

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR-33
WALDVIERTEL BLUES

St. Antony's College
Oxford, England
7 November, 1960

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

As temporary lords of Albrechtsberg-an-der-grossen-Krems, the Waldviertel was our Austria. It is a part of the country the tourist seldom sees, a land of monasteries and castles, but no notable scenery. It is a dark country of evergreen forests, granite hills and subsistence farms, forgotten by the decades of Habsburg industrialisation and prosperity and by the brief boom of the 1920's, lost under ten years of Soviet occupation, left outside the great boom of the 1950's. Its people drift away to build the Autobahn on the other side of the Danube, or to make steel in Linz or textiles in Vienna. The town councils of declining markets look desperately for ways to attract industry and tourists, fighting the apathy of great absentee landlords, the lack of power and resources and the limitations of a declining population and a notoriously bad road system.

Like similar decaying areas - Ireland or the Scottish Highlands, perhaps - it has a gentle and persuasive charm for those who take the time to get to know it and who are glad to find a retreat from the 1960's and a place where the picture-postcards are often twenty years old and few people are in a hurry.

If you take one of the old paddle-wheel steamers - the Johann Strauss, the Budapest, the Stadt Wien or the Stadt Passau - that ply the Danube from the German border to Vienna in summer, the hills on your right belong to the Alps and are familiar, but those on the left belong to the Bohemian Plateau, that angular bastion of antique granite whose geologic history is quite separate from that of the Alps, and whose possession Bismarck once said was the key to European hegemony. From the river north to the Czech border - the historic border between Austria and Bohemia - this is an ancient German frontier region, whose names remember the Middle Ages: Mühlviertel (Mill District), Waldviertel (Forest District), Weinviertel (Wine District).

For most of its 223 Austrian miles the Danube flows obediently down the middle of the gap between this plateau and the Alps (which explains the strategic and economic importance of Austria and of Vienna since Roman times). But just by Melk

the river turns unexpectedly north, for reasons a geologist must explain, and cuts a 22-mile long canyon into the Bohemian Plateau until it returns to its proper trough by Krems, just where the trough widens into the Vienna Basin

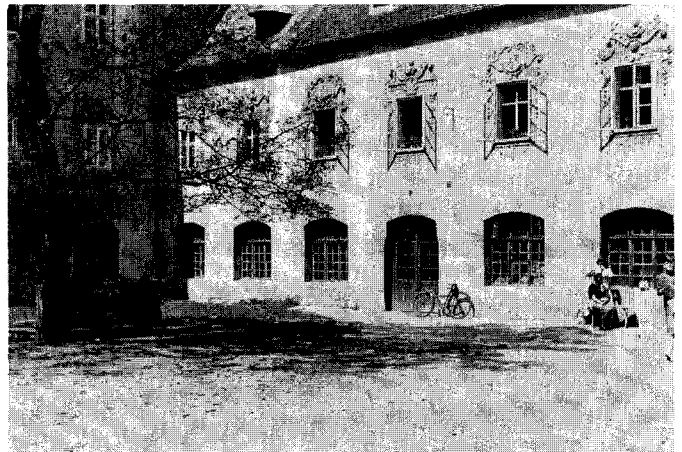
This is the Wachau, loveliest bit of the Austrian Danube, home of the Niebelungs and cradle of German history, strategic center of Charlemagne's Ostmark, and valley of romantic castles, including Dürnstein, where the Babenberg Duke held Richard Lionheart of England prisoner. The plateau to the north is the Waldviertel.



The best way to enter the Waldviertel is through Krems, eastern gateway to the Wachau valley, second largest town of Lower Austria (23,000), and my personal candidate for most charming small city in the Republic. Krems began as a market for the vineyards of the Wachau, which produce the best Austrian wines and in the Middle Ages were Europe's chief exporter of wine to Russia and the East. It redoubled its wealth as an important boatbuilding, repairing and shipping center for the prosperous Danube river traffic of the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries. Today the shipping has largely disappeared, and the town lives again from wine and tourists, but the late Baroque and Francisco-Josephinian mansions of the shipowners vie in handsomeness with the Gothic Renaissance and early Baroque houses of the old vintners.

