

## Uprooted

Thank you for the invitation. I am glad it finally worked out. Please keep in mind that I prepared the text more than two years ago, at a time when not only didn't we know anything about Covid, but couldn't imagine a new war in the middle of Europe, in places where people were killed 80 years ago. There was not enough time to rewrite the whole lecture, still the current disaster reminds us, that the history I am talking about is part of a long and accelerating movement of migration and expatriation. It since became sort of "normal" for many people, to escape and start new life in an unknown country, with often new and foreign languages, more or less help ...

My title was "uprooted", but I guess that since not everybody here is familiar with Austrian History it is necessary to explain, what happened in Austria before people lost their roots, what the conditions were that preceded their exile, and what happened in the years before people were humiliated, persecuted, expropriated.

### **Chapter I:**

Once upon a time Austria was, like Rome or Denmark, a big Empire. In 1914 it started--together with Germany--a war, and lost everything. 1918 meant the end of the 650 year-old Habsburg monarchy. And the small remaining (mainly German speaking) territory became a democracy. The majority of ordinary people and politicians doubted that the remains of the multiracial state would be able to survive; many were longing for a reunification with their neighbor in the north. But the treaty of St. Germain from 1919 had laid down that Austria was not allowed to join another country – which meant Germany in particular.

The years between the two World Wars were marked by crises. Austria had lost large territories and with them industrial, agricultural and other resources. The old social order had vanished and the country had no experience with democratic structures, didn't know about compromises, and wasn't used to making deals or arrangements. The famous 1920s were characterized by unemployment, poverty, very little social security and strong conflicts among social groups. Revanchists, conservatives, republicans and radical leftists fought one another. The problems grew worse during the world economic crisis after the bank crash of 1929. Violence, especially fights

between the right wing Heimwehr and the social democratic Schutzbund became part of everyday life. Romantic ideas of a strong Christian hierarchic state of order already had many followers when in March 1933 the parliament was dissolved (while in Germany Hitler had come into power). Censorship, prohibition of assembly, banning of the republican Schutzbund and growing violence through Nazi-organisations formed the prelude of the special Austrian way of fascism, the so-called Ständestaat.

In February 1934 a courageous uprising of worker organisations failed. 2000 supporters were killed and 5000 were wounded, thousands more were arrested and the leaders were publicly hanged. In July '34 a Nazi coup d'état failed, but the Chancellor, Dollfuss, was murdered and Schuschnigg came to power.

To make a long story short: before German troops crossed the border, Austria was an authoritarian corporative state. Its ideology was Catholic (very Catholic), not antireligious like the Nazi-party in Germany and not Protestant like the Prussians, in whose tradition the German Wehrmacht was trained. An aggressive, rather Catholic, antisemitism was „normal“ in Austria, but it wasn't part of the mainstream propaganda before 1938.

The Austrian leaders were looking towards Italy rather than Germany and had forged agreements with Mussolini. Political parties, whether right or left, were illegal, and so one of the Austrian particularities was that Nazis as well as Social Democrats and Communists were interned in the same camp. When Hitler demanded the release of the Nazis, all interned, right-wingers and republicans, revolutionary socialists and Communists too, were freed.

Pressure from Hitler's Germany grew increasingly strong. One of Hitler's threats resulted in Chancellor Schuschnigg's acceptance of a Nazi, Seyß-Inquart, as Minister of the Interior. Schuschnigg had planned to hold a plebiscite on March 13th „for a free and independent Christian, united Austria“. The day before, on March 12<sup>th</sup>, the German Wehrmacht crossed the border, „invited“ by Seyß-Inquart. This was the end of Austria as an independent state. The country was renamed "Ostmark" and became part of Germany. Austrian passports were no longer valid.

