

## WINTER VIEWINGS: WIEN, INNERE STADT

Lieber Frans, unser Bruder Hans, den wir ja zuletzt, als Du in Wien warst, zufällig getroffen haben, ist vor zwei Tagen verstorben. Unerwartet. Herz. Hier in Rom, wo ich seit gestern bin, um mich um die notwendigen Abläufe zu kümmern. Es tut wirklich weh, und ich beginne erst langsam es zu realisieren. Herzlich, B

Dear Frans, this is just to let you know (unless you know it already) that Berni's brother, the one who (if I am not wrong) directed the Vienna Cinema Festival, unexpectedly died in Rome a few days ago. Ciao, pm

Dear Pier Marco, yes, Bernhard told me. Which brought back memories ... Frans



A weekend before last Christmas we had driven up from Graz, where, retired and weary of academia and worn out by another patch of poor health, I struggled to cope with some incidental teaching on behalf of Bernhard, who was recovering from heart surgery. It was my first time back in Vienna for years. Leopoldstadt, now Bernhard's base, Alservorstadt, Alsergrund, Lichtental, Döbling, the cottage colony out in the Kritzendorf wetlands along the Danube — our idle wanderings couldn't have been more aimless as Hans' path and ours converged. A casual encounter, it yet could have seemed deliberate, like the reunion of an older and younger brother, long out of touch, to resolve some family issue that had been preying on their minds.

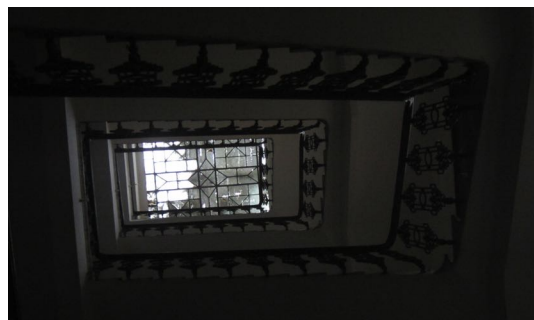


It was a bitter cold Advent day, and since the Weihnachtsmarkt on the Freyung square was of a more artsy kind and no Glühwein was to be had against the chill,

the two of us sought shelter in the Palais Kinsky, across the street. Bernhard shared a story about a mausoleum that was now blemishing its baroque grandeur: installed in the inner yard, a crypt whose design could not have been more nondescript houses the mortal remains of the Palais Kinsky's most recent owner, one Karl Wlaschek (and his fourth wife's: the fifth survives him). The third-richest Austrian of his day, the late Wlaschek had made his fortune with a food retail chain, BILLA (as if such unimaginative abbreviation could gentrify his plebeian "billiger Laden"), before he went into real estate on a grand scale and, by a mere couple of years, failed in his one remaining desire to live to a hundred.

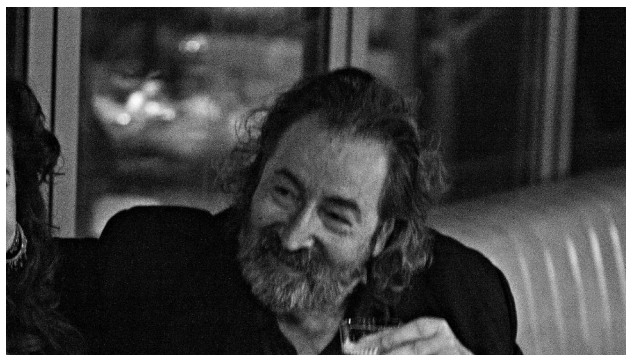


Upstairs in the auction galleries Bernhard recognised his brother, like us strolling from showroom to showroom and pausing before this painting and that. Dusk had long fallen, we were the last visitors, and yet there seemed no rush. With the seasonal glitz and bustle worlds away, a cosy, leisurely atmosphere enveloped just the three of us, as if here was precisely where we belonged for our allotted period of time, whoever might be calling the premises their own, k.u.k. nobles or latter-day moguls, Kinskys or Wlascheks. I expressed regret that I couldn't stay until the auction, because there were several small gems on offer among the Biedermeier and Jugendstil routine. Hans explained that he would be making his choices on more practical grounds: he was calculating — and I wasn't sure he wasn't joking — how much profit he could make upon reselling a painting, because at some point he really had to begin to provide for old age.

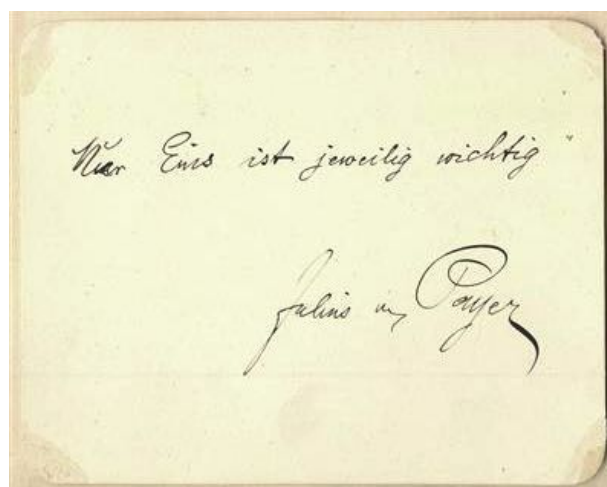


Naturally, no bids were entered towards beautifying our respective abodes or guarding against penury in our imminent declining years. We parted on the Graben, where Hans was suddenly urging home, grumbling that the 1st Bezirk, Innere Stadt, really could do with more public conveniences. Ironic and genuinely funny, Hans yet seemed to me to cut a forlorn figure as he hastened off into the freezing night, clad

in black, flowing overcoat and all, which was probably the costume for his dreams, and colours would have been a distraction.



As had once been a habit when in Vienna, the following morning I revisited the Dorotheum, around the corner from where Hans had taken his hurried leave. Since privatisation, the venerable secondhand warehouse trading in a seemingly inexhaustible supply of faded Austrian glory had evidently been in decline. Chancing into a preview for an upcoming autograph auction I did submit a bid for what appeared to be one of the more insignificant items. Among sheaves of seal-affixed sheets of court correspondence and piles of black-and-white portrait photographs inscribed by thespians of local fame, I spotted a bare album billet by Julius von Payer, the arctic explorer whose discovery of Franz-Joseph-Land had met with disbelief and derision upon his return, with most of the crew of the *Admiral Tegetthoff*, lost in the pack ice, starved or frozen to death or gone missing or mad. It was meant for Bernhard, because *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis*, about Payer's expedition, was a book I had seen in his house, and we agreed that it is its author's unsurpassed strongest. Thick fog shrouded vaguely remembered valleys and heights along the climbing curves of the Semmering railway that carried me back to Graz on Monday, and, instructed which lot to bid for, Bernhard went to the auction for me, only to be hopelessly outbid by an anonymous buyer.



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