



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Karl Pfeifer was born in Baden bei Wien, Austria in 1928. In 1938, following the Nazi German annexation, he fled with his parents to Hungary. In 1943, he emigrated to Palestine where he volunteered for the Palmach and fought in Israel's War of Independence. In 1979, he became a freelance journalist and from 1982-95 was the editor of the official monthly publication of the Jewish community in Vienna. Based in Vienna, he writes regularly for Searchlight, the British anti-fascist magazine and for the Budapest weekly Hetek. He is also Curator of The Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (DÖW). A documentary film about his work, Zwischen allen Stühlen—Lebenswege des Journalisten Karl Pfeifer, has recently been released.

ABOUT ZWORD

Z Word is an online journal focusing on the contemporary debate over Zionism, anti-Zionism, antisemitism and related areas. Editorially independent, Z Word identifies and challenges anti-Zionist orthodoxies in mainstream political exchange.

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ESSAY

Victim Competition: Antisemitism and the Austrian Left

By Karl Pfeifer

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Lest They Forget: artist Rachel Whiteread's memorial to the victims of the Holocaust in Vienna.

DURING THE SEPTEMBER 2008 parliamentary elections, the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) lost many of its traditional voters, yet still emerged as the biggest single party. Any understanding of the continuing hold of the SPÖ needs to begin with the development of Austrian society after the country's liberation by the Allies in spring 1945, and the specific fact, as Ruth Contreras has argued, "[T]hat the majority of Austrian society supported the Nazis or at least obeyed the Nazi regime was assiduously ignored."

From the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* (the National Socialist term for "national community,") Austria developed into a *Sozialpartnerschaft* (social partnership,) based on compromise between employers and employees and the integration of former Nazis: thus social harmony, compromise and consensus became predominant. One current example of this emphasis on consensus, which will bemuse those unfamiliar with Austria's internal workings, concerns Werner Faymann, the leader of the Social Democratic party (SPÖ). Faymann maintains a close relationship with the *Neue Kronenzeitung*, a populist rag which quite often publishes racist and xenophobic texts.

While the extreme right parties propagate implicit or explicit racism, xenophobia and antisemitism, the SPÖ shies away from conflict with them, trying to soften their impact. This strategy merely strengthens the far right—the two extreme right wing parties, the FPÖ and BZÖ, gained a massive 29 per cent of the vote in September elections. Indeed, nothing better illustrates



this new democratic “Volksgemeinschaft” than the oration of Austria’s Social Democratic Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer at the funeral of the BZÖ leader Jörg Haider, who was killed in a car accident shortly after the elections. “He was a remarkable person,” said Gusenbauer, as he urged his fellow Austrians to “pay tribute” to Haider.²

The Post-War Paradigm

From 1945 onwards, a central tenet of Austria’s distortion of its own past was the half-truth, originating in the Allies’ Moscow Declaration of November 1943, which designated the country as the “first victim of Nazi aggression.” For the Austrian political establishment, the argument was a simple one: from 1938 to 1945 Austria did not even exist. Thus Austrians could not be held responsible for what happened to their Jewish compatriots and only the Germans were to blame for the Holocaust. Quod Erat Demonstrandum.

“The persistence of antisemitism in Austria after 1945 originates above all from this ‘first victim’ myth”

The persistence of antisemitism in Austria after 1945 originates above all from this “first victim” myth and the resulting reluctance to assume responsibility for the destruction of Austrian Jewry. The incidents and trends documented in this article show that antisemitism has deep and lasting roots in Austrian culture, politics and society.

All the legends that were to shape the new Austria and its handling of the Holocaust were incorporated into the Second Republic’s declaration of independence of 27 April 1945. Specifically: that the Anschluss had been “forced upon” the “helpless Austrian people” from outside; and the “fact that Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist government, having totally subdued the

Austrian people and rendered it powerless by means of this complete political, economic and cultural annexation of the country, led it into a pointless and hopeless war of conquest that no Austrian had ever wanted,

foreseen or endorsed. The German government led Austrians into waging war against peoples whom no true Austrian had ever had feelings of animosity or hate.”

