INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR-10
Who is an Austrian?

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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Current world affairs are never far removed from the lives of people in Central Europe, as they are from the lives of most Americans. In the last forty-five years the story has generally been written with a tragic pen, and the miracle is that people who have suffered the most, like the Austrians, often retain a capacity for enjoyment far greater than that of the most securely nested American. Or perhaps it is no miracle, but only a matter of being shocked into seeing things in different perspective.

This is not to say that all, or even most, of the tragedies are of the sorts that win headlines. I have met Jews who escaped the Nazis and Hungarian freedom fighters who escaped the Stalinists: their stories are dramatic and have often been told. They deserve telling. But this battered corner of the world is full of other people, too, whose lives the events of the last five decades have also knocked about - less dramatically, to be sure, and on an individual basis, but still effectively. Their stories must be heard and understood too before the meaning of this latest age of conflict can really be grasped.

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Maria Motlik is 64 years old and an Austrian. But the town where she was born is no longer Austrian and the people she calls countrymen live under at least four flags now. She is one of the millions who have lived through the tragedy of Central Europe in the Twentieth Century, and she often says: "I tell you, Herr Rusinow, the things that have happened..."

Today, at 64, she is stout, asthmatic, and has a bad heart. She gets about with difficulty and seems ten years older than she is. All of this happened, her daughter says, because of the strain, both physical and nervous, of keeping an invalid husband alive during the battle of Vienna and the "Third Man" years that followed. Thinking of those days, and of their complete aloneness in the world today, the two women say that, if another war should come, they will take their cat to a veterinarian to be killed, then come home and turn on the gas. "Two wars are enough for one lifetime."

But except for these moments of remembering and thinking of the future, Frau Motlik bubbles with irrepressible good humor and enthusiasm for life: a round German Hausfrau who loves people and animals, but animals just a little better than people.

Maria Motlik was born in the reign of Franz Josef in Teschen, an industrial town of 40,000 in Austrian Silesia. Her father was a Silesian townsman who owned a little shop employing eight shoemakers. One of her grandmothers was "Reichsdeutsch" - a German from Germany - resented in Teschen because she spoke the dialect of the Prussians who had stolen the other half of Silesia from Maria Theresia a century and a half earlier. The neighbors were Silesians and Czechs and Poles, all with memories that were too long of wrongs done their nations in centuries past. Maria grew up speaking Polish as well as German, and even now she can still read both Czech and Polish.

Her family and friends called her Mitzi. She was an extraordinarily cheerful person, slim, gentle and quick-witted. She had a good voice and liked to sing, and was much in demand as a soloist in Teschen churches; she dreamed of being an opera singer. But her father died when she was a child, and in 1912, when she was 17, her mother died, too, and she married a neighborhood boy named Hildebrandt. A year later their only child, a daughter named Helene, was born.

Young Hildebrandt was a Viennese and a skilled printer, both distinctions to be proud of in Teschen. And proud he was: when a wood that straddled the direct road to his house was made into a hunting reserve for an Archduke and Hildebrandt was told to find another road, he told the Archduke to his face that Hildebrandt was a man and an Austrian, too, and it was silly to go a mile out of his way to get home. The Archduke agreed.

The First World War ended the orderly world of Austrian Silesia and ushered in a time - not yet ended - in which the fate of its farmers and miners would be repeated altered by decisions made in Paris, Warsaw, Berlin, London, Washington and Moscow by people who had never heard of its towns. Teschen became one of the saddest and most notorious victims of the disintegration of Central Europe.

Hildebrandt was drafted, sent to the front, wounded and captured by the Russians. He returned in 1919 an invalid and died three years later of his wounds. The town to which he had come back was a prize contested by the new states of Czechoslovakia and Poland, and it had been occupied by Pilsudski's armies as a blunt hint to the Allies in Paris. The Versailles powers proposed to hold a plebescite, but it never came off. The territory was finally divided arbitrarily in 1920 by the Conference of (Allied) Ambassadors, with the old town and the industrial plant going to Poland, and the mines south of town going to Czechoslovakia. The Hildebrandts, who lived in a southern suburb, found themselves Czech citizens.

