

Return to the Land of Hitler: Jewish Survivors and Reémigrés in Early Postwar Vienna

Elizabeth Anthony, *The Compromise of Return: Viennese Jews after the Holocaust*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021, 288 pp.

Reviewed by
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Vienna's Jewish history has constituted a vibrant area of research for some decades now, and consequently there exists a sizable catalog of works in both English and German, to which new titles are added each year. Much of this work focuses on the social and cultural history of Jews in Vienna in the period between the passage of a liberal constitution in 1867, which granted full emancipation to (male) Jews, and the Anschluss in 1938, when Austria was absorbed into the Third Reich.¹ Another vibrant area of study focuses on the specific dynamics of the Holocaust in Vienna, through which we know that the Austrian capital served as one of the key testing grounds for the Nazi policies of despoliation and expulsion in the run-up to deportation and extermination.²

One area that has received less attention is Vienna's postwar Jewish history, with the exception of the seminal German-language works of Helga Embacher and Evelyn Adunka, as well as the English-language monograph by Jacqueline Vansant.³ The former examined

- 1 Among the key works in English and German are Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867–1938: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Klaus Hödl, *Wiener Juden — Jüdische Wiener: Identität, Gedächtnis und Performanz im 19. Jahrhundert* (Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 2006).
- 2 Key works in this field include Doron Rabinovici, *Instanzen der Ohnmacht: Wien 1938–1945 – Der Weg zum Judenrat* (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 2000) and Dieter Hecht, Eleonore Lappin-Eppel, and Michaela Raggam-Blesch, *Topographie der Shoah: Gedächtnisorte des zerstörten jüdischen Wien* (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2015).
- 3 Helga Embacher, *Neubeginn ohne Illusionen: Juden in Österreich nach 1945* (Vienna:

the establishment of Vienna's postwar Jewish community generally, a vagarious history that, as in many other places in war-torn Europe, was shaped by refugee movements and an uncertain future. In contrast, Vansant's work examined more specifically the issue of native Viennese émigrés who decided to return to their former homes after the end of Nazi rule, thus establishing at least some continuity beyond the rupture of expulsion and genocide.

It is in this vein that Elizabeth Anthony follows with her new monograph, *The Compromise of Return*. Based on the dissertation she defended at Clark University in 2016, Anthony's monograph distinguishes itself from Vansant's forerunner both in focus and scale. Whereas Vansant concentrated on a literary analysis of "réémigré" memoirs, Anthony's monograph offers a general history of "remigration" and a sophisticated analysis of the réémigrés' motives to return to Austria, Adolf Hitler's native land, where the local population had participated wholesale in their persecution and forced expulsion. By dissecting the réémigrés' experiences of return and the issues they encountered as they tried to rebuild their lives in postwar Vienna, Anthony's study embeds this chapter of post-Holocaust Jewish life in the broader context of the nascent Second Austrian Republic and its often egregious treatment of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust.

Based on a combination of archival sources and survivor interviews, the crux of Anthony's research relates to the questions: Why, given everything they had endured, did her sample of Viennese Jews decide to return; and why, when they were met not with compassion or solidarity, but with widespread denial, rejection, and continued discrimination, did they decide to stay? Anthony does not hold out on the answer to these questions, but responds right away (on p. 2) through the words of one of her interviewees, Johanna "Hansi" Tausig: "This is my home!"

Following from Vansant's pioneering work, home and *Heimat* constitute key concepts in Anthony's sources and analysis. Yet one of her novel findings is that "home" in this context did not necessarily mean Austria, but rather specifically Vienna: "The city's remaining and returned Jewish residents were first and foremost **Viennese** [emphasis in the

Picus, 1995); Evelyn Adunka, *Die vierte Gemeinde: Die Wiener Juden in der Zeit von 1945 bis heute* (Vienna: Philo, 2000); and Jacqueline Vansant, *Reclaiming Heimat: Trauma and Mourning in Memoirs by Jewish Austrian Réémigrés* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001).

original], and many survivors remained insistent in their identification as such, not ‘Austrian’” (p. 3).

