"The Statue of Liberty Did Not Give Us the Hitler Salute":

Autobiographies and Oral Histories of Exiled Austrian Jews

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When in 1945 it seemed that the spectre of National Socialism had been banished from Austria, the majority of those 132,000 Austrian Jews who had been forced to flee their homes after the annexation of Austria in 1938 asked themselves whether or not to return. Only about 3,000 (or 2.5%) of them actually did. Why so few? There were two reasons: the circumstances of banishment (daylight robbery of their apartments, the wrecking of shops, the coercion to clean pavements under humiliating conditions, finally Kristallnacht) had left behind deep traumas which stood in the way of a reconciliation. Secondly, the Viennese showed a remarkable post-war aptitude to reconstruct, after years of collaboration with Nazism, a "democratic" self-image without ever confronting their involvement with the evils of the past. Miraculously they would change back into "democrats" who as "the first victims of Nazism" had suffered both under the Nazis and from the liberation. The Austrian poet Alfred Polgar, himself an exile, writing about "The Emigrant and His Homeland" observed:

There is a Faust-fragment by Lessing, in which the ghost, asked 'what is the fastest thing on earth?' replies 'the transition from good to evil.' Proof of the aptness of this reply was offered a few years ago by the incomprehensible rapidity with which crosses turned into hooked crosses, and men into beasts. Now and at the same speed we witness the re-transition. (238)
In the same bitter tone Stefan Zweig had remarked earlier that in 1938
the typical Austrian learnt overnight to shout “Heil Hitler” instead of “Heil
Schuschnigg” (Zweig 458). This may well have led to his suicide in 1942. In
“hundreds of letters” (Hermann Broch), and fairly regularly during their first
visit to Vienna after 1945, returning Jews (who in many instances were
searching for their murdered parents or other relatives) ran into a miasma of
self-pity coupled with an aggressive denial of guilt. “How smart it was of
you, Herr Rosenbaum, to emigrate”, they would say; “as usual, you Jews
were more clever than we. Oh you have no idea how terribly we suffered.”
When Hilde Spiel returned to Vienna in early 1946 and the head waiter of
her café made exactly this type of remark, her reaction was one of
uncomprehending disgust and dread:

Expropriation, humiliation, arrest and mortal danger, illegal border-crossings,
the years of exile as an “enemy alien”, surviving in a country badly disrupted by war
- all of it would count for nothing, would vanish in thin air, dissolved by a snapping
of two fingers. (69)

Hardly anyone was able to remember, as Broch wrote to Volkmar von
Zühlsdorff on 15 March 1947:

(...) human memory is incredibly short, especially in relation to its own errors
and misdemeanours, and that is why man is capable of constantly lying to himself.
Of those many decent and well-behaved folks whom you meet today, more than half,
in my view, were decent and well-behaved Hitler-screamers who no longer recall that
fact. (Broch 136)

And while a mere three years after the end of the war journals and
newspapers printed stories of the Wehrmacht’s “heroism”, stories of civilian
heroism, such as hiding Jews, were not printworthy. Broch agonized about
the decision to return until death took that choice out of his hands. Alfred
Polgar, conceding that the months of allied bombing must have been hard,
wrote: “but to accuse the dawn of the day for its greyish light ill befits those
who found their bearings so comfortably well in the pitch blackness that
preceded it” (238). And Theodor Kramer, whose promising writing career
was brutally destroyed by the Nazis and who limped back to Vienna in 1955
only to die a few months later, found in one of his last poems that “it is at home where I will eternally feel foreign” (117). Another example is provided by Günther Anders, whose diary entry of October 1950 reveals not only the horrible reality of an unrepentant Vienna, but subtle psychological explanations:

Even after the murder of six million Jews they dare (…) to make Jews their scapegoat again, this time the accidental remaining Jew, the accidental survivor. It is not the batter who is guilty — presumably he really does not recall his murders — but the battered: because he alone cannot forget the beating, the batter and the battered. (163)

Quite “ordinary” survivors were also to eloquently express anger with, and alienation from, the mother country. As one of my interviewees wryly remarked: ‘Oh those Austrians will never forgive me for the fact that they sent me to Dachau’ — the infamous concentration camp to the west of Munich.

My purpose here is to explore the traditional stance of critical literature on the experience of exile, and to juxtapose it with an alternative critical approach, based on a theory of exile-and-expulsion literature as a literature of trauma. Most approaches to exile literature treat the tension between two cultures as a source of creativity, and not as an obstacle to it. The perspective of one’s own culture is clarified and sharpened through the experience of cultural otherness, this critical school claims; various cultural lenses refract, twist, turn and creatively reconstruct an image which might otherwise have remained out of focus.

