

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR-32
Albrechtsberg

St. Antony's College
Oxford, England
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

This summer I went to live in an Austrian castle. It was a run-down castle in a run-down part of the country, property of a friend of a friend who was willing to let me have it for a share in the cost of installing a semblance of modern plumbing. I was originally attracted by its cheapness rather than by its romance, but perhaps it was all the better for that. No tourists, a sun terrace as the only nineteenth century improvement to a sixteenth century structure, ten horrible-to-behold mummies under the high altar, and a village whose attitude was so feudal that an Australian who stayed for a month kept asking about signorial rights. He was incidentally the same guest who saw the ghost.

Such isolation seems unlikely. Nazism, the second world war, and ten years of Soviet occupation have all passed this way, and the Iron Curtain just thirty miles away should be a constant reminder of the Cold War. There are four television sets in the village, and one can drive to the center of Vienna in two hours. Nonetheless by mid-September I was psychologically prepared to take an incident with the village postmistress with a straight face. I had gone down to send a telegram to you. She looked in her book to find out what rate to charge me and ran her finger down the column to the entry marked "USSR". "No," I said gently, "USA". She looked up in mild surprise: "Isn't it the same thing?" she asked.

Albrechtsberg-an-der-grossen-Krems (not to be confused with Albrechtsberg an der Pielach, which is near Melk) lies some 36 minutes dry-weather driving time north and west of Krems-on-the-Danube. About 2300 feet above sea level, it has a population of 800 (including three subsidiary villages a mile away), post office, doctor, general store and tobacconist, two pubs, open-air swimming in the Greater Krems, cinema, excursions. The swimming in the Greater Krems proved to be a fantasy of the Lower Austrian Provincial Tourist Office - the river is nowhere more than two feet deep and just wider than a standing broad jump - but the rest was all there. The village stands high above the river and the castle high above the village; from the nineteenth century sun terrace on the best days one can look beyond the patchwork of golden and green fields, where some peasants plough with tractors, some with horses, and some with oxen, and see the Schneeberg in the easternmost Alps, 52 miles away. At least Lina, the peasant girl who came to dust and wash up, said it was the Schneeberg; for me it was never more

than a hazy shape barely seen through the cleft in the hills just to the left of Kottes church tower.

Our life in this idyllic setting can only be described as rural with baronial touches - unless you prefer to call it baronial with rural touches.

The plumbing is a case in point. The owner, who lives in Sweden and seldom sees his castle, had intimated in our correspondence that the Russians were responsible for its condition: "My old family estate was built in the 11th century, so you must not expect much modern comforts. The place was very nicely kept but as we had Mr. Hitler for several years in Austria and then the Russians living in the castle, it is no more what it has been. The water pipes have been destroyed and water has had to be driven up to the house..."

As it turned out, this was not quite accurate: running water had never reached the castle, even in the golden days before Mr. Hitler and Marshall Tolbukhin. Washing, bathing and drinking water had been hauled up from the village, and as for sanitary facilities, they were of the feudal sort. Persuaded that improvements would be essential if some German industrialist is ever to take the family white elephant off his hands, the Baron's administrator had made an effort to remedy the plumbing situation before our arrival. Thereupon a new problem was discovered. The castle is perched on a rock high above the village housetops, and when the pipes were laid it was found that water pressure in the Albrechtsberg mains was barely strong enough to reach the lower of the two floors on which we were to live.

Result: whenever the village cows drink, and their troughs are refilling, water does not flow in the castle of Albrechtsberg.

Albrechtsberg has the thirstiest cows in Austria. They have been known to drink at midnight.

Such complaints are not new here, I found. In 1620 the owner of Albrechtsberg, one Hans Bernard von Peuckhan, died of wounds received at the Battle of the White Mountain, and the Lower Austrian provincial court ordered the sale of the fief, describing it in these words:

"The castle lies in a mountainous cold place, is dark and built in an old-fashioned way. It is also not wide enough that one can drive into it, and it was very much ruined in the late war-like disturbances, especially as to rooms, windows, doors and stoves. The fountain is without water, the dwelling is uncomfortably built, the farm is collapsing, and with the very faulty plumbing the whole is estimated at 2000 florins."

It is worth adding that no noteworthy additions have been made since the seventeenth century, except for the rebuilding of the church in the 1770's.



ALBRECHTSBERG a d. Krems, N.-Oe.