Anthony begins by differentiating between various categories of returnees and their reasons for going back to Vienna after the Holocaust. The first group consisted of several thousand Jews and people persecuted as such under the Nuremberg Laws who had survived either in “protected” circumstances or in hiding and who therefore did not “return” physically, but rather resurfaced following the defeat of Nazi rule in April 1945. They were followed by a second group, the liberated inmates of the concentration camps, who trickled into the city as part of the great refugee movement westward that followed the Red Army’s conquest of East-Central Europe. These first two groups—survivors in the narrower sense of the term—typically returned and/or stayed because Vienna represented their **familial home**.

The third group consisted of those émigrés who had survived abroad and made a conscious decision to return. Anthony further distinguishes them according to those who returned in order to participate in the reconstruction of Vienna/Austria as their **political home**, and those who returned to rebuild their lives in Vienna/Austria as their **professional home**. Naturally this typology is neither comprehensive nor exclusive, yet Anthony offers a sophisticated model for understanding different groups of survivors, their incentives to return, and their varied experiences. As she summarizes: “The possibility of multiple and intersecting incentives for return notwithstanding, a general pattern of common experience and timeline emerges” (p. 7).

Chapter 1 offers a broad historical survey and literature review, grounding the specific experience of the Holocaust, survival, and return in the longer-term context of Jewish life and culture in Vienna, reaching back to the Habsburg era. One of the primary aims of this chapter is to underline that Viennese Jews simply **were** Viennese, preempting the answer to the question of why so many returned to the country that had brutalized them: Vienna was their home and Central Europe the milieu in which they had been socialized. As Anthony remarks by reference to a photographic collection in the volume *Wie wir gelebt haben* (How we lived): “Little in the pictures reveals that the subjects are Jews” (p. 15).⁴

4 The work in question is Tanja Eckstein and Julia Kaldori, eds., *Wie wir gelebt haben: Wiener Juden erinnern sich an ihr 20. Jahrhundert* (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2008).

This chapter may be especially useful to a general readership not yet familiar with the copious body of appertaining literature. However, it suffers qualitatively from its reliance on older, in parts outdated, works, such as the problematic theses concerning “ethnic identity” and “assimilation” proffered by Marsha Rozenblit some decades ago.⁵ While Anthony here positions herself as expanding upon Rozenblit’s paradigm of Jewish “identities,” the findings she outlines throughout her book concerning Jewish Viennese self-conceptions tend rather to belie Rozenblit’s essentialist understandings of culture and identity, especially her notion of Vienna’s Jews as “ethnically Jewish” and “culturally German” (p. 19). This criticism is not specific to Anthony’s work, but rather addresses a general issue especially in English-language historiography, a detailed discussion of which would exceed the focus of this review. Nevertheless, Anthony’s analysis might have been better served by either focusing on more recent critical historiography or cutting this dissertation-style review altogether.

Anthony’s analysis really takes off in chapter 2, which focuses on “the first ‘returnees,’” meaning those individuals who survived the Nazi era in Vienna either through “privileged” positions in the “Council of Elders,” “mixed marriages,” or in hiding. As Anthony remarks, “most of these survivors did not question whether to ‘return,’ as they had never actually left” (p. 46). Opening with an account of the massacre of nine individuals in Vienna’s Förstergasse on the eve of the city’s occupation by the Red Army, she demonstrates that merely “[a] matter of hours separated the last Jews murdered in the city from the first to reemerge and ‘return’” (p. 45). These survivors in situ numbered in the thousands, but only around 600 self-identified as Jews, pre-empting the issue of defining Jewishness and awarding compensation that was to vex survivors in the years and decades to come.

