The Compromise of Return

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INTRODUCTION

Hansi Tausig fled Nazi Vienna in 1938. Like many German and Austrian Jewish women, she escaped to the United Kingdom after securing the necessary paperwork and support to take a domestic position. She lived in and around London for nearly eight years, and throughout she connected with other young Austrian émigrés—most of them Jews—through the Austrian Centre, a cultural organization established by and for Austrians living in London. In addition to providing social and cultural opportunities, however, the Austrian Centre served as a cover organization for the Free Austrian Movement of the Austrian Communist Party. Indoctrinated through the party’s youth arm, Young Austria, a young and idealistic Hansi eagerly returned to Vienna in the spring of 1946 with a number of other members. The party had promised that their return was not only welcome but also eagerly awaited, and they planned to take an active part in the rebuilding of an independent, democratic Austria—*their* Austria. But Hansi and her colleagues were disabused of such idealistic notions almost immediately upon their arrival. Once home, they found a population living in a partly bombed-out city and, along with everyone else, they too suffered hardships that included a housing crisis and food shortages. They also met with enduring antisemitism and contempt from gentile Viennese who already identified as part of the collective Austrian “first victim” of the Nazis. The Communist Party ultimately failed to gain much footing in the government, and, over years, Hansi and many others became disillusioned with and finally left the party.
I met with Hansi in the living room of her Vienna apartment more than sixty years after her return. She served me slices of Apfelstrudel and poured countless cups of coffee as she related her experiences of return and resettlement in her hometown. After hours of discussion and many examples of her disappointment and frustration, I still felt her connection to and love for the city. In an effort to prompt her assessment and explanation of this curious incongruity, I asked her for a quick and instinctive response to the question, “Why did you return?” She replied with a touch of bitterness and a wry smile but without a moment’s hesitation: “Because we were naïve!” But when I asked why she stayed, why she had not returned to the United Kingdom or emigrated elsewhere, she looked at me, sincerely bewildered. “Why would I do that? This is my home!” Nonetheless, and despite it all, Vienna was home. Austrian Jews and those with a Jewish family background that rendered them targets of Nazi “racial” persecution numbered more than two hundred thousand before the Anschluss united Nazi Germany and Austria in March 1938. Almost all of them lived in Vienna. A little more than seven years later, at the time of the Red Army’s conquest at the end of the war, less than 3 percent remained alive in the city. Some of them had survived as U-Boote (literally, submarines) in hiding, while others had endured under different levels of protection due to marriages to so-called Aryans, because of a mixed “racial” heritage, or as employees of the Viennese Jewish community that operated in some form throughout the Nazi regime. Approximately 1,727 concentration camp survivors had joined them in Vienna by the end of 1945, and by April 1947, about 2,000 had returned from exile abroad. Most of these Jewish returnees chose to stay and reroot in the post-Nazi society of their hometown, all with eyes wide open to their charged surroundings and the city’s recent past. They knew that their fellow

Viennese had embraced the Nazi takeover and unification with Germany and regularly confronted the society’s tight adherence to a mythical identity of “first victim” of the Nazis in the aftermath of an Allied victory.

Two years after the end of World War II, approximately forty-five thousand Jews lived in Austria, but about thirty-five thousand of them were among the tens of thousands of displaced persons (DPs) from other European countries who streamed into DP camps, primarily in Germany and Austria, as they sought to begin their lives anew in third countries. The percentage of the prewar Jewish population living again in Vienna had reached about 5 percent.

The city’s remaining and returned Jewish residents were first and foremost Viennese, and many survivors remain insistent in their identification as such, not “Austrian.” They had been socialized in a city with a long history of antisemitism but were accustomed to the hardships that entailed and knew how to nimbly maneuver discrimination and hostility. The same sensibility of ambiguity that enabled gentile Viennese to enthusiastically embrace the Nazis also allowed their quick shift to assume the role as the Nazis’ first victims, just as it enabled their wholehearted belief in both. It also allowed Viennese Jews to conceive of a return to a place in a society with indistinct and evolving guidelines of belonging in which they trusted they could still fit, even after the devastation and loss of their families and community. They expected that they could refashion fulfilling lives in the city they loved by employing a level of discretion and relying on well-honed skills of peaceably living among antisemites. The understanding of the vagueness involved


