

Sonja Niederacher

## Postwar Austria and the Jewish Refugees. The Role of the Exile Studies in coming to Terms with the Past

In this paper I am going to give an outline of the development of Austrian politics and society. I am focusing on how Austria has dealt with its National Socialist past from the postwar era until today and I am comparing this to the history of Exile Studies. Exile Studies is the discipline that explores the forced emigration of people, mostly Jews, who were persecuted by the Nazis.

Unlike Germany where Nazi oppression rose gradually from 1933 onwards, the 'Anschluss' Austria's to the German Reich in March 1938 came all of a sudden over the Jewish community. Approximately 120,000 out of 180,000 people were lucky enough to be able to escape the Nazi persecution in Vienna. The persecution was so brutal that Vienna gathered the status of a Model-city within the German Reich.<sup>1</sup> And it affected not only Jews but also political activists, Communists and Social Democrats as well as members and supporters of the Dollfuss and Schuschnigg governments. Some were both, Jewish and political opponents, which put them into even greater danger.<sup>2</sup> Most of them fled first to other European countries, to Great Britain, France or the Scandinavia. As the Germans succeeded to occupy big parts of Europe, the refugees had to get overseas, above all to the United States, Latin America, and Palestine.

In most countries of Exile, intellectuals, artists and politicians among the refugees built up organizations in order to support their compatriots and also to set a political signal of opposition against Nazi-oppression. In France there was the Ligue de l'Autriche vivante, in Great Britain there was the Austrian Center. The Free Austrian Movement in London was a head organization with over 500 members in different countries. As the names indicate, Austrian Exile organizations had a rather patriotic and nationalist attitude. In many cases, the cultural activities of exile organizations exported a conservative, traditionally folksy definition of the Austrian cultural heritage, which reinforced clichés and disregarded the complex situation within Austria.<sup>3</sup>

The political organizations had different point of views concerning the future of Austria, but they all demanded an Austrian state independent from Germany.<sup>4</sup> Based on this assumption, they formulated concepts of the nation in antithesis to a 'greater German' identity. The definition of 'Austrianness' was to emerge from the degree of separation from Germany – the less German the more Austrian, that was the simple rule. Distancing themselves from Germany was also a pragmatic necessity for the emigrants, in order to be seen by the authorities in their country of refuge as credible representatives of opposition to National Socialism.

---

<sup>1</sup> 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), pp. 61-89.

<sup>2</sup> See the case of the Federn's: Bernhard Kusche, *Die Ausnahme des Überlebens. Ernst und Hilde Federn. Eine biographische Studie und eine Analyse der Binnenstruktur des Konzentrationslagers*, 2 vols. (Gießen, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Muchitsch, 'The Cultural Policy of Austrian Refugee Organisations in Great Britain', in Edward Timms and Ritchie Robertson (eds), *Austrian Exodus. The Creative Achievements of Refugees from National Socialism*, *Austrian Studies* 6 (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 22-40 (pp. 25-7).

<sup>4</sup> 'Der Kampf gegen die Hitlerdiktatur und die österreichischen Sozialisten', Paris 1939. The Socialists did, however, concur with other exile groups in condemning the Anschluss as a forcible annexation.

It is remarkable that such emigrants' movements were among the few who still believed in an independent Austria, since the Austrian people had warmly welcomed the 'Anschluss'. However, it can be assumed that with their calls for an independent Austrian state, the emigrants did not intend to support the salvation from guilt of those who expelled them from their home and their country. Those who came back to Austria after the war had to find out that their commitment to Austria during all the years were not at all appreciated, instead they were confronted with the accusation that they had deserted Austria. This is even more of a let down since it is very likely that exile organizations may have influenced the formulation of the Moscow declaration, and that they supported with their patriotic attitudes the later construction of the myth of Austria being a victim of Nazism. For instance, the exile press reported at length how discontent the Austrian people were with what was called the 'Prussian occupation'. Furthermore reports of resistance activities suggested a widespread network of resistance groups in Austria, which in no way corresponded to the facts.<sup>5</sup>

The Moscow Declaration made by the Allies on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1943 designated Austria as the first free country to have fallen victim to Nazi aggression. The declaration explicitly refers to Austria's co-responsibility as a participant in the war, but after 1945 the majority of Austrians ignored this point; they simply neglected historical facts such as the broad popular approval of Hitler's invasion and that so many Austrians had participated in the expropriation, expulsion and murder of the Jewish population. Furthermore, when negotiating the State Treaty in 1955, Austrian politicians were able to ensure the removal of this passage concerning Austria's co-responsibility.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the way was clear in official terms for a myth that was to become a constitutive element of Austrian self-understanding that would last for more than 40 years.

