



**UNIVERSITY
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***Austria and the Holocaust:
Coming to Terms with the Past?***

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1.

First of all let me say what a great honour it is for me to be invited to deliver this lecture to you. Above all I would like to thank the Principal for his kind invitation and Professor Otto Hutter for putting me forward. As you know this is the sixth lecture in this series. Tonight I will at least aspire to the high standards my five distinguished predecessors have set in their instructive lectures, as well as touching on some of the issues they have raised. My subject – Austria and the Holocaust – may appear limited but, as should become clear, Austria and the actions of Austrians are hardly marginal to the terrible events we are discussing this evening.

What do we mean by “coming to terms with the past”? The phrase is one current translation of the German term “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” a composite noun comprising “Vergangenheit” (= past) and “Bewältigung” (= coming to terms). It probably entered English as a direct translation of the German in the 1960s. However “coming to terms” is not the only available translation of “Bewältigung” - alternative current translations include “tackling, confronting or facing up to.” These translations suggest a basic tension within the phrase. To put it simply, they point in two different directions and this divergence is not trivial. “Coming to terms” suggests a process which, painful though it is, allows a loss, or a trauma to be got through, at least to the point that the person or persons who have suffered it can in some sense, continue or “move on.” We commonly associate “terms” with conditions, boundaries or finishing points. “Coming to terms”, if we follow the Oxford English Dictionary, can mean to “agree on conditions, come to an agreement” or in a figurative sense “to reconcile oneself, become reconciled.” But the other translations of “Bewältigung” - “confront”, “tackle” or “face up to” imply something rather different. They speak of struggle, of honesty in engaging with a disturbing truth. They focus not on the release or “cure” which follows the process but on the process itself and the courage required to embark on it.

If we now turn to the first part of the German noun (“Vergangenheit”) the implications of this divergence become clearer. As many have pointed out, “the past” here is a euphemism. We are not, after all, talking about any old past, we are talking of a specific recent period in which mass murder was instigated and organized by a criminal regime through most of Europe. And, as Bernard Wasserstein pointed out here two years ago, it was mass murder

which had the principal motive of killing and removing all traces of Jews from the face of the earth.¹

Clearly we cannot become “reconciled” to the historical reality of this mass murder, nor should we want to be. But what I wish to argue tonight is that if we understand “coming to terms” in this sense of drawing a line in order to “move on” – then Austrian society after the end of the Nazi rule did indeed “come to terms” with the past. In other words, it broadly accepted that two thirds of its Jewish population (over 200,000 people) had been expelled, and that a further third had been murdered and it “moved on.”²

However, the further point I want to make is that these “terms of engagement” were not fixed, or set in stone. From the 1960s and especially since the mid-1980s they began to change.

2.

Before I come to these “negotiations” let me first consider Austrian anti-Semitism and Austrian involvement in the Holocaust itself.

The *Anschluss* struck Austria’s Jews with elemental force. You will probably need no reminder of the pogrom which was unleashed in March 1938, as the First Austrian Republic disappeared into oblivion. Some of those present here may have experienced at first hand what the German writer Carl Zuckmayer called “The opening of the “gates of the underworld.”” Another observer, the English journalist G.E.R. Gedye, reporting for the *Daily Telegraph* used a related metaphor when he wrote of “an indescribable witches’ sabbath”, as a vindictive mob vented its anger on Vienna’s Jewish population.³

¹ Bernard Wasserstein, *Genocide and Jewish Survival*, Fourth University of Glasgow Holocaust Memorial Lecture. (Glasgow, 2004), 4-5; on the originator of the term genocide, Ralph Lemkin, see Samantha Power, “A problem from Hell”. *America and the age of Genocide*, (London, 2003), 41.

² The 1934 census gave 191,481 Austrians “of mosaic belief” (176,034 of whom lived in Vienna); the main statistical imponderable is the number of those defined and persecuted as Jews by the Nazi regime but not declaring themselves as such in the census or registered with the Vienna Jewish Community, see Jonny Moser, *Demographie der jüdischen Bevölkerung Österreichs 1938-1945*, (Vienna, 1999). An estimated 5,512 survived in Austria.

³ Carl Zuckmayer, *Als wär's ein Stück von mir. Erinnerungen*, (Frankfurt am Main, 1966); G E R Gedye, *Fallen Bastions*, (London, 1939).

