Christian Kern

Leadership Talk by the Federal Chancellor of the Republic of Austria (2016 – 2017); Chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Austria (2016 – 2018)

Dealing with antisemitism is a very specific and sensitive issue in our country, and that is because of two main reasons. The first one is because I strongly believe that human dignity is absolutely untouchable. And the second is that we have to take care in a very sensitive way because of our heritage. This heritage imposes three main duties for a representative of Austrian society. The first one, perhaps, is that we are obliged to run a zero-tolerance policy as far as antisemitism is concerned. The second is that this heritage constitutes a very specific, special, and solidary relation to the State of Israel. And the third duty is to remember, not only with regards to the victims and their relatives, but it is also an important aspect as I strongly believe that the way how we deal with our past constitutes in what type of future we are going to live. And there is another specific issue—and I was totally impressed by one of the quotes and sayings of Noah Klieger. He is a survivor of the concentration camp in Auschwitz, and he was a member of the boxing squad, he was a sportsman, an active sportsman, and his resume after all the years was to say that “some fights,” he learned, “you can win, but they are never over.”¹ And that is exactly my position as far as antisemitism is concerned. It is a permanent task we have to undertake.

And I would like to tell you a short personal story which is very important in order to understand my way of thinking. It is a story which happened in my family. My mother was born in the year 1928, and my grandmother was serving as a housekeeper for an old Jewish couple in the late 30s, early 40s. After the Nazis took over, the old Jewish couple had to hide at the garret. My mother’s task was to provide the old couple with food and drinking water. One day, she was received at the doorstep of the house of the old couple by Gestapo officers. They chased her away and from that day on, the old couple was never seen again.

Decades later, this episode was still a lively memory in my family and my mother, becoming older and older, was repeating this story and telling it to my sister and me over and over again. And I can tell you I am really grateful

1 Cf. J. Stock, “Der Auftrag des Lebens,” *Der Spiegel*, April 11, 2015 (<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-133575551.html>).

and humble to have a first-hand insight into what happens if humanity is smashed into pieces.

Years later, I became the CEO of the Austrian Federal Railways. What you have to know is that the railway business is not a run-of-the-mill business. The Austrian Federal Railways are not an ordinary company. People are so enthusiastic, fascinated—it is full of emotions. One of the consequences was that literally hundreds of books have been published about the history of the Austrian Railways, about the tracks, about the locomotives, about the stations. When I became the CEO, it did not take long for me to have a big bookshelf full of railway books. Interestingly enough, there was one book missing. And I was asking my colleagues how does it come that we do not have any evidence about what happened in the years from 1938 to 1945? That was an important question because the Austrian Railways were part of the logistic backbone of the Holocaust as you know.² And I was asking, what is the explanation? And that was [only] roughly six years ago. And the answer was a very common one, the answer was: “that wasn’t us!” Because three days after the Nazi invasion, they took over the company and merged it with the German Federal Railways. So, it was not our responsibility. But of course, this was a usual excuse, but a totally pointless excuse by the way. Because there was a continuity of people, a continuity of assets, of machines before, during and after the Second World War and after the Holocaust.

And that was the reason why Traude Kogoj, Milli Segal, Oliver Rathkolb, and I decided to examine scientifically the history of the Austrian Railways. Our intention was not only to do that but also to involve our youngest employees in this procedure. You have to know that the Austrian Railways are the biggest educator of technical apprentices in Austria, we are talking about people in the age range between 16 and 18 years old. They did interviews and supported the researchers in this way.

One day, I had the opportunity to visit the apprentices eagerly doing their examinations. And I asked them “what have you learned in your family, what have you learned in school about this period?” Here, you have to take into account that the parents of these young people were born long after the end of the Second World War. And the answer they gave me was really disillusioning; I would say it was really frustrating. They were poorly familiar with the facts of the Holocaust. And this encounter was a very important lesson for me. Be-

² Cf. “Detailinformationen zur Thementausstellung ‘Verdrängte Jahre’,” ÖBB-Konzern, accessed January 21, 2019, <https://konzern.oebb.at/de/vielfaeltige-oebb/verdraengte-jahre/naehere-informationen-zur-ausstellung>.

cause all of a sudden, I had understood how important the first-hand record is for my generation and those to come. And due to the biological facts, we know that the survivor generation will leave us, and the chain of remembrance is breaking. Even more so, we have the obligation to increase our efforts to educate the next generations.