As early as August 1945, at a time when Austria’s infrastructure was partly destroyed, and the country was struggling to cope with thousands of displaced persons, the first president of the Second Republic, the Social Democrat (SPÖ) Karl Renner, was preoccupied with the fate of former National Socialists, few of whom were subjected to either hard labor or internment. Thus he declared in a speech that “all those little Nazis, those little businessmen, those little employees” did not want to have a war, “to the utmost they wanted to do something to the Jews.”³ Thus did he play down violent antisemitism. Renner’s attitude is also to be understood in the context of the fact that he was not only in favor of the “Anschluss” in 1938, but volunteered to write a brochure for the annexation of the Sudetenland to Germany.⁴

Much of the SPÖ leadership, a high percentage of whom were themselves “of Jewish descent,” responded by going out of their way to avoid Jewish concerns and aspirations. True, before 1933 the SPÖ was alone among the Austrian parties in parliament in not including antisemitism in its program, but the party’s literature frequently identified Jews with banking, capitalist enterprise and profiteering. The SPÖ even went so far as to accuse the Christian Social Party and, incredibly, the Nazis themselves, of being “pseudo antisemites,” conducting a “mock war against Jewish finance, designed to hoodwink the working masses”. When asked to fight antisemitism, the SPÖ leaders argued that they had no obligation to defend Jewish capital or to be a Judenschutztruppe (a bodyguard for the Jews)—this despite the fact that most Austrian Jews were not capitalists.

After unification (*Anschluss*) with Germany in March 1938, the Nazis did their utmost to gain the support of former socialists and were in many cases successful.

After the Second World War, and contrary to the situation before 1945, no-one in officialdom would admit to antisemitism. Austria’s politicians, therefore, set about systematically denying the existence of this phenomenon which so clearly gave the lie to the country’s victim myth. In 1947, Vienna’s mayor Theodor Körner of the SPÖ defended the city and its population against the accusation of persistent antisemitism. Denouncing the numerous reports of anti-Jewish incidents as “deliberate lies and thoughtless chatter,”

he noted that the “Viennese [citizen]” was “inherently no antisemite.” After all, he was a “citizen of the world,” and as such, “antisemitic tendencies were completely alien to him.”

Körner wanted people to forget how, following the *Anschluss*, the Viennese mob threw itself upon the city’s Jewish population, celebrating this great historical event with a pogrom. Around 185,000 Jewish men, women and children were first robbed of all their belongings and later slaughtered or driven into exile. Moreover, jealousy, xenophobia and antisemitism tainted attitudes towards the hundreds thousands of east European Jewish refugees who survived the Holocaust and passed through Austria after the liberation.

In his book *Hitler war kein Zufall* (Hitler was not an accident) published in 1962, the SPÖ functionary Josef Hindels criticized the “extreme opportunism” of high functionaries. He quoted one such who said: “If the gassed Jew could vote, I would be ready to speak at election meetings about the crimes of the Nazis. But unfortunately we need the votes of those who gassed them.”⁵ In 2007, I attended a lecture given by the former Austrian chancellor, Franz Vranitzky of the SPÖ, who described how SPÖ functionaries asked him not to speak at election meetings about anti-Fascism and antisemitism.

Above all, the presence of Jewish Holocaust victims proved to be an unwelcome reminder of the crimes of the Nazi period, threatening the Second Republic’s precious “victim thesis”. On the issue of restitution of Jewish property, the SPÖ was famously reluctant to push. Oskar Helmer, Minister of the Interior, even drew an equivalence—“In 1945 everything was also taken from the Nazis”—between the Jews and their oppressors. ...” On the question of restitution, he said: “I am in favor of dragging it out.” Thus was the political tone of post-war Austria’s approach to Jewish issues and concerns established.

