

## Viennese Jewish Spaces 1880–1930: A Relational Approach<sup>1</sup>

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In his autobiography entitled *Vienna Childhood Memoirs* and written in English in the author's 70s in New York, Hans Stein<sup>2</sup> expressed vividly walks in the neighborhood of Vienna's 19<sup>th</sup> district, Döbling.

"A few minutes from our home was a park, the Turkenschantz Park. Located on a hill, we had to take Peter Jordan Street and walk uphill. [...] When we did not go to the park with Fräulein Bertha [the *Kindermädchen* of the family], we walked in the neighborhood. The cottage section was one of the favorite places because this part of town consisted of wealthy homes with fences surrounding the properties. [...] It took about an hour to walk to the Donau Kanal, a branch of the Danube. What a treat to see the water, the boats and to walk across bridges! [...] The Hohe Warte section of Vienna was another favorite destination. There were beautiful homes similar to the Cottage section. [...] The soccer stadium on the Hohe Warte later on became a favorite place when I was in high school."<sup>3</sup>

### Encounters in everyday life – a spatial approach

Around 1900, Vienna's second district, Leopoldstadt, was renowned as "Jewish quarter" far beyond the city's borders. It was not only home to the northern railway station, which connected the capital of the Habsburg empire with its eastern provinces and was thus the first port of call for Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe, but also home to many synagogues and Jewish institutions. It was this—the historical settlement area of the Jewish community in early modern times—plus the fact that at the turn of the 20th century many Jews continued to live in the area, that earned the district the name Mazzesinsel.<sup>4</sup>

By no means, however, were Jews the only ones living in Leopoldstadt. Counting around 3,000 houses, the district was the most densely populated part of the city for both Jews and non-Jews. In the apartment buildings, people shared sanitary facilities and usually also the dormitories because bed lodgers were widespread in the Habsburg metropolis (20 percent of the population). In wealthier households, Jewish and non-Jewish domestic servants worked and lived their daily lives with the families for whom they worked. Jews and non-Jews regularly met in the streets. In the neighboring parks, leisure time was spent side by side. What is more, Jews did not live exclusively in Leopoldstadt, but also in the other districts. Although a

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<sup>2</sup> Gideon Hans Stein was born on 17 May 1918, the son of Dr Wilhelm Stein, a secondary school teacher in Vienna. Hans Stein studied philology at the University of Vienna until the summer of 1938. In 1939, he emigrated to the United States, where he later continued his studies at Columbia University and became a professor at a college. 'Gideon Hans Stein (später Stewart)', Gedenkbuch der Universität Wien, <https://gedenkbuch.univie.ac.at>, accessed 7 February 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Stein, *Vienna Childhood Memoirs*, pp. 1–2, Leo Baeck Institute New York (LBI), Austrian Heritage Collection, ME 1180.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Beckermann, *Die Mazzesinsel: Juden in der Leopoldstadt 1918–1938*, Vienna 1992.

different narrative has long prevailed in research, Jews shared neighborhoods and even living spaces throughout Vienna.<sup>5</sup>

Reading Hans Stein's memoir, it becomes apparent that everyday life means movement and passing time in public spaces. The FWF funded research project *New Approaches to the History of the Jews in Vienna*<sup>6</sup> drew on this observation and asked how contacts made in everyday encounters affected Jewish-non-Jewish relations. Sites of Jewish/non-Jewish encounters such as the Prater, train stations and train journeys, various leisure facilities such as vaudeville and the theater or the immediate living and social environment played thus a vital role in the project. Because contacts at sites such as these left not much paper trail, scholars tend to argue that these sites serve as proof of the social divide between Jews and non-Jews. But given the fact, for example, that the population of Vienna around 1900 communicated via postcards, which made the city to empty the mailboxes 18 times a day, people could not help but face encounters while performing their daily routines.<sup>7</sup> What is more, according to the dominant narrative Jews lived pre-dominantly, almost exclusively, in the "Jewish neighborhoods", and Jews not only lived there, but also lived there separated from non-Jews:

"The Vienna Jews lived with other Jews. The creation of Jewish neighbourhoods in the city served to separate Jews from gentiles and install more deeply the perception[...] that Jews formed a distinct group. Within their neighbourhoods, Jews came into contact chiefly with other Jews. Their residential concentration thus hindered them from forming friendships and other intimate relationships with non-Jews."<sup>8</sup>

Yet, these days, there are a bulk of new sources and digital methods available and, in the course of my research, I found that this was not the case. I argue that Vienna provided its Jewish and non-Jewish inhabitants with numerous opportunities to face daily encounters—not only in public, but also, in private spaces.