A full explanation for the depth of this explosion of aggression and hatred would need to go far back in time, further back than time allows me tonight; it would include the deeply rooted anti-Judaism of the Catholic Church as well as the emergence of so-called “modern” anti-Semitism of the second half of the nineteenth century, and its political instrumentalisation in Vienna after the 1870s by the populist Christian Social mayor Karl Lueger. It would also include the intellectual currents and resentments which were present in turn-of-the-century Vienna, and show how these were radicalized by the shock of the First World War, the collapse of the multi-national Habsburg monarchy and the economic and psychological malaise which they brought.

Suffice it to say that in the “rump” Austria which then emerged anti-Semitism was part of the common-sense of much of Austrian society and had permeated much of its political rhetoric. According to the author of one of the best surveys of the subject, Bruce Pauley, “the Nazis’ anti-Semitism found widespread support in interwar Austria simply because it was very much in accord with a long-standing tradition dating back to the Middle Ages.” An important point made by Pauley, it seems to me, was the failure or inability of Austrian Social Democracy to understand or counter it adequately.⁴

In all of this, Austria’s Jews should not be seen as self-deluded victims-in-waiting, blind to impending disaster. The history of Austrian Jews was not, any more than that of German Jews, an irreversible journey down the road to perdition.⁵ The century preceding the *Anschluss* had seen an unprecedented process of social change, emancipation, partial assimilation. It needs to be judged in its own terms, not overshadowed by the knowledge of the awful catastrophe which was to come. There is no need to talk in inflated terms of a “symbiosis” to recognize the creative aspects of this long, complex and often troubled Austrian-Jewish interaction.

⁴ Bruce Pauley, *From Prejudice to Persecution: A History of Austrian Antisemitism*, (Chapel Hill, 1992), 203, 133-149.

⁵ See Hanni Mittelman and Armin Wallas (eds.), *Österreich-Konzeptionen und jüdisches Selbstverständnis. Identitäts-Transfigurationen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, (Tübingen, 2001). See also on German Jewry Amos Elon, *The Pity of it All. A portrait of Jews in Germany 1743-1933*, (London, 2004), 12

For many it was precisely the extent of acculturation which made the outburst of 1938 so shocking. I will cite here only one of the most powerful accounts of the Holocaust published in recent years, that of Ruth Klüger.⁶

Klüger experienced the *Anschluss* as a seven year-old. She recalls her first day at school under the new regime as it slowly becomes clear that her universe has been turned upside down:

“And now the country was called the *Ostmark* and the Headmaster came personally into the classroom and explained the “Hitler greeting” to us. He demonstrated it to us and the class imitated him, only the Jewish children, from now on, were to sit at the back and not greet in this way. He was friendly, our form teacher was embarrassed, so that I, with my indestructible optimism, was not sure, if our being singled out [Ausnahmezustand] was meant as a mark of distinction or a demotion. After all the adults knew that our country had been attacked. They surely couldn’t all be Nazis.”⁷

This abrupt separation of the class into two groups was the start of a series of penalties and exclusions which meant, as she says that “[s]uddenly I had become a disadvantaged child.” No more school trips, no access to swimming baths, no chance to learn to skate. She continues: “Vienna became my first prison... Vienna was a city with no exit, a city that banished you and then didn’t allow you to leave.” The chapter in the English version of Klüger’s book is entitled “impossible Vienna”.

Klüger’s inability to leave resulted in deportation with her mother - first to Theresienstadt, then to Auschwitz-Birkenau where, in the course of unimaginable hardships she had an almost miraculous escape from death.

“Surely they couldn’t all be Nazis.” How have historians answered Ruth Klüger’s question? As far as Austrian school teachers go even if they were clearly not “all” Nazis, the German national and anticlerical sections of them were certainly a major source of recruitment into the Nazi party in its illegal

⁶ Originally published in German as *Weiter leben. Eine Jugend* (Munich, 1993), then in English several years later (with some adaptations) in the USA under the title “*Still alive. A Holocaust childhood remembered*” (New York, 2001) and in Britain under the title *Landscapes of Memory. A Holocaust Childhood Remembered* (London, 2003).

⁷ Klüger, 40 (my translation). See also Gerald Stourzh, *1945 und 1955: Schlüsseljahre der Zweiten Republik*, (Innsbruck, Vienna, Bozen, 2005), 30-1.

phase before the *Anschluss* and they became a “corner-stone” of the Nazi regime after it.