2089

Still, why does one rent a medieval castle? (One day a man and woman from the provincial travel bureau, engaged in writing a new guide book for the district, called, and I showed them around our Historical Rooms. At the end they remarked that they could not place my accent - I write those words smugly! - and what nationality was I? I told them. "Of course!" exclaimed the man. "The castles and the Americans. I should have known!") I tried in vain to explain that it was not that way at all.

I regret to report that I did not see the ghost. My Tasmanian friend, who had thought Albrechtsberg the obvious retreat in which to write a thesis on the 1910 elections in Britain, was the only one to claim this honor. It came through the locked door separating his bedroom from the castle library at three o'clock one morning and was frightened back by his hoarse scream for help. That was a week before he awoke one morning with two small red marks on his throat and we found a bat in a nearby sittingroom. But his entire Albrechtsberg experience was colored by his initial arrival. Misdirected by a drunken butcher in Senftenberg, he reached the castle just before midnight, when he found it looming out of the mists that come so mysteriously to this high plateau, and he then spent an hour wandering vainly around the battlements, pounding on various iron doors before finding the bell that - his good luck - I had installed that very day. Inside that gate one must cross the great court, climb thirty-four steps past various deserted rooms and pass another court before reaching the sanctuary of the inhabited portion.

But I did hear the ghost. One midnight, about ten days after our arrival, I heard the voices of men whispering in the inner court. The doors were locked and investigation - flashlight in one hand and a stout stick in the other - found nothing. The whispering continued, and other inmates reported next day having heard it, too. Subsequently

I discovered that whenever the wind was from the northeast, there were whispering voices in that court, but the Tasmanian never accepted this explanation. Neither did several nineteenth century guests of the Baron, as I learned from an old guestbook. They described it as a snoring ghost, but there is no doubt that in 1960 it whispers.

Castle-dwelling has its advantages in terms of prestige. To avoid some taxes that apparently are levied on improvements made to rental property, I had been asked to pose in the neighborhood as an old friend of the Baron who had "borrowed" the place from him for the summer and in return had paid for the modernisation of the plumbing out of the goodness of my heart. Since the Baron and I do happen to have a number of mutual friends in Vienna, and these often came up to call, this seemed plausible enough. Nor could the villagers know that the numerous guests who stayed for weeks were colleagues from Oxford who were sharing rent and grocery bills in return for a quiet place to work and walk. So they assumed that we were very rich as well as obviously well-connected, and we were treated as very much lords of the manor.

This must be one of the few places in Austria where the peasants are still peasants in this feudal sense - an interesting sociological observation which has little remaining basis in economic or social fact. Typical was Frau Braun, whose husband is a retired railroad worker on a miniscule pension. The first week she overheard one of the Hungarians living with me complain in the village store of the difficulty we were having buying fresh salad greens and vegetables, since most villagers raise their own. Respectfully she asked us to take what we needed from her garden, and she would never accept more than the token payment of one schilling (four cents) for enough carrots, parsley, cabbage, etc., to feed up to nine people. Embarrassed, we began going all the way to Krems for most of our supplies.

This was akin to the attitude of the small boys who would dash out of their houses to chorus "Grüß' Gott!" to any castle inmate who took a stroll through the village.

The village of course has its factions, and these soon began vying for the allegiance of those who had come in loco baronis. The basic problem, as everyone agreed, is that Baron Lempruch is an expatriate, a Swedish as well as an Austrian citizen, married to a Swede, and with sons and heirs who do not even speak German. He comes to Albrechtsberg for one or two weeks a year and is rumored to be looking for a buyer in Germany. I learned in Vienna that he had been a leader in the Heimatschutz in Lower Austria (as were, incidentally, Chancellor Raab and ex-Chancellor Figl), the clerical and vaguely Fascist political militia that had been Schuschnigg's chief bulwark against Nazism. This may explain the expediency of his absence from the country since 1938. He inherited the title and Albrechtsberg from an uncle shortly after the war, but by then was an executive in a Swedish ball-bearing firm and showed no desire to return to the banks of the Greater Krems. Until her death two years ago his widowed aunt continued to live in the castle, a semi-invalid much loved by the villagers, apparently because she gave toys to all the village children at Christmas. The Lempruch'sche Forst- u. Gutsverwaltung (Lempruchian Forest and Estate Administration) was

left in the hands of an Administrator from the Sudetenland, whom the villagers also liked because he was generous with the produce of the castle vegetable garden and forests.