I believe it is important to mention that the pictures and stories that tell us that „the Austrians“ welcomed Hitler with enthusiasm did not include all those who were either in jail or had escaped after the revolt of 1934, or had gone to Spain to support the

Republicans against Franco ... or left for the Soviet-Union, where many of them were killed by Stalin's henchmen. And of course the enthusiastic masses did not include the many enemies of Hitler: social democrats, communists, monarchists, left-wing journalists, artists, writers – and all Jews, whether they were religious or Jewish mainly by the Nazis' definition. It didn't include gypsies, Austrians of the Slovenian minority, nor others who stayed home and, for a variety of reasons, were not enthusiastic. I do not mention this in order to minimize the Austrian share in the Nazi crimes.

## **Chapter II.**

As an Austrian living in Berlin I tend to compare my two homes. One important difference was, that in Germany all the rules and laws against Jews were imposed step by step. The victims, whether Jewish or political opposition (and often both – left wing assimilated Jews), had five years to get used to the brutality or to prepare for emigration. There had been anti-Jewish actions, robbery and expropriation in Austria before March '38, but now it became part of the official order. The exclusion of Jews was organised with German precision – and with the help of Austrian underlings. The Nuremberg racial laws were enforced from one day to the next. The welcome of German Nazis was orchestrated by a special Austrian way of humiliation: Jews, whether aged or children, ill or handicapped, rich or poor, assimilated or orthodox, had to scrub from the pavements the slogans that invited a vote for independence, and to do so with toothbrushes. And the mob stood around and had fun.

The victims were Jews not just the way of Hitler, Goebbels etc. defined them. Most of them identified with emblems of Austrian culture, such as the love of cakes, the theatre and the opera, as well as hiking in forests and mountains. They lived – more or less – a secular life. Those who had links with political groups opposed to the Austrian-fascist government understood better than non-political Jews that it was dangerous to stay. Some had left, partly already before '38, first to Czechoslovakia. The leaders of the Social-Democratic party had resided in Prag since 1934; others went underground. By November of 1938, when synagogues burned and the hunting of Jews had started, optimists who had thought that the nightmare would be a brief theatrical show, lost hope. Shops, flats, synagogues were attacked, businesses aryanized, members of opposition, as far as it still existed, were imprisoned. All Jews (according to the Nuremberg Race Laws) were registered; they had to list their property and were expropriated and got kicked out of their flats, which “Volksgenossen” or neighbours

took over. Jews lost their jobs and property; they were not allowed to use the trams and buses, to enter parks or sit on public benches. Children had to leave school and girls were not allowed to wear a Dirndl (= the traditional Austrian costume). Jews were excluded from theatres, operas and concerts, where for ages they had constituted a devoted audience. Shops, restaurants, swimming pools and all public spaces carried signs saying „Jews are not allowed“. „Normal“ Austrians scribbled „Jew“ on the windows of shops and plundered them. For non-Jews it was dangerous to enter Jewish shops. Time to leave – if possible. Laws and circumstances were different from today's: In July 38 the American president F. D. Roosevelt initiated an international conference in Evian to discuss the problem of refugees. 32 countries took part. Nothing came of it. Restrictions on emigration were and remained severe, with one exception: The Dominican Republic was willing to take in a few more refugees. Learning from experiences in WW II, the UN-declaration concerning the status of refugees was only signed in 1948. End of preface.

### **Chapter III.**

It was difficult to get out, and it was nearly impossible to find a safe place on one's own. Those who belonged to a political or religious organisation, whether socialist, communist, Zionist, conservatives or legitimist (= a group which wanted to re-install the monarchy) had comrades and friends and found contacts through their network. They had better information as to where to go and what to do. France was a preferred destination for many Austrians and Germans who had to flee. It was a traditional country of Exile, associated with revolution, freedom, brotherhood. Artists, intellectuals or writers might also have had Heinrich Heine in mind when they decided to settle there. All the political groups and refugees came together in Paris. When German troops occupied France many German and Austrian emigrants were interned; others fled to the South, which was still free. Those who had managed to reach the South soon found themselves in a mousetrap. They couldn't get out after the Vichy government stopped to give exit permits and made an agreement with the Nazis to hand over people on their list. The refugees were desperate, without hope, without money, little chances to get a visa or ticket on a ship – unless they could find illegal ways to escape (I'll get back to that).