The Weight of History: Kreisky vs. Wiesenthal

It is the career of Bruno Kreisky, who served as Chancellor between 1970 and 1983, which provides a notably illuminating perspective on Austria’s approach to the “Jewish question”, past and present, particularly on the left. In the 1970 national assembly electoral campaign, the posters of Josef Klaus, the Austrian’s People’s Party’s candidate for chancellor, emphasized that he, unlike his opponent Bruno Kreisky, whose Jewish origins

were only too well known, was “a genuine Austrian”.⁶

Andrei Markovits, in his analysis “Austrian Exceptionalism,” wrote: “The SPÖ’s tacit tolerance and quiet courting of former Nazis turned open and vocal under the leadership of Bruno Kreisky, beginning in 1970. Kreisky, an assimilated Viennese Jew of the educated middle class, who spent the war years in Sweden, returned to Austria to a successful career in politics which, among other things, openly and knowingly used antisemitism as a tool to further his own personal interests as well as those of his beloved SPÖ... Kreisky hoped that by weakening the conservative ÖVP and strengthening the right-radical FPÖ, he, too, would be able to establish “Swedish” conditions in Austria where the bourgeois parties would be splintered, thus leaving a powerful social democracy as the permanent ruler of the country. The active pursuit of this Swedish strategy coincided quite conveniently with Kreisky’s personal dislike of Jews, which he expressed to just about anyone willing to listen.”⁷

Simon Wiesenthal, who has been pejoratively described as a “Nazi hunter,” disclosed the fact that five ministers in Kreisky’s first cabinet were former members of the Nazi party. After the elections held late in 1975, Wiesenthal also shed light on the fact that Friedrich Peter—the president of the FPÖ whom Kreisky had been tapping as a potential coalition partner—had served in the Waffen SS and that his unit had perpetrated crimes against humanity.

An irrational and unmistakably paranoid element now emerged in Kreisky’s responses to Wiesenthal. This became apparent in an interview with the Israeli journalist Ze’ev Barth, republished in *Der Spiegel* on 17th November 1975.⁸ After explaining that he came from a “quite different milieu” from Wiesenthal, Kreisky completely lost his rag, declaring, “the man [Wiesenthal] must disappear” (“Der Mann muss verschwinden.”)

When Barth questioned him further about his allegation that Wiesenthal had used “political Mafia” methods, Kreisky thundered back that he would not stand trial before the Israeli or Jewish public. His parting salvo, “If the Jews are a people, then they are a lousy people,” (“Wenn die Juden ein Volk sind, so ist es ein mieses Volk,”) aggravated an already embittered situation beyond repair. As a commentator in the respected German Socialist newspaper *Vorwärts* ironically put it in December 1975, it appeared that “Superman Kreisky also has a problem which he has not quite overcome—his Jewish origin.”

Conveniently, Kreisky's personal aversion towards Jews also happened to be superb politics in a country where deeply felt hostility towards Jews was an unrelenting fact of public life. Kreisky denied antisemitism even when it was directed against him. "Today there is no more antisemitism in Austria. At the most, people are talked into that. I have never felt any antisemitism," he said, rather revealingly, in a newspaper interview.⁹

The leftwing Dutch journalist Martin van Amerongen defended Simon Wiesenthal against Kreisky's venom. In his book "Kreisky and his Unresolved Past," van Amerongen criticized Kreisky for his defense of former Nazis and members of the Waffen SS.¹⁰

That argument has lost none of its resonance more than thirty years later. At the time, Kreisky and some SPÖ functionaries responded by accusing Wiesenthal of having been a collaborator with the Gestapo. And when it came to Israel, Kreisky was an early practitioner of double standards: one standard for the Jewish state, one for the rest of the world. Such virulent criticism of Israel, often formulated in such a way as to conform to the worst antisemitic prejudices, displaced more traditional antisemitic rhetoric.

