

Jose Rizal and Maximo Viola in Vienna, 20th till the 24th of May 1887

Hotel Metropol as a historical landmark

May is a beautiful month of spring. One awakens to chirping of birds as the sun rises. Trees slowly fill with varying tones of green foliage again. Fruit trees like apricots and apples display flowering buds, the leafless magnolias now bedecked with myriads of its sweet-scented flowers.

One cannot underrate the environmental effect specifically the beauty of nature on one's disposition and general feelings. At this time of the year, people spend more time out of their homes, perhaps to shed off the constrictive atmosphere and cooped up state of mind after enduring the long foggy, months of autumn and the bone-chilling months of winter.

As travelling companions, Jose Rizal and Maximo Viola must have experienced this wonderful spring-time sensation, a dynamic thrust of energy and enthusiasm. Both were at the transitional range between young-full-age of adulthood. Rizal was just a month near to his 26th birthday while Viola, who had finished his medical study a year before, was thirty years old.

While in Leitmeritz, Jose Rizal gave an extemporaneous speech, much to the bewilderment of the audience as it was delivered in the German language. He stated that solace can be found in the woods, and the rich beauty of nature – the flowers and the birds, provide relief to emotional discomforts and uplift a saddened spirit.

After a memorable encounter with Professor Ferdinand Blumentritt and enjoying the four-day stay in Leitmeritz, Rizal and Viola left on the 16th of May, travelled to Vienna via Prague and Bruenn, thereby covering a distance of over four hundred kilometres.

Austria located in the heart of Europe, was at that time an empire covering areas of what is now Hungary, Czech Republic, Croatia, Slovenia and some northern areas of Italy. Its capital city, Vienna was a thriving place in the fields of arts, education, music as well as in sciences particularly medicine. Both Rizal and Viola were well-educated Filipinos and must have learned the works of the Austrian neurologist, Ludwig Türck (“bundle of Turck”) and the physiologist Johann Nepomuk Czermak. These scientists introduced the use of laryngoscope. Another notable German-Austrian, Theodor Billroth had performed in 1881 a monumental pioneering work in abdominal surgery – a successful resection of the pylorus, a radical intervention in the treatment of the afflicted part of the stomach due to cancer. Most probably, they visited Vienna's General Hospital (*Allgemeines Krankenhaus*) which had another famous doctor under its wing. The ophthalmologist Ernst Fuchs (1851 -1930) was at that time the leading European doctor in this specialised field of medicine. His book, *Textbook of Ophthalmology*, published in 1889 was considered internationally as “the bible of ophthalmology.”

Who would not be impressed of the “Ring” or the *Ringstrasse* as it is correctly termed in the “the Austrian Way?” This wide street is formed like a ring, enclosing the architectural grandeur of the Habsburg dynasty as well as marking a linear demarcation between the members of the aristocracy, the opulent and famous from the middle class and the ordinary working citizens. Viola mentioned this impressive and historical part of Vienna. However, he failed to write what they saw. Going around the *Ringstrasse*, they could not have missed the following buildings:

- *Hofburg* or the Royal Palace which was constructed in 1881. It was and still is the supreme seat of the government of Austria;
- Parliament;
- *Rathaus* or City Hall;

- *Burgtheater* or the royal theatre;
- University of Vienna founded in 1365, the oldest university in German-speaking countries;
- *Votivkirche*. A catholic church in Gothic style, constructed in 1856 as an expression of gratitude over the unsuccessful assassination attempt on the reigning Emperor Franz Joseph.

While in Vienna, Jose Rizal and Maximo Viola stayed at one of its grand hotels - The Hotel Metropol. It was located inside the *Ringstrasse* and overlooking a branch line of the Danube River. These two non-Caucasian guests created quite a stir and novel impression, their presence was mentioned in the local newspaper.

It is quite a thing of wonder that time and events have ways of playing with what we generally term as history. From 1938 -1945, the grand Hotel Metropol became the headquarters of the Gestapo, the most feared Nazi military police. An abode which formerly provided sophisticated comfort was converted, half a century later, into a place of terror. Many succumbed to death due to brutality strategized in this very unlikely location.

Due to WWII bombing attacks, Hotel Metropol was heavily damaged. What was once built to showcase Austria's economy at the World Exposition in 1873, the hotel became a detritus and was finally demolished in the late 1960's. On its very site, a big building, though markedly less grand than its former one, was constructed and named as Leopold Figl *Hof*. The defeat of Germany and Austria led to political instability. Austria was occupied by military representatives of four nations – United States of America, France, England and Russia. Leopold Figl (1902-1965) as foreign minister played a key role in the attainment of Austrian independence in 1955. After signing the treaty (*Staatsvertrag*), Figl went to the balcony of the Belvedere Palace and announced to the awaiting public, "Austria is free" ("*Österreich ist frei*"). These are the words he is most remembered for and which are repeatedly quoted by television and radio communications network every 26th of October. Leopold Figl became the first federal chancellor of Austria after the Second World War.

On the 19th of June 1995, in commemoration of the 134th birth anniversary of Dr. José P. Rizal, Hon. Reynaldo O. Arcilla, then Philippine Ambassador to Austria, unveiled a historical marker at the Leopold Hof Building. The inscription tablet is mounted at the side of the main entrance. The translation from the German text reads:

Dr. Jose P. Rizal (1861 – 1896)

Dr. Jose Rizal, Philippine National Hero,
stayed from 20th till the 24th of May 1887

in Hotel Metropol, which was located at this site.

An Austrian teacher,

Professor Ferdinand Blumentritt

supported Rizal's actions in Europe
against the Spanish colonizers.



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