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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.¹ In a 1980's oral-history project, 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.² 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 programs and practices of the American Nature Friends, more specific information emerged.³ 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.⁴

That long before 1933 the New York and Midvale Nature Friends had already been actively pursuing an anti-Nazi agenda made it easy to integrate a first wave of members and non-members escaping from a Germany and Austria now turned fascist. Many of those driven into exile had known the *Naturfreunde* back home as a tourist club of a working-class background, its cooperative character and club practices ranging from hikes and cultural activities to the running of clubhouses. In the old-timers' interviews mentioned above conflicts between these newcomers and those long established at the Camp were not mentioned at all.

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

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

³ 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, 27 (2021): 125-138.

⁴ 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.

The respective 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-labor, and racist system. In contrast, during the Austrofascist Dollfuss and Schuschnigg regimes these characteristics appeared in a form 'moderated' by influences from Italian fascism under Mussolini, if more than there deeply rooted in anti-Semitism.⁵

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. 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, as these interpreted capitalist societies as based on the exploitation of the *working-classes* and thus contradicted nationalistic agendas. In both Germany and Austria, like other labor organizations, the *Naturfreunde* were illegalized immediately. Their regular club life ceased (there had been 60.000 members in Vienna alone, and two hundred thousand internationally),⁶ and many an activist joined resistance projects and/or escaped to other countries, among them the USA.⁷

The Austrofascist interim turned out to be the pre-history to Austria's 1938-annexation into the German Reich ("Anschluss").⁸ Now a complete copy of the German terror system, it included the full transfer of the anti-Jewish Nuremberg Laws. Annexation thus initiated a second wave of emigration, practically wiping out the vibrant Jewish life in Vienna and the rest of Austria: "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 by the Austro-fascist regime."⁹ The young generation

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

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

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

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

emigrating during this second wave did so with even more terrifying experiences in their backpacks than the first generation of exiles.¹⁰

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, during Nazi-occupation he lived a relatively secure if isolated life in the small industrial town of Gloggnitz.¹¹ In general, particularly 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* – mainly Social Democrats – should not be underestimated,¹² on an organizational scale this also holds true for them; their Central Office, e.g., was – for good reasons – removed to Switzerland.

Unlike many a Social Democrat, from early on Austrian Communists had stressed independence from Germany.¹³ When by the time of the “Anschluss“ Social Democratic inland resistance efforts began to dwindle, the much smaller Communist Party bore the brunt of oppositional action.¹⁴ Historian Wolfgang Neugebauer observes that especially its youth club was most outspoken in this respect: “It is clear that – apart from its top functionaries sent back from abroad, who were loyal to the party line – [the youth section] was more radical than the Party with its commitment to the Popular Front politics and Austrian patriotism.”¹⁵

The German and Austrian opposition movements thus diverged. Neugebauer states that “Ernst Hanisch’s concept of a ‘specifically Austrian resistance’ can be endorsed, especially given that there was an almost complete organizational separation between the Austrian and the German

¹⁰ 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.

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

¹² Cf. Lampasiak (ed.). *Naturfreund sein heißt Mensch sein*. 273-289.

¹³ Neugebauer. *Austrian Resistance*. 79ff.

¹⁴ 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 (online).

¹⁵ Neugebauer. *Austrian Resistance*. 102.

resistance groups.¹⁶ 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, unlike their predecessors these youngsters had hardly any memories of 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 CP’s refusal of Pan-Germanism and the new generation’s isolation from (former) organized labor held the Communists attractive for young anti-fascists even after fleeing 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 have by observers been attributed to the Communist orbit.¹⁷

To them first-hand contacts with comrades from the Old Left, including the *Naturfreunde*, had been scarce even prior to coming to the US. Consequently, with few experiences shared and a meeting place of their own 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 their summers were spent on its admittedly “marvelously located“ grounds mainly for their wide-ranging sports opportunities. Exemplarily, a diary entry for August 28, 1943 reads: “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.“¹⁸

Even personal contacts between the young Austrians and their „American“ peers at the Camp were hampered by this separateness, as present-day Camp Midvale activist Karin Adamietz Ahmed recalls in her own parents’ story at Midvale at the time:¹⁹

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

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

¹⁸ Eppel (ed.). *Österreicher im Exil*. 645 and 653.

¹⁹ E-mails to the author, December 4 and 23, 2021; Karin Adamietz Ahmed is a leading member of a group of Camp Midvale descendants enthusiastic about keeping alive the memories and character of the Camp to the present day; cf. <http://www.highlandsnaturefriends.org/>.

I believe my mother and my uncle were members of the Austrian youth group that frequently visited the camp in the early 1940's. They would have been quite young at the time. I don't know if I ever mentioned to you that my parents met at Camp Midvale. My father said that the Austrian group was a 'clique' that stuck together, and he was an outsider, being German. He was interested in getting to know my mother, but he had trouble breaking into their tight circle. Later on, by the time I was born, those distinctions between Austrians and Germans, Jews and Gentiles, had broken down, and many people intermarried and socialized together. My mother's family were among the Austrian Jews who left Vienna after the Anschluss.

Thus it was group psychology rather than political differences which created the gap between those established and the newcomers. From the American Nature Friends' point of view the youngsters would have fit perfectly into a Camp ideology based on a wide range of leftist attitudes.²⁰ But contacts remained more or less non-political and spontaneous. Proximity to the Communist Party certainly would not have been a dividing point, as among Nature Friends some clearly shared such a focus. Of the fact that not only government agencies but also contemporary American Social Democrats attacked the Nature Friends as too leftist, the *FÖJ* activists almost certainly were not aware.²¹ As mentioned in the quotation above, it is also open to speculation whether a ("High") German cultural predominance at Midvale may have added a particular emotional distance; the idiosyncratic presence of Bavarian author Oskar Maria Graf in the community indicates the opposite, though.²²

The later war years already laid the groundwork for the coming pre-McCarthyite menace, culminating in surveillance by the FBI and KuKluxKlan-type raids, with the effect of fewer volunteers willing to help run the Camp in a context of social isolation within the communities nearby, threats of losing their jobs, and conflicts over property rights. Under such conditions, the sizeable group of young Austrian enthusiasts would have helped a lot to support a project cherished by them at least in principle. But the "we" against "them" attitude by the *FÖJ* majority – as is represented in the diary and in the personal memories – implied a distance the oldtimers would *not* appreciate; they felt the young Austrians rather exploited their efforts than made productive contributions to common goals. To them, the *FÖJ* rather deemed themselves short-

²⁰ Cf. Klaus-Dieter Gross. "The Split: How the American Nature Friends Fell Apart in the 1940s and 1950s." *NaturFreundeGeschichte/NatureFriendsHistory* 3.1 (2015).

²¹ Cf. Gross. "Socioecological Pioneers." 131-132.

²² Klaus-Dieter Groß. "Oskar Maria Graf's langsamer Weg zu den Naturfreunden." *NaturFreundeGeschichte/NatureFriendsHistory* 3.2 (2015): 10-14.

term visitors than positive 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 youngsters to help with the chores of keeping up a collective effort 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 each others' leftist convictions, plus 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 the lack of support by a single group like the *FÖJ* was not crucial. The fact that they were remembered so vividly in interviews many years later still is proof that they nevertheless had left a major psychological scar on a Nature Friends community fighting for the survival of a project it so willingly shared with other progressive causes, including the *FÖJ*.

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