

PROLOGUE: THE FIRST VICTIM

The Nazis killed the first Jew in Vienna.

Although he had been receiving death threats for months, Hugo Bettauer kept to his regular schedule. Tuesday, March 10, 1925, found Bettauer as usual in his office at Lange Gasse 7 in Vienna's Josefstadt district, his door open to the stream of visitors seeking his advice and help. That afternoon a thin young man with dark blond hair and a mustache, wearing a brown overcoat and a soft black hat, stepped into Bettauer's office and shut the door. Bettauer, standing behind his desk, his head lowered over a letter, did not see the man take out a pistol. The stranger approached, raised the gun, and said, "Watch out, sir! Now you're gonna get it!" Then he fired. Struck in the chest, Bettauer looked up, stunned. The assailant fired four more shots. Bettauer stumbled out from behind his desk, opened the door to the anteroom, and collapsed.

The sound of the shots attracted a crowd in the street. Word quickly spread that Hugo Bettauer had been shot. Fritz Reinauer, an eighteen-year-old member of the Nazi Party, was heard to say, "It's no loss, the dirty Jew." Bettauer was rushed to the hospital and underwent emergency surgery. As he lay unconscious, his wife received anonymous threats that should Bettauer survive this attempt on his life, there would be more until he was dead. The injuries proved fatal, and despite the doctors' best efforts, Bettauer died on March 26.¹

That same day, Vienna's *Neue Freie Presse* newspaper assessed the larger meaning of the killing. "A corpse bears bloody witness to

the barbarization that has distorted the battle for morality to such an extent that the struggle of opposing Weltanschauungen is being waged by bullets and knives . . . The cult of violence and hate must end. The unfortunate Hugo Bettauer is the victim of this gruesome, mistaken thinking . . . This tragedy is a warning against every manner of excess.”²

Bettauer was born in 1872 into a well-to-do Jewish family in the Austrian spa town of Baden bei Wien. As a youngster he attended the Franz-Joseph-Gymnasium along with the future writer and critic Karl Kraus. He converted to Protestantism at the age of eighteen, a fact that meant nothing to his later critics, for whom Bettauer remained a Jew. Before the First World War, he became known in Germany as a hard-driving, muckraking journalist often at odds with the authorities, fearless in exposing corruption, hypocrisy, and rot, a champion of the downcast and marginalized. Bettauer traveled back and forth between Europe and the United States before returning to Vienna during the war, where he wrote for several publications and frequented the Café Beethoven with his fellow writers Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Stefan Zweig.

By the early 1920s Bettauer had become a well-known and controversial figure. Along with a string of popular novels, he published the magazine *He and She: A Weekly of Lifestyle and Eroticism*, devoted to a direct, unapologetic treatment of sexual matters. Bettauer and his publication championed sexual liberation, the decriminalization of homosexuality and abortion, better treatment of prostitutes, the homeless, and drug addicts, as well as the necessity of tackling a host of social ills, including Vienna’s chronic housing crisis.³ An “apostle of the new morality” and “servant of enlightenment” to those on the left, Bettauer was the Austrian nationalists’ most despised *bête noire*. The conservative *Reichspost* called him “a pornographer . . . an industrial knight of eroticism” responsible for flooding Austria with “animal filth.”⁴ Hated though Bettauer was by the Right for his views on sexual morals, it was

the publication in 1922 of *The City Without Jews: A Novel from the Day After Tomorrow* that sealed his fate.

The novel opens with a scene outside the national parliament building on Vienna's Ringstraße. An enormous crowd from across society—men, women, and children, young and old, the healthy and the lame, burghers and workers—have put aside their differences and come together, united in their shared hatred of the Jews. Inside, their representatives can hear their chant: “Throw the Jews out of Austria!”⁵ Over and over, they repeat their demand. All eyes are on Chancellor Dr. Karl Schwertfeger. Insisting, lamely, that he is “more friend than foe of the Jews,” he acknowledges the will of the people and admits that it is neither fair nor right for Austrians to be so put upon and oppressed by this small minority. They control everything: the press, the theaters, the banks. They monopolize the coffeehouses, the restaurants, and the nightclubs. They are rich, while we are poor. They are, in short, a foreign body enslaving the good, native-born people of this land.

