

Goodbye Schmidgasse 14

A documentary film directed by Georg Steinböck

Produced by the
Austrian-American Educational Commission

<http://www.georgsteinboeck.com/schmidgasse14.htm>



Goodbye Schmidgasse 14 attempts to tell three interrelated stories. The first is the story of the 4,500 m² building constructed in the late 19th century and situated in Vienna's 8th district from the suicides of its Jewish owners - Lothar and Susanne Fürth - after the occupation of Austria by Nazi Germany in 1938 to the restitution of the building to distant relatives of the Fürths in 2007. This is a very complex story with changing actors that reflects the many twists and turns of major events in contemporary Austrian history.

The second story is related to U.S. cultural and information policy in Austria from the U.S. Armed Force's requisition of Schmidgasse 14 in August 1945 to the U.S. Embassy's termination of its lease for the building at the end of March 2007. This story consists of two overlapping narratives: the U.S. participation in the Allied occupation of Austria (1945-1955) and the history of the U.S. Information Agency (also called U.S. Information Service or USIS) from 1953 until its "consolidation" into the U.S. Department of State in 1999. In both cases, Schmidgasse was a very important operative facility, and thousands and thousands of people worked there through the years. Ultimately the end of the Cold War and subsequent shifts in U.S. information policy diminished the importance of Schmidgasse in the grand scheme of U.S. foreign policy.



Group photo of former Schmidgasse 14 co-workers at a showing of the movie, Amerikahaus, December 10, 2007

The third story is about the Fulbright Commission, which received its space and infrastructure in Schmidgasse as an in-kind contribution from the U.S. government from the inception of the Fulbright program in Austria in 1950 until 2007. Over the years, thousands of Austrian and American Fulbright students and scholars passed through Schmidgasse on their ways to and from the United States and Austria.

The initial idea behind "Goodbye Schmidgasse 14" was to create a visual documentation of the facility that had housed the Fulbright Commission since its inception in 1950 for the historical record and to combine pictures of the house with oral history interviews with individuals who had worked there: Dr. Wilhelm Schlag, the first executive secretary of the Fulbright Commission (1950-55), who also grew up down the street at Schmidgasse 8, and Dr. Karin Czerny, an long-standing employee in the U.S. Embassy's Public Affairs Section, who worked on the premises from 1977-1999. These interviews then were augmented by encounters with a spokesperson from the U.S. Embassy, Mr. Greg Phillips, Counselor for Political and Economic Affairs, and two Austrian experts on restitution issues, in order to put the history of Schmidgasse 14 into a larger political and historical context: Mag. Eva Blimlinger, who coordinated the efforts of the "Historians Commission" responsible for reevaluating restitution issues after the conclusion of the Washington Agreement in 2001 and co-edited its publications, and Dr. Kurt Scholz, who heads the office of the City of Vienna responsible for handling restitution issues.

Georg Steinböck, the director and editor of this film, and Ralf Jacobs, the camera man engaged for this project, were on the premises of Schmidgasse 14 at the end of 2007 two months before the U.S. Embassy and the Fulbright Commission vacated the premises and captured what was needed for the purposes of

documenting the Commission's institutional history: pictures of the house and interviews. These materials have been augmented by historical photos from the Fulbright Commission archive and the Austrian National Library's Picture Archive as well as historical and personal photo material placed at the disposal of the Commission by Karin Schmid-Gerlich and Gerhard Kiss. Steinböck's ambitions and talents as a film maker - combined with the capacity of the house to serve as an historical microcosm and additional financial support from the Commission's board - led to this 30 minute documentary, which has been produced as a commemorative gesture with the intention of creating a document that can serve as an enduring part of the historical record.

The film has been augmented by a chronology of events which can be viewed separately on the DVD. It reaches from 1938 until 2007 and captures major stations in the complex history of the building in terms of ownership, tenants, restitution claims, and concomitant legal issues.

One picture is worth a thousand words! The Austrian-American Educational Commission hopes that you find Goodbye Schmidgasse 14 interesting!

Dr. Lonnie Johnson

Executive Director