



## Israeli–Austrian Relations: A Personal Retrospective

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## Israeli–Austrian Relations: A Personal Retrospective

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Israel's relations with Austria have experienced many vicissitudes in the sixty years that have elapsed since the two countries inaugurated formal ties. Austria recognized the State of Israel on March 5, 1949, nearly ten months after the Jewish State declared independence. In 1950, both countries established mutual representations on a consular level, Israel in Vienna and Austria in Tel Aviv. In 1956, they established mutual diplomatic relations on the level of legations, and in 1959 the legations were raised to the rank of embassies.

In addition to the bilateral relations that gradually began to develop between the two countries, for many years, Austria served as an important transit station for Jews granted permission to leave the Soviet Union and its satellites on their way to Israel and the West. However, during his term as Chancellor of Austria (1970–83), Jewish-born Socialist Bruno Kreisky, who was known to have anti-Zionist inclinations, promoted a pro-Arab policy, despite the fact that he acknowledged the importance of Israel's existence. Kreisky was the only leader in Western Europe to officially recognize the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), granting it permission to install a formal representative in Vienna and according Yasir Arafat the status of a national leader. These steps were taken without demanding that he renounce the Palestinian Covenant, which called for Israel's destruction. Kreisky's record of virulent verbal attacks on Israel and some of its leaders (notably Menachem Begin, whom he dismissed as a "terrorist" and "a little Polish

lawyer or whatever he is”) is well known. Yet, at the same time, and in retrospect to his credit, Kreisky did seek to achieve a peace settlement between the PLO and Israel based on a two-state solution. According to Shimon Peres, a fellow member of the Socialist International, once, when Kreisky was asked about the source of his anti-Zionism, the Austrian leader said, “How else could I defend Israel?”

In the spring of 1993, I was appointed Israel’s ambassador to Austria and to the United Nations Organization in Vienna, as well as non-resident ambassador to Slovenia and Slovakia. Earlier, after completing my ambassadorial mission in Communist Romania (1985–89), I served as deputy director-general of Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1989–93). In the late 1980s and early ’90s, Israel renewed its diplomatic relations with the former Communist states of East Central Europe, all of which (with the exception of Romania) had severed diplomatic relations with Israel following the Six-Day War. Israel also established relations with Albania for the first time during this period.

I received my appointment to Austria with great satisfaction. First, as a person who traces his own origins to Bukovina—a territory that had been a largely German-speaking eastern outpost of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the end of World War I—the country in which I would serve was hardly unknown to me. Indeed, I was well acquainted with Austrian history and culture. Second, I was eager to confront the challenges that faced us—above all, restoring and developing our mutual relations after the end of Kurt Waldheim’s presidency (1992). Third, during my mission in Austria, I held very constructive political talks and enjoyed friendly relations with Austrian officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and all other ministries, including with Chancellor Franz Vranitzky, President Thomas Klestil, members of parliament, and with all other public and academic institutions with which I came in contact. My objective was to initiate and enhance our mutual relations against the backdrop of the new political developments that had arisen after the Waldheim era.

Waldheim, the former UN secretary general, had been declared *persona non-grata* by many countries, including Israel. This extraordinary action arose from the revelations in May 1986 by the Austrian weekly *Profil*, and later the World Jewish Congress, that he had served in the Wehrmacht as a liaison officer and translator in German-occupied Greece and Yugoslavia. Waldheim’s service there coincided with the deportation of local Jews to Nazi German death camps and massacres of local Serb civilians—a fact that he had repeatedly denied. Though his name appeared on a Yugoslav list of war criminals, his cover-up had been successful for many years. The exposé of Waldheim’s wartime activities did not prevent him from being elected president of Austria in 1986 in an especially ugly campaign tinged with antisemitism. On that occasion, Kreisky declared that Austrians would not “allow the Jews abroad to ... tell us who should be our president.” During Waldheim’s presidency (1986–92), Israel recalled its ambassador from Vienna, and downgraded the level of its diplomatic relations with Austria.

