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THE BIRTH OF THE KING OF THE WALTZ

Vienna, 1804. The customers of a small, smoky bar in Leopoldstadt were playing card games. A few boatmen were staring into their tankards of beer and a few pub musicians had just arrived. In Vienna, these travelling minstrels were known as *Bratlegeiger* or “roast-pork fiddlers” because they played in return for an evening meal. They had low expectations, and only a few copper coins were dropped onto the plate they passed round.

14 March was a special day for the innkeeper, Franz Borgias Strauss, because his wife Barbara, née Tollmann, had given birth to a son, who he hoped would follow in his footsteps. The boy was to be named Johann Baptist, but the Viennese would later know him as the King of the Waltz. But for now, the little lad lay swaddled and sleeping. A hansom cab rattled over the cobblestones outside while violins struck up inside the inn. Fiddling from pub to pub was a hard way to earn a crust.

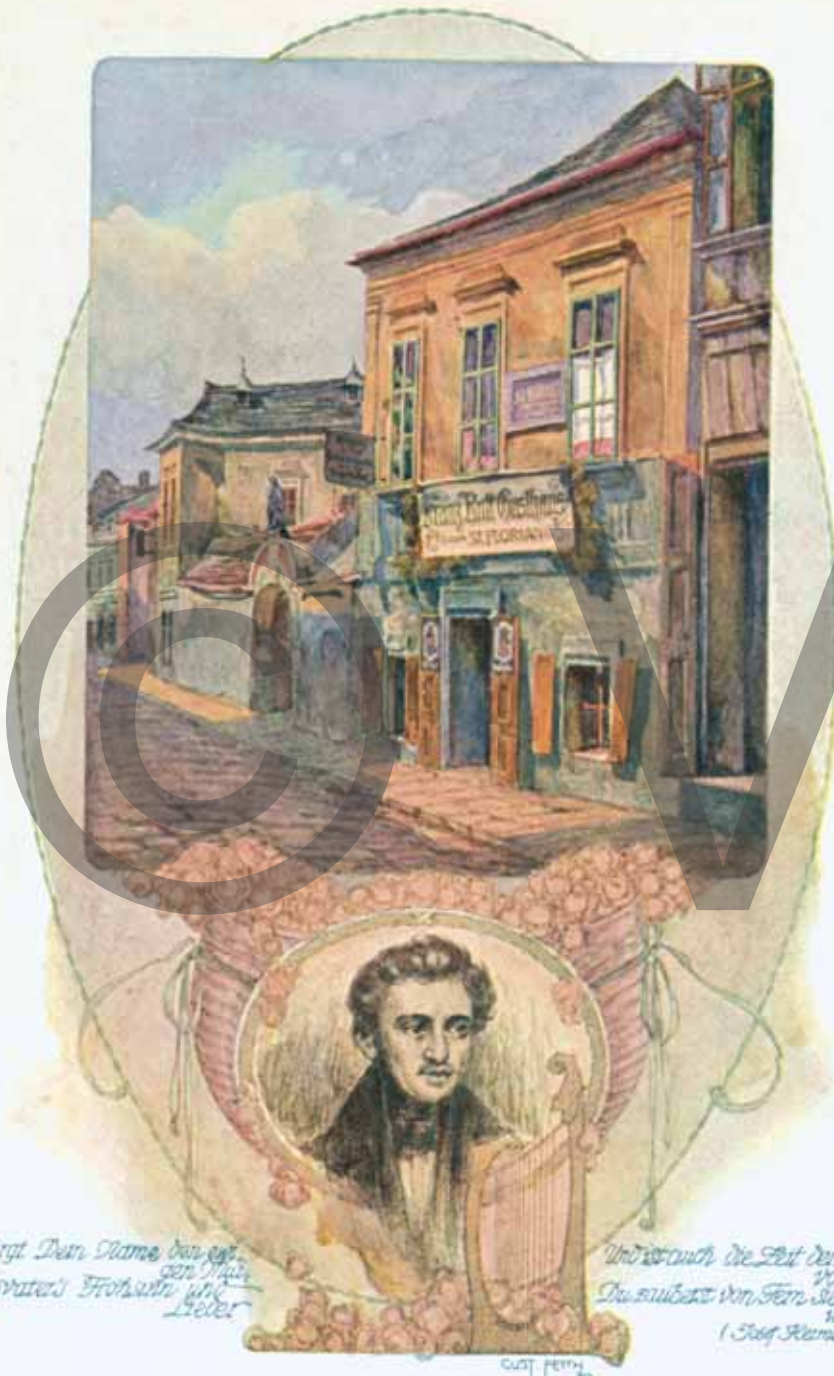
CHILDHOOD, SCHOOLING AND APPRENTICESHIP

The young Johann liked nothing better than to crawl under the minstrels’ table. At some point, his parents got hold of a basic fiddle for him, on which he copied the musicians’ songs and dances. But this childhood paradise came to an end on 28 August 1811, when the seven-year-old boy’s mother died of a “slow fever”. We know little about the stepmother, Theresa Feldberger, who took her place in 1813.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Gustav Feith, *Birthplace of Johann Strauss the Elder*, the inscription by Josef Hermann plays on the fact that “Strauss” also means “bouquet”: “Your name evokes the flowers of May, grandsire of music and mirth / and then when the blossoms have faded away, you conjure them back to the earth.”