Tourists take the Wachau road from Krems toward Dürnstein, Spits and Melk - a new minor Autobahn of concrete, modern bridges and a tunnel under the village and castle of Richard Lionheart, following the left bank of the Danube upstream. But we who came to live in the Waldviertel took another road, north away from the river, following the steep-sided valley of its minor tributary the Greater Krems up into the hills, past the ruin



of Senftenburg castle high on its rock, driving toward Zwettl (DR-12) and Weitra and the Czech border. Or, if one is coming from the direction of Linz instead of from Vienna, as we did on our arrival the beginning of August, one can make a more dramatic approach, turning off the Wachau road at Weissenkirchen and climbing abruptly from the Danube (600 feet above sea level here) to the plateau (2100 feet). Doing it that way the change from the vineyards and lush gardens of the Danube through the fruit orchards of the higher slopes to the dark forests and spare wheatfields of the highlands is striking, with the river still in sight as the plateau is reached - a gray (or once, magically and unexpectedly, a really blue) ribbon winding among the castles and vines far below.

The Waldviertel is a high, gently rolling country, where isolated hills rise to over 3000 feet. The winters are long and cold, the summers short and dry (1960, exceptionally, was short and wet). Except for deep river valleys like the Krems cut down toward the Danube, it is a patchwork of the dark pine forests for which it was named and famous a thousand years ago and of wheatfields that are seldom better than marginal producers and probably should be converted to pasture. For variety there are also great fields of poppies, poppyseed being an important export. Unlike the Danube valley to the south or the Alpine valleys beyond it, there is no industry to right the balance of subsistence farming, and in Vienna they speak of the Waldviertel as "the step-child of the boom." The forests and fields are to a large extent still owned by ancient, titled and often absentee landlords, whose castles crown the steeper hills (the Habsburgs, still in possession of Schloss Persenbeug on the Danube at the southwest corner of the Waldviertel, are the most important of these), or by monasteries like Göttweig, a great Baroque Benedictine establishment atop a hill across from Krems.

Albrechtsberg itself is typical of the region. Its origins are lost in undocumented borderland antiquity. The massive, almost windowless south wall of the castle, on the side overlooking the village, is probably twelfth century and may have been built by one of the Starhemberg clan - that remarkable

Austrian family later to provide leaders for the Turkish wars and most recently a dashing prince who became successively, simultaneously



and improbably Vice-Chancellor of the Republic, friend of Mussolini, sometime-crypto-Nazi, and Austrian patriot.

If the Starhembergs built it, the castle was already there when King Ottocar of Bohemia marched through the Waldviertel to the Danube and, according to legend, founded most of the strong villages of the area: Ottenschlag, Grafenschlag, Langschlag, Armschlag, Kirchsschlag, all on the old road from Prague to the Wachau that passes just to the west of Albrechtsberg.

Most of the present castle dates from the early sixteenth century, when Erasmus of Peuckham inherited Albrechtsberg and added the living rooms of the west tract and the charming little inner courtyard with its almost-Moorish second floor arcade. The painted wooden ceiling in the banqueting hall upstairs bears his arms and the date 1526. The hall, alas, is now abandoned to the bats, who play tag there on moonlit nights, and to some mysterious (empty) filing cases bearing the labels: "Abteilung Gross-Britaniens (Division of Great Britain) - Midlands". Who knows, perhaps Hitler's invasion of England was planned in this secluded place.

But when the west tract was new, another ideological struggle of equal importance to Central Europe was preoccupying the builder. Erasmus of Peuckham was a Protestant, and he put a Lutheran in his church as parish priest. In his lifetime Austria became 80 per cent Protestant and the Waldviertel, long infected by the pre-Reformation Protestantism of the Czech Hussites, came over to the new faith 90 per cent strong. The only record I could find of damage to the castle in battle came during the Hussite wars of the fifteenth century and again during the civil-religious Thirty Years' War, when the Swedes, the Dutch and the Germans marched through the Waldviertel. The last Peuckham died at the Battle of the White Mountain, where the Czech aristocracy and the Protestant cause were destroyed (1620).

