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1.

Family Life in an Imperial Capital Dreams of Belonging

Elana Shapira

Our story begins in a city obsessed with building monuments to its own glory. In 1880, the year of Ella Briggs's birth, Vienna bristled with construction activity. Magnificent structures designed in historical styles rose along the Ringstrasse, the grand boulevard occupying the imperial capital's long-outgrown city walls. The population had boomed, as the peoples of the Habsburg Empire arrived in the city, drawn by the excitement and the promise of a growing metropolis. To his citizens, Emperor Franz Joseph represented security and continuity. The last war—with Prussia, in 1866—had become a distant memory, and the popular monarch was credited with having brought peace and prosperity to a vast and diverse empire. The *Ausgleich* (political compromise) with Hungary of 1867 had strengthened Habsburg rule in Central Europe, and the Austrian Constitution of the same year, which guaranteed equal rights for all nationalities and ethnic minorities within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, fostered hopes for a new era of freedom. The grand public buildings of the Ringstrasse—the opera house, parliament, city hall, university, and many others—unabashedly proclaimed Vienna's immense pride, as well as its emergence as a capital of modern governance, education, and culture (plate 1).

Josef Baumfeld and Karoline Bryk, Ella's parents, were among the young people who came to Vienna wanting to partake of the capital's vitality and prestige. New railway expansion projects provided easy access to Vienna from the provincial parts of the empire. This encouraged ambitious men such as Josef, trained in white-collar professions, to move to the empire's capital in search of better employment opportunities and higher living standards.¹

Josef and his brother Isidor Theodor, as well as Karoline Bryk and her brothers, emigrated from the province of Galicia (today spanning southeastern Poland and northwestern Ukraine) just a few years before Jews received equal rights in the empire in 1867. Josef was born in 1840 in Lesko, a small town on the Sian River. He arrived in Vienna eager to launch his career as a lawyer. There he partnered with Ignaz Pisko (an authority on commercial law) and prospered, earning the title of Hof- und Gerichts-Advokat (Imperial Court Lawyer).² Josef's father and grandfather were medical doctors and therefore belonged to the bourgeoisie in Galicia.³ Karoline, born in 1845 in the city of Rzeszów, also came from a well-to-do family.⁴ Karoline's father, Salomon Bryk, had been a successful jeweler.⁵ His work as a diamond trader took him frequently to London, where he became so proficient in English that he translated a "famous English novel" into German.⁶ Affluent Jews often embraced the processes of modernization and Germanization in the region, and this appears to have been the case for both Josef's and Karoline's families.

When the couple married in a Jewish ceremony, those families undoubtedly bestowed blessings on them for children to come. And come they did: Moritz, in 1868; Friedrich, in 1870; and Friederike, in 1873. Then, on the day Friederike turned seven years old—March 5, 1880—Elsa arrived, the little sister who would become known as Ella. Perhaps Ella's conception had come as a surprise to Josef and Karoline, who at the time of their daughter's birth were forty and thirty-four, respectively. Close familial bonds likely developed as the older siblings helped care for the youngest one. As was the custom among Jewish families in the Habsburg Empire, Ella's parents gave each child a German and a Hebrew name.⁷

Ella was born at her family's apartment on Schottenbastei, a street in a wealthy new neighborhood to which her family had recently moved (plate 2). Their building, erected in 1870, was owned by the banker Nathaniel Rothschild and was designed by Jewish architect Wilhelm Fränkel.⁸ It was located near the financial center of Vienna's first district, where several prominent Jewish families lived. Among them were the Ephrussi family, part of the grain and banking dynasty celebrated in Edmund de Waal's family memoir *The Hare with Amber Eyes*.⁹ By the time Ella arrived in 1880, the Baumfeld family was living, and thriving, among Vienna's elites.

Although Ella grew up in the comfort of a bourgeois household, the family experienced changes small and large that shifted its internal dynamics and external situation. Moritz left home in 1888 for his mandatory year of military service, and Friedrich followed suit the next year.¹⁰ Far more destabilizing was Josef Baumfeld's prolonged illness, which became severe around 1890, when he resigned from legal practice.¹¹ That summer, Josef's deteriorating condition precipitated a move to healthier climes. After a long trip on the Brenner Railway heading south from Vienna toward Italy, he arrived at the city of Merano (then part of Austrian South Tyrol), accompanied by Karoline and their two daughters.¹² He may have rented an apartment for his family in Villa Gothensitz, an elegant pension.¹³ Surrounded by mountains, Merano offered uplifting walks along its beautiful promenades. After visits from Empress Elisabeth in the early 1870s, it had become a popular spa destination for the Viennese aristocracy, who enjoyed not only its sun and mild temperatures but also its famous thermal baths.¹⁴ The city had a growing and prosperous Jewish community, and a number of prominent Jewish figures stayed there hoping to improve their health.¹⁵ Sadly, for Josef there would be no recovery: he passed away in October of 1892, when Ella was just twelve.¹⁶

