

Extract from Context XXI

<http://contextxxi.org/waldheim-s-austria.html>

extracted on: 29 March 2024

Date of this contribution: October 1995

Waldheim's Austria

■ HERBERT KUHNER

The Socialists and the Conservatives are the two major parties in Austria. There is also a mini-sized third force, the so-called Freedom Party. It was formed after the war to soak up those with a Nazi past. Many were swallowed by the Socialists and Conservatives, who competed for the lion's share. The present-day Freedom Party is composed of 'liberals' and 'nationalist'. The nationalist element is dedicated to upholding the 'purity' of the German language and culture and owes allegiance to the German nation. There some thirty thousand bilingual Croations, twenty thousand bilingual Slovenians and a hundred thousand *Gastarbeiter*, or foreign workers, in Austria. Do these pose a threat to the language and culture of seven million? The largest pre-war minority, the Jews, has virtually ceased to exist due to Hitler.

In 1983 the Socialists formed a coalition with the Freedom Party. In 1985, when Walter Reder, the last Nazi war criminal incarcerated in Italy, was released, Friedhelm Frischenschlager, Freedom Party Minister of Defence, flew to Graz to welcome the old soldier with a handshake and 'Grüß Gott!' This was a bone in the throat of some Socialist, but others gulped it down without any trouble. The Conservatives raised a ruckus in parliament but smiled wanly when one of the mayors presented Reder with a hunting lodge to while away his twilight hours. The Catholic Church got into the act by offering Reder room and board until the more luxurious quarters were ready.

Incidentally, Reder gave up his Austrian citizenship in the thirties before Austria was annexed by Hitler when he

embarked on an SS career in the Reich. He did not have to apply to regain it. It was handed back to him on a silver platter along with a pension and other benefits. No Jewish emigré can boast of such red carpet treatment with a cabinet member on hand to do the welcoming.

Bruno Kreisky, the long serving Chancellor who led the Socialists to power in 1970, is of Jewish birth. He proved to be a good politician in the worst possible sense. Kreisky, the Jew, was the first post-war Chancellor to bring former Nazis into his cabinet. Kreisky may himself have been a victim of the Third Reich, but he was willing to let bygones be bygones. His motto was 'if you're brown, hang around'. His theme song was '*Brown is the Colour of my True Love's Shirt*'.

During the 1975 election campaign the Socialists were considering a coalition with the Freedom Party if they failed to maintain their majority. That would have meant designating their leader Friedrich Peter as Kreisky's Vice Chancellor. When Simon Wiesenthal came up with the embarrassing fact that Peter's SS Unit had specialized in extermination, a parliamentary investigating committee was to be set up to investigate — Wiesenthal. Bruno Kreisky then took over the role of Nazi hunter and accused Wiesenthal of having survived the Holocaust by being a Gestapo informer. In other words, open season was declared on him.

Socialist gulpers aren't new at the game. When one of their members, a distinguished psychiatrist used as an expert in the law courts, came under fire for his Third Reich past, a protective umbrella was formed over him. The

doctor in question had been responsible for the extermination of 'mentally retarded' children. After the war, he sat in court for four decades and decided who was sane and who was not. Today he lives in 'honourable' retirement and is still called upon to give his professional views on crime. In 1983 he returned from a tour of Soviet psychiatric clinics bubbling with enthusiasm. The Socialists take care of their own all right, even if they were previously *National Socialist*.

Many former Nazis have become opponents of totalitarianism and advocates of democracy. In most cases their conversion just happened to coincide with the collapse of the Third Reich. Indeed, everything has been done to integrate these converts into the fabric of present-day society, thus enabling them to contribute their skills for the 'public good'.

Winning the Jewish vote in Austria is of minor political importance. The Jewish community has shrunk from 220,000 to 8,500. But the hard-core Nazi vote can easily be estimated. Neo-Nazi Norbert Burger received 141,000 votes when he ran for the Austrian presidency in 1980. That was 3.2% of the total vote. Another distinguished Freedom Party member became Minister of Justice. He was quoted as saying he considers himself to be a German Austrian and does not feel bound to Austria as a nation, and, furthermore, that he regrets the defeat of the armies of the Third Reich.

Austrians have been accused of not wanting to face the past. But during Kurt Waldheim's presidential campaign last year the past struck the present like a slap in the face. The spectre was ugly in

deed, and it caused many to show their true colour. The language of politicians and columnists of the day was strangely reminiscent of the slogans of yesterday. Leaders of Jewish organisations were referred to as 'dishonourable individuals'; there was an 'international Jewish press' and a 'world-wide Jewish conspiracy'.

Waldheim suffered from amnesia concerning certain aspects of his military service during the war years. And lo-and-behold, Bruno Kreisky took the occasion to lambast his former friend for his lapses in memory, which was like the pot calling the kettle *brown*.

People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, but that didn't prevent the Socialist from throwing stones at the man who had been head of the big glass house in Manhattan, the United Nations headquarters. Delving into Waldheim's past by the Socialists backfired and created a backflash that helped elect their target.

Friedrich Peter referred to his stint in the SS as having done his duty. Kurt Waldheim may not have shared Peter's fervour in the thirties and forties, but he too used the cliché about 'duty'.

Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg was the man who handed Hitler the keys to the country in 1938. At a round table discussion in the seventies, he stated that had Austria fought, he and his colleagues might not have survived to tell the story. As nice as it was to have him around to chat about it, perhaps it would have been preferable if there were another story to tell.

In February 1984, Friedhelm Frischenschlager, then Freedom Party Minister of *Defence*, stated that it would have been suicidal for Austria to have fought in 1938. Lives would have been lost in a senseless struggle.

Weren't lives lost in a senseless war that began one year later — a war that lasted for five years? The blood that had not been shed fighting against the Reich was shed fighting for the Reich many times over. But it cannot be compared to the blood shed by the Reich. That cost 55,000,000 lives.

A man can't be condemned for not being a dead hero, but he should be taken to task for making malicious and asi-

nine statements.

While Waldheim was campaigning for the youth vote, a naive student asked him why he hadn't joined the opposition. The President-to-be replied that if he and hundreds of thousands of Austrians had gone into the opposition, they all would have been killed.

The point is, if there had been such a strong opposition, the *Führer* wouldn't have been able to pull off his strategy.

Way back in '71, when he first ran for the Austrian presidency, Waldheim had said: 'I deny the allegations that I am a Nazi or even a Jew!' God forbid anyone for suspecting him of being a Jew! Bruno Kreisky has no such luck. He can't deny the latter. But he has said: 'The Jews are a lousy people', and he has done his best, as an individual, to prove his assertion.

Actually Waldheim's background is Czech, and in 1968, when the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia, he proved his impartiality. As Conservative Foreign Minister, he initialed an order to close the Austrian embassy to Czech applying for Visas. This order was fortunately ignored by Ambassador Rudolf Kirchschläger. Waldheim was quite an 'initialer'. His initials appeared on wartime intelligence reports, but he was totally unaware of deportations.

At his first press conference, the newly elected president was asked whether emigrés should be invited to return since no such invitation has been extended since 1945. To show that his heart is in the right place, the President replied: 'I will look into the matter'. Let me get up on a soapbox to proclaim: 'Fellow emigrés, if my experience can be used as a gauge, you better stay right where you are!'

At the Freedom Party Congress on September 13, 1986, the 'nationalist' element triumphed over the 'liberal' element. Young Norbert Steger was replaced by younger Jörg Haider as Freedom Party leader. In 1984, at the height of Reder Affair, when Friedhelm Frischenschlager was under pressure to resign for welcoming 'the last Austrian prisoner of war' back to Austria, Haider came to the Minister of Defence's defence. 'I'd bet my fortune that if Bruno Kreisky were still Chancellor, he'd have

personally welcomed Reder'. A good part of the fortune here referred to consists of land 'Aryanised' from a Jewish owners after the *Anschluss*. Kreisky did indeed visit Reder in the Italian castle where he was imprisoned and used his influence to gain Reder's release.

Perhaps the soft spot in Kreisky's heart is partially due to a situation described in his 'Memoirs'. He was arrested twice in the thirties, first by the Christian Socialists when they took over in 1934 and then by the National Socialists when they took over. According to Kreisky, the treatment he received during the first incarceration was rougher and he struck up friendships with fellow prisoners who happened to be Nazis. When Kreisky was imprisoned again, his former fellow prisoners spoke for him, and he was released by their comrades and allowed to emigrate to Sweden where he spent the war years.

As for Haider, he denied that the Freedom Party is heir to the Nazis. His cynical reason: 'If it were, it would be in the majority.'

After his election as party leader, a Haider supporter told Frau Steger, the wife of the man he defeated. 'You husband deserves to be gassed'. Another member of the winning faction told the loser's wife, 'If we'd elected Hitler instead of Haider, your husband would be taken out and shot'.

A Haider man was also overheard to say, 'I prefer a good dictatorship to a bad democracy'.

Haider set his sights on Austrian writers: 'We will not allow Austria to be affronted as it has been by some subsidized authors ... The Freedom Party will not allow our beautiful homeland to be besmirched'. Haider's exoneration and white-washing of the war generation did indeed bear fruit. In the 1983 election the Freedom Party had received 5% of the vote; in 1986 the party under Haider doubled the number, leaving the giants weakened.

The Conservative attitude is best expressed by Secretary-General Michael Graff who stated that the Socialists would find Haider acceptable if he placed a flower pot in Mauthausen. Since Kreisky had taken Peter to Theresienstadt, perhaps Graff could take

Haider to Mauthausen.

The mockery of the millions murdered is unlimited.

copyright Herbert Kuhner, MEMORIES OF A 39er: A NOVEL OF SORTS, Vienna 1987.

Herbert Kuhner: Herbert Kuhner ist 1935 in Wien geboren. 1939 mußte er mit seinen Eltern die "Ostmark" verlassen. Er wuchs in den Vereinigten Staaten auf, wo er sein Bachelor of Arts an der Columbia

University bekam. 1963 kehrte er nach Österreich zurück und lebt seitdem in Wien als freier Schriftsteller und Übersetzer.

License of this contribution
Copyright
© copyright the article's author