
Café 7Rheinhardt
Café
Patrick Gooch

Café 7Rheinhardt

PATRICK GOOCH

PROLOGUE

Vienna, June 1938

Smouldering embers were all that was left.

I stood there, transfixed by such wanton destruction.

Bruno was beside me. We gazed, almost unbelievingly, at the pyre which for the past three hours had consumed what they termed `degenerate art`.

Uncaring, brown-shirted individuals had fed the flames. Seizing, at random, paintings that only hours before had been hanging in the salons for all to admire.

Now they were just fragments. . .whisps of canvas floating skywards: slivers of once ornate frames glowing briefly, fanned by the gathering breeze.

They had come at dusk. Stormtroopers pushing aside the last of the visitors as they ran through the Upper and Lower Belvedere Museums. Directed by SS-Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich, they had literally ransacked the walls of works that offended their leader`s sensibilities.

The smell of burning oil paint still hung heavily in the air when Heydrich turned to Bruno and demanded the whereabouts of other paintings he had noted during an earlier visit.

Bruno declared they had been removed at the wish of a higher authority, and showed him documents featuring the telling signature.

Furious, Heydrick lashed out with his glove, striking Bruno Grimhalter, the Museum`s Director, across the cheek. Turning on his heel, the SS commandant marched to the waiting car, followed by his puppet, Kajetan Hoffman**.**

Bruno and I made our way to the Lower Belvedere. Walking through the empty salons that had once featured masterpieces by Paul Klee, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Ernst, Gustav Klimt and a host of other well-known artists.

We walked, heads bowed, side-by-side down the corridor leading to the director`s office. Past Annika, his secretary, who looked up enquiringly from her desk. Through the tall, double doors to Bruno`s sanctuary, which he shut, with an air of finality. using a backward push of his foot

Bruno turned towards me. As he did so the grim set of his features turned into a hesitant smile. Then he roared with laughter, lurched towards me, and we fell into a manly embrace.

Parting, he rubbed at his face where Heydrich`s glove had struck him, Moving across to a side cabinet, he exclaimed.”I didn`t think we would get away with it! Well done, Anton! Come. . .let us drink to our success!”

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Vienna, March 1938 - three months earlier

His voice radiated across the square.

Wave after wave of sound. The loudspeakers, with their reverberating echo distorting the flow - but not the message.

A step behind the speaker stood his accomplices, keen to support his dreams, his aspirations.

Also close, a body of black-shirted men. Bodyguards. Ever-watchful. Prepared in an instant to rush to the speaker`s aid.

But there would be no interruption from the crowd. Acceptance of their fate had already occurred. Now it was being sealed in an address that wavered and boomed out from the balcony.

In every sentence he spoke of `unity`.

`*My good people of Vienna, the sudden appearance of my army on the streets of this city should not be viewed as a conquering force, but as a neighbour wishing to unite both countries in a common cause.*`

I stood in the portal of a building on the corner of Löwelstrasse listening to the speech.

It was delivered with all the bombast I had witnessed before. The clutching at the belt, the head at an angle inviting agreement, the right arm delivering a beat to the cascade of words.

The loudest applause came from the interlopers - the military force arrayed in front of the large Swastika flag flapping in the breeze. The wind strengthened. I had heard enough. Time to head back to the museum.

"Where do you think you`re going?"

The sharply-worded question was uttered by a black-shirted officer. He stood before me, legs apart, a hand on his gunbelt..

"Back to work."

"No one leaves until he has finished speaking. Do you understand?"

The holster was tapped lightly. The meaning, the intent, perfectly clear.

I shrugged.

Although I was doubtful the fellow would use the weapon, I was not inclined to argue. Turning back, I walked to where I had stood earlier, aware the officer`s eyes were upon me.

I glanced around, there were men in black shirts at all the strategic exits to the square.

***

"Ah, you`re back, Anton. Well, did you catch his speech?"enquired Bruno Grimhalter.

He followed me into my office. A short man with a rounded figure and a smiling countenance. From his greying hair, precisely parted in the middle, to the tips of his highly-polished black shoes, Bruno was neatness personified. Adding to this impression was his habit of wearing a formal black jacket over striped trousers. The model businessman.

Today, gone was the smile. He wore a more anxious expression.

I hung my overcoat on a hook behind the door, and switched on a small, electric fire. The Upper and Lower Belvedere Museums are richly-decorated buildings maintained at an acceptable temperature. It was a different world behind the splendours of the Marble Hall, the Gold Cabinet, the sculptures, wall reliefs, works of art and ceiling paintings.

For those who worked at the Belvedere, the accommodation, though not necessarily an afterthought, fell markedly short of what the public enjoyed the other side of the richly decorated walls.

"Actually, I`ve heard much of it before," I said resignedly. "He is an accomplished orator, says all the right things to those prepared to listen. Yet, you question his sincerity. Are they just empty words? They lack warmth . . .a bit like this room."

Bruno shrugged. "Where have you heard him before?"

"A few years ago at the Summer Olympics. He was the host, if you remember. He used the games to promote an image of a strong, and united people. It was a classic exercise in propaganda. Then last year, out of interest, I attended a rally where he touched upon the purity of race."

I gave a wry smile.

"He may not have inflamed the minds of the people today, but he certainly knows how to whip up enthusiasm among the growing numbers in the German Workers` Party."

