special housing project in II District, Vienna, which was built for the use of the civil servant workers in 1928-1929.

<sup>12</sup> Enns-gasse is a street in II District. The house number was 6.

<sup>13</sup> The community was mainly of Turkish people, but other Slavic and Austrian families were living among them.

<sup>14</sup> Customary dress of Turkish peasant men.

<sup>15</sup> Schmata refers to the old clothes merchants. In Polish, the word is szmata.

had entered a community now occupied by the Turkish and Bosnian workers.

Faint sounds of radios were discernable from the stores nearby, which were playing Middle Eastern music. The ethnicity was familiar to us from our previous experiences in 1964-1966, when Marlene and I lived in Adana, Turkey, while I served as flight surgeon in the U.S. Airforce.

We counted the house numbers carefully. At last, there appeared our next objective, Ennsgasse 6, **gerbertshaus** <sup>16</sup> of Kurt Mueller. It had also withstood the trauma of World War II. Large leafy trees lined both sides of the old street. Beside the very old wooden door, was clearly marked "6." We were so excited as I continued to snap my photographs. Kurt had actually been born here. Actually, Kurt was born in the nearby hospital, but his parents lived at Ennsgasse 6.

As we stood, consuming the view of the local atmosphere, inhabitants, commercial businesses, and children playing, we were overwhelmed by the sense of history. It was here that the Nazis devastated the Jewish community of II District. Kurt had escaped because he had a fever on the day the Nazis knocked upon their door. The Gestapo wanted to avoid infections, so they did not arrest Kurt. His father, Karl, had been arrested and imprisoned in Dachau near Munich. Because of good luck, perhaps from other unexplained reasons, Karl was released from prison in December 1938. They had survived the Nazi terror and immigrated to America. We thought about all of those events as we stood observing the sights of the community before us. Yes, they had survived the Nazi nightmare of demonic destruction and murder in the Holocaust. With those thoughts, I had a sudden chill and I could feel the sweat rolling down my back as I continued to take additional photographs.

I tried to imagine my cousin, Kurt, as he may have played on those streets or on the lawns of the nearby neighborhood park. Was he wearing short pants, or running with his favorite ball? Perhaps he wore his best suit of clothes with a smart tie as he walked to school. Yes, Kurt had actually been here!

Another chill spread through me. I realized that instead of seeing the faces Orthodox men with payes,<sup>17</sup> there were Middle Eastern men wearing baggy shalvar pants. We had witnessed an ethnic transformation of the II District of incredible proportion.

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<sup>16</sup> House where Kurt was born.

<sup>17</sup> Side locks of hair.

We next decided to eat a light lunch at the local Konditorei, which was located at the next intersection of Ennsgasse and asked other pedestrians for further directions toward the Prater.<sup>18</sup> As we walked along, we came upon a beautiful neighborhood park, **Max Winter Platz**. Perhaps this was the park that Kurt had remembered from his childhood. Two Turkish men, who were speaking in their native language, pointed toward the direction of the Prater along Ausstellungs strasse. Our next destination was the Praterstern at the intersection to see the famous statue of Admiral Wilhelm Tegethoff..<sup>19</sup> One of the Turks in his tailored shalvar suit walked along ahead of us until we reached the Ausstellungs strasse. In typically hospitable Turkish custom, he assured that we would not become lost in our search of his neighborhood. We had experienced similar hospitality during our two years of military duties in Turkey, where we often explored remote villages and the ruins of old Crusades Castles near our home base in Adana.

Marlene and I continued along the large bustling Ausstellungs strasse, which was very busy with auto, truck, and bicycle traffic. We passed a beautiful residential neighborhood that had been newly restored in typical and fashionable classic Viennese styles. Another huge city park came into view, which was located directly across from the Prater Park. Kurt had mentioned this place in prior conversations.

At last we arrived at the large circular road that ringed the Praterstern with the statue of Admiral Tegethoff. It was a bronze monument approximately fifty feet in height, surrounded by a well-groomed garden. Across the street was the main entrance of the Prater Amusement Park and our next destination, Heinestrasse. Let me explain why that street was so important to explore.