We have amazingly precise figures telling us how many people escaped. New statistics show that 130 742 Austrians got away, 31.050 landed in GB, 4.850 in France, nearly as



many – 4670 in Belgium, in Denmark 330, 120 managed to get to Greece; 6220 got to Shanghai, and 120 managed to find asylum in Uganda. (And so on for all countries in Europe, North and Latin America, Africa, Asia – including the Near East, Australia and New Zealand. The US accepted 29.860 refugees). Those statistics however, include the people who moved from one country to another as German troops advanced and occupied France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and all those countries where refugees had believed themselves to be secure and had to move on to prevent falling into the hands of Gestapo.

Numbers are only numbers. And as I don't believe in the meaningfulness of statistics (how many committed suicide or went back or weren't registered?) I prefer to tell some of the stories about how people got away, moved around, tried to settle, make a living and dealt with their Heimweh, the homesickness that is mentioned in nearly every biography, especially of children whose parents were left behind, not knowing whether they would see them again.

More than 10.000 Jewish children as defined by the Nuremberg Laws left for Great-Britain between the end of November 1938 and beginning of the war in September 1939. Arriving alone from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia by train and ship they were met by helpers from private organisations, especially from Quakers, and of course Jewish ones. Some could go to school, some entered refugee camps, some worked as servants or on farms, and some were unlucky, like our mother who was assigned to an unfriendly family which threatened to send her back.

You might know about the illegal Aliyah-movement which was organised by several Zionist organisations. It tried to bring people to Palestine in opposition to the British immigration policy and therefore illegal. Aliyah Bet became the main form of Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine, carried out mainly by sea, and to a lesser extent overland through Iraq and Syria. Some of these actions failed, like the transport on which our grandfather travelled from Vienna to Yugoslavia. 1000 people on the boat couldn't be rescued and were murdered after German troops had entered the country. The transports to Palestine were a risky action, because British boats patrolled the waters and in several cases sent the refugees back.

One is amazed to learn how fast solid new networks were constructed among Jewish committees in several countries, Zionist underground movement, international social

democratic and communist organisations, Writers leagues, supporters of scientists, artists, musicians as well as monarchists, also protestant and catholic charitable societies. Heroic individuals helped like the Mexican ambassador in Marseille who managed to save around 6000 people by issuing them visas. Mexico was, as Bruno Frei writes, after three countries and three camps, his friendly heaven. Mexico was, by the way, the only country which had protested against the German invasion into Austria. And when the Republicans in Spain lost the battle against Franco, the Mexican president invited all Republican fighters to Mexico. This was an exception.

Within the last 30 or 40 years a lot of material has been published. I can only offer you a taste of what uprooting and restarting meant 80 years ago. There is no single typical story. I found very different fates, more or less adventurous, full of fear, sad experiences and impressive courage. In nearly every biography I read the sentence: "I was lucky". You had to have luck to survive. Luck could mean, as f.e. in the case of Ms. Tausig, that you were running around to find a chance for a trip anywhere, and after many days and close to resignation, Franziska Tausig saw a note that two passages for Shanghai were open (The city was the last destination where you could go without a visa). Her luck was that the people who had booked it had committed suicide the day before. Fortunately the family had managed to send their son with the children's transport to England, luck that included grief. Other important factors mentioned in many interviews were friendship and solidarity, a network, often founded on political beliefs, and contacts through earlier activities. Chuzpe and ideas helped sometimes – like looking through phone-books and writing to somebody who had the same name, even if you didn't know the person. If you were not so lucky you might have bought visas from „Arian“ dealers which turned out to be worthless. Bribes were in some cases successful, as were pragmatic marriages. More or less criminal smugglers made a good business with the despair of the persecuted, but did save lives. Certificates of baptism could help – f.i. to get to Brazil after the Pope had made an agreement with the Brazilian dictator that allowed Catholic Jews to enter the country (the country had closed its borders to Jews in 1937). There was a program for Protestant baptized Jewish children from a Swedish mission in Vienna. A Swedish sister organisation of the Austrian Israelitic Community helped bring 140 Jewish children to Sweden.

