

literatur für leser

17

3

40. Jahrgang

Literarisches Wien / Literary Vienna

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Inhaltsverzeichnis

Brigitte Prutti

Editorial: Literary Vienna/Literarisches Wien _____ 201

Marc Lacheny

„Die gute alte Zeit und das gute alte Wien gehören zueinander wie ein Paar Eheleute.“ (Heinrich Laube). Alt-Wien in der österreichischen Literatur von 1850 bis 1930: Die Stadt, die niemals war? _____ 205

Imke Meyer

Gender and the City: Schnitzler's Vienna around 1900 _____ 219

Ruth V. Gross

Hermann Leopoldi: Vienna's "Großer Bernhardiner" _____ 233

S. Kye Terrasi und André Schütze

Eine Psychogeographie des Verlustes: Wien in Heimito von Doderers Roman *Die Strudlhofstiege* _____ 243

Birthe Hoffmann

Heldenplatz revisited. Wien als (un)mögliche Heimat bei Thomas Bernhard und Robert Schindel _____ 261

Susanne Hochreiter

Raue Kanten, graue Ränder. Wien in Lyrik und Lied _____ 277

Sabine Wilke

Performing States-Of-In-Between: Dogs, Parrots, and Other Humans in Recent Austrian Performances _____ 295

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Verlag und Anzeigenverwaltung:	Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, Fehlerstraße 8, 12161 Berlin Telefon: +49 (0) 30 232 567 900, Telefax +49 (0) 30 232 567 902
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Erscheinungsweise:	3mal jährlich (März/Juli/November)
Bezugsbedingungen:	Jahresabonnement EUR 54,95; Jahresabonnement für Studenten EUR 32,95; Einzelheft EUR 26,95. Alle Preise verstehen sich zuzüglich Porto und Verpackung. Abonnements können mit einer Frist von 8 Wochen zum Jahresende gekündigt werden. Alle Beiträge sind urheberrechtlich geschützt. Übersetzung, Nachdruck, Vervielfältigung auf photomechanischem oder ähnlichem Wege, Vortrag, Funk- und Fernsehsendung sowie Speicherung in Datenverarbeitungsanlagen – auch auszugsweise – bleiben vorbehalten.

Hermann Leopoldi: Vienna's "Großer Bernhardiner"

The date was October 10, 1942. The 2,500 seats in Orchestra Hall in Chicago were sold out with mostly German-speaking concertgoers, both longtime residents and more recently arrived immigrants (or refugees, as they were called at the time). The event was a concert by Hermann Leopoldi, "Vienna's most popular entertainer" as the playbill touted¹. With him was his relatively new partner, Helen (Helly) Moeslein. The next day the reviewer for the *Chicago Tribune* wrote the following:

This marked his [Leopoldi's] first appearance in Chicago. Sharing the bill with him was Helen Moeslein, coloratura soprano, who thrilled the audience with melodious and humorous Viennese and English songs. As was the precedent for all his concerts, again the box office had a sign reading "All Seats Sold."²

Both performers would later refer to this event as one of the highlights of their careers, and why not? It is not such an easy feat to transpose a cultural artefact, like a Viennese *Schlager*, from one continent to another, not to say from one world to another.

Leopoldi had a light baritone voice that tended to waver on longer notes, and his catchy tunes highlighted the clever and sometimes poignant lyrics of his typical songs. He exuded Viennese old world charm and wit, and surprisingly, the new world Americans (to be sure, many German-speaking expatriates among them) took to his style of performance and provided him a new venue for success throughout the 1940s, keeping him in front of enthusiastic audiences during his American sojourn and making him the embodiment of the Vienna they imagined.

