

E D I T E D B Y D A N I E L L E S P E R A

Regular Guests

JEWISH PRESENCE
AT THE SEMMERING



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AT THE SEMMERING

Edited by Danielle Spera



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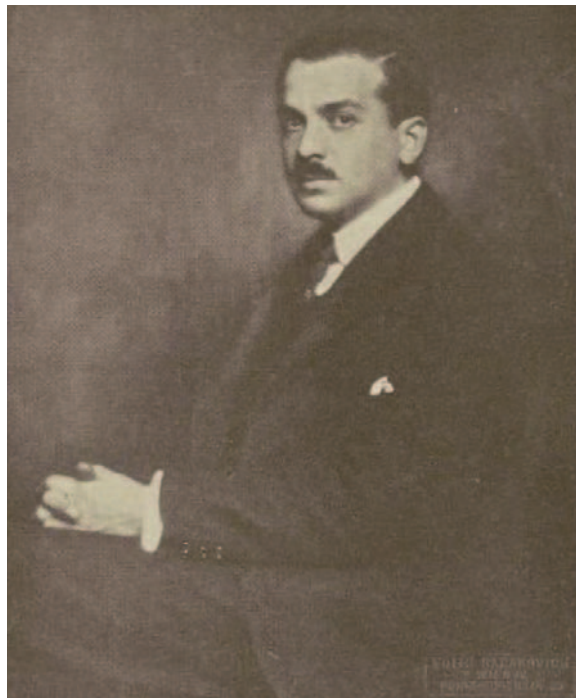
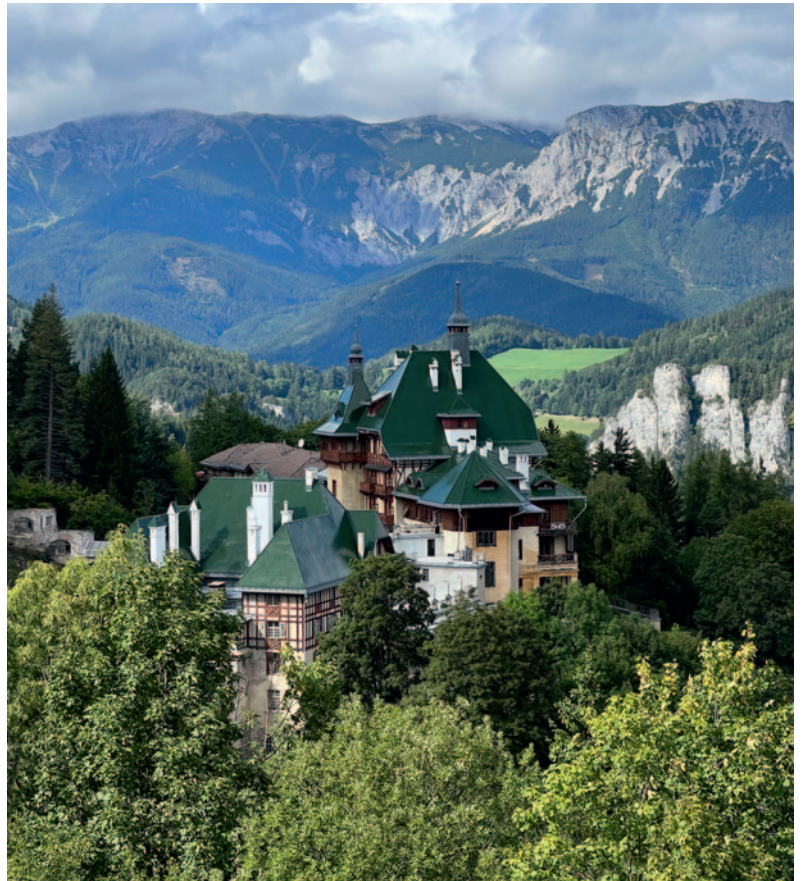
Danielle Spera

«THE SEMMERING IS
NOT A HEALTH
RESORT IN THE
STRICTEST SENSE OF
THE WORD ...»

