

by Dardis McNamee

East German Spies in Austria! The cover story of the Viennese weekly *profil* of 21 May jumped off the newsstand.

Spy stories are hard to resist. This latest was about the one-time proprietor of Gutruf, a cigar chewing *bon vivant* by the name of Rudi Wein, code name "Procurer", who re-surfaced recently in some newly-released files of the *Stasi*, the dreaded Secret Police of the former German Democratic Republic. Behind his genial demeanour, Wein turns out to have been the Head of the Vienna *Residentur* of the GDR Foreign Intelligence Service, a guy who made a comfortable living for a couple of decades selling patented technology designs and hardware across the Iron Curtain.

Could this really be true? With questions like this, there was just one person to call.

Siegfried Beer spends his life hunting down spies. Head of the Institute for Intelligence, Propaganda and Security Studies at the University of Graz, he is Austria's leading authority on espionage activities in the Alpine Republic. With luck he would be coming to Vienna.

"Sounds like fun!" he replied in an email. He could drive up on Saturday, and we would meet at the *Tatort*, the scene of the crime.

Stumbling into the spy business

"Life is just chance and circumstance," Beer told me, as we settled in for a late afternoon drink in the prime corner table at Gutruf, surrounded by photographs.

Beer had stumbled into the spy business, in a sense; it was back in 1984, while he was researching something else at the National Archives in Washington D.C. Hearing his accent, an archivist had asked where he was from. "I'm from Austria," Beer had said, not really imagining the man knew where that was. But he did, and offered to show him some new material that had just come in that might be of interest. It was from the CIA.

It was there that Beer first learned about the operations of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), run by "Wild Bill" Donovan during World War II, that included many later famous names like writer Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg, and cookery queen Julia Child. But what Beer noticed first was the number of distinguished historians. "Then I knew I was on to something. I spent months there," he said. "And I've been researching ever since."

Austria's leading espionage scholar says Vienna is still the spy capital of the world

Siegfried Beer: Tracking Spies in the Archives



Siegfried Beer at Gutruf: "It all fits perfectly with the picture I have." Photo: David Reali

It was also chance that Rudi Wein had survived the Theresienstadt concentration camp; it was chance that a group of Russian soldiers scooped the boy up into their tank and brought him the long way back to Vienna; and it was chance that in 1957, the 26-year-old Wein met Udo Proksch at a Youth Festival in Moscow, his partner-to-be in the secrets trade, future owner of the elegant Café-Konditorei Demel on the Kohlmarkt. More important, though, was Club 45 that Proksch ran upstairs, a meeting place for a Who's Who of Austria's power insiders.

More club than pub

The waitress came by for our order of a *Seidl* of Trumer Pils (him) and a white wine *Spritzer* (me). It was a hot day.

Gutruf isn't a *Kaffeehaus*, of course, it's a *Lokal*, that off-beat Viennese creation that falls somewhere between a tavern and a restaurant. This one is a pleasingly run down hole in the wall, panelled in dark wood up to the shoulder, the panels dense with photographs of patrons past, and papered above with posters of concerts, exhibitions and the like, slanted vaguely towards the avant-garde. It seats maybe 30 people at capacity, including the two standing at the bar.

All in all, it's really more club than pub, its chairs and benches upholstered in worn green velvet, the empire curves of the chair backs topped with knobs at each side like pawns on a chess board.

And, in fact, according to Wein, it wasn't even really open to the public, at least not in the old days – "We wanted to have it for ourselves," he explained for a commemorative book for Gutruf's 100th Anniversary in 2006. "If someone came in who didn't suit us, I'd say, 'Have you reserved? This isn't a public place!'"

And that usually took care of it. They wanted a private club, and so that was how they eventually registered it with the police.

So no water, except for the horses. And unreliable access to the WC.

The article in *profil* had created quite a stir at Gutruf: What did Beer think? Was this for real?