6. This figure includes formal members of the Jewish community as well as those defined as “Jews” by Nazi racial policy. Herbert Rosenkranz stated that a total of 185,028 Jews were in residence in Austria on March 11, 1938, which corresponds with the membership numbers of the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien (IKG; the Jewish community of Vienna). See Rosenkranz, Verfolgung und Selbstbehauptung: Die Juden in Österreich, 1938–1945 (Vienna: Herold Verlag, 1978), 13. Jonny Moser further calculated that 201,000 Austrians were targeted as Jews by Nazi racial policies. See Moser, Demographie der jüdischen Bevölkerung Österreichs, 18–19.
in a “Viennese way,” of flexibly fitting into the city’s culture, permitted the acceptance of conceivably living next door to a convinced Nazi, for example. They had pegged the Viennese population as opportunistic and could assume a corresponding adaptation to the Allied occupation. With that, Jewish returnees could feel confident in the possibility of a safe and secure life in their hometown once again.

Jewish returnees were Viennese, not just in thought and identification from afar but in the action of their return as well. Language and literature scholar Jacqueline Vansant has argued that, with their return and reclamation of their home, Austrian Jewish reémigrés sought to reconnect to an Austrian “we.” Although some still may have thought in terms of an Austrian collective, I would argue that a further-honed and particular Viennese “we” represented that which they sought to rejoin. These returnees still conceptualized Vienna as home and wanted to go back and reengage. Different but sometimes overlapping ideas of home guided them there. Some sought to salvage a familial home, with surviving relatives or at least in the place that they had last enjoyed family life. Others strove to reclaim a political home with the support and guidance of their political parties and comrades. And some looked to resume life in their professional home, the place where they had trained and gained experience or where they had once—and now again—aimed to form careers.

The vast majority of Austrian Jews, most of them Viennese, however, remained abroad after the war in the various locations around the globe to which they had fled to safety. They had created new homes in new places, although often with a nostalgia for and connection to what they had left behind. Many exiles’ homes in other countries still felt and looked like Viennese domiciles decades later, transported across time and many national borders. They had found a home by re-creating one, retaining what they wanted or what they needed of the old, and fitting it into the new. They had either a new home or a distinct sense of having lost “home” altogether.

8. See Diana Gregor, heim.at.home (Vienna: Metroverlag, 2012).
But the few thousand who chose to go back and to stay to reestablish lives in their hometown could still see Vienna as home. Because they kept this sense of belonging and being in the city, they could go back. And once there, even when circumstances turned out differently than expected, a Viennese awareness helped them identify the compromises required to stay.

Why did some Viennese Jews still envision homes and lives in a country that had shortly before robbed and then either expelled or deported them? Why choose to live among those who months or years before had sought their annihilation? The short answer to “why”—to go home—fails to explain the overall phenomenon in its complexity and nuance and requires an examination and analysis of “how.” Many Jews and gentiles living outside Austria even today consider the return to the former Nazi country inconceivable, yet so many Jews living there cannot imagine their home anywhere else. Both on an emotional level and in an actual sense, how did survivors return? How did they organize a place to live, sustenance, and an enduring livelihood? How did they cope with living among their relatives’ and friends’ murderers, or at least the supporters of their murderers? And how did they manage to coexist with so many of their former friends and neighbors who stood by during genocide?

The majority of European Jewish Holocaust survivors either remained abroad or emigrated onward after the war, but some did go back to their prewar homelands. Germany’s Jewish population in 1933 had exceeded 523,000, but only 12,000 to 15,000 lived there in 1947, most of them returned camp survivors along with “reemerged” former U-Boote and the spouses or children who had been protected by mixed marriages.9 By the end of the 1950s, some 12,500 (of 278,000) German Jewish émigrés too had gone back,10 to comprise a native Jewish population of a maximum of 27,500, just 5 percent of its prewar total—a percentage similar to the Austrian case. Jews from

10. Ibid., 138.
countries that had been conquered and occupied by the Nazis returned home in greater percentages than did German- and Austrian-born Jews. In the Netherlands, of a prewar population of some 135,000 Dutch Jews,11 about 21,000 returned. Just 5,000 of the 110,000 Dutch Jews who had been deported—mostly to Auschwitz and Sobibor—survived and went back,12 where they joined about 16,000 Jews who had endured in hiding.13 In Slovakia, just under 23 percent of the prewar Jewish population returned after liberation.14

But some Jews did return to Vienna. A good number found nothing awaited them, but a few regained homes, businesses, and careers. Those who stayed to reestablish their lives also took part in rebuilding European Jewish and secular life. *The Compromise of Return* utilizes contemporary archival documents and newspaper articles, testimonies, and oral histories to illuminate and analyze the experiences of the Austrian Jews who chose to live in Vienna again after the Holocaust. It focuses on the immediate postwar period and population and the ongoing politics of a national blind spot that has left the events of this time largely unexamined. It illuminates the collision of wartime experience with the fierce struggle of postwar identity politics and traces the early years of the reestablishment of a strong and vibrant—albeit small—Viennese Jewish community. This book’s analysis of the postwar history of Holocaust survivors who returned to Vienna explores their motivations for laying down roots anew in a hometown and a homeland that had expelled them and did not expect them to return and investigates the issues and problems they confronted in doing so.

