

Austria, Then and Now

In the footsteps of Kurt Hielscher (1881–1948)

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Armed with a photo book nearly a century old, Casper Molenaar steps into the footsteps of German photographer Kurt Hielscher (1881–1948) and travels across Austria. His mission: to locate the exact spots where Hielscher made his photos and to try to capture the images again.

From an early age Kurt Hielscher's developed a passion for hiking and exploration. This led him to traverse across all around Europe. When World War I broke out in the summer of 1914, he found himself unexpectedly stranded in Spain. He decided to make the best of it—wandering the country on foot with his camera. Gradually, he gained recognition by giving lectures and organizing exhibitions.

After the war, he published the photos in a book: *Das Unbekannte Spanien* (1921). A new genre was born: the photo travel book. In a specific format, each page featured one photo with a short description in five languages, printed in photogravure. European leaders invited Kurt Hielscher to create similar photo books of their countries. This led to a whole series of country photo books, including one about Austria, published in 1928. Hundreds of thousands of copies of his books were sold.

During World War II, much of his work and all his negatives were lost. After that, Kurt Hielscher faded into obscurity.



Kurt Hielscher (1881-1948)

Discovery

More than twenty years ago, I stumbled upon Kurt Hielscher's Yugoslavia book from 1926 at *De Slegte*, a secondhand bookstore in Amsterdam. I was studying Eastern European Studies with a focus on the countries of the former Yugoslavia. When I opened the book, I was captivated immediately. What stunning photographs! Printed in photogravure, they had a beautiful sepia-like sheen. It almost looked 3D and gave me a uniquely authentic and nostalgic feeling. Some photos invited me to further explore the countries of the former Yugoslavia. I looked at the images and kept thinking: I have to go

there! The book cost 30 euros, and I remember me hesitating—I was still a student at the time and I found it quite expensive. Kim, my beloved, gave it to me as a birthday gift on the condition that I would actually do something with it.



Casper Molenaar with Kurt Hielscher's Austria photobook from 1928 at the Kalvarienbergkapelle in Graz.

But what? That became clear right away: to search for the places where Hielscher's photos were taken and rephotograph them. Maybe it would show the impact of the wars in the 1990s? Maybe not—but either way, it seemed interesting and fun to do.

With Kurt Hielscher's photo book in hand as a travel guide, I visited and rephotographed a first series of locations in cities like Šibenik, Split, Trogir, Mostar, and Sarajevo. Back then still analog and in black and white. Each time, it felt special to "step into" the old photo by Kurt Hielscher and later see the result at home. Flipping through the book, over time it increasingly felt like my book, with more and more familiar places in it.

When Kim and I got our kids, the book ended up on the shelf for over ten years until I saw a Facebook post featuring photos from Kurt Hielscher's book about Yugoslavia. The post had thousands of likes and hundreds of comments. Then, I realized that the book was hardly available and most of its photos not even to be found online. I felt that I had to share them.

A week later, I launched my Facebook page about the Yugoslavia album, where I began sharing the then-and-now photos I had already made, mostly from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Later, I also traveled back again to Croatia, Slovenia, Kosovo, and Macedonia to find other locations from the book to rephotograph Kurt Hielscher's photos.

Rephotography

Over the years, I became increasingly interested in Kurt Hielscher himself. I got in touch with his grandson in the US, who told me more about his background. I also reached out to others who were involved with Kurt Hielscher, some of whom were also

rephotographing his images. I purchased two more of his books, including his first one—about Spain. In the spring of 2019, I visited the Alhambra in Granada where I was able to rephotograph more than twenty photos. It kind of started as an experiment, but I went all in that day and truly got hooked.

There's something magical about rephotography. In the present, you can feel the past with the old photo in your hand

There's something magical about rephotography. In the present, you can feel the past with the old photo in your hand—and with a bit of research, also what has happened in the meantime. The rhythm of the preparation... Where could this place be? The curiosity about what it might look like today? Then actually going there, reviewing the results at home, aligning the photos, researching the history and background, sharing the result and receiving reactions—it became almost addictive. I was also able to acquire the other Kurt Hielscher photo books, including *Österreich, Landschaft und Baukunst* from 1928. A Facebook page and a website were launched.

Austria

My familiarity with Austria was mainly based on skiing there as a child with my parents, but the 304 photos in the book continuously invite to explore the entire country. Kurt Hielscher opens his book with ten stunning photos of Salzburg. On my way to the Balkans, I had passed the city dozens of times, but last summer it finally happened. I started on the other side of the river Salzach at the enchanting and well-preserved Schloss Mirabell. Not much had changed there.



In the gardens of Schloss Mirabell, Salzburg, 1928.
Photo: Kurt Hielscher.



In the gardens of Schloss Mirabell, Salzburg, 2024. Photo: Casper Molenaar

A first thunderstorm didn't ruin the fun and even spoiled me with a beautiful rainbow. Then I crossed the Marko-Feingold-Steg, the footbridge over the river, into the old town.

In the end, I managed to rephotograph six out of ten photos there and I'd love to return for the others. Maybe it is a goal in itself to always find a reason to come back?