As for Austrians as a whole, hardly any historians would now accept without qualification the view that Austria was “the first victim of Hitlerite aggression” except in a narrowly legal sense. The phrase itself comes from the Declaration made by the three Allies at the end of the 1943 Moscow Conference. We can accept the lawyers’ judgement that the *Anschluss* was an illegal occupation in international law⁸, though it should also be noted that it was an illegality which the rest of the world, including His Majesty’s Government, swiftly accepted. But it is also clear – and this was one reason for that acceptance – that the new regime enjoyed substantial popular support. It is impossible to put a precise figure on this: the 99% vote of the manipulated plebiscite of April 1938 was clearly surreal; the proportion of committed Nazis before the *Anschluss* probably lay between roughly 20-25 % of the adult and youthful (not necessarily enfranchised) population. However, once the *Anschluss* was a *fait accompli*, many from all sides of the political spectrum jumped onto the band-wagon. It seems likely that even a properly conducted plebiscite would have produced a clear confirmation of the new order. After the euphoria of March 1938 there were ups and downs, and a progressive disillusionment, with much resentment of the “Prussians” i.e. North Germans, but this did not reach the point where it seriously threatened the stability of the regime.

The more important point this evening is that recent research indicates that many who were not committed Nazis were nevertheless anti-Semitic. And, although the evidence is, admittedly, fragmentary, many who may not have been “ideological” anti-Semites nevertheless welcomed the moves to “solve the Jewish question.” The American historian Evan Bukey has recently called anti-Semitism “the irresistible chord that attracted millions of ordinary people otherwise immune to the siren song of Hitlerism.”⁹

In two particular respects historians have seen Austrian anti-Semitism as important for the history of the Holocaust:

⁸ Bruno Simma and Hans-Peter Folz, *Restitution und Entschädigung im Völkerrecht. Die Verpflichtungen der Republik Österreich nach 1945 im Lichte ihrer außerpolitischen Praxis*, (Vienna and Munich, 2003), 21-74.

⁹ Evan Bukey, *Hitler’s Austria. Popular Sentiment in the Nazi Era 1938-1945*, (Chapel Hill and London 2000), 151.

Firstly, anti-Semitism “from below.” The wave of expropriation, extortion or daylight robbery which was triggered by the *Anschluss* was so overwhelming that for a time it moved out of the control of the Nazi authorities.¹⁰ Partly in response, partly on his own initiative, Adolf Eichmann and his associates set up what soon became the Central Office for Jewish Emigration. Its purpose was a technically more efficient method of expropriation and forced migration. Other Nazi bodies used the outbreak to rationalise the small business and banking sector.¹¹ Later in the year with the further radicalization in the wake of the “November Pogrom” the pioneering “achievements” of Vienna were cited in discussions in Berlin; Eichmann himself, now a rising star, was summoned to Berlin for the high level discussions. Historians have spoken here of a “Vienna model” though as Saul Friedländer argues, the term should be handled with care, and is more valid for the economic motivation in the period up to the outbreak of war, than as an explanation of the Holocaust as a whole.¹² Richard Overy made a related point here last year about economic explanations of the Holocaust.¹³

Secondly, the participation of Austrians in the Holocaust. In my view it is not particularly helpful to talk of a statistically disproportionate Austrian

¹⁰ See Historikerkommission der Republik Österreich, *Vermögensentzug während der NS-Zeit sowie Rückstellungen und Entschädigungen seit 1945 in Österreich. Zusammenfassungen und Einschätzungen. Schlussbericht*, (Vienna and Munich, 2003), 85-94. The commission’s estimate of the value of Jewish property at the time of the *Anschluss* ranged from RM 1.842 billion and RM 2.9 billion depending on the calculation methods adopted and assumptions made. It decided that it would be unscholarly to put a global figure on the value of property subsequently “arianised” and restituted or compensated for.

¹¹ Ulrike Felber, Peter Melichar, Markus Priller, Berthold Unfried, Fritz Weber, *Eigentumsänderungen in der österreichischen Industrie 1938-1945*, (Vienna and Munich 2005); Gabrielle Anderle and Dirk Rupnow, *Die Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung als Beraubungsinstitution*, (Vienna and Munich 2004), 236-263.

¹² Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: the Years of Persecution 1933-39*, (London, 1997), 241-8; 282; but also Hans Safrian, ‘Beschleunigung der Beraubung und Vertreibung. Zur Bedeutung des “Wiener Modells” für die antijüdische Politik des “Dritten Reiches” im Jahr 1938’, in Constantin Goschler and Jürgen Lillteicher (eds.), *“Arisierung” und Restitution. Die Rückerstattung jüdischen Eigentums in Deutschland und Österreich nach 1945 und 1989*, (Göttingen, 2002), 61-89.