With this ancient Protestant tradition in mind, we asked Lina, the peasant girl who worked for us and sang in the choir if all of Albrechtsberg is Catholic today. "No," she said, "we have two Communists." The Hussars of the Counter-Reformation had done their job reasonably well, better than the Red Army of 1945-53. (Reformation Protestantism survives in modern Austria in mountain valleys above 900 meters, "as high as the Emperor's cavalry could reach".)

After the passing of the Peuckhams, Albrechtsberg went through several hands and in 1662 was bought by Matthias Ernst von Spindler, whose daughter married one Johann Adolph von Lempruch fifteen years later. Without sons, Spindler in 1692 established a fidei comis for his eldest grandchild, Karl Ignaz von Lempruch, and died in 1695. The old man's portrait hangs in the main salon today, his mummy may be viewed among the gruesome relics in the crypt (he was over six feet tall and was buried in Lederhosen. His descendant Karl Baron von Lempruch, who lives in Sweden, was my summer landlord.

To Lempruch and the parish church, which is in the castle, belong the forests and to the peasants belong the fields. The peasants farm their land and work part-time in the forests, and from the two they subsist. There is no other employment, except for the doctor, the schoolteacher, the postman and the postmistress, the policeman, the miller, the butcher, the two shopkeepers and the two pub-owners, and half of these are also farmers. A wooden billboard outside the post office proclaims the advantages of Albrechtsberg as a "summer resort", and many peasants have spare rooms to rent to tourists, but on a wet summer like that of 1960 no one comes.

The whole country waits breathlessly for industry and tourism, magic words which are often scarcely understood. But they have heard of the transformations these modern miracles have brought to the occasional Waldviertel community that has captured one or the other.

In the Kamp valley at the eastern edge of the Waldviertel, for example, a warmer and more luxurious landscape, good river swimming and fishing, an excellent new road leading directly toward Vienna, and a thick growth of the handsomest castles (like Rosenberg on its spectacular cliff) and finest Baroque monasteries (like Altenburg, a Benedictine cloister whose elaborate seventeenth century facade and library are considered the finest of their type in Austria) have brought new prosperity to all the inhabitants.

Industry has made the difference at Leiben, at the edge of the plateau across from Melk, happily close to the Wachau railway line. Here, in the middle of the forest by a brook, just under the rock on which stands a Habsburg castle that (according to local and Vienna rumors will soon be given back to Archduke Otto, stands the "Leibener Wollgarnspinnerei und Strickwarenfabrik Geyer & Co." (the Leiben woolyarn and knitted goods factory). With some 250 employees it is not merely the economic backbone of the little market town of 500 inhabitants, but of the entire neighboring district, for which it provides employment. It is significant that over 90 per cent of the civic budget of Leiben is provided by taxes from this one small factory.

Martinsburg, some 17 miles to the northwest, had hoped for similar benefits from a new sawmill, with over 50 employees, established there by the Habsburg forestry administration a decade ago (the Habsburgs own much of the wood in the southwest Waldviertel.) But the mill was declared a forestry auxiliary, not an industry, and so was not subject to industrial taxes. The battle between the Habsburg Archduke in Persenbeug and the socialist mayor of Martinsburg has raged in and out of the courts ever since, but so far the feudal interest has remained triumphant and the town coffers empty. A parallel campaign by the Martinsburg authorities to get a branch railway spanning the twelve miles from their town to the Austrian mainline across the Danube has been equally fruitless, and without it no industrialist is interested in the cheap labor of the western Waldviertel.

A Vienna journalist, Franz Tinhof, writing about the economic problems of our district last summer, used the cinemas in Leiben and Rosenau as symbols to illustrate the difference that a little industry can make. Both villages boast modern movie houses. In Leiben the

250 workers of the local textile plant and their families provide the local cinema with regular customers; the house is generally full, its owner prospers, and entertainment tax receipts swell the community bank account.

