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The Search for a Birthday

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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

On a gray, wet Wednesday earlier this month, half of Austria celebrated the fortieth birthday of the Austrian Republic. The other half, by abstaining, raised again the ghost of Austria's imperial past, and with it the spectre of the tragic conflict between her political parties that brought the First Republic to civil war in 1934.

Earlier, Socialist members of Parliament (and of the coalition government) had demanded that the day be marked by a special, festive sitting of the legislature. The Speaker, a member of the Austrian People's Party, presumably acting with the concurrence of Federal Chancellor Raab (also People's Party), found several precedents for denying the request. Among them was the decision by the Chancellor of the 1945 Provisional Government, Dr. Karl Renner (a veteran socialist who had himself been the first Chancellor of the First Republic in 1918, and who was to be first president of the Second Republic until his death in 1950), that the twelfth of November would not be among the official national holidays.

The day before the anniversary, floral wreaths were laid ceremoniously before the monument to "The Builders of the Republic" that stands beside the Parliament. The three largest were from the Austrian Socialist Party; all the rest came from the Vienna trade unions (Socialist supporters) and the Vienna provincial government (with a Socialist majority).

On the twelfth, the newspaper of the People's Party, the Neue Tageszeitung, ran an editorial which proclaimed emphatically: "There is definitely no reason for celebrating."

Schools were dismissed and official celebrations were held in the two Länder of the Federal Republic in which the Socialists are in the majority - Vienna and Carinthia. The other seven - with the People's Party in control - did their best to ignore the day.

Yet these two parties together command over 85% of the vote in the country, hold over 90% of the seats in the federal legislature and, joined in an odd coalition that threatens to become permanent, have governed the country for thirteen years.

This squabble over an anniversary has far more significance than might at first appear. For the past several years observers both inside and outside of the country have been breaking into print with the happy news that Austria, undeniably a miscarriage in 1918,

had at last been born, out of the prolonged and painful labor of the Nazi and Allied occupations, and was a healthy, viable young democracy with a robust, growing Staatsbewußtsein (state consciousness). The twelfth of November incident casts a sudden shadow of doubt on this thesis: the most important political party in the country, representing roughly 45% of the voters, has in effect denied the validity of the past forty years of Austrian history and has appeared to say to the Socialists: "The Republic isn't ours. You take it."

Was this only a momentary relapse?

Austrian politics are a fascinating study. Partly this is because the local system is unique - clearly different from the multi-party tragedy of France or Italy, but also quite different from the two-party system known in Britain or the U.S. and developing in West Germany - and because it presents such a happy contrast with Austrian politics in the First Republic. But partly, too, this is because Austria is a small country, a large city-state, really, living in a power vacuum at the middle of the world's storm, and its politics are conducted in an intimate, clannish way. They are also conducted under the shadow of having been a Great Power within the living memory of many citizens.

It is characteristic that the three enduring rival "camps" in Austrian politics, whose bitter enmity after 1918 led first to bloodshed and then to political prisons and two kinds of authoritarianism, should have had a common origin in a single group of young Viennese intellectuals of the 1880's. From Schönerer, Viktor Adler, Friedjung, Lueger and the rest - most of them figures of European importance - sprang the Austrian Christian-socials ("Black"), Social Democrats ("Red") and Pan-German Nationalists (various colors at various times, imperial gold and Nazi brown predominating.)

The camps are enduring, and their stability is remarkable. The last democratic election of the First Republic was held in November, 1930. In 1934 the private armies of the Blacks and Reds at last came to blood, the Christian-social government turned army guns on workingclass barricades and, in the ensuing victory, the Socialist leaders were jailed. In 1938 Hitler accomplished by rape the union the Pan-Germans had sought through marriage and sent the Christian-social "Austro-fascists" to join their own Socialist prisoners in jail. After the war the Anschluss was in permanent and well-earned disgrace and the Christian-socials, eager to forget their own earlier flirtations with authoritarianism, re-emerged as the Austrian People's Party. With the Socialists, equally eager to avoid repetition of the 1920's, they formed Europe's oddest coalition, which is with us still today.

Yet in the first normal post-war election of October, 1949, after all that had happened, the results were almost identical with those of November, 1930. The People's Party took 74 seats in the Nationalrat, the Socialists 73, and the League of Independents, which could claim to be the heir of the Nationalists, took 14. (Four went to the Communists.) Except for an uncharacteristic decline in German Nationalist strength (to six seats), the picture

has remained basically unchanged since then.