The first months following the liberation were marked by severe deprivation, occasional brutality at the hands of the occupying forces, especially targeting women, as well as a marked difficulty for the “first

5 The two main works in question are Marsha Rozenblit, *The Jews of Vienna 1867–1914: Assimilation and Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983) and Marsha Rozenblit, *Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). For a recent critique of Rozenblit’s discourse and its enduring impact on the field, see Tim Corbett et al., “Migration, Integration, and Assimilation: Reassessing Key Concepts in (Jewish) Austrian History,” *Journal of Austrian Studies*, 54:1 (2021).

returnees” to reclaim their expropriated property. While Anthony cites a range of individual experiences, some more fortunate than others, the restitution of stolen property would become one of the most reprehensible aspects of postwar Austrian history. The main reason for the difficulties faced by the survivors in receiving just compensation was obvious, as Anthony remarks: “Survivors knew that, blatant or not, Austrian antisemitism had existed for centuries” and “did not disappear from one day to the next” (p. 59).

In this context many victims found that they could only turn to the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien (IKG), the Jewish community organization in Vienna, for help. The IKG in turn relied on aid from foreign governments and international Jewish organizations to meet the overwhelming challenge of caring for thousands of physically, psychologically, and economically broken individuals. The fact that many of the individuals seeking help from the IKG had not been members before the Holocaust or were not regarded as “Jewish” in the eyes of the community organization meant that established members were often given preferential treatment; new or would-be members were treated with “suspicion,” a policy that was explicitly supported by international organizations like the JDC (pp. 74–75).

In chapter 3, Anthony turns to the first group of returnees in the narrower sense; namely, those survivors who returned to Vienna from the camps. By the end of 1945, these made up around 1,700 of the decimated IKG’s 5,000 members (before the Holocaust it had counted some 175,000 members). Liberation did not signal an end to the survivors’ ordeals, as Anthony demonstrates not only by reference to continuing disease, malnutrition, and mortality, but also with specific regard to female survivors and their pervasive experiences of sexual violence at the hands of their liberators. In the absence of anywhere else to go, these survivors decided to return to Vienna, if only as a base from which to regroup and search for other surviving relatives. As Auschwitz survivor Marianne Windholm summarized: “I had nothing...[and] nowhere else to go” (p. 86).

The physical destruction that the returnees encountered in their native city exacerbated their sense of alienation, and only a few would find surviving relatives: “A deep connection to a familial home had motivated camp survivors’ return, and the loss they felt upon finding that home empty left them heartbroken and haunted” (p. 95). The enormous losses suffered in families and the community at large strengthened ties among

survivors and, as Anthony demonstrates, became the basis for a new sense of *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (community of fate). This was further strengthened by the indifferent if not outright antisemitic treatment the survivors experienced following their return. Encounters with non-Jews were often negative, and relations were strained, though Anthony also identifies cases of support in her survivor testimonies. In some of these instances, however, assistance served as a subterfuge to solicit favorable character references on behalf of individuals with questionable wartime records. As Anthony summarizes astutely: “Residency in postwar Vienna required an acceptance of living among perpetrators” (p. 102).

Anthony also points out, however, that detrimental experiences in postwar Austria were not exclusive to Jewish survivors, but also affected other survivors of Nazi persecution, such as Roma and Sinti or homosexuals, many of whom continued to be persecuted after the end of Nazi rule. It is a particularly laudable aspect of Anthony’s work that she repeatedly reminds her readers that Jews may have been the primary but not the only victims of National Socialism, a fact that is still often neglected in societal discourses on the Holocaust in Austria.⁶

Of particular significance here is the political context of reestablishing a sovereign Austrian republic in the aftermath of National Socialism. For this topic Anthony relies heavily on the long dominant narrative of the “victim myth,” the idea that Austria reinvented itself as the “first victim” of National Socialism from 1945 onward on the basis of a selective interpretation of the Allies’ 1943 Moscow Declaration. As she states in the introduction: “The victim myth thus sets both the context and the tone in which this book presents the experiences of Vienna’s returned Jews” (p. 11).

As Peter Pirker has persuasively argued, the “victim myth” is itself a construct of the historical discourse that came to dominate in the 1980s, which only partially captures the complex mechanisms of nation-building in the early years of the Second Republic. Concerning the reintegration and even celebration of war veterans, war criminals, and former Nazis in the 1950s and 1960s, especially among the right wing, Pirker compellingly argues that the use of the German-language term *Opfer* is actually ambivalent. It refers not only to “victimhood” or

6 See the recent controversy surrounding yet another memorial currently being erected exclusively for the Jewish Austrian victims of National Socialism in Vienna: “Schoah-Gedenkstätte: Ein Stein des Anstoßes,” July 4, 2021, <https://orf.at/stories/3209185/> (accessed September 1, 2021).

