

## Romancing the Eighth

By Ana Tajder

Josefstadt is where old Vienna is hiding. While the first district is filling with tourism, shopping, gastronomy and enormously expensive apartments only diplomats and Eastern European millionaires can afford, old Vienna is retreating into its eighth district. Located between the City Hall, Parliament, University and Burgtheater on the inner side and the 16<sup>th</sup> district with its kebab shops and women covered in headscarves on the outer, Vienna's smallest but mostly dense populated district became the "Burg" of Viennese Bürgertum (bourgeoisie).

There are gentlemen in loden coats and Tyrolean hats walking their dachshunde, old cafes, "Kreislere" (tiny local stores) and Heuriger (traditional wine-taverns). All amongst tall, elegant and perfectly renovated apartment buildings in Wilhelminian style and a baroque surprise here and there. You will see old Viennese ladies in their fur coats, coiffed hair and black patent shoes mingling in front of "Theater an der Josefstadt", the oldest still operating theater in Vienna. It is located on Josefstädterstrasse, district's main street, just across from where Austrian president Heinz Fischer lives. He feels so comfortable in Josefstadt that he refused to move to the presidential residence in Hohe Warte. The only sign of the highest Austrian dignitary living here is his and his wife's picture signed with a "thank you", hanging at the meats department in the supermarket next door. The president is low key, just like his district.

There are no tourists in Josefstadt. This district is not at all that exciting. It has no particularly astonishing spots and no attractions. You will have to read between the lines (houses?) here, absorb the atmosphere, imagine a fireplace burning in a "Altbauwohnung" (old apartment) and try to hear Hans Moser's singing voice in the hum of the district. Start with following:

On late afternoons, sit on a bench in Schönborn Park just behind the Baroque Palais Schönborn, where the ethnographical museum is located, and watch low sunlight creating shadows among old Viennese houses. Schönborn is a gorgeous little baroque palace filled with old furniture (they have a whole Tyrolean wooden living room), old skis and other things that have witnessed centuries of life in this country. The museum feels forgotten, like you have just discovered something special. Visit it on snowy afternoons when it is dark and cold outside and you can look out of the window into that beautiful park covered in snow. This is the true magic of Vienna.

Walk up Laudongasse: Between Florianigasse and Lederergasse you will find Melkerhof, a huge apartment complex from "Gründerzeit" (19<sup>th</sup> century). From the outside, this is a typical old Viennese building, perfectly renovated with its original yellow color. Its big green wooden doors are normally locked. But if you're lucky and someone is just entering or forgot to lock the doors, you will enter a magical Viennese courtyard. The buzz of the city will disappear in its three yards protected by inner facades covered in ivy. Old pebbles on the ground will soften your step. Find the yard closer to Laudongasse with its beautiful roses, benches, a fountain and a historical description of the Melkerhof.

In the evenings, walk down Lenaugasse, quiet and empty and filled with warm light from gas lanterns and enjoy the Viennese version of Parisian atmosphere. Walk further up the Florianigasse and peak into its many restaurants. You will hear Vienna breathe here.

Gastronomically, Josefstadt will offer you excellent traditional treats. Café Hummel and Café Eiles are old legendary Viennese coffee houses. For a younger version, not by age but by style and menu, visit Café Florianihof on Florianigasse. Through its large windows you will see the pretty Amtshaus, where many Viennese couples chose to get married. Josefstadt has plenty of original Viennese food to offer: Schnattl, Fromme Helene, Blauensteiner, Piaristenkeller (watch out, this one is very touristy). On warm summer nights enjoy a glass of wine or dinner (pizza from Sessante, Austrian food from Maria Treu Café or from Piaristenkeller) in front of Piaristenkirche “Maria Treu”, a beautiful baroque church. This is a very rare atmosphere for Vienna - it feels like the local version of an Italian piazza.

There are two secret garden gems in Josefstadt. One is “Weinstube” in Piaristengasse, which has managed to stay undiscovered by being marked only with a green lantern on its façade. On warm summer afternoons, the tiny but extremely romantic garden (including a wooden pavilion) will be filled with local artists and intellectuals. The menu is extremely simple but the food tastes just like grandmother’s. For more choice on Austrian food and a bit more *restauranty* feeling, go to “Zum narrischen Kastanienbaum” in Strozzigasse This one is slightly bigger but just as romantic and it has one special attraction: It is located below a “Burschenschaftler-Bude”, a fraternity house. So on a Friday evening, you can have a romantic date under the huge chestnut tree, with the soundtrack of jolly fraternity members singing and slamming their mugs against the table. A unforgettably bizarre experience.

Because of its closeness to the university, fraternities are Josefstadt’s secret ingredient. Their headquarters are not easy to recognize, except for “Gothia” in Schlößelgasse, which has a German flag hanging from its façade, or “Teutonia” in Strozzigasse, which has been attacked with paint balls. But you if you live in Josefstadt, you will meet “brothers” in their uniforms, most of them young and confused, going to their meetings. A great touch to the authentic atmosphere.

As a contrast, and a balance, there are many intellectuals and artists traditionally living in Josefstadt. The district does have its share of cabarets, jazz clubs, and tiny theaters, most important of which is The English Theater. There are also many students mingling around the university, many of which have inherited apartments in Josefstadt and now share with other students. This young wave of locals brought a surprise to the old establishment: as “Altbürgertumlich” as it is, Josefstadt became the second district that voted for a Green district government. Apart for a few bicycle routes, not much has changed. And it shouldn’t.