Adolf Hitler addressing thousands in Heldenplatz on 15 March 1938 – the day of Anschluss.

Source: Creative Commons

PROLOGUE

I stand for a few minutes on the edge of the Ringstrasse. I am once again in Vienna. Is it my tenth or eleventh trip? I can't really remember.

But every time I come, I stop here, I breathe deeply to catch draughts that have whistled through the centuries. In them I hear cheers, claps and cries, great debates on the arts and philosophy, arguments, anger and authoritarian commands. It is a ubiquitous past which never quite lets go.

Behind me is the grassy square in front of the Kunsthistorisches – the great art treasury of the city – and the Museum of Natural History. These two great 19th-century palaces of art and science represent a city that prided itself on its intellectual achievements. Both were built in the 1880s as opposing mirrors on either side of a square dominated by a statue of the Empress Maria Theresa.

As I stand there, other sights and sounds intrude. The Ringstrasse's rushing cars and gliding trams disappear to be replaced by the clip-clop of horses' hooves as full carriages pass on their way to the Opera House or the Burgtheater or carry dignitaries to Parliament or to the Rathaus – the centre of government for the city of Vienna.

I wait for the signal to cross and pass through the ceremonial citadel gates built to commemorate the victory over Napoleon led by

Emperor Francis II. At that time Vienna was the cultural and political capital of Europe and in 1815 the great Congress of Vienna ending the Napoleonic Wars was held here. Europe under Metternich was to make the continent safe from the dangerous ideas spawned by the French Revolution. But the appeal of those ideas could only be stemmed, not broken, and in the end they destroyed the secure world of Vienna.

I walk along the carriageway at the centre of an even larger grass square – Heldenplatz – Hero Square. I am now in the Hofburg, the town palace of the Habsburgs who ruled Vienna for around 500 years. I shut my eyes and see a whiskery face peering out of the window of the carriage as the man hurries towards his palace. It might be early in the morning – Franz Josef was famous for starting work at 5am. He is alone. His beautiful wife – Sisi – the Empress – is probably away on her travels, or perhaps limbering up in a special gym. She was a fanatic about keeping her figure.

But other sounds like those of a swelling symphony, so many of which were composed in Vienna, are filling Heldenplatz. Soon there were will be no room to stand freely. I will be jammed by a huge crowd awaiting the arrival of its hero. Black Mercedes sweep through the ceremonial gates and the cries – '*Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Fuhrer*'– rise to a crescendo. Nemesis has arrived.

All around me Viennese citizens are raising their arms and cheering. Many are smiling at the sheer joy of finally being able to join their German cousins. This is what they want – already the streets leading to Heldenplatz have been lined with similar cheering crowds as the 'little corporal', an Austrian by birth and Viennese in his early adult years, leaves his grand car, mounts the dais and in his rather rough Viennese German tells the crowd how their future is as part of the Reich. This, he says, will end those problems of poverty, social unrest, and neglect, which have reduced Austria from the status of a great power to a rump. It is intoxicating material. Hitler has arrived to re-unite all good Germans into his great new super-state. It is the final triumph of nationalism over the Habsburg ideal of a multi-national Europe.

The symbolism of making his first speech in Vienna in the Heldenplatz is not lost on Hitler. Right in front of him is a statue to

Prince Eugene of Savoy (1663–1736), one of Austria's great military leaders who successfully fought the Turks and the French in the early 18th century, and beyond him is Archduke Charles (1771–1847), the successful general who defeated Napoleon. Hitler believed that he had come to save Austria from itself.

But today there is no mention of Hitler anywhere near Heldenplatz. It's as if the great crowds that celebrated his arrival have disappeared like wraiths. They are gone. By 1945, if they survived those terrible years of oppression, war, rape and looting, these people would never admit they lifted an arm to celebrate the arrival of their one-time hero.

Hitler's arrival ushered in a decade of unspeakable horror. It changed the old Vienna for ever and left a legacy of guilt. It's a period few want to talk about. Yet failure to understand this, to recognise its existence, means that Vienna, while glorious as a city of music, art, intellectual thought, of writers, philosophers and scientists, appears to end more than one hundred years ago.

And there is more to the Vienna story than that.

Vienna's famous fiakers in Michaelerplatz just outside the Hofburg. Immediately opposite is Adolf Loos' house built between 1910–12 and called the 'house without eyebrows' because of its modernist style.