Ludwig Hirschfeld (1882–1942), the Viennese feuilletonist and cultural journalist for the *Neue Freie Presse*, repeatedly and excellently analyzed the Semmering and its regular guests as one of the keenest observers, as the title of this article, taken from one of the most popular travel guides of the 1920s, shows.¹ What exactly is the Semmering region, where does one define its borders, and what makes the area so attractive? The so-called gateway to the Alps, which was and still is comfortably accessible from Vienna thanks to the construction of the Semmering Railway, extends far beyond the pass at an altitude of around one thousand meters. It is an equally appealing and dramatic landscape that stretches from places in Lower Austria such as Payerbach, Reichenau, Edlach, Gloggnitz, Küb, the town of Semmering itself via Spital to Mürzzuschlag and became a center of attraction for Viennese society in its various forms and eras.

«The Semmering is not a health resort in the strictest sense of the word, but it is a sort of fashionable mountain suburb of Vienna, a place of refuge for all who feel they cannot stand the metropolis any longer. If a Viennese (it is the well-to-do class I am speaking of) has a nervous breakdown, or a troublesome cough, or worries at home or at his office, he rushes off to the Semmering.»² Ludwig Hirschfeld not only described Semmering as a mountain suburb, he praised its advantages in various feature articles and editorials, especially the «genuine, undiluted air,» as he writes in his *Semmeringschwärmerei* (Semmering Rapture).³

Hirschfeld stands pars pro toto for the clientele of the Semmering region, as his fate and that of his family are representative of many of the Semmering's regular Jewish guests. His parents Alexander and Henriette Hirschfeld immigrated from Hungary to the imperial capital Vienna in the middle of the nineteenth century. His father established a successful pearl barley company in Vienna. The Hirschfelds soon became one of Vienna's well-to-do, bourgeois Jewish industrial families. Ludwig abandoned his studies in chemistry in favor of a career as an artist and journalist, and became an important and respected chronicler



Wolfgang Kos
coined the term
«eccentric land-
scape» for the
Semmering. Süd-
bahnhotel, 2022

Ludwig Hirschfeld,
ca. 1921

Thalhof in
Reichenau an der
Rax, 2022



of the everyday life of his time. After his release from Gestapo custody shortly after the National Socialists came to power, he fled to France with his family in 1938, where he was interned and ultimately murdered in Auschwitz.

For a long time, leaving the city as often as possible was a prerogative of the aristocracy. With the construction of the railway, it was also possible for the less-privileged to enjoy a trip to the now not-so-distant countryside. A journey to the Semmering had been an unaffordable and difficult-to-reach luxury before the railway was built, but from 1842 onwards it was possible to take the train from Vienna to Gloggnitz. In 1854, the construction of the world's first Alpine railway was finalized. The opening of the Payerbach train station, with a separate waiting salon for the imperial family, also made the town of Reichenau more accessible. «Pack the suitcase for Reichenau, take the ticket, head out of the gloomy hall,

pleasantly smelling of coal, [...] closer, closer, always closer, the air getting fresher, more mountainous, finally Payerbach. In the horse-drawn carriage to Reichenau, 'Thalhof,'» writes Peter Altenberg, one of the Semmering regulars.⁴

The construction of the Semmering Railway was considered a technical masterpiece, a one-of-a-kind infrastructure project. Never before had a mountain region been made so accessible. Thus, the plan was conceived to develop the town of Semmering into a health and holiday resort. Friedrich Julius Schüller (1823–1894), the general director of the Southern Railway at the time, implemented the idea of building hotels along the railway line. In 1882, the Semmeringhotel was the first to be erected. Planned by railway engineers, it was soberly designed on the outside, but was intended to offer guests every comfort. Today it would be described as an all-inclusive resort. In addition to the sixty rooms, there was a

gambling parlor, a smoking lounge, a ladies' salon, a «post and telegraph office,» a large dining room and utility spaces, an administration building, stables for the horses, coach houses for the carriages and the first automobiles, as well as a laundry. At the turn of the century, the hotel was expanded to become the legendary Südbahnhotel, with more than 350 rooms. The sports facilities of the Südbahnhotel, temporarily made Semmering the most important winter sports resort in Austria. In the interwar period, the architectural team of Emil Hoppe and Otto Schöenthal designed the garage and workshop, gas station, and chauffeur's rooms, as well as the Südbahnhotel's indoor swimming pool.

As the first restaurant tenant, Vinzenz Panhans later became the Südbahnhotel's fiercest competitor with his own hotel, Hotel Panhans, built in 1888. After several expansions by the architects Helmer and Fellner, Hotel Panhans grew into one of the largest hotels in Europe, with 400 rooms.