After the war the discourse of patriotic resistance played an important role in Austrian society. It served to establish and reinforce broad acceptance of an independent Austrian national identity by the population. It also served to remove the picture from the involvement of Austrians in the Nazi crimes. Members of the anti-fascist resistance were the first group to receive support under the terms of the Victims' Welfare Law.<sup>7</sup> This took place in recognition of their services to the cause of Austrian independence, which was also required by the Moscow declaration. Austria's defenders abroad, the emigrants, were not taken into account. At the beginning Jews were not eligible for these payments unless they were regarded as victims of political persecution.<sup>8</sup> As the Historical Commission recently proved in one of its reports, the same thing happened with the citizenship laws of 1945, which gave an advantage to political persecutees over racial persecutees to regain the Austrian citizenship.<sup>9</sup>

The marginalization of Jews as victims in the period immediately after the war also represented a continuation of anti-Semitism, which was still virulent in Austria.<sup>10</sup> Around 12 to 15.000

---

<sup>5</sup> Nouvelles d'Autriche.

<sup>6</sup> Leopold Figl managed to get agreement on this during the night before the Treaty was due to be signed. See Walter Manoschek, 'Verschmähte Erbschaft. Österreichs Umgang mit dem Nationalsozialismus 1945 bis 1955', in Reinhard Sieder, Heinz Steinert and Emmerich Tálos (eds), *Österreich 1945-1995. Gesellschaft. Politik. Kultur*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Vienna, 1996), pp. 94-106 (p. 103).

<sup>7</sup> See Günter Bischof, 'Die Instrumentalisierung der Moskauer Erklärung nach dem 2. Weltkrieg', *Zeitgeschichte*, 20 (1993), 345-66.

<sup>8</sup> Wodak *et al.*, *Zur diskursiven Konstruktion nationaler Identität*, p. 148.

<sup>9</sup> Dieter Kolonovits, Hannelore Burger and Harald Wendelin, *Staatsbürgerschaft und Vertreibung (=Veröffentlichungen der Österreichischen Historikerkommission. Vermögenszug während der NS-Zeit sowie Rückstellungen und Entschädigungen seit 1945 in Österreich, Band 7)*, (Vienna and Munich 2004), pp. 344-51

<sup>10</sup> Peter Schwarz and Siegwald Ganglmair, 'Emigration und Exil 1938-1945', in Tálos *et al.*, *NS-Herrschaft in Österreich*, pp. 817-51 (p. 845).

refugees returned by 1970.<sup>11</sup> These returnees were met with rejection and anti-Semitic prejudice. People regarded the Exiles as 'unpatriotic vagabonds' and feared that they might demand back their homes and possessions.<sup>12</sup>

The majority of the population and government representatives were united in this behavior. Secretary of State Leopold Figl said in November 1945 at an election rally for the People's Party in Salzburg: 'Yes, it was more pleasant to be sitting in armchairs in some foreign country and to bide one's time cared for and protected than to suffer for Austria.'<sup>13</sup> This makes clear how the premise of Austria as victim functioned by means of discrediting 'other' victims, since their mere existence called into question the Austrian claim to victim status. Likewise, the reintegration of former Nazis required not only the ignorance but also the defamation of those whose fates were evidence of the crimes committed.

Regardless of the situation in Austria, after the war Jews were not regarded in the West, and above all in the USA, as the foremost victims. Instead, those activists who had participated in the resistance were accorded recognition as heroic victims, in contrast to humiliated 'passive' victims.<sup>14</sup> As Peter Novic describes it, the destruction of European Jewry was less of an issue, both during and right after the war. Then, in the 1970s American Jews began to define themselves as victims, making this status an important identity marker that was associated with pride. This new self-awareness also played a part in the re-examination of the Shoah that in the 1990s took place in several European countries, and also in Austria beginning with the Waldheim case. Other reasons for the rise of interest in Holocaust issues have been the End of the Cold War and the claims of former slave laborers from Eastern Europe who found their first chance to demand compensations, the Popularization of the Holocaust in the Media, for example the TV miniseries "The Holocaust" that influenced considerably public memory, and the younger generation that has begun to question post-war legends.<sup>15</sup>

This underlines the importance to analyze what has happened in Austria from the 1980s onwards towards an international dimension.<sup>16</sup>