In this paper, I scrutinize the exclusivity of "Jewish" and "non-Jewish" districts by examining two examples of a residential building in Vienna 1880–1930, one, Hans Stein's, portraying the 19<sup>th</sup> district Döbling, while the other depicts memories of the 2<sup>nd</sup> district, Leopoldstadt. Using a micro-historical approach, I reconstruct the residents and their neighborhood from a variety of sources (oral history interviews, autobiographies, address books, newspapers, registration card index). I will present how Jews and non-Jews developed a sense of community through various habitual activities and a strong identification with the larger space. In doing so, I demonstrate that microhistory and spatial considerations can be productively combined to gain new insights into Jewish–non-Jewish relations in private and public spaces.

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<sup>5</sup> Susanne Korbel, "Spaces of Gendered Jewish and Non-Jewish Encounters: Bed Lodgers, Domestic Workers, and Sex Workers in Vienna, 1900–1930," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* (2020): 1–17.

<sup>6</sup> FWF grant P31036-G28.

<sup>7</sup> Joachim Bürgschwentner, "War Relief, Patriotism and Art: The State-Run Production of Picture Postcards in Austria 1914–1918", *Austrian Studies* 21 (2013): 99-120, 102.

<sup>8</sup> Marsha Rozenblit, *The Jews of Vienna, 1867–1914: Assimilation and Identity*, New York 1983, 126–131.

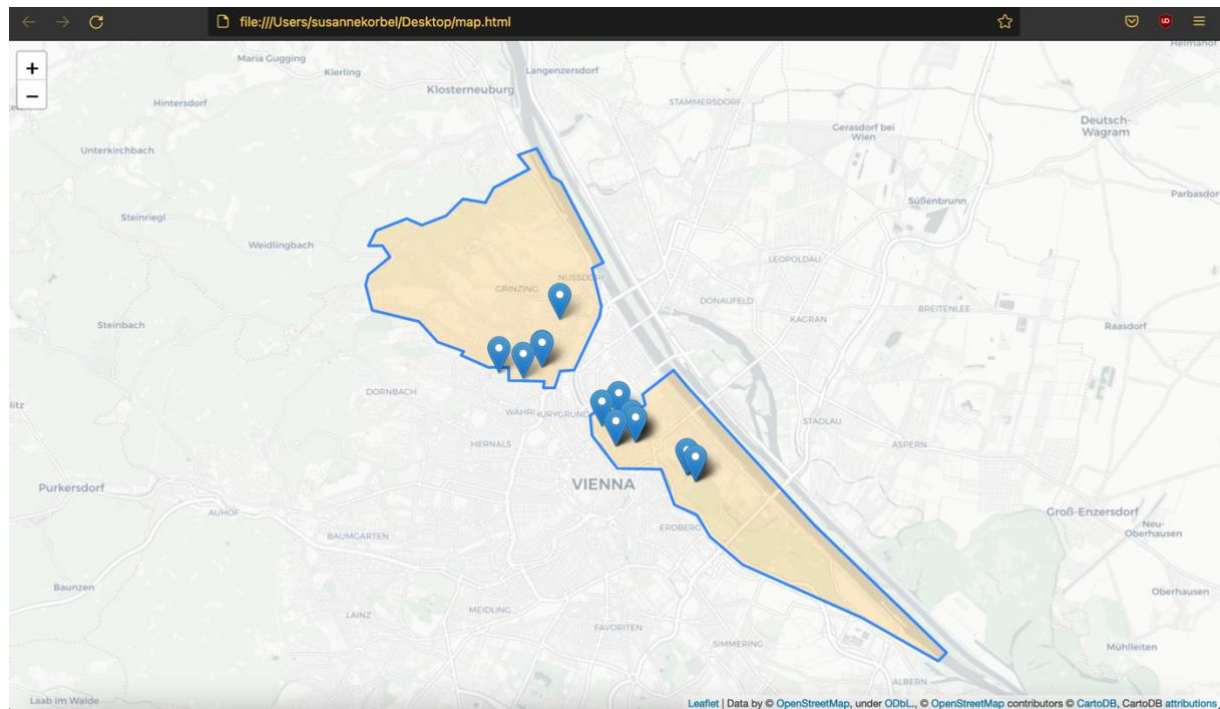


Fig.1 spatial deep map analysis by Susanne Korbel<sup>9</sup>

### Spatial analysis beyond a Jewish/non-Jewish divide

I wish to begin by presenting an example of how an alleged “non-Jewish” neighborhood, Döbling, was recalled and how housing was portrayed as a space for Jewish/non-Jewish relations in a memoir. Hans Stein, whom I quoted at the beginning, not only reflected on the neighborhood he grew up in, but also on the apartment building they lived in and the neighbors, some of whom became friends of the Stein family:

