

Hubert Feichtlbauer: **Naziism and Racism in Austria**

One of Austria's major problems is to strike a fair balance between equally wrong simplifications: Nazi country or Nazi victim, detestable Anti-Semites or admirable anti-Communists, artists of survival or abominable opportunists? The truth is more complex than such clichés. Here are some elements of it for further discourse:

- 1. There is a Burden of History.** When all nations sought and found their identities, Austrians were excluded from a German solution first by Prussia (1871), then by the Allies (1918). But all parties agreed: Austrians are Germans! Thus it was all the more remarkable that in 1933 the Austrian government decided: No union with t h i s Germany! Political resistance between 1933 and 1938 was strong, paid for dearly, but executed with wrong allies (Italian fascists instead of Austrian Social Democrats). Another historic legacy was vicious anti-Semitism, fostered by Christian preachers and instrumentalized politically since the late 19th century.
- 2. The Republic of Austria Was a Victim.** In 1938 Hitler marched 100,000 troops into Austria, toppled the government, arrested over 50,000 opponents. The Moscow Declaration of 1943 of the American, British and Soviet Allies (who had not come to Austria's rescue in 1938) pronounced Austria Hitler's victim. Should the new cabinet members returning from concentration camps have contradicted them?
- 3. Why the Dikes Broke in 1938:** Nazi enemies were disfranchised and jailed. A huge propaganda campaign was waged. Bishops, Social Democratic leaders and other celebrities proclaimed support for anschluss (which had been a goal of all parties before 1933). Open balloting required civic courage - never before trained.
- 4. Victims and Resistance.** Communists and Catholic monarchists, also individual priests, bore the brunt of persecution. Towards the end of the war O 5 units made possible peaceful transition in various cities. 2700 resistance fighters were executed, 65,000 Austrian Jews and almost 33,000 non-Jewish Austrians murdered in concentration camps and Gestapo prisons, 12,000 died as fighters in Allied armies, 120,000 Jews were robbed and expelled, 28,000 "unworthy lives" taken.
- 5. Nazi Perpetrators Were Not Spared.** In 1945 the Nazi party was outlawed (and still is today), 270,000 former members lost jobs and pensions, career ranks and voting rights, had to pay "atonement taxes". Two Austrians were sentenced to death in Nuremberg (Ernst Kaltenbrunner and Arthur Seyss-Inquart), Austrian People's Courts pronounced 13,000 verdicts of guilty (Germany: 6500), 43 death sentences (12 in Germany), 30 (3) of which were carried out. In both countries also Allied courts sentenced Nazi criminals (more in Germany). But when in 1949 most former Nazis regained voting rights, they were wooed by all parties, pardoned and reinstated in jobs and other rights, sometimes acquitted in jury trials.

- 6. Restitution, Compensation: Reluctant, Late.** At first official Austria only provided support for needy victims of political persecution, only later also for other (e.g. racial) victims. 43,000 cases of "Aryanization" were heard in court. Loopholes were closed in 2000 (for victims of forced labor) and 2001 (Jews not yet compensated for loss of flats). All restitution and compensation amounts until now add up to some 36 bill. schillings (current value): 2,4 bill. dollars or 2,6 bill. euros, pension rights not included. Thousands of works of art were returned to owners, partly with questionable deals (some had to be donated" to Austrian museums.)
- 7. Objective Reasons for Restricted Compensation.** After 1945 the state of Austria had no money, was dependent on food gifts from abroad. Hundreds of thousands of war refugees had to be taken care of. The Soviet occupation forces confiscated German assets (mostly investments) in Austria. All Austrians lost most of their savings when the currency was reformed in 1947. Generous offers to Nazi victims would not have been understood. Besides, the State Treaty of 1955 required Nazi victims compensation only to the extent of war damage compensation.
- 8. Denazification of the Minds.** Teachers were dismissed, schoolbooks burned, exhibitions staged, memorials erected, tens of thousands of school children taken to former concentration camp Mauthausen, exchange programs organized between Austria and Israel. Newspapers, radio and television constantly reported on NS past, never favorably (107 TV feature movies in the last 20 years). However, the nation's largest paper often arouses anti-foreigner and at times even latent anti-Semitic sentiments - protested strongly by many. Stage and movie theatres have regularly shown anti-Nazi plays. Christian churches staged atonement services.
- 9. Austria's Post-War Policies: Supranational.** Austria has always supported the United Nations, joined them in 1955, has offered contingents since 1960, became seat of UN institutions, solved conflict with Italy over South Tyrol under UN auspices. Austria opened borders to refugees from Hungary in 1956, from Czechoslovakia in 1968, from Balkan countries in the 1990s, enabled 370,000 Jews to emigrate from the Soviet Union when Israel entertained no diplomatic ties with Moscow, treats her minorities at above-EU average standards (EU report 2000). Asylum and immigration policies were toughened recently like in many EU states.
- 10. Anti-Semitism and Everyday Racism Must Be Fought.** Virtually nobody in Austria wishes Hitler back. There is no danger of neo-Fascism. There are some right-wing extremists like in other countries but executive and judicial authorities handle them better than elsewhere. Everyday racism is the enemy to be battled with resolve: arrogance vis-a-vis Slav peoples, Turks, black Africans, a few Muslims now. The worst aspect of racism is anti-Semitism: 10 per cent of Austrians are open, 27 per cent latent antagonists of Jews. This inexcusable shame must be overcome like Pan-Germanism has been overcome - with patience and strong determination. It is a problem of practically all European nations that must be solved in all of them so the fight for a fairer future can be won by all of us.