To prevent our society from hatred and humiliating other people because of a religion, gender, political orientation or their religious convictions, to end antisemitism—that is our responsibility. It is our responsibility to learn from the past but also to act upon the recent events where we experience a re-kindling of antisemitic rhetoric and actions in our country. However, recent events demonstrate that remembrance is not enough. Standing up against antisemitism is a matter of cause in all Sunday speeches of all politicians. And we may assume that those emphasizing its importance actually mean it. But that does not diminish the fact that antisemitic assaults are rising.³

In Austria, in these days we experience a government which intends to establish “a conservative counter revolution.”⁴ The red lines of what is morally and politically acceptable are permanently shifted to the right. The government is permanently shaping a public debate in a very problematic sense. Sebastian Kurz and Heinz-Christian Strache, the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor of Austria, are framing, for example, unemployed people as cheaters.⁵ They denounce private persons accommodating refugees as greedy profit makers. And migrants are serving as the general scapegoat, blamed for almost any problem in our country, whether it concerns the education sector, the healthcare system, or domestic security. And step by step, we witness that right-wing secret societies, the so-called *Burschenschaften*, are subverting our public institutions. They become members of the constitutional court, cabinets, top civil servants, members of the university

3 The recent antisemitism report by the *Forum gegen Antisemitismus* in Vienna has shown a significant rise of antisemitic hate crimes in Austria in 2017. Since 2014, the number of incidents has doubled. Cf. Forum gegen Antisemitismus, “Antisemitismus Bericht 2017,” issued February 15, 2018 (https://www.fga-wien.at/fileadmin/user_upload/FgA_Bilder/Berichte/Antisemitismusbericht-2017_FgA.pdf).

4 This expression was first used by Norbert Nemeth, Chairman of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) in August 2017. It has also been recently employed by Austria’s Minister of the Interior, Herbert Kickl, in his description of returning to what he calls the “normality” of political agenda, especially with regards to homeland security. Cf. “‘Kein Durchwinken mehr’: Kickl will Grenzschutzeinheit,” *Tiroler Tageszeitung*, January 18, 2018 (<https://www.tt.com/politik/innenpolitik/13906635/kein-durchwinken-mehr-kickl-will-grenzschutzeinheit>).

5 Cf. “Regierung: Vermögenszugriff bei ‘durchschummelnden’ Arbeitslosen,” *Die Presse*, January 10, 2018 (https://diepresse.com/home/innenpolitik/5351033/Regierung_Vermögenszugriff-bei-durchschummelnden-Arbeitslosen).

boards, members of public companies, and other institutions.⁶ And even worse, top down from the government, they are attacking freedom of speech and intimidate individual journalists who are not compliant with their agenda. Some of us have expected that the representatives of FPÖ would be acting in a more responsible way, being part of the government. But instead of that, they continue their hate speech as we had to witness several time in the past few weeks. In Austria, the right-wingers are no longer in the corner of society. They are sitting in the government, in the public institutions, and they have not changed their ways.

We all have to be cautious, and I am calling for the need to hold temperance. Because we all know that after verbal violence there comes the violence of actions. We have to take care that resentment and racism is not becoming socially acceptable. But unfortunately, the conservative parties like ÖVP in our country have also been taking a right-wing path. Their excuse was that they are taking the wind out of the sails of the right-wing populists in doing so.⁷ But that does not work. If they do so, their words and speeches are fueling expectations which have to be met eventually. We observe that radicals feel increasingly motivated to spread their messages. The inconvenient truth is, that the chairman of the ÖVP is paving the way for FPÖ politics. Mister Kurz has prepared the black and blue coalition for eighteen months. Now he has to learn the hard way that he cannot control the radicals in the FPÖ. The head of ÖVP is acting as described in Goethe's famous poem of the sorcerer's apprentice: "Spirits, that I have cited, my commands ignore."

Last year, I was meeting the president of Israel, and I can tell you it was really a very impressive encounter for me. President Rivlin told me that for him, it is not enough if somebody acts in a pro-semitic way but also, in other parts of his doing, in a rather racist way.⁸ And I believe he is absolutely right. From experience we know that when minorities are assaulted, we are walking at the edge

6 Cf. L. Ennser-Jedenastik, "Burschenschafter in der FPÖ: Vom harten Kern zur bestimmenden Kraft," *Der Standard*, February 6, 2018 (<https://derstandard.at/2000073719143/Burschenschafter-in-der-FPOe-Vom-harten-Kern-zur-bestimmenden-Kraft>).

