



## Mastering Entertainment

### Travelling Showpeople in Upper Austria from the Nineteenth Century to the Present

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#### ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

The article provides insight into the as yet not consistently documented history of travelling showpeople (owners of funfair rides which are operated by them at temporary fairs) in Upper Austria from the end of the nineteenth century to the present. Its focus is on three aspects: (1) the interrelation between technological developments and the popular entertainment medium that is the fairground, which is reflected in its technical equipment and aesthetic manifestations, and (2) the economic conditions to which travelling showpeople are subject. It is also going to discuss the question of how travelling, the movement that determines this profession, shapes the biographies and life concepts of travelling showpeople. (3) a reflection on the transformation of their trade taking one of their ancestors, Johannes Meyerott (1840–1909), as a point of reference.

*Keywords:* travelling showpeople, history of entertainment/technology, genealogy, oral history

#### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG AUF DEUTSCH

Der Artikel gibt Einblick in die bis jetzt nicht stringent dokumentierte Geschichte der fahrenden Schausteller\*innen (Besitzer-und Betreiber\*innen von Karussellen, Autodrom u.ä. auf temporären Jahrmärkten) in Oberösterreich vom Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts bis heute.

Drei Aspekte stehen dabei im Fokus: (1) die Wechselwirkung der technischen Entwicklungen mit dem populären Unterhaltungsmedium

Jahrmarkt, die Ausdruck in dessen technischen Apparaturen und ästhetischen Erscheinungsformen findet, sowie in den ökonomischen Rahmenbedingungen, denen die fahrenden Schausteller\*innen unterworfen sind. (2) Weiters wird die Frage diskutiert, wie das Unterwegssein, die Bewegung, die diesen Beruf bedingt, die Biographien und Lebenskonzepte der fahrenden Schausteller\*innen prägt. (3) Ausgehend von einem ihrer Vorfahren, Johannes Meyerott (1840–1909), wird der Wandel ihres Berufsstandes, ihrer Lebens- und Arbeitsbedingungen und der Unterhaltungsformate am Jahrmarkt reflektiert.

*Stichwörter:* Fahrende Schausteller\*innen, Unterhaltungs-/Technikgeschichte, Genealogie, Oral History

## INTRODUCTION

Travelling showpeople work temporal fairs with their rides and shooting galleries. During the season (from mid-March to mid-November), they mostly live in caravans. Their family histories/enterprises can be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century.

Well into the twentieth century, travelling showpeople were included in the heterogenous group of 'Fahrende' (travelling people), which was legally and socially marginalized and faced with prejudice for centuries. To this day, due to these past experiences and because of their particular conditions of work and life, they still form a community of their own, which in Austria has remained almost under-studied. They may now own permanent residences, but during the fair season they lead quasi-nomadic lives and are constantly on the move; their work structure is the family unit and their family enterprise tradition is essential to their self-image and work ethic; in addition, their work is dedicated to the amusement of others and, accordingly, takes place while others enjoy their free time. These living conditions and experiences entail a strong social bond within showpeople families and, likewise, within their trade.

My paper contributes to life writing by compiling their biographies and exploring their trade.

In so doing, I rely first of all on ethnological methodology, allowing me to capture their current everyday life, their history, traditions, and culture of this trade in our society: in a genealogical manner, by compiling an extensive family tree of the Upper Austrian showpeople families. I also undertook field research, by following them and their work to different locations over the course of several seasons. I observed and filmed them as they set up and operated their rides, so I could understand the

exact procedures and underlying conditions of their work. The film that resulted from the footage, 'FAHREN' ('RIDING', 2020, 29:51 min), mirrors their current work routine in front and behind the scenes of the fair. In interviews with two families of showpeople carried out parallel to this field research, they spoke about their historical and current conditions of life and work, family histories and traditions, and the technological development of their rides. After a brief historical summary on the 'fair-ground' dispositif, I will discuss the different artistic-scientific methodological approaches and the insights gathered through them so far, which taken together amount to a comprehensive example of life writing.

### TEMPORARY FAIRS: CARNIVAL, GAMES, AND TECHNOLOGY

The fairs I am interested in are a rural phenomenon. The fair in its contemporary form, which has evolved from a religious context (parish fair) and being a trading place of products towards the economisation of entertainment, consists of different 'set pieces'. By the fair I understand a heterotopian public space<sup>1</sup> where the audience can move unconstrained by everyday conventions. This temporally restricted space has its own rules, with visitors there 'allowed' to both literally and figuratively 'let themselves go'; at the fair they find excitement, can enter into states of intoxication and interact with each other in relative freedom from social status and conventions. The fair as we know it today, which offers various possible experiences of intoxication, evolved only over the course of the nineteenth century. Yet according to Mikhail Bakhtin, the origins of this anti-bourgeois, popular 'alternative world' can be found in the carnival of medieval times. A characteristic of the carnival is its insular nature in space and time in which everyday order and hierarchies are legally suspended by turning them into a joke. For people otherwise faced with the fear of death, the hallowed, and the power of earthly rulers, laughter here carries a provocatively liberating momentum.<sup>2</sup>