There, and in the newly erected hotels and health resorts, a new, wealthy clientele found the appropriate backdrop for self-expression. Those who had rank and name in the Austro-Hungarian Empire were there to see—but above all to be seen. The guests belonged to the highest circles of Viennese society, including archdukes and ministers; even the imperial couple was present. Later came the Jewish intellectuals, artists, writers, philosophers, doctors, and athletes who were inspired by the region. The glamorous salons served as meeting places for personalities from Peter Altenberg to Berta Zucker-kandl.

Many authors were stimulated by the unique aura and left behind literary testimonies. The posh health resort of Vienna's fin de siècle was shaped by the regular Jewish guests. Stefan Zweig, Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Gustav Mahler, Franz Werfel, Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Eugenie Schwarzwald, and many others made the Semmering a popular destination. However, they not only frequented the hotels and health resorts, but also, from the moment when Jews were allowed to acquire property, they had the finest architects of the



The Hotel Panhans terrace, 1920s



The Südbahnhotel ballroom, 2023

time build country houses and villas for them. In Vienna, many of them had already made their mark on the city's history with their mansions—now this opportunity was also available in the summer holidays. And if possible, everything was to be arranged the same as in Vienna, as people spent a long time here in the summer, furnished their residences lavishly, and surrounded themselves with the same people as in the city. In the various periods since the Semmering was discovered as a travel area, people moved here in the summer with suitcases full of clothing, often also with staff. While the female family members stayed at the summer resort the whole time, the working gentlemen of the family came on weekends, often with suitcases full of fresh

Rothschild Castle
in Hinterleiten,
2023



apparel. The summer retreat accelerated the transfer of the Viennese lifestyle to various corners of the monarchy.⁵

«Many writers, publishers, and newspaper people came to work and network. The Viennese coffee house discussions, the bridge rounds [...] were able to continue seamlessly here,» writes Wolfgang Kos.⁶ People largely kept to themselves and didn't seek contact with the local population; that hadn't changed over the decades either. Arthur Schnitzler's romantic relationship with the landlady of the *Thalhof*, Olga Waissnix, was an exception (see Georg Markus's contribution).

The *fin de siècle*, the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, marked a period of prosperity for the entire region. Jewish entrepreneurs and artists had villas and country houses built for them by prominent architects. In this way, the Jewish *grande bourgeoisie* also ensured that the Semmering area experienced an enormous boost in investment and development.

The banker Nathaniel Rothschild, for instance, commissioned the French architecture firm *Bauqué* to build a castle-like country estate on his property in the Hinterleiten district of Reichenau. The gas lighting fixtures were to be state-of-the-art. But in 1889, before the work on the interior even began, Rothschild lost interest in the luxurious building. This sat enthroned on a hill and towered over Archduke Carl Ludwig's *Villa Wartholz*, which led to dissatisfaction on the part of the imperial family.⁷ Rothschild decided to dedicate the castle as a convalescent home for patients with lung diseases. This, in turn, provoked protests within the local community, as there were fears that the presence of tuberculosis patients could damage the town's reputation. As a result, the banker changed his mind, dedicating the castle to treat wounded and disabled officers of all religions. During the Second World War, it served as a reserve hospital for the National Socialists and later as a Soviet Army headquarters. Since 1958, the property has been under the administration of the *Vereinigte altösterreichische Militärstiftungen*, a group of non-profit foundations providing social benefits to members of

643	June 1889	Reichenau, ungar. Gebiet der niederröhen Budas. j. 23371	Herzl	geb. in Lemberg	Vater: Jacob Kasanov	Mutter: Saronella geb. Diamant	29. 6. 1860	geb. in Lemberg	Juliana Naschauer	geb. in Lemberg	Vater: Jacob Kasanov	Mutter: Saronella geb. Diamant	29. 6. 1860	geb. in Lemberg	Heiratung: 27. 6. 1889	Stand: 1. Heiratung: 27. 6. 1889	Die Trennung hat: Wien, den 25. 6. 1889
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Entry for the marriage of Theodor Herzl and Julie Naschauer on June 25, 1889 Archive of the Jewish Community of Vienna (IKG Archive), Marriage Register Tempelgasse, Series Number 643/1889

