

# Vienna 22

## NAZISM, EXILE, AND ANTIFASCISM AS TOPONYMIES OF A EUROPEAN CITY

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Awareness of history is a product of individual and community representations that are expressed in a city through a visual dimension, a toponymy that underlies socio-cultural changes and political movements. This is reflected, for example, in names of monuments, places, streets, and buildings. Such expressions of interactions between various complex social mechanisms characterise the discourse of the state and that of society. The modern city of Vienna, Austria—as shown in this short article—is an ideal site for uncovering and deconstructing such mechanisms, and for setting up efforts to rebuild a memory within accepted democratic rules in contemporary discourse and aesthetics. The example taken here is the history of Nazism in this city and this country, and that of national and international protagonists defending and promoting democratic law and humanism.

La prise de conscience de l'histoire est le résultat de représentations individuelles et communautaires se manifestant dans une ville au niveau de la dimension visuelle d'une toponymie sous-jacente aux changements socioculturels et politiques. On peut constater cela, par exemple, dans le nom des monuments, des places, des rues et des immeubles. L'expression de ces interactions entre divers mécanismes sociaux complexes caractérise le discours de l'Etat et celui de la société. Comme on le montre dans ce court article, la ville de Vienne, en Autriche, constitue un endroit idéal pour révéler et déconstruire de tels mécanismes, et du coup pour s'efforcer à développer une mémoire qui s'inscrira désormais dans un discours contemporain acceptant des principes démocratiques et esthétiques. L'exemple cité ici est l'histoire du Nazisme dans cette ville et dans ce pays, et de celle de protagonistes qui ont voulu défendre et promouvoir la démocratie et l'humanisme.

The Austrian capital Vienna is again a melting pot of European and worldwide migration. Exile, asylum and the question of integration into a cultural context are the signposts of Europe in this first decade of the 21st century. But Vienna is still witness to social, cultural and economic conflicts, including xenophobia that can sometimes be observed in daily life, reflected in mass media, used for manipulation by political parties, and recognized as a crucial issue by all actors who are in favour of a civil society. This short essay will not discuss the socio-cultural or political dimensions of racism in Vienna, nor give a description of the demographic change and challenges of a society that is becoming older and depends more and more on immigration. It will rather expose, although all too briefly, an often not too well known fact that is rooted

in Austrian history and democracy.

Without doubt, a European capital like Vienna offers mutually shared relationships between various different segments of its population. As a city, it is deeply embedded in a constant historical, psychological, and political process. Space, history, and biography: all constitute the web of its sociocultural dimensions; it is important to consider such relationships as the social fabric of any city asserting its identity.<sup>1</sup>

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Vienna is geographically divided into twenty three districts that shape its geographical, cultural and political space. The river Danube separates two Northern districts (the 21st and the 22nd) from the inner city, and the older part of the capital of Austria.

After the fall of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy, and as a result of World War I, Vienna became, between 1919 and 1938, a very large intellectual melting pot in a country suddenly much too small for it. As described by one of its most important poets, Stefan Zweig:<sup>2</sup> *Vienna is a continent, and Austria is its midland.* This point was also made by Eugen Relgis<sup>3</sup> from Romania, when remembering Zweig's European journeys in South America after World War II.

After World War II, and until the 1970s, the Northern districts of Vienna had not any more a real significance in terms of a distinctive Austrian or international centre. Then, promoted by President Bruno Kreisky, one of the most prominent Austrian politicians, a site for the United Nations Organization (International

Centre Vienna, UNO City) was built close to the Danube. It became a new landmark in the 22nd district. It is important to remember that Bruno Kreisky was Jewish, and that he had to leave Austria in 1938. He was an exile in Sweden until the end of World War II. His life as an exiled Austrian Jew is akin to contemporary Austrian society, a vivid example of the more recent Austrian foreign politics.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of urban geography, the 22nd district forms a kind of a transition to the inner city of Vienna as it is situated in front of the United Nations International Centre of Vienna on the Southern bank of the Danube. The historical and social context of this urban zone is remarkable in terms of its meaning as a cultural landmark. The neighboring 2nd district—just on the opposite shores of the Danube river—was the old Jewish district during the monarchy, and remained the Jewish centre of Vienna until its destruction after 1938 by Hitler and the Austrian Nazis. Several landmarks typical of this district still remain nowadays: the *Riesenrad* (giant wheel) of the *Prater* (Luna park); a monument of the last important admiral of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy, *Thegetoff*, and the *Mexikoplatz* (Plaza Mexico).