The chancellor agrees with the people. Yes, the Jews must go, but first there are a few questions that need to be addressed. What about the Jews' property? Should they be allowed to take it with them? The answer, not surprisingly, is an emphatic no: the Jews must go, but their wealth must stay and be used for the benefit of true Austrians. Rich Jews will be given a year to leave, enough time to dispose of their property. Poor Jews must be gone within three months. Any Jew who tries to stay and hide—even one with just a trace of Jewish ancestry—will be arrested and put to death. There was also the matter of mixed marriages. The answer to this question was not so obvious, but a solution was soon found. Any “Christian woman of pure German-Aryan descent” could stay, but her Jewish husband and any mixed-race children would have to leave. Any Christian man could stay, but his Jewish wife and their children would have to leave; however, the children of these mixed-race children—the grandchildren, that is—could remain in Austria as long as they had not “mixed with Jews.”

Following the passage of the “Anti-Jew Law,” Vienna’s Jews are forced from their homes, marched to the railway stations, and sent off. No one knows where the Jews have been taken, but no one really cares. The main thing is that they are gone. After the last Jew has been expelled, church bells ring out in celebration across Austria. The city is festooned with flags, banners, and *Hakenkreuzen* (swastikas). Austrians of all ages proudly affix swastika pins to their chests and greet each other with a jubilant cry of *Heil!* as they pass in the streets. Adding to the elation is the realization that forty thousand apartments have become available. Vienna’s housing crisis has been miraculously solved.

But the euphoria is short-lived. Some Austrians who thought they were Aryans discover that they have Jewish ancestors and are forced to leave. Aryans who had seized Jewish businesses discover that they do not know how to run them and are soon bankrupt. Young women miss their Jewish suitors, always so generous with their presents and never drunk like the men they are now left to choose from. The economy sinks, prices rise, the ranks of the unemployed swell, cultural life withers. A general malaise grows among the population, followed by panic and unrest. Criminals take over the streets; markets and stores are plundered by embittered housewives. The chancellor, hailed as “the liberator of Austria,” tries to stop the drift into chaos. He calls for patience. All will be well, he tells the people, but time is needed because “I know that International Jewry is behind this, and agitators, bribed by Jewish money, are certainly at work here.”

Bettauer commented on his novel to the press in the summer of 1922:

When I once visited one of those places where it is not customary to stay longer than is absolutely necessary, I saw, among other edifying inscriptions on the walls, several examples of that categorical demand: “Throw out the Jews!”

This longing cry of a surely otherwise quite decent man, a cry you also find on posters under the lovely swastika, hear often enough in

the streetcar, and read about as a Christian-Teutonic redevelopment program in pages of the *Wiener Stimmen*, stimulates my imagination to playful thoughts about how this Vienna would probably develop if the Jews actually followed the polite request and left the city one day.⁶

If to Bettauer the subject of his story was serious, the novel itself wasn't: "I have written a very amusing little novel, as is my way, that is, in the manner of a most frivolous, thoroughly unserious mischief-maker."⁷ Whatever Bettauer's feelings about *The City Without Jews*, the public was mad for it. It was by far his bestselling novel, reaching sales of over 250,000 copies in countries around the world.⁸ Its popularity was aided by a film, now considered a classic of Austrian expressionist cinema, with the same title. Its premiere in Vienna in July 1924 produced shock waves. Young Nazis tossed stink bombs into theaters to disrupt the showings. The Berlin premiere in 1926 led to large protests.⁹

In the United States, the book and film were dismissed in equal measure. *The New York Times* called the film "one of the most fatuous productions imaginable" and opined that it addressed "no problems" of any interest.¹⁰ The *Times*' review of the novel—it was published in the United States with the subtitle *A Novel for Our Times*—noted its rather "lame effect": "*The City Without Jews* deliberately strains after a sensational and controversial subject, and contributes nothing to it but the most banal generalities, from both sides of a heated question, such facile reflections as may be heard in any café of almost any city where Jews are to be found." The reviewer mocked Bettauer's "up-to-the-minute knowingness," which he deemed typical of fiction-writing journalists, and found it all but impossible to imagine a politician ever coming to power in Austria on a slogan of "Throw Out the Jews."¹¹