the military and their families, which rents it to the Austrian Army.⁸

For some of the regular guests, the Semmering region became so important that they even tied the knot there. The journalist, author, and founder of Zionism, Theodor Herzl married his fiancée Julie Naschauer on June 25, 1889 at the Rudolfsvilla in Reichenau. According to accounts, Herzl met his future wife at the Thalhof in Reichenau.⁹ The ceremony was recorded in the marriage register of the Leopoldstadt Synagogue.¹⁰ A frequent guest at the Thalhof, Herzl wrote several of his works and diary entries here. Herzl fought passionately for the creation of a Jewish state. His intensive commitment, combined with considerable travel, further impaired his already poor health. Herzl's fate thus remained closely intertwined with Reichenau. He died on July 3, 1904 at the age of forty-four of heart failure during a stay at the Edlach Sanatorium. The health resort was later demolished, and holiday homes occupy this site today. A memorial stone, which looks more like a tombstone, commemorates Theodor Herzl. However, his remains have been resting on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem since 1949. They were transferred there from the Döbling Cemetery in Vienna a year after the founding of the State of Israel, as Herzl had wished.

Families often made sure beforehand that couples got to know each other during their summer vacation. People also observed each other while walking on the Hochweg, today's Hochstrasse. This strolling promenade, also called the *Ringstrasse am Semmering* by Ludwig Hirschfeld, constituted the connection between the two large hotels, the Südbahnhotel and Hotel Panhans. Whoever was out and about with whom always served as a topic of conversation. People also gathered on various occasions—

from New Year's Eve dinners at the turn of the century to the legendary five o'clock tea in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. But the summer retreat or winter stay was not only used as a Jewish marriage market; some guests were perhaps also looking for pleasure and conquest, as Stefan Zweig describes in his novella *Burning Secret*: «One of the new arrivals, a young man who drew admiring glances with his good clothes and the natural ease of his gait, was quick to get ahead of the others by taking a cab to his hotel. [...] The first thing the young man did on reaching the hotel was to look through the list of guests staying there. He was quickly disappointed. Why did I come? he began to



Theodor Herzl, before 1900

ask himself restlessly. Staying up here in the mountains alone, without congenial companions—why, it's worse than being at the office.»¹¹

People liked to gossip about so-called legitimate or illegitimate relationships and not just behind closed doors. Accounts can be found not only in the diaries and letters of the respective protagonists, such as Arthur Schnitzler's aforementioned love for Olga Waissnix. Alma Mahler-Werfel, whose villa became the meeting place for the artists, played a special role at the Semmering. Gustav Mahler, who raved about his hikes in the Semmering area, had selected the property with his father-in-law Carl Moll. Gustav Mahler died in 1911, before the villa was built. Alma Mahler, already married to her second husband Walter Gropius, became pregnant by her lover Franz Werfel. A romantic night with Werfel in Breitenstein in the summer of 1918 led to the premature birth of a son who died a year later. The grand, mostly Jewish writers became regular guests at the Breitenstein villa: Arthur Schnitzler and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, as well as Karola and Ernst Bloch, Elias Canetti, Egon Friedell, Franz Theodor Csokor, Gerhart Hauptmann, Ödön von Horváth, Anton Kuh, Max Reinhardt, Felix Salten, Richard Strauss, Jakob Wassermann, Paul Zsolnay, and Carl Zuckmayer.

Schnitzler's diaries contain numerous entries about Alma Mahler's villa and the atmosphere: «Wonderful house, splendidly located. [...] The fresco above the fireplace, painted by Kokoschka, Alma's former lover (not beautiful, partly interesting, but somehow malicious). Alma plays parts from *Song of the Earth* in the same room; Werfel (her current lover) tries to sing. The child of Gropius (Alma's current husband) listens. All of this seems elemental rather than me-skin, through Alma's appearance and nature.»¹²

Alma Mahler and Franz Werfel married in Vienna in July 1929 and celebrated afterwards in Breitenstein. He fulfilled her wish to leave the Jewish community but rejoined a short time later without his wife's knowledge. Breitenstein provided a refreshing contrast to the hustle and bustle of the metropolis of Vienna, from which Werfel liked to escape, although not uncritically, which he discussed with

