CHAPTER 5

Little Dictators, Little Theaters, Little Shops: Street Commerce and Underground Socialism in Vienna before the Anschluss

When the four-foot-eleven-inch Austrian chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss made himself dictator in March of 1933, and then outlawed the Social Democratic Party after the civil war in February of 1934, he effectively ended the First Austrian Republic. A new constitution promulgated on May 1 solidified the formation of a fascist state in Austria under the absolute rule of Dollfuss’s new party, the Fatherland Front. All opposition parties, including the Nazis and the Communists, were banned; the Social Democrats were forced underground, reorganized as the “Revolutionary Socialists,” and the party’s leaders went into exile. Dollfuss’s fascist state was partly modeled on Italy under Mussolini, whose appeasement was a key part of the Austro-fascists’ ultimately futile plan to keep Austria independent against Hitler’s Germany. Although Dollfuss was assassinated on July 25 in a failed coup attempt by Austrian Nazis, the fascist regime would retain power under Dollfuss’s successor, Kurt von Schuschnigg. Dollfuss and Schuschnigg had no official policy of anti-Semitism, but the banning of the Social Democrats, the political party to which most Jews belonged, and the abolition of democracy under Catholic-fascist rule effectively removed them from government jobs and public political life in general. Despite regular police harassment and imprisonment, the socialist underground thrived and still managed to publish and distribute socialist newspapers—which would lead to Paul Lazarsfeld’s Forschungsstelle being shut down.¹

For Victor Gruen, the Vienna underground in those years was a literal phenomenon. Shut down by the fascist government, the Political Cabaret and its

provincial counterpart, the Red Players, ceased to exist after February 1934. However, Gruen’s life in the theater continued with the Kleinkunstbühnen, the “little art stages” that popped up as makeshift theaters during the period of Austro-fascism. These underground theaters were often literally underground in wine cellars or coffeehouse basements, or out of public view in the concealed courtyards of the ubiquitous Viennese Heurigen, or wine gardens. These little theaters were, Gruen recalled, “the refuge of talented young artists of liberal thinking.” Copies of the illicit socialist newspaper, the Arbeiter-Zeitung, were hidden inside the legal newspapers in the coffeehouses where the stages were set up. The censors prohibited any kind of political expression, but the Kleinkunstbühnen managed to evade these restrictions by performing on small stages and by using clever rhetorical evasions, allusions, and suggestions that could not quite be pinned down by the censors. A permit would have been required for any performance before an audience of 150 or more, a decree that was intended to stifle the political theater, since no proper venue in the city was that small. The tiny cabarets, however, which were performed in intimate cafes on improvised pop-up stages, avoided the official restriction.

The stages were small, but the performances were many: on any given night, ten different little theaters might put on sold-out performances. These little theaters became famous all over Central Europe for their “daring” satirical sketches in a time of increasingly oppressive fascism. They were oases of “real wit” in an increasingly reactionary culture. “We developed a style of our own to say things,” the troupe of socialist players recalled in a later publication, “and the democratic man in Austria understood us.” Indeed, that was part of the thrill for audiences, who came “expecting to hear the forbidden.” Playwrights of the legitimate stage had been struck “dumb” for fear of the repercussions of any overtly political or even obviously suggestive utterances, the result being that these theaters were devoid of any interesting social and political content. For the socialist workers and intellectuals, however, the “legitimate” theater in fact presented a “foreign and artificial” society, and the only true theater was the political satire of the Kleinkunstbühnen. On the stage, the former members of the Political Cabaret were sometimes joined by new arrivals: Jewish and socialist refugees who had fled Nazi Germany for the somewhat less repressive regime of the Austro-fascists. Hitler was, of course, the chief target of much of the satire, however implicit and suggestive it might have been.\footnote{Sometimes Gruen records this number as 50, e.g., Gruen, Shopping Town, 6.} \footnote{Gruen, Shopping Town (2017), 49–51; “From Vienna,” The Playbill, The Music Box, July 24, 1939; H.B. Kranz, “All Is Not Waltz Time in Vienna,” New York Times, February 6, 1938; “And Now ‘From Vienna,’” New York Times, June 18, 1939; “Refugee Actors of Vienna to Present Revue June 12,” New York World-Tele-
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As Gruen’s social and political life went underground, his professional life increasingly became an above-ground spectacle of the street. After leaving Melcher & Steiner, his benefactor’s architectural firm, at the end of 1932 to set up his own private design firm, Gruen continued his work doing interior remodeling of apartments, furnishing, and facade renovations for his friends from the socialist movement. He also accumulated a list of wealthier clients from the socialist intelligentsia, some of whom learned of his services after his own job remodeling the rooms he shared with his wife Lizzie Kardos in his family’s Riemergasse apartment was profiled in the socialist photo-magazine, *Der Kuckuck*, in 1933. But beginning in 1934, Gruen began doing more commercial jobs, first remodeling the storefront and interior of a travel agency, a laundry, and several other Vienna shop interiors, storefronts, and display windows. This kind of commercial work would provide the basis for his later American career.

