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### **The *Freie Österreichische Jugend* at Camp Midvale: An Austrian-American Episode in Immigrant Anti-Fascism**

Before succumbing to external pressure and internal conflict in the 1950s, Camp Midvale used to be the largest Nature Friends property in the USA.<sup>1</sup> In an oral-history project of the 1980s, former members interviewed about its demise unanimously if in passing referred to a group of youthful Austrian anti-fascists who did not integrate well into the Camp.<sup>2</sup> No specifications as to the character of the group were given. In interviews conducted by myself later, things did not become clearer. Only when working on a recent paper on the socioecological program and practices of the American Nature Friends more specific information emerged.<sup>3</sup> It turned out that the group in focus was the *Freie Österreichische Jugend*, a New York-based leftist, nonpartisan, and partly Jewish group of young Austrian refugees who visited the Camp during summers in the early 1940s.<sup>4</sup>

That long before 1933 the New York and Midvale Nature Friends had been actively pursuing an anti-Nazi agenda made it easy to integrate members and non-members escaping from newly fascist Germany and Austria. Many of those driven into exile had known the *Naturfreunde* back home, with their working-class background, their cooperative character, their club practices from hikes and cultural activities to the running of clubhouses. In the old-timers' interviews conflicts between this first wave of newcomers and those longer established at the Camp were never mentioned.

The 1933/34-refugees were fleeing from two different versions of fascism. In 1933, in Germany the Hitler government had immediately implemented a full-range terrorist, anti-

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<sup>1</sup> Klaus-Dieter Gross. "New York's Nature Friends: Their History, their Camps." *NaturFreundeGeschichte/ NatureFriendsHistory* 2.1 (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mary Caldwell-Kane. „Ringwood Library: Camp Midvale Grant Project.“ *NaturFreundeGeschichte/ NatureFriendsHistory* 1.1 (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Klaus-Dieter Gross. "Socioecological Pioneers: The American Nature Friends. " In: Ingrid Gessner (ed.). *F&E Edition. Die Forschungszeitschrift der Pädagogischen Hochschule Vorarlberg*. Feldkirch: Pädagogische Hochschule Vorarlberg, 26 (2021) (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> For post-World War II activities of the *FÖJ* in Austria cf. Erich Makomaski (Comp.). *Die Freie Österreichische Jugend. (Ehemalige) Mitglieder erzählen ihre Geschichte*. 2nd ed. Vienna: [self-published], 2002. There are no references to the episode discussed here.

labor, and racist system. The Austrofascist Dollfuss and Schuschnigg regimes at least initially were slightly 'moderated' by influences from Italian fascism under Mussolini, if more than in Italy rooted in anti-Semitism.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike German Nazism, Austrofascism (or clerico-fascism) purported a Corporate State run on authoritarian principles along vocational tiers and based on conservative Roman-Catholic values. But united both versions were in that they saw their major enemies in what they called "Marxist," i.e. Social Democratic and other leftist concepts and organizations, who interpreted capitalist societies as based on the exploitation of the working-classes and thus contradicted a nationalistic agenda. Like all other labor organizations, in both Germany and Austria the *Naturfreunde* were illegalized by the new regimes. Regular club life ceased (there had been 60.000 members in Vienna alone and two hundred thousand internationally),<sup>6</sup> and many an activist took up resistance projects and/or escaped to other countries, among them the USA.<sup>7</sup>

The Austrofascist interim turned out to be the pre-history to Austria's 1938-annexation into the German Reich ("Anschluss").<sup>8</sup> Now a complete copy of the German terror system, it included the transfer of the anti-Jewish Nuremberg Laws. Annexation thus initiated a second wave of emigration even more focussed on Jews: "As a result of the Dollfuss-Schuschnigg regime and the Anschluss in 1938, Vienna's large Jewish community was forced to leave. About 30.000 of them found a haven in the U.S., as did many socialists who were persecuted

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<sup>5</sup> Emmerich Talos. *Das austrofaschistische Herrschaftssystem. Österreich 1933-1938*. 2nd ed. Wien: LIT-Verlag, 2013. 470-490.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Christiane Dulk/Jochen Zimmer. "Die Auflösung des Touristenverein 'Die Naturfreunde' nach dem März 1933." In: Jochen Zimmer (ed.). *Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit. Die Naturfreunde. Zur Geschichte eines alternativen Verbands in der Arbeiterbewegung*. Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1984. 112-117; Matthias Marschick. "Turnen und Sport im Austrofaschismus (1934-1938)." In: Emmerich Talos/Wolfgang Neugebauer (eds.). *Austrofaschismus. Politik - Ökonomie - Kultur; 1933 – 1938*. 5th ed. Wien: LIT Verlag, 2005: 372-389. 379-380.

