



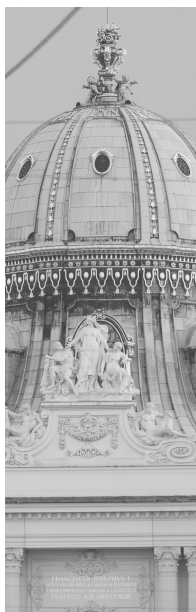
Vienna Tales

Stories translated by
Deborah Holmes

Edited by Helen Constantine



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General Introduction to Vienna Tales

When I was a cook in Unterpurkersdorf *Altenheim*, a home for the aged in the suburbs of Vienna back in the 1960s—I think it was part of a Concordia work project of the kind students did in those days, before it was called the gap year and they all went round the world—I had to wear a spotless white apron and tie up my hair in an equally spotless white cap during the day. After work I took off my cap, let my hair down and twisted again to Chubby Checker and company. In the immediate surroundings of Unterpurkersdorf in the nearby *Naturpark*, there was some relaxation, apart from Chubby Checker, to be had, but on our days off we usually took the train from Unterpurkersdorf station into the centre to see the sights: the Stefansdom, the Prater, the Albertina museum, the Spanish Riding School, and then, further afield, the Palace of Schönbrunn.

Unterpurkersdorf was, and still is, a town outside Vienna in the Vienna Woods, and therefore my experience mirrors

the structure of this volume: stories from the periphery of the capital, but looking inwards to its centre.

Several of the tales are set in the environs of, rather than in, the capital. In the 1840s the Prater amusement park, on an island outside the walls, was evoked fondly by Adalbert Stifter in his memoir; he calls it the ‘garden of Vienna’ and writes of meadows and copses and the rabbits on the path along the Danube where he can escape from the crowds in the city. At about the same time Heinrich Laube describes his arrival at an inn in Vienna with similar enthusiasm, and extols the ‘city of paradise’, full of cheerful, charming women and picturesque places, though he writes with tongue in cheek and a perceptive insight into the Viennese character. The photo opposite his story shows what Laube’s point of arrival looks like in the twenty-first century, sadly now surrounded by office blocks, but also by housing developments which have improved the quality of life for many of the less well-off. Laube remarks: ‘There is something touching about the fearful assiduousness with which the Viennese seek to uphold the belief that the good old days are still here in Vienna and that the city remains unchanged.’ He himself suffered under the repressive regimes of his day and was imprisoned for his subversive activities.

By the turn of the nineteenth century Vienna was to some extent a police state, socially conservative,

multicultural but antisemitic. But from 1867 to 1918, the end of the First World War, the Austro-Hungarian Empire did at least provide a vast zone in which a great variety of languages and cultures more or less vibrantly asserted their identities. The mid-nineteenth century was also the period of the *feuilletonists*, as described so vividly in a satirical portrait by Kürnberger included here. The *feuilleton* was a literary genre, originating from France and Germany, which might be compared to the review section of our modern newspapers, or even Facebook or Twitter, where cultural, not overtly political, subjects were discussed; much tittle-tattle was aired and there was often a great deal of gossip and back-biting.

Cities of course are constantly changing, and in the first years of the twentieth century Viennese life was by no means idyllic. However this was the period of creative activity that brought us, amongst others, Freud, Kokoschka, Klimt, Schiele, Schnitzler, and Schönberg. By the end of the First World War between 1918 and 1938, with much social division and outright conflict, life for many was very hard. In 1919 Anton Kuh writes in 'Lenin and Demel' of the effect of the class divisions in Vienna at that time. After the Anschluss in 1938 Hitler took control and Austria, already under an Austro-Fascist dictatorship, was assimilated into the Third Reich. 65,000 Jews were deported and murdered in concentration camps. As the war ended the Viennese

suffered the Allied bombings and the city was occupied until 1955. Alexander Kluge's story, 'The Twilight of the Gods', documents the events that befell Wagner's opera, with the opera house itself being burnt down in a bombing raid. The subsequent discovery in the 1990s of the film of the performances is narrated here.

People, as well as places, can be peripheral. In Dinev's story about Spas in 2003, the refugee from Bulgaria is on the periphery of society. Readers will recognize the problems, so characteristic of our own time, encountered by many refugees arriving in a capital city and looking for work. In many of the collections of *City Tales* readers will find at least one story on this subject. In Vienna as in other cities at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Poles, Russians, Bosnians, Turks, Greeks, Romanians, and latterly Syrians, among others arriving in search of work, find themselves struggling to survive. Work for refugees is the Holy Grail, and *Arbeit* is the first word of German that Spas learns. But to work you need a work permit, and—to get a permit you need to be in work. Refugees can wait for years for a visa, living in squats, old train carriages, like Spas, or in other very poor accommodation.

