
How Vienna's Socialist City Hall Put Children at the Heart of the Welfare State

BY

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Rising from the ruins of World War I, in the 1920s Vienna's socialist administration was famous for its innovative housing and public health programs. But at the heart of "Red Vienna" were its services for children, guaranteeing that even the poorest young people could share in the joys of childhood — and the foundations of a fulfilling life.

"No Viennese child should be born on newspaper." Thus proclaimed a 1932 poster for a public health campaign in the Austrian capital. The motto referred to the poverty of working-class families who, unable to afford cloth for diapers, instead swaddled their babies in discarded newssheets. But the poster also suggested how things were changing under the Social Democratic administration of "Red Vienna." It portrayed two uniformed nurses holding up newborns and, placed in front of them, a package emblazoned with the image of the Magna Mater ("the great mother" or "Mother Goddess"), a figure by the Austrian sculptor Anton Hanak. This "mother" protectively embraces two youths on either side of her, while a third child grasps at the hem of her gown from the front. Beleaguered but resolute, she appears to be marching out of her setting into an indeterminate future. The contents of the package in the photograph further clarify this depiction of working-class maternal heroism: each contained diapers, clothes, and "everything a newborn needs." Indeed, already by 1932 the Social Democratic city hall had distributed "1,272,000 diapers, 318,000 infant tunics, 318,000 infant jackets, and 53,000 infant overalls" to Viennese families.

In what would prove to be one of history's darker ironies, at the outset of the twentieth century, it was forecast that this would be the "century of the child" (as Swedish social theorist Ellen Key put it in her 1900 book of the same name). The proverbial child of the past — neither seen nor heard — had slowly migrated to the center of political discussion. This shift was reflected both in theory and practice: from Sigmund Freud's writings about infant sexuality, which hypothesized the existence of a set of autonomous, productive drives spanning a period from infancy to puberty, to reforms in early childhood education, there was a new consensus growing around the conviction that children deserved social rights. Correspondingly, they were no longer predetermined to succeed or fail based on their social class — rather, their well-being was the living proof of a society's capacity to organize itself efficiently.

The shift in thinking about children correlated to new perspectives on child and family welfare. In an effort to transcend the established form of social philanthropy built on private initiatives and charity

— insufficient because it was designed to help only the “deserving poor” and shifted the burden of welfare to elites or to the Church — the Viennese socialists were among the first in Europe to create universal welfare programs designed to alleviate childhood poverty and redress inequality in a systematic way. Promising welfare and social protection “from the cradle to the grave,” these public health initiatives reveal a political project that embraced reform and experiment. That combination proved popular: indeed, the infant packages were such a success that the opposition derisively called the votes for the Social Democrats “diaper votes.” Other initiatives — including maternal centers on the grounds of social housing complexes, where women could get information about infant disease and nutrition from health professionals close to where they lived — represented bold efforts to integrate public health services into the everyday lives of workers.

The “Red Vienna” of the 1920s represents a historic achievement of democratic socialism. Over a period of fifteen years, Austrian socialists built institutions that were designed to not only respond to the needs of postwar Austrian society, but also to address the root causes of inequality in the domains of health care, maternal care, and childcare. Children were particular beneficiaries of the programs these socialists designed — a legacy of social reform that endures to this day.

After the War

Such a situation contrasted sharply with the one the new administration had inherited at the end of the 1910s. Indeed, during World War I, Vienna had been plunged into agony — a situation the Austrian journalist and playwright Karl Kraus described as the only “possible realization” of “the conditions of decay” that had run rampant through prewar society. Children, in particular, were victims, with many orphaned, reduced to starvation diets, or left homeless. Max Winter, a Social Democrat who later became the vice-mayor of Vienna, documented these hardships in an undercover report. He examined childhood poverty in light of social inequality, writing of children who “flood the city from the outside districts each day searching for sustenance at the heels of high society. There, where the happy rich gather to promenade and stroll on the *corso*, small figures in pitiful, threadbare, dirty clothes offering little protection to thin, wretched bodies, slide between rustling silks.”

