**From Rhine to Danube: An American Librarian Experiences the Basel and Vienna Book Fairs**

Stepping out of the international terminal at O’Hare Airport in search of the bus that would take me back to Indiana and Notre Dame, I was met with a blast of arctic air, temperatures in the mid-teens, a brisk breeze, and wisps of snow swirling about the pavement. Home again, transported from the Old World to the New, from a palpable sense of historical Europe to the familiar vistas of my homeland: I had just returned from spending twelve days in Basel and Vienna for the purpose of attending their book fairs and reading festivals, and was now jolted by the sudden transition in time and space.

Aside from an antiquarian fair here and there, German-speaking Europe primarily offers four book fairs: in Frankfurt, Leipzig, Vienna and Basel. Of these, Frankfurt is clearly in a category all its own: the largest such fair, international in scope, oriented to the book and its various digital manifestations as a business enterprise. And while certainly inviting the layman to venture in, the focus is heavily on the professional ventures of licensing, author and publisher rights, in short all of the economic relationships associated with the intellectual property of the published product.

In contrast, the other three fairs are much more popularly oriented, with Leipzig being significantly larger than its “sister” events in Basel and Vienna. A few statistics may help to bring this into focus:

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| **2014 Fair** | **Events offered** | **Event locations** | **Exhibitors/countries** | **Visitors** |
| Basel | 110 | 30 | not specified | not specified |
| Vienna | 300 | 30 | 300/12 | 38,000 |
| Leipzig | 3,200 | 410 | 2,194/42 | 237,000 |
| Frankfurt | 4,000 | 1 | 7,300/100 | 280,000 + 9,000 journalists |

**From the Rhine...**

**BuchBasel**, as the Basel book fair and reading festival is called, is least like a fair and most like a series of literary society offerings. Indeed, one has the feeling at times that a university seminar is taking place. Such was the case with the presentation at the bookseller Bider & Tanner, an event held during the “Vierte Basler Buchnacht” (4th Basel Book Night). On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Christian Morgenstern’s death, the keynote lecture was given by Germanist and director of the Rudolf Steiner Archive, Prof. David Marc Hoffmann. Hoffmann presented a thought-provoking picture of Morgenstern’s spiritual/mystical side in the context of the publication of *Wir fanden einen Pfad* [We Found a Path], a collection of Morgenstern’s poetry. Such was the best of the literary society side of the Basel book night and representative of the best of the fair. As one of the speakers on the opening night event at the Basel Volkshaus Festsaal expressed it, BuchBasel is paradoxically both too small and too large: indeed, comparatively speaking, it is small, yet the richness of the offerings, the intellectual stimuli of the literary society atmosphere, with dozens of events in dozens of venues city-wide, made it more than one person could attend or absorb adequately. Its cup runneth over, but better than being dry. For three days, author readings and interviews, lectures and more took place in book shops, the public library, museums, the Volkshaus (“headquarters”) with its large display of current Swiss imprints on display and for sale, and finally, even on the Rhine ferry. The publicity highpoint of the Basel fair is the awarding of the Schweizer Buchpreis [Swiss book prize] on the last day at the Theater Basel. This year’s award of € 30,000 went to Lukas Bärfuss for his novel *Koala*.

**...To the Danube**

The Vienna book fair and reading festival, **Buchwien**, is categorically broader than Basel’s, because it is primarily a vendor exhibit fair enriched by an ample reading festival. Held in a part of the Vienna convention building, its roughly 300 exhibitors provide an ample acquaintance with the publishing world of Austria as well as that of eastern Europe. Indeed, this is an alluring element of Austria and its Viennese fair, the eastern orientation understandably not evident in Basel. One of the venues giving evidence to this interest is the “Donau Lounge,” a forum for literary and cultural discussion focusing on former east bloc countries including Rumania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Serbia, Czech Republic, Slovakia and others. With over two dozen readings/interviews/discussions, the Donau Lounge is a well-established intellectual/literary contribution to the fair.

A new addition to the line-up of offerings in Vienna this year is the first “Lange Nacht der Bücher” (long night of books), a parallel event to Basel’s “Buchnacht” (book night). Held from 8:00-11:00 p.m. in the convention hall, the event is of a popular nature, drawing in many visitors who can get a “sneak peek” into the exhibition booths at the same time, before the formal opening of the fair on the following day. This brings up a key characteristic of both the Basel and Vienna events, as well as of the Leipzig book fair, namely, its popular nature. All three fairs have significant portions of their programming and exhibits devoted to school-aged children and their teachers, and everywhere one sees large groups of youth on field trips here to experience the world of books and comics. This does not detract from the “serious” side of the fairs, but indeed reinforces the fact that they are not merely professional business conventions like the Frankfurt book fair, but encourage and welcome not only children but laymen of all ages.

For the librarian, one of the benefits of attending these events, in addition to the “live” exposure to the literary/cultural scene and its players and public, is the availability of ample literary supplements and reports in the press. Especially in the case of Vienna, there were multiple journalistic venues covering the current literary/intellectual scene, providing valuable “leads” to pursue in developing library collections. The *ProgrammZeitung: Kultur im Raum Basel* (Program Newspaper: Culture in the Basel Environs) took a brief overview look at the book fair in Martin Zingg’s “Ein Fest der Literatur und des Lesens” (A Festival of Literature and Reading) in the November issue, while the “Kultur Woche” (Culture Week) section of the *Basler Zeitung* (Basel Newspaper) presented an in-depth essay in coverage of Basel keynote speaker Thomas Hürlimann, “Toleranzpropaganda ist alles andere als tolerant” (Tolerance Propaganda is anything but tolerant) as well as Hürlimann’s own essay “Die Erinnerung ans dunkle Paradies” (Remembering Dark Paradise).

To be expected, the feuilletonistic establishment in Vienna produced a greater abundance of press about the Vienna fair. *Der Standard* covered keynote speaker Juri Andruchowytsch’s focus on Ukraine between East and West. *Die Furche: die österreichische Wochenzeitung* (The furrow: Austrian Weekly) devoted a 16-page supplement to the Vienna fair, while the Verband österreichischer Zeitungen (Federation of Austrian Newspapers) published a 62-page special issue on its occasion, *Beste Seiten: Extrablatt der österreichischen Zeitungen und Magazine zur Buch Wien*.

Looking back on a very full nearly two weeks in Basel and Vienna, I can attest to the statement that it was both too much and yet not enough. Navigating (indeed locating) the many venues, I was immersed in two rich milieus and will not soon forget these very different events and the cities that host them. Now it’s time to pore over my notes and those feuilletons that I brought back, extracting what is of value for enhancing the collections here back home. *Adieu*, Basel, *Servus*, Wien!