But there is a terminological hurdle to clear first, and it is that of “exile”, a protean term which has tantalizingly assumed many shapes in the course of this conference. As will shortly become apparent, the distinction between “exile” and such related concepts as “emigration/emigré”, “displaced person”, “foreigner” or “alien” and “refugee” matter in a context of traumatized vs. non-traumatized writing within a topography of not-home. “Emigration” I define as the conscious decision, usually arrived at through years of deliberation and Angst, to abandon one country for another. The two
main reasons for emigration are the hope of better economic conditions, and (though less frequently) the absence of political freedom. Emigration is always accompanied by subtle identity changes anteceding the actual uprooting, which are initiated by the emigrés Themselves. Why? In order to justify to oneself and to friends and family the extraordinary decision of giving up certainty at home in exchange for uncertainty about the future, the emigrés have to loosen Their emotional ties to the fatherland. It becomes necessary to “disenthrall” oneself, as Emerson would have said, of one’s cultural legacy. At the same time an image of the new country will be constructed, resulting in unrealistically benign and opportunity-filled notions. Separation from a regional or national identity is thus a prolonged process easing the pain of leaving. Subsequently, the emigrant will work extremely hard in order to be a success. The emigrants need success in order to justify their emigration, to prove to themselves AND TO EVERYONE WHO STAYED BEHIND that the decision was correct. The emigrant thus often becomes a model citizen, fiercely loyal and patriotic, even more so than his peers of older families. An instructive example is provided by Ron Kovic, the paraplegic Vietnam veteran and author of Born on the Fourth of July. The night before joining the Marines he stays up before the TV until “The Star-Spangled Banner” plays: “I put my hand over my heart and stood rigid at attention until the screen went blank” (75). A Jewish refugee remembers the same emotion on the occasion of being awarded American citizenship:

We practically waltzed out of the building. We were citizens again! American citizens! We were practically like everyone else. We felt superpatriotic. Five years after our arrival, we only spoke English at home. (...) We celebrated every American holiday. We all felt entirely American and did everything we could to support the country. (...) We had no past. (Whiteman 410)

Expatriation differs in that the causes of migration are less economic than cultural. The typical expatriate is an artist who is disenchanted with the narrow-mindedness and sterility of his or her environment. Beckett, Joyce, the restless Rainer Maria Rilke, E.M. Remarque after 1945, Ernest Hemingway, the Australians Christina Stead and Miles Franklin, and Patrick White for long stretches of their lives, were all “expats”. But the expatriate does not necessarily expect a more prosperous life, seeking a freer
life instead. Nor does the "expat" feel beholden to praise his host country. However, what the emigré and the expat have in common is that they can return home at any time. The choice is always possible, and frequently the return happens at a point when success and financial security are no longer in doubt.

But what about the term "exile"? Bertolt Brecht, who fled from Nazi persecution as early as 1933 and after settling in California had to flee in the return direction, this time from HUAC persecution in 1945, thought the distinction between the terms "emigré" and "exile" important enough to devote a whole poem to it:

I always disliked the name that they gave us:
emigrés. Which means, "leavers of their country."
But we did not leave voluntarily, choosing
another country. Nor did we immigrate
into a country in order to stay there, maybe
forever, but fled. Expelled and banished were we.
And the country accepting us won't be our home,
but an exile. Restless we sit, as close to the border
as possible, waiting for the day of return.
(12:81)

It is here that a radical difference in the condition of exile becomes apparent. Exile is not chosen, it is forced upon one. Whether the return to one's country of origin will ever be possible is a matter of doubt. When the exiled person compares his or her former status as a respected citizen with that of a refugee in an alien land, s/he will be shocked by the huge loss as regards the quality of life. A great many Viennese Jews had been, in pre-1938 days, highly prosperous and respected. For instance, after the annexation a full 78% of the teaching staff of the medical faculty of Vienna University were dismissed, almost all of them Jews (Hubenstorf 233-288). In the arts and sciences, as well as in trade and commerce, Jews were present at a disproportionately high rate. And overnight they became un-persons whom everyone was free to molest, to rob, or worse. Shocking as it is in retrospect, Viennese anti-semitism turned out to be more brutal than the anti-semitism of Hitler-Germany up to 1938. Moreover, whereas anti-
semitism in Germany was very much the domain of bureaucrats, in Vienna it was a drama with gleeful audience participation. Harrasing the Jews was a playful activity, carried out by "gemütliche" Viennese in three-quarter time beat. Quite precipitously, any reliable social consensus for living amongst others simply vanished. There were no norms or rules any more; no law that would protect. As one of my interviewees remembered: "It was as though we had been thrown into an impenetrable jungle together with wild animals, and we had no weapons with which to defend ourselves"1. Dozens of people would disappear, as they still disappear today in certain Latin American dictatorships, without anyone knowing where they end up, but also without anyone asking questions about these disappearances. There was, of course, the organized terror of the SA and the SS, the Austrian SA and SS mind you, which made Jürgen Kramer speak of Vienna as located by the beautiful brown Danube. But it seems that the mass of private examples of petty nastiness have an even more prominent place in the memories of exiles, and it is these memories which have been so demoralizing. Many spoke of the outrages that happened to them in apocalyptic terms, using images of collapse and chaos, but also of terrifying insights. Because of the precipitousness of all the changes, the soon-to-be exiles could not find the time to properly assess, analyse and understand a multitude of processes affecting their lives and identities. It was as though they were shell-shocked. And indeed Lore Segal writes in these terms in her autobiography Other People's Houses:

