

Writer Frederic Morton revisits Vienna during an era ironically similar to the era he chronicled

The Paradoxes of Thelemangasse

By Ana Tajder

Last month, Frederic Morton was again back in Vienna, the city of his birth that has long been his muse and continues to be a focus of his work.

On this particular visit, he attended the opening night of the musical *Rudolph*, playing at the *Raimundtheater*, the story of the Crown Prince's last eight months leading up to the presumed double suicide with his lover at Mayerling, his hunting lodge in the Vienna Woods.

The show's libretto is loosely based on Morton's narrative history *A Nervous Splendor*, about the pivotal years 1888-1889, at the height of Vienna Imperial greatness at the end of the 19th century. It was a time of renaissance in art and the birth of psychotherapy, but also the year that Vienna became the suicide capital of the world. The Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy had begun to crumble; for many Viennese, it was the last glimmer of light, when dreams began to shatter and reality to roll in like heavy clouds before a storm.

Ironic, then, that Morton would visit this city as the world again faces the cold realism that follows times of exuberance, excess and greed.

But Frederic Morton's life seems full of ironies. There was a certain paradox, for example, in the fact that he was awarded the *Cross of Honor for Arts and Sciences* in 2003 from then-Austrian president Thomas Klestil. The irony lies in the fact that, before Morton's family was forced to flee Vienna during the *Kristallnacht* of 1939 when Frederic was 14, they produced those very medals of honor for the Austrian government. Later, they were produced for the Nazi regime.

And there is yet another Morton paradox: after the medal-manufacturing business expanded, his grandfather Bernhard Mandelbaum bought a bigger workshop on Thelemanngasse 4. He turned the house on Thelemanngasse 8 into a synagogue. During the war, the synagogue was demolished and was later renovated and reopened as a mosque after the war. In his Los Angeles Times blog, Morton describes his visit to this house during a trip to Vienna in 2006: "From the ground floor of the building before me came a wail, a low chant, a murmuring choir. I, a Jew, am the landlord of a mosque!"

Thelemangasse plays the central role in *Forever Street*, one of Morton's most successful books. It tells the story of three generations of a Jewish family from Vienna on a small street, appropriately named Thelemanngasse. In 2002, the book was chosen to inaugurate Vienna's program *Ein Stadt, Ein Buch* (One City, One Book) which enables the city each year to print 100,000 copies of a book of choice and distribute it to Vienna's citizens for free.

After having fled Vienna in 1939, Morton's family landed in New York where Morton later studied literature. In 1959, he started working for several American periodicals including *The New York Times*, *Esquire*, and *Playboy*, mainly as a columnist. In 1961, he published the family biography *The Rothschilds*, which became an international best seller and was also turned into a musical.

His two books on Vienna, *A Nervous Splendor* from 1979 and *Thunder at Twilight* from 1989, have become what one could call cult classics. The latter follows the thrust of the earlier book 25 years later, capturing another peak year of 1913 to 1914, on the eve of The Great War. By then, the Austrian Empire had played it's hand out the very end, it seemed, and seemed to be unraveling at the seams.

Again, the parallels of that era and today's crisis are eerie. In his opening pages, Morton describes the Bankruptcy Ball of Jan. 13, 1913:

In the depth of winter of 1913, at the height of pre-Lenten carnival, the Vienna Bankers Club gave a Bankruptcy Ball at the opulent Blumensaal hall. Some ladies appeared as balance sheets, displaying voluptuous debits curving from slender credits. Others came as inflated collateral: faux enhancements amplified the bust or upholstered the posterior. As for the gentlemen, thin ones were costumed as deposits, fat ones as withdrawals. Sooner or later everybody repaired to the debtor's prison — the restaurant of the Blumensaal.

Here mortgage certificates made pretty doilies for Sachertortes. Ornamented with the bailiff's seal, eviction and foreclosure notices were colorful centerpieces, each topped by a bowl of whipped cream. If you wrote your waiter an I.O.U., he would pour you a flute of Champagne. Dancing and merriment continued until 5 a.m., when, suddenly, the orchestra leader stopped his men in the middle of the "Emperor Waltz." He announced that since the musicians hadn't been paid, there would be no more music, good morning, good luck, goodbye.

Morton himself is fully aware of the ironies. This excerpt from *Thunder at Twilight* appeared in *The International Herald Tribune* on Mar. 9, suggesting again that there is a lot to learn about the present from the past. In this excerpt, Morton illustrates the fascinating parallels between the pre-WWI Vienna and today's collapse on Wall Street,:

"Austria is the laboratory for the apocalypse," he quotes Austrian *fin-de-siecle* satirist Karl Kraus and wonders what Kraus would say about America today.

On Mar. 5, he was invited by the *Society of Friends of Austrian Exile-Library* and *Viennese Lectures* to *Literaturhaus* to read from his autobiographical texts and speak with Hubert Christian Ehalt, coordinator of *Viennese Lectures* and editor of the book *I come from Vienna: Childhood and Adolescence in Vienna Modern till 1938* (Bibliothek der Provinz, 2008). His 2005 memoir *Runaway Waltz*, an autobiography, an excerpt of which, published in *Harper's Magazine*, was chosen for Best American Essays, 2003.

Books by Frederic Morton

A Nervous Splendor: Vienna, 1888-1889 (ISBN 0-14-005667-X)

Thunder at Twilight: Vienna 1913/1914 (ISBN 0-306-81021-2)

The Rothschilds: Portrait of a Dynasty (ISBN 1-56836-220-X)

The Forever Street (novel, 1984) (ISBN 0-7432-5220-9)

Runaway Waltz (memoir, 2005) (ISBN 0-7432-2539-2)

Musical *Rudolph* is currently playing in *Raimund Theater* in Vienna.