The inequality Winter observed was compounded by the arrival of distressed refugees fleeing from violence on the Eastern Front. Between 1914 and 1915, more than two hundred thousand refugees fled to Vienna for protection. Many would return home, but around a tenth of them remained in the city. The majority of them were Jewish, exacerbating xenophobic and antisemitic sentiment in the postwar capital. Joseph Roth, a Jewish-Austrian writer from Galicia, described the conditions of Jewish children living in the city’s Leopoldstadt district: “The Eastern Jews don’t live any better than the Christian inhabitants of this district. They have lots of children, they are unaccustomed to hygiene and cleanliness. They are detested.” The Social Democrats, he continued, “wary of being thought ‘a Jewish Party,’” did no more than any of the other parties to help Jewish families struggling at the margins. These latter were instead left to the mercy of private charity and Jewish institutions.

Roth’s account of Jewish refugees’ living conditions was published in 1927, the same year the Social Democrats rolled out their infant care packages program. Although limited to “babies born in Vienna,” the packages were part of a health care campaign that aimed to reduce infant disease and promote hygiene universally, regardless of a child’s class, religion, or ethnicity. Their chief proponent was the Social Democrat, health care politician, and physician Julius Tandler. A Jewish convert to Catholicism, Tandler also acted as the director of the city’s first Anatomical Institute, which was regularly the target of antisemitic rioting due to its perceived “high enrollment” of Jewish students. Aware of these threats, which also emanated from right-wing colleagues, Tandler diligently recorded attacks on the institute in a journal he titled “chronology of terror.”

Keen to redress the problems that Roth described in his report on Jewish life in the Leopoldstadt district — particularly in the areas of hygiene and disease — Tandler set about implementing key reforms in the city’s management of public health. In a lecture held in 1923 — published in the *Viennese Medical Weekly* in three separate issues the following year under the title “Marital and Population Policy” — Tandler wrote of the specific social conditions that had been introduced into Austrian society by the war:

war has brought with it a redistribution in society: some have seen improvements, while the majority have seen a decline in their living standards. The proverb says “it is not shameful to be poor,” a truth that may be applied to the individual. Yet poverty is a stain on any society that tolerates it.

“The Basis of All Other Forms of Welfare”

On May 4, 1919, the Social Democratic Party of Austria won the majority of votes in Vienna for the first time in history — a year after universal suffrage was instated in Austria. From 1920 onward, the Social Democrats were in opposition to the Christian-Social Party in national government, but they controlled Vienna’s own city hall until they were banned by the incoming Austrofascist regime in 1934.

Seeking to remove the “stain” of poverty, the Vienna Social Democrats developed welfare reform policy on two fronts. In practical terms, they argued that individual welfare could be most efficiently managed through comprehensive family welfare reform. Furthermore, they tied welfare to public health policy, designing a system whose running required the coordinated deployment of social workers, doctors, nurses, teachers, childcare workers, and midwives.

On June 30, 1921, Tandler presented four major points that concisely stated the welfare reform goals of the Social Democrats:

1. Society has an obligation to provide help to all in need.
2. Individual care can only be efficiently managed through family welfare.
3. Social welfare reform is preventative care.
4. The organization of a welfare system must be cohesive and unified.

On the same day, the Vienna city council ordained the establishment of its new combined welfare department. On July 9, 1921, the *Worker’s Newspaper* reported that “a central department, which would combine municipal departments dealing with the care of the poor, child welfare, and public health” was being planned. The article noted the plan to construct a building to bring all of these matters “under the same roof.”

Tandler argued for an approach to childcare that made it the “basis of all other forms of welfare.” An inveterate aphorist, he summed up this philosophy with the shibboleth “he who builds children palaces tears down prison walls.” One such palace was a children’s home that he was instrumental in designing: a community child protection center, the first of its kind in the world. Founded in 1925 — replacing a

city orphanage that Max Winter had described as “Vienna’s greatest shame” — it served as a point of “transit” for orphaned or neglected children on their way to foster homes or youth centers; here, children received medical care and were placed under the supervision of trained social workers and doctors. Between 1925 and 1934, more than sixty-three thousand children and adolescents had transferred through the center. Ever matter-of-fact about the origins of children’s suffering, Tandler characterized the families and children who passed through the home with these words:

One mother might come with a newborn baby because she’s homeless, while another will come because the father is a drunk, and the third because her husband has no work . . . They present a terrible picture of children’s suffering, which is an abomination of capitalist society.