"Oh, I think so," he said. "It fits perfectly with the picture that I have. There was a whole scene in Vienna with connections to East Germany, Austrians doing business in the East." And they had ready partners in the authoritarian intelligence services. "These guys were their own businesses, big into money making," he went on. "That's what the Nazis did, that's what the *Stasi* did. So I'm sure this is solid."

In a way, it was just another chapter in a long messy history of corruption in high places in Austria that began to emerge in the 1980s, as the tight lid on the post war cauldron of ugly secrets was gradually lifted.

It began with Kurt Waldheim, the former U.N. Secretary General who was running for the Austrian presidency when his cover was blown. The legendary *profil* journalist Alfred Worm found gaps in Waldheim's war-time record placing him at or near the scene of Nazi war crimes. In the end, no guilt was proven beyond that of lying about his past, but his reputation never recovered, and he was deemed *persona non grata* throughout the West.

But the CIA had known all this all along, Beer confirmed, happy to let sleeping dogs lie until the files were opened in the 1980s. Spying

is one thing, acting on the information something else entirely.

Over the years, Beer has been a key source for a number of high-profile spy cases, one of the most controversial the revelation that long time ORF journalist and former Vienna Mayor Helmut Zilk had accepted money for information from the Czech Secret Police in the mid 1960s. Since the first reports of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 1998, Zilk has had both critics and defenders, some suggesting he was a double agent, perhaps for the ever-present CIA. Beer has no doubt.

"Zilk was a spy; the case is crystal clear," he had told the Austrian daily *Die Presse* at the time. And today? "Of course, I was going out on a limb a little bit," he admitted to me. "But I never heard from Dagmar [Koller, Zilk's widow]. Never. So that proves it."

The waitress came back and brought us a second round, and the conversation turned to Beer's recent trip to Washington and his strong ties to the U.S from his years of research and teaching, and of course, Sharon, his American wife of 35 years.

"America has always baffled me," he said. "I've been going there every year since 1967, mostly Massachusetts. But I can never quite figure it out – how this diversity connects Americans..." Maybe it doesn't, I suggested.

"No, maybe not," he acknowledged. "On Cape Cod, we get such a strange mix of liberal and conservative. But at the same time there is this feeling Americans have about being American..."

Not so the Austrians? "No," Beer said. "Not like that."

The discrete charm of the Viennese

A highlight of this trip to Washington had been a visit to the Spy Museum – his first ever – invited by an Ex-CIA agent who had come across his work and was eager to meet him. "The guy had been in Vienna and said, 'Do you know, Vienna is still the greatest spy centre in the world!'"

I laughed. This was hardly news to Siegfried Beer, who has been making this case for years: with some 17,000 diplomats – "and around half of them have some connection to the intelligence agencies," he said, Austria has the highest per-capita density of foreign intelligence agencies anywhere.

It is also a question of ambiance: Vienna is a city where people can withdraw, with discrete

places, like Gutruf and others like it, a high standard of living, a relaxed atmosphere and exceptionally good flight connections.

But not everyone slips through the net. Glad-hander and confidence man Udo

Proksch was convicted of murder when six people died in the sinking of his cargo ship *Lucona*, in what later proved to have been a deliberate insurance fraud.

"Before Proksch and Waldheim, it was not a sin to lie in Austria," Green Party Parliamentarian Peter Pilz had said after the fraud investigation in 1989. "Now it is."

But none of it ever touched Rudi Wein; espionage is not in fact illegal in Austria, as long as it does nothing to harm the national interest. He died peacefully in 2011 at the age of 81.

And at Gutruf, the *profil* article was dismissed as a lot of sensationalist hokey.

"Rudi Wein? A spy?" guffawed a wizened regular at a nearby table. "He would certainly have been amused to hear that!" ♦

There was a whole scene in Vienna with connections to the East Germans, who were big into money making; it's what the Nazis did, what the Stasi did.



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