To the thousands of Viennese refugees who escaped Hitler's Germany in the late 1930s, their *Heimatstadt* remained in heart and mind a place that Stefan Zweig famously represented as "the world of yesterday."³ Their reality was such that they needed to recall for themselves the Vienna that no longer existed. I know this well, because my parents were refugees. The term meant something very specific in the big American cities like New York and Chicago of the 1940s and 50s. Refugees were Central Europeans (mostly Jews) who had emigrated to escape the scourge of the Third Reich. As in immigrant communities before and after them, the individuals and families who came to America because of Hitler tended, at least at first, to live in close proximity to one another, use their native language in social situations, and generally to recreate a familiar ambience for themselves. In our case, it was the world of pre-war Vienna. As I remember my pre-teenage years, my parents functioned well in the American professional and commercial worlds, but at home they did much to replicate the environment of the city from which they had to flee.

1 Playbill—<http://www.hermannleopoldi.at/content/view/24/42/><http://www.hermannleopoldi.at/content/view/24/42/>

2 GermaniaBroadcastPage—<http://germaniabroadcast.net/events/hermann-leopoldi-helen-moestein-orchestra-hall>

3 Stefan Zweig: *Die Welt von Gestern. Erinnerungen eines Europäers*. London, Stockholm: Hamisch Hamilton gemeinsam mit Bermann-Fischer, 1941.

What I remember in particular about the evenings when family friends would get together was the plethora of jokes and songs shared on such occasions. The tone was nostalgic, bittersweet, and sometimes downright acerbic, and it all added up to what one might call “refugee humor.” A good way to illustrate this kind of humor is by example: Yankel goes to visit his friend Moritz in his new apartment in the Washington Heights section of NYC and is horrified when he sees a huge poster of Hitler hanging on the living room wall. When he expresses his dismay, Moritz replies to Yankel: “Mittel gegen Heimweh.”⁴

Hermann Leopoldi was a composer/performer who brought both the reality and the fiction of Vienna with him wherever he went. Unlike most other cabaret artist emigrés, Leopoldi managed to establish a successful career in New York in the early 1940s, first in his own café, the “Viennese Lantern,” and then in a number of other entertainment venues where he performed his repertoire both in German and English. His songs, because of their ability to express a common sentiment that was both nostalgic and at the same time current and new, served as a “Mittel gegen Heimweh” to some, and an enjoyable new perspective to others.

Einzi Stolz, wife of the Viennese composer Robert Stolz (1880-1975), knew Leopoldi well, and she once described his appeal: she remarked that to those living through the difficult years before, during, and after World War II, he seemed like “a creature from a different planet” in terms of keeping an optimistic outlook and maintaining a belief in the good of humanity.⁵ And therein lies the key to Leopoldi’s success both in Europe and America. His humor was sweet, and his songs, even the more satirical or critical ones, had a charm and kindness to them that were not the norm. The music of his compositions could convey a sense of comedy in itself, so even those who might not fully understand the language in which he sang could delight in his act, and he sang with a laugh in his voice that showed that he was enjoying the performance as much as his audience.

In a newspaper article, he humorously described his process of composing songs as akin to giving birth; a process in which he was the mother and the lyricist the father. I will cite it at some length because I believe, although written as a comical piece, it goes a long way to explain precisely how Leopoldi approached writing his music and why his songs had his DNA, so-to-speak:

“Ich fühle mich Mutter.” Die ganze Fülle des Glücks, Hoffens und Harrens. “Himmelhoch jauchzend zu Tode betrübt,” den ganzen Komplex der Seelenempfindungen vom ersten Erröten der Jungfrau bis zur Geburt des Sprösslings empfinde ich mit der Geburt meines Schlagers mit. Der Vater meines Kindes ist “Der Text.” Er poussiert mich, hofiert mich, verfolgt mich, ich verstoße ihn, ich spiele mit ihm, bis ich endlich fühle, dieser Text ist es und kein anderer, der mich – “halb zog sie ihn, halb sank er hin” – gefangen nimmt und dann beschäftigte ich mich mit ihm, erst zaghaft, dann immer stärker und dann liebe ich ihn, nur dass ich seinen Namen nicht im Vollgefühl des Glücks hinausschreien, sondern hinauszingen möchte. Erst in Melodien, die mir vertraut sind, dann zaghaft tastend in neuen Melodien widme ich meinem Geliebten einige Noten... Endlich treten aus dem bunten mich foppenden, in meinem Gehirn tanzenden Tongewirr einige zusammenhängende Melodien heraus, die sich wie alte Bekannte breit machen und ganz vertraulich aus der Gedankenwelt in den Gehörgang, in die Werkzeuge des Mundes schleichen, um sich als trällerndes Liedchen auf meiner Zunge zu entpuppen. Das ist dann der Einfall, das ist die Befruchtung!