¹³ Richard Overy, *Making a Killing: The Economics of the Holocaust*, Fifth University of Glasgow Holocaust Memorial Lecture (Glasgow, 2005), 7.

role in the Holocaust.¹⁴ It is surely enough to note that many Austrians inside the party were prominent in organizing and radicalizing the processes which led to the Holocaust – Eichmann, Franz Stangl (camp commandant of Treblinka), Franz Novak, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Odilo Globocnik and Alois Brunner, are only a few of the better known names in this hall of infamy. The notion of a relative Austrian immunity to Nazi policies is clearly untenable. So is the contrast between a supposed easy-going (*gemütlich*) Austrian attitude and a fanatical Prussian spirit, a contrast which circulated after the war, in this country as well as in Austria. Surely more useful than such stereotypes – or their mirror images – is the recent suggestion by Michael Mann that “refugee ethnic Germans and those from threatened border, Catholic, and Austro-Bavarian areas were all more likely to become perpetrators because genocide flowed from their ethnic *grossedeutsch* imperialism.”¹⁵

What was the situation seven years after Hitler’s jubilant welcome in Vienna? The Nazi regime had undoubtedly become unpopular and faith in the “Führer” was crumbling; but there was no question of mobilizing organized resistance to the regime and no widespread assertion of a national Austrian identity. As for Austria’s Jews Bukey finds “scant evidence to suggest that popular attitudes towards the ‘racial enemy’ had in any way softened.” And he adds that “while Austrians may have broken forever with the *Anschluss* few of them expressed regrets that the Jews had disappeared from their midsts.”¹⁶ Of course we should not overlook those who clearly did express both regret and remorse.¹⁷ Yet the accounts of Jews who survived and returned or those who emerged from hiding are eloquent about the general absence of either of these among former neighbours or acquaintances. Many individuals and organizations had become implicated in the property transfers of “monstrous dimensions” which had taken place.¹⁸ They may not have been committed anti-Semites at the start but by 1945 many had a stake in those anti-Semitic arguments which had justified their enrichment – such as Jewish monopolies, Jewish mismanagement, Jewish exploitation and so on.

¹⁴ Robert Wistrich, *Austria and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, (New York, 1999)

¹⁵ Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy. Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge, 2005), 232

¹⁶ Bukey, *Hitler’s Austria*, 225.

¹⁷ See Gerald Stourzh’s powerful plea in *Schlüsseljahre der Zweiten Republik*, 22-31.

¹⁸ Historikerkommission, *Schlussbericht*, 453.

3.

What then were the terms of post-war Austria's engagement – or disengagement – with the Holocaust? It is now fairly clear that a significant part of the country's post-war elites either shared, or where they did not share, tolerated popular antipathy to Jews. Austria's provisional Chancellor, later first president, Karl Renner provides many illustrations, as for example, when he looked back to 1938 and noted, in would-be mitigation that “[a]ll these little officials, these ordinary citizens and businessmen” who had supported the *Anschluss* (as had Renner himself) had had “no far reaching intentions at all – at the most that something be done to [sic] the Jews.” (“höchstens, dass man den Juden etwas tut.”)¹⁹

Clearly anti-Semitism could not be mobilized in the way it had been before the *Anschluss* but the taboo on it, if there was one, was often only thinly veiled. Sometimes anti-Semitism became manifest, especially when the Austrian population and thousands of Jewish Displaced Persons often came into proximity with each other. One American observer predicted a pogrom if the Allies were to withdraw, a prediction which was never tested. The response of the mayor of Vienna (Theodor Körner, who later succeeded Renner as president) was a forthright condemnation of the “Fairy tale of Viennese anti-Semitism” and a classic of post-war evasion. This was not repression in the sense of an unconscious banning of a disturbing reality or trauma, it was a conscious denial of an unpalatable truth.²⁰

Both Renner and Körner were veteran social democrats. The Social Democrats, having so long been excluded from power or suppressed now became, alongside the conservative People's Party, one of the two pillars of the state. Both had a clear interest in avoiding the most sensitive areas of conflict in the First Republic, and in evading the role that parts of their own

¹⁹ Cabinet meeting 28th session, 29 August 1945, in Gertrude Enderle-Burcel, Rudolf Jeřábek and Leopold Kammerhofer (eds.), *Protokolle des Kabinettsrates der Provisorischen Regierung Karl Renner*, vol. 2 (Vienna, 2003), 388; according to the version of Renner's comments in Doris Sottopietra and Maria Wirth, ‘Die Länderebene der SPÖ’, in Maria Mesner (ed.), *Entnazifizierung zwischen politischem Anspruch, Parteikonkurrenz und Kaltem Krieg, Das Beispiel der SPÖ*, (Vienna and Munich, 2005), 79 which comes from the Socialist Party records, Renner stated merely that the ordinary people had wanted the Jews to be “demoted” (zurücksetze).