7 Cf. R. Misik, "Im Sog des rechten Mainstreams," *Zeit Online*, October 12, 2017 (<https://www.zeit.de/wirtschaft/2017-10/oesterreich-wahlkampf-migration-flucht-medien>).

8 Referring here to the Freedom Party members of the Austrian government. The Austrian government has repeatedly expressed its political loyalty to the State of Israel. However, its Freedom Party members have continuously acted in racist ways, e.g. making immigrants in Austria the number one scapegoat for unemployment, housing shortage and an increase in crime. This general behavior led to a boycott of a political cooperation with the Freedom Party by the Israeli government in December 2017. Cf. e.g. "Israel boykottiert FPÖ-Minister," *Wiener Zeitung*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/politik/oesterreich/936094-Israel-boykottiert-FPOe-Minister.html>.

of a cliff—and it would take just a small step to fall down. Some might say that the recent outbursts of Freedom Party and its supporters were not motivated by antisemitism. But we all know that Jews will be among the first affected if our social redlines get blurred.

So what are the take-aways for our open and liberal society? How can we successfully protect it? First and foremost, I believe that we have to be aware that our democracy is not a given. Second, we need to strengthen the civil rights to protect our values and convictions, and we all know that civil society could make a significant contribution. And the third point is that we have to activate our institutions, such as freedom of the press, or rule of law. They are strengthening our democracy and therefore opposition and civil society have to defend them as well as we have to protect our fellow Jewish citizens. And finally, we need to make clear that antisemitism is an insult of ourselves, of our constitution, of our open society, and we have to foster the understanding that the best weapon against hatred of any kind, and antisemitism is a pluralistic and self-confident democracy.

A business journalist by profession, Christian Kern served as spokesman of Austria's Social Democratic Party's (SPÖ) parliamentary group in the mid-1990s, before he became a senior manager in Austria's leading electricity company Verbund AG. In 2010, Kern was appointed CEO of the Austrian Federal Railways (ÖBB). Kern served as Chancellor of Austria from 2016 to 2017 and as chairman of the Social Democratic Party from 2016 to 2018.

Bibliography

- Ennser-Jedenastik, Laurenz. "Burschenschafter in der FPÖ: Vom harten Kern zur bestimmenden Kraft." *Der Standard*, February 6, 2018. <https://derstandard.at/2000073719143/Burschenschafter-in-der-FPOe-Vom-harten-Kern-zur-bestimmenden-Kraft>.
- Forum gegen Antisemitismus. "Antisemitismus Bericht 2017." Issued February 15, 2018. https://www.fga-wien.at/fileadmin/user_upload/FgA_Bilder/Berichte/Antisemitismusbericht-2017_FgA.pdf.
- Misik, Robert. "Im Sog des rechten Mainstreams." *Zeit Online*, October 12, 2017. <https://www.zeit.de/wirtschaft/2017-10/oesterreich-wahlkampf-migration-flucht-medien>.
- N.N. "Israel boykottiert FPÖ-Minister." *Wiener Zeitung*, December 19, 2017. <https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/politik/oesterreich/936094-Israel-boykottiert-FPOe-Minister.html>.
- N.N. "'Kein Durchwinken mehr': Kickl will Grenzschutzeinheit." *Tiroler Tageszeitung*, January 18, 2018. <https://www.tt.com/politik/innenpolitik/13906635/kein-durchwinken-mehr-kickl-will-grenzschutzeinheit>.

N.N. "Regierung: Vermögenszugriff bei 'durchschummelnden' Arbeitslosen." *Die Presse*, January 10, 2018. https://diepresse.com/home/innenpolitik/5351033/Regierung_Vermögenszugriff-bei-durchschummelnden-Arbeitslosen.

ÖBB-Konzern. "Detailinformationen zur Themenausstellung 'Verdrängte Jahre'." Accessed January 21, 2019. <https://konzern.oebb.at/de/vielfaeltige-oebb/verdraengte-jahre/naehere-informationen-zur-ausstellung>.

Stock, Jonathan. "Der Auftrag des Lebens." *Der Spiegel*, April 11, 2015. <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-133575551.html>.