Today, for those of us who choose to visit the city, but don't have to live on the edge of society, Vienna is considered to be one of the most 'liveable' cities in the world. We hope this literary journey, from the outside looking in,

travelling through Vienna's woods and suburban streets into the heart of the city, will induce readers to make the acquaintance of writers who have lived and worked there, and thus gain an insight into what Vienna and the Viennese are 'really' like.

Introduction

Wien ist anders—Vienna is different. It's hard not to agree with the city's official slogan, omnipresent on billboards and in tourist brochures since the early 1990s. Vienna is different—different from the rest of Austria in its diversity and urban flair; different from other European capitals in its compact greenness and impeccable public transport system; different from what English-speaking visitors in particular seem to expect. Although the city's small, historic centre caters rather too exclusively to the luxury shopper, beyond this—and it can be walked through easily in twenty minutes or so—Vienna is a traveller's dream: as well as astonishingly reasonable food and accommodation, the city provides an impressive array of events open to whoever cares to attend, outdoor concerts, film showings, festivals, street parties, innumerable Christmas markets, food fairs. On the subject of which, the neat pun *Wien isst anders*—Vienna eats differently—has also become something of an official slogan, revealing both the childlike glee of the Viennese in word play and justified self-congratulation as

regards the city's culinary traditions. Home of the Sachertorte and the schnitzel, to give but two notable examples, Vienna also offers fine wines, grown and served on sloping terraces within the city limits. The visitor sits, glass in hand, looking down over the 'Blue Danube', whose waters are not only famous in music and word, but also clean enough to provide miles of leafy beach in the long, hot summers. In many ways, it's immediately obvious why Vienna regularly tops the charts of cities with the highest quality of life worldwide.

When researching the stories for this collection, it therefore came as no surprise to discover that writers have often used Vienna as a byword for pleasure. In texts from the early to mid-nineteenth century in particular, the city stands for wine, women, and song, for a laid-back, playful—perhaps somewhat lax?—outlook on life that is invariably linked to its location as German culture's southernmost centre. The pieces I have included here by Heinrich Laube, Adalbert Stifter, and Ferdinand Kürnberger are very much in this vein. Kürnberger, a native of Vienna, plays up to the clichés of Viennese nonchalance and hedonism in a spirit of gentle self-irony. Laube and Stifter are two outsiders—Laube a Prussian, Stifter from the west of Austria—who knowingly allow Vienna to seduce them with its charms, and end up in an enjoyable if not uncritical daze.

Given the strength of this tradition, it comes as a surprise, as a shock even, to discover just how difficult it is to find more recent stories that take a light-hearted view of the city. The theme of the good life and of Vienna's beauty continues, but there are very few authors who do not dwell on elements of darkness or melancholy. Indeed, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, death itself seems to have become the preferred guide to the city in literature, as Austria's pre-eminent literary critic Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler once pointed out. Time and time again, narratives set in modern-day Vienna begin with the demise of a character or a funeral. Following the hints of an ever-constructive editor to balance the collection with some more cheerful pieces, many was the tale that I discarded—stories full of Viennese colour but characterized by negativity and loss: Heimito von Doderer's 'Tod einer Dame im Sommer' (Death of a Lady in Summer) for instance, and Thomas Bernhard's anguished 'Verbrechen eines Innsbrucker Kaufmannssohnes' (Crime of an Innsbruck Merchant's Son) or the blackly comical 'Ist es eine Komödie? Ist es eine Tragödie?' (Is it a Comedy? Is it a Tragedy?). Several such pieces remain: 'Six-nine-six-six-nine-nine' by Doron Rabinovici, a story about music, ghosts, and telephone sex, or else Eva Menasse's 'Envy', which shows that the twenty-first-century Viennese tale has by no means shaken off the shadow of death. Whether

Ingeborg Bachmann's 'O Happy Eyes' ends in an actual fatality or not is a moot point—something of a recurring feature in her short prose writings—and other stories in the collection are also pervaded by an atmosphere of finitude and endings: Christine Nöstlinger's 'Ottakringerstrasse' for example, or else Dimitré Dinev's 'Spas Sleeps'.