After Josef Baumfeld's death, his widow and two daughters returned to their life in Vienna, now changed forever. From a financial standpoint, it is unclear how this painful turn of events impacted the family. Here and there we glimpse signs of continued affluence. Yet from a number of moves the family made over the ensuing years to less desirable neighborhoods within Vienna, it appears that money was a concern.¹⁷

The children could not have helped much financially. Moritz was then the only child in the family to have finished *Gymnasium* and completed his *Matura* (an exam taken at the end of secondary school that students must pass in order to enter university).¹⁸ Before his father's death, Moritz had been studying law at the University

of Vienna; afterward, perhaps freed from paternal expectations, he pursued a journalistic career. He established himself as the editor of several liberal newspapers in Vienna, namely the *Neues Wiener Journal* (New Vienna Journal), *Wiener Sonn- und Montagszeitung* (Vienna Sunday and Monday Paper), and *Capitalist*.¹⁹ Once Moritz, in his late twenties, married Angelika “Ange” Dorothea Hanss in 1895, he would have needed his income to support his own growing family.²⁰ Friedrich, unlike Moritz, attended a *Realschule* (vocational secondary school).²¹ When he lost his father, he was in his early twenties and just starting to launch a career in timber sales. In time, he accumulated substantial wealth, but he could not have contributed much to the family coffers in the early years after his mother was widowed. Sister Friederike, who was nineteen when her father died, does not seem to have been employed, and Ella, of course, was still a child.

If Karoline did need assistance, as many widows would, she may have turned to relatives for help. By then, Josef’s brother Isidor Theodor was a wealthy bank director, but having the means to help is not necessarily the same as having the inclination to do so.²² It seems more likely that Karoline’s own family would have offered financial support if she found herself in reduced circumstances. The Bryk family resided in the predominantly Jewish second district of Leopoldstadt and occupied a socially prominent place in Viennese society. Adolph and Philipp Bryk, Karoline’s brothers, had successfully integrated into Viennese economic and cultural life.²³ Adolph had earned the title of Imperial Court Lawyer, like Ella’s father.

In adolescence and beyond, Ella found important role models among her mother’s family as she crafted her own sense of professional identity. Her late grandfather Salomon Bryk’s prowess at crossing frontiers and learning new languages became a part of Ella’s cultural and family heritage, remaining a source of pride throughout her life. His story likely encouraged her own frontier crossings, which began at the turn of the twentieth century. Although Salomon died about ten years before Ella was born, Ella kept his portrait, painted in miniature, as a prized possession. Other Bryk relatives may have similarly provided her with inspiration. Karoline’s brother Philipp was an acclaimed pianist and directed his own music school in Leopoldstadt.²⁴ He also led the musical society *Lyra* in Vienna, and counted among his friends Franz Lehár, famous for his operetta *Die lustige Witwe* (*The Merry Widow*). Philipp’s son Hugo (Ella’s cousin) was a conductor and composer who worked in cities across Europe, including Berlin.²⁵ Other members of the Bryk family were involved in the Viennese liberal publishing world.²⁶

For the Bryks and for many other Jewish newcomers, attaining a leading position within the arts and culture of Vienna meant not only achieving social integration but also playing a critical role as producers of Austrian culture. It is telling, for example, that outside the courtroom, Adolph Bryk positioned himself as a *Macher* (mover and shaker) in Viennese bohemian circles. A dandy, he was immortalized in Johan Strauss’s 1873 operetta *Der Karneval in Rom* (*The Carnival in Rome*) in the character of the eccentric painter Arthur Bryk.²⁷ But the very success of Jewish newcomers such as the Bryks would come to have unintended consequences—ones that in many

important ways would affect Ella's own future as an upper-middle-class Jewish woman in Vienna. As the Jewish population grew and prospered, they became a thorn in the side of Austria's conservative Christian majority, and members of emerging German nationalist movements threatened to undercut their success. Vehement antisemites in political and cultural circles attacked prominent Jewish individuals, especially those with origins in Galicia and Bukovina, criticizing their contributions to Viennese culture as presumptuous attempts by "outsiders" to teach locals their own German culture.²⁸

