
Coming To Vienna



In September 1919 about twenty students traveled from the small Hungarian town of Sopron, where I had been born in 1900, to Vienna to begin their higher education. Most of them intended to study medicine. I was undecided. Scientific subjects were my favorites, and I was rather inclined to take up engineering as my profession. I changed my mind. Medicine would be interesting too, and I would be freer, my own master, not an employee. For a Jew this was an important consideration. I soon found that my technical ability and dexterity were indispensable requirements for a good physician—contrary to popular belief, it did not suffice merely to have bad handwriting in which to make out prescriptions. Since I had attended a technical school, I had to make up an exam in Latin by the end of my first year at the university. At that time I regarded it as a nuisance, but later in life I was glad that I had had to learn it. A lack of acquaintance with Latin would have been a serious gap in my education. My knowledge of German was none too satisfactory, either. However, my biggest handicap was my poverty.

For many years afterwards, when I remembered or talked about my student days, I would feel intense pangs of hunger, like a conditioned reflex. Our group of students, mainly from Hungary but with some from Poland, was, with a few exceptions, always hungry. It was a time of near famine in Vienna immediately after World War I, and the official food rations were insufficient to keep body and soul together. If I exercised the utmost restraint and self-control, my weekly bread ration lasted barely three days. We didn't have the means to buy food on the black market. The partly rotting apples that were sold from barges on the Danube canal were manna from heaven. The Mensa Academica Judaica (Jewish Academic Cafeteria), financed primarily by the American Joint Distribution Committee, fed us herring, dried beans, peas, and some sort of porridge. It was a blessing, though not enough in quantity, not to mention its quality. We often had to line up for an hour for this meager fare. There were just too many poor students who took their meals at the Mensa, which was in a cellar in the Alserstrasse. On those days when I had to do without breakfast, a cup of cocoa and a slice of cake was served, under a staircase, another generous gift of the American donors. For a while, Hitler's sister was one of our cooks.

Once the Mensa was completely wrecked by anti-Semitic students. The attack came unexpectedly, at a time when only the cooks and a few students were there. They fought back with herring missiles. Anti-Semitic students often prevented us from entering the main university building. They beat up those whom they caught inside and ejected them roughly. The building was under university jurisdiction, so that the police were not allowed to enter. Sometimes the police arrested those who had been thrown and kicked out.

Several times clothing and shoes came from the United States too. They lay in heaps in a room, and whatever we pulled out was potluck. There were lots of cutaways — just the right clothes for us! With the shoes it was even worse. There were odd shoes, and if one found a shoe that fitted, it was a hopeless task to dig out the other

of the pair. A friend of mine attempted it. He took off one of his own shoes to try on others, and when he gave up, he had an unpleasant surprise—someone had mixed his shoe into the pile, and he was unable ever to spot it again.

We shivered in the unheated lecture rooms and in our “digs” (lodgings). I didn’t have any heating facilities. One Jewish professor, M. Hajek, set up an arrangement in his hospital: we could use some cellars and passages there for study. It was a blessing, especially on weekends when all the libraries were closed. Those few of us who had some money studied in the coffeehouses.

We were about six hundred freshmen in medicine, and less than half qualified as doctors.¹ A number dropped out soon after they realized that the courses were too difficult for them; others were compelled to give up for financial reasons. They came from middle-class families who had become impoverished during and after the war [World War I]. Many were lured away by the prospect of making money quickly and easily. There was a kind of financial—but not economic—boom. Coffeehouses and inns were converted into private banks and currency exchange offices. Some people made fortunes through financial speculation and manipulation. The paper money of the old Habsburg Monarchy could not be speedily replaced by the newly created states. The Austrians printed a complicated stamp over it and kept the value as it had been. Other states each valued and devalued the currency differently. There was a lot of smuggling from country to country according to the changed valuation. The Hungarians, for instance, put a primitive stamp over the money and devalued it by 50 percent: the banks gave fifty stamped Kronen (crowns) for every hundred unstamped ones. The stamp was soon forged, so that people could get their money stamped privately at a discount of 10 percent. Bonds and shares were more complicated but very profitable for those who knew the ins and outs and were willing to take risks. It was a time of bliss for financial jugglers and swindlers. Some of my colleagues lost their money, repented, and returned to medical school.