Sweden was not only important for Austria, because Denmark brought its Jews, including emigrants, there, when German troops invaded the country. It also gave

shelter to the first progressive chancellor of Austria, Bruno Kreisky – and to the German chancellor Willy Brandt, who were both active social democrats. The country had a strong social democracy, was German-friendly and had a law which allowed asylum for political (but not „only“ racial) refugees. The Austrian social democrats in Sweden, who, like all the other social democrats, had for a long time approved of joining Germany, fought for an independent Austrian state, thereby contradicting the English and American policy of social-democratic exile organisations. Communication across the borders was astonishingly intensive – through written letters and sometimes trustworthy people who were able to travel.

The Austrian immigration did not manage to form a government in exile, as there was too much hostility and animosity, dogmatism and quarreling among the immigrants. Nevertheless the different groups in all the host countries worked hard to convince politicians and bureaucrats that Austria had been, and wanted to become again, an independent country, rather than a part of Germany. It was the major achievement of political exile organisations that the allies finally accepted this idea.

Only two groups had always been in favor of Austrian independence: communists and monarchist. A historian counted 13 Austrian groups of different political colour in England alone, including a neutral committee in which conservatives, social democrats, legitimist and communists were represented. Activists in the communist party were known to be stubborn and not very talented in compromising, but they were excellent organisers who built meeting points in many countries where emigrants could eat, discuss, read papers and borrow books. In London they even had a cabaret, a café and a restaurant and lots of initiatives intended to strengthen Austrian self-confidence and patriotism. As political activities were forbidden in England, those places – the Austrian Center, Young Austria and the Free Austrian movement--were “cultural”, not communist.

#### **Chapter IV.**

Commemorative speeches and lectures usually emphasise two main aspects (at least in Germany and Austria). One is „Our Jews“, whom we miss – leaving unprecise what “the Jews” means. The other, closely related, is the “sad brain-drain”: all those scientists, writers, artists, musicians, architects – the big loss for the country (by now even members of the right-wing-party like to mention „Austrian roots“ if somebody

who lived nearly their whole life in the States, becomes famous or wins a Nobel Prize, like Eric Kandel, Carl Djerassi, Erich Korngold, who came to the States as children).

Of course we know more about those who wrote books and those who were famous. Some of you might know Austrian writers like Stefan Zweig, Joseph Roth, Franz Werfel, Vicky Baum, Manès Sperber, Elias Canetti or my non-Jewish idol Robert Musil, and of course Sigmund Freud, who was 83 when he was allowed to leave, or Karl Popper who survived as far away as New Zealand. But not every emigrant was educated, not all of them could build a new existence, and few had enough money when they escaped.

Most of the refugees were not well known, and each family or individual had to find their own way. Those who worked with language – writers, actors, journalists – found it very difficult to start a new life in a foreign country. And even if they had been successful in the pre-Nazi-time and did get a visa it could end sad. Like Lili Körber, a (non-jewish) Austrian novelist, who had come via France to the States. She tried to write in English, but the loss of language, a life without acknowledgement and the worry how to survive meant disgrace for her. She worked as a nurse and stopped writing. For young people it was easier. Like f.e. Friedrich Katz, born in 1927: he grew up with German as his first language, then went to a French school, and his parents escaped onward to New York and finally to Mexico. He spoke four languages fluently.

Quite often in the new country it was the women who earned the living – working as servants, in low-level jobs and factories. Ex-lawyers or professors sold insurance or drove taxis, students worked in mines, sold this and that.

Conditions were different from today's: to leave the country you needed a passport, a health certificate, a work-permit and a ticket. If you were lucky enough to find an ambassador who was willing to give you a visa, you had to prove that you could support yourself; moreover, you needed transit visas for the countries you passed through. All the papers were scheduled and would run out if one fee or certificate was missing. Before you could think of getting away from Austria or Germany, you needed permission to leave the country, which was connected with all sorts of harassment. You had to pay a special tax (Reichsfluchtsteuer): tax penalty imposed on fleeing the Reich" and other untranslatable German papers like Steuerunbedenklichkeitserklärung and Vermögensverzichtserklärung – consent to leave any property behind. It all meant that you had to queue for hours, ask, with

appropriately deferential gestures, some angry man for one permission or the other, and of course every paper cost money, which, after all the expropriation and fees – was frightening. Sometimes it was a just small amount or a period of two days that made the difference between survival and deportation.