What are the reasons for this? Much has already been written about the cult of death in Vienna, of Viennese fascination with the 'schene Leich', which can mean either an exquisitely beautiful corpse or else a particularly sumptuous and well-organized funeral. In many ways, this seems to be the natural flip side to Viennese hedonism, as encapsulated countless times in popular *Wienerlieder* (Viennese songs): 'Es wird a Wein sein, und mir wer'n nimmer sein, d'rum g'niaß ma's Leb'n so lang's uns g'freut. / 'S wird schöne Maderln geb'n, und wir werd'n nimmer leb'n, D'rum greif ma zua, g'rad is's no Zeit' (there'll be wine galore, and we'll be no more, so enjoy yourself, don't stop and reason. / There'll be pretty girls to hold, and we'll have gone cold, so cling on to life's brief season). There is also a counter-reformatory, Baroque element that persists in Viennese culture, be it only as ironic quotation (Eva Menasse!), which favours the *memento mori*. But all of these reasons pale in comparison to Vienna's deadly twentieth-century history. Although it was one of the world's largest

cities by 1900, it shrank rather than growing over the following hundred years. Decimated by starvation and epidemics after the First World War and by the Nazis' murderous racism 1938–45, Vienna's population has only recently begun to recover. Even now, it has still not regained the size of its *fin-de-siècle* glory days. The gaping holes left in the city's social and intellectual fabric by the expulsion or extermination of its Jewish population continue to preoccupy, if not torment, some of its finest writers. Vienna's historical losses are addressed repeatedly, either openly—as in Rabinovici's tale—or else as an ever-present, ominous substratum, as in Bachmann's story of Miranda, a woman who literally refuses to see Vienna for what it is.

To a certain extent, however, the sense of endings and limits in many of the tales is also simply a result of my initial idea for the collection. I wanted to concentrate on stories set at the city's margins. Perhaps more than any other modern European capital, Vienna is dominated by its natural surroundings—the Vienna Woods and the foothills of the Alps to the west, the arms of the Danube cutting through the city from north to south and the Pannonian plain stretching away to Hungary in the east. Modern developers have had relatively little opportunity to obscure this distinctive topography. The Iron Curtain descended less than forty miles away, and Vienna was left

stranded in a backwater until the Cold War ended: roads and railways petered out towards this hermetic border. At least the regulation of the Danube was concluded during this period—no longer is the city plagued by catastrophes such as the flood that ends Franz Grillparzer's 'The Poor Fiddler', another tale regrettably excluded from this collection. Even now, as housing developments gradually begin to creep across the eastern plain and up into the Vienna Woods, clear differences remain between the appearance of the city's geographical 'regions'—and Vienna as a whole is still small enough for the visitor to explore each of these for him or herself.

There are also still many places where you can see into and out of the city with one exhilarating gaze. Laube's description of arriving in Vienna from the south first attracted me because of the familiar feeling it conveys of passing the *Spinnerin am Kreuz* and looking down over Vienna, despite almost two centuries' difference. And even from the centre, the vineyards of the Kahlenberg and Bisamberg remain visible, the two small mountains—confused by Miranda in Bachmann's story—that stand sentinel to the west and east of the Danube as it enters the city. This natural gateway directs wind and weather into Vienna, which is situated both literally and figuratively on a watershed between western and eastern Europe. Atlantic fronts clash with air from the steppes above the

city, and centuries of cultural and political struggle have been conducted within it. Every metropolis is a melting pot, but Vienna's self-consciousness as either a 'gateway to the east' or else 'bulwark of the west' is especially acute. The threat of siege—real or imagined—recurs as a theme, taken up here by Anton Kuh in his account of deposed Habsburg aristocrats negotiating newly republican Vienna in 1919 (and what could be a more Viennese solution to their dilemmas than taking refuge in a coffeehouse?). However, whatever position writers take up in the interminable debate of East versus West, their descriptions of the city are informed by the same topography, the same climate and natural landmarks. A feeling of being, paradoxically, both at the centre of Europe and on its margins can be found again and again, mirrored in the microcosm of the city and its environs.