4 My recollection of the joke that was told at our dinner table again and again when I was growing up by a family friend, Richard Akselrad. (He told it infinitely better and everyone always smiled, although they knew it well.)

5 Einzi Stolz cited in “Music and the Holocaust,” <http://holocaustmusic.org/places/camps/central-europe/buchenwald/leopoldihermann/>

Die Weiterentwicklung ist vogelartig und gleich dem Ausbrüten eines Eies... Und so brüte ich über dieser neuen Frucht, bis ich eines Tages den kompletten Schlager vollkommen empfinde... Da heißt es ausbessern die Fehler, über die das träumerische Gehirn spielend hinweggehüpft ist, ausglätten, Ton für Ton sichtbar, fest geformt... die Schale fällt und der Schlager, lang ersehnt, erträumt, mit Hoffnungen und Befürchtungen gehegt, steht auf dem Papier. So ist er unter Schmerzen geboren...

In quälendem Zweifel rufe ich Grossmama an, die in Gestalt des Verlegers erscheint und siehe: Grossmama ist entzückt! Nun, dann fliege hinaus in die Welt, mein mit Schmerzen geborener Sprößling – und Mutter sieht sich nach einem neuen Vater um.⁶

Certainly, the piece is meant to be funny, but it also is a plausible explanation of why Leopoldi's songs when sung by him have a completely different quality than when sung by someone else. As their "mother," he has insights and knowledge about them that no one else will ever have.

Hersch Kohn (Leopoldi's birth name) was born in 1888 in Gaudenzdorf, a suburb that would eventually be incorporated into Vienna's 12th district, Meidling⁷, the name Hersch was the Jewish version of the German Hermann. He had grown up hearing his father Leopold Kohn perform the *Wienerlied*, a unique 19th century musical and socio-cultural phenomenon that had been a psychograph of the Viennese way of life in its combination of idealism, joy, and desperation. Like his father, Hersch was a talented musician, as was his older brother Ferdinand (1886-1944). Both brothers got their first piano lessons from their father who, in addition to being a piano teacher, performed as a *Volkssänger* under the name "Leopoldi."⁸ It was Leopold who secured his son Hermann's first bookings in cafés in 1904.⁹ Taking what had already been his father's stage name before him, the younger "Leopoldi" started as a pianist in the provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, slowly working his way from Zagreb to Prague back to Zagreb and ultimately by way of Lower Austria to the Savoy-Bar in Vienna. Along the way, it became quickly evident that Leopoldi's real talent was as a *Klavierhumorist* rather than a pure instrumentalist. During the World War I years, he performed, while in military service, as a piano-humorist and conductor and traveled throughout the waning Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was right after the war that he got his big break and was engaged at the Ronacher Theatre in Vienna, where his brother Ferdinand joined and accompanied him at a second piano; this two-piano combination became an innovation for Leopoldi's popular music. His rising success led to his ultimately opening his own cabaret-club, shared with his brother and another comedian, Fritz Wiesenthal. The Kabarett Leopoldi-Wiesenthal (familarly known as "L-W") existed in Vienna's *Innenstadt* from 1922-1925 and was not only a platform for Leopoldi's piano-comedy, but also a venue for many actors from the Burgtheater and elsewhere: Raoul Aslan, Armin Berg, Szoeko Szakall, and Hans Moser, to name only a few. It became an increasingly popular nightspot, but although always sold out, it proved to be a financial loss for the Leopoldi brothers and Wiesenthal, all of whom,

6 Newspaperclipping: "Die Geburt des Schlagers" von Hermann Leopoldi. (Nachlass H. Leopoldi/H. Moslein, S R. Leopoldi), cited in Franziska Ernst: *Hermann Leopoldi: Biographie eines jüdischen Unterhaltungskünstlers und Komponisten*. Diplomarbeit, Universität Wien, 2010, p. 80-1.