Arthur Schnitzler: «Nice evening walk with Werfel to the Kreuzbergwarte. I tell him about my plays [...] He talks about his life up here, especially about the loneliness in the winter, the almost unbearable concentration, the depression... Wonderful landscape.»¹³

The ambience of the wonderful landscape attracted growing attention. A year after his wedding to the aspiring actress Hedwig Kiesler, later Hedy Lamarr (1914–2000), who had become famous for the nude scenes in the film *Ecstasy* in 1933, the weapons manufacturer Fritz Mandl (1900–1977) bought the Fegenberg estate in Schwarzau im Gebirge. The hunting villa originally belonged to the Hoyos family.¹⁴ Mandl, who came from a Jewish family but had no fear of Italy's fascist leader, Benito Mussolini, or the head of the paramilitary *Heimwehr* (Home Guard), Ernst Rüdiger von Starhemberg, not only used the villa as a social meeting spot, but also invited politicians and business partners. «In any case, the host lured the prominent guests not only with his attractive wife, but also with the beauty of the landscape and the stimulating offer of hunting.»¹⁵ In 1938, the Fegenberg estate was expropriated by the National Socialists and given to the State Forest Authority, only to be incorporated into the Forest Office of the German Reich in 1941. Brutal crimes took place in Schwarzau and Reichenau in the final days of the Second World War. Informers from the two towns betrayed alleged dissidents, deserters, and Jews to the National Socialists, who publicly executed them. The Fegenberg estate was returned to Fritz Mandl in 1956 and remained in the family's possession until a few years ago.

The quiet and seclusion, in combination with the climatically favorable location, also ensured that the Semmering became a popular health resort. Jewish doctors practiced there, and many Jewish guests came to the Kurhaus to relax. Alma Mahler's daughter Anna got to know her future husband Paul Zsolnay better during her convalescence there.

Even after the First World War, regular Jewish guests remained loyal to the Semmering. In the interwar period, summer and winter tourism in the Semmering region experienced its last heyday. The



The actress Hedy Lamarr was an enthusiastic skier, here in Kitzbühel, 1928.

Hakoah hut, built in 1935 at the top of the pass, was an important attraction. The Jewish newspaper *Die Stimme* reported on its opening:

«State Councilor Dr. Desider Friedmann, who did not miss the opportunity to take part in the celebration in person despite his health problems, congratulated Hakoah on its creation on behalf of the Jewish community and expressed his satisfaction that the first Alpine Jewish refuge was opened here. All of us, said State Councilor Dr. Friedmann, are witnesses to a memorable moment. The opening of the Hakoah hut is of great importance not only for Jewish sport, for Jewish tourism in Austria, but for the Jewish community in general. The thousands of people who came to this festival not only expressed their allegiance to Hakoah, but also a commitment to Jewish vigor and Jewish self-care. [...] As soon as Chairman Kohn [Hugo, President of the Hakoah Ski and Tourism Section] had finished his speech, the Semmering band started playing the 'Tikvah.' To the sound of the Jewish anthem, the blue and white flag was raised and the Zionist flag fluttered in the autumn sunshine

from the roof peak of the Hakoah mountain hut.»¹⁶ However, the Hakoah athletes were not able to enjoy their refuge at the Semmering for long. After several attacks on the hut, it was confiscated by the Gestapo in 1938.

One of the numerous Jewish athletes who laid the foundation for an outstanding career in the Semmering area was Paula Kann (1922–2001). The Vienna-born Jewish woman learned to ski in Gloggnitz, where her parents owned a house. The future Hakoah member won several ski races in her childhood, completing her first in Payerbach when she was six. From a language trip to England in early 1938, she did not return to Austria due to the highly dangerous developments for Jews. With her father, the lawyer Leo Kann, she fled to the USA in 1940. After training as a ski instructor, Paula Kann (married name Kann Valar) worked at a ski school in New Hampshire. Shortly thereafter she competed for the US ski team, among other championships, at the Winter Olympics in St. Moritz in 1948. As the head of a ski school and as a ski instructor, she remained forever connected