The distinctive feature of the fairs I attend to, is that they are annual. To this day, the fairs only come to an Austrian village or town once a year. People look forward to this social group experience as a change from the everyday routine. From medieval times to modernity, amusement formats used to be just a secondary aspect next to the religious ceremonies at sacral church fairs and to trade at fairs.<sup>3</sup> Minstrels, jugglers, showpeople, singers, magicians, fortune tellers, artistes, animal voice imitators, illusionists and musicians, presentations on magnetism, electricity, and such using the *laterna magica* entertained and 'informed' the people.<sup>4</sup> The church fairs may have profaned and the fairs changed their character during the centuries, but one thing has remained the same: they offer a

community experience in which various rituals such as tests of courage, first inebriations and other rites of passage, such as brave carousel rides, can be performed and experienced collectively.

According to Sacha-Roger Szabo, Roger Caillois's definition of 'play' and the four categories of play developed can be extended to the fair-ground. Caillois defines play as means to waste time and assets, describing its formal characteristics as follows: it is a voluntary activity, in a spatially and temporally limited framework; play is furthermore an uncertain and unproductive exercise, the course and result of which are not clear from the beginning, which does not produce any new materiality and which lacks a logic of exploitation. A visit to the fair is a regulated activity that, although subject to conventions, follows its own rules. It could be regarded as a fictive activity that creates an alternate reality and puts you into a different state.<sup>5</sup>

The four play categories of chance/gamble ('alea'), competition ('agon'), mimesis/role playing ('mimikry'), and the ecstatic play ('ilinx') that rests on the irritation of physical and sensory perception, were all to be found at the fair in different formats until the beginning of the twentieth century. Today the fair is dominated by the 'ilinx' category of play,<sup>6</sup> meaning the generation of physical, intoxication-like effects with the help of rides, while other aspects/formats like 'mimikry' (imitation, here in the sense of: disguise, masquerade) are hardly to be found.

All across of the more industrialised Europe and United States exhibition shows dominated the fair up until the 1870s, with technology being one of many topics.<sup>7</sup> The role and disguise play ('mimikry'), which allows to escape into another reality, manifested at fairs from the end of the nineteenth to the first third of the twentieth century through ghost trains, show booths, freak shows, ethnological expositions, cabinets of curiosities, menageries, illusion shows, and also through cinema with all of its precursors (photography, panorama, cinematographs, phono-bioscopes). The presentation and the active trying-out and learning of new technologies played an important role. Stefan Poser points out that since the late nineteenth century the two main functions of the fair were to learn about technology on the one hand, and to be confronted with technology on the other, with both taking place in a playful manner.<sup>8</sup>

Technology became pivotal only for the modern fair, which evolved during the time of high industrialisation during the nineteenth century. Rides, amusement and test-your-skill attractions increasingly gained in importance.<sup>9</sup> Over the course of the eighteenth century carousels, (Russian) swings and slides spread across Europe, with knowledge transfer from the Middle East and also Russia playing a crucial role.<sup>10</sup> Mechanical





Unknown Photographer, Bioscope at the Urfahrner Markt around 1910, NORDICO Stadtmuseum Linz, Neg.4094

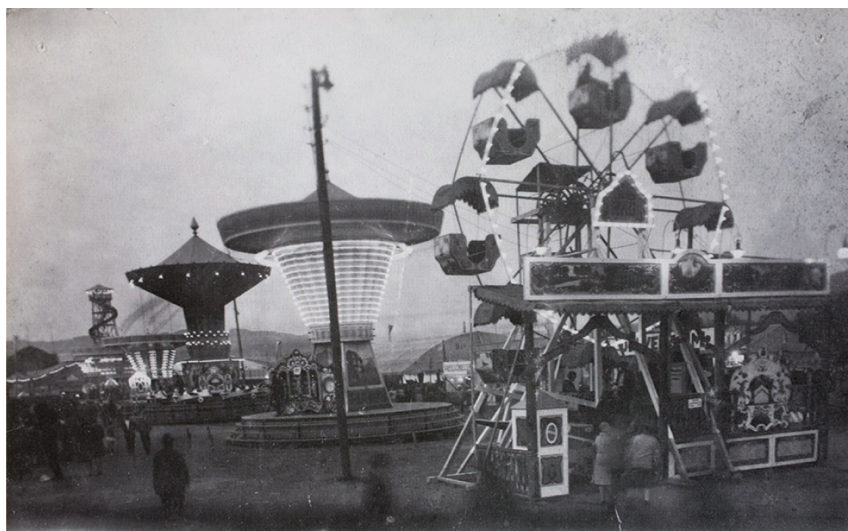
rotation devices were first used for festivities at European courts, spread to stationary fairgrounds during the eighteenth century and became a popular fair amusement at public fairs from the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