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11. In January 1941, the German occupiers forced Dutch Jews to register as Jews; 159,806 individuals did so, including 19,561 children from mixed marriages. This total also included about 25,000 Jewish refugees from the German Reich. Thus, of a prewar Dutch Jewish population of nearly 135,000, some 15 percent returned. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The Netherlands,” accessed March 18, 2019, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-netherlands.
13. Ibid., 31.
This book follows patterns of return. In the course of research and examination, it became clear that Jews who went back to Vienna could be seen as members of distinct cohorts, each group sharing similar wartime experiences and locations, motivations for return, and postwar arrival dates in the city. Those who survived within the city limits reemerged to “return” to society first, followed in the first few months of peacetime by those who came back after internment in concentration camps. These first two groups arrived in Vienna within the first hours, days, or months of the war’s end and mainly harbored ideas of reclaiming their familial home. Jewish émigrés who survived the war abroad with their political parties in exile returned in the next wave, which started at the end of 1945 and continued through 1946, and—like Hansi Tausig—sought to take part in rebuilding an autonomous and democratic Austria; they aimed to reclaim their political home. A fourth group of returnees mainly began their remigration from locations abroad about two years after the end of the war and did so seeking to regain or begin anew careers they could only imagine in their professional home.

To be sure, returnees had manifold and complicated reasons for their postwar (re)settlement, and sometimes those overlapped. Those who returned from living in exile in Shanghai, for example, held the same hopes for a familial home but came back a few years later than the first, immediate postwar cohort. Some politically affiliated returnees had designs on recovering a career in their hometown, even if it was primarily their work on behalf of their party and country that carried them there. The possibility of multiple and intersecting incentives for return notwithstanding, a general pattern of common experience and timeline emerges.

The particular context of Vienna, Austria, and Austria-Hungary underpins this history. Jews had a long presence in the region and enjoyed the liberal policies and restrictions in the Habsburg Empire. They remained loyal and supportive of the monarchy through World War I and the bitterly disappointing defeat of the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary. Despite freedoms greater than those of Jews in other parts of Europe, antisemitism was pervasive in the empire and then in German-Austria after
World War I. But Austrian, and in particular Viennese, Jews knew how to traverse such discrimination as a part of the landscape of their beloved Vienna. The interwar rise of a homegrown Catholic fascism, Austrofascism, and an opposing and illegal Nazi Party fueled a buildup to the Anschluss, the unification of Germany and Austria into one German cultural nation-state. The concept of Anschluss had predated the Nazis and Hitler by many years and seen together with native antisemitism helps to explain the large part of the population that embraced the March 12, 1938, arrival of the Germans, as well as the wanton violence perpetrated against Jews and their homes, businesses, and religious institutions. The Viennese Jewish community responded as it was forced to but also as it saw best. That is, Viennese Jews could only cooperate with their Nazi oppressors to administer a forced emigration program. Of a pre-Anschluss population of more than two hundred thousand Austrian Jews, the vast majority of them Viennese, about two-thirds fled the country after the Nazi takeover, after suffering persecution and spoliation, and most of them left thanks to the extreme efforts of the Viennese Jewish community. When Nazi policy shifted to deportation and annihilation, hopes of escape were all but lost, and by the end of the war some sixty-five thousand Austrian Jews had been murdered.