7 Today, there is a Hermann Leopoldi Park in that district to commemorate its native son.

8 Presumably because the name Kohn would instantly be recognized as Jewish.

9 Georg Traska and Christoph Lind: *Hermann Leopoldi: The Life of a Viennese Piano Humorist*. Studies in Austrian Literature, Culture and Thought, Biography, Autobiography, Memoirs Series. Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2013, p. 24.

it seems, had no business acumen. Still it proved to have been a successful venture in terms of Leopoldi's career. From there he went on to perform solo in other cities, while his brother stayed in Vienna playing bar piano.

In Berlin he teamed up with his first female partner Betja Milskaja,¹⁰ and there, as well as in Prague and elsewhere, the duo's reputation grew such that by the time Leopoldi came back to Vienna in 1930, he was one of the leading cabaret performers of the day. His lyricists provided him with good material to which he composed song after song, giving the typical *Wienerlied* a comic twist and turning it into an immediate *Schlager* or hit.

During the time of the Austro-Fascist corporate state (1933-38), Leopoldi's stature was that of cultural icon. The regimes, first of Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuß and, after his assassination, of Kurt von Schuschnigg did not make racism one of their essential and overt political elements or policies. In some ways, at least until it could no longer sustain itself, the corporate state actually served as a counter-force to the Nazis and became a refuge for artists fleeing from Germany after the Nuremberg Laws had gone into effect. Hermann, who in the 20s had unequivocally served the Social Democrats with a march he had composed,¹¹ openly affirmed the politics of the Austrofascist regime and often stated his admiration for Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg.¹² In 1937, Leopoldi received the "Silbernes Verdienstzeichen" (Austrian Silver Order of Merit) from the Chancellor's hand. The award was given to individuals, "die sich durch überragende, hervorragende, außerordentliche, bedeutende, besondere oder große Verdienste um das Land Wien durch öffentliches oder privates Wirken erworben haben."¹³ Less than a year later, he would find himself under arrest by the Nazis in the city that became—after the Anschluss and during World War 2—*Vienna, Germany*.¹⁴

Until 1938, Leopoldi's iconic style was never mere parody but rather inhered in composing songs that joyfully reminded the audience of the *Wienerlied* while, "at the same time interpolating variously established ironic distances from the traditional motifs, above and beyond, the lyrics and their interpretation."¹⁵ This is what his piano-humorism consisted of and what made it so "typically" Viennese. His years in exile in New York in the 40s would build on this essence, yet at the same time give it a new patina.

After an unsuccessful attempt to flee Vienna after the Anschluss, Leopoldi was summoned to Gestapo headquarters, ostensibly for political reasons, but probably because

10 Not much is known about Milskaja other than her great success as the distaff side of Leopoldi's act from 1929-1938. They tried to flee from Austria together in March 1938 immediately upon the *Anschluss* but were turned back at the border. The only additional information about her is that she later turned up in New York in the 40s, as well, now married to a magnate (according to Leopoldi) named Samuel Rosoff.

11 *Immer voran! Das Lied vom Arbeitsmann* (1929) was the march written "in boilerplate Marxist style" (Traska/Lind: *Hermann Leopoldi*, p. 172).

12 For a more detailed explanation of the political situation and the reasons for Leopoldi's political stance, see *ibid*, pp.170-9 and Ernst: *Hermann Leopoldi*, pp. 100-10.

13 Hans Weiss und Ronald Leopoldi: *Hermann Leopoldi und Helly Möslein. „In einem kleinen Café in Hernalds“. Eine Bildbiographie*, Wien: Editions Trend, 1992, p. 44.

14 When I first saw this geographical designation in going through the papers of my grandparents, whose passports from 1939 registered this as their place of birth, it made me shudder.