“victimization,” but also to the “sacrifice” made for the “fatherland” by soldiers and other contributors to the Nazi war machine—a point that Anthony also makes in a later chapter by reference to Heidemarie Uhl (see, for example, pp. 205, 216).⁷

The “victim myth” furthermore proves insufficient for explaining the continuing maltreatment of Jews in the postwar period. Put simply, non-Jewish Austrians did not mistreat Jewish survivors because they saw themselves as victims of National Socialism, but because many continued to cling to Nazi attitudes, including antisemitism. Anthony herself remarks on this in a later chapter in reference to postwar opinion polls (see, for example, p. 196). However, given that Pirker’s critique of the “victim myth” was published when Anthony’s monograph was already in production, this point is not a criticism of Anthony’s analysis, but indeed demonstrates the pitfalls of working at the intersection of such vibrant fields, in which groundbreaking new work is being continuously released.

In any case, Anthony highlights a situation in which Jewish survivors quickly learned to rely on one another and to look to the IKG, the Allied authorities (especially the U.S. occupation forces), and international Jewish organizations for support rather than to their own government. The U.S. occupation forces even designated the *Rückkehrerheim* at Seegasse 9 in its occupation zone (one of three homes established in the city for returning survivors) as a “Displaced Persons Camp,” an “unusual” designation “particular to Vienna” (p. 118). This was designed to offer the Austrian returnees the benefits of American government aid. The impact of this support and the new transnational orientation of the small community of Austrian survivors were demonstrated by a commemoration of the first anniversary of U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s death by the residents of the home on April 12, 1946 (p. 122). Many of these returning concentration-camp survivors eventually decided to emigrate to America or Palestine/Israel. But many also stayed, like Auschwitz survivor Susanne Lemberg, who stated in 2008: “Austria and Vienna were my home. Despite it all” (p. 124).

Chapter 4 proceeds with the first of two groups of reémigrés; namely, those who returned from their places of refuge abroad in order to participate in the reconstruction of their native city and the Republic

7 Peter Pirker, “The Victim Myth Revisited: The Politics of History in Austria up until the Waldheim Affair,” *Contemporary Austrian Studies*, 29 (2020), pp. 153–174.

of Austria. To a large degree this group consisted of Communists and Social Democrats who had remained politically active in their countries of exile (especially the U.S., UK, and USSR) and who had spent the intervening years planning for “a day when they would return to reclaim **their** Austria,” their “**political home**” [emphases in the original] (p. 127). While their idealism turned out to be naïve, leading to “disappointment and disillusionment” (p. 126), the significance of this group of réémigrés is reflected most pertinently in the election of one of its members, Bruno Kreisky, as chancellor of Austria in 1970. Kreisky is emblematic, as Anthony shows, of a milieu that may have been persecuted as Jews yet in their political convictions nevertheless returned with a strong commitment to the reestablished republic “as **Austrians**” [emphasis in the original] (p. 128).

Of particular interest is Anthony’s discussion of the Austrian networks established in the principal countries of exile, in which Jews played a leading role, such as the Austrian Centre in London, which later morphed into the Austrian Cultural Forum London. While the cultural forums today constitute outposts of the Austrian Foreign Ministry, their establishment by political and cultural exiles during the Nazi era points to the widespread transnationalization of Austrian culture in the wake of National Socialism. Anthony also discusses the plethora of political organizations founded in exile, which ranged from communist to monarchist and a full gamut of political positions in between. All of them were united, however, in their continued commitment to Austria, which set them at loggerheads with the Zionist organizations in exile, the latter believing that “every path would be better than the one leading back to Austria” (p. 142). While the members of these Austrian exile organizations were predominantly Jewish (since Jews made up the largest group of exiles from Austria), Anthony points out that the majority of Jewish exiles did not belong to such organizations and were overwhelmingly loath to return to the land of Hitler.