Americans could be dismissive. Austrians, however, found the matter deadly serious. Walter Riehl, a lawyer and founder of the Austrian Nazi Party, called the book "the most impudent mockery ever by a foreign-race people of an indigenous population whose hospitality they

enjoy.” Nazis across Austria called for the “lynching” of this “perverted sewer rat.” By the end of 1924, Bettauer was receiving death threats.¹² For roughly a year the nationalist press and right-wing politicians called for the government to do something about Bettauer. When it did not, his foes decided it was time to take matters into their own hands.

Otto Rothstock was an unemployed twenty-year-old dental assistant who lived with his parents in Vienna’s Margareten district. The family was originally from Bohemia but had fled the violence of World War I for Vienna like thousands of other subjects of the Habsburg Empire. As early as 1920 he had joined the *Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (DAP), the German Workers’ Party, founded in 1903, which became the Austrian Nazi Party. Riehl, one of the leaders of the DAP, went on to create a new party called the *Deutsche Nationalsozialistische Arbeiterpartei* (DNSAP)—the German National Socialist Workers’ Party—which competed for control of the Nazi movement in the early 1920s with fellow Austrian Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NDSAP). For a number of years it was not clear who would become the leader of the Nazi movement—Riehl in Austria or Hitler in Germany. After the First World War, Austria counted thirty-four thousand Nazi members, compared to fifty-five thousand in Germany, a smaller number but a much larger proportion of the national population. Riehl’s party stood for unification with Germany and socialism, but these were secondary to antisemitism. *Judenherrschaft* (Jewish domination) was, according to the DNSAP, the greatest threat facing the world. Apparently, in 1918 Riehl chose the *Hakenkreuz* for his movement’s symbol, later to be adopted by Hitler. By the mid-1920s, however, Hitler and his German Nazis had eclipsed Riehl’s Austrians and taken over the movement. Nonetheless, according to one authority, Riehl, not Hitler, was “the spiritual father of National Socialism.”¹³ The Austrian roots of Nazism ran deep.

By 1923, Rothstock belonged to a Nazi squad—a forerunner of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), or Storm Troopers—that went around intimi-

dating and beating up political opponents and providing muscle for the party. He engaged in bloody clashes, acted as a guard at meetings of *Hakenkreuzler*, “Swastika-men” (Nazis, that is), and swore an oath of loyalty to Hitler following the unsuccessful Beer Hall Putsch in Munich in 1923. Just two days before he appeared at Bettauer’s office, Rothstock had been seen marching with a large swastika flag across the city’s Rathausplatz with a group of fellow Nazis.¹⁴

Rothstock was taken into police custody immediately after the shooting. The following day he told Austrian police that he had gone to Bettauer’s office to kill him. He had been planning the murder for the past ten days.¹⁵ He also admitted to having been a member of the Nazi Party. Rothstock would go on trial in October for the murder of Hugo Bettauer. Vienna’s nationalist lawyers competed for the privilege to represent him in court. Rothstock chose Walter Riehl.

The right-wing press came to Rothstock’s defense in the lead-up to the trial. The *Reichspost* hailed the murder: “Not enough that he kept shouting his filth into the ears of the Viennese day after day, but in his novel *The City Without Jews* he openly encouraged the Christian population to be happy to have Jews who pay well for the virginity of Christian girls.”¹⁶ The *DÖTZ* argued that guilt lay with “the impudence of the press, through which our German nation, struck to its core, is being demoralized . . . Rothstock is no ordinary murderer, he is the executor of the people’s verdict.” The future Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg gave “The Case of Bettauer” extensive coverage in *Der Weltkampf*, a monthly devoted to “the Jewish question in every country.” The Jewish race, said Rosenberg, was never happier than when producing and distributing “filthy literature, especially since it has become a Hebrew monopoly the world over.” As for Bettauer, his novels amounted to “a slap in the face of Germans everywhere.” Rothstock did exactly what hundreds of thousands of mothers had wanted someone to do. According to *Der Hammer* magazine, Rothstock had earned the country’s medal of honor.¹⁷