Tandler’s view of family welfare had already been articulated by the Austrian social theorist Ilse Arlt, a major figure in the history of social work, who founded one of the first schools for the education and training of social workers. With the assistance of Tandler’s skillful political maneuvering, she helped give legal status to the occupation of “social worker” as early as 1917. In 1921, she published a textbook on the basic elements of social work, where she argued that the welfare of the family and the general welfare of children were not separate goals. She disapproved of removing youth from “unworthy” parents, writing “so many completely underestimate the benefits of family life and seem to prefer a situation where they separate children from their families throughout the day. If we succeed in separating children from their families, how will we ever see any improvements in family life? Is not the only path to preventing difficulties in the family to support, promote, and recognize the qualities of loving parents in every possible way?”

Arlt’s theories about family well-being provided the foundation for the training of social workers in Red Vienna, so-called “care workers.” Their numbers grew rapidly: from 1918 to 1931, these posts more than tripled in Vienna, and by 1934, they had grown sevenfold. Care workers worked in various sectors of society: as assistants in kindergartens, hospitals, schools, birthing centers, and in homes for women. They also paid home visits to families, where they gave instruction on hygiene, nutrition, and childcare.

Tandler’s third point to the city council stipulated a correlation between disease and social environment. Childhood disease prevention, one of his areas of concentration, was a field in which this comprehensive new approach to social welfare was tested. In the 1920s, Viennese children were afflicted with a host of serious diseases: 51 percent of school children between the ages of two and six had contracted tuberculosis, and 10 percent of children suffered from severe forms of rickets. Rickets, which was linked to poverty and a lack of sunlight, could lead to serious deformities when left untreated. To counteract the effects of the disease, the city constructed three “sunning stations.” These efforts did not go far enough for everyone: in a pointed recommendation, Else Feldmann, a reporter and writer for the *Worker’s Newspaper*, argued that all Viennese children be taken immediately to the grounds of the old royals’ Schönbrunn Palace to roam and play on its sunlit meadows.

Maternal centers became another key coordinate for distributing information about hygiene and health: they were directed to provide women with extensive information about syphilis, its symptoms, its effects on pregnancy, and its etiology. In 1924, the city spent 144 million paper crowns (kronen; around 2 percent of national expenses, in 1924 estimated at 8 billion kronen) on building new health centers dedicated to distributing information about syphilis specifically. These efforts were rewarded with a drop in the overall number of syphilis cases in the city.

Model Experiments

In June 1929, Tandler visited Atlantic City for an international medical congress. He enjoyed the visit, reflecting bemusedly that the Americans had received him to the tune of the “Emperor’s Hymn” — the anthem under the deposed Habsburg monarchy. He was impressed by American medical technology, even envious of their laboratories, but critical of the country’s privately managed health care system. In a visit to New York, he was approached by the city’s secretary of public health, who confessed to Tandler without any rancor that that New York lay far behind Vienna in terms of its medical and social health infrastructure. In Atlantic City, Tandler gave a lecture comparing the poverty of Vienna to the vast wealth of America: “It is not in spite of being poor, but because we are poor that we are tasked with the special responsibility of doing all that is humanly possible to build our social welfare system.”

A further area in which Social Democrats pioneered new approaches in child welfare reform was education. In 1917, Otto Glöckel, a Social Democrat who served as the first minister of education in the Austrian First Republic, published a pamphlet on school reform that he titled *Tower of the Future*. It laid out in clear terms the state’s moral responsibility to raise children out of poverty through education. “Children,” he wrote, “are a joy, but they also represent a responsibility and a duty.” His pamphlet described fathers who returned home exhausted after long workdays, mothers who searched for work in addition to caring for the home, and children who were forced to supplement household incomes through their labor in their most vulnerable years. For Glöckel, school had to become a “tower of the future,” a mediator between the state and the family, and he made the instilment of democratic values, the promotion of creative individual development, critical thinking skills, and a separation of church and state his chief reform goals.