Widowed in 1922, Mitzi became a seamstress. In 1924 a new blow fell: the Czech government closed the German schools in the Teschen area, and the Widow Hildebrandt was told she must enter her daughter, now 10, in a Czech school. Her answer was to travel the same day to Moravska Ostrava, where there was an Austrian consulate, to request an immigrant visa. She closed the house in Teschen and took her daughter to Vienna. It seemed the logical place to go. Not only had her husband been Viennese, but Teschenites had always gone to Vienna: in 1910 for every thousand persons born in Teschen over 100 had moved to the imperial capital, a record equalled only by Lower Austria itself and southern Bohemia.

"Why," I asked the old lady once, "did you not want your daughter to go to a Czech school?"

She made a deprecatory face. "Teschen was my home," she said slowly, "and I had all my friends there. I didn't want to leave. But, well, a Czech school..."

I pressed my question. "I don't like the Czechs so much," she finally said, reluctantly.

In Vienna in 1936 she married a man twenty years older than herself, a railroad pensioner named Motlik. He was from Prague, a Czech. Herr Motlik's brother was furious with him: why had he married an Austrian, when Prague was full of Czech widows?

The tragedy of Teschen continued after Maria Hildebrandt had left. The Poles had always nursed a grudge about the perhaps 76,000 Poles included within the 1918-20 borders of Czechoslovakia. (A Hungarian Foreign Minister, Count Teleki, is credited in W. Kolarz' book Myths and Realities in Eastern Europe with this anecdote: "I once asked a very prominent Czech politician how many Poles there were in the district of Teschen. He said, 'Perhaps 40,000, perhaps 100,000.' I said 'How does it happen that you give me such different figures just when the question seems to be of momentous importance?' He replied, 'Well, the figures change. The peoples of certain villages are changing their nationality every week, according to their economic interests and sometimes the economic interests of the mayor of the village.'") After the Munich agreement had dismembered and isolated Czechoslovakia, the Poles availed themselves of the opportunity to sieze the Czech portions of the district on October 2, 1938, and Maria's old neighbors became Polish citizens. Eleven months later they passed, with Poland, into Hitler's empire. Teschen was separated from the German-puppet "Government General of Poland" and annexed directly into Germany. Maria Motlik visited her old house once, in 1944, and found it run down. The government had taken it over, although the title was still technically hers.

In Austria the Motliks lived in a little villa with a vegetable garden in Strasshof, a farming and commutors' village 15 miles east of Vienna in the flat and fertile Marchfeld. Maria was never really happy there - she was a town girl, not a peasant - and old Herr Motlik's poor health and the coming of the war persuaded them to move into Vienna, closer to doctors and the daughter's place of work. Housing was scarce in the city, but in the Leopoldstadt, between the Danube Canal and the Danube River, where most of Vienna's Jews had lived, the filling of concentration camps and gas chambers was emptying apartments, which became available to people with priorities. Although the Motliks were not Nazis, they were finally able, in 1941, to get a flat there, overlooking the Canal.

On the day she moved into the new apartment, Frau Motlik stood with the houseowner on her little balcony above the street. A small group of people went by wearing the compulsory yellow armband that marked the Jews. The houseowner said reassuringly: "You don't have to worry about being annoyed by those people. They are being taken away and gassed very soon."