A new era began in 1992 with the election of Klestil, which afforded us the opportunity not only to restore our mutual relations, but also to expand and deepen them in many practical fields. Israel and Austria were soon engaged in an intensive political dialogue on all levels, signing bilateral agreements for the first time in the fields of economy, culture, science, education, and security, as well as exchanging official visits on the ministerial level (including the Foreign, Trade and Industry, Economy, Culture, Education, Science, and Defense Ministries).

Of even greater historical significance were the respective official visits of Chancellor Vranitzky (1993) and President Klestil (1994) to Israel—the first time in the history of Austrian–Israeli relations that such high-level visits had been undertaken. In their respective official speeches—Vranitzky at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (where he received an honorary doctorate) and Klestil in the Knesset—the two statesmen referred to the Holocaust of the Jews in Austria and to Austria’s responsibility for the crimes perpetrated by the Nazi regime against Austrian Jewish citizens. Each man also referred to the criminal acts that many Austrians had committed during the Holocaust, a responsibility from which Austria had long recoiled.

During his visit, Vranitzky declared:

This is the first visit of an Austrian head of government to the State of Israel, and it is also my first stay in Jerusalem. I must confess that every moment of this visit, from the peaceful Rose Garden to the bustling streets of the Old City, from the serene silence of Yad Vashem to the towering Wailing Wall, has been full of the deepest, and at times very disturbing, emotions.

These emotions are linked to the closeness that many Austrians feel for Israel; but even more so, they are linked to the tragedies of our common past. And standing on this historic site of Mount Scopus, the cradle of academic learning in modern Israel, I find it appropriate to say a few humble, clarifying words about Austria and the dark years between 1934 and 1945.

We clearly have to face the catastrophe that the Nazi dictatorship brought upon my country: Hundreds and thousands of Austrians, many of them Jewish, were thrown into prison and concentration camps, perished in the Nazi slaughterhouses, or were forced to flee and leave everything behind—victims of a degenerate ideology and the totalitarian quest for power. And many Austrians died on the battlefields and in the bomb shelters.

There were those who were courageous enough to offer active resistance against the madness or tried to help the victims, risking their lives by doing so; but many more joined the Nazi machinery, and some rose through its ranks to be among the most brutal, hideous perpetrators. We

have to own up to this side of our history, our share of the responsibility for the suffering that not Austria—for the state no longer existed—but some of its citizens inflicted upon other people, inflicted upon humanity.

We share moral responsibility because many Austrians welcomed the *Anschluss*, supported the Nazi regime, and helped it to function. We must not forget those who offered resistance. I stated the following in the Austrian Parliament, and I want to repeat that vow firmly again today: We admit to all that has happened in our history—to the deeds of all Austrians, be they good or bad. Just as we claim credit for our good deeds we must beg forgiveness for all evil ones—the forgiveness of those who survived and of the descendants of those who perished ...

I am here to represent a new, modern, and a self-confident country, an independent and democratic state that has been established as the antithesis to Nazism, and indeed, many of its founding fathers were survivors of the concentration camps and prisons of the Third Reich. This is one of the reasons why the Moscow Declaration of 1943, which declared Austria the first victim of Nazi aggression, was accepted as the only truth, and for a long time could obstruct the recognition and the acknowledgement of the other, darker side of our history ... <sup>1</sup>

The Austrian statesman finished his speech by mentioning the fact that shortly after the ceremony, a cooperation agreement would be signed between the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the University of Vienna.

President Klestil's 1994 speech was no less moving:

I stand before you as the first president of the Republic of Austria ever to have visited the State of Israel. It is 125 years to the day since the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef, who bore the title "King of Jerusalem," visited the holy places of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

I stand before you as the representative of the Austrian people, whose destiny has been so fatefully bound up with both the greatness and despair of the Jewish people.

I stand before you as a friend, who knows full well the burden of history, but who firmly believes in the opportunities the future holds for us all as we discover what we have in common ...

To my mind, anyone who speaks of Austria and Israel, anyone who really wants to understand the past, and what must happen in the future to guard against the forces of evil, must face up to historical truth: the entire truth ... Today, we Austrians recognize that the acknowledgement of the full truth was long overdue.

