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The Lester and Sally Entin Faculty of Humanities
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The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: cst@tauex.tau.ac.il. We are glad to share with you the forty-fifth issue of Perspectives.

The Esterházys

A summer journey through a glorious, troubled Jewish past

Jakob Brandstätter

After a rainy spring, summer has arrived in Vienna.

The Viennese soul, swaying between discomfort and exuberance, is never quite satisfied. In the spring, the weather was too cold. Now it is too warm. On the weekends, Viennese escape the stifling city and head to one of the lakes their landlocked country has in abundance.

In the early hours of a Sunday morning, I drive to the Burgenland region for a cooling swim. On the way, I travel back in time to a glorious, troubled Jewish past.

Burgenland, the easternmost of the Austrian federal states, borders Hungary and forms a transition of sorts between the Alps and the Pannonian Plain. In addition to the flat plains in the north, the landscape is characterized by rolling hills and vineyards in the central part of the province.

During the Middle Ages, the area was part of the Kingdom of Hungary, while supreme authority rested with the Habsburgs. It was dominated by powerful noble families, a legacy still visible today in numerous castles that survived.

From the 17th century onwards, the Esterházy became the most powerful family in Burgenland. Loyal supporters of the empire, they served as military commanders and also distinguished themselves as influential patrons of the arts and culture.

The influence of the Esterházy family in Burgenland facilitated the rise of a previously rare and isolated Jewish presence in Austria.

The first Jewish families settled in the region as early as the 14th century. However, these early communities were vulnerable to systemic persecution, particularly during the plague pogroms and other episodes of antisemitic violence. In some cases, the settlements did not survive these periods of unrest.

The turning point in the positive development of Jewish life in Burgenland was led by Paul I, Prince Esterházy (1635–1713).

Initially, the prince was a zealous proponent of the Counter-Reformation and adhered to the antisemitic currents of his time. In 1670, following Emperor Leopold I's expulsion of the Jewish communities from Vienna and Lower Austria, Prince Esterházy, acting as a loyal servant of the Emperor, expelled the Jewish population from his own territories.

Then the prince changed course. Not for moral reasons, but for economic-utilitarian ones.

Prior to their expulsion, Jews had played vital economic roles as craftsmen, merchants, moneylenders, and traders. The Esterházys came to recognize, out of self-interest, the economic potential of the Jewish communities as operators of supra-regional trade networks, managers of capital and credit, and skilled specialists in a wide range of trades.

In 1676, Prince Paul I began to resettle Jewish communities within his territories. This led to the development of a system of protection, in which the Jews of Burgenland were granted relative security by the House of Esterházy in return for the economic vitality they brought. On this basis, a flourishing enclave of Jewish life emerged and endured for approximately 170 years.

During this period, the prosperous Jewish Sieben Gemeinden (seven communities) known in Hebrew as Sheva Kehilot, emerged. These included Eisenstadt, Mattersburg, Kittsee, Frauenkirchen, Kobersdorf, Lackenbach, and Deutschkreutz.

The House of Esterházy formalized the legal status of the Jewish population within its domains through letters of protection. These documents defined the rights and obligations of the Jewish communities with considerable precision. They stipulated conditions such as trading licenses, tax obligations, and the routine administrative responsibilities of community life.

The protection was not granted unconditionally. It had to be acquired through the payment of a Schutzgeld (protection fee), the Austro-Hungarian version of jizya.

From 1701 onwards, the House of Esterházy authorized Jewish citizens to purchase houses from Christians, a significant step towards greater legal and social integration. Jews were granted additional economic rights, including trade licenses for kosher butchers and even breweries.

The Esterházys also extended a degree of political autonomy to their Jewish subjects, permitting the election of community leaders and the establishment of their own Jewish police force. As a result, several of the Sieben Gemeinden developed into important commercial hubs within a broader regional trade network that encompassed Vienna, Wiener Neustadt, Bratislava, and Ödenburg during the 18th century.

The religious rights of the Jewish communities were regulated by their autonomous administration. The Esterházy Schutzjuden established Jewish cemeteries and synagogues and elected their rabbis independently.

Some symbols of this once-flourishing religious life have survived to this day.

I leave the highway and navigate towards the center of Eisenstadt.

I walk across Esterházyplatz and catch sight of the magnificent Baroque palace. The already strong morning sun intensifies the glow of its ochre-yellow façade, a color typical of Habsburg Baroque architecture.

I pause to admire the palace. The aura of power remains palpable.

After a few minutes, I head west towards Jerusalemplatz to enter the former Jewish ghetto of Eisenstadt. The area was once enclosed by a wall and had two gates. The gates symbolized the distinct legal status of the Jewish community. As a sign of protection, they denoted the privilege of legal recognition and autonomy; yet at the same time, they embodied social and religious segregation, a visible boundary between inclusion and exclusion.

I continue along Unterbergerstraße in a westerly direction and end up in front of Wertheimerhaus, a baroque townhouse with a bright yellow façade, clear lines, and a slightly recessed portal. It was built in 1719 by Samson Wertheimer, one of the leaders of Sheva Kehilot. He was court financier to the Habsburgs, rabbi of the seven Burgenland communities, and advisor to Emperor Leopold I.

Today, the building houses the Austrian Jewish Museum which documents the history of the Jewish communities in Burgenland. The originally preserved private synagogue on the first floor, the Wertheimer Schul, is particularly impressive with its rich ornamentation and beautiful Torah shrine.

I can sense that this building is far more than a museum; it is a time capsule that takes me back to the heyday of the Sieben Gemeinden, a living reminder of the prosperous Jewish life in Austria and a testimony of its tragedy.

I leave the synagogue feeling sadness, and gratitude. Gratitude that something of Sheva Kehilot has survived so that we will never be able to forget.

The abolition of the feudal system after the revolution of 1848 ended the need for the legal protection system that defined the Sieben Gemeinden. The Esterházy Schutzjuden became Austro-Hungarian citizens of the monarchy and were allowed to settle in the cities from 1860.

The constitution of 1867 made the Jews of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy equal citizens, at least theoretically. This achievement was followed by the disastrous end of the monarchy, which ushered in the darkest of days for Austrian Jews.

I get into the car and drive westward to Lake Neusiedl. The water awaits me, cool and calm. It is there every summer.

Jakob Brandstätter is a graduate of Tel Aviv University in Security and Diplomacy and an associate contributor at the Center.