

by Duncan J. D. Smith

Concealed inside a courtyard behind the Stephansdom there stands a venerable Plane tree, where within living memory a sharp piece of iron could still be seen, piercing the bark from within. That, swore locals, was the sword of a medieval knight! Well, perhaps...

Into Another World

The Fährnrichshof is one of Vienna's most charming courtyards. Best entered at Blutgasse 9, it's like chancing upon another world. The visitor is immediately confronted by a dizzying well of light flooding the balconies that layer the four-storey building. Such balconies are known as *Pawlatschen* (from the Czech word Pavlač meaning 'open gallery'), used both to provide access and a place to hang out the washing.

A narrow passage leads to the main Fährnrichshof, the Ensigns' Court, where local residents once assembled around their flag (*Fahne*) in times of unrest or danger. The present courtyard dates from the sixteenth century and was once part of a nearby nunnery of St. Nikolaus, for which the street Nikolaigasse is named.

Here in one corner stands the Plane tree, casting its dappled shade over the courtyard. Several hundred years old, it was originally protected from hungry horses by an iron fence. As the tree grew thicker, the fence broke and fragments of it became incorporated into the trunk. It's a prosaic explanation when compared with the knight's sword, but like all good urban myths there is also some truth behind the tale.

Protecting Pilgrims

On the opposite side of Blutgasse stands the sprawling twelfth century Deutschordenshaus, named for the Roman Catholic Order of Teutonic Knights. Like their contemporaries the

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The Knights of Blood Alley

Knights Templar and the Knights Hospitaller, they were sworn to protect pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land, after the Crusaders had captured Jerusalem in 1099. Over the next century the Order also set about subjugating the pagan Baltic tribes of East Prussia, opening the area to German colonisation.

The Order acquired the Deutschordenshaus around 1200, with the Fährnrichshof perhaps providing a secure refuge. It is tempting to think that the narrow passageway, which could have easily been defended, might be a remnant of the original structure. Certainly the lingering memory of the knights would be enough to give rise to the legend of the sword, plunged deep into the heart of the old Plane tree.

Bloody Histories

The name Blutgasse – Blood Alley – is another mystery. Between 1369 and 1411 this thoroughfare is documented as Khotgasse, or Mud Alley, referring to its unpaved condition. Not until 1542 does its bloody appellation appear for the first time, and three explanations have been put forward to explain it.

Some have suggested a link between Blut and the Old High German Bluot, meaning a sacrificial offering, raising the tantalising possibility that an ancient pagan shrine was once

located here. Without excavating, however, it is impossible to be sure.

A second explanation dates to the reign of Rudolf von Habsburg (1278-1282), when two noblemen ambushed and beheaded some Viennese burghers here because they had voiced support for Rudolf's power rival, Ottokar II of Bohemia. The bloodied corpses were left at the scene, with the severed heads balanced on top of them. Rudolf himself is said to have passed by afterwards but let the perpetrators off lightly.

The third explanation concerns the abolition of the knightly orders in 1312. Serving monarchs as well as pilgrims, the knights



The courtyard of Fährnrichshof as seen from Blutgasse 9

Photo: Duncan Smith

amassed enormous wealth. However Philip IV of France built up such a debt that he chose to suppress the orders rather than settle the bill. Accordingly Philip accused them of heresy, and obliged Pope Clement V into agreeing with him. Many knights perished on the street outside the Fährnrichshof, thus giving rise to the name Blutgasse.

The Knights Today

Whatever the truth behind Blutgasse, the Teutonic Knights clung on to their power, and rumours of their hidden treasure, secret rituals, and continuing influence have fascinated ever since. They survived military defeat at the Battle of Tannenberg in 1410 and further suppression under both Napoleon and Hitler.

The Order today is a pastoral and charitable organisation, caring for those in need, especially in the former Communist countries and offering reasonably priced accommodation to travellers. But memories of the old days still linger, with the walls of the Order's Gothic chapel on Singerstrasse ablaze with coats of arms, and windows sporting the black cross that once adorned the knights' white cloaks. Best of all is the Order's treasury to the rear of the church, established by Grand Master Albert of Prussia in 1525. Pride of place goes to an incredible golden salt cellar festooned with fossilised sharks' teeth, which were believed to exude moisture should poisoned food find its way to the Grand Master's table, a potent reminder of just how powerful the knights of Blood Alley once were. ◇

*The Treasury of the Teutonic Knights at Singerstrasse 7 is open Tue, Thu & Sat 10-12am, and Wed & Fri 3-5pm
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