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Kuhner about Kuhner

n HERBERT KUHNER

I was born in Vienna of Austrian-Jewish parents in 1935. My parents left what was then called 'Ostmark' with me in 1939; the alternative would have been to have been murdered. That was the fate of members of my family who stayed. My family first went to Britain, and from there to the United States, where I grew up and was educated. I worked for the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency, and in 1963 I became a resident of Vienna. Returning to my birthplace has enabled me to have a unique view of events in Austria for the past quarter of a century. Emile Capouya, who published Nixe first novel at Funk and Wagnalls and *Austrian Poetry Today* at Schocken, encouraged me to write a chronicle of my experiences in Austria. I call the book a novel of sorts, but there is nothing fictitious about it. I use the term as a protective device. Historical personalities have been named, but I have changed the names of some of the other characters. They are types and they are interchangable. I have integrated a collage of political quotations, events and situations into *Memoirs*. Here there is no need for invention. The truth is more absurd than Kafka or Orwell.

Before coming to Austria, man's inhumanity to man had always been a mystery to me. That is no longer the case. Since my return, I have been afforded much aid in gaining a better understanding of the barbarity of the Third Reich. At the fiftieth anniversary of the *Anschluss*, it is evident in many ways that the Reich has not ceased to be. The resurgence of open anti-Semitism in politics, journalism and public life is a confirmation of that. And now, more than ever, there are infamous endeavours to rewrite history in order to minimize the horrors of the Nazi past and to vindicate Austrian participation.

Bruno Kreisky was the first post-war chancellor to openly integrate former Nazis into the Austrian political fabric. In 1971, Leopold Gratz, then Minister of Education and formerly Hitler Youth Elitist Leader, went to Holland for a tour of Dutch Schools and universities. Accompanying Gratz four cabinet ministers who had previously been Nazi Party members. Freedomite leader Friedrich Peter, sometime SS-officer, schoolteacher and educational supervisor, in the order, had been added as a special treat for the Dutch. However, the hosts did not prove to be very hospitable. They promptly sent their guests packing.

These are two examples how Austria has failed to come to terms with the past. The dissemination of this information is essential!

'The prologue occured in my grandmother's apartment in 1938; I was three at the time. The doorball rang and I ran to the door and opened it. My mother swept me away as two men in streetclothes entered. One of them, I remember clearly, wore a brown suit and limped. The brown-suited man pushed my grandmother, who was eightythree, away from the sideboard in order to ransack it. And indeed it contained her shopping money.'

'In 1939, when I was four, my parents left Austria with me before the juggernaut could crush us. Other members of my family weren't that lucky. They stayed and were crushed. My grandmother had the good fortune to die of a broken heart before a worse fate could befall her.'

'When I returned to my birthplace I was made to feel as if I had never left.'

By having returned to Austria, I have been afforded a unique view of what can be termed the aftermath of the Holocaust. I have depicted the situation from the vantage point of a witness who had to leave in 1939 and was foolish enough to come back. I am convinced that my testimony can provide a piece of the puzzle concerning man's cruelty to man and that by reading it a better understanding of historical events can be achieved.

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Herbert Kuhner: Herbert Kuhner ist 1935 in Wien geboren. 1939 mußte er mit seinen Eltern die „Ostmark" verlassen. Er wuchs in den Vereinigten Staaten auf, wo er sein Bachelor of Arts an der Columbia University bekam. 1963 kehrte er nach Österreich zurück und lebt seitdem in Wien als freier Schriftsteller und Übersetzer.

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