Industrialisation triggered the development of the fair as we know it today in three respects: firstly, by the newly formed social class of workers and employees who supplied the audience; who secondly, as a consequence of the new organisational form of work and the 'free time' that resulted from it, sought entertainment. And thirdly, because the machines, the technological possibilities that were developed during industrialisation, were introduced into the fair by the advent of mechanised rides. Large-scale rides such as big wheels necessitated engineering constructions. Mechanical skills alone were no longer sufficient. Building 'flying constructions', with lever arms, pneumatic systems, hydraulics, and parts rotating around several axes, evolved into a special branch of heavy machinery engineering.<sup>12</sup>

By the year 1900 the significance of conventional 'illusions' had declined and visitors preferred a particular function of the amusement park: that of the sensory, physiological, which is to say physical stimuli.<sup>13</sup> Back then about half of the attractions, including carousels, small

railways, big wheels and big swings, were already steam-powered. Shortly thereafter, the first roller coaster was constructed. Fairground structures that are similar to those of today had evolved, as had its technological shaping and fairground entertainment's focus on physical irritations. This development started at permanent fairs and, with some delay, also arrived at temporary fairs. The delay can be attributed to the financial means of travelling showpeople on the one hand, and to the lack of means of transportation on the other.<sup>14</sup>

For the showpeople, the production of amusement is hard work. They do not play for the audience but toy with them, by creating a particular atmosphere and inciting their emotions. Technology is of eminent importance in this process. This 'fairground blend' of the playful and the serious, of amusement, the commercial range of offerings, and the pressure as a business owner to adapt to the audience taste makes the fairground become a mirror of society.<sup>15</sup> Since the mid-twentieth century, for instance, the fair's role as a place of amazement and horror has become obsolete, as has its role as a venue where technological novelties, 'sensations', alleged 'miracles', and physical shows are presented. Over the course of the twentieth century, new technologies and media have become available to all social classes, and are now part of everyday life. New media (starting with radio, to television to the internet) keep taking over functions of entertainment and information, which can now be



Unknown Photographer, Urfahrner Markt, 1920s, Avi family private archives, Wels

consumed from home, individually and at any time. Social experiences as well as physical experiences that are generated by carousels can still be consumed quickly, cheaply and safely at the fair which stands in sharp contrast to sports that would have similar effects on the body but require background knowledge and training, meaning more time and sometimes high costs.

## TRAVELLING SHOWPEOPLE

### Method 1. A Genealogy of A Family of Upper Austrian Showpeople

In the 2017 exhibition ‘200 Jahre Urfahrner Markt’<sup>16</sup> at NORDICO Stadtmuseum Linz, the travelling showpeople were presented as the so-called third pillar of Urfahrner Markt, with the others being the beer tent (since 1911), and the ‘Marktfieranten’ (market merchants) who sell merchandise and food. I came to know several showpeople from different families, some of which have worked at Urfahrner Markt for more than a century. I was fascinated by their unusual way of life and work, as well as the long tradition of both the trade and the families.

In numerous conversations with the showpeople families Schlader, Bachmair, Rieger and Avi, they loved to mention that they are all related ‘somehow’. Yet since there was no collective family tree, they knew neither the degrees of relationship nor the links. I compiled a family tree by gathering information from individuals of the Upper Austrian showpeople families, who, as the tree now shows, are ‘one’ big family.

### The Family Tree

The Schlader family has been a well-known presence at many fairs in Upper Austria and the Austrian Salzkammergut for generations. Today exist several family branches and businesses that exist under the name. They all trace back to Georg Schlader (1841–1909) and his wife Theresia (née Juretko, 1847–1928), respectively their sons Blasius (1881–1941) and Rudolf Schlader (1885–1958). The showpeople family Bachmair is related to this family branch by marriage, as is the Avi family who will be addressed in detail later on.

The great showpeople dynasty Gschwandtner also goes back to Blasius Schlader and his wife Caroline (née Wallersdorfer, 1884–1949). Blasius’s daughter Leopoldine (1905–1985) married Ernst Gschwandtner (1901–1967), who also came from a family of showpeople. Today the showpeople

family Gschwandtner is also the owner of several businesses operating at fairs and is related to the Wiesbauer family by marriage. The latter focuses on tent rental these days.

The still presently active showpeople families Rieger, Deisenhammer and Straßmeier are connected to the Sonnberger family. The showpeople couple Karl (1882–1920) and Aloisia (née Parzer, first marriage name Deisenhammer, 1887–1938) had five children, the so-called ‘Sonnberger Girls’. One of them, Theresia Sonnberger (1913–2004), was the ‘first European Globe of Death rider’. In the 1930s she and Heinrich Straßmeier performed highly successfully under the stage names of ‘Heinz and Gitta Gordon’. They entertained the audience by riding motorcycles inside a steel ball, the ‘Globe of Death’. Theresia Sonnberger left the trade and became ‘privat’ (private), while her sister Olga (1905–n.a.) married into the showpeople family Rieger. Another ‘Sonnberger Girl’, Aloisia (1914–1993), married Heinrich Straßmeier (1907–1990), with their descendants working as showpeople to this day.