²⁰ See Robert Knight (ed.), *‘Ich bin dafür, die Sache in die Länge zu ziehen’*. Die Wortprotokolle der Bundesregierung über die Entschädigung der Juden 2nd edn. (Vienna, Cologne, Weimar 2000), 119-20.

constituencies had played in sustaining Nazi rule. For the People's Party the *Anschluss* was portrayed as a martyrdom which was both national and Catholic – the commemoration of the Mauthausen concentration camp shows this.²¹ For many Socialists the language and interpretations of antifascism blurred the central differences between the Nazi regime and the clerical dictatorship which had preceded it. It also glossed over the support the Nazis had gained from the working classes. The new party leadership signalled to former Jewish leaders and activists that their return from exile was not welcome. It soon began to recruit from the ranks of the “academics” who had supported the Nazi regime and were, at least potentially, threatened by denazification. One such was Heinrich Gross, a “euthanasia” doctor who experimented on and murdered so-called defective children in Vienna. He was protected by the Socialist patronage networks until the 1990s, even after Werner Vogt, a courageous medical doctor, first publicly exposed him.²²

It is clear that neither party's leadership was prepared to invest capital in combating the prevailing anti-Semitic prejudices. At best there were votes to be lost in being labelled pro-Jewish, at worst there were votes to be gained in employing implicit anti-Semitic messages. This, it seems to me, is a key point about an important Austrian Cabinet discussion, which I published nearly two decades ago. It shows that the Austrian government was intent in keeping restitution and even the alleviation of distress of Jewish survivors to a minimum, largely out of fear of domestic political fall-out. The issue under debate was the disposal of “heirless” Jewish property, which the Austrian state had already decided in principle that it would not seek to profit from. The socialist Minister of the Interior Oskar Helmer opposed a proposal to grant an advance out of a fund (yet to be established), which would have alleviated the desperate position of Jews in Vienna.

“I see everywhere the Jews spreading out...but the issue is also a political one. The Nazis too had everything taken away from them in 1945 and we can now see a situation where even a university-educated Nazi has to work on a building site...We are no longer living in 1945. The English are fighting the Jews now... the Americans haven't kept their promises either.”

²¹ Robert Knight 'The Politics of Memory in post-Nazi Austria,' in Edward Timms and Andrea Hammel (eds.), *The German-Jewish Dilemma. From the Enlightenment to the Shoah*, (New York, 1999), 291-304.

²² Wolfgang Neugebauer and Peter Schwarz, *Der Wille zum aufrechten Gang. Offenlegung der Rolle des BSA bei der gesellschaftlichen Integration ehemaliger Nationalsozialisten*, (Vienna, 2005), 268-305.

And his conclusion: “I would be in favour of stringing things out.”²³

Helmer’s antisemitic comments have become notorious in Austria. But surely it is equally striking how reluctant his fellow ministers were to contradict them. This basic attitude has been confirmed by much of the research into restitution instigated by the Austrian Historians’ Commission, on which I recently served. Admittedly it showed that Austrian restitution legislation (which was largely passed as a result of US pressure) did allow the restitution of some categories of property – especially larger businesses (where they had not been liquidated) and real estate. On the other hand restitution was limited to property which could be identified and several categories (notably rental and leasehold property) were not covered; in numerous cases, some of them of great complexity, the Austrian state, notably the central institution the *Finanzprokuratur*, deployed all its muscle to resist the claims of survivors. While the latter were dispersed across the globe, the former had the institutional and logistical capacity and the stamina to maintain its resistance over years if not decades.²⁴ The recent outcome of the legal dispute about Klimt’s famous pictures, now finally transferred to the claimant Maria Altmann, confirms how wrongheaded, and in the end counter-productive, this stance has been.

Behind this was the state’s dogged determination to stick to the “victim thesis” even as it came to look increasingly morally threadbare. It was, as the Commission concluded, “objectionable” because it was also “used to excuse the participation, sympathy or at the least agreement of Austrians.”²⁵

Nevertheless we should not forget two points:

Firstly, there *were* alternative voices, those of self-critical Austrians, who questioned the official line and these voices were never entirely eliminated. Gerald Stourzh has recently drawn attention to their expression in the post-war period. They should not in my view be seen as representative, but if they are ignored altogether later changes become difficult to explain; *Secondly*,

²³ Knight, 146, (132nd cabinet meeting, 9 November 1948) my translation.

