

# **Anti-Semitism and Victimhood in Waldheim's Vienna**

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## **I**

1988 was an intense year for the Viennese. Kurt Waldheim was in the third year of his presidency. It was the one hundredth anniversary of the Burgtheater. And it was the fiftieth anniversary of the Anschluss, the annexation of the Austrian State into the Third Reich. While living in the city for six months in the latter half of that year, I had the opportunity observe the internal debate on the experience of the war, particularly the experience of Viennese Jews. I came away from this experience with a heightened awareness of the continuing insecurity of the Gentile majority fifty years after the start of World War II. I have spent quite a bit of time in Vienna over the past fourteen years, but never was I as aware of the undercurrent of anti-Semitism as I was this time, an anti-Semitism without significant numbers of Jews. Altogether, there are an estimated 10,000 Jews in a population of 7.5 million Austrian, with about 8,000 of these living among the 1.2 million Viennese. Among Viennese Jews, just over 4,000 are registered members of the religious community. In effect, the Jews are an all but invisible minority.

Most Austrians of the wartime generation have avoided complicity in the Holocaust because of a foolish declaration made by the Allied foreign ministers at Moscow (October 30, 1943) that the Austrians were the first victims of Hitler's policy of aggression and that the German occupation of Austria was null and void. The purpose of the declaration was to encourage Austrian defections from the Wehrmacht. This tactic failed. However, this declaration is interpreted by the wartime generation as exculpating Austrians from responsibility for the Nazi horror. A second clause concerning Austria, that Austria must remember that it carries the responsibility for participating in the War on the side of Hitler's Germany and that during the final reckoning its contribution to its own emancipation would be taken into account, is conveniently forgotten. After the War, the negotiators for Austria were able to prevent the inclusion of a war guilt clause into the Austrian State Treaty.

Thus, if any fraud is perpetrated on history through the myth of Austria as the first war victim, the responsibility for it is as much that of the Allies as of the Austrians (Richard Mitten: personal communication).

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, as the Federal Republic of Germany was engaged in numerous efforts to come to grips with its fascist experience and searched for ways to compensate its victims, Austrians did nothing. They were, after all, not to blame for the terrible things that happened. There were Austrian Nazis who committed heinous crimes, to be sure, and they should be punished as criminals and as traitors to their nation. But ordinary Austrians, even those who served in the Wehrmacht as officers (they say under conditions of terrible organizational discrimination owing to their dubious Germanness), were victims. It is true that the Viennese population did suffer at the hands of the Nazis. Workers in defense related transport and industry were reduced to virtual slaves in the final year of the war. Also in the final days, the Wehrmacht turned their cannon onto the city, now occupied by Russian troops. It was during this Nazi bombardment that the supreme cultural landmark of the city, St. Stephan's Cathedral, was set on fire and destroyed.

Americans bombed Vienna's transportation centers and heavy industries in the last year of the War. This bombing was incredibly sloppy, destroying housing far more effectively than the intended targets. On one square behind the Opera House, Albertinaplatz, a large commercial-residential building, the Philliphof, with hundreds of people in the bomb cellar beneath it, was destroyed during one of these raids, burning the building and suffocating the people in the shelter. Their bodies were never removed. A small monument was erected to their memory, and the square, planted over with grass, was primarily used as a dog toilet.

There are pictures from 1938 showing Hitler saluting the in-marching Wehrmacht from the gate of the Imperial Palace in the center of Vienna. On all sides of the open, expansive square known as Heldenplatz, the Square of Heros, there are tens of thousands of people with arms raised in the fascist salute. In order to reconcile their view of themselves as victims, the Viennese refused to believe that the people saluting Hitler in these photographs were themselves. Either they were Germans trucked in for the purpose, or they were Salzburgers or Tyrolers. Both Heldenplatz and Albertinaplatz continue to be significant sites in the collective memory of the War.

