

My second homeland

Jacob Nachmias - Jan 2018

I lived in Sofia, Bulgaria from age five (1933) to eleven (1939). But my second homeland during that period was Austria. There were two reasons for this. The first is that Sofia was a bit of a medical backwater, and so we often took the train to Vienna to see specialists, whether it was for my eyes or for my mother's digestive problems. I also had some fun times in Vienna, being taken to the Prater amusement park with its famous Ferris wheel. Also going up and down hotel elevators (there were none in Sofia at the time)

The second reason was that we went on vacation to a small town in the Vienna Woods called Perchtoldsdorf. I have memories of a friendly waiter who told me of being a prisoner of war in Russia during the first world war, and a garden gazebo with magazines before that war, with pictures of women in long dresses and bustles. I had very blond hair in those days and because of Austrian governesses, was fluent in German with a good Viennese accent.

We went on many hikes in the pine woods. Paths were marked with stripes of different colors painted on trees where paths crossed. It was cool and still in the woods with ground covered in pine needles. Occasionally a meadow opened out. This is where I saw the last maneuvers of the Austrian army in the summer of 1937. It was an infantry unit with old fashioned field telephones and rifles, making its way down a hill.

A few months later, in the spring of 1938, was the 'ANSCHLUSS' - the joining of my second homeland to Nazi Germany. I listened with horror

on the short wave radio at Hitler's triumphal entry into Vienna, with MY Austrians screaming "Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Fuhrer!"

Later I learned from someone who later was able to leave on a 'Kindertransport' whose mother wrote him how her neighbors in Vienna had forced Jewish women they had known for years to kneel and scrub the sidewalk with toothbrushes.

But much worse was yet to come. My father had some distant relatives living in Vienna when the war started. None of them survived. More recently I have been able to find out what happened to them from the meticulously kept Vienna municipal records. One of them was said to have "moved to Poland in 1941", which probably meant Auschwitz, another to Minsk, which was where the SS Einsatzgruppen killing squads operated. One of my relatives was able to leave before the war, probably because he was a Greek citizen. He went to Salonika, where Carlos (Karl) Nahmias suffered the same fate as all Jews in that city. There is still a memorial website maintained for him because apparently he was a very prominent student of classical languages.

I have never gotten over this sense of betrayal. Unlike the Germans who have for the most part taken responsibility for what they did in those years, the Austrians - it is my impression - pretend that they were under German occupation and so not responsible for anything that happened to its Jews.

I visited Austria once after the war with a friend on leave from the US Army, and wearing his uniform. Austria was still occupied by the allied armies at the time, and the train went through the Soviet Zone to reach

Salzburg. It was during the time of the Mozart Festival, and places to sleep were hard to find, so we took a couple of beds offered by a local family. The beds were comfortable enough, but the atmosphere was tense: on the night table there was a photo of their son in Wehrmacht uniform.

We went on to Vienna which was divided into sectors for each of the allied armies. I have a photo of my friend Bernie next to a Soviet tank parked in Stalinplatz. From two former British intelligence officers who served in Vienna I learned what a corrupt place it was at the time, where one could buy absolutely anything for a price, but I suppose that is not unusual where asymmetrical relationships dominate. Also, according to him British Intelligence in Vienna at the time was so inept, that he thought his unit was a front for the real thing.

Under the circumstances of my last visit to occupied Austria with a uniformed American companion, it was hard to have casual contacts with the man-in-the street, so my feelings about Austrians remained unchanged.

POSTSCRIPT.

As I reread this account, I am brought short by one of Elie Wiesel's sayings, based on his own bitter experience, that all collective judgements are wrong. In this instance, there were surely 'good' Austrians after the Anschluss, just as there were 'good' Germans in the Nazi era - in fact, I have known one, who I greatly admired.

Also, I got to know and like several Germans of the post WWII generations. But it so happens, I never met any Austrians of those generations.