15 Traska/Lind: *Hermann Leopoldi*, p. 205.

he was Jewish and had written some explicitly anti-Nazi lyrics.¹⁶ He was sent first to Dachau, then, at the end of September, along with 2000 other Jewish prisoners, transferred to Buchenwald. Already in Dachau, Leopoldi showed his resilient spirit; on one occasion there was a kind of gathering of inmates who were musicians and performers, and spontaneously, he sang a song with the following lyrics: "Ich bin ein unverbesserlicher Optimist / Ein echter Optimist, ein Optimist / Man muss das Leben nehmen, wie es ist / Als Optimist, als Optimist."¹⁷ There is little doubt that Leopoldi took the hand he was dealt and somehow always managed to win with it.

The story surrounding his famous composition, the "Buchenwäldermarsch," is a good example. The genesis of this song is quite strange. The story goes that the deputy Commandant at the camp, a man who was enamored of children's and folk songs, and often made the inmates stand together and learn and sing these songs for hours on end, one day, while visibly drunk, expressed his desire to have a camp song written. According to Leopoldi himself, the words of Deputy Commandant Rödl were: "Schreibts was auf Buchenwald. Zehn Mark für'n Besten."¹⁸ Of all the attempts, Leopoldi's music along with Fritz Löhner-Beda's (1883-1942) lyrics,¹⁹ appealed to the Commandant the most. They had not dared to put their names on the composition to give it to the Commandant directly, so they chose an intermediary, the Capo of their barracks, who claimed it as his own invention. As such, it was accepted as the camp song. The text of the verses is fairly harmless and could be sung by all the inhabitants of Buchenwald—guards and inmates alike—but the refrain shows the abominable day-to-day routine of the camp and the longing for liberty:

O Buchenwald, ich kann dich nicht vergessen, / Weil du mein Schicksal bist. / Wer dich verließ, der kann es erst ermesen / Wie wundervoll die Freiheit ist! / O Buchenwald, wir jammern nicht und klagen, / Und was auch unsere Zukunft sei – / Wir wollen trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen, / denn einmal kommt der Tag, dann sind wir frei.

The last recurring line, according to Viktor Frankl, inspired a motivational response in the inmates and enabled them to actually affirm their horrible existence.²⁰ Once he had accepted the composition as the camp song, the commandant made the inmates rehearse it *ad nauseum* while they stood together on the *Appellplatz*. The song was soon heard outside the camp and throughout the Third Reich. Leopoldi later commented that because of the refrain, the song was revolutionary; the fact that it spread shows how benighted the Nazis were not to recognize the subversive nature of the song, allowing its popularity as if it were nothing more than a camp song for the soldiers there and elsewhere.²¹

16 Leopoldi's arrest no doubt occurred both because Leopoldi had openly supported the corporate state and because he was Jewish. In fact, his personal data card at Buchenwald labeled him as a "political Jew." Traska/Lind: *Hermann Leopoldi*, p. 215.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 212.

18 Weiss/Leopoldi: *Hermann Leopoldi und Helly Möslein*, p. 54.

19 Löhner-Beda's most famous songs include lyrics for Franz Lehar's operettas *Land des Lächelns* and *Giuditta*. He is the lyricist of *Dein ist mein ganzes Herz*, the Lehar aria that was Richard Tauber's *Laiblied*. On most of the songs he wrote for others, he goes by the name of Beda, pure and simple.

20 Viktor Frankl gave the book he published in 1946 that recounted his concentration camp experiences the title: "... trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen": *Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager*, taking the title from the *Buchenwaldlied*.

21 Weiss/Leopoldi: *Hermann Leopoldi und Helly Möslein*, p. 57.

Leopoldi was indeed lucky. His in-laws had emigrated to America in 1930 and were thus already American citizens who were able to sponsor him, and his wife, Jenny (Eugenia Kraus). With a large bribe to the German government, Jenny then arranged for Hermann's release. He was freed in February—nine months after his arrest and returned to Vienna to make ready for emigration to join his wife and their two children in America. Almost a year to the day after his arrest, Hermann Leopoldi sailed on *The City of Baltimore* to New York and to the freedom sung about in the *Buchenwaldlied*. His librettist, Löhner-Beda, was less fortunate and was ultimately bludgeoned to death in Auschwitz in 1942.