I remember the financial adventure of one of my colleagues who bought a kilo (two pounds) of saccharin from a stranger. This was a rare commodity. In a doorway he tasted a small sample and paid a large sum for it. When he opened the parcel at home, it turned out to be some tasteless white powder. He told us what had happened, expecting some sympathy, but he became a laughingstock instead. We poor ones were spared this sort of temptation. It took a few years for the financial and economic conditions to settle. The private banks were changed back into coffeehouses, and the trading firms melted away. Many of the prospective doctors lost their wealth, and ended up with neither money nor a diploma.

It still puzzles me how I stuck it out and carried on with my studies. I was young and determined to make a success of what I had started. Was I waiting for a miracle to improve my situation? I don't know and can't explain it. TB scars on my chest X-rays are the hidden evidence of those grim years.

I would never have dared to embark on such a long course of study at the University of Vienna without the encouragement of the father of a fellow student from Sopron. I coached the son for several years, and we were close friends, too. He was a likeable and gifted boy from a wealthy family. His parents had lived in Vienna before moving to Sopron, where they owned a factory. They wanted their son to study medicine in Vienna. The father asked me to keep an eye on him, and arranged a private scholarship for me among his affluent business partners. A moderate sum, it was a fortune to me. Alas, it lasted only through the first year. The son let us down. He enjoyed his unrestricted freedom and was introduced by some new friends to the social life of Vienna. I rarely saw him at the university, and my warnings fell on deaf ears. He got involved in a love affair with a girl, and after a sham suicide attempt he dropped out. That was the end of my financial support.

I spent the summer vacation at home in Sopron, earning some money by teaching and studying for my impending exams. During that time I escaped by a hair's

breadth being drafted into the Hungarian army. A number of my friends and I had received invitations to meet the mayor of our town. What an honor, we thought. At the town hall we were herded into a room and ordered to strip for a physical examination. There was a recruiting committee, and those who were deemed fit—nearly all of us—had to sign a form that we were volunteering for the army. I protested, showed my university card, and was exempted. All the others had to serve in the army for at least a year—an army made up solely of volunteers, in accordance with the Versailles peace treaty!

The connections I had made during my first year were very helpful when I returned to Vienna for the second year. I managed to find cheap “digs” in Hernals, a working class suburb, and free meal tickets from the American Joint Distribution Committee. I was kept going by coaching my fellow students and by translating from French into Hungarian and German such things as the instructions for the then-new permanent waving procedures. As neither my French nor my German was very good, I sometimes wonder how those permanents turned out!

I was recommended to be the tutor and mentor to a ten-year-old boy from a wealthy family. I spent the weekends at their home, and in addition to some payment, I got my meals. It was a happy family and he was a bright boy. Unfortunately, half a year later his father died after an appendectomy.

Quite a number of my friends were in an equally miserable position. We decided to form an “Association of Hungarian Students” with the subtitle “Victims of the *numerus clausus*.² Some well-known personalities in Budapest, including a member of parliament, took up our cause and agreed to support us. Soon Jewish congregations throughout Hungary were raising funds for us. I was on the executive committee and we distributed the money as fairly as possible. These sums, though modest, were a godsend.

My people helped me as much as they could, but they had to struggle to make ends meet. When I was sixteen,

my father died at an early age after a long illness. My two elder brothers were penniless emigrants to Brazil, my two sisters worked as office clerks, and my youngest brother, a highly intelligent fellow, became a carpenter and furniture maker after finishing high school. He deserved a higher education, but we couldn't afford it.

Several times I was on the verge of giving up my studies and taking an office job, it would have solved all my problems. Still, I passed the exams without any difficulty, I made a number of friends, and despite all the misery, I came to love Vienna. Being poor as a church mouse, I was of no interest to the sweet Viennese girls, and having so many worries, I didn't miss them either. There were however, some very clever girls among my fellow students, and I enjoyed their company at the university and the libraries. My depressive moods disappeared and I carried on.