Maria Deisenhammer (1904–1994), Aloisia Sonnberger’s daughter from her first marriage, built a business in the 1930 that is still run by the Deisenhammer family today.

The family tree indicates that many showmen and showwomen married partners from the showpeople trade. Which itself suggests the same socialisation which implied that the entire life had to be subordinated to work, to the ‘business’, and that life would be spent travelling. Some also chose partners, predominantly women, ‘from private’. Some children of showpersons became ‘private’. That term, which is still in use today, reflects the showpeople’s above mentioned attitude towards life, which makes a distinction between those who belong to the showpeople and those who do not.

What can also be seen from the family tree is the decline in the number of children. As a consequence of the lower number of children and, in addition, the freedom to choose their own profession (since the 1990s), a handover of the family business is no longer ensured. The showpeople’s personal assumption is that the future will see smaller businesses bought up by bigger showpeople companies, with only a handful of big companies coming to dominate the market. It is and has hardly ever been the case that entrepreneurs from ‘private’ entered into the showpeople business, the reason being the unusual way of life it required. Which can not simply be learned, especially the attitude that the great amount of work is accepted not just for profit but because of passion. What is more, it is not economically feasible to hire any more additional workers in place of the practise of sharing the workload within the family structures.<sup>17</sup>

My research into the ways of life and work of today's travelling showpeople subsequently focused on two (extended) families.

The Schlader family consists of several businesses with different specialisations, which enables them to jointly operate at individual fairs.

Sabine Schlader (\*1971) owns and operates two dodgems, two shooting galleries, and shares a chairplane with a cousin. After her father Rudolf III. Schlader (\*1938) retired in 2000, she took over part of the business. Her father still joins and assists her.

On weekends and during the holidays she is also joined and assisted by her son Philipp Rudolf Schlader (\*2004), who is training to be a lorry mechanic. It is quite safe to say that he will take over the business.

Rudolf IV. Schlader (\*1974) is Rudolf III. Schlader's nephew. His speciality within the joint family is children's rides. Next to their other jobs and education, his mother, wife, and two kids occasionally assist in the business. A second line of business that Rudolf IV. Schlader has established is the event rental of his rides (company/family celebrations). In addition, he is the event organiser personally in charge of coordinating the fairs in Traun and Leonding. He will also be able to hand over his business to his two children.

The second family is represented by the couple Erich (\*1954) and Elfriede (née Spitzer, \*1955) Avi, who today are operating and travelling with several children's rides. Their extraordinary (working) lives, their routes, as well as their ancestors will be discussed by this text in detail later on.

## Method 2. The Documentary Film 'FAHREN'/'RIDING'

After working on the exhibition and the family research, both of which reflected the historical context of the fairground, I wanted to get to know and at the same time document the present-day life and work of showpeople. I went on the road with the protagonists mentioned above. In 2017/2018 and 2019 I joined the Avi couple and the Schlader family on their routes through Austria. As the means to document their day-to-day work I chose film, itself a medium of motion and a fairground attraction in its beginnings. Movements, of the showpeople, of their rides, and of the visitors, are the film's major theme.

I travelled alone with camera and sound, in order to be as flexible as possible in reacting to the work situations and to disturb as little as possible the work of the showpeople and their labourers.

I spent day after day at various locations where showpeople were setting up their rides, following their work with my camera in order to acquaint myself with the individual steps and their duration. Using the





Setup of a dodgem, Altaussee, Filmstill of *RIDING*, 2020



Setup of a dodgem, Sabine Schlader with her father Rudolf III. Schlader and her son Phillipp, Filmstill of *RIDING*, 2020

camera's viewfinder, I was simultaneously working on the visual representation of these operations. This brought me close to experience the time-consuming, physically demanding work that is necessary to set up the 'machines'/rides. The interaction of human bodies and machines became the focus of my interest. The process made me realise the demand in time and physical effort necessary to produce a brief amusement for the fair visitors. Most surprising about it was the time-consuming and hard physical labour that is still required to set up the rides. The dodgem, which has also been an essential and cherished ride at temporary fairs since the 1950s, takes a particular lot of time. Transport and setup of the dodgem may have become easier thanks to a two-column construction and hydraulically foldable elements. It can now be transported on a single lorry trailer (excluding cars and ticket wagon). Yet it still takes 3–4 people almost two days (at any weather) to position and level hundreds of wooden blocks, in order to bring the steel floor into a horizontal position.

The setup of other rides, such as the Tagada or the Round Up, was and is rationalised through folding mechanisms, hydraulics, and the use of cranes, in particular as regards the use of as few labourers as possible, as they are very hard to find these days.

The documentary film 'FAHREN'/'RIDING' follows the production and operation of the temporary spectacle that is the fair over the course of one season in present-day Austria. It provides insight into the mechanisms



Disassembly of a Tagada, Filmstill of *RIDING*, 2020



Sabine Schlader working in her dodgem, Filmstill of *RIDING*, 2020

of the fairground—into those of the rides and their mechanical aesthetics, and into the travelling showpeople’s work in front and behind the scenes of the fair.