Months before the trial, the court was inundated with requests

—1
—0

for tickets to attend the proceedings. A large crowd showed up at the court building in the early morning of the day the trial was set to begin.¹⁸ The judge began by asking Rothstock: “How do you plead, guilty?” Yes, the accused replied, but only in the narrow sense that “I drove the writer Hugo Bettauer from this world into the hereafter, killed, that is, as it’s called. But I am not to blame.” He then turned to address the courtroom:

Two thousand years ago—a few minutes in the span of divine time—the Son of God appeared on this Earth to do battle against Jewish writers and scholars, for they are the sons of lies and of Satan. I appeared on this Earth to continue this battle. What I did is not assassination. It was an alarm bell to arouse all peoples, and especially the German nation, to continue the battle, brutally and ruthlessly, to protect themselves before it is too late. Hugo Bettauer mocked everything that is German. I am blameless.

In later statements Rothstock elaborated on his motives. He had “shot a corrupter of the people,” he said, “a traitor to my fellow countrymen.” Rothstock always insisted that he had acted alone and there had never been a larger Nazi plot; nonetheless there was a clear Nazi connection beyond his own membership in the party: “I shot the Jewish journalist and writer Hugo Bettauer in Vienna in the hope of injecting a renewed fighting spirit in the party in Austria and beyond.”¹⁹

Upon the advice of Riehl, Rothstock agreed to a defense strategy of *Sinnesverwirrung* (confusion of the senses, or temporary insanity). The courtroom was packed with Rothstock’s rowdy supporters. The jury delivered its verdict after less than an hour of deliberation. Although they had unanimously found him guilty, the jurors were evenly split as to whether Rothstock had been in his right mind at the time of the murder, and so the presiding judge, Ernst Ramsauer, acquitted him. The right-wing press was ecstatic. “Murder is not allowed, self-defense is allowed,” observed *Das neue Volk*, a Christian antisemitic weekly.

“A martyr for the German *Volk*,” wrote the *Deutsche Arbeiter-Presse*. “Rothstock, we will not forget you!”²⁰ Having avoided prison, Rothstock was transferred instead to the asylum Am Steinhof outside Vienna. He was released in May 1927, when the doctors could no longer find any symptoms of mental disturbance.²¹

The City Without Jews was prophetic with a level of specificity that might have surprised Bettauer himself. Not merely the expulsion of Austria’s Jews would come to pass in little over a decade after his murder, but the targeting of Jewish wealth, the obsession with Jewish ancestry, the calculating of Jewish blood, the categorizing of half and quarter Jews, and the expropriation of Jewish homes as social policy, along with the jubilation that greeted these antisemitic measures, became reality following Germany’s Anschluss of Austria in 1938. Bettauer did get one thing wrong, however. His novel ends with the Viennese coming to their senses and, after realizing and regretting their mistake, welcoming the Jews back. After three miserable years, the anti-Jew law is overturned, foreign investment rushes in, the economy stabilizes and then soars. The disgraced former chancellor commits suicide. Word of the first Jew’s return races through Vienna; the man is discovered, borne aloft on the shoulders of a joyous throng, trumpets blaring, and carried to city hall in triumph and glory. Of course, there would be no such happy end for Vienna’s Jews. Instead of history repeating itself, to paraphrase Marx, first as tragedy and then as farce, in this instance it was the other way around.

The destruction of Jewish Vienna under the Nazis was a tragedy of immeasurable proportions. Much has been written of Vienna’s role as the birthplace of the modern West. The latest book devoted to the subject carries the subtitle *How the City of Ideas Created the Modern World* and asserts in its opening sentence that this “European capital on the banks of the Danube lit the spark for most of Western intellectual and cultural life in the twentieth century.”²² Vienna’s extraor-

—1
—0

dinary influence in the spheres of art, culture, science, economics, and politics is unthinkable without acknowledging the enormous role played by Jews. Had Vienna been—particularly in the approximately seventy years straddling 1900—a city without Jews, it would never have been worthy of such grand claims.

