

1955

In the year I turned ten, Austria received its State Treaty, which ridded it from occupation. I still remember, from the pre-Treaty years, the 'Four in a Jeep', comprising an American, Russian, Briton and Frenchman who cruised the neighbourhood together in a jeep in order to control us. They had remained victorious in World War II, and the generation that came before me (the war was barely over when I was born) must have done quite a few things wrong in order to merit so much control (in point of fact I learned nothing about the historical background for a long time; the period was discussed neither in the family nor at school – and even today, in 2013, it is not easy to obtain unfiltered information about those events from persons who witnessed them).

The Russians irked me quite especially; not only because I lived in Kaisermühlen, a Russian-dominated quarter of Vienna, but also because the part of the country surrounding Vienna was Russian-occupied: from time to time hikers would encounter Russian soldiers, which always left me with a feeling of unease.

When Raab and Figl, by drinking the Russians under the table, had cleared the way for the State Treaty, it was signed on 15 May 1955 and at that moment I was to be found on the rubbish dump (colloquially known as 'Mistgstettn') that covered the area now home to the Danube Park and the 'UN City' (which houses the United Nations Office at Vienna). Constantly plying their trade, the refuse lorries had already fed the dump to a height of about fifteen feet, and it was growing in a north-westerly direction over to the housing complex known as 'Bruckhaufen'; the illegal shack village known as 'Bretteldorf', a settlement of ramshackle huts built by the pauperised, had to yield to its advance. Almost the entire Danube Park is refuse-based, but the refuse was removed at great expense and re-dumped at the Rautenweg where the ground was destined to house the UN City and the adjacent tower blocks. Most of it was, of course, decomposed; only nylon stockings and carbon paper had defied decomposition and dangled out of the brown walls of refuse looking like new.

Those days, however, were far distant in 1955 as I stood on top of the dump looking out for such coveted pieces as fragments of crystal glass or painted porcelain, or the entrails of technical appliances.

As I was immersed in my search and suddenly heard the bell known as 'Pummerin' ring across the Danube, I knew that the State Treaty had been signed and I was filled with a sense of liberation.

Later I learned from the media that Figl, standing on the balcony of Belvedere Castle, had announced to the crowd gathered below that 'Austria is free!' – a sentence that was to reoccur in 1956, but this time with a very different meaning (see the next article).

Erwin Kohaut ©

Vienna, Austria, Europe, 2013

Notes:

Leopold Figl: Austrian minister for foreign affairs in 1955

Julius Raab: Austrian federal chancellor in 1955

Belvedere: a sumptuous castle in Vienna

Pummerin: Austria's biggest bell; it hangs in the north tower of St Stephen's Cathedral.