

The second day started off with a breakfast that, if anything, is typical in Europe but gut busting in the States. Variety of cold cuts, cheeses, rolls and jams, yogurts, juices, and cereals are the standard fare. No low-cal foods here. We eat our share and head out to meet Laurentiu. He is late. His excuse ... he only had a \$100 euro and the bus driver did not want to make change. He had to walk all the way to the underground, a distance of perhaps 1-1/2 miles from the hostel. Nonetheless he was in good spirits and our frustration was short lived as we headed west to explore a new area of the city ... the Belvedere Quarter. It seems that Laurentiu was on a mission ... had to buy a projector lamp and a computer card for the University. Prices are much higher in Bucharest and Vienna offered lower prices. We find the business where he makes the lamp purchase and we again head for the underground to re-visit the Townhall and Museum Quarter. We will return to the Belvedere the next day to visit the Palaces and garden of the Belvedere.



German opera. Only after I charged the tickets to my Visa did it hit me ... (and this is because we are now using "funny money") ... the 3 tickets cost \$457 euros ... \$415 US dollars, or \$138 EACH. Cripes, what an extravagant spender. Too late, we are going to the Opera regardless of the cost ... but it better be good.

The emperor Franz Joseph commissioned the major institutional buildings of the Hapsburg Empire, and the city, along the Ringstrasse in the mid-19th century. Today these buildings remain a successful and imposing example of good urban planning. The districts to the west of the Ringstrasse are untouched, including Josefstadt, which still retains an 18th century atmosphere with its picturesque streets, modest palaces and Baroque churches (left). The area's cultural institutions are vibrant; the brilliant productions of the Burgtheater and the wide-ranging exhibits of the Natural History Museum and the Kunsthistorisches Museum are all popular today. For over 4 hours we explore this area ... but for most of the time without Laurentiu. During lunch at the Einstein Café, we discovered that the projector lamp he bought was cracked and he had to return to the firm that sold it to have it replaced. We walked and we talked and we absorbed as much as possible. Laurentiu finally returned as we headed back to City Center by way of the Hofburg Quarter. An idea came over me ... as long as we are in Vienna why can't we see a performance at the State Opera, if one is running? We walk to the Opera House (right), I inquire at the ticket office and sure enough a performance is available for Friday night (next night) and tickets are available. I asked the ticket price, it seemed reasonable and bought 3. The performance was a 5-hour production of the "The Music Meister von Nurnberg" by Richard Wagner, a classic heavy



Seeing that we have a few hours to spare, Laurentiu recommends that we take the underground to the Danube River for a long leisurely stroll along its bank. Fifteen minutes later we are at the river ... walking the north side. Few if any people are there, the river attractions are still closed for the season. We amble our way for over two miles and cross another bridge to enter an area called "Millenium City" (left). It is the housing / shopping / entertainment mecca for Vienna. Modern and glitzy we stop for coffee, beer and tortes. We do a little shopping; I use the Internet Café. Time to leave, we head for the underground for a return to City Center. Celebrating my spending habits, we head off for another Viennese eatery in the Stephansdom Quarter. During dinner at least 50 Japanese tourists walk in. Do they serve sushi here? But of course, Vienna is full of Italian, German and Japanese tourists. Americans are rarely to be seen. We eat and drink heartily and again escort Laurentiu back to the underground. Tomorrow will be a busy day ... Schonbrunn Palace, Palace of the Belvedere, and of course ... the Opera.

Friday morning, after a good breakfast, welcomed us as we met up with Laurentiu. Because the opera performance started at 5PM we had to do our sightseeing with utmost precision. We head east again to the Belvedere Quarter. This is a grandiose and extravagant district. From the Karlsplatz, with its gardens and statues, there is a lovely view of the Baroque Karlskirche. East of this great church are the two palaces of the Belvedere, now public galleries and the Schwarzenberg Palace, now a hotel. These huge palaces and beautiful gardens were designed following the crucial defeat of the Turks in 1683. Only after the Turkish threat had been removed was it possible for Vienna to expand. Nearby is the Historical Museum of the City of Vienna ... the Musikverein, home of the Vienna Philharmonic ... and the Bestattungsmuseum (undertakers' museum) that chronicles the importance the Viennese attach to pomp and