Bruno stared at me briefly, then changed the subject. "Don`t forget we have a meeting at six to finalise the details of the `City of Women` exhibition. I`ll see you later."

The door closed behind him.

I rose to my feet and stood in front of the electric fire. Its feeble heat slowly warming my legs.

Of course, I would not forget. We had been working on the project for several months. Johann Lederer was bringing together the strands of the project. Of the four curators in my team he was the most able, and the most dependable.

The art exhibition, scheduled to take place in six weeks time, would be depicting the city`s talented women.

We had been able to call upon such artists as Elena Luksch-Makowsky, Helene Funke, and Erika Giovanna Klien. They had contributed significantly to Modernism and the artistic trends that appeared after the First World War. To commemorate these artists and their achievements, a long overdue event was about to be staged in the Lower Belvedere.

At ten to six I walked along to the general office. Lederer was not at his desk, but Hans Juckenheim, one of the assistant curators, mentioned he had gone down to the warehouse to check recent arrivals

As I was descending the stairs Johann pushed through a door. He grinned up at me.

"That`s it, Herr Fischer. . .the last delivery. We can now print the exhibition catalogue."

By seven o`clock that evening we had covered all the relevant aspects of the female artists` exhibition, and had moved on to the Gustav Klimt retrospective later in the year.

On this occasion, with the Belvedere holding a substantial number of his paintings, we would not have to seek works from other galleries or those in private hands.

Some of the Klimt paintings currently in our possession were on loan from individuals; but, to all intents and purposes, the Belvedere regarded them as part of its inventory. Many owners did not want the heavy expense of insurance, or were unable to provide the right conditions to display them.

With the discussion finally at an end, Bruno opened a bottle of his favourite wine from Neusiedlersee. The wines from vineyards along the lakeside were too sweet for my taste; however, because the director believed it was a treat also to be enjoyed by his staff, I accepted a glass with an obvious show of enthusiasm..

That evening I decided to walk to my apartment in Neubau, Vienna`s seventh district. About four kilometres from the Belvedere, it usually took me three-quarters of an hour. That`s if I didn`t stop at the Café 7Rheinhardt, one of my regular haunts.

Although chilly, at least the wind had dropped. I turned up the collar of my overcoat, thrust my hands into the pockets.

I often walk home if I want to consider how to tackle a situation or a problem that has arisen at work. But this evening my mind was more on the events of the past few days. What would be the outcome? Importantly, how would it affect the Belvedere? I wondered how long it would take before their leader`s honeyed words turned into the grim reality of oppression by an invading force?

Already I was aware that the police patrols were now accompanied by sinister-looking men in black leather coats.

The aroma of coffee drew me towards the café. Usually, the place was full, but when I pushed through the door most of the tables were empty.

"Ah, a welcome face," murmured Ingrid, who ran Café 7Rheinhardt with her husband. "Take a seat, I`ll bring you your black coffee. Anything stronger to drink, something to eat?"

"Nothing alcoholic, just an open salami sandwich, please, Ingrid."

A few minutes later, she brought over the order and slid into the seat opposite.

"So. . .what do you think of the situation, my English friend?"

Not many people knew of my dual nationality. It had come out when drinking late into the night with Ingrid, her husband Pieter, and several of my neighbourhood friends.

I don`t know how the subject arose. Clearly, too much alcohol had loosened my tongue. I had revealed more than intended.

Not that there was any real need to hide my past. Except that, at the time of the downturn in the economy, when jobs were scarce, it was better to be thought a national rather than a foreigner.

I had been born here in Vienna. However, at eight years of age, my father, a biochemist, had been offered a post with a company in England.

As a result my mother, my sister, my two brothers and I had moved to a home on the outskirts of London. Disappointed at the time, I later realised that it had been formative in my choice of career.

Father had bought a house in Dulwich, a leafy haven only a short distance from the capital. It was also close to the Dulwich Picture Gallery. I was drawn to its treasures, and as I grew older, spent more and more time wandering through the various salons.

At sixteen I even acquired a job of sorts at the gallery: collecting the post, running errands, and other minor tasks. It also gave me more time to study the work of the masters.

I attended Dulwich College, and in my late teens was accepted by St John`s College, Oxford, to read history of art.

By then I had acquired a blue passport, Anton Fischer became Antony Fisher. I was now recognised as one of King George`s loyal subjects.

Moreover, I was now fluent in English; and having an Italian girl friend at the time, was prompted to converse in that language as well.

Interested in my original homeland, after graduating I made regular visits to meet members of our distant family. Eventually, deciding that I would quite like to spend more time in Austria, I looked around for a job to pay my way.

That was six years ago.

Now, I made periodic visits to the family in England.

"You can see the effect it`s having," remarked Ingrid, scanning the café. Seeing few customers where normally it was crowded, alive with noisy conversation.

"Don`t worry. . .it will pick up once people get used to the idea the country is no longer ours," I said. But there were niggling doubts in my mind.

"Do you know that Chancellor Kurt Schuschigg has been deposed? Guess who they`ve appointed in his place?"

"The Nazi-lover, Seyss-Inquart probably."

"You`re right," she sniffed. "What will happen to my beloved Austria? What will become of us with him in charge, Anton? This so-called Anschluss is a charade . . .a curse!"