Vienna was the second-largest Jewish city in Europe after Warsaw and the largest in the German-speaking world. Jews had been part of the fabric of the city since the early Middle Ages, and in just seven years of Nazi rule they were almost completely wiped out. A population of approximately two hundred thousand was reduced to a mere few thousand by the end of the Second World War. Most of Austria's Jews fled abroad and survived, but as many as sixty-six thousand were murdered in the Holocaust.

A less frequently noted contribution of Vienna to the modern world is the leading role it played in establishing the mechanisms, strategies, and institutions of Nazi genocide. The city became a laboratory for the Holocaust: from its importance in shaping the murderous antisemitism of a young Adolf Hitler to the propulsive intensity of its popular anti-Jewish violence in 1938 to the various methods for getting rid of the Jews—forced emigration and later deportation to the killing fields and death camps in the East—which were developed and first put into action in Vienna and then exported to the rest of the territories controlled by Nazi Germany.

To quote the Austrian historian Gerhard Botz, “The anti-Semitism in Vienna was more intense than that in the Old Reich. In consequence, from 1938 on Vienna was always a few steps ahead of Germany in the process of persecution of the Jews. Not only were the comparable measures applied earlier in Vienna than in Germany, but they could also count on much broader support among the non-Jewish population. Here, the organizational instruments and procedures could be developed which would later be applied by Eichmann in the ‘Final Solution.’”²³

Once in power, the Nazis came for the rest of Hugo Bettauer's family. His widow Helene and son Reginald, together with his wife

and child, managed to leave for the United States in 1938. Another son, Hellmuth, fled that summer to Holland. After Germany invaded in May 1940, he escaped to Belgium and went into hiding. Hellmuth was captured in 1942 and held prisoner for two years before being transported to Auschwitz and murdered in April 1944. Hellmuth's first wife, Margarete Grün, was deported to Auschwitz on July 17, 1942, and murdered there. Margarete's youngest sister, the writer and actress Lili (Elisabeth), had been deported two months before to Maly Trostenets, near Minsk, and murdered upon arrival. Another sister, Frieda, had been sent to Opole in Poland on February 15, 1941, and murdered. All five of the Grün siblings perished in the Shoah.²⁴

In 1942, the Nazis declared Vienna *Judenrein* (free of Jews). This was a lie. Jews remained in the city. A few thousand survived in mixed marriages or had gone into hiding, and a small number were, somehow, incredibly, still living openly as Jews. One of them was Mignon Langnas. Born in Poland in the early years of the century, Mignon had moved to Vienna with her family to escape the violence of the First World War. They had little money, and life was a struggle, but Vienna offered safety, opportunity, and hope. As the years passed, it became their home. Mignon and her sisters received an education; they fell in love, married, started families. By the 1930s Mignon's mother could only marvel at the lives they had built for themselves. Things, she observed, had never been better.

The Anschluss put an end to all this. The family business was expropriated; Mignon's husband, Leon, was nearly arrested before fleeing to England and then on to America. Once Leon was settled in New York City, Mignon entrusted her two young children to a friend to take them to their father. Everyone around her was trying to get away to safety, but Mignon remained behind to look after her elderly parents, who were unable to leave Vienna. The start of the Second World War soon ended any chance of emigration from the Third Reich. Mignon and her parents were now trapped. In the autumn of 1939, the Nazis began deporting the city's Jews to Poland. Over the

next six years, tens of thousands of Austrian Jews were put on trains and sent to concentration camps across Eastern Europe.

Mignon managed to find work as a nurse in a Jewish hospital. Not only did the position provide a bit of income, it also, and more importantly, offered some protection from deportation. Three times she was about to be deported, but somehow she managed to avoid this fate. Instead, she watched as nearly every Jew she knew disappeared into the camps. Her world shrank in upon itself. The loneliness came close to consuming her. As the tide of war shifted, Mignon faced new threats. Twice she was almost killed by Allied bombs. After liberation in 1945, she barely avoided being raped by a band of drunken Soviet soldiers. All of this she recorded in diaries and letters, several hundred pages of vivid and intimate writing that chronicle the horrors of life in Vienna. In Mignon's personal story, one of loss, fear, terror, despair, longing, and even hope, is written the larger history of Austria's Jews under the Nazis.