Rosenau is quite a different case. It is a curious village some six miles west of Zwettl and fifteen miles from the Czech border, hidden in the woods and approachable over one of the Waldviertel's most hellish roads. I went to see it out of an interest in its famous squire of seventy years ago, one Georg Ritter von Schönerer (DR-7), founder of the Pan-German and anti-Semitic movement in Austria, much admired by the young Hitler.

Schönerer's palace at Rosenau is ranked as possibly the handsomest Rococo structure in Austria, a neat building of perfect proportions and pastel colors, lightening the mood of this dark borderland, and not at all what one expects of its onetime master. It would be an ideal Schloss-hotel, surrounded by pleasant walks and good hunting. A glorious driveway lined by tall larches leads up to the gates, and the castle park, now a jungle, must have been very fine. But it is all falling gently and quietly into ruin. A sign by the gate warns that entrance is forbidden, but just beside it another sign indicates that the village postoffice is to be found on the ground floor, inside the courtyard. There laundry hung from the windows and the smell of cooking announced that the first floor has been turned into peasant dwellings, but above this level swallows dive through broken windows into desolate rooms. Plaster and paint are peeling and a damp smell warns anyone who has done much castle-crawling that masonry is rotting.

Opposite the gate to this relic of the declining Empire, in unlikely contrast, is a modern cinema. An enterprising shopkeeper's wife had thought in this way to bring the peasants of the district to Rosenau, to the profit of the village. But her investment was misplaced, her theater remains empty. A scattered peasantry is no substitute for a small factory in providing regular customers to such an entertainment facility. No industry, no tourists, only a rotting Rococo pile.

Weitra, just beyond, was once a prosperous trading town, dealing profitably in the exchange of young Hungarian pigs on their way from the east to Bohemia for corn-fattened slaughter pigs passing from Bohemia to Vienna. In 1878 Weitra could pay 92,000 Gulden to build its first water system, and in 1892 another 65,000 Gulden for its stately town hall, all out of local sinking funds and municipal bonds. Today the entire yearly tax receipts are 8800,000 Schillings (32,000), while a new water system in 1959 cost six million Schillings and a new school, finished this autumn, cost five million. There is not enough money for streetcleaning or repair of the medieval town wall, one of its hopeful tourist attractions. Burgermeister Dr. Kindermann calls it "a trading town without trade."

The essential reason for this state of affairs in Weitra and Gmund itself lies at the bottom of the hill where the bridge crosses the little Leisnitz river to the part of town called Cesky Venenice.

At one end of the bridge flies the red-white-red flag of Austria, at the other the red-white-blue of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. The customs officials at either end have little to do, the bridge is empty, the town divided by the Treaty of St. Germain from its suburb. The Hungarian couple with us the day we drove up there joked that they could cross the bridge without visas (under a new Czech-Hungarian agreement), and we pointed out that they could go, but they might have a little trouble crossing back again - they had waited six weeks for their visas to enter Austria from Budapest.

I was reminded that last year the Vienna press reported the case of a Waldviertel peasant who fled across the Iron Curtain near Weitra and asked the Czechs for asylum. The Czech border guards returned him to Austria and turned him over to Austrian officials, saying: "He's obviously crazy!" He was, it seems, the village half-wit.

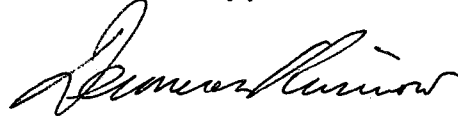
If the Iron Curtain just to the north poses additional problems for Waldviertel commerce, the Soviet occupation from 1945 to 1955 left little mark. Castles and manor-houses that were empty at the time of the take-over often suffered considerable damage. Typical was Walkersdorf, home of the friends who had found Albrechtsberg for me, in the lower Kamp valley. There the library was torn apart page by page and the furniture systematically cut up - pure vandalism, my friends believe, although I suspect that a search for the imagined jewels of the aristocracy provides a more reasonable explanation.