Gruen’s big break came with a commission for the complete remodeling of the interior and storefront of the Bristol-Parfumerie on the Ringstrasse, just down the boulevard from the grand Staatsoper. Gruen used design to make the most of the tiny dimensions of the shop. Though its frontage was a mere eleven feet (two and a half meters) across, Gruen’s all-glass front had the effect of turning it into a virtual display that merged the store with the street. He also amplified the cramped interior by installing a long band of mirrors on the ceiling—an old theater trick used to visually enlarge a space, he said—and he added a modern flair by encasing the furniture in white lacquer. The design received much attention in the trade press, including a favorable notice in the August 1935 issue of the English-language trade journal *Display*. The positive attention in the architectural journals led to many more commercial commissions. In 1936, Gruen designed a recessed “arcade” entrance for a fabric shop, J. Singer, which allowed pedestrians to step to the side of the flow of sidewalk traffic and into an “intermediate” zone between shop and street that showcased the store’s wares. The intent of the design was to transform curious passersby into customers. Gruen became well known for his skills in retail architecture, and he designed several other storefronts and shop interiors in Vienna, including a bookstore, a cosmetics shop, a beauty parlor, a coffee shop, a haberdashery, a millinery, a menswear shop, a confectionery, and even an automatic buffet (similar to an automat). His

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1936 design for the menswear shop Josef Deutsch on Adlergasse was featured in *The Architectural Review*. At the same time, he continued his regular work remodeling apartments.6

Gruen’s professional success in the capitalistic aboveground was tempered by the repressive tactics of the Austro-fascists and their harassment of socialists who were confined to the underground, if not imprisoned. Gruen’s close friend from the *Kleinkunstbühnen*, the writer and poet Jura Soyfer, was apprehended by the police in November of 1937 and was forced to confess his participation in the underground theater and his socialist affiliations, including his friendship with Gruen. While Dollfuss and Schuschnigg had sought to appease Mussolini by banning the Social Democrats, in the end it was their banning of the Nazis that brought Austria as an independent nation to a final confrontation with Hitler. When Schuschnigg met Hitler at his *Berghof* near Berchtesgaden on the Austria-Germany border on February 12, 1938, Hitler presented Schuschnigg with an ultimatum: continued Austrian national sovereignty would require Schuschnigg to grant immediate amnesty for all imprisoned Austrian Nazis. Schuschnigg met the demand, but at the same time also released nearly all imprisoned Communists and Social Democrats. Hitler soon indicated that Austria’s independence was not guaranteed after all, and, in early March, Schuschnigg rather feebly sought out the Social Democrats—who were once again permitted to meet publicly—as allies to defend Austria against Hitler. Schuschnigg called for a plebiscite on Austrian independence to be held on March 13. Despite the referendum’s endorsement of a one-party state, the leaders of the Revolutionary Socialists were reluctantly prepared to support it, but it was no matter: on March 11, Schuschnigg finally capitulated to Hitler and resigned. The plebiscite was cancelled, and German troops invaded Austria the following day, meeting no resistance, as directed by Schuschnigg, to avoid spilling “German blood.” Indeed, the Nazis were welcomed by many Austrians. Hitler’s dreamed-of *Anschluss* of Austria had come to fruition.7

The dramatic events collapsed what had been a briefly hopeful period for Gruen following Schuschnigg’s amnesty for Social Democrats, when he had

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been able to reunite with his politically active friends who had been imprisoned and interrogated. Terrified by the news of March 11, Gruen frantically burned all records of his association with the Social Democrats and the Political Cabaret, though he spared a few of the plays and sketches from the Kleinkunstbühnen. “I burned that part of my life which connected me closely with the fight for freedom, the fight against social injustice and the fight against fascism of any sort,” Gruen recalled. He took particular care to destroy the satires on Hitler, Göring, Goebbels, and Himmler, as well as any material related to Dollfuss and Schuschnigg. But he made sure to keep all of the documentation from his professional life, including his certificates, photographs of his work, and a stack of letters of praise from clients. Although Gruen had never been properly licensed as an architect because he was forced to cut short his training at the Academy of Fine Arts to go to work for Melcher, he had recently received word that his application to officially use the title of “architect”—based on his submission of his professional dossier—had been approved. By this time, however, the Anschluss had already occurred, and Gruen had no desire to visit a government ministry for an official swearing-in. So, he would remain uncertified. And, in any case, there was no future for him as a socialist Jew, he rightly believed, in a country that had been subsumed by Nazi Germany and was no longer called Österreich but rather “Ostmark.” He and his wife rapidly began to plan for their emigration to America, where an uncle and an acquaintance were all they had to rely on in the hopes of getting an affidavit.