The mythology of victimization quietly sustained the wartime generation until the election of Waldheim. There were those uncomfortable conversations with their children in the 1960s about what they had done in the War, conversations that had led to very strained relations between the generations. These were all private discourses. With the Waldheim campaign, the private became public. From the beginning Waldheim was a stronger candidate than his opponent, Steyrer, a physician and former Minister of Health. As a former Secretary General of the United Nations, he was considered perfectly suited for the largely ceremonial post of Bundespräsident. For the Austrians, the election was not based solely on the assessment of personality or even of political resume. Instead, it was a referendum on a decade of parliamentary domination by the SPO. Waldheim was the candidate of the historic rivals of the socialists, the Christian Democratic Osterreichische Volkspartei (OVP). The SPO had something to fear from such a referendum. Since the retirement of Bruno Kreisky (1983), the national party had displayed clumsy and uninspired leadership. They had become involved in a number of financial scandals with the result that this staunchly working class party was viewed as increasingly corrupt by their own natural constituency. They seriously mishandled a popular "peoples occupation" of a section of Danube wetlands targeted for development as a nuclear reactor electricity generating plant, sending in the police and army to clear the demonstrators and leaving themselves open to charges of political heavy-handedness. Most importantly for the Waldheim election, they were also tarred by their association with former Nazis. Since losing their parliamentary majority in 1983, the Socialists had ruled in a coalition with the Freiheitliche Partei (FPO). This party is often labeled liberal in the Western press. It was Liberal, but this is no longer the case. Today, it is German nationalist, increasingly reactionary, and increasingly successful in provincial elections. One year into this coalition, the Socialists were embarrassed by publication the leader of FPO, a Mr. Peter, had been an SS officer. Afraid of being labeled as sympathetic to fascists, the Socialists sought ways to diffuse this as a campaign issue.

As the election heated up, the candidates backgrounds became favorite topics for journalists. Working on his own, Hubertus Czernin an investigative reporter for the Austrian news magazine profit, got access to Waldheim's military identification card and entries from his military service record in his personnel file in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On March 3rd, 1986, he broke the story of Waldheim's military activities. On March 4th, John Tagliabue filed a summary of Czernin's story with the New York Times. Soon after that, the World Jewish

Congress (WJC) accused Waldheim of war crimes based on information from the same documents used in the profil story. How and when the WJC got these documents is still not clear. One possibility is that the SPO leaked the personnel file materials to members of the WJC in order to increase the pressure on Waldheim and to preempt the Peter issue in the campaign. The effect of the accusation was to internationalize the election. Now it was no longer Austrians who were criticizing other Austrians, but outsiders, Jews and Americans, who were criticizing Austrians.

The evidence against Waldheim was easy for the conservative Austrian press, such as the mass circulation *Neue Kronenzeitung* and the establishment *Die Presse*, to dismiss. Most of the charges were guilt by association. A smoking gun was never found (Mitten 1988: 68-76). This same conservative press then took the lead in a xenophobic backlash that took the form of a barefaced defense of the victimization myth. The role of the WJC was immediately interpreted conspiratorially as abetting "eine Gruppe amerikanische Juden (V. Reimann, *Neue Kronenzeitung* 3/30/86 cited in Gruber 1988)," a special interest group composed of "judische Journalisten und Politiker (Karl Seinitz, *Neue Kronenzeitung* 3/15/86 cited in Gruber 1988)," believed to control "Amerikas Massenmedien" through "die Propagandamaschinerie des Weltjudenkongress (Thontas Chorgherr, *Die Presse* 3/30/86 cited in Gruber 1988)," and to have harbored a grudge against Waldheim from his days as at the UN.' Jews were portrayed in these accounts as seeking revenge by embarrassing Austria and Waldheim, who was the most prominent Austrian on the World scene since Franz Josef (Gruber 1988: 175-184). Before the accusations, Waldheim would have easily carried a majority of voters. The press-inspired populist xenophobia only created another reason to vote for him.

The moral issue of having a president who was potentially a war criminal, which was so important to Americans in the election, was probably less important in making up the minds of the Austrian electorate than the referendum on the Socialist leadership. Of course, we can never know the weight of such factors on the final decision of individual voters with any certainty. More importantly than how Waldheim won the election is the fact that through these stories in the national media anti-Semitic language returned to political discourse.

