The Compromise of Return

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CONCLUSION

Born in Vienna to an assimilated, nonobservant Jewish family, Bruno Kreisky was active in Austria’s Social Democratic movement as a student. He suffered imprisonment under the Austrofascist regime and was also incarcerated briefly by the Nazis. They released him dependent on his immediate emigration from the country, and he fled to Sweden, where he continued his political engagement, working with the international Social Democrats. He returned to Vienna in May 1946 and resumed political activities on behalf of the Austrian government, which immediately assigned him to its foreign office in Stockholm. He went home permanently at the end of 1950, and his political climb peaked when he became chancellor in 1970. Just twenty-five years after the end of World War II and the attempted annihilation of European Jewry, the head of state of a former Nazi country was a Viennese Jewish returnee, a Holocaust survivor.

Kreisky accomplished a great deal for his country. Before his chancellorship, he had a key role in drafting the Staatsvertrag (Austrian State Treaty, ratified in 1955 at the end of the Allies’ occupation of the country). While he was in office, the economy came to near full employment, the social welfare system (which remains Austria’s pride today) grew and strengthened, and the official workweek was shortened to forty hours. But some of Kreisky’s actions proved controversial and did nothing to gain him favor with Jewish leaders. He maintained good relationships with Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and Libyan prime minister Muammar Gadaffi, and during the Kreisky administration, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) established an official office in Vienna. At the same time, Austria under
Kreisky became a transit country for Jews fleeing the Soviet Union to Israel and the United States.

Kreisky strategically identified mainly as a political and not as a Jewish persecutee of the Nazis. In many situations, he strove to highlight and heighten his Austrianess by foregrounding his antifascist and resistance past and ignored the fact that being Jewish in Nazi Austria had been a death sentence. A self-proclaimed agnostic, he claimed no identification with the Jewish community and regarded Judaism as a religion and neither a culture nor a nation. But Kreisky also never denied his Jewish family background. Rather, he assumed and wielded it when it was of political advantage. He acted specifically as a Jew, for example, when he showed willingness to form a coalition with former Waffen SS officer Friedrich Peter and the far-right Freedom Party, although fortunately no such partnership became necessary.¹ Kreisky’s foreign policy in the Middle East and his forgiveness and tacit pardon of former Nazis appealed to gentile Austrians, and in such cases, his Jewish identity served to validate him as an Austrian leader.

Kreisky’s implausible insistence that he had suffered no antisemitism in his Viennese youth was one of many claims that also enhanced his popularity among gentile Austrians and served to position him as a Jew who could provide absolution from guilt for the Holocaust. As historian Robert Wistrich has written, “Kreisky was destined to become the Entlastungsjude (exonerating Jew) freeing Austrians of the burdens of complicity in the German mass murder.”² Opinion polls conducted in the 1980s by the Paul Lazarsfeld Society showed that Kreisky was singled out as “possessing in even greater measure the attributes that summed up the meaning and characteristics of Austria,” even more so than the celebrated skier Anne-Marie Moser-Pröll and the well-known actor Heinz Conrads.³ He remains

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one of the country’s most beloved politicians, second only to the Emperor Franz Josef.

Kreisky’s example, albeit extreme and public, demonstrates the ambiguous and careful way a Jewish returnee could successfully handle family heritage and experiences of persecution under the Nazis in order to manage in postwar Austria. In many ways, he embodies both the conundrum of postwar Austrian national identity and the complexity of the Viennese Jewish identity developing within that context. A Jewish Austrian and a Social Democrat, he survived the Nazis in exile abroad and returned to Vienna to reclaim a political home. Once reengaged, he rose through the ranks to serve the country in its highest office, and in the shadow of the Holocaust, he helped to solidify a positive Austrian identity for his country’s citizens, gentiles and Jews alike. The enigma of Austria’s beloved Kreisky may be better understood when viewed through the lens of The Compromise of Return. Indeed, his case elucidates many aspects of this book’s main themes.

A small fraction of the prewar Jewish population reclaimed their home through the reestablishment of lives, families, and careers in Vienna after the Holocaust. The majority of those who fled from the Nazis to locations around the globe remained in their adopted countries or emigrated further, where many re-created or found “home” anew—or at least trusted that it lay in store for them there. But those who went back still conceived only of the Danubian capital as home, and they stayed when they recovered at least some version of the memory and feeling they held dear. They arrived back in waves, the timing of which largely depended on their location and experiences during the war and their motivations and expectations for remigration. Each sought to regain a familial home, political home, or professional home—or some combination of the three; their wartime whereabouts and all that they had encountered, as well as the fellow (Jewish and gentile) Austrians with whom they had lived and socialized, frequently determined the time and means of their journeys and the conditions they faced upon arrival.

Those who had managed to live out the war in the city itself constituted the first group to (at least figuratively) return. They reemerged and reen-
gaged in the chaos of immediate postwar Vienna almost instantly upon
the Red Army’s capture and occupation of the capital. They made no con-
scious decision about “return” but rather instinctively resumed daily life in
their partially destroyed and traumatized city. Some had survived in hiding
(U-Boote), while others had lived under a protected status as a spouse in a
mixed marriage, as the child of such a union, or as an employee of the Jew-
ish community. They resurfaced into life in their familial home, a place they
had never physically left but from which they had been thrust and excluded.

Concentration camp survivors followed the Jews who had remained in
the city by weeks or months. They made their ways to Vienna as soon after
liberation as possible, some by their own means and others with repatria-
tion assistance from the Allies. They wanted to go back to the place they
had last been with family, although most were disappointed in their quest
to locate surviving relatives. Nonetheless, the desire to reconnect with their
familial home drove them there.