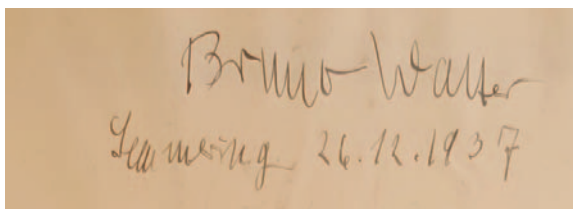


Paula Kann at Mount Cranmore, wearing the official overcoat of the 1948 U.S. Olympic team

to the sport she had learned at the Semmering. In 1970, Paula Kann Valar was inducted into the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame.¹⁷

The dark side of the supposedly idyllic mountain region around the Semmering became apparent early on. Animosity against the Jewish guests and residents was stirred up in newspapers and magazines, and reprisals and attacks became more and more frequent. The renowned conductor Bruno

Autograph of the famous conductor Bruno Walter in the Semmering station chronicle from December 26, 1937



Walter always rested for several weeks at the end of the summer at the Semmering after his guest appearances at the Salzburg Festival.¹⁸ Walter emigrated from Germany to Austria in 1933 and spent time at the Semmering shortly before Austria's annexation to the German Reich («Anschluss»), as the record book of Semmering train station proves. The author of this book was Heinrich Tschakert, the Semmering station dispatcher back then. He must have been an enthusiastic collector of autographs. After 1938, the yearbook increasingly became a propaganda publication and a glorification of war.¹⁹

From the early 1930s, Jews were more forcefully pushed out of resorts; the turning point of 1938 put an end to this culture. In addition to numerous other exclusionary regulations, such as the ban on entering parks or bathing establishments, the antisemitic agitation against Jewish summer visitors after the «Anschluss»—starting in Salzburg—also led to the enactment of a «ban on traditional costumes for Jews» by the municipal administrations in many areas.²⁰ The region was quickly declared *judenrein* («free of Jews») and the Südbahnhotel was used by the German Wehrmacht as a military hospital. Hotel Panhans became the property of the *Gauwerke Niederdonau AG* (Gau Works Lower Danube Stock Company), which was greeted with jubilation in the National Socialist press (see Oliver Rathkolb's contribution).

Austria's annexation to the German Reich and the expulsion and murder of the former guests sealed the demise of the region. The Jewish houses were confiscated, looted, or occupied. A third of the villas were «Aryanized.» For the vast majority of Semmering guests, it was the first time that being Jewish played a role. Very few were religious, and many were baptized. Two examples illustrate the fate of the villa owners and their properties:

In 1928, the cabaret artist Karl Farkas bought a villa in Edlach-Dörfl that had been built in 1906. He and his wife Anny spent all their free time there—not just in the summer, but every weekend when possible as well. Farkas wrote many of his legendary sketches there. Immediately after the «Anschluss» the villa was

«Aryanized.» Farkas fled to the US and had to leave his wife and disabled son behind. After his return, he fought for the restitution of his house in Dörfel, which he achieved three years later (see Georg Markus's contribution).

The family's villa in Hinterleiten, near Rothschild Castle, was also expropriated. The Hacker family operated a respected handcrafted silverware factory, which, among other things, owned the prestigious building at Operngasse 2 in Vienna, opposite the State Opera. Moritz Hacker, the company's founder, died in 1932; his widow and one son were murdered at the Theresienstadt concentration



camp. The sons Cornel and Erwin managed to escape. Cornel Hacker fled to California with his sons Hans and Friedrich. After the Second World War, Hans Hacker fought unsuccessfully for ownership of the Operngasse building for years. The house at the Semmering was returned to the family after long efforts (see the interview on page 54).

Once a place of relaxation and retreat for the famous cabaret artist Karl Farkas and his wife Anny, 2022

Like the Hacker family, most of the former owners of villas and houses at the Semmering and in the surrounding area endured the same process. They only got their houses back with great effort and after a long struggle, mostly in a devastated condition and without furnishings.

