

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR-9
The Fasching Revolution

Vienna
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
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366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

In Carnival, 1959, the Revolution was proclaimed in Vienna. Its proclaimers have naturally said that it was a great success, but for the rest of us life does not yet seem very much different. Perhaps by next year we shall know.

The Revolution, while it had nothing to do with Communism or the Soviet Union, confessed itself to being anti-American. It was announced on January 11th, in the pages of the liberal, but normally cautious Vienna daily Die Presse, and it scored its first and most important victory by bloodlessly winning over Vienna's High Society on the 22nd.

Its slogan: "The call to Unreason."

Its goal: rescue of the Viennese Carnival season from Americanization and boredom and its return to Viennese romance, frivolity and excitement.

In the United States "Carnival" had always signified for me parades and a handful of balls and parties on Mardi Gras in such old-world centers as New Orleans and Mobile. But the Austrian Carnival ("Fasching") covers the entire period from January sixth (Epiphany) to Ash Wednesday, and, in fact, right on up until Easter. (The Viennese claim a special dispensation is given them to dance on through Lent because - well, because this is Vienna.) The celebration is entirely an indoor one, which any reasonable man would blame on the climate, although Munich and other German cities do manage parades and other outdoor festivities.

Here it is a matter of parties, banquets, and balls. In Vienna alone 1959 recorded over 1300 of this last category before Ash Wednesday. Many of these were fairly small, although the figure does not include dances in private homes. But the largest is opened by a ballet performance and then by a waltz danced by 1000 young couples and watched by several times that many.

There are grand, full-dress-only balls for high society, "tickets only upon presentation of invitation." There are balls by professional societies, with high-priced tickets that can be obtained by anyone really interested, "dinner jacket or full dress with decorations." There are policemen's balls and political party precinct balls, dark suits and cocktail dresses acceptable. And, sadly few in number, there are still some "Gschnas" balls.

The last are the costume parties - "Gschnas" is a characteristically unpronounceable Vienna dialect word signifying working-class people, but without the political connotations of "proletariat". Originally the term was used for the sort of party to which dukes came dressed as chimneysweeps; now it means any masquerade. The only Gschnas-fest of real note remaining on the calendar is that of the Wiener Secession, a Viennese Beaux-Arts ball.

That Vienna's Fasching should be bound intimately to the ballroom, the waltz, formal dresses and glittering chandeliers - in contrast with the better-known parades, drunkenness and collective madness of Cologne or Munich-is only appropriate. The most famous Vienna ball is probably Prince Orlovsky's party in the second act of Die Fledermaus, and Johann Strauss's gayest opera is always performed in Vienna on New Year's Eve, when Fasching really begins. Orlovsky's is the ideal Fasching party, and a newcomer to Vienna finds himself measuring the real ones he attends against this musical model. Some, happily, bear the comparison quite well.

But Viennese with long Fasching experience have been complaining for some years that the Carnival is in decline here, that in these days of unprecedented Austrian prosperity, when the balls might reasonably be expected to grow ever more glittering and exciting, they are instead becoming duller and arousing less interest. They were not only better in Imperial times, they were better in the otherwise miserable days of the First Republic.

Die Presse decided to face the issue squarely and in a major Sunday feature announced where the trouble lay: in the post-war importation of American dance traditions. By this were not meant the new kinds of dances - there have always been new kinds, and many of the latest imports are exceedingly welcome - but the custom of dancing at a ball only with the people in one's own party, often only with one's own date, the entire night.

In the old days it was quite different here, say the critics. "When one only remembers how a girl flew from arm to arm, and a man had the possibility of really dancing himself out for once and perhaps" (with a meaningful glance at his wife) "at the end of finding his life's happiness there..."

"Today," suggested the newspaper, "a girl will only fly from arm to arm if she has brought a busfull of dancing partners with her."

The old customs were easy enough when most people at a ball knew one another, and in Imperial Vienna the various clearly defined levels of society were all small enough for this to be possible. As the balls grew larger, there came into being as a substitute the custom of the "Committee". This was a group of members of the sponsoring organization at each ball, marked by a lapel badge, to whom any young man could come with a request that he be introduced to any unknown young lady with whom he had decided he would like to dance. This served the purpose for dances at higher levels of society, where girls were unwilling to dance with absolute strangers. Among more ordinary folk, the girls had never had such scruples anyway.

