

by Duncan J. D. Smith

Sometimes in winter, Austria can be gripped by a cold spell you could swear was worthy of the Arctic. So surely there is no need to actually *go there*. Yet others have, and two memorials in Vienna honour men who made their names in the frozen north. Now, with a chill in the air, it's high time their stories were re-told.

### North East Passage

The first is Bohemian explorer and landscape artist Julius von Payer (1841-1915), whose simple headstone is in the Zentralfriedhof. A soldier by profession, he was posted to Verona in 1862, where he spent his free time mapping the Italian Alps. So impressive were the results that he was transferred to the Austrian Military Cartographical Institute in Vienna.

There he met Captain Karl Weyprecht, an officer in the Austro-Hungarian navy, and together in 1872 they led the first Austro-Hungarian Polar Expedition. Their aim was to discover a North East passage to the Pacific through Arctic waters north of Russia. But when their schooner, the Admiral Tegethoff, became stuck in pack ice north of Novaya Zemlya, their goal instead became survival.

### Nie zurück

Drifting slowly northwards, the crew happened upon an archipelago in the Barents Sea, which they named Franz Josef Land for their emperor. It would be another two years before Weyprecht gave orders to abandon ship. They eventually made land on the Russian coast and returned to Vienna and a heroes' welcome. Their

*Drifting slowly northward, they happened upon an archipelago they called Franz-Josef Land. Two years later Weyprecht finally gave the order to abandon ship.*

*Memorials honour Austrians Karl Weyprecht and Julius von Payer and the Norwegian explorer and "peacemaker" Fridtjof Nansen*

## Heroes of the Polar Seas

efforts contributed to the establishment of the International Polar Year a decade later, launching collaborative scientific efforts in polar regions.

Artifacts from the expedition are displayed on the main stairs of Vienna's Naturhistorisches

Museum, and Payer's dramatic oil painting *Nie Zurück (No Return)* hangs in the Austrian Military History Museum. Payer later opened an art school and returned to the oil painting he had studied in his youth. But

he never entirely gave up his polar ambitions. Even at the age of 70, he was planning an expedition to the North Pole in a submarine.

### Polar currents

"Man wants to know," wrote Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930), "and when he ceases to do so, he is no longer a man." The Norwegian explorer whose bronze head by Viennese sculptor Hubert Wilfan adorns the suitably-remote Fridtjof-Nansen-Park in Liesing is the second hero of the polar seas. Remembered for his daring Arctic adventures, it was his humanitarian work that



*Explorer Fridtjof Nansen is honored in Vienna for his service to refugees* Photo: Duncan J. D. Smith

earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1922 and led to his being honoured across Europe.

An expert skier, Nansen became fascinated with the polar world during a trip on an Arctic-bound seal-hunting vessel, and in 1888, he became the first European to cross Greenland. A decade later he headed for the North East Passage, where he deliberately allowed his ship *Fram* to be trapped in the ice while he and a companion headed for Franz Josef Land, the nearest point. After four months of almost unendurable isolation and cold, they happened on the British explorer Frederick Jackson who took them to safety. Three years later the vessel emerged unscathed, proving that ocean currents carry Arctic ice from east to west; every one of his hand-picked crew of 12 survived.

### Nansen passport

With the outbreak of The Great War, Nansen turned his attention to international politics, and from 1920 until his death, he served as Norwegian delegate to the League of Nations. In this role, he established the principle of international responsibility for refugees and helped repatriate half a million prisoners of war who had fought alongside Germany. With his famous "Nansen Passport", he enabled many thousands more stateless refugees to be repatriated, which after his death included those fleeing Nazi Germany and other totalitarian regimes.

"He was a fearless peacemaker, a friend of justice, an advocate for the weak and suffering," said fellow League of Nations delegate Sir Robert Cecil. Each year since 1954, the UNHCR has granted a Nansen Medal, "in recognition of extraordinary and dedicated service to refugees." ♦

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