It was the first that Frau Motlik had heard of this solution of the Jewish problem. By reflex she protested: "But they are people!" The Hausfrau looked at her suspiciously: "Well, yes, of course, but after they are Jews, and we can't have them just running around." Herr Motlik and the daughter were horrified at Mitzi's outspokenness: "We'll lose our apartment!" Herr Motlik, the old Czech-Austrian pensioner, had never cared for the Nazis, but he had always grumbled: "I'll not say anything, as long as they leave me in peace." But Frau Motlik's remark was not forgotten, and as the only non-Nazis in the house, life was never easy for the Motliks. In the last, hungry months, when cheese was available in the cellar for the rest of the house, the Motliks lived on potatoes.

In the second week of April, 1945, the Russians came to Vienna. They advanced from two directions, and Malinovsky's army, coming from the north like Suleiman's Turks in 1683, occupied the Inner City while the Germans still held the Leopoldstadt, across the Canal to the east. Three teenage German soldiers came with a machinegun they wanted to set up in the Motlik's sittingroom, which commanded a good view of the Russian positions on the opposite bank. The inhabitants of the house retired to the cellar, taking what valuables they could. The Nazi houseowner had taken his family to a country villa near Baden for greater safety.

When the householders ventured out of the cellar again, their apartments had been shot up and were filled with Russians instead of Germans. Frau Motlik found two wounded Russians in her kitchen, and since they were people, too, and reminded her of her Polish neighbors in Teschen, she bandaged them as best she could. One later died there, and was among those buried in the little park in front of the house.

Helene Motlik, like all the younger women in the house, had made herself look as ugly and undesirable as possible, but the Russians harmed no one. "They were too worn out, the poor boys," says Frau Motlik. But the Nazi houseowner who had run off to Baden was not so lucky. He was tied up and his two daughters repeatedly raped before his eyes, a shock from which he has never completely recovered (although the daughters seem to have). "I still think of that every time I see one of the girls," said Frau Motlik's daughter, with a touch of Schadenfreude.

Frau Motlik's own small revenge on her Nazi neighbors came soon. Discovering that she could speak Czech and Polish and understand a little Russian, the district Red Army commandant came to her for information. The neighbors begged her to cover for them. "Who were the Nazis in the house?" the Russian officer asked. Frau Motlik pointed upstairs and down: "From top to bottom," she said, quite casually. And the one-time Nazis were marched off to do compulsory work clearing rubble from the streets of the Leopoldstadt. "They were not so proud then, believe me," says Frau Motlik.

"But the've never forgotten what I did," she adds, a little more sadly.

Old Herr Motlik had survived the war, but not the peace. The first winters, when coal and wood were almost unobtainable (the coal ration in 1947-48 was 300 kilograms per household) and the windows lost during the battle could be replaced only with thick paper, and when the basic ration only gradually increased from 950 to 1500 calories a day, took their toll, and he died in 1948.

Since then history has left Maria Motlik in peace, to nurse her scars. The Russians occupied the Leopoldstadt for ten years, and then were gone. Vienna grew up again, the apartments were repaired, and the householders made arrangements to pay off in ten years the half million Schillings that refacing their war-battered building cost. Now only a few shrapnel holes in an antique cupboard are left to memorialize the teenage Germans with their machinegun, and the Russian who died. And Frau Motlik's bad heart, which the doctor says was the result of carrying coal and sticks through the cold winter streets of post-war Vienna.

Last year the cousin of a friend came from Teschen on a visit. The old Hildebrandt house still stands, she says. Teschen belongs to the Czechs again, and is called Cieszyn.

* * *

Maria Theresia Farkas is 61 years old and an Austrian. But the town where she was born is no longer Austrian, and although Vienna is now her home, neither this city, nor Austria, nor even Austrian citizenship is involved in really very much of her life story.

Citizen of six different countries - seven if you count the week she held a Paraguayan passport - and resident of a dozen: it is a typical biography of a member of her class in the Central Europe of today.

"Look," she says, "I'm a gypsy!"

At 61 Maria Farkas is trim, energetic, merry and handsome, and looks ten years younger than she is. Perhaps the business of raising a modern teenager - her son and only child is 16 - helps keep her that way.

