

continental divide. geteilte leben

Video documentation from Andrea Strutz and Manfred Lechner, 47 min, 1997, S-VHS.

Dissemination of the research: Emigration. Austria – New York, 1996-1997

Goal of the research activities in the project *Emigration. Austria – New York* was the collection and scientific analysis of experiences and memories of Austrian Jews who were expelled from Austria in 1938/39, took refuge in the United States and could not (or did not want to) return after the Second World War.

After the “Anschluss” in March 1938, Austria officially ceased to exist, and became incorporated into Nazi Germany as “Ostmark”. From that moment, the living conditions for Austrian Jews changed dramatically. The racial Nuremberg Laws (1935) affected approximately 206.000 persons in Austria. That share represented around three percent of the total Austrian population at the time. The traditional centre of Jewish life in Austria was Vienna, where 91 percent of the Jewish population lived. In 1938/39, more than 130.000 Austrian Jews had to flee – deprived and penniless – from Austria and another 65.000 Austrians fell victim to the Shoah.¹ Relevant studies mention the number of 28.615 Austrian Jews² admitted to the United States between March 1938 and November 1941. Altogether approximately 38.000 Austrian Jewish refugees immigrated to the US until 1945.³ Either this happened direct, in most of those cases the sea passage started from Italy, Portugal, or Spain⁴, or the United States of America had been their second immigration country. Several Austrian refugees – some of them also had been detained in concentration or internment camps – first fled e.g. to France or Great Britain, hoping that they would be save there. Austrian Jewish refugees preferred to settle in urban areas on the east or west coast, mainly in cities like New York, Boston, Philadelphia, or Los Angeles. To a lesser degree the “thirty-eighters” moved to the mid west (mostly to Chicago), but

¹ Cf. Jonny Moser, *Demographie der jüdischen Bevölkerung Österreichs 1938-1945*, Schriftenreihe des Dokumentationsarchivs des österreichischen Widerstandes zu Geschichte der NS-Gewaltverbrechen 5 (Wien: DÖW 1999), 9.

² The total number of Austrian Jewish refugees in the US is imprecise, because American authorities counted sometimes Austrians as Germans due to a shared German-Austrian quota; cf. *Österreicher im Exil. USA 1938-1945. Eine Dokumentation*, ed. Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes, Einleitungen, Auswahl und Bearbeitung: Peter Eppel (Wien 1995: Österreichischer Bundesverlag 1995), 28.

³ Moser, *Demographie der jüdischen Bevölkerung Österreichs 1938-1945*, 79.

⁴ Fugitives from Hitler needed not only visas for the immigration to the US but also visas for transit countries to reach the harbours, where ships to America would start. Since those visas were hard to get, some of them had to cross European borders even illegally.

almost nobody settled in the American South.⁵ “Since so many of the Austrians were city-dwellers from Vienna, it was not surprising that a very large proportion of them settled first in New York.”⁶ Besides that, the city was in particular attractive for refugees, because of the high proportion of Jewish inhabitants, the great amount of relief organizations but also because of institutions like the New School for Social Research, where a lot of expelled academics and intellectuals affiliated. Overall more than 70.000 fugitives from Hitler (Austrians and Germans) populated New York City, where Washington Heights (Manhattan) - then called the “Forth Reich on the Hudson” - and Riverdale (Bronx) became the living and cultural centre of German-speaking immigrants.⁷

The investigation concentrated on interviewees living in New York because the city became – as mentioned above – one of the world’s largest survivor communities. Another cause concerned financial means, due to a limited budget for travel expenses the researchers needed to operate within short distances. Research in this cultural studies project is largely based on qualitative interviews. All conversations had been recorded with a video camera. The media video extends research possibilities of Oral History through visuals, and opens up new perspectives in research. Video History (audio and visual recording) creates the possibility to process historical findings not only in a written form, but also as audio-visual. For the research team Video History means to ask questions, to listen, to collect, and to preserve life stories with the opportunity to transfer the stories to recipients in the interviewees’ own voices supported by visuals. Eventually we gather life stories (and figure out patterns in the interviewees’ narrations) that indicate – although they might be very individual stories – a more common experience and general significance. It was intended from the beginning not only to produce a conventional written book chapter, but also a video documentation based on interviews.

