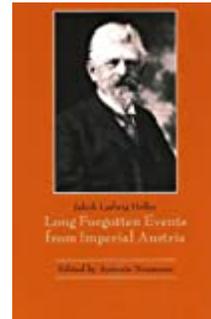


**Jakob Ludwig Heller.** *Long-Forgotten Events from Imperial Austria: Told with Wisdom and Jewish Humor.* Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2005. 295 pp. EUR 26.72 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57241-144-9.



**Charles Sealsfield.** *Austria As It Is: Or Sketches of Continental Courts.* Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2003. xvii + 136 pp. \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57241-111-1.



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## Austrian Odysseys

Journeys are not only geographical but also commemorative endeavors. Jakob Ludwig Heller's (1842-1921) memoirs posit a special journey in time, since the manuscript went on a nearly ninety-year odyssey until its original publication in 2001. In contrast, Charles Sealsfield's travelogue of 1827 reports on a more traditional journey to Austria, focusing on the political and cultural present of the time of narration. Reading these texts together gives rise to a quite contradictory and fascinating image of Austria in the years 1827-1918.

Heller began to write down his family history at the age of seventy-one in 1913; his manuscript came into the hands of his youngest daughter Agnes at his death. Agnes, like her husband, her oldest sister and a brother-in-law, died in Auschwitz in 1944. Agnes' children Antonie (born in 1917) and Otto Neumann (1912-2004) managed to escape to Paris and Sydney, respectively, and for several decades Otto Neumann kept his grandfather's writings in Australia.[1] During a visit to Paris in 1984, he shared the family treasure with his sister, who after many years managed to transcribe, edit and publish the

manuscript. Subsequently, her brother decided to make the book available to an English-speaking audience as well. The siblings sought to “bridge the gap caused by the disappearance of our parents’ generation in Auschwitz” (p. 13), the book at hand provides, along with the family history of the Hellers, a piece of cultural history of nineteenth-century Jewish life and trade in the Austrian Empire.

The book documents the time period from 1842 (the year of Jakob Ludwig Heller’s birth) to 1918, when Heller, who was never a professional writer, abruptly ended his observations. While the first part of the book provides some family background, mainly about his parents and grandparents, the last part takes the form of a diary, commenting on the events of World War I. In the middle of the book, a chapter called “Character Studies” offers further details on some of Heller’s sixty-eight cousins, thoughtfully condensed by the editor.

Heller’s father began as a poor peddler, but eventually established a flourishing business in metal buttons. When Heller was thirteen, his mother died and the boy entered his father’s business. He describes the journeys to trade fairs in Leipzig, Paris and London and how he quickly grew up to become a businessman himself. Literature, art and politics play a minor role in his memoir, which instead focuses on morals, traditions and family values; Heller rhapsodizes about the “good old days” when “children rightly learned to value not only their father, but both of their parents” and “wives [still knew] the value of their husbands’ individual responsibilities” and gave their husbands “the care and attention that they deserve[d]” (p. 129). Ironically, Heller’s own marriage was not very happy, and he eventually left his wife, who “over time ... became so severely hysterical that living with her, and even everyday dealings with her, became extremely difficult” (p. 189). Here and elsewhere, Heller omits his own contributions to the family crisis, presenting his decisions as a result of circumstance rather than choice. Thus it remains unclear why he left his wife after more than thirty years of marriage, especially since he mentions the separation merely to explain a two-year estrangement from his favorite cousin Max (his wife’s brother).

Furthermore, while Heller mentions difficulties that Jews had to endure (for example, a Jew had to purchase property in Dresden if he wanted to open a business there), antisemitism does not feature prominently in his memoirs. The book thus differs substantially in this respect from Stefan Zweig’s *Die Welt von Gestern* (1941)

or Arthur Schnitzler’s *Jugend in Wien* (written between 1915-1920 and published posthumously in 1968). Heller rather focuses on the diligence (possibly the most common word in the text) of family members who managed to establish themselves in society through clever negotiations, endless travel, and a learning-by-doing approach.

Heller’s book is a valuable document of the time, as he provides insights into the organization of business in the nineteenth century from a salesman’s perspective, rather than a literary one. The sometimes quite amusing anecdotes reveal not only how much Heller enjoyed his work and how close he was to his family, but also the ethical values that led to his conformity to public opinion at the outbreak of the First World War. In 1914, Heller witnessed the complete collapse of the religious and ethnic traditions that he had been embracing since his youth, which may have contributed to the writer’s final silence in 1918.

