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St. Georg's graduates in Vienna: The unknown face of Turkey

Forty years ago Vienna was a different place. I had to get used to it, Cinar Sözer remembers the 1970's when he came directly from feisty and untamed Istanbul. And there was another thing that occupied him: the High German he had learned at the Austrian St. Georg's High School wasn't always compatible with real-life between Vienna and Innsbruck. The sense for dialects came as time went by.

Vienna has changed to the positive. The students that come from Istanbul to study in Vienna have also changed, In Sözer's days you were in a lost position, had to find your way through the bureaucracy and university jungle alone, there was no graduate network and most of the students studied engineering or medicine. Today they enroll in all kinds of faculties, from business administration to journalism. There are contact persons, scholarships, legal assistance, all offered by the St. Georg's graduates association in Vienna. As the President Sözer is responsible for the activities of the association. They just celebrated its 10th. year anniversary.

"Our main idea was to show the unknown face of Turkey", the doctor says. A picture that goes beyond the guest worker "because there are also Turkish academics, artists, famous authors and business men." Several went to St. Georg's High School in the middle of the Beyoğlu district. The furore of the banned Christmas celebration at a German-Turkish high school has bypassed the Austrian High School. Unlike the other high school the Austrian High School had a Christmas party, cookies were baked, songs were sung.

The prestigious school abroad – one out of seven worldwide – was founded in 1882, at a time when Istanbul was called Constantinople and when it was a vivid center of monotheist religions. It is the history of this metropolis that the association wants to emphasize. "We, the inhabitants of Istanbul come from a multinational society. We want to show that we have lived together peacefully, that we have shared joy and sorrow", Sözer says. A planned photo exhibition for next year will refer to that. The photographer Paul Landl has photographed houses of prayer in Istanbul, the pictures show the Blue Mosque, the Armenian-Gregorian church, the Byzantine Hagia Irene, the Chora-church. Those melancholic-seeming pictures will be exhibited at the Vienna University Campus before they'll go on tour.

The exhibition should have opened this year but the fragile bilateral relations have upset those plans. The association sees itself as a bridge builder, a link, a meeting point of both countries. That may work with a photo and art exhibition at the gallery of the architect Walter Stelzhammer or with discussion evening, lectures by historians and balls at Hofburg. Sözer calls the mosaic of events "laboratory experiments".

Taken all this engagement into account you wouldn't think that Sözer initially wanted to go back to Turkey after his medicine studies. But he met an Iranian woman here, later their son was born here. "Entirely by chance I have stayed in Austria", Sözer says. The school has prepared him very well for life. Learning languages – something that the St. Georg's High School upholds – is still one of his hobbies. The school has also put emphasis on analytical thinking and accuracy and – very helpful – punctuality.