A city's open and public spaces are the witness of its historical, social and political development, and a quintessential attribute of the narrative of its people. On the other hand, the construction and the naming of landmarks constitute also fascinating opportunities for artists, politicians, and all kind of social and political actors. That is why this author<sup>5</sup> decided in 1988 to push for an official decision by Austria regarding the toponymy of its capital, and namely that exile, destruction, and the Holocaust, are now inseparable parts of the historical, social and psychological urban space of Vienna.



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#### AN AWARENESS OF PAST HISTORY

Mexico and Vienna are maybe distant protagonists in the 19th and the 20th century, but they share nevertheless several common experiences. The year 1938 constitutes one of the significant dates for both countries: that of a common historical event. 1938 is the year of Mexico's Protest against the *Anschluss*. *Mexikoplatz*, in Vienna's 2nd district, promotes the urban evidence for this act of international solidarity,

although it is also sometimes remembered as one of the Austrian myths regarding Mexico: some people still want to believe that the Mexico-Place is named after Maximilian, the so called emperor of Mexico's 2nd Empire, who was executed in Queretaro, Mexico.

Mexico became one of the most important centres for Austrian exiles during World War II. With the help of Mexico's consul general in Marseille, Gilberto Bosques<sup>6</sup>, many intellectuals, artists, writers and political figures

persecuted by the Nazis found asylum in France, and later on (in 1940–1942) in Mexico-City.

In 1988, fifty years after the *Anschluss*, and as a parallel initiative to the Waldheim affair, the idea emerged to develop all necessary efforts to name a street after the consul general of Mexico, Gilberto Bosques. The city considered a street close to the UN Building and the Vienna's 22nd district, just on the other side of the Danube, in front on the *Mexikoplatz*. Let us remember: Gilberto Bosques rescued over 30,000 combatants of the Spanish Republic, and organized their getaway to Mexico. He saved as well the life of hundreds of Austrian Jews and political refugees by granting them visas for Mexico. Bosques himself, his wife, three children, and the team of the Mexican consulate in Marseille could not get out of Europe in time. They were captured and held captive in Nazi prisons for almost a year (1943–1944).

The biography of Gilberto Bosques represents yet another important chapter of national and international political and cultural relationships. Let me mention, for example, that he subsequently became the Mexican ambassador to Cuba in 1959 when Fidel Castro took over; and also the ambassador to Sweden when the very first exhibition *IMAGO MEXIKO* was traveling from Sweden to Paris and then to London. That exhibition showed for the very first time a history of ancient Mexico on equal foot with non-Mexican and international contemporary art.

As for Vienna, its today's toponymy—geographical, social, psychological—better reflects its older and more traditional spirit,<sup>7</sup> namely that of a democratic and welcoming city, that of an European capital at the crossroads of history and culture.

The *Gilberto Bosques Promenade*, as well as the *Isidro Fabela Promenade*,<sup>8</sup> are now landmarks of Vienna's 22nd district. They can be seen and enjoyed by all people who are daily crossing the Danube, by all national and international visitors to the beautiful city of Vienna, as well as by all diplomats visiting or working at the United Nations.

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Kühne, 2006.
- 2 Zweig, 1942.
- 3 Relgis (Sigler), 1960.
- 4 Röhrlich, 2009.
- 5 Kloyber, 2002.
- 6 Bosques, 1993.
- 7 Bourdieu & Passeron, 1973.
- 8 Isidro Fabela represented Mexico in 1938 at the League of Nations in Geneva; he is the intellectual author of the Protest of Mexico, under Mexico's president General Lázaro Cárdenas, against the "Anschluss" of Austria to Nazi Germany.