Partly as a way of evading, but partly also as a way of redefining these debates on the city's identity, authors of Vienna tales have often chosen to set their works at the city's edges, in the interstices between urban and rural life. They have also found transitional moods and moments in the city centre, which is dominated by its own series of 'natural' landmarks—labyrinthine parks and enormous green spaces, the Volksgarten, Stadtpark, Augarten and Prater, the banks of the Danube and the river Wien. Much of Vienna's built environment has remained unchanged

for so long that it also seems natural—the craggy single peak of the Stefansdom, the crooked axis of Graben and Kärtnerstrasse and the bulk of the imperial Hofburg. What on earth, Kürnberger’s blasé coffeehouse patron asks, is an author to write about in Vienna, where everything always stays the same? From the early 1860s onwards, shortly after this text by Kürnberger was first published, the inner city wall was gradually demolished and the transportation network modernized. Even then, however, the city fathers chose conservative solutions: the famous Ringstrasse that replaced Vienna’s bastions still traces the same semi-circle, dividing the centre from the outlying districts. The first urban railway lines were opened late for a metropolis the size of Vienna—1898—and constructed around the city’s existing features rather than ploughing through or under them. Vienna’s constancy and harmony with its natural surroundings has been idealized by generations of writers seeking to capture the secret of its charm. At the same time, as my collection goes some way to showing, a counter-tradition has grown up of consciously seeking the seamy, the corrupt, and the horrific beneath the city’s attractive exterior. Here the idyllic images of woods and water, mountains and parks appear in ironic subversions, used to throw the darker episodes of Vienna’s history into starker relief.

In keeping with the original theme of the collection, the stories are arranged geographically rather than

chronologically, around and through the city from west to east and back again. I begin and end with two pieces by Arthur Schnitzler (1862–1931), a writer who lived and worked in Vienna throughout his life, and whose oeuvre is remarkable for its precise and yet poetic evocations of the city. No matter how impressionistic, his descriptions of Vienna's centre can always be followed step by step with a map in hand: street names, addresses, cafés and amenities of the time are all there. Away from the centre, the topography in his works becomes less determinate, but the sense of place, paradoxically, seems even stronger. The two stories selected here 'The Four-poster Bed' and 'Out for a Walk' are prime examples of this, introducing us to the Vororte west of the city that used to be a half-rural, half-urban no-man's land between Vienna's suburbs and the outlying villages and is now subsumed in the fifteenth to nineteenth districts. This is a setting to which Schnitzler returns, for the location of the masked ball gate-crashed by Fridolin in the extraordinary 'Dream Story' of 1926. 'The Four-poster Bed' and 'Out for a Walk' are early works, written sometime between 1891 and 1893. Neither story was anthologized during Schnitzler's lifetime, nor did they make it into the collected works that Schnitzler selected for publication by Fischer in 1922. They are effectively rejects and have never been translated before, not even appearing in book form until 1977 (in the posthumous *Gesammelte*

Werke also published by Fischer). However, they not only fit in perfectly with my theme of the city's margins, but are also perfectly rounded stories, which makes their marginal status in Schnitzler's oeuvre even more intriguing. They illustrate in miniature a much discussed characteristic of all his writing: its repetitive nature and obsessive variation of a limited number of themes—love, death, Vienna. Schnitzler is a gift to every anthology, because it is arguably easier to do him justice with one or two short pieces than other Viennese writers from the same period with more varied themes such as, for example, Musil or Hofmannsthal.

No-one actually dies in either 'Out for a Walk' or 'The Four-poster Bed', but lots of things come to an end—and at the beginning of both texts, we find ourselves physically at the very edge of the city, beyond the outer *Linie* or *Linienwall*. The composition of the two stories was swiftly followed by another ending, the demolition in 1894 of this last line of Vienna's historic fortifications, making way for a wave of building expansion that swept away the Vororte as Schnitzler describes them here. Both stories share almost identical openings, but develop very differently. 'The Four-poster Bed' is a bittersweet love story between a young gentleman from the city centre and a 'süßes Mädel' ('sweet maid') from the Vorstadt—one of the many lissom, sexually available lower-middle-class females so central as a concept in Schnitzler's works

and yet often so peripheral as characters. 'Out for a Walk' by contrast evokes the mood of city's periphery as the setting for a heated debate between four young men—part flippant, part desperate—as to what Vienna might 'mean' and whether or not it has a soul. They are however in total agreement as regards its fickleness and the pitfalls of seeking success and recognition there. 'Out for a Walk' enriches my anthology not only with references to Viennese topography, but also to its literary history. The four friends would have been immediately recognizable to readers of the time as portraits of the central clique of 'Young Vienna': Schnitzler, Hofmannsthal, Felix Salten, and Richard Beer-Hofmann. The problem they discuss of how to reconcile the (self-)critical and experimental with local patriotism and tradition was one of the chief dilemmas of Viennese Modernism.