"When am I going?" I asked. "Thursday" my father said. The day after tomorrow Then I felt the icy chill below my chest where my insides had been. (25)

Benno Weiser, using a similar metaphor, speaks of the Anschluss as "the beginning of the stone Age of the heart" (71), whereas Max Knight, co-author of the "duograph" entitled One and One Make Three makes a reference to a cultural abortion when he writes that fleeing Vienna was leaving "the womb of my home in Vienna, my family, my country, my tradition and security. It was a violent birth, Hitler as midwife" (Fabrizius 2). Many exiles had recurring dreams; some have them to this day. I'll offer three examples. Mrs. Edith Arie dreamt "at least fifty times, maybe a hundred" that all alone, she had to pack suitcase after suitcase, ten or maybe
a dozen of them that would not easily close (with bits sticking out), that she had to shlep them down from her mother's first-floor apartment to street-level, and nobody was there to help. The streets were empty, and she had to find a taxi to get to the station, dreading all the while that if she was not on a certain train she would never get out. Another exile told a similar story:

Even today I still have nightmares. I have to climb over high mountains, and there are deep gorges, and I do not know how to get across. Sometimes I am at the station and I want to leave for somewhere, and suddenly I am in an alien land, I do not know anyone, don't recognize any streets, I am lost, I cannot come home. When I wake up, I thank God I am in my bed.

Finally, a terrifying dream connoting the loneliness of exiles who had to leave all their friends and family to the holocaust. The narrator was buying garden chairs, all sorts, and then all kinds, and then, while the salesman counted up, she said to him: "And when shall you deliver the people who shall occupy them?" (Whiteman 388)

And getting OUT of Nazi-Austria was not at all the only problem: getting INTO a country was even more difficult. As we know, 62,000 Jews did not succeed in getting immigration permits and were later taken to the death camps. When an immigration visa was finally granted, this was like a new lease of life, a ticket out of an unbearably oppressive situation. Understandably, such refugees were profoundly relieved to get out. In a study of the uprooting of Jewish children the memory of a 10-year-old child who managed to get to England is documented. She did not speak any English at the time and yet she said:

We boarded a British vessel. I was greatly relieved to hear English instead of the despised German. We could not understand what the sailors were saying to us but felt from their good-mannered laughter that they were being kind. (Whiteman 162)

Another example is this stanza about the arrival in New York harbor in 1941:
At last we’re at anchor in a harbor bay
Around skyscrapers busses are hooting.
Lady Liberty gives us her raised-arm hooray,
For the first time it’s not a Nazi saluting. (Elbogen 40)

But paradoxically, the subsequent relation with the host country and its culture was never an easy one. The opposite to the example of Paul Elbogen is provided by the writer and translator Gitta Deutsch, who flatly states in her autobiography that she did not feel one shred of thankfulness to her saviors, and that homesickness was to be her constant companion for the next thirty years (52). Lily Sykes told me that when she arrived in England in 1939, she was often referred to as “that bloody foreigner”, adding that this has not really changed over the last 50 years (Wimmer 170). Inga Joseph complained that her neighbors even now sometimes say “When will you go home to Austria?” (152). Lore Segal, author of Other People’s Houses returned to Vienna in 1992 to do a TV documentary. In the final shot she says: “you know, I’d love to love this city, if I only dared”. And there is a lovely anecdote about an old Viennese lady in New York who was asked by her niece if she would like to return. The lady answered: “You know that I can only live here in New York now. But the only place where I could really live is Vienna — if I could only live there” 4.