When the Muellers were evicted from their previous home in the Volkswohnhaus on the Handelskai by the Nazis in 1938, they had been forced to live with Aunt Lily, who lived on Heinestrasse. She owned her own business, **Zur Zuckerlprinzessin**.<sup>20</sup> It was located at 40 Heinestrasse. Her apartment was located above the store. Typically, among Viennese buildings, the ground-level floor is divided into retail or business spaces.

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<sup>18</sup> The Prater is a famous recreational area in the II District. It is a lovely park that has Ferris wheels and other amusements for family entertainment. The Prater was featured in an old American film that was entitled, "The Third Man" starring Orson Wells.

<sup>19</sup> Austria had a naval military whose duties were essential in maintaining security over the Danube river.

<sup>20</sup> Zur Zuckerlprinzessin means the sugar princess. It was a fine candy store.

Residential apartments were reserved for the upper floors. There were usually three to five upper-floors. Most of the structures now have elevators, but not all of them.

At first, we spotted a sign of a candy store, but it was the wrong address, 42 Heinestrasse. The Turkish owner spoke English and was fascinated that we were researching his neighborhood. He re-directed us down the block. As soon as I saw the beautifully carved wooden arched passageway of the front door, I recognized the site of the previous Zur Zuckerlprinzessin. Kurt had given me a copy of the old photograph of his Aunt Lily's store. This was unmistakably the proper address and location. Another chill and sweat broke out on my back as I prepared to make additional photographs.

Just after I snapped my first picture, Marlene poked my ribs with her elbow. She wanted to point out that a beautiful young lady, wearing a skirt with a remarkably high side-slit, had just exited # 40 Heinestrasse. I didn't need reminding, I spotted her first in my camera viewer. It was daytime, so I couldn't accuse the woman as a "lady of the night," but Marlene was quick to remind me about recently published stories regarding the suspected "other occupations"<sup>21</sup> of this neighborhood. Nonetheless, I maintained my composure and concentrated upon my initial research purpose for this particular neighborhood exploration.

We continued walking along the lovely boulevard, window shopping, translating the advertisements, and generally enjoying the neighborhood. We finally reached the intersection at Zirkusgasse. It was a lovely and well-restored residential street with several local restaurants and shops scattered among the ground level spaces. Many of the buildings displayed outstanding baroque architectural designs and window treatments. In the middle of the next block was the school, which Kurt had attended, Zirkusgasse Gymnasium. It was located at 48 Zirkusgasse at the intersection of Blumauergasse. The name of the school had been changed to **Bundesgymnasium und Bundesreal Gymnasium**,<sup>22</sup> but it was definitely the school that Kurt had remembered and attended.

In front of the school and along this beautiful street was a large gazebo that was made from arched metal rods bent in sweeping curves. It was

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<sup>21</sup> Heinestrasse and adjacent streets of this section of the II District has a very high concentration of Muslim immigrants and Hasidim, Jewish immigrants, who were newly arrived from Russia.

<sup>22</sup> Secondary education in Austria consisted of the highest academic high schools called the Gymnasium and other schools with different curricula called Realschules.

built as a memorial to those Jewish families, who had been murdered during the Nazi Holocaust.<sup>23</sup> There were comfortable wooden benches along the street by the gazebo and many plants and trees had been placed nearby to give one an opportunity to sit and reflect in tranquility the past events that occurred in this society. It was a stark reminder of Austria's darkest history. Marlene and I sat there for quite awhile, thinking quietly about those events and tragedies. How fortunate we were to have been descendants of immigrants, who went to America.

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<sup>23</sup> Our son-in-law, Christoph Hofinger, has a maternal uncle, Peter Mlczoch, who is a member of a group of dedicated Viennese, who formed a civic authority, with the support of the District Mayor, to identify the homes, synagogues, and individuals that were displaced, killed, and properties destroyed during this very dark period of Austrian history. They have succeeded in publishing documents about this history and collected old photographs of that era from survivors. Numerous memorials have been built and placed on the exact residences or on monuments placed on the sidewalks in front of those sites. All of the synagogues were burned to the ground by the Nazis, but they have not been forgotten. Only the main synagogue in the I District still remains, but it was protected by its well-recessed location behind the frontal walls of the street. There is a Jewish Cultural Museum on Dorotheergasse in the I District that is located very near St. Stefan's Cathedral. It has become the repository of archival documents and photographs of the history of the Jewish Community of Vienna.