“Our family lived on the second floor of a three-storey apartment house in Hardtgasse 6 in the nineteenth district [Döbling] in the city of Vienna. The most important person in the house was the caretaker, a she: Frau Englisch. She lived on the first floor; everyone who entered the house had to pass her door. [...] Frau Barnas and her family lived on our floor. She had a son about my age. A decent person, she was friendly to us. I remember very little of the Barnas family except that Hans Barnas, the son, tried to play the piano although his efforts sounded rather futile. [...] Mr and Mrs Heller, a retired old Jewish couple, lived on the floor below. They were Jewish, but we did not have any contact with them. Next to them lived Frau Petersilka and her boyfriend, a dental technician, who in his spare time tried to be a dentist. My sister and I were treated—badly.”<sup>10</sup>

Stein’s memoir emphasizes not only that he and his family lived among Jews and non-Jews alike, but also that Jews shared daily interactions with their non-Jewish neighbors in the

<sup>9</sup> Part of the project is the recording of daily contacts in deep maps. For this presentation, two examples were selected from a large number. The interactive deep maps are programmed in Python using the libraries folium and geopandas. The maps are based on the open source *openstreetmap*. The maps created in the FWF project are open available as github repository.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Stein, *Vienna Childhood Memoirs*, pp. 1–2, Leo Baeck Institute New York (LBI), Austrian Heritage Collection, ME 1180.

spaces surrounding their private homes.<sup>11</sup>

Vilma Neuwirth (born Kühnberg) emphasises at various points in her memoir entitled *Glockengasse 29* that there was intensive contact among the residents of the apartment house in the second district, Leopoldstadt.

"We had such a warm atmosphere in the corridor that everyone knew everything about each other. In summer, when it was extremely hot, it became especially cozy. The women appeared at the gangway with a bucket or bowl and an armchair. They filled the respective vessels with water and sat down, having their feet in the cool water, in front of the windows belonging to their apartments. Everyone had their coffee mug with *Zichorienkaffee* (chicory coffee; a coffee substitute). They would sit there for hours, gossiping and joking."<sup>12</sup>

According to Neuwirth's memories, most of the families lived not so much in their flats but, rather, in the whole building:

"Mr. and Mrs. Högenwarth, who were my father's customers, also lived on our floor. We had a particularly good neighborly relationship with them. [...] The doors of the apartments were not locked; you came and went to your neighbors as you pleased."<sup>13</sup>

The apartment building in which Vilma Neuwirth grew up was located in the very heart of the Leopoldstadt. Just two blocks away from the southeast end of the Augarten, a large public park area, and a five-minute walk to the Prater, the place where people spent their leisure time, the Kühnberg family lived in a neighborhood full of shops, coffeehouses, theaters, as well as religious sites. Just across their block, the Taborstraße—one of the city's most famous vaudeville areas—was located. Also, the Leopoldstatter Tempel, the largest synagogue of Vienna, was only a ten-minute walk away. Many Catholic churches and smaller Jewish *Bethäuser* (prayer rooms) were found on or across the street. And, literally just a few doors down the block, there was the famous Varieté Reklame, a cinema and vaudeville that hosted the most popular performances of the time.<sup>14</sup>

It was there, at Glockenstraße 29, that Vilma Kühnberg grew up in a Jewish-Catholic family. Her father had immigrated to Vienna from Budapest, the second residential city of the Empire, with three children from his first marriage. It was there that he and Vilma's mother, who had immigrated to Vienna as a domestic worker from a rural area in Lower Austria, met. Only a

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<sup>11</sup> For other memoirs in which close relations between authors' families and maids are mentioned, see Ulrich Furst (1913–?), *Windows to My Youth*, p. 43, LBI, Memoir Collection, ME 902; Toni Stolper (1890–1988), *Recorded Memories*, p. 8 and pp. 20–21, LBI, Memoir Collection, ME 390.