The last three months of Gruen’s life in Vienna under the Third Reich amounted to a theater of absurdity. He had received a commission in 1937 to design a large men’s and women’s clothing store on Vienna’s main shopping avenue, the Mariahilferstrasse, which was an important advance in his career. He was overseeing the construction of this very project on March 15, 1938, the day that Hitler paraded down the Mariahilferstrasse from the Westbahnhof to declare the Anschluss before a massive crowd gathered on the Heldenplatz. Weirdly, in the following months, business operated “normally” at Gruen’s small architectural firm, which continued to do its work and even accept new commissions. However, Gruen suddenly faced the bizarre situation of having an employee, a Mr. Geiser, suddenly reveal himself to be an enthusiastic National Socialist. Mr. Geiser thereupon declared himself, as a newly proud “Aryan,” to be Gruen’s boss and proceeded to badly mistreat his new “employee.”

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8 For example, Alois Reichmann, in a letter to Viktor Gruenbaum dated April 15, 1937, applauded Gruen’s good taste and speedy work schedule. Box 75, folder 9, Gruen LOC.
9 Gruen, Shopping Town (2017), 5–8, 54; “Notes for a New Book,” January 4, 1972, box 77, folder 14, Gruen LOC.
business projects Geiser brought to the firm typically involved designs for “Kraft durch Freude” (Strength through Joy) events, the Nazis’ euphemism for reorienting working-class culture toward its nationalistic ideal of Volksgemeinschaft. Gruen, the founder of the firm, was reduced to rendering swastika designs for the decoration of great halls at the behest of a Nazi underling.

Gruen was also suddenly subjected to all kinds of anti-Semitic abuse and arbitrary exercises of authority in his everyday life. He received fines for traffic violations and gasoline bills for his rarely-used car, which had been commandeered by a couple of armed Nazi youths. He was then paid a visit by the Gestapo, who complained that his stolen car was parked in their space—of course by then it had come under the use of one of their men. To his disgust, Gruen latter spotted a friend of his from the socialist movement behind the wheel of his car. It turned out that his friend had been conscripted into service for the Nazis as an “Aryan” designer, before he was finally able to flee Austria through Switzerland with his Jewish girlfriend. Another time, two officers of the German Wehrmacht appeared at Gruen’s door to inquire obnoxiously about his future plans for “travel,” and they then proceeded to “purchase” large pieces of Gruen’s furniture for an offensively tiny sum. Gruen was also harassed in the street because his passport, which he was required to carry with him at all times, identified him as Jewish. He would be routinely recognized as Jewish simply by failing to bear a swastika or greet passersby with a jubilant “Heil Hitler!” The anti-Semitic bullying Viktor Grünbaum had faced as an adolescent had suddenly reemerged in his transformed hometown of Vienna, but now it was endorsed with the full legitimacy of the state.10

Gruen was, in the meantime, desperately trying to arrange for his flight from Austria. He first needed to acquire an affidavit of support for himself and his wife so that they could secure a visa to emigrate to the United States. His only two contacts there were his uncle Harry Lowry (formerly “Levi,” his mother’s brother) and an acquaintance, Ruth Yorke, an American actress whom he had met on a train from Paris to Vienna in the early 1930s. The two then became friends while she attended the Max Reinhardt acting seminar in Vienna, and they struck up a correspondence. In the end it turned out that Harry, whom Gruen had imagined as his “rich uncle in America,” was merely a low-level employee at a second-rate hotel in Manhattan who could do little to help Gruen. But Yorke’s boyfriend, Paul Gosman, was a well-connected businessman who

was able to promise Gruen a job and thus secure him an affidavit to immigrate to the United States as a permanent resident.  