When the war started on September 1st 1939 with the invasion of Poland, those refugees who had managed to get to England or France were defined in these countries as enemy aliens and interned in camps – sometimes together with German Nazis. Some were deported from England to Australia or Canada, others, like our father, stayed there for 18 months. In France those internees had the choice to join the Foreign Legion. One who did so was Ernst Frey. He was sent first to Morocco and then to Indochina, where he fell into the hands of the Japanese. In the United States and England some thousands joined the army of the allies to fight Nazi-Germany.

Argentina had been a classic immigration country, but after 1933 it tightened controls, and refugees chose illegal routes across rivers and mountains, through deserts, often with the help of human traffickers. Between 1.700 to 2.800 Austrians are said to have gone to Argentina. It had, like Chile, a strong Jewish – and a strong German-nationalist-community. In a report issued by a Viennese school, where pupils tried to find out about students who had attended their school before 1938, I came across the story of Fritz Lantos. He started as a gaucho in Argentina, went from Bolivia to Tierra del Fuego, from the Atlantic to the Andes, by foot, and on horseback, following an Indian who sold salt, and as a blind passenger on a petroleum-tanker and providing the human ballast on an airplane.

There are so many interesting, sad or crazy stories, and I haven't talked yet about people like Leopold von Andrian, a very catholic legitimist dreaming of the restitution of the Habsburg monarchy. He had been a high-ranking diplomat, an aristocrat in the service of the k.u.k. Austro-Hungarian State, also an advisor of Habsburg.

Unfortunately his mother was Jewish. He found refuge in Brasil. Otto (von) Habsburg, son of the last emperor and crown-prince of the vanished monarchy, shouldn't be omitted from the history of Austria. He had quite some influence, was active in the US and committed to the struggle for Austrian independence.

A now well-known hero who aided many, was Varian Fry, called „the angel of Marseille“. He created a network and helped 2,000 to 4,000 anti-Nazi and Jewish

refugees after the invasion of France in June 1940 to escape. Fry, an American protestant, backed by American Unitarians and wealthy art aficionados, together with friends formed the Emergency Rescue Committee, collected money and smuggled writers, avantgarde artists, musicians and hundreds of others out of France via Martinique or across the Pyrenes to neutral Portugal. Among them were Alma Mahler and Arthur Köstler, or – to mention some famous non-Austrians – Hannah Arendt, Lion Feuchtwanger, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Marc Chagall, Claude Levy-Strauss and many others. They all got to the United States where different organisations helped them to find money, get grants, jobs, flats and make friends. Very late Fry was celebrated as a hero; in Berlin a street and bus stop were named after him. Another is the Swiss police inspector Paul Grüninger who helped thousands of refugees to cross – illegally – the Swiss border. He faked papers so that several thousand refugees could enter Switzerland. Grüninger was dismissed, condemned and died impoverished. It took years till he was rehabilitated.

There were other cases, like that of Josef Schleich. He had been asked by the Jewish community of Graz to help teach agriculture courses in preparation for the Hachschara, the immigration to Palestine, which in the beginning was allowed by the Gestapo. The courses were paid for by the Israelitic Cultural Community. His farm was in the south of Austria, near the Yugoslav border, and soon he started to bring Jews over this green border. He founded a big business, dealing with the authorities in Yugoslavia, Italy and Greece with the goal of organizing ships for the passage to Palestine (which in the end didn't work). He then opened a travel agency, made a contract with the Gestapo, and brought Jews by taxi or train to the border, sometimes joined by Gestapo men. He demanded significant payments and he continued to co-operate with Jewish aid organisations, later also from the "German Reich", as information about this operation became soon known among the helpers. The demand grew so much that in October 1940 he asked the Gestapo in Vienna to let him have an office in the Palästina-Amt – the official address for emigration to Palestine installed in Vienna by Eichmann. Beginning in 1941 the Nazi policy changed from expulsion to deportation and extinction. Schleich's work ended and he even got arrested by the Nazis. After the war he was suspected of self-enrichment, thievery, war crimes and he was put in jail again. But he was also celebrated as an important savior by people who had escaped with his help – they proposed him as a „Gerechter unter

den Völkern“, Righteous among the nations, the Israeli honorary title for Gentiles who helped Jews.

