

Speech by André Heller at the Commemoration of the
80th Anniversary of 12 March 1938

12 March 2018,

Ceremony Hall of the Vienna Hofburg

Check against delivery!

On the evening of 11th March 1938, my father, a major sweets manufacturer and committed Austrofascist, as well as an optimist – most likely for the last time in his life that day – spoke reassuringly to his friend Emil Fey, former Dollfuss Vice-Chancellor and leader of the right-wing paramilitary Heimwehr forces: “*You know, things certainly won’t be as bad as they seem right now.*” A hundred hours later, after being brutally interrogated by the Gestapo, Fey shot his wife, his son and then himself. At about 9 o’clock on the morning of 12th March, after German troops had marched into the First Republic completely unimpeded – in what is known as the “Anschluss” – the doorbell of my parents’ apartment at Brahmsplatz 1 in Vienna rang insistently. The housekeeper opened the door to three young men in police uniforms wearing swastika armbands. As if speaking normally was prohibited, one of the three shouted, “*Where’s the Jew Stephan Heller?*” With admirable courage Miss Kralicek replied, “*If you please, guests are received only by appointment.*” More shouting: “*We always drop by unannounced.*”

Then they shoved the girl aside, causing her to fall on the floor. At that moment, my father appeared in his dressing-gown, closely followed by my fearful 24-year-old mamma holding my brother, age three-and-a-half, by the hand. “*You are taking liberties!*” said my father.

The answer: “*We can take whatever liberties we like. The decent people are finally in charge. You’re coming with us – right now!*” At least that’s how my mother remembers things. Now age 104, she’s at home watching the broadcast of this event on the ORF.

My father than asked, “*Is this an arrest?*”

“*Yes, for your protection.*”

“*Protection from whom?*”

“*From the righteous indignation of the people.*”

“*Will you allow me to change and pack some necessities in a bag?*”

“*Yes, but get a move on. We still have a lot of interesting protective measures to implement today.*”

My father went to his dressing room, and while they waited the three men forced my terrified mother to hand over all of her jewellery.

When my father returned, he was wearing his three-piece suit and camel-hair coat on which he had placed all of the medals awarded to him as an officer during

the First World War. “*What impudence!*” screamed one of the henchmen, and another slapped Stephan Heller just for the hell of it. “*What you call impudence is the token of my service in the Imperial Army and my passionate Austrian patriotism.*”

“*Starting today, Austria no longer exists,*” said one, dangerously softly. And then, looking at Father’s travel bag, “*I hope you’ve brought a toothbrush. You’ll need it.*” Then they escorted my father to an area before the Theresianum school and forced him to kneel for an entire hour before a jeering crowd of laughing Viennese and use the toothbrush to scrub away pro-Schuschnigg slogans painted on the pavement, calls for a referendum for a free Austria, which he could hardly do. Then they locked him up in the “Liesl”, the police prison on Rossauer Lände. That’s how my parents experienced the first few hours of the “Anschluss”.

It must have been in October 1970 when my friend and mentor Helmut Qualtinger rang and asked, “*Would you like to come to the Falstaff restaurant near the Volksoper at 8 o’clock tonight to meet Carl Zuckmayer?*” Of course I wanted to meet the author of theatrical hits such as “The Captain of Köpenick” and “The Devil’s General”. He also incidentally co-wrote the script for the classic film “The Blue Angel” with Heinrich Mann. So I got there on time and saw Helmut already in a lively discussion with Zuckmayer,

who was smoking a pipe and looked like a lovely Tyrolian wood carving come to life.

“*Sit down and pay attention,*” said Helmut, “*Zuck has experienced more than most people do in five lifetimes.*” “*Don’t exaggerate,*” answered the writer, “*but for a life that isn’t over yet, it really is a lot,*” and he again took up the thread of the conversation that my arrival had interrupted. “*The words of your Herr Karl, who said that the atmosphere of the cheering crowds during Hitler’s speech at the Heldenplatz and on the following days gave the impression of being at an enormous Heuriger wine tavern, just more festive, may have applied to those intoxicated with the Nazis. But for the rest of us it was completely different,*” and then Zuckmayer launched into an impassioned description of what he also recorded in his memoir “A Part of Myself”.