Otto Schenk, the great director and actor, is familiar with the Semmering region before and after the Second World War. After the war he owned an apartment in the area for several decades. As a child, he and his father often visited the villa of aunt Minna and uncle Marcel in Breitenstein. «Uncle Marcel died,

Antisemitic cartoon about the «ban on traditional costumes for Jews,» announcement in the SS newspaper *Das Schwarze Korps*. *Völkischer Beobachter*, June 30, 1938, 12



House of the
Hacker family in
Hinterleiten,
2023

then they wanted to take the house away from my aunt, but a Jew can't do more than die.» As the son of a baptized Jewish father, it wasn't easy for Otto Schenk to leave the city after the National Socialists seized power. Protected by his parents' «mixed marriage,» he was placed in Hilde Keune's children's home in the summer. Before it was confiscated by the National Socialists, the house with the former address Semmering 134 belonged to the Jewish doctor Dr. Gertrud Hollitscher. «It was just an imitation of Nazi homes. Mostly we sang and recited poems, but nothing political. The ambition was mainly for us to gain weight. And we marched all over the Rax. I have weirdly beautiful memories,» recalls Otto Schenk.²¹ For Gertrud Hollitscher, however, it was deadly serious. With a lot of luck she was able to escape to England. Her sister, Dr. Anna Winiewicz, and her sister's husband, Karl Winiewicz, were murdered in Auschwitz; her brother, Dr. Albert Hollitscher, was deported from Italy to a concentration camp, where he died in 1943.

After the end of the war, the region itself was only able to build upon its previous success to a re-

duced extent. From the 1950s onwards, Jewish families traveled to the Semmering again. Many were concentration camp survivors or displaced persons who had found a new home in Austria and discovered the summer resort with their children. The Semmering became their local mountain, where one also enjoyed taking a day trip in the winter, as Chief Rabbi Paul Chaim Eisenberg mentions.

Kosher guesthouses and hotels were opened and received many guests. One example is Pension Alexander, located directly on Hochstrasse. The house, which was to become the meeting point for Orthodox Jews at the Semmering, was operated by Josef Vorhand and his family, who also ran the legendary kosher restaurant Weihburg in Vienna. The guesthouse hosted worship services, particularly on Shabbat. During the Jewish holidays, especially Passover (the holiday that commemorates the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, on which special dietary laws apply), many families ate their meals in the Vorhand family guesthouse. The kosher infrastructure was completed by a mikveh (ritual immersion bath). The house on Wellspacherstrasse, in which the mikveh was operated, belonged for a long time to the Azei Chaim association, based in Vienna-Leopoldstadt, which supports Jewish refugees.



Otto Schenk and his childhood friend Christl
in front of the Südbahnhotel, 1937

Margit Dobronyi (1913–2009), who fled communist Hungary in 1956, had established herself as an unsolicited photographic chronicler of Viennese Jewish community life since 1960. She appeared, uninvited, at all the parties and took photographs. Numerous journeys also took her to the Semmering, where she documented the Jewish guests on summer and winter vacations.

The Hakoah hut was also revived and quickly became a year-round center for Jewish youth. Sports was the main focus, but beyond that, the hut became a popular meeting spot for many young people, where strict rules were not taken so seriously and girls and boys could get closer to each other. The Hakoah hut was a forbidden zone for well-protected Jewish girls. Concerned parents did not allow a trip there.

The fact that the hut was returned to Hakoah immediately after the war «was not a matter of course,» stresses current Hakoah President Paul Haber in an interview with the Jewish magazine *NU*. Haber also attributes the return to a certain amount of support from the Russian occupying forces: «The Hakoah was a gathering place for Jews who had survived in Vienna or who had returned to Vienna. One didn't have much, one didn't need much. The food came from CARE packages and local farmers. Apart from polenta, there was almost only polenta.» Under the roof there was a large room with bunk beds; on the first floor there were several rooms with up to six single beds. Although boys and girls were strictly separated from each other in the hut, it provided «a good opportunity to get to know each other better,» President Haber remembers.²²

Kitty and Erich Sinai, for example, met at the Hakoah hut and remained together until Erich's death in 2012. They were a couple for sixty-five years, married for sixty-two of them. Kitty Sinai points out the importance of the athletes' refuge: «We were a lot of young people; we have experienced terrible things. And we tried to recover physically and mentally.»²³ The group of young athletes, who all shared a similar family history, managed to do this together—an impression confirmed by many of the interview



partners who were regular guests at the Hakoah hut and shared their memories in this book.

With the dwindling significance of the Semmering as a holiday region, the Hakoah hut also faded out of the focus of interest and was ultimately sold in 1978. Cathy Fiscus was occasionally allowed to visit the Hakoah hut. Her father Emanuel (1900–1984), a journalist and publisher of various newspapers and magazines, vigorously advocated for the restitution of Jewish property and denounced the antisemitism that existed after the end of the Second World War.

