

ONLY IN VIENNA

Interview with Dr. Murray Hall for ORF English Language Radio Service
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HALL: Duncan J. D. Smith has been described as an “urban explorer”, a “photojournalist” and a “travel guide writer”. A native of England, he studied Ancient History and Archaeology at Birmingham University at the end of the 1970s. As an author, his topographical book “Yorkshire: A Portrait in Colour” has been a long- and bestseller. He’s also published many other works. But it seems that the Austrian capital, Vienna, has not only become a “home away from home” for him but also the subject of his new book, “Only in Vienna”. So how did Duncan J. D. Smith come to be a sort of ‘Viennese of choice’? And why does he feel particularly attached to the city? They were the first questions I put to him when he came to our studios.

SMITH: When I look back on it there was a wonderful sense of fate about things. I had actually visited Vienna briefly in the mid-1970s, as part of a European coach trip with my parents – but I have to say I took few memories away with me. It was the usual Hofburg-and-Habsburg type of trip and that’s not really my cup of tea. However, for the next twenty five years I harboured a deep desire within me to one day spend time in another country and to have the opportunity to get to know it in my own way.

Exactly how this was to happen I wasn’t sure until in 1999 I met my girlfriend who, quite by chance, lived in Vienna. For several years I enjoyed her visits to England, showing her around our stately homes and taking her to the seaside, but all the while I wanted to explore her country – and especially to explore the city I had visited all those years before.

So it was, with her blessing, that in 2003 I finished my job, packed my camera and came to Vienna, initially for just six months. My natural default in a new place has always been to explore it thoroughly, as a means of getting over any feelings of dislocation or alienation: so that’s exactly what I did with Vienna. And my attachment to the place grew from there...

HALL: Now, your new book published by Christian Brandstätter Verlag here in Vienna is called “Only in Vienna”. The subtitle is “A Guide to Hidden Corners, Little-known Places and Unusual Objects”. It’s also available in a German version – the title is “Nur in Wien”, by the way. Before we go on to talk about the actual contents of the book, what was it that inspired you to write and illustrate it? I mean, surely there is no shortage of pictorial guides to Vienna...

SMITH: Yes, there are plenty of guidebooks to Vienna and I never really intended to write another one. However, the city proved such a fascinating place that the idea for a book grew quite naturally out of my many expeditions through the city. However, I have never really been interested in writing a traditional guidebook to anywhere. Like you said in your introduction I like to see myself, first and foremost, as an explorer and as such I like discovering places that lie off the beaten track.

I adopted the same approach that I had used when writing guidebooks in England with my father, Trevor. Whilst we were both interested in the broad brushstrokes of history to be found in most textbooks, we liked to view such history from a different perspective, to uncover it by visiting less well-known locations and by tracking down strange and unusual objects. Such books are rather popular in England and yet almost unknown on mainland Europe.

And it's certainly a technique that our readers seem to enjoy since it helps them not only to escape the crowds but also to give them the feeling that they discovered the place for themselves. As a result, they go home with a more indelible memory of their experience than if they had gone somewhere with a crowd of other tourists.

HALL: Would you say the book is mainly aimed at visitors to Vienna rather than the local population?

SMITH: That's a very interesting question and one that I have thought about a lot. I always expected the German edition to sell well outside Vienna because of the strong German tourist market. However, early indications are that the book has also proved very popular with the Viennese themselves. I think this proves the old saying that it often takes a visitor to tell a native where the local sights are, the native rarely having the time or inclination to discover what is on their own doorstep.

That said, the English edition is also selling well, especially to Vienna's sizeable ex-patriate community, as well to English-speaking visitors who wish to supplement their traditional guidebooks with something a little more exotic. Being a well-illustrated book it also makes a nice gift as well as a good 'armchair read'.

HALL: What are some of your "hidden corners, little-known places and unusual objects"? Might our listeners be familiar with some of them?

SMITH: It is my hope that most readers will not be too well acquainted with my selection of "hidden corners", as these are the ones that took quite a lot of finding!:

A good example would be one of Europe's oldest Jewish burial grounds, the Rossau Cemetery, concealed somewhat surprisingly behind an old people's home on Seegasse in the 9th district. Hidden too is the maze of medieval tunnels running deep below Tostmann's Trachten shop at the Mölker Bastei, just down from the doorway where Harry Lime first appears in "The Third Man".