In chapter 5, Anthony turns to the final group of returnees, who distinguished themselves from the political réémigrés by the pragmatism of their return. This group consisted substantially of professionals who were unable to reestablish themselves abroad for linguistic, bureaucratic, or practical reasons. They included writers who were unable to find a German-speaking audience abroad or doctors and lawyers who were unable to have their Austrian degrees and licenses recognized. Exiles in countries with generally low prospects of making a livelihood, such

as the Kazakh SSR and China, were also far more likely to return than the large Austrian émigré populations in the UK and U.S.

As Anthony discusses by reference to the writer Friedrich Torberg, these returnees often only managed to reintegrate themselves by obscuring their Jewish origins and remaining silent about their experiences during National Socialism. She also identifies a notable gender dimension among this group, which consisted mostly of male professionals who “persuaded or coerced wives to join them.” These women often followed “with little enthusiasm” and at best managed to cultivate a renewed attachment to Austria as their “**familial home**” [emphasis in the original] (p. 168). The dissatisfaction felt by many female returnees was compounded by the fact that women had found themselves catapulted into new positions of responsibility and autonomy following the Anschluss, as it was often up to them to arrange their families’ emigration and to secure a livelihood in their places of exile. Once they returned to Austria, however, they frequently found themselves relegated back to their prewar marginalized roles as housewives and mothers.

The picture Anthony paints here is of return as a conscious sacrifice made by many married women for the sake of their husbands’ professional and psychological well-being. However, the group of professional reémigrés also included female professionals, as Anthony examines by reference to the theater director Stella Kadmon. Reduced to performing menial labor in Palestine during the initial years of the war due to her limited knowledge of Hebrew, she was thus keen to return to Vienna after its end, where she successfully reestablished her theater in the First District. Through her consistent and insightful focus on gender, Anthony commendably expands the pioneering work on the history of Jewish women in Vienna, which has to date focused exclusively on the prewar period.⁸

Having outlined her four major categories of analysis in the previous chapters, Anthony finally expands the scope in chapter 6, in order to complicate her own model of remigration patterns. Opening with an examination of the return from 1947 onward of hundreds of Viennese Jews who had survived in Shanghai but had few prospects of establishing

8 Seminal works include Elisabeth Malleier, *Jüdische Frauen in Wien 1816–1938* (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2003); Michaela Raggam-Blesch, *Zwischen Ost und West: Identitätskonstruktionen jüdischer Frauen in Wien* (Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 2008); and Alison Rose, *Jewish Women in Fin de Siècle Vienna* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

livelihoods there, she demonstrates that the various waves of returnees were “not so precisely divided. Motivations did not always fall into one tidy category of familial, political, and professional home, but rather intentions overlapped and timelines stretched” (p. 195). Nevertheless, all survivors returning to Vienna “faced the same issues, despite the differing motivations or rationales that brought them there” (p. 196). The chapter proceeds to elucidate powerfully the reprehensible mechanisms by which the postwar Austrian state and large segments of society evaded culpability for the crimes perpetrated against the country’s Jewish citizens while employing all possible means to prevent the survivors, both at home and abroad, from receiving just compensation for their losses and suffering.

Austria’s failures in coming to terms with its Nazi past has spawned a vast body of literature.⁹ Yet the overview that Anthony offers of Austrian *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and restitution (or lack thereof) in the first decades after the war, as well as the rampant, if covert, proliferation of antisemitism on all levels of Austrian society is indispensable for understanding the hardships suffered by Austria’s surviving Jews and the idiosyncratic developments of Vienna’s postwar Jewish community. As compensation payments were largely limited to Austrian citizens (Jews had categorically been stripped of their citizenship under National Socialism, and very few had regained it in those early years) and victims of political persecution were privileged over those “racially” persecuted, Jewish Austrians were from the outset made to feel like outsiders in the nascent Second Republic. In an egregious example, Anthony highlights the establishment of the *Schutzverband der Rückstellungsbetroffenen* (Protective Association for Parties Affected by Restitution) by the “beneficiaries of Nazi ‘Aryanization’ policies,” who cast themselves, perversely, as victims of Jewish legal claims on properties that had been taken from them, often by force, following the Anschluss (p. 217).