My hardest time was in September 1922, when I could barely scrape together the small sum necessary to return to Vienna. Then I struck oil! By chance I met a friend who was a student of commerce and business administration. He had a part-time job with a Hungarian transport firm which he wanted to give up, and was looking for a successor. I gladly accepted his offer, and this solved my problems nicely for the next two years, until the firm closed down. I never actually met my bosses, Messrs. Gyenes and Markovics. I had an office at 5 Rotenturmstrasse near St. Stephen's cathedral, where I went several times a week to collect my instructions and the firm's mail. Once or twice a month I had to travel to Gänersdorf, on the Vienna-Budapest railroad line, to a yarn factory that was located nearby. I had to take over some fifteen or twenty crates destined for the Textile Manufacturing Company in Vacz near Budapest. Under my supervision they were transported to the railroad station and loaded into a wagon. I had to note the wagon's number and send telegrams to a Mr. Kósa in Hegyeshalom (the first station over the border in Hungary) and also to the customs office. I had to inform them that wagon no. X was on the way to Hungary. Then I would return to

Vienna and send a report to the firm's headquarters in Budapest. Each time it took me the better part of a day. My commission depended on the number of crates, and my payments arrived promptly. I earned just enough to exist without neglecting my studies—it wasn't difficult to get away from the university for the odd day. There was something mysterious about the firm, but it wasn't my business to be nosy. My guess is that the firm had special connections with the Hungarian customs office.

My next problem was to pass the twelve final exams. It took nine months, from September, 1925 to June, 1926, and during that time I had scant savings and no earnings. Without the help of my younger brother, who had a good job by then, I could hardly have managed it. We were a close family, ready to help each other if one of us was in trouble.

I considered myself extremely fortunate. Some of my colleagues contracted tuberculosis, others went insane or committed suicide. One of the saddest cases was that of a fine young man who jumped out of a hospital window. He broke some limbs, but his life was saved. It was heartbreaking to see him dragging about on crutches. Another one, Dr. Hajnal, studied under appalling conditions, and when he finished, drowned himself in the Danube. Most of my close friends struggled through, and some went on to remarkable careers in various parts of the world.

I was now nearly twenty-five years old, a qualified M.D. from the University of Vienna, and without any means whatsoever. I couldn't practice in Austria, Hungary, or any other part of the world.³ The future looked very bleak indeed. When I spoke of my predicament to the head of the Rothschild Hospital in Vienna, where I was working as an unpaid volunteer in the department of internal medicine, he replied: "You are a superfluous man."⁴ That hurt me badly. I was determined to fight for a place in the sun.

That was when, with borrowed money, I started my training as a dental surgeon.⁵ Dentistry appealed to me as a mixture of medicine and engineering, with a lot of scope

for my instincts as a "fixer." It was hard to get into the Dental School, but I received a personal invitation from two professors who had evidently recognized my potential. Besides, they too had come from Hungary. While still in training myself, I gave theoretical instruction to two colleagues who had not yet gained admission. They got their practical training with a dental surgeon and set up practices in the suburbs. Both made a good living.⁶

I was determined to stay in Vienna and pursue my naturalization as an Austrian citizen, which I eventually got in 1928 through a friend of my father's who had the right political contacts. One day I read an advertisement that a dentist urgently needed an assistant. He interviewed me the next day and offered me the job. When I confessed to him that, as an alien I was not entitled to practice, his answer was that his only interest was in my competence as a dentist. I worked in that practice for nearly a year. It was a mass practice, and I learned there how not to practice dentistry. I needed the money badly. The head of the group would let us juniors do the hard part of preparing the fillings by excavating the decayed areas, and then would come in and tell the patient: "I can personally put the filling in for you—for a small extra charge."

My future wife was working as a volunteer at the dental hospital. She had come to Vienna in 1914 from her hometown of Buczacz in the province of Galicia not far from the Russian frontier. As the defeated Austro-Hungarian army retreated, starved, exhausted, with blood seeping through their bandages, panic spread among the population at the prospect of a Russian occupation. My wife's family fled with six children, ranging in age from four to twenty. It happened so suddenly and unexpectedly that they had to leave everything they couldn't carry. It took an adventurous journey of two weeks before they reached Vienna. This experience had made such an impression on the young, meticulously clean girl that she swore never to become a refugee again. The refugees were disliked by the Viennese authorities and the general population. Still, her family somehow managed to settle in.

My wife had long dreamed of studying medicine, but her parents did not favor this goal. A girl from an Orthodox Jewish family should get married at the first reasonable opportunity; that was the tradition. Since they couldn't make her change her mind, they reluctantly agreed. We met in medical school, but I, in my charity cut-down cutaway⁷ and shabby leather leggings, was far too poor and provincial to dare approach her. Once, at a student outing, I danced with her.

After my Austrian citizenship was granted, we decided to get married. This was in September 1928. The following ten years were the happiest of our lives, despite Austria's economic and political problems. Then the Nazis occupied the country.