Too generous, it seems, because when the present Baron fired him six years ago the estate was several million Schillings in debt. "He was a thief, that Sudeten German," his successor, Herr Verwalter Franz Svaricek, who comes from Moravia and does not love Sudeten Germans, told me. A Vienna friend offered a handy definition: "A thief in this business is an Administrator who does not know when to stop stealing."

Herr Verwalter Svaricek ("Mr. Administrator" because everyone is called by his title in Austria) is the Baron's man and employer of half the village. He is therefore an important person, as I learned the first day in Krems (14 miles away), when I needed to change money and the banks were already closed. Svaricek tapped on the window of the Landerbank, and it was most deferentially reopened for us.

(This, like the attitude of the villagers, is difficult to explain, when one considers how heavily the estate is in debt, and how small it in fact is - just over 200 hectares of forest, much of it on the steep slopes of the Krems river, where logging is difficult and expensive. All the farmland - as of this year - has now been sold or leased, so that the Baron's disinterest and his financial straits are clear to all, and fewer and fewer of the village people are in his employ. But old habits change slowly in this district.)

In Albrechtsberg, however, the Administrator is respected, but not well liked. Again as the Baron's man. It was not until later in our stay, when we had penetrated to village undercurrents, that I discovered that it was a minor triumph for the opposing faction that the "folks from the castle" had taken to frequenting Fritz and Anni Knoll's Gasthaus. It was Frau Knoll who pointed out to me that the old Baroness, although her "bourgeois" son (by an earlier marriage) could not inherit the estate, had taken more personal interest in its running than her absentee nephew, and that the Sudeten German Administrator had been a very agreeable person. Svaricek later told me that he never went near the Knolls' Gasthaus except for a five minute visit on Thursday evenings when he bought his weekly ticket in the state lottery. It is also significant that Svaricek wanted me to speak to the parish priest for historical information about the castle, while the Knolls steered me to Herr Weissensteiner, the schoolteacher.

There are two new houses in Albrechtsberg - the priest's and the teacher's. The latter is still unfinished and Herr Weissensteiner and his sons - who are also teachers, in neighboring towns - spent the summer holiday building it, apparently without professional assistance. The priest, since his predecessors were richly endowed with forest and farmland by the early Lempruchs, is the richest man in the village, able to take long holidays in Yugoslavia and Holland with his car and cook. The remaining citizens live mostly in eighteenth century farmhouses and cottages, the village having only a century ago rid itself of the disagreeable habit of burning down

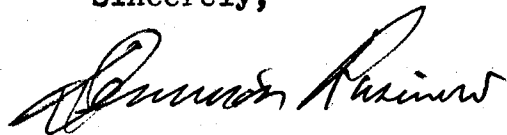
completely every hundred years. In a declining district (DR-33), it has some twenty houses fewer than in 1850. A sadly large number of children are spastic or mentally defective, and half the village girls look like sisters - all signs of rural in-breeding. The finest flower garden belongs to the village postman, a genial extrovert and natural village leader who reminded me vaguely of Jacques Tati as the postman in Jour de Fete.

The brighter young people escape when they can. Those now in their teens are going in larger numbers to the high schools in Krems. Lina, who worked for us and is twenty, is the most attractive and intelligent girl we met, but commented sadly that when she finished the eight years of the local Volksschule, it was "not done" to go on. One of my Vienna friends who visited us arranged a winter job for her as a maid in a suburb of the capital; I doubt if she will return to Albrechtsberg.

Castle life in an isolated village develops its own routine. Meat for the week should be ordered on Friday evenings, because the village butcher slaughters on Saturday morning. Twice a week to Krems for the supplies that cannot be bought locally, and guests are instructed to watch for mushrooms when walking in the woods. Once a fortnight to the vintner's cooperative in Unterloiben, and coin-flipping before each meal to decide who must go on safari to the cellar (our refrigerator), two courtyards and forty steps away, hewn out of the living rock under the north tract. A trip to the crypt whenever new guests come, to look at those horrible mummies (exposed when an earlier administrator stole the metal bands sealing the coffins sixty years ago). A solid afternoon's work on the terrace vanished because another fuse has blown, or the propane gas in the kitchen has run out again, or the duty cook must have some carrots from Frau Braun, or some more German hikers have got into the dungeon and must be got out, or a bat is loose in the Professor's bedroom....

Anyone interested in an inexpensive castle for next summer?

Sincerely,



Dennison Rusinow

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