

Nightmares of the Holocaust: Central Europe Tilts to the Far Right

By Thomas Ország-Land

The savage recession still blighting the economic landscape of Central Europe has stirred up troubling nightmares of the Holocaust, dominating landmark elections in Austria and neighbouring Hungary, the principal political trendsetters of this region.

On April 25, the Austrian electorate safely returned the widely popular Heinz Fischer, the veteran Social Democratic politician, as president for a second term in office—but it also expressed a symbolically significant 15% support for the controversial candidate of the anti-Semitic far right. On the same day, the decisive second round of the Hungarian election granted a crucial two-thirds majority to the ultra-conservative Fidesz party that may be pushed even further to the right by a radical-nationalist opposition taking its place in Parliament on the Danube for the first time. The revival of the far right is evident throughout the region.

The outcome of the Austrian presidential election was never in doubt. The only serious third contender was Rudolf Gehring, the candidate of the small Christian Party who won just over 5% support. Voter turnout was low. The presidential office is largely ceremonial, yet the outcome of the election has given rise to deep anxiety within the country and beyond. For political analysts assess the significance of the contest as a test of support for the openly racist far-right Freedom Party (FPO), once led by the late infamous Joerg Haider, in important regional elections that will take place later this year.

Fischer won under 79% of the vote. He projected a campaign image of a calm, benign, enormously civilized statesman able to unite with great patience and compassion even the most embittered political foes in the best national interest. He advised against allowing the populist FPO near the seat of power on the grounds that its brash politicians might damage Austria's hard-won goodwill abroad.

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And he argued that no country in its right mind would risk such an asset in the bitter aftermath of the worst global recession in half a century.

But Fischer carefully steered clear of any public discussion of the unease generated among Austria's trade partners in Israel, North America and within the European Union (EU) by its lucrative and dramatically widening trade relations with Iran. Austria's exports to that Islamic theocracy—including much sensitive “dual purpose” technology potential-

ly useful for the development of nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles—grew by 6% last year, while its exports to the rest of the world contracted by close to 20%, according to an authoritative recent analysis published by *The Wall Street Journal*. The trade figures reflect government policy agreed on at the highest level, without public knowledge or consent. This policy circumvents the United Nations sanctions regime introduced by Austria's Western allies in an attempt to moderate the heady pace of the develop-

ment of Iran's nuclear war-fighting capacity. All this should have emerged as a fiercely debated election issue in any healthily functioning democracy.

Much of the colour and drama in the election were generated by Barbara Rosenkranz, the main challenger of the incumbent president. Rosenkranz is a regional leader of the FPO and a mother of 10, married to a prominent publisher and former member of a now banned neo-Nazi party. She also refrained from raising the issue of Austria's trade relations with Iran, a country widely popular with the European far right as a source of ideological and allegedly financial support. And she also exploited the economic anxieties magnified by the recession. Her fiery election rallies unfailingly attracted impassioned protest demonstrators and an appropriate protective police presence. She relentlessly singled out the country's relatively small immigrant populations, as well as its racial and religious minorities and “the foreigners,” for blame for all the perceived ills of society. She demanded the introduction of armed frontier patrols to prevent an invasion by criminals from Austria's Eastern EU neighbours.

Rosenkranz also called for legal reforms to repeal the law forbidding public expressions denying the



Far-right challenger Barbara Rosenkranz.

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Holocaust, which is in force in most European countries that were under Nazi occupation during the Second World War. This issue is important in Austria, a country annexed by Germany in 1938 that became a willing participant in horrendous crimes committed by the Nazis. But unlike Germany, Austria was declared by the Western Allies after the war a victim rather than perpetrator of atrocities. Its society has been therefore largely spared the pain of confronting its own, shameful past, hence the electoral popularity of neo-Nazi contentions that the Holocaust did not even occur.

Like the president, Rosenkranz also made revealing omissions during her campaign. She prudently avoided expressing any clear belief that the Holocaust was a Jewish invention. “She merely says that she believes in the history she was taught in school,” an American academic election watcher told a foreign correspondent. “Her anti-Semitic supporters understand that she went to high school at a time when history courses generally stopped with 1918. So they know that she is covertly denying the Holocaust. But as she has not stated that aloud, she has not broken any law.”