### Method 3. Interviews/Oral History: ‘At Home’ in a Nomadic Way of Life

In line with my artistic research practice, in which I have frequently dealt with biographies and their transfer into presentation in various media (theatre, mappings), I approached the topic of showpeople through their biography as Karl Schlögel ‘Everything comes together in the biography: the individual, the universal, the human being, the “character mask”, the zeitgeist and the individual temper, trend and chance (...). Places (...) give evidence about upbringing, education, careers, fates. They flank life stories, they mark paths of life’.<sup>18</sup>

In numerous interviews with the Schlader family and the Avi couple my focus was on the question of how the travelling and being in motion required by their profession shapes their respective concepts of living and their biographies. This inherently included the reflection upon the changes in the showpeople trade over the last century, as well as its future. The focus was especially on the question of how the travelling and being in motion required by their profession shapes their respective concepts of living and their biographies.

Showpeople of today describe themselves as entrepreneurs and managers, as enthusiastic hard workers. They are self-employed all-rounders capable of practising several professions: machinists, electricians,



craftspeople, blacksmiths, lorry drivers, and accountants. Not only do they repair and tweak their rides, they also (re)build a lot, e.g. their caravans and ticket wagons, warehouses, and even their own residences. They call themselves masters of improvisation, as each location and setup can confront them with unforeseen challenges for which there are no standard solutions.

A large part of their work is taken up by travelling. Even though all showpeople now have permanent residences and do no longer live in a caravan all season long, they are still constantly on the move between the venues and their homes. Both Sabine<sup>19</sup> and Rudolf IV. Schlader<sup>20</sup> describe this being on the road in positive words. They particularly appreciate this aspect of their job and like to call it 'Reisen' (travelling). Sabine Schlader enjoys the variety of different places and the people she gets to meet there. Important to her is the independent, varied and challenging work outdoors. Neither Sabine Schlader can picture herself in an office job with regular working hours nor can Rudolf IV. Schlader. He would also feel insufficiently challenged by an eight-hour day, as he usually works a 14-hour day.<sup>21</sup>

They disagree with the hypothesis that the notion of travelling showpeople is still associated with a so-called anti-bourgeois lifestyle. Until the twentieth century, this prejudice pertained to three categories which were mapped out by Markus End and which Birgit Peters refers to: an alleged lack of identity due to the lack of a permanent residence, parasitic behaviour, and a lack of discipline.<sup>22</sup> Today's showpeople own permanent



Rudolf IV. Schlader at work, Filmstill of *RIDING*, 2020

residences, put special emphasis on performance and work, and family ties are also of eminent importance to them.<sup>23</sup>

Neither Sabine and Rudolf IV. Schlader nor Erich Avi feel that they are now faced with this prejudice against their profession or way of life. Erich Avi remarks<sup>24</sup> that he used to have different experiences in the past. The saying 'Räumt die Hendl und die Wäsch weg, die Zigeuner kommen!' (Clear away your chickens and laundry, the gypsies are coming!) was still commonplace in his childhood in the 1950s and 1960s and relates to the above mentioned long-lasting structures of prejudice against so-called 'Fahrende' (travelling people). Beginning around 1900, this term aimed at summarising the ever-heterogeneous group of poor people, mobile traders, itinerant healers, quacks, itinerant artists (theatre actors and puppeteers, artistes and tightrope walkers, athletes and magicians), as well as Sinti and Roma.<sup>25</sup> Today, it seems, the residents of the respective villages and towns are well aware what a demanding job being a showperson is, not least because of the professional use of heavy technical equipment such as cranes.<sup>26</sup>

There is another societal fact that confutes the above mentioned hypothesis. It is rooted in the change of attribution of the term 'nomad'. Mobility has become a matter of fact for many professions in today's neo-liberal society. It includes a called-for and required flexibility and has often become a prerequisite for a career path in both the academic field and in the private sector. Today the label of 'nomadic' as a lifestyle is used with a positive connotation. The theoretical figure of the nomad that was introduced in the 1980s by the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari has since stood for a high degree of mobility, freedom, for crossing frontiers and anti-conformism.<sup>27</sup> The term nomad has become self-referential in various professional environments, such as arts and culture, the so-called creative industries, in the spheres of media and IT, and in management. Yet it is only voluntary mobility that is assigned a positive connotation. This positive connotation excludes the (involuntary) movements of refugees, migrants, and yet again of Sinti and Roma.<sup>28</sup> With these (groups of) people, the structures of prejudice of being parasitic, of lacking discipline spring into action even today, and are also activated by the political sphere. They are not associated with a 'nomadic lifestyle'.