Education reform found an even more strident voice in Otto Felix Kanitz, a socialist and the main proponent of an anti-authoritarian education movement. From 1920 to 1925, he served as the director of “Kinderfreunde,” an independent organization founded in 1908 with the goal of educating proletarian children that was incorporated into the Social Democratic Party in 1921. In 1919, Max Winter commandeered parts of the Schönbrunn Palace for the institute, which combined a training school for educators with a school for children. Twenty young children and one hundred school-aged children lived together in a collective with educators. Kanitz’s ambitions were less modest than Glöckel’s, and he aimed to completely overturn “bourgeois” pedagogy in favor of a model that would educate proletarian children in revolutionary class consciousness. This would express itself through solidarity, collectivism, moral freedom, and revolutionary discipline. In a text titled *The Proletarian Child in Bourgeois Society*, Kanitz wrote: “No longer subjugated, no longer robbed of the joys of childhood, no longer threatened by the lie of being objects of charity, these children can grow into proud, free, complete, and creative individuals.” In addition to running the Schönbrunn Palace institute, Kanitz also organized two summer holiday camps for proletarian children in 1919 on the grounds of what had been a refugee camp in the Austrian town of Gmünd.

Social Democrats and socialists in Red Vienna put forward policy reform that completely changed the infrastructure of early childhood education in Vienna, combining public health campaigns with educational reform. All kindergarten-aged students received their own “health data sheets,” and the city’s kindergartens opened their doors at 7 a.m. and remained open until 6 p.m. They provided children with meals, and educators modeled their teaching on Montessori or Fröbel pedagogical methods. The city of Vienna also created its own training institutes and courses for kindergarten educators, who had the opportunity to attend podium discussions, lectures, and other additional educational venues for further training.

Crushed

The experiment of “Red Vienna” ended in 1934 after the Austrofascists came to power in the

aftermath of the Austrian Civil War. Many Social Democrats fled Austria, including Julius Tandler, who left first for China and then for the Soviet Union. He died in Moscow in 1936. Ilse Arlt was forbidden from teaching due to her “partial Jewish heritage,” the Nazis shut down her social work school, and she lived out the years of the Third Reich in poverty. Max Winter immigrated to America in 1934 and died in Hollywood in 1937 after being stripped of his Austrian citizenship for perceived “hostility to Austria from abroad.” Otto Glöckel was imprisoned by the Austrofascists and sent to an internment camp. He died in 1935, shortly after being released. Joseph Roth drank himself to death in Paris in 1939. Else Feldmann was murdered in the Sobibor extermination camp in 1942, and Otto Felix Kanitz was executed in Buchenwald in 1940.

In a sinister epilogue to the chapter on family welfare reform in Red Vienna, the Nazis absorbed some of its aspects into their own system. Viewing children as vectors of racial hygiene and as necessary for the reproduction of German culture, “family welfare” under the Nazis was reformulated into a system of racialized welfare. An example of this was the National Socialist aid organization “Mother and Child,” which organized medical care for “Aryan mothers” throughout their pregnancies and sent “care workers” from a National Socialist nurses’ association to provide medical and social support for mothers at home. They were, ironically, assisted in these projects by Tandler’s own eugenic writings on public health. In his efforts to reform social welfare in Vienna, Tandler had written about people as “organic capital” and speculated on the viability of life for those afflicted with psychic diseases, the severely handicapped, and wounded veterans. Now, the Nazis decided that these categories were to be eliminated.

Today, the “Magna Mater” once sited in front of Tandler’s Children’s Home stands at a fountain in Vienna’s twenty-third district. The mother and her children are surrounded by snakes, which were meant to symbolize the “dangers of the metropolis.” In the end, the sculptor’s fears about the metropolis proved misguided: danger did not emerge from the vices of the city, but from forces that sought to control it. Yet the positive legacy of the Red Vienna Democratic Socialists continues to live on: in 1948, the infant packages were universally reinstated after having been abolished by the Austrofascists in 1934, and almost a hundred years later, families with registered residences in Vienna are eligible for “diaper backpacks” from the city for their newborns. In a time of a global health crisis, vast wealth inequality, and the systematic mismanagement of public health institutions in the West, Red Vienna offers much inspiration for the reforms we need today.

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