For example, in the summer of 1978, Kreisky gave an interview to the Dutch daily *Trouw* in which he expressed sympathy for Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat having to "deal with pettifoggers, little political pettifoggers like [Israeli Prime Minister Menachem] Begin, a little Polish lawyer or whatever he is. They are

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so alienated from normality, they think in such crazy fashion, these Ostjuden. They lack political responsibility. They lack subtlety in politics. They make themselves unpopular at the United Nations. The most hated diplomats today are the Israelis. It is incredible. They need another hundred years. They are as unpleasant as the Africans, who are also quarrelsome people."

Fritz Edlinger and "Secondary Antisemitism"

Some of Kreisky's followers went so far as to denounce Jewish "perpetrators", in order to support their claim that Israel was now the reincarnation of fascism. Josef Cap, who is now the SPÖ's parliamentary whip, spoke of the "endeavour to exterminate the Palestinians, (which) is in the last analysis genocide."

This is what is known as secondary antisemitism: "The notion is commonly used primarily to describe antisemitism in Austria and Germany, where secondary antisemitism is usually considered a reaction to the debates on national identity and National Socialism. Drawing on older stereotypes about Jewish power and influence in the media, a typical claim of secondary antisemitism is, for example, that Jews are manipulating Germans or Austrians by exploiting feelings of guilt...Characteristic of all forms of 'secondary antisemitism' is that they relate directly to the Holocaust and they allow speakers to avoid expressing open antisemitism. Secondary antisemitism also has a psychological component. Rather than constituting a form of antisemitism that exists in spite of the history of National Socialism, it exists because of it."¹¹

At the beginning of April 2002 MEP Hannes Swoboda asked Europe's Jewish communities to dissociate themselves from Israeli politics, lest they promote antisemitism. Swoboda is something of a regular when it comes to anti-Israeli events.

In a typical example of secondary antisemitism, Johann Hatzl, chairman of Vienna's local council, was interviewed on Radio Wien in May 2002 when he freely offered his opinion that Ariel Sharon was a "state-terrorist who, with the might of a state, authorizes extra-judicial assassinations of persons in foreign countries and persecutes minorities in ways which the Jews would not like if it were done to them."

Karl Blecha, a former SPÖ Minister of the Interior and now president of the Socialist Pensioners' Association (Pensionistenverband), said, according to the weekly *Format*: "The Zionists, who wanted to found in the whole of Palestine an exclusive Jewish state, have been exposed by their reaction for what they are—racists; and their state has become an example of one that practices unlawful racial discrimination." He also added that "faithlessness has been a Zionist tradition."

Former Austrian Foreign Minister Erwin Lanc

(SPÖ) also participated in “conference of rabbis” under the aegis of the Jewish anti-Zionist Neturei Karta sect, held on 1 July 2004, which was attended by a veritable who’s who of prominent right wing extremists.

On 20 July 1982, Fritz Edlinger the chairman of the SPÖ’s young generation sent a letter to the Vienna Jewish community, in which he asked the following question: “Can you live with taking financial support from a country whose chancellor you defame again and again as an enemy of the state of Israel?”

He continued: “Instead of constantly directing cheap and superficial appeals to Austria’s guilty conscience and demanding compensation from Austria’s population, you should rather look more critically at the political development of the state of Israel that you defend uncritically... Until you are not ready to do that, I deny absolutely your

“What had the makings of a major public scandal ...was nevertheless ignored by the mainstream media in Austria”

moral right to pass judgment on and make public declarations about the activities of Austrian organizations.”

Remarkably, these words did not come from an aging Nazi, but from a young man who prided himself on his “leftist” and “anti-fascist” image. Here was a prime case of secondary antisemitism, accusing Austrian Jews of exploiting the Holocaust for political and financial gain and expressly excluding them from the national collective.

Edlinger became a keen promoter of political and trade links between Austria and the Arab world, serving as General Secretary of the Society for Austro-Arab relations (GÖAB) and as the SPÖ’s representative at the Middle East Committee of the Socialist International from 1997—2002.