My hypothesis is that the difference to showpeople and the lifestyle mentioned above is to be found in the 'learning' of said mobility. Showpeople consider mobility as natural from an early age and, in their own words, it can rather be classified as a 'need'. The self-definition as formulated by Rudolf IV. Schlader<sup>29</sup> and Erich Avi<sup>30</sup> correlates: one cannot learn being a showperson (which is factually correct, since there is no apprenticeship for it). It is a calling, a passion with which they were practically born. They



Elfriede and Erich Avi in their caravan, Filmstill of *RIDING*, 2020

all worked and went on the road from early childhood. Their parents' workplace was also their playground. If they no longer went to school as itinerant pupils (which applies to Sabine and Rudolf IV. Schlader), they would still travel with their families on weekends and in the holidays. This passion involves that the enormous amount of work(time) required by the job is willingly accepted, with the same going for the financial risk. As a consequence of this calling they are eager to 'set out' in spring, plus they do not want to stop working, despite the statutory pension scheme, which they naturally do make use of. Rudolf III. Schlader is living proof of this model of living. He retired in the year 2000 and handed over his business to his two daughters. Yet he still joins Sabine Schlader in all of her travels and is an important part of the workforce.<sup>31</sup>

All of the showpeople that I interviewed stressed that they feel at home wherever they work. It makes no difference whether it is their permanent residence or a workplace with their mobile accommodation unit. Since most of the locations repeat every season, they also describe their arriving there as 'coming home'.

### Routes and means of Transportation

What showpeople view critically about their present-day mobility is the increased frequency of fairs at which they can respectively have to operate. Modern lorries have made transport easier and faster, but this has

also increased the number of fairs operated at as well as the distances travelled. Sabine Schlader operates at 25–27 locations per year, while her father only used to do 18. Profits, however, have stagnated or tend to decrease, which is due to higher fees and lorry maintenance costs. Because of the length of the season as well as the number of her labourers, she cannot operate at any further locations.<sup>32</sup> And Rudolf IV. Schlader estimates that he spends 70 per cent of his working hours driving, as none of his labourers owns the relevant driving licence.<sup>33</sup>

Erich Avi, who used to live out of a caravan throughout the year with his parents Gertrude (née Schlader, 1935–2017) and Roberto Avi (1928–2008) until the 1960s, still used to be an itinerant pupil. The route, and in turn the small number of places they operated at, can be retraced in his distance education record.<sup>34</sup>

The season began in spring in Linz, at Bulgariplatz. Repairs on the rides were made there, while money was earned on the side with the stalls. The next location was Urfahrner Frühjahrsmarkt (spring market), also in Linz. These places are only a few kilometres from each other, yet back then they had two to three weeks for the move and the setup/dismantling work. Today they drive 300 km or more on a given day in order to set up a carousel within a few hours. The route went on through several small towns in Upper Austria: to Steyr, Stadt Haag, and to Innsbruck in Tyrol, in to the Alps. On their way back they stopped at Rieder and/or Welser Messe (having returned to Upper Austria), in order to end the season



Sabine Schlader transporting her dodgem, Filmstill of *RIDING*, 2020







Unknown Photographer, Transport of a swing, 1920s, Avi family private archives, Wels



Unknown Photographer, Rudolf III. Schlader transporting his rides by train, 1966, Archive Rudolf Schlader



Unknown Photographer, Christine Schlader on the carousel she later sold to the U.S., 1932, Avi family private archives, Wels

(1840–1909) did a hundred years before. The following section reconstructs the family history of the Avi/Meyerott family since the end of the nineteenth century.

### From Upper Austria to The Middle East

Until the 1990s, Erich and his spouse Elfriede were showpeople traveling in Austria and Germany. In the mid-1990s, Erich Avi designed the upside-down ride ‘Typhoon’ (600 m<sup>2</sup>, 200 t), which they took on a journey from Hamburg to Antwerp to Cyprus, where they stayed for several years.





Erich and Elfriede Avi transporting their ride 'Typhoon' through Oman, 2004, Avi family private archives, Wels

After that they travelled with 'Typhoon' through the Middle East, with stops in Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain, among others, onwards to Dubai and then to China. They worked in Shanghai, where Erich Avi was general manager of a big amusement park, for one and a half years. They embarked on this journey without prior knowledge of languages or places, with themselves behind the wheel of their heavy road trains, of course. The labourers were always hired locally. The so-called 'Rekommandierkommandos' (announcer's commands; 'Step closer! Come aboard! Fasten seatbelts, please!', etc.) were read by Elfriede Avi using phonetic transcriptions of Arabic. The Avi couple eventually sold 'Typhoon' to Dubai, where it has remained in operation to this day. After 10 years abroad they returned to Austria and decided to carry on with small rides and without employees. They like to rent out their rides and have only a small number of fairground dates per year. During the off-season they travel around the globe, also owing to the fact that their (grand)children live(d) in Dubai, the U.S., and in Asia.