Emotionally, but not economically, the best climate was provided by the Zionists of Palestine. Conditions were more favorable in the US, traditionally a country of immigrants, than in Britain, where the largest contingent went 5. Thus the British Central office for refugees (commonly known as Bloomsbury House) issued a flyer to all refugees from Nazism advising them about their behavior. “Don’t talk German in the streets, in public places or any places where others may hear you” it said, which must have given them the impression that the British might mob them in the streets. “Don’t ask whether your friends and relatives can be brought into the country, whether or not (sic!) they have permits” it went on, addressing their main sorrow, since everybody had been separated from their beloved. “Do be as quiet and modest as possible” was another and somewhat ominous remark. Ending on an uplifting note, it gave the eminently practical advice “Do be as cheerful as possible” 6.

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And one might even be tempted to believe that cheerfulness did exist amongst exiles — was, indeed, a quasi-romantic aspect of their stormy new existence — when one reads a humorous autobiography such as Berczeller’s *Displaced Doctor*. Berczeller emphasizes the thrill of meeting highly distinguished people, of whom there was a large proportion in a Belgian refugee camp. In 1942 he attended an evening language course that was compulsory for doctors who wanted to obtain a license to practise again in the US. In an “old building on Lexington Avenue Berczeller meets a cross-section of an Academy of Medicine in Vienna, Munich and Berlin. I could recognize some of them. There were surgeons, gynecologists, urologists, internists, dermatologists, and two psychiatrists I knew had once sat listening to Freud. And here they were now, straining to catch every word from the lips of this little girl «their instructor». (86)

It sounds distinctly jolly. The more so, when, a few lines later, the instructor suffers from a bout of faintness and becomes the diagnostic target of a massive medical brain-trust: she is first examined by a dermatologist (who sat in the front row), then, in quick succession, by a psychiatrist, gynecologist, an ear, nose and throat man, and other experts. The “schoolboys” had been dying to be their former selves once more — a wish all too often denied to those unable to fulfil the minimum language requirements. It was different for youngsters, who learnt the language more quickly. Some of them later became successful academic writers: Arthur Koestler, Franz Borkenau, Martin Esslin, Sir Ernst Gombrich, Egon Wellesz, Bruno Bettelheim, or Sir Karl Popper. Others even became proficient enough to write fiction or poetry. Apart from those already mentioned there were also Max Knight, Josef Fabry, Mimi Grossberg, Helen Hilsenrad, Hans Kraus, Frederick Brainin, and the Pulitzer-winner Frederic Morton (formerly Mandelbaum)⁷.

But the war-time attitude of “grinning and bearing” breaks down sooner or later, and then what? Do the narratives find an outlet, and if so, do they get an audience? And even if they do, does this cure the trauma? From the study of other genres of trauma literature, such as war narratives, holocaust narratives, rape and incest narratives, we know that this is far from certain.
A study of Hiroshima survivors for example has revealed that 30 years after the fact they feel deeply guilty about their survival and that they are defenceless against the ostracism of the get-ahead post-war Japanese generation, which has largely rendered their plight invisible. Incest victims need on average fifteen years between the crime and the telling of the crime. Holocaust survivors such as Eli Wiesel and Simon Wiesenthal have both testified to their own “survivor guilt” as well as to long public indifference to their tales. Wiesel moreover has argued that non-traumatized readers tend to read holocaust literature as allegories or metaphors for human existence rather than concrete historical fact. The “Anschluss” has similarly not found many literary champions or publishers: until very recently, it tended to get glossed over both by contemporary Austrian literature and our collective memory. In England and the USA, only a few brave publishers risked their money on Anschluss memoirs, and as far as the general public is concerned, I have often heard the story that owing to the seductive “schmaltziness” of such movies as The Sound of Music (which presents a totally misleading picture of pre-1938 Austria) many English or American citizens didn’t even believe the horror stories of exiled Austrian Jews, and so they withdrew into their own shells. But an even more important aspect was a self-generated censorship of exiles. Their suffering, as they felt with some justification, had been negligible in comparison with the horrors of the holocaust, and so many thought it inappropriate to fuss over their losses. The result was decades of silence and suppression.

