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Antisemitism in Austria after the Shoah

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In Austria, there is a popular, sarcastic saying to the effect that the Germans were the “better Nazis”, but the Austrians were definitely the “better antisemites”. From a historical point of view this bitter saying may not actually be that far from the truth — taking the long history of Austrian antisemitism into consideration, especially the excessive anti-Jewish measures during the annexation (*Anschluss*) of 1938. But what can we say about today? Does antisemitism still exist in Austria after the Shoah? If so, what kind of antisemitism are we dealing with?

Before answering these questions I would like to preface my remarks with a few words about the specific situation in postwar Austria with respect to the Nazi past. As is well known, for decades Austria successfully presented itself as “Hitler’s first victim” and thereby largely avoided accepting a share of the responsibility for National Socialism. This “victim theory” (*Opferthese*) was effective not only on the state level, but was gratefully embraced by a majority of the Austrian population as well. Almost all Austrians saw themselves as victims: of Hitler, of war, of the occupying powers, etc.

It is undisputed that the State of Austria lost its sovereignty in 1938, and that there were indeed many Austrian victims, most of whom were either Jews or political opponents of the Nazis. There is also no doubt (except maybe in Austria itself) that Austrian society, due to its broad acceptance of National Socialism and the participation of many Austrians in Nazi crimes, must be regarded structurally as a “perpetrator society”. Nevertheless, these historical facts came to be ignored, relativised, or denied for quite some time.

The consequences of this self-victimization (the “other side of the coin”) include the exclusion of one’s own responsibility and actions on the one hand, and the exclusion and defamation of the “true” victims (the Jewish victims) on the other.

Without a doubt, the Shoah presents *the* major caesura in the history of antisemitism. Faced with the monstrosity of the Nazi crimes against the Jews, antisemitism as a political ideology seems to have become entirely discredited — not only, but especially in former perpetrator societies. Right from the outset, Germany, as the successor state to the Third Reich, had to accept responsibility for the Nazi crimes. Therefore, the ban of all forms of antisemitism and prevailing attitudes towards the Jews functioned as a crucial indicator of Germany’s “ability for democracy”, which led to a “top-down philo-Semitism” and a strong taboo on antisemitism. In Austria, because of its different self-image with respect to the past, this process took considerably longer.

Although the Shoah was an essential break, antisemitism did not disappear after 1945. Especially within social circles frequented by former Nazis, an open and aggressive hostility toward Jews continued to flourish (as confirmed also by my interviews with “children of the perpetrators”). Antisemitic prejudices survived not only among the general public, but also in parliament and in political parties,

where antisemitic arguments were frequently voiced. This demonstrates the lack of a decisive gap between political elites and the broader public in Austria, which presents a contrast to the situation in Germany.

Who were the targets of this postwar antisemitism? In the first years after WW II, antisemitism was directed against the tens of thousands of Jewish Displaced Persons (DPs), who soon left Austria. Even the few Austrian Holocaust survivors were treated with hostility because they reminded the former perpetrators and bystanders of the guilt they denied. Also in effect was a comparable dynamic of guilt-defensiveness directed toward Jewish emigrants, in order to prevent their return. They were defamed as “traitors to their fatherland”, and the claim was made that they supposedly had enjoyed a better life in exile than the “poor Austrians” had had because of the war. Not only common people, but even esteemed politicians propagated such sentiments, which included antisemitic resentments as well as much envy and rivalry. The period of debates on the return of emigrants, on compensation and restitution for Nazi victims (*Wiedergutmachung*) in the 1940s and 1950s is indeed a shameful chapter in contemporary Austrian history.

During the following decades, however, even in Austria, a normative ban on antisemitism gradually prevailed. Antisemitism became taboo, which means that it moved to “backstage”, though occasionally it could be reactivated and politically instrumentalised.

In the 1960s, for instance, the “Borodajkewicz Affair” occurred, whereby a professor at an Austrian university, a former Nazi, gathered a devoted following of right-wing students and conservative political elites in response to his antisemitic provocation. Incidentally, during a demonstration pro and contra Borodajkewicz, a Communist resistance fighter was killed by a young neo-Nazi. In my opinion, the importance of this affair is that it led to the first truly critical public debate on antisemitism in the postwar era.

In the 1970s, debates about the past were dominated by Bruno Kreisky who remarkably enough became the first Jewish chancellor in a latent antisemitic country such as Austria. Many have written on this subject, including myself. Just a few remarks: On the one hand, Kreisky was exposed to much antisemitic hostility, while on the other hand, the “good Jew” Kreisky was instrumentalised by many Austrians for the purpose of self-exoneration — because of his tolerant attitude toward former Nazis and his criticism of Israel. He —a Jew! — was able to say what the Austrians were supposedly not *allowed* to say. In my view, this topic represents a highly complex mixture of Jewish identity, ambivalence on both sides, and, not the least, a massive need for exoneration that existed even decades after the Shoah.