Paul Chaim Eisenberg, Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Community of Vienna from 1983 to 2016, Semmering, 1980s



Moti Vorhand, son of the kosher caterer Josef Vorhand, in front of Pension Alexander, 1970s

During the month-long summer vacation at Hotel Panhans, the trip to the hut was a welcome diversion. In the tradition of her father, who recorded his memories in diaries and photos, Cathy Fiscus also kept an album as well as hotel bills from her Semmering stays over the decades.

On the Styrian side of the pass, in Spital am Semmering, Agudat Israel, a Hasidic Orthodox Jewish movement, ran a holiday resort in the 1930s where up to three hundred young people could spend their vacations, with religious education being the primary focus. «The spirit that prevails in the holiday resort cannot be described; one has to see it, recognize it

and experience it. It is the spirit of sincere friendship and camaraderie, without distinction of age, knowledge, or economic circumstances. The spirit of upright paternal faith [...] which inspires individuals and the whole. And the hardly imagined possibilities that arise in such a home to educate the children agudistically [in the sense of traditional orthodoxy], are diligently exploited.»²⁴

Weight gain was also an issue at the home. The motherly, caring cook, Mrs. Leipnik, was spotlighted in a newspaper article from 1935 and proudly reported that some of the young holiday guests had gained as much as six kilos.

Spital am Semmering has experienced a different social development over the course of history. The top of the pass on Semmering formed a border—not only between Styria and Lower Austria, but also between worlds, says Angelika Horowitz, who grew up in Spital am Semmering in the early 1970s: «The world of the workers begins here; the upper middle class was there. One couldn't do anything with this world. My father was the Jewish community leader of Spital. When I was a child, he took me to the Südbahnhotel, to this wonderful swimming pool. That was my first memory, also of the smell of the old



Photographer Margit Dobronyi in front of Hotel Panhans, ca. 1960

wooden cabins and the cots; that was beautiful. Later I was allowed to recite poems at the top of the pass when high-ranking politicians, such as President Rudolf Kirchschläger, drove over the Semmering. Then there was a schnapps for everyone.»²⁵

In any case, the pathway to the Semmering took place in stages: from the private quarters in Edlach to the bed and breakfast in Reichenau, and if one stayed at a hotel in Semmering-Kurort, one had climbed to the summit. Nevertheless, the memories from all these stations always remained vivid. Amelia Bernstein (née Schamrak, 1920–2011), who was able to escape from Vienna as an eighteen-year-old Jewish girl and build a new life in the USA, never forgot her trips to the Semmering region. Fifty-two years after her escape from Austria, the daughter of the textile merchant Abraham Schamrak recalled her impressions in an essay entitled «A Magical Place, Still There» in the *International Herald Tribune*: «I can still see this place whenever I think of it, its tranquil beauty, the green meadow with its wildflowers, the woods across from the farm, the scent of the pine trees and the fragrant aroma of the cyclamen. The clear, cool air in the foothills of the Schneeberg. Nothing has diminished in my memory.»²⁶

In the 1970s, new types of summer tourism took hold. Holidays on the Adriatic and, later, more distant



Paul Haber in a white Norwegian sweater, 1964

destinations became popular. Regular guests no longer drove to the Semmering but passed it on the way south. The hotels were gradually shut down. The remnants of the magnificent buildings still stand today as a symbol of a modern and artistically inspiring era.

«Jewishness is part of the DNA of this region, but it remains in an intangible past,» analyzes Wolfgang Kos.²⁷ As a representative of the broad artistic work that emerged in and around Semmering, I would like to end with a quote from Karl Kraus that perfectly conveys the mood:



Georg and Cathy Fiscus at the Semmering train station, 1953

Blanka, Rita, Cathy, and Georg Fiscus, Semmering, 1952

Jewish Orthodox
men strolling on
the Hochweg,
1980s



«Alpenglow in the Semmering area. As always, the focal point of the colorful hustle and bustle was the terrace of the Südbahnhotel, where young and old, big and small, gathered to enjoy the magnificent mountain scenery—the view of the Rax, Schneeberg, and Sonnewendstein. The evening ended with a magnificent mountain illumination that only nature can create. The Semmering faithful remained together for a long time in quiet contemplation ...»²⁸

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