²⁴ See *Die österreichische Finanzverwaltung und die Restitution entzogener Vermögen 1945 bis 1960. Beiträge von Peter Böhmer und Ronald Faber*, (Vienna and Munich 2003), 251-365.

²⁵ Historikerkommission, *Schlussbericht*, 22

the construction of Austria's "victim myth" did not take place in a vacuum. The country was occupied for ten years. The outside world did not simply take over the myth of Austrian innocence in May 1945 or give Austria its victim status "on a platter." The meal of evasion was cooked primarily in the post-war period, and the kitchen was the Cold War. Then in the decade after Austria regained its sovereignty and the Cold War gradually thawed, Austria gained international standing as a centre of neutrality. For most of the outside world Austria's Nazi legacy was hardly noticed. Its recent history was viewed broadly on the lines of "The Sound of Music"; a small idyllic country falling victim to a foreign invasion, a people of *Edelweiss*-singing patriots, with only a tiny Nazi minority of misled youths and traitors. By contrast, within Austria in this period the activities of the neo-Nazi right expanded rather than diminished. At Vienna University extreme right-wing student demonstrators could shout "long live Auschwitz," and an anti-Semitic professor like Taras Borodajkewycz could pepper his lectures with offensive remarks. Figures like Simon Wiesenthal were not the revered figures as they later became but isolated and often vilified.

4.

In the 1960s the terms of engagement began to shift. But the changes were not particularly dramatic, especially when compared to the controversies which convulsed West Germany. Austria had no heated parliamentary debates about whether Nazi crimes should come under a statute of limitations. There was nothing comparable to the "Auschwitz trial" held in Frankfurt. On the contrary there was a series of scandalous acquittals including the case of the Belgian Jan Verbelen, who had already been found guilty of war crimes in Belgium. There was nothing comparable to the West German 'Central office of State Justice Administrations' to coordinate prosecutions of Nazi criminals. Instead there was a virtual moratorium on prosecutions, instigated by the Justice ministry. Eichmann may have seen himself as an Austrian in some sense but the Austrian state did not.²⁶

²⁶ See Helmut Andics, *Der ewige Jude. Ursachen und Geschichte des Antisemitismus* (Vienna, 1965), 292 ff. 37 ff., which was written in the aftermath of the Eichmann trial and contains a curious mixture of anti-Semitic assumptions with a condemnation of the consequences of anti-Semitism.

In Austria, as in Germany, the Social Democratic Party was on the up, and it dominated federal politics for nearly 15 years. But unlike its West German sister party, Austrian Social Democracy did not emerge with the élan of a party which had been out of power for over thirty years; more importantly it did not place the scrutiny of Nazi crimes at the centre of its mission. Under the banner of modernization it looked forward not back. Its leader was the “Sun King” Bruno Kreisky, a brilliant and paradoxical figure who dominated Austrian politics for over a decade. I will not rehearse here Kreisky’s blind spots towards his own Jewish background and towards Israel except to say that these were complex and should not be reduced to the notion of “Jewish self-hatred.” However it is clear that the critical historical research which Kreisky did support was primarily directed towards the conflicts of the First Republic not the Nazi period.

Nevertheless more questions were being asked about Austrian involvement in National Socialism. Some of the critical voices came from the left-wing of the SPÖ, some from unorthodox Catholic intellectuals like Friedrich Heer. The important point here is that their criticism began to resonate more widely, especially among a better-educated post-war cohort, many of whom now enjoyed access to further education. The official line that Austria had been a collective victim of National Socialism began to be scrutinised from anti-Nazi premises. The historical basis of the “victim myth” was steadily undermined as a result, even while its associated values began to permeate Austrian society.²⁷ The state, whether intentionally or not, fostered this process by investing more resources into bolstering the “victim myth” against attacks from the German national and neo-Nazi right. Gradually the focus of historical and political interest shifted from what Germans or Germany had done to Austria, to what Austrian Nazis and then increasingly Austrians as a whole – whether Nazis or not – had done to Austrian Jews and other victims.

This shift had begun before the “Waldheim affair” of 1986. Nevertheless the affair was undoubtedly a turning-point, and thus rather more than merely one in a series of Austrian scandals.²⁸ Let me remind you briefly what this

²⁷ I have attempted to pursue this distinction in the context of Austrian restitution in ‘The Road from the Taborstrasse: Austrian restitution revisited.’ in *Year Book of the Leo Baeck Institute* (forthcoming).