She was born in the reign of Franz Josef in Pola near Trieste, the handsome naval and commercial port the Habsburgs had built as their door to the Mediterranean. She was one of four children of Baron Siegfried Pitner of the Imperial and Royal Austrian Navy and later of the Austro-Hungarian foreign service.

But Trieste and Pola she hardly knew. Her father's diplomatic career had taken the family to London, to South Africa, to Liverpool, to Niš (then in Serbia), to Vienna (then an Imperial city), to Breslau (then in Germany), to Brussels. In Vienna she saw the Old Emperor just once, but never forgot it. Then came the 1914-1918 war and the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy. With it went the old way of life. History overtook the cities where she had lived: Niš became Yugoslav

and, after another war, Breslau became Polish. Pola, her Austrian birthplace, passed through Italian hands to become, after 1945, Yugoslav.

Trieste and Pola in 1919 had been granted to Italy, and Baroness Maria Pitner found herself perforce an Italian citizen - without ever having been in Italy. Italian she had no particular desire to be, but when she came to change her citizenship, she found that the town from which her family had originally come was now across another border in Czechoslovakia. For six months she was a Czech national, before Austrian citizenship was finally arranged.

Life in Vienna in the 1920's was not what a young girl of good family could really want, so Maria Pitner followed her father into the diplomatic service and in 1926 was posted to the Austrian Embassy in Budapest. The Hungarian capital was to be her home for most of the next 22 years and, like many Austrians, she admits today that Budapest was a more magic place than Vienna ever hoped to be. It was also comfortably remote from the political and economic storms that left Austria Europe's saddest country in the 1930's.

With the Anschluss in March, 1938, external forces again began to prod the Pitners into unchosen paths. With a known anti-Nazi record, Maria Pitner immediately lost her job in the Austrian foreign service and found it prudent to stay in Hungary and seek Hungarian citizenship. In this last effort she was helped by a Budapest lawyer named Farkas, who was legal consultant to the Spanish Legation, and whom she had known casually for several years. They were married after the war began, and their son was born in 1942.

Until mid-1944 life in Hungary was as good as life in neutral Switzerland. Admiral Horthy, Regent of Hungary, had adhered to the Axis in November, 1940, and sent a division or two to the front in support of his German allies; in return he was left alone at home. With territorial gains in Slovakia, Ruthenia and Transylvania - all with Hitler's blessing - and a profitable place as an agricultural supplier within the Nazi Grossraumwirtschaft, Hungary seemed to be the favored child of the New Order. Budapest was as gay with Gypsy music as ever, and one Gypsy violinist developed such an attachment for the Farkases in this period that, in the darker days that followed, he insisted on playing for them still, when there was no money to be had for his efforts.

The approach of the Red Army changed all this. Horthy attempted to escape the German clutch and was promptly deposed. The Wehrmacht entered Hungary to defend the Pannonian plain and acted as conquerors rather than allies. The Spanish Legation staff, foreseeing the outcome, appointed Farkas as Charge d'Affaires and took to their heels. The Hungarians and their army went over to the Russians by the thousands, but in Budapest the Germans made one of their last and most fanatical stands, and the battle lasted for six weeks in midwinter of 1945, half destroying one of Europe's most beautiful cities. The people of Budapest took to their cellars, but it was through the cellars (which had been connected to one another as a civil defense measure against airraids) that the Russians advanced, house by house.

It was during the battle that Maria Farkas became a Paraguayan.

The Hungarian employees of the Spanish Legation had taken refuge with their families in the Legation cellar, and with them were about fifty Hungarian Jews, to whom Farkas had granted diplomatic sanctuary against last-minute excesses by the Germans (several other neutral legations apparently did the same at this time). It must have been a curious group: those who were not in mortal fear of the Germans had reason to fear the Russians. They all decided it was better not to be Hungarian, but that to become Spanish would be no improvement. Then someone remembered that the Paraguayan Minister, who had departed earlier, had left his responsibilities and his official seals with the Spanish Charge d'Affaires.