The debate over the Nazi past of presidential candidate Kurt Waldheim in 1986 led to the first extensive discussion that put the collective victim status in to question.<sup>17</sup> Many observers therefore regard the Waldheim case as a crucial turning-point in post-war Austrian history.<sup>18</sup> But, it was not until 1991 before Austrian members of the government for the first time admitted Austria's complicity in National Socialism. The Austrian chancellor of that time, Franz Vranitzky

---

<sup>11</sup> Dieter Kolonovits, Hannelore Burger and Harald Wendelin, Staatsbürgerschaft und Vertreibung (=Veröffentlichungen der Österreichischen Historikerkommission. Vermögensentzug während der NS-Zeit sowie Rückstellungen und Entschädigungen seit 1945 in Österreich, Band 7), (Vienna and Munich 2004) p. 428.

<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Freundlich writes in her memoirs that 'the principle of 'vaterlandslose Gesellen', that Goebbels hurled in the faces of the emigrants following long-established tradition [...], this concept has remained with us for decades after the war.' Cited in *Salto*, 9 October 1992.

<sup>13</sup> *Das kleine Volksblatt*, 22 November 1945, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Novic, *The Holocaust in American Life*, pp. 21-7.

<sup>15</sup> See for instance Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle and London 2001)

<sup>16</sup> Heidemarie Uhl, 'Generation – Gedächtnis – Wissenschaft. Thesen zum „Perspektivenwechsel“ in der österreichischen Zeitgeschichte' in Martin Horvath, Anton Legerer, Judith Preifer and Stephan Roth (eds.), *Jenseits des Schlussstrichs. Gedenkdienst im Diskurs über Österreichs nationalsozialistische Vergangenheit* (Vienna, 2002), pp.212-19.

<sup>17</sup> Heinz P. Wassermann, 'Zuviel Vergangenheit tut nicht gut!' *Nationalsozialismus im Spiegel der Tagespresse der Zweiten Republik* (Innsbruck, 2000), pp. 197, 218.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Anton Pelinka, *Zur österreichischen Identität. Zwischen deutscher Vereinigung und Mitteleuropa* (Vienna, 1990).

was the first to apologize for what Austrians had done during the Nazi era. Since the late 1990s the perception of Austria's history has changed fundamentally in terms of legal and research matters. In 1995 the National Fund was established in order to compensate victims of National Socialism, who until then, had not been entitled for compensation payments by the government. This included victims of forced sterilization and of euthanasia, those persecuted because they had been classed as 'asocial', as well as homosexual.<sup>19</sup>

1998 was *the* central year in coming to terms with the past, and can be seen as the second step forward after the Waldheim scandal in 1986. Since Austria was under enormous international pressure, the government appointed a committee of historians that would carry out a comprehensive reappraisal of the expropriation of Jewish and other citizens from 1938 onwards as well as their restitution and compensation after 1945.

The commission's final report, completed in February 2003, which is in process of being published in 49 volumes, underlines the ambiguity of the victim thesis and its historical transformation.<sup>20</sup> With all the main facts put on the table open for discussion and further investigation the commission has provided a solid basis for negotiating the Austrian past and has set new standards for historical research.

In view of the class actions coming from the United States many companies like VOEST-Alpine Stahl, the Austrian Postal Savings bank or the Dorotheum were forced to take action and examine their role during National Socialism. The Social Democrats as well as the People's Party have had their role in the post-war restitution process examined.

After a debate over stolen artworks that gained much interest in the media, the Austrian government put a law in order to standardize the restitution of looted art in possession of the state. They set up a commission of provenance research in order to trace obscure art pieces.

In 2001, eventually, Austria and the USA agreed in Washington upon a sum of 210 million US-Dollars to be paid to victims of "aryanization" as soon as the class actions against Austria would be dropped.<sup>21</sup> By 2002 Austria paid 182 million Euros to former NS-slave laborers.<sup>22</sup> The since the year 2000 center-right government is trying to claim credits for these achievements. But critical voices consider the speed in accomplishing the conditions for restitution payments more likely an attempt to close this embarrassing chapter definitely, in order to calm down international critics, instead of coping seriously with the past.<sup>23</sup>

However taking into account the nowadays various initiatives on the cultural and educational sector to memorize the Holocaust, we can state with awareness that the recognition of Austrian guilt today constitutes the dominant form of memory, even though some segments of society might be still reluctant to accept this version of history to a full extent.

