

Bernhard Herrman

Robert Streibel

The Wine of Oblivion

A few words in advance...

If it were up to the "Winzergenossenschaft (winegrowers' cooperative) Krems", then you would only have a book with empty pages in your hands. Turning the pages would be just another form of silence. In a total of three e-mails to the board of the Winzergenossenschaft, the authors requested an interview in which they wanted to report on their book and their research. The central sentence of their last email of 31 July 2017 was, *"In our preoccupation with the past and the Nazi era, we were never concerned with blaming the next generation for anything, but it is important that every company faces up to its history"*. The reaction came promptly next morning. A call from Director Franz Ehrenleitner, Managing Director and - according to their homepage - "thinker and driver" of "Winzer Krems" and holder of the honorary ring of the city of Krems. His message was clear and in a commanding tone, "Leave us alone! I want peace once and for all! We have nothing to say. I don't want to deal with it. I am a Christian-thinking person. I have done a lot of good. I look to the future. Leave us alone! If not, steps will be taken! We look to the future. We should be more confident, us Austrians. We always look back to the past. I know that everything has been declared right, and that's it. Who cares about that? Not me. It was an effort to call you. I don't want to meet you. What's the point? Why? I don't have time for this. I was born in 1954. Who'll give me my two uncles back who died in the war? My father was sick when he came back from being a prisoner-of-war, that's emotional for me. There are no eye witnesses who really know what happened, but I can tell you that I will not talk to you, nor will I meet you, and no employee of Winzer Krems will talk to you either.. I don't have to talk about these things, I'm not interested in tattoos, even though many people are tattooed today. And, if I don't want to say anything about gay marriage - is that why I'm a bad person? I'm not a politician,

I don't have to say anything and I don't want to say anything." There are some things I can't change. And, if there's a landslide in Chile, I don't want to see it because I can't do anything. "We are constantly being bombarded with such reports." On the objection that the "Winzer Krems" could perhaps appear in a bad light due to their refusal to talk. Ehrenleitner said that the "Winzer Krems" had already survived other things. "We survived the wine scandal and had nothing to do with it. I'm not responsible for what happened. Period! That's it! Leave us in peace! It's always about making amends, about payments! That's always the case, the companies have to pay. Leave us in peace. Who cares today."

Winzer Krems had nothing to do with the wine scandal. True! But, it had everything to do with its own origins. The Winzergenossenschaft Krems - founded in the summer of the following year 1938 - was only made possible by the "Aryanisation" of the winery by the Jewish owners Paul Josef and Johanna Robitschek. The board of directors of "Winzer Krems" was not interested in the history of the company. The authors were.

It all began with a small house in Salzburg-Elsbethen which was inherited by Bernhard Herrman from his cousin Ingrid Herzog in 2008. A locked metal box was also part of the estate. A kind of mini-safe, 40 cm long, 30 wide, 30 high. The contents consisted of letters, documents, official letters and photos. Some of those who had sent letters, and some in the photos were known to Bernhard Herrman. Most of them not. The name "August Rieger" appeared again and again in the documents. Bernhard Herrman knew the name from his mother's stories. She had always raved about a "Baron Rieger", his stately appearance, his sonorous voice and his impressive appearance. But she had also spoken of enormous debts, and that he had had a Jewish lover, a Viennese wine wholesaler. Albert, her sister Margarete's husband, had also been intimate with the Baron. And then there were some letters with swastika postal stamps dated 1938. These letters wrote about Paul Josef Israel Robitschek, wine merchant and owner of the "Sandgruben-Gut Krems". The name Sandgrube made one think. Was "Sandgrube 13" not the address of the Winzergenossenschaft Krems, the Lower Austrian model enterprise par excellence which successfully exports its wine all over the world? Wasn't the 2002 vintage wine presented

to the Vienna Opera Ball by Mr. Ehrenleitner, chairman of the board, accompanied by great press hype? But, what did Paul Josef Israel Robitschek have to do with Sandgrube 13? What about the Winzergenossenschaft Krems? Curiosity was aroused. Would the homepage of "Winzer Krems" contain perhaps a reference to Paul Josef Israel Robitschek? Under "History" there was no reference, but one sentence made us wonder: "In 1938, responsible winegrowers of the Krems and Stein guild founded the WINZER KREMS. The question immediately arose, What was the "responsibility" of the founding winemakers in Krems in the year of Austria's so-called "annexation" to Nazi Germany? The word "Israel" was striking. The nicknames "Israel" or "Sarah" were given exclusively to Jews by the Nazis. It was clear that Paul Josef Robitschek had something to do with the winegrowers of Krems.