Even more revealing were the anonymous, obscene graffiti election slogans manifesting the changing racial enmities of the far right. “Turks and Jews, poisoned blood,” warned a sign prominently sprayed on the huge, painstakingly preserved walls of the Mauthausen slave labour camp in Upper Austria, where some 100,000 Central European Jews, as well as Roma, gays and political dissidents, perished during the war. The sign declared: “Today, the Turks are to us what the Jews used to be to our fathers.”

Xenophobia is nothing new to Austria, where periodic electoral gains achieved by the resilient far right have provoked waves of outrage in the rest of the EU. The strength of Austria’s populist move-

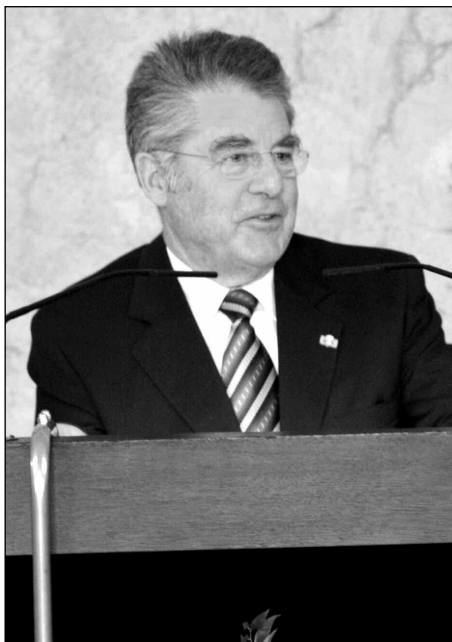
ments springs in part from frustration provoked by the stranglehold on power traditionally exercised by the centrist parties. This is now reinforced by deep insecurities stirred up by the recession. Battle cries like “Our Land for Our Children” are attractive to many people in times of economic uncertainty. But many other Austrians know that important institutions of their society, including the public health system, and even the world-famous symphony orchestras, simply could not function today without contributions from foreigners.

Down the River Danube, across the EU’s undefended Schengen frontier, politics are rougher in formerly Soviet-dominated Hungary than in Austria. The Hungarians are less inclined to observe the rules of democracy than their Western cousins. But there is very little difference of substance between them. The Hungarian elections have produced a populist Fidesz government holding 263 seats in the 386-seat, single-chamber legislature. The new administration has won more than the two-thirds parliamentary majority required for changing the constitution in the absence of cross-party accord. The electorate threw out the ruling minority Socialist administration by granting

it only 59 seats. The Socialists’ last significant act in Parliament was the successful introduction of legislation making Holocaust denial a criminal offence. Their executive has now resigned. The Liberal Party, the Socialists’ erstwhile coalition partner that used to enjoy vigorous Jewish support, has lost its parliamentary presence. A new Green Party won 16 seats.

The most interesting development of these elections has been the phenomenal rise of the openly anti-Semitic, anti-Roma, far-right Jobbik party that has secured 47 seats. Jobbik is the paymaster of the banned paramilitary Hungarian Guard organization modelled on the uniformed rabble of the Arrow Cross that murdered thousands of Jews in Budapest alone during the Holocaust. Jobbik can also count on further parliamentary support from yet one more racist, independent deputy. These results had been widely expected after the EU’s parliamentary elections last June when Jobbik catapulted from the margins of local politics into the limelight of international attention for the first time by winning three seats in Brussels. Since then, that party has emerged as one of the most virulent sources of racist demagoguery in this region.

Fidesz campaigned in the national elections with a promise focused on restoring Hungary’s past greatness, without revealing meaningful aspects of its policy priorities. By contrast, Jobbik has published a blood-curdling legislative programme



Social Democratic incumbent Heinz Fischer.

Our deepest sympathy to
the **Kunig** family.

Dovid was a great Yiddishist
—your loss is our loss.

*Vity Bagel, Roz Usiskin, Reta Dordick,
Dora & Harry Rosenbaum
—Winnipeg friends.*

including the restoration of the defunct Gen-darmerie, a brutal, anti-Semitic security force that served as a major instrument of the Holocaust, deployed in the deportation of some half-million Hungarian Jews to the gas chambers. The Association of Hungarian Jewish Religious Communities, the largest regional Jewish organization, has formally called on the democratic parliamentary parties to defend the country's human rights tradition by isolating the incoming racist deputies. Peter Feldmájer, chairman of the Association, says he has not experienced so much anti-Semitic abuse, in both public and private life, since the 1940s.

