

75 years after his death, Vienna struggles with Freud

23 September 2014, by Philippe Schwab

Even before Sigmund Freud fled Hitler on the Orient Express from Vienna in June 1938, the father of psychoanalysis and his ideas about sex, dreams and cocaine divided opinion in the Austrian capital.

And even now, 75 years after his death in London on September 23, 1939, Freud and the groundbreaking theory of mind that he fathered still lack the recognition they achieved elsewhere.

"Nobody is a prophet in their own country, and this is particularly true of Freud and Vienna," Monika Pessler, director of the small museum at Berggasse 19, the spot where Freud lived and worked for 47 years, told AFP.

Because he and his many followers had to escape, "it was elsewhere that psychoanalysis really took off—in London, New York, Buenos Aires. In Vienna it still fights for recognition today, even at universities," she said.

Freud was born in 1856 in the present-day Czech Republic, moving aged four to Vienna, at the time a glittering imperial capital and a haven for the leading minds of culture and science of the time, many of them, like Freud, Jewish.

Qualifying as a doctor, Freud over the decades sought to treat mental disorders by investigating a patient's unconscious mind through "free association" of ideas and the analysis of dreams and libido, including in childhood.

Such revolutionary ideas, formulating for instance the Oedipus Complex theory—involving sexual attraction to a parent of the opposite sex—and pushing cocaine as a cure for mental problems won him admirers but also many detractors.

After Adolf Hitler entered Vienna to cheering crowds in March 1938 and "annexed" his native country into the Third Reich, the octogenarian

Freud did not at first recognise the dangers facing Austria's Jews—65,000 of whom would ultimately die at the hands of the Nazis, with another 130,000 forced to flee.

But after several visits by the Gestapo and the brief arrest of his daughter Anna, the old man, already suffering from cancer, decided finally to leave for London and settled in Hampstead.

He was never to return, dying the following year aged 83, and the Nazis publicly burned his works.

Rat man

Today, Vienna's Freud museum attracts some 75,000 visitors every year to see where his many famous patients, given nicknames like "rat man" or "wolf man" in his case notes, would take to the famous couch—now itself in London.

"Freud? He is Vienna's most famous face the world over. Thanks to literature and cinema, and Woody Allen in particular, he became a kind of global pop culture icon," Vienna's tourism chief Norbert Kettner told AFP.

While Freud's ideas have in many ways been superseded since the middle of the 20th century, he remains one of the world's best known intellectuals, with terms like "Freudian slip" and "ego" part of everyday language.

"Even if they don't have a profound understanding of his works, lots of people feel that his discoveries concern them directly," Kettner said.

But of the people visiting the museum, many buying Freud T-Shirts—not least the risqué and famous "What's on a man's mind" cartoon of a naked woman incorporated into Freud's face—only one fifth are Austrian.

To coincide with this week's anniversary, several

events are attempting to redress the balance.

The Vienna Psychoanalytic Society (WPV), founded by Freud in 1908, is starting to put online his entire writings including some 11,000 letters, while the Belvedere art gallery is staging a major exhibition.

A black banner will meanwhile cover the exterior of the Freud museum, and a BBC radio interview with Freud after his escape from Vienna—the only surviving recording of his voice—will echo in the stairwell.

"In the end I succeeded in acquiring pupils and building up an International Psychoanalytic Association. But the struggle is not yet over," he is heard to say.

More information: Website: www.freud-museum.at

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