## **Chapter V.**

How do we know all that? It was an important job of immigrant organisations to collect material, programs, letters, journals. Also, many individuals held on to their diaries and correspondence, and when later asked for them by scholars, were happy to finally tell their story. There is nowadays a lot of research, school-projects like the one cited earlier; we have several libraries, teaching programs, exchange-programs, university chairs on the subject. In this context I want to mention another Austrian special quality. The documentation of refugees started comparatively early in Austria. Emigrants who had gone back founded in the early 60ies an archive, collected biographies and all material they could get.

Germans started earlier with such research – but with a different motivation. In the country of “Dichter und Denker” (poets and thinkers) that didn’t want to continue to be the place of “Richter und Henker” (judges and executioner) the first projects concentrated on writers and literature. A broader interest, including additional aspects of exile didn't emerge until the mid 80s. The DÖW, the Austrian documentary archive that was founded 1963, specialized from the beginning on political emigration – which included Jewish emigration, but the main emphasis was on biographies of (leftist) activists. The DOW collected all material it could get – newspapers in exile, letters, documents about meetings, information about ordinary people. It held interviews and organized international conferences.

It remains difficult to distinguish between political and Jewish emigration, not only because many so called political emigrants were „Jewish“ (in quotation marks), but also because their meeting points were always a centre for all Austrians; many non-political Jewish refugees found a sort of „home“ in their places. The DÖW, Austrian document-archive of resistance, was founded by the generation that had been in exile and come back. Some of the children of emigrants were among the first researchers. In West German a broader interest in the history of exile was pushed by the political movements of the late 60s, when students had started to ask their fathers and mothers about WW II, and a debate about guilt and shame ensued, followed by the search for “the other” history. In the GDR books on political exile and literature of the

exile were part of the mainstream culture, often ignoring the Jewish background of the protagonists.

90% of emigrants are said to have stayed in their country of refuge after the war. Which of course was easier in US or England than in Uganda or Shanghai. Those 10% who went back to Austria weren't welcomed. Antisemitism and Nazism were still strong and nobody wanted to be reminded of neighbours whose flats and shops had been expropriated and who weren't seen for seven and more years and had been "enemies" in the powerful propaganda. These Austrians had a different history and a different memory of the time between '38 and '45. Neither the politicians nor all those who had made a career after the Jewish professors, doctors, lawyers etc. had vanished liked the re-migrants.

I wouldn't call it "back to the roots" when some hundreds – mainly political emigrants – returned after the war to their old homes, especially since their relatives had been for the most part murdered. I had the chance to meet some of the people who lived through so much fear and terror and I always found it fascinating that these old people were generally lively, humorous, not at all resigned.

To finish I want to come back to the word "uproot". Most of those who settled in a more or less secure country tried to assimilate and stayed on in the new homes. Their children became „normal“ British, American, Israeli or Argentinian inhabitants, grew up with the local language and made a career in their countries. Since the 90ies surprisingly many of well integrated British, American etc. second or even third generation have started to look for their German or Austrian roots, or even settled in the countries where their grandparents had come from. Quite a few moved to Berlin or Vienna. Whether they find their roots – I can't say. But nowadays this doesn't seem as important as it was 100 years ago. Reading studies, novels, biographies and PhD theses of non-jewish Germans I sometimes got the impression, that those writers, academics, journalists or freelance researchers are searching for alternative roots – beyond the contaminated German and Austrian history. I cannot tell whether they are successful in the construction of a new (anti-racial, democratic and loveable) German (or Austrian) "identity". However roots are defined or borrowed – they need some fertile ground.