So, after some discussions and considerations, it became obvious that the authors should undertake an historical dive into an apparently very well hidden piece of Krems' economic history. Thousands of pages of documents were made available for this purpose. Diaries, letters, the Aryanization Act "Winzer Krems / Paul Josef und Johanna Robitschek" of the National Socialist Property Transfer Office in the Austrian State Archives, Nazi Gau files, Gestapo and People's Court court files, files of the Restitution Commission as well as statements by eye witnesses, and by direct descendants of the Robitschek family in Caracas/Venezuela and in the USA, Florida and New York. So - contrary to what Mr Ehrenleitner suspected – and in addition to the historical documents, there were also eye witnesses who knew what it really was like back then. In any case, it was very different to that which Hans Frühwirth maintained in his book "Der Kremser Wein und die Kremser Weinkultur" (2005) that the cellar of Paul Robitschek, who fled in 1938 and was administered by a trustee, had cost nothing. It was purchased at a price appropriate to the time. That it was not a dishonest acquisition was confirmed in 1947 by an official of the People's Court. And, Frühwirth also subliminally suggests Jewish greed and dishonesty. Nevertheless, in 1946, Robitschek, who is now based in Venezuela, demanded the restitution of the cellar. The complete fulfilment of his claim (1 million) would have seriously damaged the cooperative or even led to its dissolution. In June 1948, after a local inspection by Chairman Preiß, a settlement was reached: WG paid an advance of S600,000 and thus bought the

cellar for the second time. Frühwirth does not mention that the "then corresponding" purchase price of 22,000 Reichsmarks had been placed in a blocked account and had thus fallen to the treasury of the Third Reich. It is also astonishing, that Frühwirth's text about the Winzergenossenschaft Krems does not contain a single reference to National Socialism. Frühwirth thus deliberately hides the founding history, the profiteers in Krems, the anti-Jewish Nazi legislation ("Entjudung") and its dramatic effects on the fate of the Jewish owners of the Sandgrube and their friends. 80 years on, it is now time to unveil the truth about the founding history of the winegrowers' cooperative in the summer of 1938.

1 Krems, 27 May 1937 / Corpus Christi

There's something in the air...

"We need a One World Church where everyone can worship in their own way, Christian or Jewish, Muslim or Buddhist, there is only one God who is for all."

(Diary - Paul Josef Robitschek)

The Kremser Landstraße is sprinkled with freshly cut grass. Birch trunks, whose green foliage is already somewhat faded and withered lean against house walls. In a few places flash blood-red from the green of the street and the twigs on the walls. Also, on the occasion of this Corpus Christi procession, the Nazis scattered flyers again...

"Arrive Krems train station, Thursday 27 May with early train. Book a table at the Hotel Alte Post for 12 o'clock. Looking forward to seeing you and Grete. All the best, Gustl, Robi, Erzi". Albert Herzog, the recipient of the telegram, immediately executed the order. He is not only the private secretary of the Viennese wine wholesaler Paul Josef Robitschek and his partner August "Baron" von Rieger, but, since the beginning of March 1937, also their manager of the Sandgrube winery in Krems. Albert Herzog is used to telegrams like this. This time, his employers are making the most of the long weekend to show up again in Krems to relax a little. Albert is looking forward to their visit, it has been a few weeks since he last saw them. Smiling, he wonders what extravagant clothes the Baron will be wearing this time. A lilac shirt? The light linen suit with handkerchief in dark purple? And perhaps the light Panama

or even the new cream-coloured Borsalino? Whatever the Baron will be wearing on this high Catholic holiday, he will certainly be a striking splash of colour in the festive and colourful soft image of the small town. And certainly, Paul Josef Robitschek will - as always - be wearing a discreetly classical suit made of the finest English cloth, or a sporty knickerbocker ensemble.

When Gustl and Paul, accompanied by Erszi Farkas, arrive with the early train from Vienna on Corpus Christi Saturday, Albert Herzog and his wife Margarete were already waiting on the platform. Albert in a wine grower's traditional suit and Gretl in a dirndl dress. The five want to take part in the Corpus Christi procession. All five love spectacles, and such a procession with all its pomp, and particularly in a rural region, can go straight to one's heart. The little girls in their white dresses scattering rose petals, the little boys decorated with sashes, and the priest, with the golden monstrance in hands, walking gracefully under the "heaven". A richly embroidered canopy carried by four serious looking men, and ministrants swinging the incense. In addition, brass music is playing, and the faithful, many in costume, are saying prayers and singing songs: "Here before You, in the dust, the crowd of Christians...", "I greet you... Oh, Mary help! ... Mother of God - ... oh Maria, help us! ... help us all... in our deepest moment of need..." Yes, religious festivals are dear to the hearts of the five, be it a Catholic high mass in St. Stephen's Cathedral with swaths of incense and organ roaring, or be it the cantor's songs in the Great Synagogue in Vienna, or be it a moving sermon in the Protestant Church in the Dorotheergasse, or simply a procession like this one in Krems. In Vienna, one always visits a wine tavern after a religious occasion. Here, in Krems, after the procession, they will go to the "Alte Post" There it will surely be good fun when Paul Robitschek and Gustl Rieger tell tales of Viennese social life. And, Erszi will dominate the conversation with her laughter. And so, the five join the procession, sometimes kneeling with the faithful in front of the birch altars and making the sign of the cross, and singing hymns and praying to God and Jesus Christ the divine Redeemer. Less out of religious emotion and conviction, but more because of the solemn mood.

