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## JEWISH COMMENTARY

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# How Chancellor Kurz Redeemed Vienna

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MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

AS HAMAS FIRED missile after missile into Israel, the Internet was inundated with celebrity condemnations of the Jewish state and misinformation from the media. Yet one pro-Israel image strikingly stood out: a picture of the Israeli flag flying proudly from the central house of government in Vienna. This was done at the order of Austria's chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, who explained in a tweet that it was intended as a "sign of solidarity with Israel" while it was under threat. "The terrorist attacks on Israel," he further wrote, "are to be condemned by the strongest possible terms! Together we stand by Israel's side."

For Benjamin Haddad, writing in *Foreign Policy*, the raising of the Zionist flag heralded a possible realignment between Europe and Israel. After decades of insisting that only through the "peace process"

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could Israeli amity with the Arab nations be achieved, Europe may be realizing that the Abraham Accords suggest another path. Europeans now understand, Haddad further argues, that they too face a terrorist threat and "have increasingly associated Israel as a country facing similar challenges, the canary in the coalmine for European democracies."

Such a realignment would certainly be good news, but at the same time, Sebastian Kurz stands out. While Israel reacted negatively when Kurz's original coalition contained one historically anti-Semitic party, the 34-year-old has emerged as a chancellor dedicated to not only fighting anti-Semitism but embracing Zionism. One former leader of Vienna's Jewish community told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that from his first visit to Israel, Kurz "fell in love with the country." In Austria, the JTA further reported, "Kurz's pro-Israel policies offer him few political dividends, but he adheres to them in any case because of his convictions and values."

Given this, Kurz's celebration of the Israeli flag in the Austrian capital bears a unique and profound



*The Israeli flag flying proudly from the central house of government in Vienna.*

poetry. For it can be said that it was Vienna where the roots of Nazism can first be found; moreover, it was the unique anti-Semitism of Vienna that was part of what inspired Zionism in the first place. By all accounts, it is Austria's history that drives Kurz's pro-Israel posture today, and we too must understand his country's past if we are to appreciate the meaning of what he has done in the present.

In 1895, Theodore Herzl, working as a journalist in Paris, returned home to Vienna and found the city in the midst of a mayoral election that would be won by the charismatic Karl Lueger, known to his admirers as "Der Schone Karl." Lueger would come to be seen as the man who would change Vienna, reconfigure it into an embodiment of modernity, technology, and beautiful gardens, which is why he is celebrated to this day in the city's Karl Lueger Square.

But Lueger would herald the coming 20th century in another, more ominous manner: He demagogically described the Jews as a cabal controlling Europe and as the central threat facing European civilization. "The influence of the masses," Lueger inveighed in one speech, "is in the hands of the Jews, the greater part of the press is in their hands, by far the largest part of all capital and, in particular high finance, is in Jewish hands, and in this respect the Jews operate a terrorism that could hardly be worse." Austria's goal, Lueger argued, must be "liberating Christian people from the hegemony of Jewry."

Lueger's anti-Semitic diatribes earned him the adulation of the Austrian masses, among them a young man by the name of Adolf Hitler who studied in Vienna during the mayor's administration. Hitler would cite Lueger as his role model and make special mention of Der Schone Karl in his own memoir, *Mein Kampf*: "I regard this man as the greatest German mayor of all time. If Dr. Karl Lueger had lived in Germany, he would have been ranked among the great minds of our people." Knowing this lends an extraordinarily eerie perspective to Herzl's own description in his diary of Karl Lueger on the hustings:

Municipal elections in Vienna took place the day before Rosh Hashanah eve. The anti-Semites won all the mandates. The mood among the Jews is desperate. The propaganda against them has whipped up a lot of hatred among the Christians.... On Election Day I was in Leopoldstadt outside the polling place, to take a closer look at all the hate and anger.... In front of the polling place a silent tense crowd. Suddenly Dr. Lueger stepped out into the square. Wild cheers, women waving white kerchiefs from the windows. The police held the crowd back. Next to me, someone said, with tender warmth but in a quiet voice: This is our Führer.

“More actually than any declamations and outbursts,” Herzl further reflected, “it was this phrase that proved to me how deeply anti-Semitism is entrenched in the hearts of these people.” It was at this moment that Herzl’s dream of a Jewish state was born.

It is often assumed that it was the Dreyfus affair that inspired Herzl’s vision, but in fact, as Rick Richman has noted, Herzl had originally assumed Dreyfus’s guilt, and he had dismissed French anti-Semitism as a mere “salon for the castoffs.” In contrast, Richman writes, “Vienna was Herzl’s home, the capital of the Hapsburg empire, the heart of Central European high culture, where a Jewish population nearly twice as large as that of all of France resided.” These Austrian Jews, who had given so much to their country, “were being accused of polluting the culture they had for a century longed to join, and not simply by a benighted clergy but by politicians and the populace at large, in a democratic election.”

Thus it can be said that, in 1895, Vienna’s leader taught Hitler his insidious craft and also inspired Herzl’s Zionist dream. Others had already written of a restored Jewish society, but Herzl became convinced that only as a genuinely political movement could Zionism succeed. “What,” Herzl wrote immediately after Lueger’s election, “is a flag? A pole and a piece of cloth? No Sir. A flag is greater than this. With a flag people are led to where you want, even to the chosen land. For a flag, people live and die. It is the one thing people are willing to die for.”

We are now able to understand the meaning of

what it meant to fly the Zionist flag in the city that taught Hitler the power of hate and the city that taught Herzl the importance of Jewish nationalism. In a speech to American Jews, Kurz argued that Austria’s history “guides my political work today,” reminding him that “we have to be a strong partner of Israel.” By

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And in the end, Kurz reminds his fellow leaders that this is a choice faced by all of Europe. Writing from Paris, Michel Gurfinkel recently reflected how, throughout the continent, ostentatious memorials to the Holocaust are erected, as Europe mourns “its lost dead Jews of yesterday, whose murder it variously perpetrated, abetted, or (with exceptions) found it could put up with.” Gurfinkel summarizes the European approach in a stark sentence: “To the dead Jews of yesterday, everything; to the living Jews of today, little and littler.”

But not, at least for one moment, in Vienna, where a chancellor in the city stood side by side with the state that was born in the mind of a Viennese Jew and hung Herzl’s flag from the edifice embodying his administration. It is too soon to tell whether the realignment described by Haddad is to endure, but if there is to be a better future in Euro–Israel relations, it will be because Sebastian Kurz has helped show the way. 🇮🇱