We know full well that all too often, we have only spoken of Austria as the first state to have lost its freedom and independence to National Socialism, and far too seldom of the fact that many of the worst henchmen in the Nazi dictatorship were Austrians. No word of apology can ever expunge the agony of the Holocaust. On behalf of the Republic of Austria, I bow my head with deep respect and profound emotion in front of the victims.

We know full well that for too long we have not done enough, and not always the right thing, to alleviate the plight of the survivors of the Jewish tragedy and that of the victims' descendants. And we know that for too long we have neglected those Jewish Austrians who were forced to leave their native land, humiliated and embittered.

I can conceive of no reason why Austria and Israel should not work far more closely together. Basically all we have to do is look to the future, in full awareness of the past. And we have to work even more intensely on building stable human bridges that form a permanent bond . . . . It is my earnest hope that this first state visit will contribute to the attainment of that great objective.

The respective talks held between Vranitzky and Klestil and their Israeli counterparts, who were accompanied by Israel's cabinet ministers, were most fruitful. The same can be said of successive visits by Israel's foreign affairs, trade and industry, economy, defense, and science ministers to Austria and their Austrian counterparts to Israel. The Israelis proposed heightened cooperation in the fields of economy, culture, and science. These ideas were unanimously accepted by their Austrian interlocutors and the discussions opened new horizons by laying the groundwork for such developments.

Several other events in the early 1990s advanced the development of Austrian-Israeli relations. First, the dissolution of the USSR and the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe that ended the Cold War allowed for diplomatic possibilities that had been inconceivable until that point. Second, the signing in 1993 of the Declaration of Principles (Oslo Agreements) between the PLO and Israel was praised by Austria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Austrian diplomats promised to attempt to advance the peace process between Israel and the PLO, to assist the Arab population in Gaza, Judea, and Samaria financially, as well as to take part in the peace process between Israel and the Arab states. Third, Austria played a very important role in Israel's quest to obtain the release of Israeli navigator Ron Arad in the talks Austrian officials held in Vienna and Tehran with Iranian politicians. Arad, presumably held in Iran, was captured in Lebanon by Hizbullah and his whereabouts are unknown to this day. Fourth, Austria's membership in the European Union (1995) also provided another opportunity for close cooperation with Israel. All of these factors considerably increased and strengthened the mutual cooperation and friendship between Israel and

Austria, evident today in their intensive political dialogue and mutual relations, Austria's engagement in the Middle East peace process, and via its efforts in the EU and United Nations.

At the parliamentary level, relations were fostered by the chairman of the Austrian legislature between Israel and the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), and the opposition parties (excluding the Freedom Party of Austria [FPÖ], with whom Israeli officialdom avoided any contact, due to its ambivalent attitude to Austria's Nazi regime).

Several examples illustrate the ongoing positive state of Israeli–Austrian relations. One is the effort by Austrian universities to establish courses in Jewish studies and to acquire books on Israel and Jewish history. These institutions also offer lectures on Israel and on the peace process in the Middle East. Likewise, a department for Austrian studies was established at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

The Israeli embassy in Austria also worked assiduously to develop relations with the associations of Austrian friends of Israeli universities, medical institutions, Yad Vashem, the Austria–Israel Friendship Society, as well with the Austrian media. In addition, Israeli concerts, theater performances and art exhibitions were held in Austria, including various events to mark the 3,000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jerusalem. In 1997, an impressive exhibition was brought to Vienna from the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem called “Treasures from the Land of the Bible.” That exhibit was opened in the presence of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. All these events were well received by much of the Austrian public.

We also dealt with four important issues in the field of education together with Austria's minister of education:

- the participation of Austrian teachers in a two-week seminar held in Jerusalem on the History of Zionism, Israel, and the Holocaust;
- the participation of Austrian teachers in the annual seminars held by Yad Vashem on the methods of teaching the history of the Holocaust;
- the establishment of a common Austrian–Israeli committee to examine the way in which Jews and Austrians were portrayed in the text books of both countries; and
- the signing an agreement, for the first time, on mutual cooperation in the fields of culture, education, and arts, and a first agreement on Austrian–Israeli cooperation in the scientific field, which was signed in 1994.