Waldheim probably never did anything that could be labeled a war crime. He was too clever and too much of an opportunist to take that kind of chance. His real failure was a failure of leadership. He could not bring himself to say, "In my youth, I was an enthusiastic supporter of

National Socialism, as were many of my countrymen. I now recognize that experience as a grievous error and dedicate my presidency to help my fellow Austrians exorcise the ghosts of Nazi complicity that have haunted us all these past years." Instead, he continued to uphold the lie that had fed his own personal sense of exculpability throughout his career in government. Because he could not now transform that belief into one of personal and generational guilt, thousands of Austrian men and women who had the same experience, continue to feel justified in their victimhood.

The Waldheim presidency forced Austrians to re-examine the past. The first and most pressing question was whether the new president was a war criminal. It took two and half years to decide he was not, during which time every new piece of evidence damaged his credibility. By the time I arrived in Vienna in June, 1988, the war criminal circus had died down. Commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Anschluss had taken its place.

## II

In 1983, the City of Vienna commissioned a professor of sculpture at the Institute of Applied Art in the city to design and build a monument to the victims of fascism to be placed on Albertinaplatz. Just as I arrived, his designs were made public and the date for completing the monument was set as an event of the commemorative year for late November. The monument was to be not merely a memorial, but a Mahnmal, an admonishing monument to all future generations never to descend along this path ever again. To this purpose, the sculptor designed four elements: an element depicting the depravity of fascism (two narrow granite blocks through which the visitor must squeeze with marble reliefs sitting on them depicting death figures holding people by the throat or stepping on their necks), a second depicting the insult to the human spirit that fascism created (a Jew, in bronze, on his hands and knees scrubbing the street with a toothbrush), a third element, also in marble, remembering the victims of the bombing raids still lying under the square, and a fourth element, a marble stele, which recites the words from the contract granting a return of sovereignty by the Allies to Austria in 1955, in which the permanent neutrality of the Austrian State is announced.

The German nationalists and conservatives reacted by attacking the monument's artistic value, the sculptor, and the site. Of these, the attack on the site was the more durable, requiring the Mayor of Vienna to reaffirm publicly the city's intention of erecting the monument on

Albertinaplatz. The finished memorial was unveiled last November. Like the Viet Nam monument in Washington, D.C., it has become the kind of memorial that people need it to be. There are fresh flowers laid at the base of the bronze Jew every day. Another bouquet is often placed in the e of the relief of the death's head holding victims by the neck. People walk quietly around the elements in silence. There is always a crowd, and always a policeman watching to make sure that no one tries to deface the pieces. While one can objectively conceive of a more grandiose scale for the elements, a more effective frame for the square to symbolically sacralize and separate it from the street, or a different organization to the elements themselves, the monument has already become an attraction among the Winter tourists (Italians!).

Lots of commemorative and provocative events culminated in November, as if everyone wanted to get the difficult issues over with before the December frenzy of Christmas buying began. The month started off with the fiftieth anniversary of the November Pogrom, known to the fascists as Kristallnacht (the night of November 9-10), during which synagogues and shops owned by Jews were burned and thousands of Jews were killed by Nazi party members. This day was commemorated in Vienna by members of the Austrian Student Union assembling at important subway stations and transportation links throughout the city and reading the names of the murdered Jews through a loudspeaker while others passed among the crowds handing out leaflets describing the actions of the Viennese Nazis fifty years earlier.

In late October, a newspaper leaked highly inflammatory lines from the upcoming November premier of a play, "Heldenplatz", by one of Austria's leading playwrights, Thomas Bernhard. The piece had been commissioned by the government's culture ministry to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the Burgtheater. From the purloined portions published in the press, it was also viciously critical of Austria and the Viennese. Several lines from the play were quoted out of context to the effect that Austria was a sewer and all Viennese were fascists and anti-Semites. The play was quoted as saying that 1988 was worse than 1938, because in 1938, at least, you knew with whom you were dealing, but in 1988, everyone pretended to be someone who they were not. Waldheim redux.