In short order the inhabitants of the Legation cellar had been fitted out with Paraguayan passports, and the next few days of the Battle of Budapest they passed exchanging what few scraps of information they could remember about Paraguay, in case the Russians should ask questions.

The Russiand did arrive, and were very courteous. But later the same day they came back, angrily. Someone had shot at them from a Legation window, they said, and they lined up all the men in the cellar against the wall: they would be shot in reprisal. Someone persuaded the Russians that this would be an injustice and they left. Charge d'Affaires Farkas decided the cellar was no longer safe, and went upstairs to make a reconaissance. Frau Farkas attempted to follow him, but found her way blocked by Russian soldiers. Her husband never came back: she found his body when she was finally able to leave the cellar three days later. He had been shot, but whether by Russian soldiers on purpose or by a strafing aircraft by accident she never knew. Legation servants buried him in the garden.

The Russians occupied the Legation, and Maria Farkas took her two year old son to Austrian friends in another part of town, and from there sent word to the foreman of a small farm she owned sixty miles northeast of Budapest, in an area long before occupied by the Russians. The foreman came for her a fortnight later, with a shaggy little Mongolian pony the Red Army had given him in exchange for his Hungarian horse and a makeshift wagon he had assembled out of three wheels and some boards. If he had brought the good wagon, he explained, the Russians would have confiscated it.

The first postwar years were ones of transition in Hungary, and in her isolated village Maria Farkas was only vaguely aware of the stages by which the Communists were consolidating their hold on the country. The early land reforms of the peasant Smallholders regime in Budapest are confused in her mind with the later, more radical ones of the Communists. At first the usual post-war runaway inflation was a much greater cause for concern. Prices went up from day to day, and American dollars hoarded during the war were carefully brought out and exchanged one by one. Once, when she missed a train to Budapest, Frau Farkas had to wait overnight to get more money from the bank, because the fares had gone up before the next train came. But the banker, when he opened for business next day, did not have enough cash on hand to cover the increased train fare (for the sixty mile trip), and by the time he had obtained it, the fares had doubled again.

Maria Farkas found that her farm had been reduced to five acres by the reforms, but food was still plentiful in the country and other necessities could be got by barter. Then in the fall of 1948, her son was ready to enter school, and it was a Communist school now. All the rest had been supportable, but this was not; Maria Farkas moved to Budapest to campaign for an exit visa, and on the 23rd of December, 1948, she took her Hungarian-born son across the border into Austria.

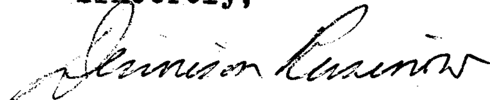
"I would not have decided to leave, if it had not been for Janos' schooling," she says today.

A brother had emigrated years before to Boston in the United States, and Frau Farkas now followed him. She took out American citizenship and lived for seven years in Florida, the longest she has ever lived anywhere except in Hungary. Young Janos Farkas grew up into an American teenager. He can no longer speak Hungarian, but both his German and his English are touched by a Magyar accent.

Last year the Farkases packed up and moved back to Vienna to live with old Baroness Pitner, the sailor-diplomat's widow, who is now 88. Janos is talking of Austrian citizenship and a career in the Austrian foreign service. His friends are the children of his mother's friends: Austro-Hungarian landowners and old bureaucrats with titles. They are a group drawn together by two shared memories: of the Monarchy whose passing they still regret, and of the Budapest cellars they shared in those January days of 1945.

The cellars are today the feebler memory. The parents are concerned that their children are making the "right" friends and moving toward "appropriate" marriages; the children are concerned that every night of their first grown-up Carnival season will see them dancing till dawn. The gypsies have been stilled in Budapest; in Vienna the Waltz is eternal.

Sincerely,



Dennison Rusinow

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