Still, the voting pattern - the strength of the camps - is almost the only thing about Austrian life that has not changed. Those who have thought the Second Republic to be new, different, and healthy - their English language representatives in print are Richard Hiscocks of Canada (The Rebirth of Austria) and Gordon Shepherd of Britain (The Austrian Odyssey) - have a strong case, which it will be the burden of some future newsletters to examine more closely from the perspective of 1958.

The history textbooks of the between-the-wars period, on which I was raised, dismissed Austria as economically non-viable and obsessed with the desire for Anschluss with the German Reich. The first has proved to be a myth, born naturally of the Republic's post-1918 desperation and its confusion at finding itself cut from an empire of 65 million people to an unbalanced economy of seven million. The second of the old saws is certainly no longer true. After 1945 somebody noticed that "non-viable" Austria had natural and human resources the equal of those of her prosperous Swiss neighbor. And today I have difficulty in finding an Austrian who has a kind word for the Germans, while German culture, it is now universally emphasized, is only one element (albeit a large and still honorable one) in the composite culture of Danubian Vienna. Both changes are evidence of the newly-discovered Staatsbewußtsein.

The economic evidence is a separate story, but comprises an Austrian economic "miracle" not less remarkable, because less publicized, than the German one.

In the political field, many reasons have been adduced for the radical change in party attitude that has made possible thirteen years of an historically unlikely coalition government, one that can probably claim the largest majority of any democratically elected government in the world. Undoubtedly both parliamentarians and electorate had learned a lesson from the experience of the First Republic. Prison comradeship during the Nazi years has often been cited as a contributing factor - the Christian-social jailers of the Dolfuss-Schuschnigg era then often found themselves sharing cells with the Socialists they had jailed. One such jail-bird friendship is that between Dr. Adolf Schärff, a Socialist who last year moved from his job as vice-chancellor to the office of President of the Republic, and Dr. Felix Hurdes, a People's Party leader and the President of the Parliament who this month ruled against the twelfth of November commemorative sitting of the Chamber. In 1945 all these men had emerged from jail with the coalition already agreed upon. Some claim that, born out of this post-1945 need to show national solidarity in the face of the Allied occupation, the system has continued out of habit.

The Coalition has been odd, not only historically, but also in practise, for it is hardly a coalition in a real sense at all. It has turned into an agreement to divide up the spoils of office on a proportional basis and then go separate ways, each party with its share of ministries, power, bureaucrats...and village postmen. The system, known locally as Proporz, is exceptionally subject to

misuse, inefficiency, and even corruption, if the corrupter is careful to involve representatives of both parties in his scheme so that neither will dare to expose him. In the Nationalrat, meanwhile, the parties take turns playing opposition on specific measures.

At a higher level the system is subject to a more subtle disadvantage: the lack of any democratic opposition or any democratic alternative to the present government. A man who disapproves of the administration can vote his disapproval only by voting for the Communists or for the Freedom Party, the present representatives of the German Nationalists, with neo-Nazi leanings. Both of these alternatives are generally repulsive to him. Democracy, London Daily Telegraph correspondent Gordon Shepherd has written of Austrian politics, consists not only of being able to put a government in, but also of being able to turn one out, and this is precisely what the Austrian voter cannot do under the present system.

Conscious of all these things (fierce denials of "coalition dictatorship" and promises that Proporz will be ended appear in the party press from time to time), and also of the elections scheduled for next autumn, the Austrian politicians are groping for a way out. They seek one that will get them clear of the coalition deadlock without giving up the governmental stability that has given Austria such an advantage over France, Italy, or even some more stable European democracies.

There are enough real issues to divide the parties in 1959. The advance or retreat of nationalization, which has already gone far here, touches basic dogmas, even though the Viennese are fond of saying: "We have our choice of two kinds of socialism - red or black!" There are differing views on the relative importance of Schilling stability and the danger of unemployment, which divide left and right here just as in America and Britain. Chancellor Raab and Foreign Minister Figl (Raab's predecessor as Chancellor), both People's Party, discussed renewed negotiations for a new Concordat with the Vatican while in Rome for the coronation of Pope John XXIII, and if progress is actually made it may later run into a Socialist anti-clerical roadblock.