After the war, the Committees disappeared. At dances one saw more and more couples who, sufficient unto themselves, danced with no outsiders the entire evening. For this they did not need to come to a ball. Interest waned. The critics were right.

The solution is clear, cried Die Presse: back to the old customs, down with the new (American) ones; back to the committees, back to the Herreninsel (stagline), back to the days when one went every night to a new ball as to a new adventure. Back to the good old days of Viennese Unreason.

The revolutionary cry was taken up with surprising speed, and the first society to accept the challenge gave the movement a real boost. Although the Opera Ball is the best known Vienna party in the world at large, the Philharmonic Ball is considered locally as the socially most important (there are one or two more snobbish balls, but they are perhaps too exclusive). Within two days the Philharmonic Society had requested permission to post copies of the article from Die Presse in Vienna University and the Engineering College with an announcement that they were setting aside a hundred half-cost tickets to develop a student stagline at their January 22nd ball.

Then the "Techniker-Cercle", an organization that has been giving another leading Fasching ball since 1874, delegated its entire membership as a "Committee" for its dance and attached to all men's tickets a note explaining the old custom. At their dance the genuine "stag island" in the middle of the dance floor was re-established and it seemed that Vienna's Fasching might be coming back into its own. The revolution's victory was still spotty, but it was noticeable.

The 1300 Vienna Carnival season balls are held in a variety of halls, but almost all have their share of gilt and crystal chandeliers. The best-known of the Fasching dances, the Opera Ball, which attracts foreign guests by plane and train from three continents, is held in the Vienna Opera itself, especially converted for the occasion. Flooring is laid over the orchestra seats to connect with the deep stage and make a huge ballroom, surrounded by the loges, boxes and galleries from which older party-goers can look down on the waltzing multitude. This year the entire building was turned into a fragrant winter garden, with a special feature in the form of thousands of fresh carnations, shipped in to Vienna in refrigerated freight cars as a gift of the Republic of Italy.

The Philharmonic Ball is also held on home ground, with the Musikverein building converted for the occasion and its great concert-hall, stripped of seats, serving as the main ballroom. This is a wonderful room in which to hold a Fasching ball: a great, long rectangle full of gilt and statuary and an unbelievable golden ceiling. It is a room that strikes most foreigners, newly-arrived in Vienna, as garish, outlandish, Nineteenth Century "Francisco-Josephinian" Austrian rococo at its worst. Then, as one adapts to Vienna, it gradually comes to seem appropriate and finally handsome. What if the pillars supporting the balconies would look better as simple pillars and not as bigger-than-life, buxom, half-nude women with strong necks? What if the classical lintels above the doors into the loges

are made ridiculous by the additional nudes that sprawl up either side of their pediments? It all seems, in the end, right enough for a Viennese concert, and even more right for a Viennese ball.

But no one room makes a proper Vienna Fasching party: the entire Musikverein building must participate. The two smaller concert halls - also full of gilt and crystal and rococo statuary - are fitted out with tables and buffets and flowers; in one cellar a "Japanese teahouse" is established in commemoration of a successful Japanese tour by the Vienna Philharmonic last year, complete with Japanese girls in kimonos; in another a Vienna "Heurigen" or wine cellar is set up, including the inevitable Heurigen music; and in a third, named the "Hula Hoop Bar" for the party, another dance orchestra plays for those seeking a more intimate atmosphere than that of the main ballroom upstairs.

The opening of a Fasching ball is a ritual occasion, and in the case of a leading ball like the Philharmonic, it has considerable social significance. There the "Honor Presidium", before whom the opening takes place, is made up of cabinet ministers, including Federal Chancellor Julius Raab, the Speaker of the Nationalrat, and the Mayor of Vienna, and is headed by the President of the Republic. Viennese girls look forward to opening such a ball much as girls in other lands anticipate their debuts. The more than one hundred



BEFORE THE OPENING - A Smaller Ball in the Sophiensäle

young couples who opened the Philharmonic Ball rehearsed for weeks under the anxious eye of one of the capital's two leading dance instructors. Among them were a Habsburg, a Habsburg-Lothringen, two Batthyany, a Kossuth, an Aehrental, a Turnovsky, and names of more recent prominence like Kamitz (daughter of the Finance Minister, the Erhard of the Austrian economic miracle) and Schuschnigg.