The revelations unleashed a firestorm of protest. Conservative and German nationalists in parliament called for the withdrawal of the play. The Socialist minister of culture stood firm. There were calls for the removal of the director of the theater, who himself had made news the previous Summer by calling the Austrians uncultivated provincials and the bureaucrats, with

whom he had to deal, Arschlöcher (assholes). The director was not removed. It seemed as if the conspiracy of foreign hate-mongers would never leave poor Austria alone. Everyone seemed to be acting as if they were part of the performance. That this was precisely the point the playwright seemed intent upon making was not missed either, and everyone involved felt sadly used. The play premiered with only one incident: a disgruntled pair of Viennese dumped a truckload of horse manure in front of the theater on opening night. The critics declared the play a success and in the best tradition of satirical self-parodies of Raimund and Nestroy of 19th century Vienna.

Satirical self-parody maybe, but the amount of criticism hurled at the audience from the stage for over three hours was remarkable. The play is the story of a Viennese Jewish academic who emigrated when the Nazis annexed Austria, returned in the mid 1980s and committed suicide because he felt that the 1988 Austrians had barely changed in their attitudes towards Jews. The dead professor's wife spends more time in an insane asylum than in her apartment because the apartment her cantankerous husband chose overlooks Heldenplatz, the scene of the Hitler's salute to the in-marching troops fifty years earlier. Her insanity takes the form of constantly hearing the cries of "Sieg, Heil" from her fellow Viennese beneath the window. When she begs her husband to move, he replies that Hitler was not going to force him to move twice in one lifetime. The professor is already dead when the play opens, so Bernhard decries the state of Viennese arts and intellectual life through the characters of the dead professor's daughters, one of whom represents those contemporary Jews who see their neighbors as all closet fascists, and the other who represents those who excuse even the most blatant affront (she is spit on in the street) in the name of assimilating and fitting in. But the best lines go to his brother, also a professor, who attacks every institution of government and culture in the city, accusing the Viennese of importing provincials to fill the positions in cultural leadership left vacant after the Jews, who had made Vienna a center of cultural power, were murdered, and observing repeatedly, so that point will not be missed, that the current state of Viennese culture is sheer mindlessness (Stumpfsinn). This was not a message, coming as it did from their leading playwright, that the Viennese could ignore.

For a metropolitan society whose self-image is one of cultural ascendancy and primacy, this is blasphemy. The audience actively cheers or boos, often times at the same line. People sitting around me could be heard to mutter, "That's not true." or "How can he say that about us." Every performance was sold out. For two months, the politicians, journalists, and intelligentsia

talked of nothing else. A political cartoon from one of the most anti-Semitic dailies shows a caricature of Bernhard urinating on a map of Austria, while a formally dressed theater critic, looking suspiciously Jewish, cheers wildly behind him. What the non-theater goers read were the excerpts and news stories of how politicians, whose ideas they often found appealing were upset over this piece of theater. Public opinion dismissed Bernhard as a black sheep Austrian who had always hated his countrymen and was now taking one more opportunity to insult his land.

The Jewish community was split over the value of Bernhard's play for improving community relations. The pro-Bernhard faction was excited that the Gentiles were finally being confronted with their Waldheimian perfidy. The anti-Bernhard faction pointed out that it too easy to ignore the play especially since it was a Jew on stage doing all the complaining (again). The leading Jewish culture critic in the city labeled the play as ultimately anti-Semitic itself because of the unattractive qualities of the Jewish characters.

### III

Both factions agreed with Bernhard, however, that anti-Semitism is a fact of everyday conversation in Vienna. "In the Bakery, at the cleaners, at the drugstore..." is the way the professor's daughter describes where she hears anti-Semitic comments in the city. "It's true," replied a Jewish acquaintance of mine who lives an assimilated life in one of the more exclusive parts of the city, where, theoretically, there are no Jews. "They talk freely because they don't expect a Jew to be standing there, and they don't expect a Gentile to contradict them. It's all there: the hatred, the conspiracy theories, the stereotypes. Bernhard is absolutely right about them. They haven't changed."