He was particularly close with Ba’athist regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. In 2005, he was at the center of a scandal when a journalist revealed that Edlinger’s GÖAB had received \$100,000 from an Iraqi front company as well as donations from Austrian companies soliciting business in Iraq.¹²

Saddam was not the only Arab dictator cultivated by Edlinger. In 2001, he traveled to Khartoum in order

“to participate at the twelfth anniversary of the taking office of President Omar Hasan Al Bashir.” This was a more diplomatic means of describing the anniversary of the military putsch in Sudan that brought to power a man who now stands accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes in Darfur.

The Shamir Scandal and After

In 2005, the leftist Vienna publishers ProMedia released a book, “Flowers of Galilee,” by the shadowy antisemite Israel Shamir, who has more than once changed his name in Sweden (first to Jöran Jermas then to Adam Ermash). Shamir, who converted to orthodox Christianity, is known for his fanciful claims and dubious connections (for example with MAUP, a private university in Ukraine which is that country’s principal publisher of antisemitic literature.)

Despite all this, Edlinger jumped at the chance to edit Shamir’s book, to which he also wrote the foreword wherein he insisted that Shamir was “a leftist and a radical democrat.” Edlinger also included a German translation of Shamir’s article “The Shadow of ZOG” (Nazi-speak for “Zionist Occupation Government” and a favorite buzzword amongst right wing hate groups and antisemites) in which Shamir says: “The Occupation Regime in Iraq was installed by the US army in the interests of Zionists, and it may be rightly called ZOG, Zionist Occupation Government, if anything. However, this ZOG is also a Zog, a servant of Darkness and Annihilation, for its first step was the destruction of Baghdad’s libraries and museums. [...] The problem is, the US people have no way out of the Zionist takeover. [...] The prominence of Jews in Western discourse causes the same sort of trouble that you would experience if you were to refuel your diesel car with petrol.”

Shamir then writes: “The Jewish supremacist forces and the greed worshippers united again to crucify Christ. The US, this New Rome, again gives hand and agrees to become the executioner. Now it is our turn to decide. ...they will destroy the Mother Earth herself, turn her into waste lands of Mordor. They need this victory to bind us together by the dark forces of domination. Let us deny them, this time.” Elsewhere, he repeats the infamous libel that Jews have used the blood of Christian children whom they murdered to make matzah, the unleavened bread consumed during the Passover holiday. Bizarrely, Shamir has also claimed that even if the notorious Protocols of the Learned

Elders of Zion are a forgery, they are nevertheless true.

Shamir himself noted that the ZOG article was translated into German for the so-called Deutsches Kolleg, an “intellectual” outfit whose active leader, Horst Mahler, found his way from the radical left to the neo-Nazi right. The purpose of the Deutsches Kolleg is to act as a Nazi ideological training centre.

What had the makings of a major public scandal—a leftist publisher bringing out a crudely antisemitic book—was nevertheless ignored by the mainstream media in Austria. It was only when Edlinger was invited to chair a discussion at Graz University in November 2005, and a group of Austrian students and intellectuals protested against his presence, that the daily *Der Standard* and the weekly *Falter* reported the scandal.

Edlinger was forced to distance himself from Shamir’s book. Before he did so, he gave an interview to *Muslim Markt*, an Islamist website in Germany, in which he stated that “I have rarely experienced such a massive and hysterical campaign as this one against Israel Shamir and his writings. Obviously, with his critical views he touches a raw nerve for some, especially Zionists, on sensitive points.”¹³

What distinguishes the Austrian left’s interventions on Jewish and Middle Eastern issues is, above all else, its historic context. While analogies between Israel and the Nazis are never acceptable, in Austria they are especially jarring, as they cannot be separated from the patently false doctrine that the country bears no moral responsibility for the Holocaust.

At the same time, it should be noted that there are parts of the Austrian left which do resist antisemitism of both the primary and secondary kinds. A telling example concerns an event, entitled “Gaza Must Live,” which was scheduled to be held at the Vienna Lutheran cultural centre, and where Fritz Edlinger was billed as a speaker.