death. Winding our way past familiar landmarks we shuffle our way past the Karlsplatz Pavillion, the Technical University and Karlskirche. We linger briefly at a surviving Soviet-era monument with its magical fountain. Belvedere is only a block away. But something caught Laurentiu's eye ... the Romanian Embassy. He had to take a picture. We arrive at the Belvedere (above - right). The Belvedere was built as the summer residence of Prince Eugene of Savoy, the brilliant military commander whose strategies helped vanquish the Turks in 1683. Situated on a gently sloping hill, the Belvedere consists of two palaces linked by a formal garden laid out in the French style. The garden is sited on three levels, each conveying a complicated programme of Classical allusions: the lower part of the garden represents the domain of the Four Elements, the center is Parnassus and the upper section is Olympus. The Upper Belvedere dominates the site, whose domed copper roofs resemble the shape of Turkish tents (an allusion to victory over the Turks). The Statues of Sphinxes, with their lion bodies and human heads (left), represent strength and intelligence and seem a most erotic sight in such grand surroundings. Eventually, we exit the Belvedere through the Nunnery and enter another magical world ... the Botanic Gardens of Belvedere. After a brief excursion here (the bonsai specimens were unique, some 170 years old), we exit, head for the underground and make out way to the Schonbrunn Palace for a tour of the inside of the Palace.



We arrive at the Palace grounds, purchase the tickets for a self-guided tour with audio players, retrieve the players and head for the second floor. Bang ... wall-to-wall people. Now I know how a sardine feels. It is virtually impossible to explore the royal chambers at leisure ... people everywhere. All are jostling for position ... pushing and shoving is the norm. Intermingled are the guided tours in several languages. To top it all, no picture taking is allowed. Not a pleasant experience. Although this type of a tour would have been a pleasure to take, it was turning into a nightmare. With the throng of people it was impossible to backtrack ... we were stuck going forward on this human treadmill. Forty-five minutes later we exit ... having survived a crush of humanity. This is spring ... what will things be like in the peak summer months? We leave Schonbrunn with our lives intact. We head back to the underground, exit at Stephanplatz and walk the short distance to the hotel. On the corner by the hotel is a pastry shop ... overlooked by us previously. With time to spare before the evening's performance we stop for coffee and some torts. Now this is what



Vienna is famous for ... delicious and satisfying. Our Viennese gastronomical experience is now complete. Getting back to the hotel we freshen up and dress for the Opera. What this means for travelers is a clean shirt and maybe a light jacket. We depart and walk the one block to the Opera.

Gaining entry into the Opera building we are not that impressed with the foyer. Simple yet lacking elegance, in my opinion. We find the nearest door leading to our seats and enter. Yep ... just like in some pictures, the Vienna Opera House is a jewel. Compact yet imposing. Besides the main floor, there are six levels of "balconies" that ring the chamber. The top level is true "nose-bleed" country. The chamber starts to fill up rapidly with patrons in all manner of dress ... from furs and long gowns to simple dresses and light jackets (as we are dressed). The lights dim, the pit orchestra starts the prelude and the opera is ON. Hello ... what's this? On the back of the seat in front of us there is a miniature electronic display that translates (in English or German) what the performers are singing. Now that is impressive. As a rule, in an opera, one does not have a clue of what the performers are singing about, unless one knows the opera beforehand. Here the patron is treated to a running dialogue of the performance. Great, but there is a downside ... your head is bobbing up and down ... reading one moment then looking up to see the actual stage performance. This is a true Wagner opera ... five hours long with two intermission breaks to allow the patrons to avail themselves to purchased champagnes, wines and canapés. We pass on this tradition. During the intermissions, we opt to simply walk the inner hallways and admire the architecture. By 10:30 PM the opera is over ... our eyes are glazed over from the dim lights and reading the "subtitles" on the miniature monitors. We exit the Opera house having enjoyed, nonetheless, the performance. We walk slowly to the hotel for Laurentiu to retrieve his bag ... we say our good-byes and reminisce briefly on our 2½ days adventures. I escort Laurentiu to Stephanplatz underground a few blocks away, express my appreciation for him joining us on this leg of the trip and watch as he vanishes down the stairway. Back at the hotel, sleeps welcomes me as the Vienna adventure ends.