Although the traumatic experience of expulsion from Austria in 1938/39 was a central issue for creating the project, the questionnaire should not only focus on that part of the interviewees’ life. Therefore the questionnaire (semi-structured interviews) included aspects of their lives in Austria and in the United States of America. The questions concerned growing up and education in Vienna in the 1920s and 1930s, personal experiences with anti-Semitism in Austria, and the importance of the Jewish religion and culture in their lives. In regard to the changes after the "Anschluss" we wanted to know about the reaction of their families and about the circumstances of their flight. Further we asked about immigration experiences into American society and culture (a foreign culture with a

⁵ Cf. *Österreicher im Exil. USA 1938-1945*, 43.

⁶ E. Wilder Spaulding, *The quiet invaders. The story of the Austrian impact upon Amerika* (Vienna: Österreichischer Bundesverlag, 1968), 88.

⁷ Cf. Michael Winkler, „Metropole New York,“ in *Exilforschung. Ein internationales Jahrbuch 20: Metropolen des Exils* (2006): 179.

different language), we also wanted to know about their expectations concerning restitution (“Wiedergutmachung”), and about their relationship with Austria today, and respectively the images and memories they have in mind about their former home country.

During a research stay (1996 in New York) the team recorded twentythree interviews with Austrian Jewish refugees in New York City. But it was already in the mid-1990s – more than 50 years after the “Anschluss” – not easy to find interviewees.⁸ It was up to the participants to choose the language they felt comfortable for the conversation. All but one person decided to talk German, even those interviewees who stopped talking German in their everyday life.

Participants answers do not differ very much from findings of other researchers. Well, at the beginning many of the refugees – most of our interviewees also mentioned that – had troubles to adjust to the unfamiliar social and cultural conditions in the USA. This concerned for example the conversion from German to English language and since English was not the first foreign language in Austria at that time only a small group among the refugees spoke already English, when they arrived in America. In addition, American manners and lifestyle, other gender roles, a less patriarchal society as well as a different political system required very much habituation. Besides difficulties to recover from huge material losses (e.g. mainly through Nazi dispossession and aryanisation of property) and struggles to rebuild an existence, identity loss and survivors guilt often affected Jewish refugees. Career discontinuities and loss of social status caused in particular serious difficulties for male refugees. It was especially hard for high-educated refugees like academics, scientists, or artists to find again an appropriate job. This was often caused by a lack of language skills or through restricted access to professions (e.g. lawyers, doctors); only for craftsmen, it was a bit easier to find a proper job. Therefore, refugees often became involuntarily unskilled workers at least throughout the first years of immigration. Regarding to the first immigrations years, we could observe significant gender differences. While men repeatedly had depressing experiences concerning their social status and career possibilities, women experienced quite the opposite. Generally, women adapted easier to the new living and working conditions; they accepted quickly the comparatively more progressive role of women in America, even if their socialization in Europe had been in quite traditional female gender role. So many of these women started working, and for the first time in their life, they earned money.⁹ However, it was an essential part in the project *Emigration. Austria – New York* to explore

⁸ With the help of Mrs. Frederike Zeithofer at the Austrian Cultural Institute in New York we were able to make contact to Austrian Jewish refugees in New York.

⁹ Cf. Andrea Strutz and Manfred Lechner, „drehbuch ‚continental divide. geteilte leben‘“, in *multiple choice. Studien, Skizzen und Reflexionen zur Zeitgeschichte*, eds. Abteilung Zeitgeschichte (Graz: Leykam 1998), 155-181; *Österreicher im Exil. USA 1938-1945*, 173-258.

the relationship of Austrian Jewish refugees with their former home country and to find out particularly, what images and memories about Austria the interviewees had in mind.

The video documentation *continental divide. geteilte leben* (1997, 47 min, S-VHS) is the audio-visual result of the project and features the life stories of these interviewees and crucial moments in their lives, but also the relationship with their former home and their reminiscences of Austria. The video gives these Austrian Jewish refugees a voice to express themselves, and shows in an impressive way the various ways of coming to terms with the past.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Parts of the video documentation are available at: <http://www-gewi.uni-graz.at/zg/cd/cd1.htm>.