The Lutherans cancelled the event, citing the antisemitism of the meeting’s organizers, who referenced the work of Ibrahim Alloush, a Jordanian contributor to Neo-Nazi media. In addition, one of the meeting’s participants, Walter Sauer, a Professor of Social History at Vienna University, infamously wrote: “We shouldn’t close our eyes before the lingering genocide against the Palestinians caused by the state ideology and state praxis of Jewry, especially in Gaza.”¹⁴

Sauer is also assistant chairman of the working group for policy development of the Austrian Social

Democratic Party, as well as Secretary of the International Department of Austrian Trade Union Conference (ÖGB). His diagnosis of the situation in Gaza has nothing to do with the reality there and everything to do with the need of some Austrians to level the difference between the many Austrian perpetrators during the period of National Socialist barbarism and the Jewish victims of that regime.

Rudolf Hundstorfer, chairman of the ÖGB, who has been nominated as Minister for Social Affairs in Austria’s new coalition government, declared in response that “the ÖGB is distancing itself from such contents and declarations - independently of whoever they come from. The Austrian Trade Union Conference has always taken a stand against any form of intolerance, racism and antisemitism and does not accept that our engagement will be undermined by such declarations.”

Such definitive statements, in a country where no political current has remained immune from antisemitism, might suggest that there is some light at the end of the tunnel, even if the journey is fated to be an arduous one. However it should be noted that the SPÖ did not say a word about the antisemitic outburst of a high functionary of the party.

Moreover, a member of the extreme right wing Olympia student fraternity, Dr. Martin Graf of the FPÖ, was elected to be the deputy president of Austrian parliament in October 2008. Not only did the SPÖ remain silent; some of its MPs even voted for him¹⁵. This was yet another demonstration of Austria’s social democrats throwing their anti-fascist principles out of the window in order to maintain harmony with the extreme right. 



- 1 Ruth Contreras: *On the Situation in Austrian Universities*, Institute for Global Jewish Affairs, Nov 2007. www.spme.net/cgi-bin/articles.cgi?ID=4463
- 2 Benjamin Weinthal: *Austrians praise deceased Nazi admirer Haider* Oct 19, 2008 <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1222017576775>
- 3 “Ich bin dafür, die Sache in die Länge zu ziehen” Wortprotokolle der österreichischen Bundesregierung von 1945-52 über die Entschädigung der Juden, Hgb. Robert Knight, 1988, page 114
- 4 Wiener Zeitung, the official daily of Austria: Karl Renner favored the annexation of Austria and the part of Czechoslovakia inhabited by Germans and published in Vienna in autumn 1938 a brochure about the “...Anschluss and the Sudetengermans” <http://www.wienerzeitung.at/linkmap/personen/renner.htm>
- 5 Knight, p. 197
- 6 Robert Wistrich “Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism: The Case of Bruno Kreisky”, Jerusalem 2007 www.sicsa.huji.ac.il/acta%20kreisky.pdf
- 7 Ruth Wodak and Anton Pelinka, editors “The Haider Phenomenon in Austria”, 2002, page 109f
- 8 Wistrich, op. cit.
- 9 *profil*, 9 November, 1973
- 10 Martin van Amerongen, “Kreisky und seine unbewältigte Gegenwart,” Graz 1977
- 11 Anti-semitism / Summary overview of the situation in the European Union 2001-2005 updated version December 2006, page 19 http://eumc.europa.eu/eumc/material/pub/AS/Anti-semitism_Overview_December_2006_en.pdf
- 12 Corinna Milborn in *Format* 44/05 <http://www.wadinet.de/news/iraq/newsarticle.php?id=1551>
- 13 See <http://www.muslim-markt.de/interview/2005/edlinger.htm>
- 14 See <http://www.gazamussleben.at/de/1002>
- 15 See my article on this subject at <http://blog.z-word.com/2008/10/austria-right-wing-extremist-elected-parliament-president/>