Kuchl, 1928. Photo: Kurt Hielscher.



Kuchl, 2023. Photo: Casper Molenaar.

When, with my family on our way home coming from Slovenia, we felt the urge to experience something beautiful in nature and went for the Gollinger Waterfall. Then I also had my mind set on visiting nearby Golling an der Salzach and especially Kuchl. In Kurt Hielscher's book, my eye had lingered on a beautiful photo of the village with the square and the mountains in the background. I was so curious to see what it would look like today.

The square turned out to be a road, and with the announcement of the Seefest, the cars, an extra floor on nearly every house, the contrast between then and now became obvious.

People sometimes ask me why I don't take the new photo in black and white as well. Well, I believe that using color enhances the contrast with the old photo. If it is the case that not much has changed, comparing two black-and-white photos side by side quickly becomes dull. With color, I also satisfy my own imagination and curiosity about what the place in the old black-and-white photo must have looked like in real life. In short, color provides information that the old photo lacks.

"In color, the contrast with the past is enhanced — if I were to photograph in black and white as well, I think it would become boring."

Großglockner

Upon arrival at the Pasterze Glacier along the famous Großglockner High Alpine Road, I was utterly shocked. The glacier had almost completely disappeared. Never before had I seen the effects of climate change so directly with my own eyes. I don't have a lofty mission with this photo project—I just try to document what the places look like today and enjoy my own journey and leave it for the rest to the spectator. But here in the Alps, you simply can't ignore climate change.



Pasterze gletsjer and Großglockner, 1928. Photo: Kurt Hielscher.



Pasterze gletsjer and Großglockner, 2023. Photo: Casper Molenaar.

The combination of a camper spot and a Kurt Hielscher photo often determines where I stop along the way. That's how I ended up in Gmünd in Carinthia. With its castle and a super cozy market, the town is very photogenic and welcoming.



Pankratius Tor, Gmünd, 1928. Photo: Kurt Hielscher.



Pankratius Tor, Gmünd, 2023. Photo: Casper Molenaar.

Upon entering through the Pankratius Gate, or the South Gate, I had a nice conversation with the resident of an imposing house across the street. He told me that an elderly lady currently lives in the apartment above the gate and that she had added an extra floor to

it. On the other side of the 13th-century gate, indeed I saw a stairlift going up to the door of the first-floor apartment—answering the question of how she gets inside.

Graz

While Salzburg, Kuchl, and Gmünd more or less spontaneously crossed my path, I had long looked forward to visiting Graz and had carefully prepared for it—or so I thought. I was immediately drawn into the impressive Landhaushof, of which Kurt Hielscher included two photos in his book. From there, I continued via the Hauptplatz and took the funicular up to the Schloßberg to capture *the* landmark of Graz: the Uhrturm, and of course, the panoramic view of the city.



Uhrturm in Graz, 1928. Photo: Kurt Hielscher.



Uhrturm in Graz, 2024. Photo: Casper Molenaar.

From the Schloßberg, you can now see the “Friendly Alien,” the building on the right with the bubbles on the roof. This is the Kunsthaus, the museum of modern art, which has only been there since 2003, when Graz was the European Capital of Culture. In the forefront, the Kastner & Öhler department store stands out—a massive building and the oldest department store in all of Austria-Hungary, dating back to 1894. In 1945, the store was partially destroyed in a bombing. Over the years, it has been renovated several times.



View in Graz, 1928. Photo: Kurt Hielscher.



View on Graz, 2024. Photo: Casper Molenaar

Hallstatt

Another highlight in Austria is, of course, the world-famous Hallstatt. Here, I felt as if time had stood still. I settled with my camper on the opposite side of the Hallstätter See. I could already see the famous town in the distance. I had paddled halfway across the lake in a canoe, and in the evening, I stared at the flickering lights.



Hallstatt, 1928. Photo: Kurt Hielscher.



Hallstatt, 2024. Photo: Casper Molenaar.

The next morning, it was finally time to visit Hallstatt. Despite the crowds—and I think it wasn't too bad that morning—I thoroughly enjoyed myself. What a charming and beautiful place Hallstatt is, with all its wooden or painted houses and flower-adorned balconies! Every few meters one is treated to another picturesque corner, and always there's the view of the lake. Now I understand why people come here from far and wide.

Not much has changed here. The ferry has been modernized, and a few boathouses have been added. If you look closely, you'll also notice that the Heritage Hotel Hallstatt, the building to the right of the church, has changed.

Now I'm looking forward to discovering all the other well-known and lesser-known places in Austria using Kurt Hielscher's photo book as my guide. I'd love to climb the summit of the Kleinglockner with my eldest son—a secondary peak of the Großglockner—to capture the main peak from there. That's exactly where Kurt Hielscher took a stunning photo of Austria's highest mountain. Hielscher himself was 47 at the time, so it should still be doable.

Returning to Graz and Salzburg for the remaining photos, and especially Innsbruck, are high on my list—as is, of course, Vienna. So I'm far from finished.

More about the photo project:

www.inthefootstepsofcurthielscher.com

<https://www.facebook.com/inthefootstepsofKurtHielscher>

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