In summary ... Vienna is a clean and thoroughly "westernized" city with all the trappings and services one would expect in any major city. It caters to the tourist. The underground is superb ... cheap and a fast way to get around. We never felt unsafe anywhere in the city, including the river walk. Although many of the architectural jewels are holdovers from days long gone, Vienna is a reconstructed city; modern intermingled with the old. Yet, it is worth visiting. Museums require a greater time to explore so perhaps another visit is in the offing.



Saturday morning ... have to catch the train to Prague. Packed our bags the night before so after a leisurely breakfast we took a cab to the Sudbahnhof (South train station). I like to be there early so that I can be certain which train is on what track. Checked and rechecked the timetable and track information and headed to the train. The EuroCity train is modern equipment (left) ... no graffiti as yet. We find our first-class coach compartment, settle in and wait for the 10:30AM departure. A South American couple joined us in the compartment, but neither said a word to the other (a language thing). And the second stage of our journey has begun. Within 30 minutes, passport control for both sides was completed and all we had to do was stare out the window and enjoy the springtime greenery passing by. Train was fast and smooth. EuroCity issues a printed schedule that shows each stop and the time reached. Nice ... we know that Prague-Holesovice will be reached at 2:50PM. The transition from Austria to the Czech Republic was uneventful ... even the scenery was no different.

On time, we reached the Holesovice depot in Prague and disembarked. Within 50 feet we saw a man holding a sign with our name on it. That is the arranged pickup from Maria's, a Prague agency through whom we rented an apartment (right) for our stay in the city. Ten minutes later we were filling out forms at the office and getting all the introductions to Prague. When it was time to pay our rental fee they do something different here. Payment has to be in cash, as in hard US dollars. We handed over a slew of \$50s and \$100s. When we received the receipt we noticed a list of numbers at the bottom. We asked what those numbers were. The agent told us that they record the serial number of every foreign currency received so that in the event of a "dubious" bill they could track down the individual who handed it over. Seems that fraud is prevalent here. Nice to be trusted. We were then driven to our 3rd floor apartment and ushered in. Not exactly a 5-star accommodation but adequate, clean and one city block from the City Center. It was in the Jewish Quarter of Prague. We surveyed our digs, unpacked our bags and waited for the arrival of Sonja, our cousin from Jilcin, about 80 kilometers north of Prague. It was 5PM. Not knowing if and when Sonja would arrive (she was told when and where we would be staying), we decided to leave our apartment and wander outside for a while. As we exited the building (you need a key to enter and leave the building) we were approached by an elderly lady who said the magic words "Ed and Dolores?" It was Sonja ... she arrived with Dagmar, her daughter, only moments before and was unsure of how to contact our apartment and was simply standing there, waiting for something to happen. It was fortuitous that we elected to go downstairs; otherwise she would still be waiting as night set in. The greeting outside was brief before we escorted Sonja and Dagmar upstairs. At this point I must say



that I did not recognize Sonja when she first approached us. I was perhaps only 6 years old when I last saw her in 1945 and, although I had plenty of recent pictures of Sonja, time has a way of fooling one's eyes. After a momentary lapse I clearly saw Sonja's facial features that reflected those of her pictures. A little older, a few added wrinkles, but the smile and the gleam in her eyes said it was Sonja (left). I must also say that the greeting, although it included hugs and kisses, was rather subdued. It's not as if we had no contact with Sonja since 1945 and this meeting was to be emotional and wrenching. We have extensively communicated by letter the last two years and we both felt that we knew each other well, time and distance irrespective. We were delighted and happy to meet in person after these many years, but at our ages (Sonja is 77 and I'm 63) we tend to keep our emotions in check. Anyway, after a short time in the apartment, we again ventured outside, found an outdoor café, ordered some drinks and proceeded to exchange family facts. At this time, I also found time to exchange US dollars for Czech "funny money".

After an hour at the café, Dagmar had to return home to her family (she lives in Prague) so we escorted Sonja back to the apartment where she elected to nap for a while while we went out to find something to eat. Her bus trip was tiring and she wanted to catch up on her rest. We found a decent restaurant, ate a decent Czech meal, gut stung by an overpriced (padded) bill and returned to the apartment by 9PM. Sonja was fast asleep so we did not bother her and instead elected to get some sleep ourselves. By 10PM lights were out ... it was a long day. Welcome to the Czech Republic.

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