The girls in white formals, the young men in full dress or (for the first time this year since before 1938) the uniform of the Austrian Military Academy cadets, this "young people's committee" enters accompanied by a Festival Fanfare, composed by Richard Strauss for the first Philharmonic Ball and played by the Vienna Philharmonic itself. The Honor Presidium, led by the Chancellor, takes its places. The national anthem is played, and Federal President Schärff makes his entrance. The balletmaster requests and receives permission from the President to open the ball. For the opening this year, the Philharmonic had chosen a waltz from Josef Strauss, and 224 young Viennese in white and black whirled around the ballroom in the Musikverein to the music that is their city's trademark. It was Carnival in Vienna.

There are many other kinds of balls in many other places, but each will have its equivalent of this opening scene. Perhaps the most exciting place for one of these festivals is in the Hofburg, the Emperor's Vienna palace. Here the Festsäle have been redecorated recently to be used by the United Nations Atomic Energy Agency (whose secretarial headquarters are in a neighboring wing) for its intermittent general assemblies. This has meant the introduction of one large modern, but somehow not incongruous, Espresso coffee bar and, otherwise, only a lot of regilding, repainting and polishing - so that the rooms could not have looked better when Franz Josef first opened them. In the Hofburg, for a large ball like that of the Vienna Legal Society, three dance bands play in three different ballrooms, and tables and buffets are laid out in a dozen more white and gold audience chambers and anterooms of the Habsburg emperors. Dancing in this unaltered splendor, one must be very insensitive indeed not to feel an occasional ghost waltzing nearby.

There are Fasching dances for all other levels of society as well. The Traffic Policemen's Ball is presumably typical. There is more Wurst and beer, less champagne and caviar. Most of the people seem to have a better time than at the "high society" balls, or else they show their enthusiasm more. More older people seem to dance here, instead of merely watching, and more women have a tendency to bulge over the tops of evening dresses that clearly were bought when they were younger and slimmer. But this does not damp the fun. The traffic police are there in full force, naturally enough, in their white-jacketed dress uniforms, the more senior ones staggeringly be-medaled (for what, one wonders briefly, does a traffic policeman get medals?). The best two of the four dancebands playing continuously in the three ballrooms are police bands, which is somehow not surprising. At midnight there is a cabaret, including a singer from the Vienna Opera and a master-of-ceremonies with jokes that would bring blushes in a seedier American nightclub - but do not here.

The "stag island" for which the Fasching revolutionaries had

pleaded was nowhere in evidence at the Policemen's Ball. Instead there was a sadder phenomenon: a sort of female stag line. The unattached women, most of them apparently having come with their fathers or else with groups (including their sisters?) that did not have enough men, tended to stand in a row near an entrance to one of the dance floors. If an unattached man entered, he could look this row over and pick out a partner from it. Since lone men seemed to be scarcer than lone women, there were a lot of wallflowers.

Most Fasching balls last until six in the morning. After about two, the older generation begins to disappear and the bands begin to play more rock 'n' roll and Latin music. The youngsters catch their second wind, and from two to four the dance is at its best. After the Law Society Ball in the Hofburg, I asked one starry-eyed eighteen-year-old daughter of a Vienna judge how she had enjoyed it. "Wonderful!" she sighed. "I don't think I sat out a single dance! And I never danced more than twice with the same man!"

That, I thought, is the way a ball should be: Hurrah for the Revolution!

On the icy, pre-dawn sidewalks outside, hundreds of people in evening dress, homeward bound from one of the thirteen balls that had taken place that night, passed sleepy-eyed workers on their way to their shops and offices. The office-bound gave the homeward-bound no envious glances, for they would be going to one of the eleven balls scheduled for the next night. Production and productivity figures tend to slump in Austria in January, but no one really minds that either. It is Fasching.

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Lieutenant-Colonel (ret.) Professor Willy Elmayer is a Vienna institution, and intimately connected with Fasching. For forty years everybody who is anybody, and quite a few who aren't, have been sending their children to Prof. Elmayer's dancing school to learn good manners, the waltz, and the latest dance steps (which were the Fox Trot and the Charleston when the school was new, are Rock 'n' Roll and the Cha-Cha-Cha today).