But there were similar issues before the 1956 general election, and the experts were forecasting the disintegration of the Coalition then. The People's Party indeed picked up eight seats in the voting, but they all came from the collapse of the League of Independents, with its Nazi undertones, and not from the Socialists, who also picked up one seat - from the Communists. Only one vote shy of an absolute majority, the People's Party was tempted to go it alone, but shied away from having to rely on the six votes of the Freedom Party, successor to the League of Independents.

It is in the context of this political history and the coming election that the dispute over the twelfth of November should be viewed. The dispute reaches back over forty years of latent and open civil war, of Anschluss, of world war, of occupation, and makes a political issue of the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Liberal intellectuals here, who have in the past voted for the People's Party faute de mieux, because they are Catholic and anti-Marxist, have privately expressed their revulsion and distress over the party's attitude. Die Presse, the influential and respected Vienna independent daily, condemned it publically in a front-page editorial on the twelfth. (The controversial publisher of Die Presse was a leading figure in the small Austrian underground during the war.)

We had thought there was coming to be a definite Staatsbewußtsein, said this editorial, but it appears that there is still no definite attitude toward the State. Loyalty to the provinces still comes first, but, on top of this, "sometimes the Party inserts itself between the citizen and his State," and this is ever more clearly a hindrance to the development of a sane and sober state consciousness. From the present dispute, asks Die Presse, are we to conclude that the Austrian People's Party is against the Republic? This surely cannot be, because its leaders, as the leaders of the government, have taken an oath of loyalty to the Republic. Ambassadors are appointed in the name of the Republic, laws are proclaimed for it. A republic we undoubtedly have. Whether it is just as we want it is another question. We must ask how far we have already come away from true Parliamentarianism.

The alarming thing about the stand of the People's Party is that it ignored all of this. The official argument was simply and logically put: the birthday of the Republic was also the deathday of the Empire; it is now clear - even clearer in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Transylvania than here in Austria - that the passing of the Empire was a great tragedy for Central Europe, and the tragedy is still not finished; therefore, the birthday of the Republic is not a day to celebrate, but rather to mourn.

Many casual foreign observers, for whom Austria is still a land of people in threadbare coats with fur collars, vintage 1900, sitting in dark coffeehouses listening to a starving Schrammel-quartet play Strauss and sniffing nostalgically the faded scent of Imperial glory, will feel their picture of the country is confirmed by this news.

There is a class here that undoubtedly does hold the attitude expressed by the People's Party toward the Republic. They have titles, they call themselves monarchists and refer to Otto von Habsburg as "Our Emperor", and, if they are old enough, they remember with rapture Franz Josef riding along the Ring in his open carriage, and the good old days when they occupied the whole of the family palace instead of one apartment in it. They are Vienna's most charming people. But their threadbare coats have been replaced, and, instead of dark coffeehouses, they frequent the Eden Bar, which has a good dance band and a strikingly goodlooking French chanteuse, but is still very Viennese in its plush seats, marble tables and the efficient courtesy of the owner, who greets regular customers familiarly by name and is rude to everyone else. The daughters of this class will run over to Munich for a party this weekend, and down to Rome for the Pallavicini ball in a

fortnight. If they generally cannot see down to their own feet, at least their horizons are virtually unlimited: the Austrian aristocracy is supra-national, because it belongs to an Empire that was supra-national, and they all have friends and relatives, as well as property, left behind in the satellite, Yugoslav and Italian provinces that were once under the Habsburg crown.

But with all their charm, their surprising comprehension of East European affairs and their incomprehension of home ones, they are a very small piece of Austrian society. Their political influence, since the passing of Prince Stahrenberg and his aristocratic friends in the Heimwehr, seems to be small. The People's Party today is the property of the Peasant League (Dr. Leopold Figl, Foreign Minister and former Chancellor) and of the Chambers of Commerce (Dr. Julius Raab, Chancellor), both with an apparent vested interest in the live Republic, not the dead Empire.

These are politicians of a very different stamp from any Austria has known before. Even the leaders of the First Republic were often of imperial size: Chancellor (and Jesuit Priest) Ignaz Seipel and Socialist Otto Bauer fought their political battle at a stratospheric level only remotely connected with the realities of life in an unhappy republic of seven millions. Theirs was the struggle of the Kingdom of God on Earth against the Classless Society, and it was fully in the tradition of a dynastic concept that transcended national boundaries and took the whole world into a Holy Roman Empire.