The Soviets conquered Vienna in April 1945, and as their troops advanced through the city, the retreating Wehrmacht (Nazi German army) and Waffen-SS (combat units of the Schutzstaffel, or SS, that fought alongside the general army) continued to fight and terrorize Jews to the bitter end. Fighting broke out in the streets, and the city center became the front line. The Red Army took the city, and Jews who survived the war under different levels of protection or in hiding cautiously emerged as a part of the first wave of returnees to Vienna. They joined those who were still there who were married to so-called Aryans, the children of such unions, and the employees of the few remaining Jewish institutions that served them. Another estimated eight hundred also had survived in hiding in the city. All reemerged and reentered the society from which they had been thrust. Without a choice or even a thought, they were the first Austrian Jews to “return” to Vienna, with the only ambition of survival in their familial home, a place they physically had never left.
The second group of Jews to return comprised concentration camp survivors. They employed varied processes and journeys as they too followed their impulse to return to a familial home. Liberated in camps across Europe, their only thought was to again be in the last place that they had been with family. Their intentions may or may not have been to stay permanently, but they certainly planned to return, and many reestablished lives in Vienna. By the time of their arrival, just weeks or months after the war's end, the postwar government’s embrace of the so-called victim myth had taken hold and shaped a developing postwar national identity that viewed the Anschluss as an aggressive military invasion and occupation and Austrians as victims. Camp survivors met with little sympathy or understanding for their wartime trauma and suffering from their gentile compatriots, as they struggled along with the small but strengthening Jewish community to get back on their feet.

Austrian Jews who were affiliated and active with their political parties in exile abroad formed the next group to return to Vienna. Their parties shaped their motivations and expectations to return home while they lived abroad after fleeing from the Nazis. Both the Communist and the Social Democratic Parties told their members that Austria and Austrians wanted them to return, an overall message that involved a certain level of acceptance of the victim myth. They mistook the departure of Germans from postwar Austria as an overall departure of Nazis, a concept that served to encourage Jewish Social Democrats and Communists to go back to take part in the political and physical reconstruction of their country. Upon arrival, however, the reality they encountered quickly disabused them of their idealistic notions. They too confronted their neighbors' refusal to face what had transpired, along with gentile Austrians' self-pitying narratives of victimization. Notwithstanding an environment hostile with lingering antisemitism and Nazi sentiment, these politically affiliated returnees stayed and did indeed help to rebuild their country. They sought to regain their political home and did, even if it did not develop as anticipated.

Returnees from exile abroad looking to regain a professional home began to arrive shortly thereafter. Doctors and lawyers whose training and certification were tied directly to Austria, for example, saw Vienna as their one
and only place to make a career and thus a home. Many writers and performers who felt tied to the language held the same ideas. All returnees felt many of the same challenges in the course of launching their lives again in Vienna. Antisemitic hostility included official discrimination and deprivation of victims’ welfare benefits, and a cemented victim myth ensured a lack of empathy and understanding by gentile neighbors. A series of restitution laws quickly proved ineffective. Reaction to such legislation included the formation of advocacy groups to protect the so-called Aryanizers and to try to ensure that they retained Jews’ property acquired under Nazi “Aryanization” policies. Political parties vied for the electoral support of former Nazi Party members, while Cold War tensions between occupation forces shaped the postwar Austrian government and a new and emerging Austrian national identity. And at the same time, Viennese Jewish identity developed and adapted to the postwar situation.

A number of particulars to the Austrian and the Viennese setting require specific attention. The unique context of postwar Austria and the victim myth are fundamental to understanding the specific experience of Viennese Jewish returnees. The Allies’ wording of their 1943 Moscow Declaration gave credence to and shaped an entitled attitude of victimhood that guided the formation of a new Austrian national identity after the war. This statement, issued on November 1, 1943, by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, elucidated their plan for the postwar treatment of Austria. It proclaimed the Anschluss null and void; called for the establishment of a free Austria, specifying it as “the first free country to fall a victim to Hitlerite aggression”; and declared the Allies’ intention to liberate the country from “German domination.”  

The victim myth thus sets both the context and the tone in which this book presents the experiences of Vienna’s returned Jews. The choice of language in this particular setting is important. For example, in the post-war decades, everyone from scholars to the average person on the street referred to the German “occupation” that began with the Anschluss in March 1938 and ended in April 1945 with the Red Army’s “liberation” of the city. The most conservative and right-wing even spoke of “seventeen years of occupation” to mean that Austria first suffered seven years under the Nazis, followed by ten years of the Allies. The Anschluss, however, was neither an aggressive military invasion nor an occupation, and therefore the Soviets did not liberate the country but, rather, conquered it. For this reason, I decline to use either term. This choice becomes tricky with regard to survivors’ testimony, as many do refer to their “liberation” by the Red Army. For Jews alive in Vienna at the end of the war, this description was indeed true, but I argue that it is definitively incorrect to use the term Befreiung (liberation) in most cases related to Austria. The fact that many survivors employ the term, however, indicates a certain perspective and milieu in which they lived after the war and one we must consider. They were Viennese, after all.