Austrian Jews who had lived out the war abroad and engaged with their
political parties in exile formed the next wave of réémigrés, some as early as
the end of 1945. Many returned under the auspices of their organizations
and with fellow members. While in exile, their leaders had told them that
Austria and Austrians awaited them and would welcome them. They re-
inforced the myth of Austria as “first victim” of the Nazis and gave merit
to the idea that the Anschluss had been an unwanted military invasion
and occupation by Germany. With this in mind, Jewish Communists and
Socialists sought to regain their political home and arrived in Vienna with
idealistic expectations of taking part in the reconstruction of an autono-
mous and democratic Austria. They were soon disabused of any notion
that their fellow Austrians desired their homecoming, but most stayed
and indeed took part in the rebuilding of what would become the Second
Republic of Austria.

A fourth cohort trailed the politically affiliated réémigrés and included
those who sought to reattach to a professional home. Writers, lawyers,
and doctors, for example, could conceive of working only in Vienna and
felt bound to the city by language, training, and certification. Conditions
in their lands of exile had been such that many had been unable to work in
their chosen fields or to keep their standard of living to the level to which
they had been accustomed. These professionals, most of them men, decided that resuming their chosen career paths was worth the challenges of living among former Nazis and their supporters.

The majority of Jews who would return to Vienna had done so by the end of 1947. With differing expectations and motivations before their arrival, their experiences converged once back in their hometown and as the reestablishment of lives, families, and the larger community commenced. They met with discrimination in various forms in public and in the workplace, but Viennese Jews retained the ability to navigate the long-standing and endemic antisemitism that had long marked the city’s history. A series of restitution laws went into effect that same year and aroused the appearance of more outspoken and public antisemitic sentiment. Property owners who had benefited from Nazi “Aryanization” policies formed advocacy organizations to help them in their fight to retain “their” property. Few Jews regained their former residences and businesses. But still, most stayed.

On May 15, 1955, Austria’s Foreign Minister Figl and the four Allies’ representatives signed the Austrian State Treaty at the Belvedere Palace in Vienna, and with it the Second Republic of Austria was founded. The goal of establishing a free and independent nation had been achieved ten years after the end of the war. The phrasing of the State Treaty included the entrenched language of victimhood and omitted reference to responsibility as a perpetrator nation. The Austrian Parliament passed a constitutional law proclaiming the country’s permanent neutrality on October 26, 1955, immediately after the last occupation soldiers had departed.

During the ten years of occupation, the Allies had tacitly condoned Austria’s identification as victim and thereby fostered this important facet of a developing postwar national identity. A lack of denazification practice in the country, viewed alongside the Soviets’ practice of pursuit of reparations

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through plunder and exploitation of regions under their control, suggests the Allies’ implicit understanding of Austria’s responsibility for Nazi war crimes and intentional silence: eliding Austria’s culpability suited everyone. Both neutrality and victimhood stood as pillars of an Austrian national identity that developed in the postwar years and framed the context into which Austrian Jews rerooted.

Both some degree of acceptance of the victim myth and previous experience traversing the city’s inherent antisemitism served the returnees. They reentered a society that had retained all the ambiguities with which they had been socialized and to which they were accustomed. As Viennese, in fact, they returned because such ambiguity was a part of their identity, resulting from the history of the multinational, multiethnic empire. Marsha Rozenblit’s description of a tripartite Austrian Jewish identity—the possibility of feeling German, Austrian, and Jewish, all at once—was a trait derived from a larger and particular Viennese cultural characteristic, one that also dictates the recognition of a fourth facet; even with all of these identifications, Viennese Jews were, above all, Viennese. Their multiple identities revealed an immersion into and acceptance of a multifaceted, at times contradictory, culture. Even after the Holocaust, returnees believed they could resume lives as Viennese and Jewish.

Friedrich Torberg’s work exemplifies the discretion employed to live and work comfortably as a Jew in postwar Vienna. Although much of his writing focuses on a Jewish element of Viennese society that had been lost, he never explicitly states who had taken it away. Without direct attribution of blame, no dialogue or confrontation could ensue, and such careful handling and indirect language permitted gentile neighbors to remain willfully ignorant of their Jewish neighbors’ experiences. A mutual silence also allowed survivors to live among former Nazis and to suppress thought about their possible involvement in war crimes. The development of postwar Viennese Jewish identity occurred within the context of the reformulation of a larger

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national identity characterized by victimhood and neutrality. Wishing to resume life in Vienna, Jews left this characterization largely unchallenged.

Important to returning Jews was that they felt thoroughly Viennese. They wanted to again be part of that city and that society, defining themselves and operating within the boundaries it required. Reémigrés recommenced the delicate navigation of antisemitism with the assumption that they could handle the challenges of such discrimination. Presuming it would pose no more of a problem than they had encountered before, they considered Austrians’ embrace or tolerance of the Nazis’ eliminationist antisemitism to have derived from opportunism rather than from principled, deeply held conviction. This acceptance of some level of the postwar victim myth enabled Jews to cohabitate with former Nazis: with the Germans gone, they expected Austrian antisemitism would revert to the “simple” prewar bias that they well knew. They quickly realized, however, that seven years of Nazi indoctrination had left its mark on the population. They adapted and learned to overcome and to avoid the obstacles that confronted them in their return. Home after all had motivated and enticed them back, and once there, the majority of them indeed made it home again, even if that home was neither the same as before nor exactly as they expected.