<sup>7</sup> Bruno Klaus Lampasiak (ed.). *Naturfreund sein heißt Mensch sein. Naturfreunde im Widerstand 1933-1945*. Berlin: Naturfreunde Verlag, 2013; Manfred Pils, "Berg frei!" *100 Jahre Naturfreunde*. Wien: Verlag für Gesellschaftskritik, 1994. 137-147; Gerald Schügerl. *80 Jahre Naturfreunde Österreich*. Wien: Naturfreunde Österreich, [1975]. 109-131.

<sup>8</sup> Talos. *Herrschaftssystem*. 537-549; Wolfgang Neugebauer. *The Austrian Resistance 1938-1945*. Vienna: Edition Steinbauer, 2014. 52-55.

by the Austro-fascist regime.<sup>9</sup> The young generation emigrating now did so with a host of even more terrifying experiences in their backpacks.<sup>10</sup>

For the Austrian Left the “Anschluss” created a particular problem. After the dissolution of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire in 1918/19 some working-class leaders, in spite of all the political differences with their bourgeois opponents, had expressed pro-German sympathies. Among the Social Democrats who as late as in the Thirties welcomed ‘unification’ was Karl Renner, co-founder of the *Naturfreunde* and up to 1934 a major political leader; although forced into retirement, after Nazi-occupation he lived a relatively secure if isolated life in the small industrial town of Gloggnitz.<sup>11</sup> In general, the Social Democratic opposition was mainly active from outside the country, such as by smuggling illegal literature into Austria. Although local resistance activities by the *Naturfreunde* should not be underestimated,<sup>12</sup> on an organizational scale this also holds true for them; their Central Office, e.g., was – for good reasons – removed to Switzerland.

By the time of the “Anschluss“ Social Democratic inland resistance efforts had dwindled, and from 1938 onwards the much smaller Communist Party bore the brunt of oppositional action.<sup>13</sup> From early on the CP had stressed independence from Germany.<sup>14</sup> Historian Wolfgang Neugebauer observes that its youth club was even more coherent in that respect than the parent organization: “It is clear that – apart from its top functionaries sent back from abroad, who were loyal to the party line – it [the youth section] was more radical than the Party with its commitment to the Popular Front politics and Austrian patriotism.”<sup>15</sup>

In consequence, the German and Austrian opposition movements diverged. Neugebauer states that “Ernst Hanisch’s concept of a ‘specifically Austrian resistance’ can be endorsed,

<sup>9</sup> Günter Bischof/Hannes Richter. *Towards the American Century: Austrians in the United States*. New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2019. [2].

<sup>10</sup> Siegfried Beer. “Exile between Assimilation and Re-Identification: The Austrian Political Emigration to the USA, 1938-1945.” In: Walter Hölbing/Reinhold Wagnleitner (eds.). *The European Emigrant Experience in the U.S.A.* Tübingen: G. Narr Verlag, 1992. 39-50; Adi Wimmer. “Expelled and Banished: The Exile Experience of Austrian ‘Anschluß’ Victims in Personal Histories and Literary Documents.” In: Hölbing/Wagnleitner (eds.). *The European Emigrant Experience*. 51-72.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Richard Saage. *Der erste Präsident: Karl Renner - eine politische Biografie*. Wien: Paul Zsolnay, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Lampasiak (ed.). *Naturfreund sein heißt Mensch sein*. 273-289.

<sup>13</sup> See tables in Wolfgang Neugebauer. “Der österreichische Widerstand 1938–1945: Namentliche Erfassung der Opfer politischer Verfolgung 1938–1945“: 7-8. [https://www.doew.at/cms/download/2ob0q/wn\\_widerstand-2.pdf](https://www.doew.at/cms/download/2ob0q/wn_widerstand-2.pdf) (online).

<sup>14</sup> Neugebauer. *Austrian Resistance*. 79ff.

<sup>15</sup> Neugebauer. *Austrian Resistance*. 102.

especially given that there was an almost complete organizational separation between the Austrian and the German resistance groups.<sup>16</sup> In addition, as in the lives of the young the half-decade between the razing of labor organizations in 1933/34 and the “Anschluss“ of 1938 had truncated personal memories, these youngsters could hardly recall an era when the Austrian Left had been strong. Never had they experienced an organized group life shared within a vast network of other working-class organizations, among them the *Naturfreunde*.

