

WILHELM “WILLY” SCHLAG, 1923-2011

Wilhelm “Willy” Schlag was one of the great pioneers of Austrian-American educational and cultural exchange after World War II. He played a crucial role in the establishment and development of programs and institutions that have been instrumental in the promotion of Austrian-American understanding since the 1950s, including the Center for Austrian Studies.

Willy Schlag’s initial encounter with the United States was in July 1944 as a German POW. He was captured in Normandy and interned in Nebraska, where he husked corn, served as a camp interpreter, and taught German to USAF officers from McCook Airbase. He returned home in 1946 to study law at the University of Vienna and was among the inaugural group of forty-five young Austrians the United States occupational forces recruited to send to the United States under the auspices of the Smith-Mundt Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948. Willy benefited from this foundational piece of U.S. postwar public diplomacy legislation and spent the 1949-50 academic year studying political science at UCLA.

Upon his return to Vienna, Willy was an ideal candidate for the position of founding executive secretary of the U.S. Educational Commission, a binational body established in June 1950 to manage the recently established Fulbright Program. He worked closely with key U.S. officials and organizations as well as Austrian ministries and universities to get bilateral exchanges of Austrian and American students and scholars up and running for the 1951-52 academic year. He also helped establish the policies and procedures that guided the Fulbright program through its initial years in occupied Austria. Starting in the summer of 1951, Willy escorted large groups of Austrian Fulbright grantees by train to western European ports like Genoa, where they boarded ships bound for New York, and in September 1951 he welcomed the first of many groups of U.S. grantees at the bombed-out Vienna *Westbahnhof*. He considered supporting and orienting Fulbright grantees, especially the U.S. students in Austria, to be among his foremost responsibilities. He did so with great enthusiasm, and Fulbright grantees from the 1950s remember him with great affection.

Willy understood the peculiarities of American and Austrian institutional cultures and bureaucracies, and he was a genuine diplomat who managed to negotiate Austrian-American differences and interfaces exceptionally well. In 1955, he joined the Austrian Ministry of Education, which was also responsible for the promotion of Austrian culture abroad at the time. In 1956, the Ministry dispatched him to New York City to found and direct the Austrian Cultural Institute, an institution conceived to serve as a clearing house for cultural relations between Austria and the U.S. Willy also actively reached out to the large, predominantly Jewish, Austrian exile and expatriate community in the metropolitan area, and was responsible for buying the brownstone townhouse on East 52nd Street that served as the Austrian Cultural Institute’s home until the late 1990s, when it was torn down to make way for the new Raimund Abraham-designed structure, the current home of the Austrian Cultural Forum.

In New York, Willy’s former U.S. Fulbright grantees provided him with a network of personal and institutional contacts all over the U.S., and he reconnected with E. Wilder Spaulding, a legendary cultural affairs officer who had been the first chair of the Austrian Fulbright Commission board in Vienna in 1950. In the following years, Willy collaborated with Spaulding, whose classic *The Quiet Invaders: The Story of Austrian Impact on America* (Unger, 1968) was a pioneering history of the contributions of Austrian immigrants to the American way of life.

After eleven years in New York, Willy returned to Vienna in 1967 where he spent the majority of the next decade working as a senior ministerial official responsible for bilateral cultural affairs, including a three-year stint as the director of the Austrian Cultural Institute in London. In 1976, the Austrian government wanted to endow a leading American university to establish a center for Austrian studies as a bicentennial gift of the people of Austria to the United States. It launched a project that entailed the sale of “American stars” for a few



Wilhelm Schlag, 2010.
Photo: Petra Spiola.

dollars apiece to raise funds in Austria for this gift. The *Amerikastern* project was a phenomenal popular success. As the key player for the Austrian Ministry of Science and Research in this project, Willy Schlag played a leading role in managing the competition of the fifteen U.S. institutions interested in hosting such an institution. He was instrumental in the negotiation of the agreement that ultimately led to a \$1,000,000 gift from the Republic of Austria to the University of Minnesota in 1977. This led to the establishment of the Center for Austrian Studies directed by William E. Wright, a former Fulbright student and scholar in Austria in the 1950s and 1960s, with whom Willy also worked closely during the initial years of the CAS in the 1970s.

Willy Schlag ended his distinguished public service career as the director of the ministerial department responsible for national and university libraries, federal museums, and monument protection and retired as a Director General (*Sektionschef*) in 1984. Although Willy was the recipient of many awards and the highest of honors, including *das Große Goldene Ehrenzeichen für Verdienste um die Republik Österreich*, he was a modest man with an impeccable sense of tact and a fine sense of humor.

In the Fulbright Commission archives, there is a USIS photo of Willy lugging Fulbright student luggage around at the train station in Vienna in September 1951. When I asked him in the course of an interview for a documentary if carrying luggage was part of his executive responsibilities, he reflected briefly, smiled, and said: *Ich habe es gern gemacht*. Willy Schlag was always “glad to do it.” The genuine enthusiasm and preparedness to help that he brought to so many important tasks benefited so many people and made it a pleasure to be associated with him. The Fulbright Program in Austria, the Austrian Cultural Forum in New York, the Center of Austrian Studies at the University of Minnesota, and the Austrian Ministry for Science and Research in Vienna are indebted greatly to him for his pioneering spirit and his pioneering achievements. *Er hat es gern gemacht*.

Lonnie R. Johnson
Executive Director

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