

MY COMPLIMENTS AND CHEERS!

Up Close and Personal: Conrad Seidl

Beautiful women are his hobby, according to the confidential files of the Austrian Ministry of Defence, in which the CV of Conrad Seidl, political journalist and Beer Pope, is painstakingly recorded. 48 hours spent at the side of one of Vienna's most dazzling personalities can enrich one's own life and thoughts considerably. Many-sided, colourful and very hard to grasp precisely – these qualities are what has created the myth of this patron saint of beer, this Homo Austriacus.

12 noon. We're meeting in Hollerbusch, one of Seidl's favourite pubs, well-hidden in the first district, and yet only a stone's throw from the city hall and the parliament building, the university and the newspaper offices. I'm greeted with a kiss on the hand, requisite and expected behaviour for a genuine Viennese gentleman and connoisseur of women. Usually, he meets the politically prominent here, whenever confidentiality is required and something big is going down.

Conrad Seidl is a military journalist, or perhaps more precisely a political reporter for the STANDARD, and in particular responsible for questions regarding national defence. A reconnaissance man so to speak – and one who served in that division of the army during his national service.

Conrad was born on 11 August 1958 in Vienna. His father is privy counsellor (Hofrat) for the Lower Austrian provincial government, and his mother is a civil servant and comes from a prominent officer's family. The son can sense from an early age that his parents' characters are too diverse to truly harmonise with each other.

Although or perhaps precisely because he feels he's inherited a propensity for his mother's brooding introversion, he models himself on his father, who is open,

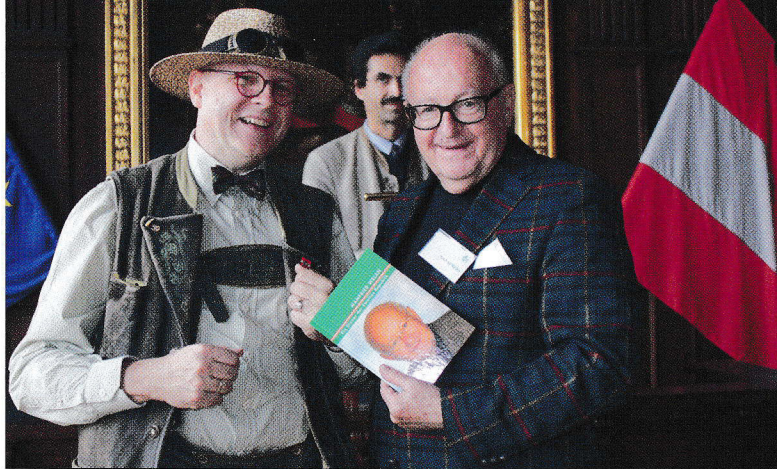
fun-loving, and full of life, an inspiration for Conrad. "Like so many of her generation, my mother was never able to live the life she wanted."

Always a bit of freedom

In one way, however, she served as a sterling example for the growing young man: "Always stand up for those who are weaker" – the chivalrous words of his mother Margarethe Seidl become Conrad's leitmotiv: Let those be heard who are otherwise ignored. Get involved. Use language as an instrument.

As early as 1968, at the tender age of 10, Conrad makes the decision to become a political journalist. Inspired by the dramatic events in the CSSR, he set his professional goals at a time when other kids were dreaming about flying to the moon. "Austria was a neutral country, and we were afraid the Russians would come back and overrun us. I thought at the time, I'd like to learn to analyse and to report on these kinds of situations and their consequences."





Another side of Conrad Seidl: Seidl with Em O Univ Prof Dr jur Manfred Welan, one of Austria's most important authorities on the constitution

Young Conrad is a loner. He ambles alone through the museums in the first district, where he's growing up and where he attends mass every day at St. Stephan's cathedral. He knows very early that his path will not be ordinary. He does, however, let his hair grow down to below his waist and he takes part in demonstrations for peace and justice, and is interested in any- and everything except school. Writing and only writing captivates him, and so he writes day and night. School newspaper, school radio, he arms himself with anything that might prove useful in his approaching career.