This biography links Erich and Elfriede Avi to his great-great-grandfather. At the end of the nineteenth century, Johannes Meyerott (1840–1909) also took his panorama on a voyage that brought him as far as the so-called 'Orient'. His 'Wanderbuch' (travels record),<sup>37</sup> in which the permits for the respective venue had to be registered, makes it

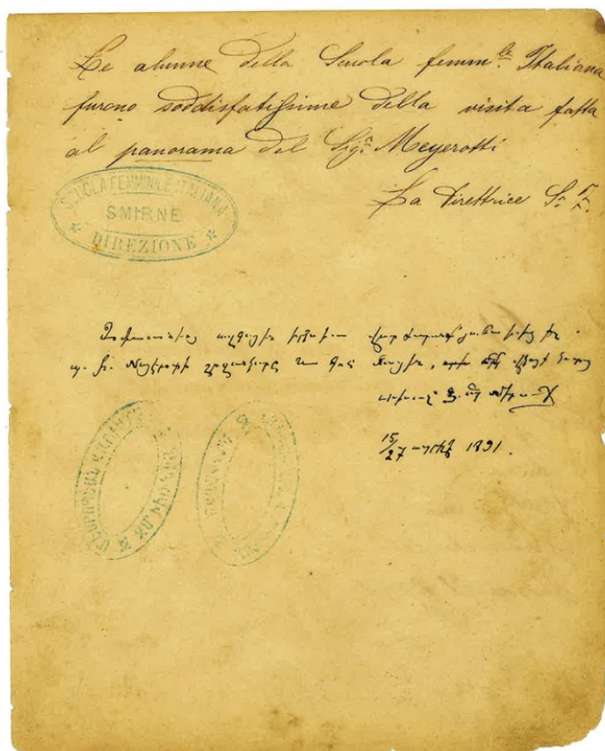




,Typhoon', 2004, Avi family private archives, Wels

possible to retrace the route, yet incoherently, as individual pages are lost. Johannes Meyerott travelled through what then was the Austrian Monarchy (South Tyrol, Czechia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia) to Smyrna (now Izmir, Turkey), where he displayed his panorama in 1891. His means of transport was horse and cart. It can be assumed that he took a ship to get from Greece to Izmir.

The panorama (also known as 'Kaiser-Panorama') was a pastime amusement that was popular in the second half of the nineteenth century. Peepholes allowed several people at the same time to look at an automated sequence of stereoscopic images series. Most of the motifs shown were exotic, but there were also erotic ones. The age of the panoramas ended when cinematography was invented in the year 1895. Johannes Meyerott ceased operations in 1905 and died in 1909 in Urfahr/Linz, Upper Austria. His daughters Auguste (n.a.-1936), Franziska (n.a.) and Emma (n.a.), and his son Georg (n.a.) carried on the travelling show-people trade in various manners. Georg Meyerott travelled with a 'Cosmorama' (a variation of the panorama), which put on display attractions



Wanderbuch (travels record) Johannes Meyerott, 1880–1896, Avi family private archives, Wels

from all over the globe. It is no longer possible to retrace the route and how long he travelled with it, since all that has survived is an undated announcement/description in Italian.<sup>38</sup> Johannes Meyerott's daughter Auguste worked as a wolf tamer, among other things. From 1905 to 1914, together with her husband Ferdinand Seitz and on her own after his death, she ran a travelling cinema. Other than fairs, its venues included inns and multi-purpose halls. In 1914 she settled down and founded the cinema in Weiz (Styria).<sup>39</sup>

Meyerott's other daughters, Franziska (married name Schneider) and Emma (married name Strobl), on the other hand, operated until the 1930s with a photography stall, a swing boat and shooting stalls, as evidenced in photos from the archives of the Avi family. These stalls were



Unknown Photographer, 'The Royal Biograph' of Auguste und Ferdinand Seitz, around 1912, Archiv Annenhofkino/Privatbesitz, <https://www.museum-joanneum.at/blog/in-bewegung-geraten-wanderkinos-in-der-steiermark/>, date accessed: 08/07/2019.

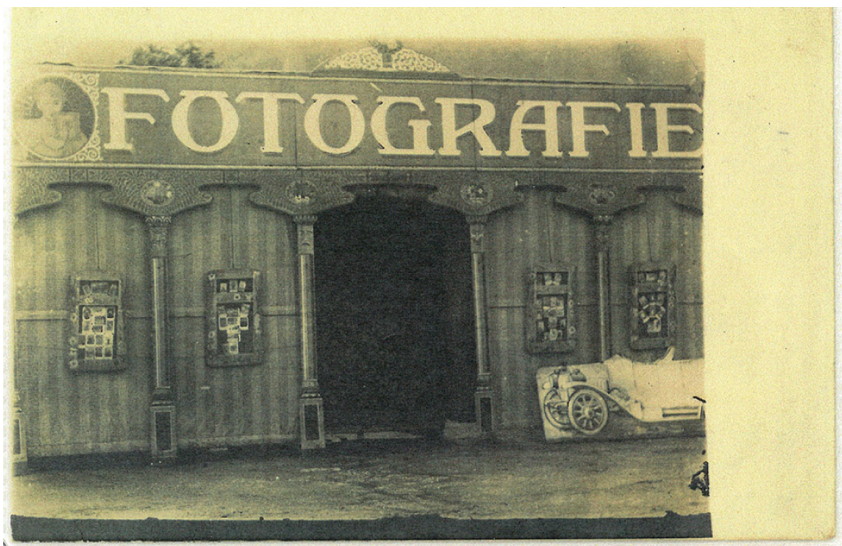
easy to set up and could be transported on a caravan. Meyerott's granddaughter Franziska (née Strobl, 1907–2003) and her husband Robert Avi (1904–1989) took over the operation of the swing boat and the photo stall.