From the western outskirts of the city, the collection takes us on excursions up into the Vienna Woods with Joseph Roth and Friedericke Mayröcker. Mayröcker also plumbs the city's depths, represented here by its Second World War bomb shelters. The descent into Vienna's underworld continues with Alexander Kluge's documentary-style description of how Wagner was recorded in cellars around the State Opera during Allied raids in spring 1945. We surface again in the city centre to take a satirical look at the effects of the First World War with

Anton Kuh's account of Konditorei Demel, a coffeehouse and cake shop patronized by the Habsburgs themselves, whose sumptuous window displays and uniformed waitresses continue to grace the Kohlmarkt today. Many of the photographs featured here were selected over lunch in Demel's 'smoking salon', sunk deep in armchairs that would surely still be feudal enough to put the barons and counts in Kuh's piece at their ease. Some writers consider the carefully cultivated sense of historical continuity in Vienna's city centre disturbing—*unheimlich*, to use a term favoured by one of its most famous former inhabitants, Sigmund Freud. Bachmann's Miranda in 'O Happy Eyes' is at once deeply attached to her home in the central Blutgasse and at the same time determined to distance herself from the realities of life in the city. By the story's end she seems to have achieved her ambition, if not by the means originally intended.

To escape the burden of history, we then take a fresh run-up at the city, entering it from the south with Laube in the mid-1830s. Twenty years later, Kürnberger's amusing anatomy of Vienna's various 'species' of journalist suggests several different approaches or perspectives. His final example, that of the 'social feuilletonist' or *Feuilletonistus aequivocus*, gives us a brief glimpse of what were then Vienna's newly forming industrial suburbs, another vantage point from which to see the city from its margins. The

next piece, by the Bulgarian-born Dimitré Dinev, is one of many examples of how Vienna's literary scene has been revitalized by immigrant writers in recent years. Its unassuming hero Spas is an asylum seeker whose view of the city throws a whole new light on the traditional connotations of its topography.

We first and last see Spas in the third district, Wien Landstraße, to the south-east of the centre—said to have been considered by Metternich as the beginning of the Balkans. The second short piece I have selected by Joseph Roth, 'The Spring Ship', encapsulates beautifully the feeling of wanderlust this part of the city inspires with its open skies and the Danube canal leading further south to far-away places... The canal also marks the dividing line between the third and second district, the latter dominated by the Prater, Vienna's 'green lung'—an immense, teardrop-shaped park that combines fairground, football stadium, conference centres, pubs, clubs, meadows, swamps, and primordial woodland. The proportions of this mixture may have changed over the years, but as the stories here by Stifter and Canetti show, its unique attraction has remained constant. Although it is such a varied and open space, the Prater represents a concentration of conflicting traditions typical of Vienna as a whole. Originally a Habsburg hunting ground and the exclusive preserve of a dynastic elite, it was opened to the public in 1766 under Emperor Josef II, a great

Enlightenment reformer. The upper classes continued to use the Prater for riding, racing, and hunting into the 1920s, but at the same time it became a much-loved site of popular entertainment and of popular protest. From 1890 right up to the present, streams of workers have marked Labour Day in Vienna with marches through the Prater. And Vienna's Communist movement, although otherwise moribund, still manages to host the enormously successful Volksstimmfest ('people's voice' party) there every year. Veza Canetti's story refers to these traditions in the political bent of her unabashed young protagonist. Canetti herself was closely associated with 'Red Vienna', the Social Democrat administration that attempted to revolutionize the city after the First World War, before a proto-fascist putsch put an end to it and to any realistic chance of being able to hold out against Hitler.

Childhood experience of the city is central not only to Canetti's tale, but also to Christine Nöstlinger's description of the Ottakringerstrasse, the busy street that divides the sixteenth from the seventeenth district. In both pieces, any sentimentality is counterbalanced by an ironic, at times surreal edge—as one would expect from these socially critical, unconventional authors. Nöstlinger takes us close to the city's western edge, where the villa of the charismatic but ultimately isolated literature professor in Menasse's 'Envy' is to be found. Sergio, the composer

in Rabinovici's tale, also takes refuge in a suburb, although it is not made clear which: musicians have found inspiration throughout the city and its history, as numerous plaques on walls show. Equally, the events leading up to the Holocaust, fundamental to Rabinovici's mysterious narrative, could also have taken place in any district of Vienna. In 'Merry-go-round', Joseph Roth takes us back out to the Vororte, where Schnitzler's four friends are 'Out for a Walk', concluding the anthology. The combination of little-known pieces by writers already indelibly associated with Vienna and tales by contemporary authors translated here for the first time will, I hope, give the reader a new perspective on the city, seen from its literary margins.