I watched the Professor, at age 74, demonstrate a rhumba and a jitterbug step for about sixty Viennese boys and girls. Looking bored or self-conscious, the youngsters shuffled around the room in imitation of the steps, under the watchful eyes of four attractive women assistants. I had no doubt that their mothers and fathers - or perhaps their grandparents - had looked just as self-conscious or bored when these rooms smelled of fresh paint in November, 1919.

Said a teenager who finished the course last year: "It's so corny. We don't learn anything that's being danced now. Mostly old, closed dances. Who dances closed anymore? And all his little rules of conduct..." and she made an unruly noise.

Said a Viennese newspaper editor and historian: "My mother went back to learn the Charleston from him after the first war. I learned to dance there. And if Elmayer lasts another four years, I'll start sending my children there."



OPENING THE BALL - This is the Ball of the re-established Wiener-Neustädter Military Academy. In the center, Federal President Schärff; on his left, Chancellor Raab; extreme left of picture, in profile, Dancemaster Willy Elmayer.

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One comes to a curious discovery: almost no important Viennese under 65 has not spent a year in the Elmayer school. Even the children of the Empress Zita - in their Spanish exile - had the benefit of his training for a year in the 1920's.

Willy Elmayer was a Captain of Cavalry in the First Dragoons of Emperor Franz Josef, and he knew personally the Archduke Karl, who was serving in the neighboring Seventh Dragoons until he succeeded to the throne in 1916. Then the Empire and the Emperor were no more, and the young cavalry officer, who suspected that horses would not be ridden into battle much any more anyway, saw the army disintegrating. His fellow officers, bewildered, were seeking other careers or becoming adventurers. Should he try to stay in the minuscule Austrian army that was left over?

Then Elmayer read somewhere of an important and heroic officer of Napoleon, who, after Waterloo, had founded a dancing school in Paris that became famous in the days of Louis XVIII. It seemed a noble and worthy idea. Elmayer borrowed money, rented and remodeled

the groundfloor stables of the Palais Pallavicini, just across from the National Library wing of the Hofburg, and founded his school on November 1st, 1919. Instead of horses, the stables and Rittermeister Elmayer turned to children. The Empire was dead, but Willy Elmayer's Dance School "for modern society dancing, deportment training and aesthetic movement" had been established, an institution to give the Viennese idea continuity in the troubled decades ahead.

The Second World War put the old soldier back in uniform & a German uniform this time - and he reached the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. The Nazi years were bad years, because "courtesy to other people and attention to the ladies disappeared," and Professor Elmayer feels that he is even today fighting these evil influences of Hitler and Germanism on Austrian society.

Today there are other problems, too. "Young people now confuse being free with being uninhibited. Politeness is the goal of this school. It is based upon discipline. Without discipline life has no meaning. Neither has freedom. The Americans are the freest people in the world, but their army knows the meaning of discipline."

Students began coming into the converted palace stables as we talked. About 3500 Viennese teenagers - most, but far from all, from the upper and upper-middle or professional classes - spend one and a half hours a week there. The boys all were wearing suits and freshly shined shoes, and as each came in, he put on white gloves, bowed to one of the young ladies, who took his arm, and they began to promenade, clockwise around the room. Soon there were some thirty couples.

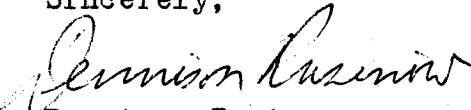
"That is the beginning of discipline and politeness to ladies," said Prof. Elmayer. "So they also learn to talk to each other, and not just about school and math and chemistry."

I looked at the children. Some were talking animatedly. Most walked silently.

We spoke of Fasching. Either Prof. Elmayer or Prof. Willy Fränzel, his only serious competitor, is in charge of the opening of all the important Carnival balls. Over forty years of this task and a virtual monopoly on the dance instruction of Viennese social leaders inevitably has an influence. Prof. Elmayer claims credit for having introduced the now universally accepted custom of girls opening balls wearing white, classical formals. He has recently published a book, Proper Behavior Re-Examined, a sort of Austrian Emily Post.

But beyond this superficial level, one cannot but wonder what other influences this old cavalry captain, this dated Austrian patriot, this caricature Viennese may have had on the two generations of this city's leadership over whose good manners he has been given authority.

Sincerely,


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