Gruen was forced to pay a bribe to a Nazi lawyer so that he could get an exit permit and passport, and he compiled a stack of flattering letters of recommendation from his many clients that would serve him in exile. On his emigration application, he listed his citizenship as “German-Austrian” and that he and his wife were “non-Aryan.” By early May he had received word from the American Consul General in Vienna that his request for immigration had been approved, and by the middle of the month he was permitted to leave the city. He booked a ticket on an ocean liner from England to the US, and he packed a suitcase with his and his wife’s clothes. He also packed a few small pieces of furniture, some family heirlooms, and his architectural drawing instruments, but while he was staying with his mother-in-law he received a frantic phone call from a friend who told him not to return to his apartment, which had been broken into by the Gestapo. He managed to enlist an old friend from the socialist movement to return to his apartment, dressed in the uniform of a Nazi stormtrooper, to retrieve his few belongings, declaring that he was under orders to confiscate the Jewish architect’s belongings. When Gruen finally did receive permission to leave the country on May 28 on a one-time exit visa, he was not forced to give up his Austrian citizenship—but that fact was moot since the state of Austria “ceased to exist,” as Gruen later put it.

Gruen and his wife Lizzie finally fled the Third Reich on June 9. “I left Vienna on my Austrian passport, and was forced to declare that I would never enter Austria again by the German authorities,” Gruen would later state in a letter to the US attorney general in a declaration of allegiance to his new country. “I could never have become a German citizen,” he explained. He was, rather, a “victim of the Nazi system” because he was identified as being “of the Jewish race.”

Gruen and Lizzie first took a plane to Zurich, where they stayed with friends from the theater; they then took a train to Paris, where they stayed with

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13 Victor Grünbaum to Francis Biddle, January 30, 1942, box 22, folder 7, Gruen LOC; Lizzie Kardos to Gruen, August 7, 1977, box 77, folder 3, Gruen LOC.
friends for two weeks; and they finally crossed the Channel to London, where they arrived on July 2. Many of Gruen’s friends from the socialist political scene and theater world of Vienna were staying there temporarily. He took a little time to learn English, which he had only a rudimentary knowledge of from school. But after only a few days in London, Gruen and Lizzie would depart from Southampton to make their way across the Atlantic to New York as refugees aboard the S.S. Statendam on the Holland-America Line. They were brought to the seaport by Gruen’s mother, who would later join them in the US. Viktor and Lizzie were joined onboard by several friends and acquaintances from the Kleinkunstbühnen, and they played games and enjoyed themselves on the weeklong journey. Despite the difficult circumstances—and a last-minute panic about arriving penniless—Gruen remembered the journey fondly, and he felt optimistic about the future. They arrived in New York on July 13, 1938, where Ruth Yorke and her stockbroker friend picked them up in an open sports car.  

14 Hardwick, *Mall Maker*, 15; “Application for a Certificate of Arrival and Preliminary Form for Petition for Naturalization,” form N-400, U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service (Edi-
Of course, not all of Gruen’s friends from the socialist theater scene in Vienna were so lucky. Jura Soyfer, “thrice-threatened” as a leftist activist, antifascist author, and Jew, attempted to flee Austria after the Anschluss on skis over the mountains into Switzerland, but was apprehended by the Nazis and sent to the Dachau concentration camp. From there, he was transferred to the Buchenwald camp in September of 1938. Gruen was successful in getting him a visa to come to the United States, and although he had been formally granted release, he died in the camp from dysentery on February 16, 1939.15

Conclusion

The center of Victor Gruen’s social and political life, the Political Cabaret, was shut down by the Austro-fascists in 1934, but the underground Kleinkunstbühnen that sprang up in wine cellars and coffeehouses across the city became some of the last refuges of satirical wit in an increasingly oppressive and reactionary Europe. Gruen also channeled his creative energies into his professional work. When he established his own architectural design firm in 1932, he increasingly began designing and remodeling commercial retail storefronts and shop interiors. His clever innovations, such as shopfronts with mini-arcades and interior designs that made liberal use of glass and mirrors, gained attention in the German- and English-language architectural trade press, which further propelled his career by increasing the interest of prospective clients in Vienna and around the world. The end of social democracy in the Austrian Republic did not manage to stifle his artistic or professional ambitions. But Hitler’s Anschluss of Austria in 1938 made Gruen’s life and career in Vienna impossible. The anti-Semitic ideology and reactionary politics that Gruen’s allies in the political theater had made it their mission to attack with satire were suddenly legitimized. The only possibility for a Jewish socialist like Gruen was to flee. He set his sights on America, where he had few contacts but, fortunately, a friend was able provide him and his wife with affidavits of support so that they could secure visas. They arrived in New York in July of 1938 to begin anew.