So, Leopoldi made it to America and for seven years, he brought his style of piano-humorism and his old and new *Schlager* to the cafés and bars of NYC where Central European refugees congregated. He also performed in a few other big cities as well as in the Catskills. After recuperating from the voyage to America at the home of his in-laws for a few months, Hermann started performing at a small New York nightspot—the Alt-Wien on 79th St. The Leopoldi presence and performances turned a sleepy café into a jumping nightclub. It was also at this time, in April 1939 that he first discovered the Viennese-born Chicagoan, singer Helen (Helly) Moeslein, whom he quickly took on as a partner, both professionally and personally. She taught him English songs and played the second piano, as Milskaja had done in the old country. Together they created an act for American audiences in both English and German that brought them considerable fame in New York. “Within the Leopoldi-Möslein²² repertoire there was no linear development from ‘Vienna’ to ‘America’ but rather a creative adaption of Viennese music to shifting American settings.”²³ He personified the Viennese perspective—at least one version of it—in his performances, turning the profound pain of loss that many in his audience were feeling into a bath of nostalgia and joy. He performed that magic with his songs. In his compositions, he kept the nostalgic essence of the *Wienerlied* that conveyed the pain of loss so profoundly felt by the refugees, and, at the same time, his wry humor gave it a smile and turned it into a thought-piece.²⁴

I would now like to look at three songs that were part of Leopoldi's American repertoire to illustrate the essence of his artistry and what made him more than simply a “Meidlinger Bua” only beloved in Vienna. His humor and talent were widely appreciated during the decade of the 1940s in America and created the essence of “his” Vienna for Americans.²⁵

In New York, Hermann met up with one of his former lyricists, the Berliner Kurt Robitschek and set his text *Die Novak's (sic) aus Prag* to music. Written and first performed in 1941, this song is both simple and eloquent in its portrayal of the ambivalence of exile that those who had been fortunate enough to get out of Hitler's Europe had experienced. The fact that the family in question is from Prague doesn't make this any less a Viennese song. Ultimately, the message is to be careful what you wish

22 From here on, I will use the German spelling of Möslein with the umlaut.

23 Traska/Lind: *Hermann Leopoldi*, p. 265.

24 Although Leopoldi did not write most of his own lyrics, they became HIS songs precisely because of the music and his unique style. Few remember the lyricists—but all remember Leopoldi.

25 You can hear all of the songs discussed here and more by going to the website “Leopoldi im Exil—Karriere in den USA”. <https://www.mediathek.at/hermann-leopoldi/leopoldi-im-exil/>

for; and the melody plus Leopoldi's delivery and the words themselves all combine to create a sweet and touching embodiment of the refugee experience. Its first verse establishes the Novaks as an average family and introduces the various members and their wanderlust and individual longings for distant, exotic-sounding venues. Then, in the second verse, Hitler takes over Europe and the Novaks' longings are ultimately fulfilled. That is the bittersweet irony:

... der einzige Fehler den Novaks gehabt, sie waren so schrecklich verträumt: [and then the chorus] Es träumte der Leo von Montevideo... Die Tante, die Anna, die träumt von Havanna, die Sehnsucht von Arthur dem Jüngsten war ein Stierkampf in Lisbon zu Pfingsten! Die Köchin Marianka träumt von Casablanca... Die Novaks, die träumen in den eigenen Räumen, von einer Sehnsucht der herrlichen Welt.

The second verse succinctly describes Prague's fall: "Der Fußtritt der Zeit hat die Novaks gekickt. Sie wurden aus Träumen geweckt... Marschierenden Schritte, ein Führer, ein Volk... Da hat man im Schnellzug gesehn die Wrbas, die Krejcis, die Bilys die Kres—Doch was ist mit Novaks geschehn?" And the chorus returns with slightly different words describing a totally different situation, but the same melody:

Es sitzt jetzt der Leo in Montevideo... Die Tante, die Anna, die sitzt in Havanna und wartet auf Arthur den Jüngsten denn der Dampfer von Lisbon kommt Pfingsten. Die Köchin Marianka sitzt in Casablanca... Die Novaks, die träumen in gemieteten Räumen von einem Ort nur: sie träumen von Prag.