Source: Jenny Haworth

Chapter One

FIRST ENCOUNTERS

At first sight the once great Imperial capital appeared dingy, dark and dusty. Had the sparkling culture I had so longed to see been destroyed by years of neglect and unspeakable hardship? Initially I was disappointed but it did not take me long to find the old Vienna behind this façade.[1]

Jenny Wily, 1975

My first visit to Vienna was at the end of 1975 – it was only just over twenty years since the Russians had withdrawn and the Allied Powers ended the occupation of Austria and the four-power division of Vienna – getting rid of the Russians is still regarded as a 'miracle'. They had been gruesome years which had impoverished the city, although the Viennese hid it well.

I arrived in December – the winter snow had just started to fall, but the streets were wet and slushy – it was dark and cold. As was to become customary, I caught the train in from the airport and then took a taxi to the pension which was in the 1st district in Dorotheergasse – the centre of the old town. I was driven into a courtyard and the driver indicated a decrepit lift and wrote 4th on a piece of paper. At that stage I had no German and could understand nothing of what he said.

I loaded my bags into the lift that creaked and groaned all the way to the 4th floor. It came to a halt in a small lobby and I was greeted by a rather stout, but very regal Austrian woman, Madame Pertsky. 'Yes, you are expected.' Behind her every passageway was blocked off with heavy velvet curtains which hung in loops. For a moment I thought I had arrived in a boudoir. Madame explained that in this

pension there were no evening meals and that breakfast was at 7.30 am. The bathroom was just down the corridor from the bedroom and that all baths were an extra charge. Her accent was thick and I wasn't sure how many schillings I would have to pay for a bath. There was no such thing as a shower.

She pushed aside the heavy velvet curtain and led me to my bedroom. It was dark and rather dingy and there was no light from the outside. It was too late to go and look for food so after a tepid bath I climbed into bed and hoped for a brighter morning. The pension was so silent that I wondered if there was anyone else staying there.

Next morning, when I opened the curtain, I found my room looked into a man's office and although it was only 6 am he was already working at his desk. During subsequent visits I was to learn just how hard the Viennese were prepared to work to help their country recover from the war.

At breakfast I learnt the pension had numerous guests. There was no elaborate breakfast buffet – we were served rolls, butter, jam and a little honey. I think there may have been a plate of salami and ham on the table. It was accompanied by a large cup of milky coffee that was tepid, like the bath water.

The other person at the table was a very pleasant Englishman who had just arrived from Romania. He was not really prepared to tell me what he had been doing there, but he did talk about how slowly that country was recovering from World War II. 'It is,' he said, 'just so poor. The peasants live as they did in the 19th century even though they have collectivised the farms. Some wonderful things to see though, but it's not a tourist country.'

He had also been in Budapest on the way back to Vienna – a place that I longed to visit. 'Lovely city,' he said, 'ruined by war, revolution and oppression. But things are improving under Kádár – the Hungarians feel they have some future.'

All this was tantalising and I longed to go. But these countries were closed to me – they all needed visas and expensive payments to Intourist organisations in hard cash. I wasn't in Vienna to spend hours organising that. But I had inadvertently discovered one of the

unspoken features of Vienna in the 1970s – it was a listening post for what was going on the Soviet Empire. People went as tourists and came back as informers.

On this first trip Vienna was a comparatively inexpensive city. For perhaps the only time during my numerous visits there I had the money to buy good seats for the opera and to enjoy the Vienna Boys' Choir and the Spanish Riding School.

It was all very romantic as were the palaces – it was a glimpse of the Vienna I had loved as a child. At the age of seven I was taken to see a production of Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow*. Even then I understood that while this operetta was set in Paris it was really about Austria-Hungary, about the world of its princes and princesses, even if hardly realistic. What was portrayed was a glamorous, romantic world that stretched way beyond the very Brito-centric world I was growing up in. There was romance, colour and swaying music which made me want to get up and dance.

Soon I saw Vienna as a wonderful world of elegance and excitement. But later, other stories suggested a different world, especially those told by the few desperate refugees who had arrived in New Zealand. Often these people spoke nostalgically about what they had lost – the missing city of intellectual ferment and artistic creativity they had had to flee. So, I learnt about the glamour and excitement, but also about the seeds of destruction that were encased in the fabric of the city. It was these I was to uncover in my many visits to the city.

I soon learnt that what makes this city so fascinating are the wonderful stories of people. I have discovered many more of its characters through reading non-fiction or exploring its atmosphere through a variety of novels.