After passing his comprehensive exams, he does his stint in the army, then takes his first job at IBM in programming, to keep from putting blinders on too early. "So many journalists haven't learned anything besides writing. They can't see beyond the typewriter carriage or the computer screen. I wanted to dive into something completely different, to gain perspective."

At the age of 21, he comes to the notice of the International Atomic Energy Agency and negotiates with them a well-paid 4-year half-day contract, so he has time to continue to ply his pen. In the morning he writes computer programme, in the afternoon, whatever he feels like. "I never wanted to do just one thing. Anyway, I always have to feel a bit free." Freedom – spiritual as well as physical – plays a significant part in the life of Conrad S.

His lovely and clever wife of 29 years, Viktoria, describes him without rancour as "Single with familial obligations." She has been almost solely responsible for raising their two children, Titania (24) and Leander (18). Their daughter studied art, and has exhibited paintings inter-

nationally, and their son is going to study business. Their home is a loft in an artist's quarter, built in an old bread factory – and all three are very laid-back about the fact that Father only sleeps two thirds of the year at home. The rest of the time he spends travelling the land with missionary purpose and intent.

His position as 'Beer Pope'

After all, the head of the family is a pope, and how many people can make that claim. The title 'Beer Pope', by the way, has been copyrighted by Conrad Seidl. The publishing company where he published his first book about beer and its culture suggested the title to him. Conrad recognised immediately the hidden potential in the name, and there's one thing he knows for sure: Where beer is concerned, he's a hard man to fool. Over time, his passion for hops and malt has made him one of the most sought-after beer experts worldwide.

It's been 20 years already since the Maisel Brewery voted Conrad the best German-speaking beer journalist. He's been repeatedly distinguished by the North American Guild of Beer Writers

for his articles in American Brewer about brewing technology, and he has enjoyed many other international awards. Books, Columns, Seminars – "Herr Seidl" lets no opportunity to spread his gospel of hops go to waste.

At the end of 1999, Conrad Seidl's 'Bier-Katechismus' is released, followed two years later by the cookbook 'Aus Bier-Küche und Bier-Keller', co-authored with his wife. Conrad Seidl's Beer Seminar is available as a book with an accompanying DVD, or more precisely, as a double DVD with an accompanying book. Additionally, every year he brings out a new edition of his famous Beer Guide, the 13th in 2012.

In it, he discusses draught culture from the Bodensee to the Neu-siedlersee, the length and breadth of Austria. Almost 1,200 Austrian taverns are subjected to critical tastings, and only the very best are distinguished by a corresponding number of beer mugs. 'Brew daring beers!' is the heraldic exhortation of the guide's author, and so it comes as no surprise that such exotic sorts as 'Bonifatius Barrique,' 'Spekulatius Ale,' or 'Pirate Queen Porter' (aged in a rum barrel!) have been awarded special prizes by Seidl.

The 'Pirate Queen Porter' can be tasted at one of his favourite hangouts, the 1516 Brewing Company, an American-style pub complete with its own in-house brewery. Horst Asanger is the brewery owner and a friend of Seidl's and shares his predilection for strongly flavoured beers.

Conrad was happy to grant the tavern owner's wish to invite good brewers with unusual beers to Vienna, and in February 2004, Bill Covaleski from the Victory Brewing Company in Pennsylvania

Seidl among politicians: (from left to right) the Austrian Minister of Agriculture Nikolaus Berlakovich, Conrad Seidl, Lower Austrian Governor Erwin Pröll, and State Parliament President Hans Penz



visited 1516 and granted them the licence to brew the Company's beers. Ever since, American hops have been bubbling away in the pub's tanks, and Seidl is happy. After all, ever since then his favourite beer has only been a few steps away.

Be your own brand

Anyone who's underway with the beer guru soon learns how multilayered this seemingly simple product of the brewer's art can be. Tastes of peach, banana, grapefruit, chocolate, smoke, or bacon – the panoply of flavours can be extended almost indefinitely. For the hardened palate, the chili beer, which brought tears to the eyes of a Russian military attaché, might be worth trying. The moral of the story: With regard to diversity, very little can compare with the hoppy brew, and what goes for the beer goes for its Pope – multifaceted, surprising, and always ... something else.