Charles Sealsfield’s (1793-1864) travelogue *Austria As It Is* depicts a very different type of odyssey. This book, originally written in English for a London audience in 1827, provides insights into the geography of the Austrian Empire, the political situation under Emperor Francis I and Prince Metternich and an overview of aristocratic and lower-class life in Vienna. In the introduction, the editor seeks to demystify the author, who was born Karl Postl in Moravia and adopted many identities and names during his adventurous life in Austria, the United States and Switzerland. He enjoyed a brief period of fame and gained a reputation as “the German Walter Scott” (p. i), but his literary works were already forgotten towards the end of his life. Today, the writer is nearly unknown, with the exception of his German novel *Das Cajütenbuch* (1841), which depicts life and war in America, and has attracted some scholarly attention during the past thirty years because of its influence on the Young Germans.[2]

*Austria As It Is* begins with the return of a native Austrian to his homeland after a five-year stay in North America. His agenda is to compare the old and the new objectively, which he does with a British audience in mind, using what he calls the English “bulwark of liberty” (p. 15) as his screen of comparison. Sealsfield describes the Bohemian countryside, Prague and Vienna, and ends with a scathing critique of Austrian censorship, the educational system, the conditions for Austrian writers like Grillparzer, the emperor and the Prime Minister Prince Metternich.

Sealsfield’s ironic tone when writing about the

French citizens, Austrian farmers or the Bohemians at times recalls Heinrich Heine's polemic critiques of the English in *Französische Zustände* (1832) or *Englische Fragmente* (1827/1833). When he writes about institutions or politics, Sealsfield is, however, very frank. He calls Bohemian schoolbooks "the most barren and stupid extracts which ever left the printing press" (p. 42); reveals that since "the year 1811, the emperor ... has broken his imperial word of honor not less than twenty times, and not kept his promise a single time" (p. 67); and claims that "never has there been a man more detested and dreaded than Metternich" (p. 75). Although subsequent scholarship has demonstrated that Sealsfield made some factual and even observational errors (p. x), the book's initial reception in Austria confirmed Sealsfield's notion of the Metternich police state. The book was banned as "unpatriotic, hostile propaganda" (p. xi), yet all the copies in Leipzig bookstores (where a French translation of the book was originally published) had been sold before the censors could recall them (p. xii).

For today's reader, the biased analyses of the school system and modes of travel as well as the political commentaries are all fascinating despite the factual errors, while the romanticizing depictions of the landscapes and houses are at times tiresome. This latter effect is due to the long-winded style that Sealsfield adopts when describing nature. In those descriptions his moralistic view of the "pragmatic" yet "natural" lower classes also emerges, as an example from his rendition of Lobkowitz in Bohemia illustrates: "The whole country exhibits a sort of still life, which contrasts in a strange manner with the beautiful variety of the scenery, and still more so with the deep and intense character of its inhabitants" (p. 27). The second half of the text is both more anecdotal (for which the text was severely criticized, as the editor points out) and more emotionally loaded, transforming the text into an interesting document of individual political protest. Sealsfield argues, for example, that, contrary to common belief, emperor Francis I was not "a mere instrument in the hands of Metternich" (p. 70) and continues to illustrate why he believes that "Right is in Austria what pleases the Emperor—his will; wrong, what displeases him" (p. 72).

Heller's and Sealsfield's texts differ significantly; one was written as a personal memoir and the other as an educational travel guide. Neither book's value lies in its literary quality. Heller begins many chapters with

the phrase, "Now I want to write about," listing the stories about his relatives rather than linking them into a coherent narrative. Sealsfield provides chapter headings with keywords for the depicted stations of travel, but his narrative cannot hide the fact that he "dashed off this manuscript" in a few months without time to read the proofs (pp. viii-ix). Together the books depict nineteenth-century Austria as a state with many political upheavals, strict censorship, a bureaucracy and a smoothly operating spy system. They reveal a culture of trade across many borders, industrial progress, state debt that led to the right to buy oneself out of military duty, financial collapses and a firm belief in the people.

Heller's book is marred by a few editorial glitches (a paragraph is repeated verbatim on pp. 96 and 97 and one of the notes refers to a wrong page number), and at times the German sentence structure obtrudes upon the English translation. The simplified family trees at the end of the book, however, provide a clear picture of Heller's large family where—as was the case with the writer himself—many cousins intermarried. Photographs and some copies of family documents help "to bridge the gap" between the grandchildren and grandfather generations. Sealsfield's volume is cleanly edited with a minimum of typographical errors. The editor undertook the task of correcting a prior edition, since the original manuscript for *Austria As It Is* has disappeared (p. xvii). While the attached glossary is very helpful, however, a historical map would have assisted the reader in appreciating the vastness of the Austrian empire and Sealsfield's travels.

Both books are unusual, but welcome, additions to the study of Austrian history and culture. While Heller's book may be of more interest for oral historians and scholars of the *fin de siècle*, Sealsfield's work contributes to the travel literature of the early nineteenth century, the influences of Young Germany, and to the study of Grillparzer's Austria.

#### Notes

[1]. Otto Neumann's last name is given as "Naumann" by the publisher on Amazon.com. The book "corrects" this typo.

[2]. "Sealsfield," *Kindlers Neues Literatur-Lexikon*, ed. Walter Jens (München: Systhema, 2002); cited from CD-ROM edition.

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