A particularly interesting dimension of this history is the role played by the Allied occupation powers in pushing for greater restitution measures but also abetting the postwar Austrian government’s recalcitrance. The occupying powers, especially the U.S. and USSR, pursued their specific agendas in the context of the burgeoning Cold War, and the domestic

9 For a concise history, published as early as two decades ago, see Helga Embacher, *Restitutionsverhandlungen mit Österreich aus der Sicht jüdischer Organisationen und der Israelitischen Kultusgemeinde* (Vienna: Oldenbourg, 2003).

politics of justice and restitution in Austria were overshadowed for a long time by an intense international focus on (West) Germany. This still holds true today for a large portion of international scholarship on Jewish history, the Holocaust, and postwar *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which often treats Austria as little more than a province of Nazi Germany and/or a footnote to the history of the Holocaust. As Anthony concludes: “Understanding the [Western] Allies’ desire to maintain a neutral Austria and to limit Soviet expansion served to foster the desired national narrative of guiltlessness.” Consequently, the Austrian state and civil society could feel “relieved of both economic and moral responsibility” while projecting the blame for National Socialism exclusively onto Germany (p. 221).

Anthony concludes that the minority of persecuted Jews who decided to return to and/or remain in Austria “chose to live in a place with which they identified but among a people about whom they felt, at best, ambivalent” (p. 231). Despite the manifold forms of discrimination faced by returning Jews as they attempted to rebuild their lives in Austria, the prevailing mutual silence about the Nazi era that predominated in the first decades after the war actually enabled Jews and non-Jews to coexist more or less amicably in postwar Vienna. This situation formed a tense status quo until Austria’s role in National Socialism took center stage during the Waldheim affair in the 1980s, which led in turn to an epidemic of outspoken antisemitism and a notable shift to the right among the voting public.

Anthony’s brief conclusion recapitulates the arguments of the preceding chapters, including the problematic narratives of “Jewish assimilation” and the “victim myth” already addressed above. Another unfortunate shortcoming of this conclusion is that Anthony makes no attempt to reach beyond the Waldheim affair, thus limiting her contribution to an exclusive analysis of the immediate postwar context. Given that more than three decades have passed since the Waldheim affair, and efforts toward coming to terms with the Nazi past and providing just, if belated, compensation to the victims of Nazi persecution have exploded in the intervening years, a contextualization of Anthony’s subject matter in light of these seismic shifts in contemporary Austria would have been beneficial.

In fact, Vienna’s Jewish history has become so mainstreamed in Austria in recent years—as evident from a plethora of museums, memorials, and research institutes, not to mention mountains of

publications, both scholarly and popular, dedicated to this subject—that controversies have even arisen concerning the degree to which the right-wing, anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, and in parts racist government of Sebastian Kurz and his successors has been actively instrumentalizing this history.¹⁰ Given the relevance that these developments have for the broader discourse in which Anthony's work is located, their inclusion, if only summarily, would have seemed warranted.

These critiques aside, Anthony's monograph provides a carefully researched, concisely written, and accessible study that not only deepens our understanding of the complex experiences of return and reestablishment of Jewish life in post-Nazi Austria, but also embeds these in the often reprehensible context of Austria's postwar policies toward these Jewish survivors. This work makes a much needed contribution to expanding our horizons beyond the context of postwar Germany, with a particularly commendable effort to integrate gender and women's history into the substantial literature on Vienna's Jewish history. As such, it will surely and deservedly be received as a critical milestone in English-language historiography of Jewish survival and the postwar politics of justice and restitution in Austria.

10 See the discussion in Dirk Rupnow, "Austria's Year of Memory and Commemoration 2018: A Review," *Contemporary Austrian Studies*, 28 (2019), pp. 223–238.