
STRANGERS IN THEIR OWN LAND:

Young Jews in Germany and Austria Today

by Peter Sichrovsky

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To many Jews, the heart of Europe is a poisoned place. The soil of what was once the Third Reich, and of what are now the two Germanies and Austria, nourished the leaders who devised the Final Solution to the Jewish problem, the bureaucrats who organized it, the industrialists who devised the technologies for it, the troops who carried it out, the population that applauded it or tolerated it or preferred not to know of it, and the

culture, traditions, and values that, if not promoting it, did not stand in its way. To those Jews, especially the ones who lost all or almost all of their relatives to the Nazis' focused carnage, that soil is forever contaminated, a kind of radioactive wasteland that is incompatible with Jewish life.

Small wonder, then, that many of the Jews who have returned to live on that soil have in fact developed strange and distorted lives. And small wonder, too, that, to other Jews in other places, the discovery that some of their brethren do live on that soil, and seem to live on it willingly, is a mystery, a shock, even an abomination.

Nor is it an abomination solely to them. To many of the approximately 35,000 Jews now living in Germany and Austria—perhaps one-twentieth of the number that lived in those countries in 1933—it is an abomination as well, not to mention a shock and a mystery. They, too, recognize the anomalies of their existence, both historical and contemporary. And it is those anomalies that are repeatedly revealed in Peter Sichrovsky's *Strangers in Their Own Land*.

The book consists of 14 first-person accounts by Jews in West Germany and Austria, the first 13 derived from Sichrovsky's interviews with those Jews, and the last Sichrovsky's own story. All of the accounts describe the lives of Jews born after World War II. Most of them are the children of Jews who escaped the Third Reich before 1939, or who, remarkably, managed to hide, or who, almost as remarkably, survived the concentration camps to which the Nazis had sent them.

Some of those parents returned to Germany or Austria because it was the only place they had ever called home. Some returned as an act of vengeance, to live among the murderers as constant reminders of German or Austrian guilt. But the parents' return imposed dilemmas and ironies on the children that rendered their lives damaged and, finally, grotesque.

For some of these children, early childhood in Germany or Austria was almost normal. "But I got used to everything, went to school here like all the others, and never had any problems about my Jewishness," says Tuvi, a policeman whose parents moved back to Germany from Israel when he was six. For others, it was marked by frequent encounters with anti-Semitism. Ultimately, the lives of many of the young Jews presented in this book were characterized by several common themes.

One such theme was the recognition, at some point, that they were living among the killers of their families or among the children of those

killers. Another theme was rage at the unwillingness of Germans, and especially Austrians, to take responsibility for their country's past. "I am not broad-minded enough to accept your father's role in the mass execution of women and children," says Robert, a Viennese doctor, to his non-Jewish wife. Yet another was the striving, at some point, especially in early adulthood, to become more German or Austrian and less Jewish—to "get out of history," as one, a woman journalist, put it. They tried joining the Left, say, or a peace group, or a feminist group. They then discovered, in those groups, among the young Germans or Austrians born after the war, a refusal, similar to that of their parents, to recognize the horror of the past, or a tendency to trivialize it, or to present themselves and other Germans or Austrians as victims of it just as surely as were the Jews.

Still another theme was that of escape. Many of these young Jews feared that, at some point, the Germans would rise up once again to kill them. This fear was followed by the worry that, like so many of their relatives under Hitler, they would fail to heed the warning signs and stay until it was too late.

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But perhaps the most common theme that emerges from the accounts of these Jews, some of them as young as 14 or 15, is the inward turn they ultimately took. Recognizing their environment as foreign, they withdrew from it, rediscovered their identities as Jews, and burrowed into those identities, often to the surprise and distress of their parents. For some, in fact, it became Judaism itself that was the only truth they could grasp and the only belief that could save them.

Why, if life is so painful for these people, and the soil on which they find themselves so contaminated, do they stay? Some leave, and some of them return. Perhaps, for them as for some of their parents, Germany or Austria is home. For some, rage at things German is matched by an attachment to them—an irony contained in the comment of Anna, the child of a German mother and an Austrian father, who was sent to Germany by her parents "so I could learn the language of the poets and thinkers and murderers." When she left Israel, where her parents now live, her father said to her, "You are going to a country where they speak the language of Herzl and Hitler. . . ."

The ambivalence toward the language and the place is constructed of ties that bind no less than of hatreds that repel. Caught in that conflict, these Jews build walls around themselves. They feel attacked as Jews even when they are not. They are overwhelmed by doubt, rage, and the ever-crowding images of death.

"Almost every conversation with my wife, my parents, or my friends ends with the question of whether to remain or to leave," Fritz, a successful lawyer in Berlin, tells us. "And the head always wins out over the heart. I am here today and will still be here tomorrow. But if I stay here I am sure to die of heart failure, because no heart can stand this sort of humiliation forever."

—Walter Reich '83