In addition, the embassy placed special emphasis on deepening and enriching relations with the leadership of Austrian Jewish communities, their institutions, organizations, and media. The Jewish communities' own activities, aimed at broadening public knowledge of Jewish history, and at cultivating Jewish

education, media, and culture, as well as relations with Israel and with other Jewish communities abroad, were most impressive. Of course, Israeli embassy representatives also took part in all events held at Vienna's main synagogue, the *Stadttempel*, on Seitenstettengasse, and at commemorative ceremonies held at the Holocaust memorial museums on the site of the former Nazi concentration camps in Mauthausen and Ebensee.

I do not recall any serious manifestations of antisemitism during my mission in Austria. Of course, that does not mean that individuals who had virulent antisemitic inclinations disappeared or ceased to express their views, but merely that the Austrian authorities were active in keeping them at bay by legal, administrative, and educational means.

One event, however, does remain deeply engraved in my memory, and it is a telling commentary on the scope of the problem of antisemitism. Understandably, I was quite interested in what young people in Austria learned about the destruction of European Jewry, which is why I asked the director of the Education Department of the Vienna municipality whether the Holocaust of Jews in Austria was included in Austrian school textbooks. A short time later, he informed me of a twelfth-grade class of a prestigious *gymnasium* in Vienna that had worked on a project on this subject. I was eager to learn more and asked if I could visit the class to get acquainted with the project. We fixed a date and went to meet them.

After having heard from the youngsters about what they had read, that they had met Holocaust survivors, and that they had visited Mauthausen, I asked them how they could explain the fact that the Holocaust took place in a center of world culture such as Austria. There was no reply, only silence. I repeated my question. Then a school girl said: "I think it happened because all the Jews in Austria then were rich, whereas all the Austrians were poor."

I tried to convince her that this had not been the case, and asked the class: "If all the 6,000 Jews living in Austria today were rich people and all the six million non-Jewish Austrians were poor, would that justify another Holocaust?" There was no answer to my question. Both the director of the Education Department and I were astonished. My conclusion was—and still is—that the roots of antisemitism continue to exist in the minds of quite a number of Austrians, and are passed on to successive generations. That is so despite all the educational, cultural, and legal means taken by the Austrian authorities to sever them.

Indeed, in the late 1990s, antisemitic pronouncements by extreme right elements (mainly associated with the FPÖ, headed by Jörg Haider) became more commonplace, and there were even incidents in which several Jewish cemeteries were desecrated. These events took place against the backdrop of the increased popularity of the FPÖ, which, in 2000, joined the coalition of Austria's government for the first

time in the country's history. This development was sharply criticized by many foreign governments, including that of Israel, which subsequently recalled its ambassador from Vienna. Relations on the ambassadorial level were only restored three years later, during Foreign Minister Dr. Benita Ferrero-Waldner's visit to Israel.

The many examples of positive diplomatic relations are all a result of activities that Israel's embassy in Vienna carried out before the Waldheim period and especially in the years immediately after it—following the election of Klestil as president and later, after the return of Israel's ambassador to Vienna in 2003. Furthermore, Austria's engagement with the peace process in the Middle East allowed it to fulfill a constructive role in the region. In sum, much has been achieved during the past years in fostering relations between our two countries in virtually every possible arena. Happily, the doors on both sides remain open, further enabling Israel and Austria to leverage the existing potential in many fields.

## **Note**

- <sup>1</sup> Recalling that visit, Vranitzky wrote in his book *Politische Erinnerungen* [Political Recollections] (Vienna, 2004), "The relations of our Republic with Israel were at the beginning of the nineties not bad, but also really not good. After my speech, a turning point took place ... We were most cordially welcomed. My meetings with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, President Ezer Weizman, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu, Jerusalem's mayor, Teddy Kollek, and with members of the Knesset were all held in great harmony and in a mutual spirit of eagerness toward strengthening future cooperation."