²⁸ For this over-narrow contextualisation see Michael Gehler, “...eine groteske überzogene Dämonisierung eines Mannes...” Die Waldheim-Affäre 1986-1992, in

was about: the former UN Secretary-General had been extremely evasive about his war-time career, in particular his service as an intelligence officer on the Staff of General Löhr's Army Group E. Löhr and his army had committed horrendous war crimes in the Balkans under the heading of "counter-insurgency" or "fighting bandits" i.e. communist-led partisans. Waldheim, it emerged after intensive research in archives across the world, was not complicit in war crimes in any juridical sense, but he clearly was a small cog in a killing machine. In responding to charges and allegations Waldheim (and some of his supporters) showed a kind of moral autism. For some outside observers – myself included – this alone should have disqualified him from the highest office in the country.

The Waldheim affair deeply divided Austrian society. Some of Waldheim's supporters were unscrupulous in their readiness to use subliminal anti-Semitism, others were merely reckless or ignorant about the historical context in which they were operating. Many responded to the evidence of Waldheim's evasions with a cynical shrug of the shoulders and – pointing to the record of the SPÖ - the comment that "they all do that." Others felt in a kind of patriotic resentment that they were being "got at." The grain of truth in this was that the outside world's views and sensibilities were shifting. After what Saul Friedlaender calls "two decades of virtual silence" the Holocaust began to move into the centre of consideration of National Socialism.²⁹ But Austria was not just an object, much less a "victim" of this new sensibility, part of its younger generation also shared it and in effect demanded a renegotiation of the terms under which National Socialism was considered.

Changes since then can be summarized under three headings: memory politics, material liability (restitution and compensation), and historiography.

Michael Gehler and Herbert Sickinger (eds.), *Politische Affären und Skandale in Österreich. Von Mayerling bis Waldheim*, (Vienna, 1995), 614-665.

²⁹ Saul Friedländer, 'History, Memory and the Historian's Dilemmas and Responsibilities', in Jakob Tanner and Sigrid Weigel (eds.), *Gedächtnis, Geld und Gesetz. Zum Umgang mit der Vergangenheit des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, (Zürich, 2002), 71; see also John Torpey, "'Making Whole what has been smashed': Reflections on Reparations", *Journal of Modern History* 73, June 2001, 333-358, here 334.

- 1) After decades in which Austria's Jewish victims were either "Austrofied" or simply ignored in the commemorations of the Second World War, they are now at the centre. The way they are commemorated is of course - and will certainly continue to be - controversial, both politically and aesthetically. A recent prominent example was Rachel Whiteread's monument to Jewish victims in Vienna's *Judenplatz*. Whatever one may think of the merits of the monument, the debate around it - especially when contrasted to the antifascist monument of Alfred Hrdlicka - shows that a shift in sensibility has taken place. A shift can also be seen in another controversial event of memory politics, the exhibition about the *Wehrmacht*'s war of annihilation in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Let us recall that the first President of the Second Republic Karl Renner was dissuaded by his officials from referring to Austrian participation in the "[b]arbarities of the *Wehrmacht*" in his radio broadcast for V-E Day. By contrast the current president Heinz Fischer has been at the forefront of proposals to rehabilitate deserters from the *Wehrmacht*.³⁰
- 2) Secondly, on Austrian liability: the Austrian state has not given up its legal position that Austria as a state should not be liable for misdeeds committed after the *Anschluss*. But it has recognised that the construct is a fragile one and begun to put less weight on it. Since the 1990s the official position has become an acceptance, a "moral co-responsibility" (i.e. not a legal one). Restitution and compensation have been improved, for example with the simplification of the restitution of citizenship. The Austrian National Fund was set up in 1995 to make one-off payments for victims of Nazi persecution. More recently from 2000-2005 forced and slave labourers received payments totalling 350 million Euros from the Reconciliation Fund. Under the terms of the Washington Agreement of January 2001 a range of other measures (including for loss of rental property) were agreed to fill gaps in previous restitution provision, to be paid out of the General Settlement Fund worth 360 Million Dollars. It has taken four years for the pending legal cases to be settled or withdrawn but the first payments out of this fund have now begun.

³⁰ Josef Schöner, *Wiener Tagebuch 1944/1945*, ed. Eva-Marie Csáky, Franz Matscher, Gerald Stourzh (Vienna, Cologne Weimar, 1992). 238. See also *Die Presse* 20 January 2005 ('Fischer: Demonstrativer Akt für NS-Deserteure'); for the historical background see Walter Manoschek et.al. *Opfer der NS-Militärjustiz. Urteilspraxis – Strafvollzug – Entschädigungspolitik in Österreich*. (Vienna, 2003).