The C.P.’s refusing Pan-Germanism and the new generation’s isolation from (former) organized labor kept the Communists attractive for young anti-fascists even after fleeing from their country. Peter Eppel singles out as one such exemplary community the *Freie Österreichische Jugend* (Free Austrian Youth), a New York group of some 250 members, among them 25 to 50 Jewish. Abroad they kept on adhering to their Austrian heritage in an almost nationalistic way. They considered themselves as nonpartisan yet for the reasons given are by observers attributed to the Communist orbit.<sup>17</sup>

As stated, first-hand contacts with comrades from the Old Left, among them the *Naturfreunde*, had been scarce even prior to coming to the US. Consequently, with its own meeting place in New York City (on 107 West and 100 St.), the *FÖJ* visited Camp Midvale, the Nature Friends property closest to New York City, exclusively for leisure activities. Eppel quotes sources on how summers were spent on its admittedly “marvelously located“ grounds mainly for the wide-ranging sports opportunities there. An entry for August 28, 1943 puts it like this: “Our sports season in Camp Midvale comes to an end with a big festival, including water polo, fist ball, volleyball and girls’ handball matches against Nature Friends teams.“<sup>18</sup>

With the American Nature Friends supporting resistance activities and a Camp ideology based on a wide range of leftist attitudes,<sup>19</sup> the *Freie Österreichische Jugend* would have fit well into local club life. But contacts, as is exemplified in the quote, mainly remained non-political and spontaneous. It is open to speculation whether a (“High”) German cultural predominance

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<sup>16</sup> Neugebauer. *Austrian Resistance*. 53-54. Reference is to Ernst Hanisch. “Gibt es einen spezifisch österreichischen Widerstand?“ In: Peter Steinbach (ed.), *Widerstand. Ein Problem zwischen Theorie und Geschichte*, Köln 1987. 163–176.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Eppel (ed.). *Österreicher im Exil. USA 1938-1945. Eine Dokumentation*. Vol. 2. Wien: Österreichischer Bundesverlag, 1995. 643.

<sup>18</sup> Eppel (ed.). *Österreicher im Exil*. 645 and 653.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Klaus-Dieter Gross. “The Split: How the American Nature Friends Fell Apart in the 1940s and 1950s.“ *NaturFreundeGeschichte/NatureFriendsHistory* 3.1 (2015).

at Midvale may have added emotional distance, although, e.g., the idiosyncratic presence of Bavarian author Oskar Maria Graf in the community indicates the opposite.<sup>20</sup> Neither would proximity to the Communist Party have been a problem, as among Nature Friends some also shared such a focus. Of the fact that not only government agencies but also American Social Democrats attacked the Nature Friends as too leftist, the *FÖJ* activists almost certainly were not aware.<sup>21</sup>

From the Midvalers' perspective at times of the beginning McCarthyite witchhunts a sizeable group of young enthusiasts would have helped a lot to support a Camp overstrained by internal insecurity and external pressure, including surveillance by the FBI and KuKluxKlan-type physical attacks. But the "we" against "them" attitude represented in the quote implied a distance the oldtimers did *not* appreciate; they felt the young people rather exploited their efforts than made productive contributions to common goals. To them, the *FÖJ* members deemed themselves short-term visitors rather than supporters of the Camp. Their exclusively concentrating on an Austrian identity and a reductive focus on sports opportunities contributed to the disappointment of the locals who had hoped for the newly arrived to help with the chores of keeping up a collective project grounded in progressive working-class culture.

In sum, that the *Freie Österreichische Jugend* felt attracted to the Camp was due to that they were welcomed as refugees from Nazi-infested Europe, that the Camp and the Nature Friends shared their leftist convictions, a common language and a similar cultural background. On the other hand, for the youngsters it remained hardly more than an attractive playground provided within a Popular Front context. Inexperienced in organized working-class club life as they were, they underestimated or did not understand the Camp as a location to actively practice solidarity. It is clear that among the multiple conditions which contributed to Camp's demise these tensions with the *FÖJ* were not crucial. The fact that they were remembered so vividly in interviews many years later still is proof that nevertheless they had left a major

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<sup>20</sup> Klaus-Dieter Groß. "Oskar Maria Grafs langsamer Weg zu den Naturfreunden." *NaturFreundeGeschichte/ NatureFriendsHistory* 3.2 (2015): 10-14.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Gross. "Socioecological Pioneers."

psychological scar on a Nature Friends community fighting for the survival of a project it so willingly shared with other progressive causes.

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