And yet, as Julia Kristeva has argued (307), there is a great need to re-join those seemingly mutually exclusive areas of “longing” and “knowing”. In the final phase of life, as family ties, friendships, and business contacts fall by the wayside, it is natural to seek a reconciliation with those who never asked for forgiveness. This becomes even more plausible considering a certain disenchantment with host countries: Thatcherism, crime, and the disintegration of American cities are often cited in this context. Stella Rotenberg, who started writing verse at the age of 50 and has since become an accomplished poet, wrote one of the most moving exile poems that I know. It is entitled “Rückkehr” (Return), and lists a number of non-reasons for returning to Austria, such as the (clichéd) notions of an atmosphere, Gemütlichkeit, the waltzes, the crystal snow in winter. The final
stanza explains in stunning simplicity: “Simply / in order to hear the sound of my mother tongue / once more, would I return / into the abyss of hell.” Billy Wilder complained in an interview that his responsibilities as a Hollywood director had more or less robbed him of his mother language: the only person with whom he still talks German, he added, was Fred Zinnemann (Seeber 144). There are a number of reasons why there has been a dramatic rise in the number of stories in the past few years. The scandal about our head of state, a man who did not dare remember his own past, who lacked both the head and the heart to address the truth, had much to do with it. There is also a greater willingness on the part of young Austrians to explore the concealed history of their fathers. But most important, in the final stage of their life many exiles are irresistibly drawn to the country of their lost youth and dreams. And that is why for the exile the consoling proverb “time heals all wounds” simply does not apply. On the contrary: the pain increases. At a symposium in St. Pölten (Austria) in July 1992, many exiles spoke of an ever-increasing pain since 1945 which is caused by the insensitivity of others. A woman now living in Oslo spoke for many when she said: “In 1945 I had a vision, and they have ridiculed it” (Ley 18). When exiles make a return visit, they make it very clear to others and to themselves, that it is only the land they visit, not the people. The land did not shout “Heil Hitler”, the mountains are green and white, not brown, and the smell and taste of things has nothing to do with politics. Which may well be a benign delusion. The German language, once “the language of barbarians”, permeates all: it is only in their second language that exiles can reconstruct childhood, their first language having been tainted by fear, claustrophobia, terror, cultural or real asphyxiation. A community of victims is always a marginalized one — but in the case of exiles their marginalization is twofold. The various national myths of their new countries are unaffected by their knowledge (Jewish suffering is not English or American suffering), and so it is easy to marginalize them. Post-war Austrian myths, on the other hand, have centered on the essential difference of a vague Austria ‘national character’ as distinct from that of the Nazi, and so the stories of the Jewish exile could not simply be ignored, they had to be denied.

Nonetheless, the recovery of lost or suppressed aspects of personal
identity can be a healing process. The notion of both personal and social healing is an important aspect in the public reception of trauma narratives. Like most forms of orthodox psychoanalysis, healing involves the passage from silence about troubling experiences to the release of sorrow through narration. When suffering is denied or repressed, it continues to affect the person trying to forget. Those who follow that path (and I have encountered such individuals) are often unaware that the sharing of an individual sorrow with an audience can have a beneficial social effect. Who can doubt that a society with a history of collective evil badly needs to absorb the stories of its victims into its collective memory?

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*Note, Notes, Anmerkungen*

(Translations of German sources are mine.)

1) Dr. Maria Piers, who fled to the USA and later became a famous TV-psychoanalyst as well as the director of the Erikson Institute. Personal interview, August 1990.

2) Personal communication, August 1993. Obviously the many and heavy suitcases represent a cultural baggage which refuses to be simply packed and shipped away. The absence of any solidarity from fellow citizens. The dream as such is about the enormous mental strain of leaving the country of one’s birth, one’s culture, one’s hopes and dreams.

3) A similar dream: The mountains and valleys, once a source of pride and recreation, have turned into deadly foes, as indeed all the country has. Caroline Warren, “Ich habe noch Alpträume” (“I still have nightmares”) (Wimmer 158). My translation of this part of Mrs Warren’s oral history.

4) Personal communication by Dorit Whiteman. The lady is her own aunt.

5) The US was very much the rich immigrant’s refuge, and so that group had a better start than the average refugee.

6) For this information I am indebted to Edith Mahler-Schachter (cousin to
the composer Gustav Mahler), who recently died aged 90.
7) A complete list is to be found in Zohn, appendix.
8) “I encountered among Hiroshima survivors a frequent sense of being ‘as-if-dead’, or what I called an ‘identity of the dead’. (...) An expression of this sense of themselves can be found in the life-style of many survivors, one of marked constriction and self-abnegation, based on the feeling that any show of vitality is in some way inappropriate for them, not inwardly permissible. They retain a sens of... guilt and responsibility for the catastrophe itself, despite being victims rather than perpetrators of that catastrophe” (Lifton 13).
9) “I have not yet come across a piece of rape or incest literature that was not published at least ten years after the event” (Tal 217-249, fn. 6).

Opere Citate, Works Cited

Zitierte Literatur


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