## *Exile Studies*

---

<sup>19</sup> Brigitte Bailer-Galanda, 'Die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus und die so genannte Wiedergutmachung', in Tólos *et al.*, *NS-Herrschaft in Österreich*, pp. 884-901 (p. 894).

<sup>20</sup> Clemens Jabloner *et al.*, (eds.), *Schlussbericht der Historikerkommission der Republik Österreich: Vermögensentzug während der NS-Zeit sowie Rückstellungen und Entschädigungen seit 1945* (Vienna 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Allgemeiner Entschädigungsfonds, BGBl I Nr. 12/2001.

<sup>22</sup> Versöhnungsfonds.

<sup>23</sup> Margit Reiter, "Gedächtnisort" Generation – und wo stehen wir ZewithistorikerInnen?' in Horvath *et. al.* (eds.), *Jenseits des Schlusstrichs*, pp.205-211.

By looking at the history of exile studies as a discipline, it is possible to show how the critical engagement with Austrian identity that had begun in exile is linked with Austria's status as a victim of Nazism. The essential point is the tendency to interpret exile as a form of resistance within a patriotic-Austrian frame of reference.

For many years the political situation in Austria was not in favor of exile research. The universities were unwilling to deal with the expulsion of students and academics as part of their own history.<sup>24</sup> Research into this area, which in the 1970s was still at an early stage, was therefore done by non-university institutions and individuals, mostly emigrants and reemigrants. That the researchers were the subject of their own investigations made an impact on the academic discipline, which should not be underestimated. The two fundamental axes of exile studies research were political and literary exile. There also has been considerable interest in the exile of scientists and academics, in the story of how they picked up work that had been interrupted and of how it was received. In their first works Exile Studies focused on elite social groups, on artists, politicians, intellectuals and, in particular, writers. Facing a complete ignorance by the Austrian public Exile Studies tried to bring the 'forgotten' Austrian emigrants back into collective consciousness. Moreover, they put a strong emphasis on people who can be somehow associated with resistance or at least oppositional activities in Exile. The bulk of those who had been exiled were of no interest, neither to the Austrian public nor to emigrants themselves.

This temporary symbiosis of exile and resistance represented the struggle against Nazi Germany as the concern of all Austrians. Attention was paid to those who had worked in Exile for the 'liberation' of the country. In the accounts of reemigrants and early exile researchers winning recognition as victims is not prioritized. Their concern was to be seen as Austrian patriots. Resulting from this, the Exile Studies supported unwillingly Austria's victim thesis by adapting the victim – perpetrator framework. The foregrounding of political (patriotic) resistance distracted attention from the numerically much more significant emigration of people not involved in political activities and from those who no longer considered returning to Austria.

Only belatedly did the discipline begin to take an interest in everyday life, apart from political and cultural activity.<sup>25</sup> In the course of this research on the private sphere, attention also turned to women who until then had been situated literally at men's side. The changes in the 1990s have had impact on the Exile Studies, too. Since then, the emphasis on political emigration, which had had such a strong meaning, has almost disappeared from the works in Exile Studies, whereas literature is still important. The sciences have gained even more attention paid since this exile was 'probably the greatest cultural and scientific transfer' in the history of Austria.<sup>26</sup> And some people argue that the country is still suffering from this intellectual loss.

Recently interest in non-outstanding scholars has increased. By using new technologies like electronic databases<sup>27</sup> and internet platforms,<sup>28</sup> much effort is made in collecting biographical data with the aim to catch the emigrants at large.

---

<sup>24</sup> See Johannes Feichtinger, *Wissenschaft zwischen Kulturen. Österreichische Hochschullehrer in der Emigration 1938-45* (Frankfurt a.M., 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Wolfgang Benz (ed.), *Das Exil der kleinen Leute. Alltagserfahrungen deutscher Juden in der Emigration* (Munich, 1991).

<sup>26</sup> Schwarz and Ganglmair, 'Emigration und Exil 1938-1945', p. 819.

<sup>27</sup> BiografiA. Biographische Datenbank und Lexikon österreichischer Frauen, <http://www.biografiA.at> (1.10.2004)

<sup>28</sup> Austrian Exile (Österreichische Wissenschaftsemigration): <http://www.austrianexile.coresearch.org> (1.10.2004).

source: Unpublished manuscript, Vienna/Lubbock, TX 2004.

---

This recent consideration of the mass of emigrants can be seen as a consequence of the strengthening of the victim status of Jews and therefore emigrants in Austria, that has occurred since the 1990s.