But, if you look more closely, you can see that some of the faithful are worshipping another

shining figure alongside Jesus the Jewish Saviour from Bethlehem. They are worshipping a saviour from Germany. One with a rumbling voice and a rectangular moustache under his nose. In the crowd, Robitschek recognizes some of these "double believers," as Gustl once called these Catholic Nazis, by tiny swastika pins they are wearing - hardly visible - on their lapels. It seems to him that they speak the words in the "Lord's Prayer": "... Your kingdom come, Your will be done..." with special fervour. Yes, when the Jew Paul Robitschek and the Protestant Gustl Rieger walk together in such a harmony, one can feel they are attached to each other in a kind of special way. And, for a few months, Albert Herzog, the Catholic, is the third in this male group. Where these three are, hardly anyone pays attention to the two beautiful women in their company. That would still be the case today. Even Erszi's and Gretl's low-cut dirndl dresses are nothing as eye-catchers. At some dinner parties, women are the decoration of men's rounds. Here, they are both finery and alibi.

Tired of getting up early and the train ride, and hungry after the procession, the five go to the "Alte Post" for lunch after the final blessing. The inn is a good choice. After all, the owner is an enemy of the Nazis on the Patriotic Front and a fervent supporter of Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg. Gustl is the first to enter the guest room. He has the nonchalance to wait until the eyes of those present are directed at him. This is always and everywhere the case. Up until now, the same in Krems as well. A waiter is quickly on the spot and leads the small holiday party to their table. Gustl goes first. And, whether because of his clothes or stealthy conduct is interestedly eyed by all other guests. But the looks here in the Wachau are not mute, and a whispered remark is clearly audible: "The warm ones are back! And such a gown on such a holiday! It couldn't be warmer! The ass-hole should be sewn to them!" August Rieger ignores the words and pretends not to hear anything. The cheerful mood should not be clouded. You take a seat, greet the guests with a friendly nod at the neighbouring tables, and orders food and drink. At one of the tables is the winegrower Franz Aigner with some friends. Strange, Gustl thinks when he sees Aigner, that the Nazis are already sitting in The Alte Post. One of Aigner's table fellows can't help but commenting, "Someday the Jews won't have anything more to order! Not even here in Krems" Suddenly, words and the sound of busy cutlery die. Most guests lower their heads and stare into their

plates. It suddenly feels icy in the room. It's as if a frost has just passed through the doors and windows. The question hangs unspoken in the room. How will the abused react? Paul Robitschek slowly rises from his chair. And then, with chest out and stomach firmly in, in firm military posture, pulls up his right arm and calls out to Aigner and his men in a barracks yard tone and imitating Hitler's rhetoric. "Yes, my Führer, my Führer!". Redeeming laughter fills the restaurant. Robitschek's small, rectangular moustache on his upper lip, not unlike Hitler's, has lent authenticity to the parody.

The cheerfulness is back, the cutlery is chattering again, and conversations are back on track. In fact, Paul Robitschek is not only a good wine merchant, but a very good actor as well. He has talent. Guests always wait eagerly for his Hitler imitations at Gustl's parties in Vienna. This mockery and insult to the Führer sounds angry coming from Aigner's table, especially from a Jew who will still feels sorry for Lord Robitschek and the Baron! And, Mr. Sandgruben's administrator doesn't have to grin so stupidly, and the ladies not at all! Today, in public, they may take the liberty of joking at the Führer's expense and laughing at him. But the day will come when laughter will pass, just as surly as they are all sitting there. And, in her own way, Erzsi Farkas laughs loudest of all at these threats from Aigner's comrades, stroking Paul's cheek with rapture and appreciation. Later, while leaving the "Alte Post", August Rieger picks up on some of the astonishing statements. "Well, they're not afraid of saying what they mean", says one. And another, "They are all very strange birds!"