ABOVE: Memorial plaque at the birthplace of Johann Strauss the Elder.

BELOW: Birthplace of Johann Strauss the Elder at 7 Flossgasse in Leopoldstadt. Photograph by August Stauda, 1902.



*Es birgt Dein Name den Ruhm
den Vater
Grossvater's Frohsinn wie
Lieder*

*Und Strauss die Zeit der Blüte
wobei
Du saubest von Fern sie uns
wieder
(Josef Hermann)*

Joh. Strauß Vater.

Gust. Feith pinx.



Radetzky - Marsch.

Piano - Conducteur.

Johann Strauss, Vater, Op. 228.



Numerous scores of the *Radetzky March* by Johann Strauss the Elder were published. From *Odeon* no. 24, c. 1900.

celebrations of fraternity and sympathised with the Academic Legion. Another revolutionary piece from those days is his Scherzpolka (“Joke Polka”) *Liguorian Sighs* (op. 57), which plays on the expulsion of the hated Redemptorist (or Liguorian) order from Vienna on 6 April 1848 and includes a mocking and noisy caterwaul of “*Ligouri ci gouri gouriani ani ani*”.

The police banned this piece and confiscated the score. Strauss was sufficiently carried away to perform the *Marseillaise* on 3 December 1848 in the inn *At the Green Gate*, and was consequently required to explain himself to the local

authorities three days later. Johann had the diplomatic skill to save his skin, but the powers-that-be did not forget this impudence. When the position of director of music at court was vacated by his father's death, the compromised son was passed over for promotion. It would take more than a few flattering waltz dedications for the imperial and royal authorities to overlook his lapses of 1848.

On 25 July 1848, legendary Field Marshall Joseph Wenzel Count Radetzky von Radetz had defeated an uprising in Northern Italy and this success at Custoza

was on all lips in restless Vienna. A victory celebration was arranged and Strauss the Elder was to compose the triumphal hymn, the *Radetzky March* (op. 228). The piece was premiered on 31 August 1848 on the Wasser-Gracis. The March was an immediate hit and was encored twice after tumultuous applause. The next year, on 22 September 1849, Radetzky was honoured with a banquet in the Redoute Hall during a visit to Vienna. The military orchestra struck up with Strauss' March, but its composer was unable to conduct in person as he was lying in bed with a fever.

Even the liberal students admitted that the elder Strauss' *Radetzky March* was much more stirring than the lifeless *Revolutionary March* by the Younger – it was described as “the better march for the worse cause”. King Friedrich Wilhelm IV decided in 1849 to have the piece included in the Prussian army's repertoire of marches.

On 6 January 1849, Strauss left for two weeks in Bohemia. In Prague he encountered “Czech patriotism” in the form of vocal opposition to inviting the imperial loyalist director of music. In spring, when a sad peace had returned to bombarded Vienna, Johann Strauss the Elder decided on another long concert tour. From 6 March, he and 35 musicians travelled through various German cities. The divisions of the Revolution were still far from mended, and in Heidelberg and Heilbronn, for example, the nationalist students derided Strauss, whom they saw as an opponent of the liberal revolution. It was not until he reached Munich, Brussels and Antwerp that he received his accustomed applause once more. The final leg of his journey took him to Britain, where he performed at soirées for the upper aristocracy between 24 April and 9 July. He played for Queen Victoria at a court ball at Buckingham Palace. While staying in London, he also met the exiled family of Chancellor Metternich. It was high summer by the time Strauss returned to Vienna, tired and drained by a total of 46 concerts.

Postcard with the likeness and signature of Field Marshall Joseph Wenzel Count Radetzky and an excerpt from the March named after him. Drawing after a photograph of 1856.



his Maxingvilla in Hietzing on 6 July 1850. Dedications and messages of loyalty to the House of Habsburg were becoming ever more frequent as Strauss determined to polish up his battered political reputation.

TO WARSAW

On 10 October 1850, Strauss, his 24 musicians and the orchestral porter were issued with a passport that was explicitly also valid for Russian Poland. The planned concert tour coincided with a six-day visit to Warsaw by Emperor Franz Joseph I who was meeting the Russian Tsar and Prussian King there. The bandleader

Marcin Zaleski, *The Royal Łazienki Palace in Warsaw*, c. 1836–1838.



and his men travelled to Warsaw on their own initiative and it is highly unlikely that the Austrian emperor knew anything about it.

The long, stressful journey left the musicians exhausted. Even before they had reached the outskirts of the city, they were pulled of the train by the Russian police. The governor of Warsaw, anxious about the safety of the attendant royals, suspected the Austrians of some kind of conspiracy and threatened to deport them to Siberia. When asked for assistance, the Austrian consul did nothing – he had been given no orders.

