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Written by Maureen Younger

LIFESTYLE

Oh, Vienna

With Eurovision about to waltz into Vienna, former resident *Maureen Younger* reflects on the city behind the sequins and statues. Three decades on, she finds a capital still alive with humour and friendship.

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There is always a strange feeling when you go back to a city that was once your home. I think it's because you know the city as it was but not as it is. It's as if you've left a life there that you could have lived and now you're back, the city and the people you knew have moved on, and everything is just ever so slightly out of sync.

So what makes somewhere home away from home? I think it all boils down to one word – friendship.

I first went to Vienna in the mid-'80s to study German. The one flaw in that plan is that Austrians don't really speak German – at least not in so far as many Germans believe it should be spoken. To paraphrase George Bernard Shaw: Germany and Austria are two countries separated by a common language.

I had no idea about this, of course. This was long before the existence of Wikipedia. If truth be told, I mainly went to Vienna because my lecturers told me I shouldn't. (For some unearthly reason they wanted me to go to Kassel) So ignoring their advice, as is my wont, I set off for the Austrian capital.



Maureen's student ID from Vienna University.

After a 24-hour train journey from Victoria Station via Belgium and through what seemed like most of Germany, I finally arrived in Vienna minus two very large suitcases. Needless to say it came as a bit of a shock when, upon arriving at Vienna's

West Station, I enquired about my missing suitcases only to find that the one person who spoke 'proper' German seemed to be me.

Having gone there to study German and Russian, I duly enrolled as a foreign student at Vienna University. Once there, I attended the odd lecture and then decided I'd learn more German by socialising with Austrians. This proved to be true but, not surprisingly, did little to improve my Russian.

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However, it did mean I made some friendships that have lasted over three decades. I ended up in the eighth district, sharing with a flatmate who went by the rather un-German-sounding name of Doris. For the first three days we both pretended to be extremely tidy. Then, much to our mutual relief, we discovered we were both slobs and our zealous tidiness blitz soon disappeared, never to return.

Doris's family had been turfed out of Yugoslavia after the war – those who hadn't been killed by partisans, of course. She worked various odd jobs from social worker to waitress, to working as a guide at one of the grandest museums in the world, the Naturhistorisches Museum. It was thanks to the latter job that I managed to see *The Jungle Book* in German. Though in all fairness singing along to *Probiert mal mit Gemütlichkeit* doesn't really have the same ring to it as *The Bare Necessities*.

Doris and I had the incredible good fortune of living opposite three guys whose front door didn't lock properly. This being '80s Vienna it wasn't much of a security issue. It also meant that my flatmate and I could walk into their flat whenever we liked by flipping up the lock, and therefore tended to regard their front room/kitchen as an extension to our own flat.

As the guys could cook better than us and were extremely good company, not surprisingly we seemed to spend more time in their flat than ours. And as we were students we had a lot of time on our hands. We therefore also went to cafés – a lot. And it was in cafés such as the nearby Café Hummel in the Josefstadt that I spent some of the happiest evenings of my youth.

My neighbours – Franz, Alois and Walter – were all country boys who hailed from Upper Austria. This meant that once they had had a bit too much to drink they would invariably start talking in dialect and so neither I – nor Doris for that matter – could understand a word they were saying.

The Austrians pride themselves on having a different sense of humour from their German cousins. One of the neighbours explained that this is because, unlike the Germans, they actually have a sense of humour. That rather partisan theory aside, there is a certain type of cultured wit that is endemic to any decently educated Austrian for which I seem to have an ingrained adoration.

Austrians play with words, ideas, and the register of the language for comic effect. They'll pontificate, for example, about why you shouldn't eat mayonnaise with chips but in such a way that it's hilarious, and of course they don't believe one iota of what they are saying. It's all for comic effect. In fact, one of Austria's unofficial national sports is taking the mick out of hapless German tourists and ex-pats who mistake their comic sorties as serious diatribes.

So if I'm feeling down, I'll put on an Austrian film such as *Der Bockerer* (in which a Viennese butcher manages to run rings round the Gestapo and the Nazi authorities who are never quite sure if he's just thick or being subversive) or the far more recent Austrian TV series *Braunschlag*, and just hearing that unmistakable intonation will generally put a smile on my face. This soft spot I still have for most things Austrian is, of course, in no small part due to the friendship I've built over the decades with my former neighbours.

"There is a certain type of cultured wit that is endemic to any decently educated Austrian for which I seem to have an ingrained adoration."

I'm still good friends with all three of the guys. And because they met me in my 20s they know and see the *me* that I see and think I still am, and not the middle-aged *me* that I've become and that everyone else sees and treats accordingly.

All four of us recently caught up with each other. Of course we'd seen each other over the years but we'd not all been in a room together since the '80s. Despite the passage of time we just picked up where we'd left off. And no doubt much to the irritation and sheer boredom of everyone else around us, we were still laughing about things that we'd originally found funny 30 years back. There is a closeness and a deep affection which true friendship engenders that the passage of time seemingly can't touch.

None of us live in Vienna anymore. Unlike me, though, they all have proper jobs, have settled down and have families. As they all still live in Austria, I'm guessing they are not as nostalgic as I am about the place, but it's clear we all remember our student days in the Blindengasse with a great deal of fondness.

When I returned back to my UK university having immersed myself for six wonderful months in Austrian culture, I had such a thick Austrian accent the German language assistant laughed so much she almost fell off her chair. The thick Austrian accent has sadly long gone. However, the Austrian intonation is still there, as is my love for the Austrian wit, culture, humour and above all the great friendship that for me the city represents.

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