<sup>12</sup> Vilma Neuwirth, *Glockengasse 29*, Vienna 2008), 23: „Bei uns am Gang ging es so familiär zu, dass jeder von jedem alles wusste. Im Sommer, wenn es sehr heiß war, wurde es besonders gemütlich. Die Frauen erschienen mit einem Kübel oder Schaffel und einem Sessel am Gang. Sie füllten die jeweiligen Gefäße mit Wasser und setzten sich, die Füße im kühlen Nass, vor die zu ihren Wohnungen gehörenden Fenster. Jede hatte ihr Kaffeehäfärl mit Zichorienkaffee vor sich. Dort blieben sie stundenlang sitzen und tratschten und führten Schmäh.“

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 24: „Auch Herr und Frau Högenwarth, sie waren Kunden meines Vaters, wohnten auf unserem Stockwerk. Zu ihnen hatten wir ein besonders gutes nachbarschaftliches Verhältnis. [...] Es gab keine versperrten Wohnungstüren, man kam und ging zu den Nachbarn, wie es einem eben gerade einfiel.“

<sup>14</sup> On the duality of popular and religious culture in Vienna's Leopoldstadt, see Susanne Korbel, *Auf die Tour! Jüdinnen und Juden in Singspielhalle, Varieté und Kabarett. Zwischen Habsburgermonarchie und Amerika*, Vienna 2021, 62–67.

few years later, the working-class couple had eight children to care for. Vilma's father, Joseph Kühnberg (1888–1942), was a hairdresser with his own business, and her mother, Maria Kühnberg (born Böhm 1892), took care of the eight children and of her parents-in-law.

But how did the Kühnberg family of 10 lived there? Vilma's family settled in a typical *Zimmer, Küche, Kabinett* (a room, kitchen, and connecting room that constituted many Viennese apartments at the time) apartment. Vilma, her seven siblings, her mother, and her father all lived there. This means that the family of 10 shared an apartment of fifty square meters, which included two toilet areas (with no running water) separated within these rooms. And still, this was a more comfortable living situation than the previous generation had been exposed to. Since a massive growth of its population transformed Vienna into a metropolis of more than two million inhabitants, the vast majority of people had to share housing with their fellow citizens. This led to as much as twenty percent of the population ending up as *Bettgeher* (bed lodgers, or people who could not even afford to rent a shared room and had to pay for a bed only to sleep in).<sup>15</sup> This means, that up until the 1930s, one fifth of Vienna's inhabitants shared the alleged most intimate atmosphere of a home with an average of six up to ten other non-family members. Accordingly, there existed plenty opportunities for Jewish/non-Jewish relations to emerge in private spaces.

The building at Glockengasse 29 had three floors. On the ground floor was Vilma father's hairdressing salon and a grocery. On the first and second floors, there were five residential units each; under the roof, on the third floor, there were two residential units. The apartments were oriented to the street and the courtyard. The corridor was arbor-like and led outside to the entrances of the apartments.

Who were the residents of Glockengasse 29 and of Hardtgasse 6? Starting from the memoir of Vilma Kühnberg, I have included other sources (first the address book, then the *Melderegister*) to reconstruct who the inhabitants of the house were at the time when the Kühnberg family lived there. The grocery next to father Kühnberg's salon was run by the Bergkirchner family. On the first floor, the Vanetscheks and the Häuslers, a non-Jewish and a Jewish family, had their apartments. There were three more apartments. On the second floor—this is where the Kühnbergs lived—resided Mr. and Ms. Högenwarh, the Novotny family, and a coffeehouse owner named Ms. Kemper. As Neuwirth wrote:

“There were five apartments on the second floor. Besides us, two other Jewish and two Catholic families lived there.”

Under the roof, Hirsch David and his wife and a non-Jewish family had their apartments. At Hardtgasse 6 in Döbling, the residents passed a shoe store and a store for small machines on the way to their apartments. On the first floor, the non-Jewish janitor Mrs. English lived, next to family Petersilka and the Heller family. On the same floor as the Stein family lived the Barnas family. The better-off Steins inhabited a four-room apartment, together with a domestic and the nanny, who had their own room in the center of the apartment.

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<sup>15</sup> Between 1890 and 1930, Vienna's population increased threefold. In 1880, approximately 730,000 people lived in Vienna. In 1890, the population had crossed the one million threshold, with 1.1 million people settled there, and by the turn of the century it had 1.6 million inhabitants. By 1910, the population had again increased by a quarter, with two million people, including 175,000 Jews, living in the metropolis. Ivar Oxaal, 'Die Juden im Wien des jungen Hitler. Historische und soziologische Aspekte', in Gerhard Botz, Ivar Oxaal, Michael Pollak and Nina Scholz (eds), *Eine zerstörte Kultur. Jüdisches Leben und Antisemitismus in Wien seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*, Vienna 2002, 47–66 and 50–51.