Political and economic analysts fear that the electoral success of Jobbik will undermine Hungary's nascent recovery from the recession. Victor Orbán, the Fidesz chief who has declared his intention to rule for the next 20 years, has promised to limit the damage by curbing the rise of neo-Nazis. People close to Orbán believe that he is not a racist, only addicted to power. Hungary's Holocaust Memorial Day was initiated by a previous Fidesz government under Orbán in 2001. Tamás Deutsch, a former Fidesz cabinet minister and one of Orbán's closest political associates, recently publicly declared his Jewish origins, whereupon he was moved out of harm's way to the European Parliament. Orbán himself is widely believed to have at least one Roma grandparent, linking him to a minority loathed by the Hungarian far right even more, if possible, than the Jews.

So far, the most prominent battles are being fought on the streets. Shortly before the election, the windows of Rabbi Shmuel Raskin were stoned by unidentified assailants during a Passover Seder, in the vicinity of the Great Dohány Street Synagogue of the capital. Anti-Semitic slogans have appeared in various parts of Budapest. A Holocaust memorial was repeatedly damaged at Zalaegerszeg, in the relatively prosperous west of the country close to the Austrian border. And in Tiszaeszlár, a deprived region of eastern Hungary, a neo-Nazi rally sought to revive an infamous blood libel case that was dropped by the courts in the absence of evidence after an 1882/83 trial, a source of great suffering to the Jewish community.

Days before the second round of the election, tens of thousands of Hungarians responded to the latest neo-Nazi provocations by staging a torchlight procession along the Pest side of the River Danube, the scene of nightly mass murders of civilians carried out by Arrow Cross thugs in the winter of 1944/45. The demonstrators included state, civic and religious dignitaries as well as diplomats, academics and artists. They called for national unity to confront the rise of racist agitation. Their "March of Life" was the biggest among several commemorative events taking place to mark the 66th anniversary of

the incarceration of Hungarian Jews in specially designated ghettos. That process launched the final and deadliest phase of the Holocaust involving the deportation and murder of Hungarian Jewry in camps like Auschwitz and Mauthausen.

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There has been a steady flow of Hungarian Roma responding to the rise of the far right by seeking refuge elsewhere from racism, in the EU well as Canada. So far, there is no statistical evidence of Hungarian Jewry engaging in mass emigration. But its Jewish community—the biggest and most vibrant in Central Europe, with a population estimated at some 100,000—abounds with anecdotal evidence of recent graduates settling in Israel as well as the West, and their parents considering their options on the depressed Hungarian property market, with the intention of following them as soon as possible.

Professor Agnes Heller, an eminent Central European Jewish philosopher currently engaged in the graduate studies program of The New School of New York City, describes the process leading to the present election results as exemplifying the bankruptcy of post-Communist politics. Many believe that the vote reflects the deep disillusionment of societies in this region with the results of the transition to a market-based economy that has produced the biggest recession they have experienced since the Second World War.

Hungary and its formerly Soviet-administered neighbours, where racist paramilitary organizations are on the march, have been totally unprepared for the boom-bust cycles of modern capitalism. This has made them vulnerable to political agitation by neo-Nazis simplistically blaming minorities for the resulting poverty, corruption and joblessness.

George Konrád, the international best-selling Hungarian Jewish novelist and a famous architect of the country's democratic institutions erected after the collapse of Communist power 20 years ago, blames the Fidesz chief for the unfolding disaster. "Orbán has created a political monster," he told me in a recent interview, "by persistently encouraging the far right in the hope of absorbing its supporters into his own camp." But Judit Lakner, the well-known children's author (and Konrád's wife), hopes that the entry of the far right into parliament will force Fidesz towards the centre-ground of politics and compel it to become a powerful, moderate conservative party hitherto lacking in Hungary.

In an improved world economic climate, such a development could indeed counter Central Europe's current, fearful tilt towards the far right. But this appears possible only if the new Fidesz administration can resist the temptation to adopt the Austrian government model of excluding the electorate from essential elements of the national decision-making process. ♦