Nazi language presents a unique challenge, and I have made every effort to indicate that such terms are not my own, either through the use of quotation marks or with reference to a “so-called” concept. In other cases, I have declined to use terms that are otherwise commonly accepted. For example, the use of the word Kristallnacht has fallen out of fashion in Austria because of its Nazi origin and use. One writes rather of the Novemberpogrom (November Pogrom) or Reichspogromnacht (Night of the Reich’s Pogrom). The Nazi term Mischlinge (persons of mixed “Aryan” and Jewish heritage; literally, mongrels) poses obvious problems with its negative canine connotation, but I have used it with indication. I have treated “mixed marriage,” “Aryan,” and “race” and “racial” in the same way, with an acknowledgment of the associated issues, and have used each with care.

I have specifically avoided the somewhat untranslatable German word Heimat. It connotes something deeper than “home” or “homeland” and involves a feeling and atmosphere (Stimmung) with a connection to landscape
and a link to other elements of a culture. Survivors have indicated (during interviews that I conducted and those I have read) that Vienna is their home (Zuhause) but not their Heimat, something that was lost to them. And Austria certainly does not represent Heimat, seemingly because of the Nazis’ corruption of the word. If they have a Heimat, some have said it could be Israel, although they do not live there and may never have. In identifying Israel as a land to which they are connected in a way that defies description, they convey a love and relationship associated with a geographic location that they cannot feel for Austria or Vienna—although Vienna, nonetheless, was and is home.

To add another layer of difficulty, the Nazis used Heimat as they did words like Volk (also difficult to translate but something like “ethnic group” or “people of a national group”) and Stolz (pride) and in such a way that they came to connote and indicate National Socialist sentiment. Such words are employed today with care and specificity but retain these colorings of German nationalist ideas.

Finally, I would like to clarify that I employ the term “Holocaust survivor” as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum does in its exhibitions and literature. That is, a survivor is “any person who was displaced, persecuted, and/or discriminated against by the racial, religious, ethnic, social, and/or political policies of the Nazis and their allies between 1933 and 1945. In addition to former inmates of concentration camps and ghettos, this also includes refugees and people in hiding.”16 Thus a Viennese Jew who fled Nazi oppression after the Anschluss is a “survivor,” just as were those who endured concentration and death camps. Those who survived in their hometown under different levels of hiding or protection, too, are Holocaust survivors.

Much like Hansi Tausig, the world-renowned psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud felt a paradox in his commitment to Vienna. He encapsulated the

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incongruous yet faithful nature of Viennese Jews’ relationship to their city in a conversation with the writer, producer, and director Ernst Lothar shortly after World War I. The two met in Freud’s Berggasse apartment in Vienna’s ninth district, where they lamented the fall of the dual monarchy and dismemberment of Austria-Hungary. Freud remarked, “I don’t want to live anywhere else. For me, emigration is out of the question. I will just live on with the torso and delude myself into thinking that it is the whole body.” Neither man could have known that in less than two decades they both not only would emigrate but would be forced to do so. Freud closed their discussion that day by observing, “Austria is a country that annoys you to death but where you want to die anyway.”

Author and journalist Eva Menasse noted that this statement could be Lothar’s life motto. Fortunate to flee shortly after the Anschluss that united Austria with Nazi Germany, Lothar, his wife, and their daughter made their way via Switzerland and France to the United States. After an initial struggle, he reestablished himself as a writer in his land of exile but finally returned home in 1946 as a theater and music officer of the US Department of State. Lothar permanently resettled in Vienna in the late 1940s, and his struggle with national identity, his experiences in exile, and the effects of National Socialism on his homeland and hometown inspired much of his work over the course of his career.

Freud and Lothar had been born in Moravia in Austria-Hungary, but their families had migrated to Vienna when both were young. Most Jews in Vienna at least stemmed from families that originated in other parts of the empire, if they had not actually migrated to the imperial capital themselves. Although some spent summer months in the Ausseerland (a mountainous lake region in Austria) and others may have enjoyed winter sports in the

Austrian countryside and alpine regions, it was the capital city in which they lived and to which they were dedicated. For most—including Freud and Lothar—Vienna was Austria.

And so, to paraphrase Freud, one might say that Vienna annoyed Lothar, but he wanted to die there anyway. And in fact, he did. But he also wanted to live there. It was home, nonetheless.