As regards "little-known places", I think most people will have heard of these locations – but few will know all the secrets they hold. A perfect example is the Stephansdom where there is an inscribed Roman gravestone built into the main entrance to Christianise a pagan site, a curious iron handle by the north door giving sanctuary to those who hold it, several Turkish cannonballs still embedded in its spire from the siege of 1683, the cryptic O5 symbol carved on the façade by the Austrian resistance during World War II, and a statue of Christ with a beard of black hair that is said to be growing!

And then there are my "unusual objects" ... and some of them are very unusual! I particularly like the huge mosaic of Da Vinci's "Last Supper" hanging in the Minoritenkirche. It was commissioned by Napoleon as a replacement for the original, which he intended to take to Paris, but he was defeated before it was finished. There is also the Holy Lance in the Hofburg's Schatzkammer, said to have been used to pierce the side of Christ on the Cross, as well as Emperor Joseph II's re-useable coffin in the Undertakers' Museum, an unusual attempt to save wood that proved very unpopular with the Viennese!

HALL: How did you go about 'collecting' the corners, places and objects? Did you do this systematically or did you stumble across them by chance?

SMITH: It's a combination of techniques I suppose. Traditionally, I've always tended to purchase a really good street map, breaking it up into districts and marking on anything of interest (especially unusual street names and cemeteries,

etc), and then walking as many of the streets as possible. I prefer to be out and about rather than approaching my subject from a purely academic standpoint. Luckily I've inherited my father's special eye for noticing anything out of the ordinary and that in itself usually generates enough material to get started. After that it's a case of making sure I weave all the important historical facts about a place into the text, together with a sprinkling of local colour by way of a few legends, customs and urban myths.

Having said all that, I love nothing more than walking down an assuming street and finding something really special, about which I had previously known nothing at all, as was the case recently when I came across the graves of Sigmund Freud's parents in the Central Cemetery.

HALL: Do you have any particular favourite, or favourites, among the things you describe and photograph? If so, why?

SMITH: My list of favourites is constantly changing but I tend to return to the same two:

My favourite little-known place in Vienna would have to be the Klimt Villa, tucked away on Feldmühlgasse in Hietzing. I had the good fortune to live in the area for a while and often wondered about the history of an abandoned villa I could see from my window. It wasn't until I started writing the book that I discovered it occupied the site of Gustav Klimt's last studio, which had apparently been demolished when the villa was built in the twenties. You can imagine my delight when I found out that just recently some old plans had been discovered showing that Klimt's house had in fact survived, the villa simply being wrapped around it. It's such a romantic place to visit, its pair of windows looking out over the remains of his beloved garden that featured in several of his paintings. It really retains so much more of the man than any art gallery and yet few make the effort to visit it.

As for my favourite unusual object I would have to pick the so-called Snake's Tongue Poison Detector, to be found in the collection of the Treasury of the Order of the Teutonic Knights, on Singerstrasse in the First District. Dating back to 1526 it is actually an extraordinary saltcellar – one of only three such examples in the world – that would have graced the table of the Order's Grand Master. It is made from a branch of red coral from which hang 13 fossilised shark's teeth, believed originally to be the tongues of snakes or even dragons. It is said that the teeth would exude moisture in the event of the saltcellar being placed near poisoned food! Rather useful I suppose if you had enemies to dinner!

HALL: Now that "Only in Vienna" is out on the market, do you have any plans for similar publications in the future?

SMITH: Well, the whole experience has been so rewarding for me, not only to have created the Vienna book but also to be told that other people have become amateur urban explorers themselves as a result of reading it. I have therefore decided to carry on exploring and to produce a series of similar guidebooks. I've just finished "Only In Budapest", which will be published in March 2006, and I am now hard at work on "Only In Prague". I'm pleased to say that both cities have already provided me with plenty of unusual material, including an elephant house in Budapest Zoo built in the style of an Islamic mosque and an old greenhouse in Prague containing giant water lilies capable of supporting a child, first collected on the Amazon by a Czech botanist.

And after that I thought about exploring Krakow and Berlin and then maybe even Istanbul ... and who knows where else... If a place has got hidden corners then I feel that it might as well be me who gets to discover them!