The operation of the swing boat in respect of its discontinuation shows two changes in how fairs are operated: today it is only used at nostalgia fairs, as its setup is too laborious and time-consuming. And the other change is that visitors would be patiently standing still inside, waiting for the swing to start moving automatically, since visitors are no longer used to making a ride move with their own body.

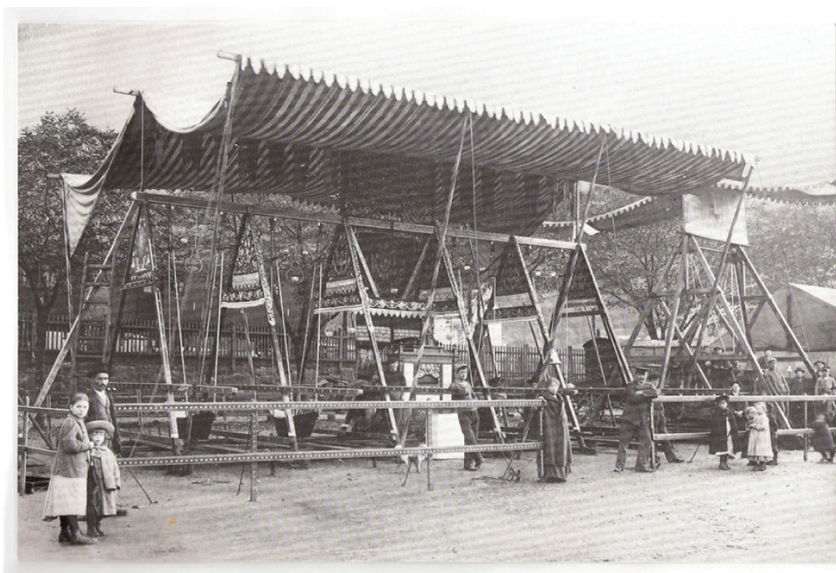
### Outlook

At the fairground, once and for a long time the venue where the latest technological developments, innovations, and 'sensations' were presented, the moving, heavy apparatuses of the rides now feel anachronistic. In the age of digitisation, confronted with the 'entertainment machine'





Unknown Photographer, Photo stall of Franziska (née Strobl) and Roberto Avi, 1930s, Avi family private archives, Wels



Unknown Photographer, Swing of the Avi family in Bozen, 1899, Avi family private archives, Wels

that is the smartphone, these machines seem like relics of a bygone era. In its present-day stereotypical repetition, the role of the fair as a mirror of the respective technological developments, desires and dreams has become obsolete. But even today, the desire for physical experiences, for the irritation of the senses and for an atmosphere of the unusual, for the out of the ordinary to be experienced by a community, make the temporary spectacle that is the fair attractive and alluring. Even if the rides at smaller Austrian fairs, which include the Tagada, dodgems, Round Up and chairplanes, have remained the same for decades, they are still hugely popular. Due to the high investment costs, these attractions are not going to change in the near future. More spectacular and newer rides can be found at larger fairs (e.g. Salzburg, Linz/Urfahrer Markt) and are operated by showpeople from Germany, as Germany offers more options to bring these rides into operation. The travelling showpeople, despite increasing difficulties to find labourers, growing bureaucracy and fees, have a relaxed view regarding their future. They see themselves in a long tradition of creative all-rounders who have already weathered many (technological) changes in their trade and in audience taste, and who will be able to do so in the future. The renaissance or innovation of new fairs and public festivals in smaller villages and also towns is evidence of the continued interest in this format of entertainment, and therefore also for the profession of the travelling showpeople, no matter the size of their sphere of action.

The life writing based on various research methods—genealogical research, oral history of the showpeople, the gathering of their memories and views, and ethnological field research and interviews on their current everyday lives—provides insight into their trade and their particular model of living. As present as fairs may be in urban and rural areas of Austria, as yet unknown is showpeople's role in them. Taking individual biographies of showpeople as examples, life writing enables us to follow the transformations of mobility technologies and (entertainment) media since the eighteenth century. Their change and influence on industrialised western society is mirrored in the fair itself, as it is in the biographies of these showpeople.

The research into the life writing of and, simultaneously, the life writing on the travelling showpeople of Austria will be continued by working through the Avi family archive, which holds travel records, correspondences, and numerous photographs since the end of the nineteenth century, and, through the transformation of the culture/technology/media of entertainment which make evident the contemporary technological developments as well as the zeitgeist in this example, be put in a cultural studies context.



Setup of a carousel, Filmstill of *RIDING*, 2020

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