Gödel’s Vienna

JOHN W. DAWSON JR., AND KARL SIGMUND

By August 17, 1939, a European war was imminent. Two weeks before Hitler invaded Poland, Dr. Kurt Gödel received a letter from his tailor: ‘Sending repaired trousers. As I heard, you will journey to America again. You will certainly need a suit . . . With German greetings, Decker.’

Gödel ordered the suit. His journey back to Princeton seemed to offer no problems. On August 30, 1939, a few days after the Stalin-Hitler pact, Gödel blissfully announced to his friend Karl Menger his intention of returning to Princeton forthwith, in a letter which, in Menger’s eyes, ‘may well represent a record for unconcern on the threshold of world-shaking events’ (Menger 1994).

Two days later, Hitler informed a wildly cheering German Reichstag that ‘since 5:45, the fire has been returned.’ Gödel’s outlook changed drastically. He had to write Oswald Veblen in November: ‘It now seems likely that I will not be able to come to Princeton this academic year, because it will probably be impossible to obtain a German visa during the war-time.’ Gödel was trapped in Vienna. He would spend the next few months in desperate attempts to leave for the US. Against all odds, he finally succeeded. But after the war, Gödel would never return to Vienna again. He was through with it.

Vienna: A Logical Choice

In 1924, when he arrived in Vienna as an eighteen-year-old from provincial Brno to study at the university, things had looked very different. Vienna had overcome years of hunger and misery, and the economy was picking up. The intellectual and cultural life underwent an amazing flowering. Very soon, Kurt Gödel would contribute to it. His work may one day well be viewed as the most lasting achievement of that epoch.

Today’s tourists to Vienna follow the traces of Habsburg, visit the imperial museums, and are shown the many dwellings of Beethoven and Mozart, or the churches where Haydn and Schubert performed. Increasingly, tours include aspects of Vienna between the two world wars, most notably the recent Leopold museum, with its paintings by Klimt, Schiele, and Kokoschka, or the architectural monuments of Red Vienna, or the art déco villas built by Hoffmann and Loos. If, as a tourist, you relax in a coffee-house between visits to these sights, you will already be very close to Gödel. Let us pick up his trail, a map of which appears at the end of this article. (For more details, see Dawson 1997.)

Kurt Gödel’s parents were well off—his father was manager, and part owner, of a textile firm in Brno, a charming little town which used to be called ‘the Czech Manchester’, less than two hours by train north from Vienna. In 1919, the treaty of St. Germain had established a border between Austria and Czechoslovakia, but for the large German-speaking segment of what was by then Brno, Vienna as the former capital was still the focus, and obviously the place to go to study. At that time, young Gödel could probably not have chosen a site more tailor-made to his talents anywhere in the world.

Settling Down

Kurt Gödel moved in with his brother Rudolf, four years his elder, who studied medicine under the illustrious faculty to which Freud had often dreamed of belonging. Kurt first enrolled for physics, but switched to mathematics under the spell of superb introductory lectures on calculus by Furtwängler and a ‘survey of the major problems in philosophy’ by Gomperz (Sigmund 2006).

In his fifteen years in Vienna, Gödel lived in seven different apartments. Tourists will be reminded of Beethoven or Mozart, who also moved a lot. The Gödel brothers obviously had a well-
defined image in mind in their apartment hunts: the seven houses look remarkably alike. All are massive four-story buildings erected at the turn of the century, staid and stately. If you have seen one, you have seen them all. Only one of the houses has a plaque commemorating Kurt Gödel, but this may change with the 2006 centenary—Gödel was born on April 28, 1906, and Vienna is set to celebrate.

Most of the houses are close to the university, and especially close to the building on Boltzmanngasse where the institutes of physics and (in Gödel’s time) the Mathematische Seminar were located. On one occasion Gödel lived just across the street, two floors above the Josephinum, one of the most decorative cafes favoured by Viennese academics and students (but brutally disfigured today).

Gödel was a very quiet young man, but not always the hermit he later became. He studied diligently, and was soon invited to join the Vienna Circle, a brilliant group of positivists gathered around the mathematician Hans Hahn (famed for his work on functional analysis) and the philosopher Moritz Schlick. Both were professors at the university. The young German philosopher Rudolf Carnap had also just moved to Vienna and joined the Circle. Gödel’s closest student friends were Marcel Natkin and Herbert Feigl, who studied mathematics and philosophy and were disciples of Schlick. They all met, every second Thursday, in a small lecture room of the Mathematische Seminar (Stadler 2002). Informally, most of them also met at the Josephinum, or the Café Reichsrat, Café Central, and Café Arkadenhof, among other places filled with journals and tobacco smoke. These cafes were crowded with intellectuals and world-reformers nurturing delusions of grandeur and talking philosophy, literature, psychoanalysis, economics, or politics late into the night.

A Nervous Splendor

Austrian politics was dominated by a fierce struggle between the Social Democrats and the Conservatives. The former had the majority in Red Vienna, and were engaged in a sweeping program of social reforms. The Conserva-