This became apparent also in the 1980s with the controversy over Kurt Waldheim, which definitely presents the main debate on the Nazi past in Austria. A wave of antisemitism and even anti-Americanism reappeared in this context: Hidden but nevertheless real anti-Jewish resentments were reactivated, and a mixture of well-known antisemitic stereotypes (the “American East coast”) and typical forms of “secondary antisemitism” (e.g., guilt-defensiveness) were articulated. Again, it was an antisemitism expressed not only by certain segments of the popu-

lation and the media, but also by political elites, in this case, especially bourgeois and Catholic circles.

Things have changed since then. In the meantime there has been an official acceptance of responsibility for National Socialism, and hardly a commemoration takes place without some distancing from antisemitism. This remarkable change has also led to a critical engagement with the Shoah, Jewish victims, and — what seems to be more difficult — with the Austrian perpetrators. Furthermore, over the past 15 years efforts have been made to provide both material and symbolic restitution to Jewish survivors and forced laborers, and to return stolen art. However, these measures were often accompanied by virulent antisemitic resentments.

Despite this predominantly positive development, antisemitism still exists in Austria, namely, in two manifestations/forms and contexts:

- 1) In the context of Israel: in the form of a “new antisemitism”, and
- 2) In the Austrian context: in the form of anti-Jewish manifestations within Austria.

ad 1) Yesterday we had an interesting panel on this topic, so I would like to mention just one point: In Austria we find, by and large, very similar arguments, debates and dynamics in terms of “Israel criticism” and “new antisemitism” as in Germany, albeit perhaps more moderate.

ad 2) Now, I would like to focus on anti-Jewish manifestations within Austria. Every year we are confronted with a number of antisemitic incidents, such as desecrations of Jewish cemeteries, physical and verbal attacks on Jews, antisemitic comments in public and in anonymous postings ... These incidents are usually played down as exceptions or single *faux pas* (“slips”) and do not attract much public attention. However, over the past few years there have been some prominent incidents that led to broader public discussion.

Ariel Muzikant, former president of the IKG, the official body of the Jewish community, who had always expressed strong self-confidence in the Austrian public, became a prominent target for verbal antisemitic attacks in recent years. Jörg Haider, for instance, used Muzikant’s first name to make obvious antisemitic allusions and “jokes”. In 2009 another Freedom Party politician labeled the director of the Jewish Museum in Hohenems, Hanno Loewy, an “exiled Jew from America” (“Exiljude aus Amerika”). He was not. This statement was not only undoubtedly inaccurate, but also presents a clear exclusion strategy, for which there is a long tradition in Austria. In August 2012, the current leader of the Freedom Party, Hans-Christian Strache, posted an “anti-capitalist” and antisemitic cartoon on Facebook. The image of a “fat, American banker” was marked as a “Jew” by a stereotypical hook nose and star of David. Despite the obvious antisemitic character of the cartoon, Strache simply rejected any antisemitic coding and acted like most antisemites do – belittling and denying antisemitism.

As you may have noticed, such incidents often occur in the context of the far-right Austrian Freedom Party, which is well known for its problematic dealings with the Nazi past.

Last year another disturbing incident occurred: (Greek) hooligans verbally abused a Rabbi in Vienna and even used the Hitler salute (*Hitlergruß*); the police on location did not intervene. Subsequently, a public debate began surrounding the inactivity of the police and the Jewish community, and some antifascist activists organized a flash mob to protest antisemitism. In the end, however, no legal consequences grew out of the incident for either the perpetrators or the policemen involved. Nevertheless, the Vienna city government passed a resolution against antisemitism — remarkably, by common consent, which means that even the Freedom Party voted for it.

In conclusion, antisemitism clearly still exists in Austria today. Compared with the postwar period there are fewer manifestations of antisemitism, and they are not as openly articulated as used to be the case. Fortunately, certain *old* stereotypes have faded away or even disappeared altogether over the course of time and over generations; however, transformations (e.g., in the context of Israel) and *new* forms of antisemitism can now be discovered. In the meantime, antisemitism is considered taboo even in Austria, and there is also a broad consensus that it is no longer *politically correct* to be an anti-Semite — at least at an official level and in historically aware circles. However, this does not mean that antisemitic incidents are immediately recognized and condemned. Normally discussions emerge, but for the most part they take a predictable path (accusations on the one hand, rejection and defense on the other) and in the end there are no consequences whatsoever

Finally, antisemitism in Austria becomes apparent almost entirely in the context of the Nazi past, which means that, above all, we have to deal with typical forms of “secondary antisemitism”. Precisely because the “victim theory” has been called into question, Jewish victims (and also their descendants) must be defamed in order to relativise one’s own guilt, which can no longer be denied. Obviously, the need for exoneration is still extremely strong, even among succeeding generations, who want to defend and exculpate their parents or grandparents. Hence, the general assumption that antisemitism after the Shoah exists, and does so not *despite* but *because of* “Auschwitz” applies also to the case of Austria.