

## Joyce, Jelinek & Franz Joseph: Bloomsday in Vienna

By Ana Tajder

It was “Bloomsday” evening, Jun. 16 at Café Korb. Yet another book reading, I feared – the intoning of Literature with a capital “L” – but instead, it was a colorful café-fairground of contrasting scenes and people. James Joyce would have loved it.

Joyce’s *Ulysses* revolutionized the 20th century literature by taking the reader inside the mind of the revolving narrators to describe the details of the day of Jun. 16, 1904 in Dublin over 1,000 pages. (“*Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked giblet soup, nutty gizzards,... Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine.*”)

Bloom, an ad salesman at a daily newspaper and poet Stephan Dedalus lead us through the novel and their own sensibilities, pleasures and lusts to at the time new idea of what was possible to capture in print. And since at least 1954, Bloomsday has been celebrated in cities and towns around the world to honor Joyce’s stretching the possibilities of language to capture the truth of experience.

(“*Every life is in many days, day after day,*” Joyce wrote. “*We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love. But always meeting ourselves.*”)

This year in Vienna, echo medienhaus had a new concept: Bloom’s Austrian colleagues in advertising and media, including Maria Oppitz, Publishing Director of *profil*, Reinhold Gmeinbauer Business Manager of *Die Presse*, Dr. Andreas Mailath-Pokorny, Vienna’s Culture Councillor, and *The Vienna Review*’s Dardis McNamee and 35 others would be reading one by one from *Ulysses* in front of mics and camera in Café Korb, one of Vienna’s most lively coffee houses on Tuchlauben in the 1<sup>st</sup> District.

Café Korb was a perfect choice for this event, long frequented by Viennese writers, artists and intellectuals of various stripes, including Nobel laureate Elfride Jelinek. Jelinek apparently loves the place – or at least did until she got famous and lost her privacy. “Café Korb is like life itself. What greater praise can you give a coffee house?” she wrote.

Since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, this strange little square was the hub of textile merchants (Tuch is German for textile). Its triangular form gives away its age – markets were triangular before year 1,000, so archaeologists claim it for one of the oldest markets in Vienna. The tiny square is encircled by very tall elegant buildings from the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is so much of old Vienna here (including the horse-drawn carriages that are constantly passing by) that standing on this square, you can almost feel the sweep of the Emperor’s cloak raising goose bumps on back of your neck.

(“*History,*” commented Stephen Daedalus, “*is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.*”)

Speaking of which - Franz Joseph was the guest of honour at the opening of *Café Korb* in 1904. *Korb* has always been a family business, the latest being the Widl’s, whose daughter Susanne Widl has been running the Café since 2000. She is a special figure, just as *Korb* is a special Café – a known in the 1960s as actress, model and performance artist. In an interview last year on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1968, she had complained that people have become conformist, while back then, young people tried to be creative and look different. Well, Widl still always manages to look different, with her heavily charcoaled eyes and theatrical wardrobe worthy of Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*.

(“*And when all is said and done*” Bloom decides, “*the lies a fellow told about himself couldn't probably hold a proverbial candle to the wholesale whoppers other fellows coined about him.*”)

Unfortunately (at least to some), the café was modernised in the 1960s, and the basket-like plastering that gave the Café Korb (German for basket) its name was ripped off. Still, today, *Korb* does have the most crucial characteristic of a real Viennese Café – patina. The red padded benches, old bent-wood chairs, black and white photos on the walls and a table covered with newspapers on wooden holders, all add to the feeling of timeless Vienna, of reading and conversation and well spend leisure.

But on this day, the patina was accessorised with some startlingly up-to date technology. As the reading itself took place in the basement-turned-Art Lounge – too small and too hot for the expected number of guests – a large flat screen was placed in the middle of the Café where the readings were beamed up into the Café for all to share. It posed a fascinating contrast to the old world of the Café and the traditional “Herr Ober” in their black tuxedos who elegantly manoeuvred pass the screens and loudspeakers. The reading could also be followed on the terrace through two large loudspeakers.

Which was great, because the terrace was actually the most interesting place to be. This is where the worlds collided. There were tables of colourfully dressed visitors who had actually come to the posh Café Delia’s next door; unable to find a place to sit, they were grafted onto the scene at the Korb. But it was a bit of a mis-match, chatting too loudly and showing no interest whatsoever for the melodious words of Joyce coming out of the loudspeakers. And then there were the participants of the event – writers, journalists, a TV crew, and other black & jean-clad intellectuals who were interested in what was going on, but even more interested in networking.

They all added to the colourful and lively flair, making this more than just a reading. Here, art had become an *event* - if nothing else, for its ability to connect the seemingly un-connectable, and revive the creative chaos that many might have believed lost.

(“*Think you're escaping and run into yourself, ” concluded Leopold Bloom as his day came to an end. “Longest way round is the shortest way home.”*)