Prague here stood for Vienna, Berlin, Frankfurt or wherever. It was the shared refugee experience that no one could quite convey like Leopoldi. As he noted himself in his memoir—"Von weit und breit kamen die Leute, um sich dieses Lied anzuhören, das ich mit einem diskret böhmischen Akzent vortrug."²⁶ The composition immediately became a classic—an anthem for the Jewish refugees who heard Leopoldi sing it.

In *Das Märchen vom Bernhardiner*, written in 1945 with code-switching lyrics by Robert Gilbert (a lyricist famous for his work on the operetta *Im Weißen Rössl* and who wrote many of Leopoldi's texts), two refugee dachshunds, now living in Washington Heights (one of the areas of New York City that housed many refugees in the early 40s), meet and compare stories about their lives, "over there" in Vienna and "over here" in America. In the music, Leopoldi includes echoes of George M. Cohan's American war anthem "Over There", as well as his typical verse and refrain format. In the first verse of the song, a comical mixture of German, Viennese, Yiddish, and English, the first Dachshund recalls that "over there" he had been a St. Bernhard—a *Bernhardiner*—"ein großes Tier" and not only *groß*, but "der größte Bernhardiner." But now, "over here", he has become insignificant: "Wenn ich am Broadway wackel, als ganz a kleiner Dackl." The trouble is that he can't perform the task he had at home—being a lap dog—so he is advised to get a job; but that's not so simple "over here" because he "barks" with an accent. What newly arrived refugee could not relate to this tale? In the second verse the second dachshund replies that he has heard stories like this before from all kinds of other dogs he knows, and he doesn't always believe them—every dog can say: "ich war einmal ein großer Bernhardiner—over there" as an excuse for failure. Although it never mentions that these are Jewish "dogs", the text uses yiddishisms in many of the phrases, like "grien" instead of "gruen", "Schainheit", and "Schnorrer." Leopoldi conveys through his delivery both the comedy and the pathos

26 Weiss/Leopoldi: *Hermann Leopoldi und Helly Möslin*, p. 70.

that are part of the difficult experience that these new Americans face in establishing themselves “over here.” And it’s all done with humor, charm, and a combination of nostalgia and optimism—a perfect “melting pot” for the new American audiences. It also brings back the Viennese ambience with its linguistic “Kauderwelsch” mix of German, Viennese dialect, and Yiddish, and its comical blend of boastfulness and self-deprecation.

Although this is the version of the song that everyone now knows, there was a first version that made direct references to the reasons for emigration rather than simply talking about the feeling of displacement. It was a far more politicized lyric, ending with the following third verse:

Wo sind die Zeiten, Lieber?
Sie sind dahin –
Doch müsst’ ich lügen, wenn ich heut’ nicht happy bin –
Denn vor dem Maulkorb drübn
Packt mich ein Graun,
A so a Hundeleben hält kein Hund mehr aus!
Drum als sie dort uns arme Bernhardiner
An Ketten g’legt so wie ein böses Tier,
Da nahm ich gern mein Packerl –
Lieber a ganz klaan’s Dackerl
Over here! Over here! Over here!²⁷

Leopoldi, with the final popular version, has opted for the “Maulkorb” (muzzle), so that he could laugh with his listeners rather than agitate them. It is much lighter in tone, certainly less openly political, and is meant to provide the audience with smiles rather than anger or lamentation. The intention of Leopoldi’s humor, at least since the early 1930s, was to charm, not to instruct. The charm *was* the instruction.