### **Spaces of encounters between Jews and non-Jews – a relational approach**

I suggest approaching the housing spaces as shared spaces. The research group of the New York Tenement Museum stated that focusing especially on encounters between neighbors is most important when it came to interactions, getting acquainted with living conditions and forming relationships. Because, as they learned from testimonies, staircases, entrance areas, but also rooms within inner flats were open to the other inhabitants of a building and the spaces surrounding the inhabitants' living rooms functioned as zones of active engagement with their fellow inhabitants.<sup>16</sup> Notions of shared spaces are common in the memoirs of Vienna's Jewish population as well. In addition, their memoirs reveal that they paid particular attention to these contact zones in or near their homes.

A second important aspect of the daily encounters between Jews and non-Jews in the private sphere is that they seem to have been less characterized by antisemitism in a first instance. Within their private spaces most people were indifferent to antisemitism. Klaus Hödl found evidence that Jewishness did not matter when deciding whether or not a person would be allowed to rent a bed. Instead, people tended to draw attention to the former experiences, relationships, and meaningful contacts which they shared with applicants.<sup>17</sup> In the context of everyday life, people acted with 'indifference' towards their peers. Individual activities suggest that behavior necessary for daily routines or to earn a living may have diverged in some cases from the articulation of debates that shaped public opinion.

### **Conclusions**

What was life like outside Glockengasse 29? Which places and spaces did the Kühnbergs frequented regularly in the course of everyday live? Vilma Kühnberg remembers that she lived almost in the streets: "For us, the Prater Hauptallee was actually our extended kids' room."<sup>18</sup> They would all go shopping to the nearby Karmelitermarkt; she and her sister often followed their elderly brothers to play soccer at the Konstantinhügel in the Prater; and they went to school a few meters down to Blumauergasse. In the afternoons, she, her sister, and up to 12 other Jewish and non-Jewish children from the same street would play outside. "We were a group of 12 to 14 ragamuffin who had nothing else on their minds but to cook up new pranks all the time."<sup>19</sup>

As also indicated with the quote at the beginning, this praxis of frequent movement outside one's home inevitably involved meeting people. For the children, sometimes this ended well, while at other times it ended with getting into trouble, depending on how their pranks were perceived. In any case, the everyday life of adults and children did not take place in isolation. Yet, moving a few years forward in Vilma Kühnberg's autobiography, less idyllic memories are revealed. As in many other autobiographies that report on life in the interwar period, it very quickly becomes apparent what drastic changes the seizure of power by the National Socialists

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<sup>16</sup> 'Bowery Boy', Episode 246, 17 December 2017; shared spaces occur at around 8:40.

<sup>17</sup> Klaus Hödl, 'Interaction and Meaningful Contact', in Tim Corbett, Klaus Hödl, Caroline Kita, Susanne Korbel, and Dirk Rupnow, 'Migration, Interaction, and Assimilation: Reassessing Key Concepts in (Jewish) Austrian History', in *Journal of Austrian Studies*, 53, no. 2 (2020), 1–28.

<sup>18</sup> Neuwirth, Glockengasse 43.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 14.

brought to Jewish–non-Jewish relations, which until then had been perceived as continuous and thoroughly positive. Concerning the very next-door neighbors of the Kühnbergs, Vilma wrote in her memoir: “Mr. and Mrs. Högenwarth, with whom we had lived together in best harmony for years, became mortal enemies overnight in 1938.”<sup>20</sup> Or: “The Vanitscheks also made our lives hell during the Hitler years.” And concerning her friends: “Our friends, whom we had known since we were little children and with whom we were together every day, insulted us in the meanest way.”<sup>21</sup>

This finding concerning the transformation of Jewish–non-Jewish relations under National Socialism is, of course, not a new one. Why, then, should the spatial homogeneity of Jewish neighborhoods be questioned at all?

First, it demonstrates that conventional interpretations of antisemitism are somewhat outdated and need to be expanded. In studies of the process of Jews acquiring bourgeois equality, it has been highlighted that it was the exclusion of the Jewish population from associations from the turn of the century onward that nourished the increasing radicalization of antisemitism in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, since it resulted in less contact between Jews and non-Jews. Looking at the housing conditions of the working class or the bed lodgers, who were plagued by even greater poverty, however, a narrative of isolation—either for Jewish or non-Jewish neighborhoods—cannot be sustained. A narrative that goes beyond dichotomous explanations can help expand this line of reasoning by questioning the presumption of exclusivity through the perspective of space as a shared space. It is important to ask how it could be that such frequent and positive exchanges did not lead to lasting relationships and how exclusion mechanisms were implemented so radically within a very short time.

Hence, and secondly, an in-depth spatial analysis of shared daily experiences reveals new points of departure for the study of contacts and relations between Jews and non-Jews. Studies interested in space can, thus, expand binary narratives.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 48.