- 3) Thirdly, historical research: it is clearly no longer the case that Austrian involvement in National Socialism is ignored in the education system or the media. The commission on which I served and which produced 49 volumes on the subjection of expropriation and restitution and related issues is only one example of several. Many areas for research remain of course including the role of the parties. The Austrian university system is currently in something of a crisis, nevertheless in political terms the universities, not least that of Vienna have in many ways been transformed since the days of Borodajkewycz.³¹ They are certainly a world away from the hotbeds of German nationalist and Nazi activity which they were in 1938.

For surviving victims all this is unlikely to prompt much jubilation. And we should not allow ourselves to forget that Austria has seen the rise of Europe's most successful recent extreme right-wing politician, Jörg Haider. Haider, it used to be said, was not an anti-Semite. The point is debatable and there is no shortage of counter-examples, but what is abundantly clear is that Haider is more comfortable talking to veterans of the Waffen-SS and praising their war effort, than accepting the reality of the Holocaust. Listen to his response to a journalist on the Vienna magazine *Profil* in 1985:

Haider: For me there was an era in which there were military confrontations, in which our fathers were involved. And at the same time in the context of the Nazi regime there were events, which are not acceptable. But none of my relatives were involved in them.

Interviewer: Did I hear right? What do you call events?

Haider: Oh alright, they were activities and measures against groups within the population, which were striking breaches of Human rights.

Interviewer: Do you have difficulty speaking of gassings and mass murder?

Haider: Alright then if you like, it was mass murder.³²

In electoral politics Haider is now on the way down, if not yet altogether out. Yet the recent success of the (non-Haider) FPÖ in Vienna municipal elections, where it gained nearly 15% of the vote, shows that there is still a core of extreme right wing and xenophobic opinion capable of being

³¹ See for example Fritz Stadler (ed.), " ...eines akademischen Grades unwürdig". *Nichtigerklärung von Aberkennungen akademischer Grade zur Zeit des Nationalsozialismus an der Universität Wien. Im Auftrag des Rektorates an der Universität Wien* (Vienna, 2005).

³² *Profil* 18 February 1985 (my translation)

mobilised in Austria's capital. There is also still an archipelago of extreme right wing and anti-Holocaust activity concerned to disseminate the kind of revisionist views about the Holocaust which Haider only hinted at in his interview. David Irving was travelling to one of its islands last year when he was arrested. Irving's own pretensions to be taken seriously as a historian have of course been comprehensively demolished by Richard Evans and others³³ and the political importance of these groups is negligible. For that reason I share the fear that his punishment may prove counter-productive.

What finally can we say about the present and future terms of Austria's engagement with the Holocaust? As I have tried to show, without sounding complacent or "whiggish" they have shifted – often under outside influence and pressure – towards a critical acceptance of Austrian involvement in it. Of course the danger of a state-sponsored "harmonisation" whether of past misdeeds or of post-war evasions clearly remains, as shown by the recent discussion about an Austrian "House of History." And even where no evasion is being attempted there is a kind of desperate displacement in some of the contemporary discussion; most of the soul-searching comes – when it comes – from those who were not responsible nor even alive at the time of the Third Reich, while the guilty or the indifferent who were, are dying out. So of course are the surviving victims.

These changes, whether we like it or not, are turning the Holocaust into history. The question is, what kind of history? We can find a kind of answer by returning to Ruth Klüger, whose book is not just a remarkable account of a young girl's experience of the Holocaust but also a deeply uncomfortable account of the response of the post-war world to this experience. She is referring mainly to the USA and, more recently to Germany, but her message is a wider one. Recalling one post-war discussion swapping war-time experiences Klüger concludes that her own claustrophobic memory of being transported with her mother from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz is "not for polite company" ("nicht salonfähig"). It seems beyond the experience of any of her friends or acquaintances. And yet, she continues, even an attempt to understand it requires some more accessible point of comparison. After all she asks, "is thinking about human conditions ever anything else but a deduction from something which we can recognize, and recognize as related.

³³ Richard Evans, *Telling Lies about Hitler: The Holocaust in Court: History, Memory and the Law*, Third University of Glasgow Holocaust Memorial Lecture. (Glasgow, 2003).

One can't manage without comparisons. Otherwise one can only file the matter away, (*ad acta legen*) as a trauma which is removed beyond empathy."³⁴

To avoid the temptation to "file away", to attempt to empathise on the basis of what is recognized as "related" even with events which appears beyond comprehension, might also be seen as a way of "coming to terms with the past."

I thank you for your attention.

³⁴ Klüger, *Weiter leben*, 110-1 (my translation)