In 1946 Leopoldi added a song in English to his repertoire, whose title and refrain became a kind of motto for the transplanted new Americans—I know, because I grew up hearing this phrase again and again—*See little Erica, this is America*. Leopoldi is supposedly singing a response to his niece, who has written him a letter from Lisbon (where, as we know from the movie *Casablanca*, she is presumably stuck waiting for an exit visa) asking about what America is like. The humor of the song lies in the interspersing of positive and negative impressions of what it is like to be in this “Land der unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten” as America was referred to in the 40s and 50s, but the ultimate affirmation is the dream that one day the progeny of immigrants can be president.

Another of the songs Leopoldi wrote for American audiences in 1945 was with lyricist Kurt Robitschek, *An der schönen roten Donau*. Having been lucky enough to survive and viewing the situation from America, Leopoldi and Robitschek make fun of the hypocritical, political opportunism of their “beloved” former Viennese compatriots, those that forced them out of the city and country. The essence of this song is that now that the Nazis are gone and the Russians have become occupiers, the Viennese invite Leopoldi—addressed in the song by his original Jewish name, “Herr Kohn” —to

27 *Leopoldiana—Gesammelte Werke von Hermann Leopoldi und 11 Lieder von Ferdinand Leopoldi: Beiträge zur Wiener Musik*. Bd. 2. Herausgegeben vom Wiener Volksliedwerk. Hrsg. Ronald Leopoldi. Wien: Döblinger, 2011, p. 117.

return to Vienna to enjoy the wine and the new atmosphere of a supposedly changed Vienna: “Unsre Hemden tan ma wechseln / und verkaufen unser G’wand. Nur statt ‘arisch’ heisst’s ‘Towarisch’, / Russenschand statt Rassenschand.” Perhaps the most biting words occur in the second verse: “wir ham schliesslich kan Charakter, / doch wir ham a gold’nes Herz.”

That song was written in 1945, and yet, 3 years later, the American citizens Leopoldi and Moeslein decided to take up the Austrians on their invitation to return to Vienna to live. Leopoldi had had true success in America—he even appeared in a Lerner and Loewe musical on Broadway *The Day Before Spring* (as Sigmund Freud, no less), along with his many other performances. But the pull to return to perform in his true *Heimat* was too strong. There were probably many reasons that Leopoldi decided to return to reactivate his career in Vienna and live out his days there, but I would speculate that one of them concerned his celebrity. No matter how much success he had in the land of unlimited opportunities, the audience would always be limited to those who had some connection with Vienna or the German language, and as beloved as he was by these grateful audiences, it was not enough to counter the pull of *Heimat*. I began this paper by emphasizing Leopoldi’s optimism and luck. Returning to Vienna was for Leopoldi evidence of that optimism—optimism that the Viennese “hearts of gold” that he had sung about in *An der schönen roten Donau* would somehow overshadow their “lack of character” and their attitudes over the past ten or more years. He wanted to believe that past was past. A visible sign of that optimism (and perhaps also luck) was the birth of his son Ronald in 1955 when Hermann was 68 years old—perhaps for Hermann, it was Austria that was “das Land der unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten.” For Hermann, Vienna was the place where he could continue to capitalize on the name Leopoldi, a name that was just as big there in the 1950s as it had been in the 30s. He would go on to write 67 of his total 239 songs in the last decade of his life back in his *Heimatstadt*, and twenty-one years after receiving the silver service medal, he received a gold one: on 17 October 1958 Leopoldi was awarded the *Goldene Verdienstzeichen der Republik Oesterreich* in honor of his life’s work. He died a year later at the age of 71 and is buried in an *Ehrenggrab* in the *Zentralfriedhof*. Vienna and Leopoldi belonged together.

Unlike the songs of Cole Porter or Irving Berlin, Leopoldi’s *Schlager* had lyricists other than the composer; and yet, they are forever after considered as and known only as Leopoldi’s songs. His musical compositions were, of course, good, but, in my opinion, certainly not inspired in the style of George Gershwin or Frank Loesser. The difference was that Leopoldi was also the performer of those songs—the piano-humorist that had given birth to them²⁸ also made them live. To his audiences they became completely his, his and Vienna’s. Both at home and abroad, he had created, in tune and tone, a Vienna of his own and that was also the Vienna that was embraced by his audiences.

28 See FN 6.