"Now," one of Austria's leading journalists and historians told me, in the most significant statement I have yet heard on Second Republic politics, "our politicians have been cut to the size of our country." It was said with satisfaction.

Julius Raab, Chancellor of Austria, is a large, round man with round cheeks, a little moustache, and an air of being pleased with life. He looks vaguely like the late Oliver Hardy, which makes it difficult to take him seriously. He is rumored to drink a lot, which makes one think of the lighter side of Krushchev's character. I have never seen a serious biography of him, but every Vienna bookstore features in its displays a thin volume entitled Julius, a series of caricatures of him - not often flattering - done by a wellknown local cartoonist. The back of the dust jacket shows a photograph of the Chancellor with the author, looking at the caricatures and enjoying them immensely.

Somehow it all seems quite fitting.

But he is also a very practical man, behind this jolly facade. He was one of the Lower Austrian Heimwehr leaders who vetoed the union of that rightwing para-military organization with the Nazis in 1930; he was a leading industrialist and a member of the Schuschnigg cabinet that did its feeble best to resist the Anschluss in 1938; during the war he kept out of prison, but was

in contact with those who, like Figl, went to Dachau; after the war he was president of the Austrian Business-men's Association and of the Chamber of Commerce, and became chairman of the People's Party in 1951 and Chancellor in 1953.

It is a fairly typical biography of a Second Republic politician.

These are not the sort of men one would expect to make a campaign issue out of the twelfth of November and the moral claim of the Republic to existence. The meaning of the whole affair remains obscure.

Four days before the twelfth of November, another newspaper incident occurred that further illustrates the curious and ambivalent attitude of the Austrians toward their recent history. Die Presse, in its larger Sunday edition, devoted the front page of its feature section to a long commemorative article looking forward to the anniversary later in the week and entitled "Forty Years of the Austrian Republic." It was a well-written tribute, primarily devoted to placing the Republic in the larger context of a thousand years of Austrian history and to showing that it represents, not a break, but a new chapter. The author of this commemorative article: Otto von Habsburg, son and heir of the last Emperor and pretender to the Austrian throne!

If Vienna rumors are correct, more may soon be heard from "der Otto," and what this more will be is relevant to any discussion of November twelfth and of the party attitudes toward the Republic.

"Dr. Otto Habsburg" (as republican papers prefer to call him) lives in a lakeside villa in Bavaria. His mother, the Empress Zita, lives in Spain. His father, the Emperor Karl, who "withdrew" from governing Austria on 11 November 1918, but never formally abdicated, died on the island of Madeira in 1921, after a series of unsuccessful attempts to regain the Hungarian half of his double crown. The return of Otto was mooted in the 1930's, when restoration of the monarchy might have slowed the Anschluss movement, but the government never acted.

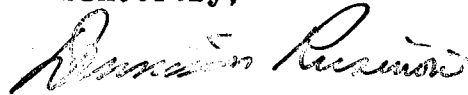
Otto is something of a political scientist, a subject on which he has both written and lectured. He is no longer informed of government decisions and problems before the President is, as he was by that plus-royalist-que-le-roi Chancellor of the Republik Kurt Schuschnigg, but he is still considered a well-informed, intelligent and interested observer of Austrian affairs. He holds an international diplomatic passport that lists no nationality; his children (five daughters) have Austrian passports stamped "Not good for Austria". He can petition to return to Austria and Austrian citizenship - including, presumably, the right to run for public office - at any time he is ready to make a formal and final renunciation, for himself and descendants, of any claim to the Habsburg crown. This presumably would satisfy the clauses in the 1955 State Treaty and the Constitution forbidding the restitution of the Monarchy.

Vienna is full of rumors that Otto is about to petition to return. The current rumors add that, if he should return, it would be to enter politics. If this is the case, or is believed to be the case, his return could easily become a political issue of importance. Then the attitudes already struck by the parties over the twelfth of November may determine their attitudes toward the pretender's petition.

Of the twelfth of November perhaps it is best to conclude, provisionally, that this is but one more swing to the right along the sinuous course Austria has charted for herself on the way to full "state consciousness". The alternative is to fear that the People's Party may blunder into the unfortunate position of making the Republic itself the campaign issue for 1959.

There are better ways to break up the coalition than that.

Sincerely,



Dennison Rusinow

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