The governor was only required to let these supposed rebels go once the Tsarina heard of the incident. On 27 October, Strauss and his orchestra performed at a gala soirée in the Łazienki Palace, at which Emperor Franz Joseph was the guest of honour. Other concerts and soirées were also scheduled. Maybe they even played the *Warsaw Polka* (op. 84) that Strauss would present to the elite of Vienna at a grand ball in the Sofienbad Hall on 25 November.

JOSEF STRAUSS JOINS THE FIRM

Strauss allowed himself and his musicians no rest. The men were constantly on stage, while their boss hurried from one ballroom to the next. The perpetual demand for new pieces and many sleepless nights took their toll. Shrovetide 1851 was a strain on Strauss and he collapsed in the early hours of Ash Wednesday, after which he was “alarmingly ill”. Johann needed a break, but the burden of duty lay heavily on his exhausted shoulders – since his father’s death, he had borne the sole responsibility for providing for the family in the *Hirschenhaus*.

Another draining concert tour took the Strauss band to the German Federal States, Belgium and Holland. The orchestra played in Prague as they passed through,



Caesar Willich, *Richard Wagner*, 1862.

RICHARD WAGNER

Johann Strauss first performed the music of a certain Richard Wagner as early as 1853, in a concert at the Volksgarten. He conducted the Pilgrim Chorus from Wagner's Romantic opera *Tannhäuser* and the intermezzo from *Lohengrin*; both works had been previously unknown in Vienna. Strauss held Wagner in exceptionally high esteem and made a major contribution to the latter's breakthrough in Austria. On 3 July 1860, he first conducted passages from Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*, completed a year earlier, which can be considered a kind of world premiere. The opera would not be staged in its entirety until 1865, in Munich.

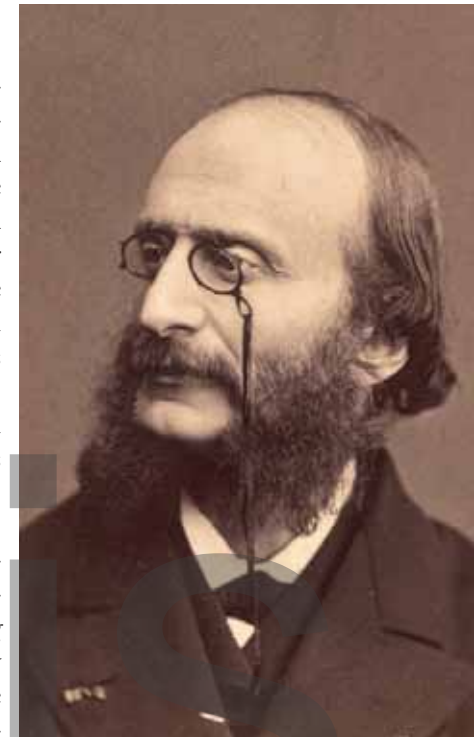
An essay by Wagner on the Hofopertheater in Vienna written in 1863 shows that he also recognised Strauss as a leading musical personality: "... a single Strauss waltz surpasses in grace, refinement, and real musical substance most of the products of foreign manufacture which we often import at such great cost, just as the tower of St Stephan's surpasses the hollow pillars that line the boulevards of Paris." It is also said that it was Wagner who bestowed the becoming epithet of "Waltz King" on Strauss.

On 21 May 1861, Strauss welcomed Wagner, who had just arrived in Vienna for a performance of *Lohengrin*, with a programme of the loveliest melodies from *Tristan and Isolde*. He repeated this tribute two years later, when Wagner was visiting to celebrate his 50th birthday. Wagner offered the warmest of thanks to "the most musical head I have ever come across" and offered the master of light music the highest public praise. The two men only met in person once, however, when Wagner was in Vienna for some concerts in 1875.

JACQUES OFFENBACH IN VIENNA

Jacques Offenbach visited Vienna at Carnival 1863 and was received with tumultuous ovations. Johann Strauss also showed goodwill towards the French master of the operetta. Both Offenbach and Strauss had been commissioned to write a waltz for a ball to be held by Concordia (the Viennese press club for writers and journalists), on 12 January 1864. Strauss' contribution was entitled *Morgenblätter* (*Morning Papers*, op. 279), while Offenbach's waltz was then still untitled. The mischievous Concordians naturally suggested the name *Evening Papers*. When the evening of the ball came, the two maestros conducted their dances. Offenbach's *Les feuilles du soir* was rapturously applauded and encored, but Strauss' *Morning Papers* fell flat. Strauss was so aggrieved by this bagatelle that he returned home where he burst into tears. At later concerts, however, the Viennese appreciated the beauty of Strauss' waltz, which soon came to be considered one of his best works.

For all their rivalry, the Parisian composer was very fond of the Waltz King and is said to have given him an idea in the course of a convivial drinking session at the *Golden Lamb*: "you should be writing operettas, my dear Strauss!" The Frenchman's words were well received and Offenbach can thus be considered to have helped usher in the Golden Age of Viennese operetta.



LEFT: Fritz Luckhardt, *Portrait of Jacques Offenbach*.