But where the owners were in residence, they were generally treated with courtesy. In Heidenreichstein, near Gmünd, stands the most perfectly preserved moated castle in Austria, largely furnished in period pieces of the twelfth to seventeenth centuries. In 1945 many art treasures from Vienna had also been brought here for safe-keeping. When the Russians arrived, Prince Palffy, the owner, then in his 70's, was in residence. The Red Army never crossed his threshold, but the Soviet commander sent a respectful and polite note asking to see Palffy. "They were all curious to see a real prince," the caretaker told us.

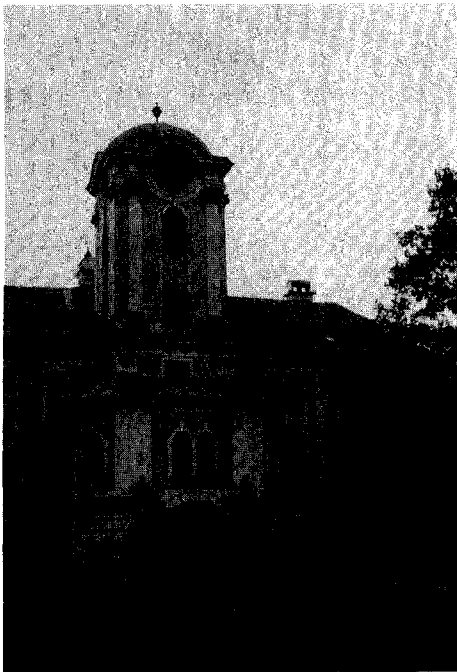
Ottenschlag, a market place of a thousand inhabitants five miles from Albrechtsberg, was a mustering center for the German army retreating toward Upper Austria early in 1945, and was therefore a target for Russian interdiction bombing. Afterward it became the district commandatura in charge of a Major Alexander, locally nicknamed Alexander the Great. Was this tiresome? "He was a little difficult just at first," I was told, "but then he took up with a girl from the village, and she straightened him out. After that the only bother we had was that she liked to dance, so the Russian band played every Saturday night and we were virtually required to attend." Alexander stayed the whole ten years of the occupation, and when he left the girl went to work in a Vienna hotel. "She was an orphan, and had never had anything at all, so no one held it against her."

The Russians are gone and largely forgotten. Politically the Waldviertel, still a semi-feudal land of peasants, is the most conservative part of Austria - the election district to which it belongs gave 110,002 votes to the clerical People's Party and 66,186 to the Socialists in the 1959 general election. It is self-consciously German, as border areas generally are - Schönerer found his home here and Adolf Hitler's ancestors came from villages along the western edge. Someday soon this forgotten zone between the Danube and Bohemia may discover the twentieth century, but the process is proving a slow one.

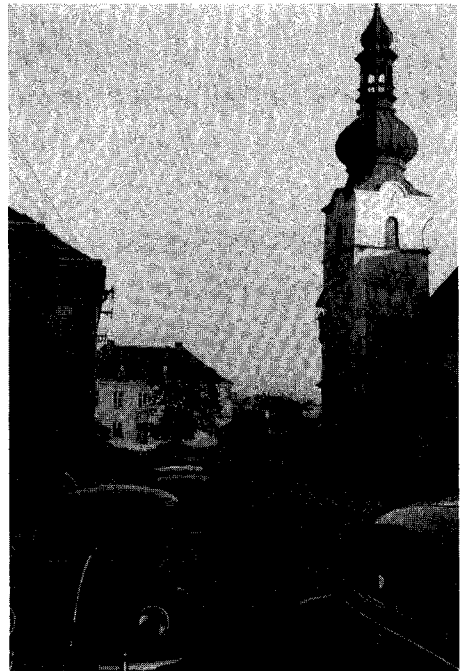
Sincerely,



Dennison Rusinow



Schönerer's Palace - Decaying



Waldviertel Village - Ottenschlag

Received New York November 16, 1960