The return of anti-Semitic expressions in the public media of press and theater has coincided with a resurgence of these formulas in private speech as well. We can be confident about this thanks to a study by the sociolinguist Ruth Wodak and her co-workers at the Institut für Sprachwissenschaft and published in their study of anti-Semitism in the public discourse of Austria since 1986 (Seifert and Wodak 1988). They analyze taped remarks as people reacted to a set of placards in the plaza directly in front of St. Stephan's Cathedral. The speakers did not know their remarks were being recorded. The placards, inspired by the election of Waldheim, were erected by the city to describe in provocative words and pictures its fate under fascism. The remarks were taped for twenty-four hour periods between June and July in 1987.

What is clear from the analysis of these remarks is that a Gentile-only language has wide currency among the population. As such, it serves to shore up the majority against the current threats to its vulnerable self image. It is a language that created a Gentile in-group that continues to excuse the wartime complicity as no mistake ("Unsere Manner waren alle eingerückt! Die mussten alle Verbrecher sein ."2 ),that reverses the historical relationship between victim and victimizer ("Sie treiben es soweit, das wir dort sind, wo wir waren. Der Judenhapist da!"3), that denies the responsibility of current generations for historical oppression ("Wir sind unschuldige Tater! Die Schuldigen sind eh aufgehängt worden."4), that relativizes the Jewish experience to reduce the level of actual harm suffered by Jews ('...in der Gaszelle umzukommen, ist noch angenehmer, als von Partisanen ermordet zu werden.;"Ich kenn nur einen Juden, der nachher nicht wieder da war."), and that rationalizes the appearance of anti-Semitism ("Schaun Sie, es sind nur jetzt die Emotionen aufgeschaukelt. Auf der einen Seite sind die Emotionen gegen Waldheim, auf der anderen Seite sind da eben andere Emotionen.") (Wodak and Seifert 1988:112-114).

Armed with the capacity to identify the anti-Semitism of such expressions as a result of this study, the Jewish Austrian Student Union is waging a billboard campaign to boycott Austrian Newspapers that employ anti-Semitic language. So far, their efforts to educate the public to the inappropriateness of this language in the public discourse has not been effective. The most virulent of the offending dailies has had no change in its circulation. It took a entire generation before the Gentile-only speech lost its power as a symbol of Gentile solidarity in the United States. It will probably take decades before the anti-Semitic language of the Viennese also loses its social potency, along with the various myths that sustain the underlying sense of threat. But after the Waldheim presidency and the anniversary year 1988 with its symbolic transformations of Heldenplatz and Albertinaplatz, things will never be the same again.

The persistence of a language of anti-Semitism in a society in which there are so few Jews suggests that contemporary anti-Semitism has, in fact, evolved from the anti-Semitism of 1938 into a new form. Today it has more to do with the very local and highly sensitive belief of Austrian victimization and the perception that foreigners and Jews are repeating that victimization against contemporary Austrians by forcing them to confront, through Waldheim, their support of fascism. This is what the tales of the two squares, Heldenplatz and Albertinaplatz, are all about: complicity between living Viennese and the Nazi horror. It is a past

that is so threatening to contemporary Viennese images of themselves ("When can we go back to being the Austria of the "Sound of Music," one frustrated informant asked.) that even skilled politicians would rather be seen as weak liars than admit to any wartime complicity.

## Notes

1. "Nur vordergründig um eine vom Jüdischen Weltkongress begonnene, von den Medien des Eastern Establishment der Vereinigten Staaten übernommene und von manchen Parteistrategen aus guten Gründen genusslich zitierte Ha-kampagne gegen einen österreichischen Bundespräsidenten werden möchte ... Hier wird Abrechnung gehalten, aber nicht mit dem österreichischen Kandidaten, sondern mit den Vereinten Nationen (Thomas Chorherr Die Presse 4/26,27/86)."
2. "All our men reported for duty. They must all be criminals."
3. "They play it up so much that we are right back where we were. The hatred of the Jews is there!"
4. "We are all innocent actors! The guilty were all hung."
5. "..... to die in a gas chamber is still pleasanter than to be murdered as a partisan." "I only knew one Jew who didn't come back."
6. "Look, now it only builds up the emotions. On one side is the emotion against Waldheim, and on the other side there are just other emotions."

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