Galicia was considered the poorest and most backward province of Austro-Hungary. Many Galician Jews lived a marginal existence as *luftmenschen* (unanchored people), a Yiddish word, meaning to live in and from the air as a transient, indigent person, used to describe Jewish small-town traders, peddlers, and vagrants.²⁹ Many well-to-do Galician Jewish residents in Vienna who feared being tainted by the dubious reputations of Galician Jewish peddlers avoided associating with them.³⁰ We do not know how Ella related to her own family's Galician Jewish roots. In 1932 she would misrepresent her family's origins, stating they had come to Austria from Germany. This declaration was made, however, in the context of her application for German citizenship, and at a time when the contributions of all Jews were coming under increasingly violent antisemitic attack.³¹

Efforts to undermine claims made by Jewish men and women that they belonged to German culture grew stronger—even fashionable—around the turn of the twentieth century. In 1897 a seventeen-year-old Ella would have watched as Emperor Franz Joseph was compelled to approve the election of the antisemite Karl Lueger as mayor of Vienna. Lueger's hateful rhetoric included a call to boycott Jewish businesses, rants against other sources of Jewish wealth and power, and promises to "liberate" German culture from Jewish influence.

Lueger's antisemitism shook Vienna's Jewish residents, long-term and newly arrived alike. Jewish voices rose to protest his threats of violence. Felix Salten, best known as the author of Walt Disney's *Bambi*, pilloried the dangerous speeches Lueger made after his election: "Then this man comes and slaughters a Jew . . . in front of the howling crowd. On the rostrum he slaughters him with words, stabs him to death with words, tears him to shreds, hurls him to the people as a sacrifice . . . [It is his first act in power]: showing the general discontent the way to the Jewish alleys, where it can run riot."³² In this climate, some Jewish residents left in search of more hospitable environs. This may have factored into Ella's brother Moritz's decision around this time to seek his fortune in New York. Similarly, it may have motivated Ella's cousin (Adolph Bryk's son) Siegfried to pursue his journalistic career in Berlin, where he would rise to the top echelons of the city's press scene.³³ In Vienna Jewish patrons, who had largely funded the development of the Ringstrasse, endeavored more than ever to support liberal-modernist cultural institutions and art movements as a progressive alternative to Mayor Lueger's xenophobic politics.

For young Ella, Moritz served as the conduit to the worlds of contemporary politics and culture. After suffering the loss of her father, it seems she turned to her oldest

brother to fill the lingering void. The two siblings became close. As Ella grew to adolescence, Moritz introduced her to the richness of the imperial capital's arts and society, which he actively cultivated. He wrote broadly on politics and legal affairs, as well as on art, literature, and theater. In articles appearing in the *Wiener Montags-Journal* he supported modernism, even going so far as to call for a cultural renewal.³⁴ Moritz's passion for art and modern culture apparently rubbed off on Ella, who would continue to explore them both throughout her own life.

From her earliest days, when her mother or perhaps her nanny took her for walks around the neighborhood, Ella witnessed firsthand modern Vienna's institutional, artistic, and cultural emergence as made manifest in the construction of its many impressive new buildings along the Ringstrasse. The neoclassical Parlamentsgebäude (Austrian Parliament Building) was completed when Ella was three. The majestic, neobaroque Burgtheater (Court Theater) opened when she was eight (see plate 1). As she neared her tenth birthday, she would have noticed that the palatial Kunsthistorisches Museum (Museum of Fine Arts), which would house the Habsburgs' art collections, was almost finished. Ella's escorted walks through turn-of-the-century Vienna would no doubt have provided her with an inspiring view of life in a constant state of improvement. Given her family's involvement in Viennese culture, perhaps the young Ella even began to anticipate joining its exciting world of art.

But at the same time, with the rise of German nationalism and the proliferation of narrow-minded, antisemitic campaigns in Austria, Ella must also have sensed a danger. For families like the Baumfelds, the Ringstrasse represented the collective efforts of an earlier generation of Jewish patrons and leaders to shape Viennese life and culture; for conservative Catholics and populist German nationalists, it represented a threat to Viennese life and culture as they knew it. If Ella, like other Jewish residents of Vienna at the time, recognized that maintaining cultural aspirations would be critical to their continued integration and success in the city, she must have also realized that achieving those aspirations would not come without a fight.

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