Mr Seidl went through many different guises before arriving at his current identity: long hair, short hair, blonde hair, no hair, big glasses, square glasses, small, round glasses, grey suit, wacky suit, no suit. By the time he was thirty, at the end of the eighties, he had found himself. Since then, his head is devoid of even the tiniest hair, his spectacle frames are exclusively red, and the traditional Austrian look in clothing is almost obligatory.

Mr Seidl wears rustic 'lederhosen' only – custom cut by Austria's most recognised tailor, of course. "Be unique and recognisable" is his current motto. He advises anyone who wants to have long-term success to create his own brand identity.

His book 'Die Marke Ich' (Be Your Own Brand), which he and the market researcher Werner Beutelmeyer brought out in 1999, continues to sell well. It describes the art of self-presentation in the smallest detail, a kind of styling consultancy at the highest level. If, however, you are of the opinion that you can pigeonhole Mr Seidl because of his exacting and constant cultivation of his image, you couldn't be more mistaken. Just when you think you've got him in the right-sized box, he jumps out again, like a jack-

in-the-box and thumbs his nose at you, exclaiming "Na, na, na, na, na! You'll never catch me!"

Seidl, the paradox

Conrad Seidl is a paradox, exhausting yet fascinating. In the eighties, for the conservative daily paper the KURIER, he assumed the role of the alternative-green political journalist. He is passionate about ecological politics, and as a result of his perseverant news coverage, the construction of a hydroelectric plant on the Danube can be prevented. He rails against the dieback of forests and cheers on alternative energy methods. He has the enmity of industry, but the love of the farmers, to the extent that they award him the prestigious Hans-Kudlich-Preis for exceptional service in agriculture.

His enthusiasm for ecological issues remains undiminished. He continues to write a regular column, 'Conrad Seidls Zwischenruf' (Seidl's Interjections) for Ökoenergie, the eco-paper with the largest distribution worldwide. He has worked as a reporter and political commentator for the STANDARD since 1989, responsible among other things for questions concerning national defence and empirical social research. For books like 'Wehrhaftes Österreich' and 'Der Homo Austriacus in einer veränderten Welt' he was awarded the National Medal for Intellectual National Defence in 1988.

Although his detractors might ascribe him chauvinistic tendencies, nothing could be further from the heart and soul of Seidl the patriot than blind faith in any system. To adopt any idea without rigorous examination he would regard as anathema. He belongs to no political party, and describes himself as a sceptical conservative, but you could also call him an idealist. "On the staff of the conservative paper I was the token left-winger, on the left-liberal paper I'm the token right winger."

'Your Beerness!'

Who could be surprised to learn that this pope's favourite beer is called 'Hop Devil,' and his holiness, at least as far as drinking is concerned, diabolically possessed?



Conrad Seidl in conversation about tax questions in 1999

But make no mistake, questions of faith are no joking matter for Mr Seidl. Trying to discuss the merits or malarkey of religion proves to be difficult, if not impossible.

On a quick tour of Vienna's churches, however, Conrad shows that he can also take a lighter view of things. As a good Catholic, he genuflects before the entrance to the hallowed halls, a pious gesture, which he finds easier since eating less (without, of course, cutting down on his drinking!). "Since I lost 15 kilos, I get up a lot faster."

If you ever have the pleasure of strolling through Vienna's fabled lanes at the side of 'his Beerness' (a term coined years ago but still used by his son Leander), allow me to give you a few pointers:

- Drink nothing but beer, preferably for 24 hours, and without getting drunk.
- Show great respect for farming.
- Do not try to question the validity of a frozen chicken/ fighter jet exchange.
- And always remember: In Vienna, anything is possible.

"Unfortunately, I'll never be God in heaven" are the beer pope's parting words; but then you see him striding away, his imposing figure with its flowing coat, his hat sporting snow goggles, and you know – one day, he might just make it. □

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