Here is a direct quotation:¹ “*That night hell broke loose. The underworld opened its gates and vomited forth the lowest, filthiest, most horrible demons it contained. The city was transformed into a nightmare painting by Hieronymus Bosch; phantoms and devils seemed to have crawled out of sewers and swamps. [...] What was unleashed upon Vienna was a torrent of envy, jealousy, bitterness, blind, malignant craving for revenge. All better instincts were silenced. [...] But*

¹ From *A Part of Myself, Portrait of an Epoch* [*Als wär’s ein Stück von mir. Horen der Freundschaft*] (1970), translated by Richard and Clara Winston.

here only the torpid masses had been unchained. Their blind destructiveness and hatred were directed against everything that nature or intelligence had refined. It was a witches' sabbath of the mob. All that makes for human dignity was buried."

That was the perception of a gifted observer and literary analyst, which I have never forgotten and will never forget.

That witches' sabbath of the deluded in Vienna became the model for the wave of pogroms across the Reich in November 1938. Two months later, in January 1939, Hitler built on this and announced to the German Reichstag – with the whole world listening – that the outbreak of war would mean the end of European Jewry.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is an undeniable connection between the jubilation at the Heldenplatz then, right outside these windows, and all of the subsequent mayhem.

But what preceded this madness? The Austrian rump state that became the First Republic suffered from a first-class loss complex.

Radical loss of territory, radical loss of importance on the political world stage, loss of many industries, loss of agriculture and jobs, loss of something that was particularly boundless, replete with nostalgia and intensely beautiful: the sea and the Mediterranean

landscapes. Loss of the role of the aristocracy, loss of a collective sense of worth, and of the unique mix of languages, religions, cultures and ethnicities that had nourished and inspired the subtle energy body of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy for centuries. In November 1918, no one knew what awaited German-Austria, all that remained of the Habsburg empire map:

representative democracy, Bolshevism or a revolutionary ferment of every horrifying and beneficial nuance were realistic options, and hardly anyone in the country knew what meaning this state of Austria could still have. The governments changed quickly: once a lawyer was chancellor, then a prelate, then a police official, then an agricultural expert who with his movement dissolved parliament and established a Catholic dictatorship.

And in the midst of that uncertainty, that confusion, that tragic turmoil that was so reliant on improvisation, luck and political skill, to which fate brought hyperinflation and complete devaluation of the currency in the early 1920s as a further shock for wage-earners and the middle class, it was very, very difficult for people who weren't black marketeers, profiteers or morally bankrupt speculators to stay optimistic.

My beloved, beautiful, open-minded grandmother from South Tyrol once told me, *“You know, my boy, during the tumultuous interwar period, what was most comforting to me and what I felt to be a lasting homeland was the music of Mozart and Schubert. And when I heard Lotte Lehmann sing at the Staatsoper or Rilke or Hofmannsthal read their poems at the trade association, then I was at least temporarily safe and my eyes and ears were able to escape from everything coarse and unkind. We could feel that something terrible, an unspeakable breakdown was developing. And we didn’t just feel it, we knew it was happening as soon as workers were shot and then the Socialists, the Communists and the illegal Nazis were all locked up together in Austrofascist camps. Starting in 1936, the Nazis were no longer illegal and could once again be seen in the streets, and on 12th March 1938 everyone who wanted an independent Austria to continue to exist was utterly vanquished. That’s how it was, my boy,”* said my wise grandmother.

Ladies and gentlemen, one of the cruellest pillars of murderous dictatorships has always been the creation of scapegoats who must always be guilty of everything and on whom savage punishments are often visited. They are the bloody screen behind which extreme cynicism, immorality and criminality can run riot. It is striking to note the disproportionate

number of Austrians among the Nazi gang of state criminals: Hitler, Kaltenbrunner, Eichmann, Seyss-Inquart and some particularly brutish commandants of concentration and extermination camps, to mention just a few. The arsenals of homicidal rage, surreal sadism and infamy extending into the very darkest corners were used: the extermination of the Jews, along with the Roma and the Sinti, planned with military precision. Homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses and many adherents of other faiths, as well as those known as political prisoners, were sent to the concentration camps, while sick children and adults – known in Nazi parlance as “worthless life” – were exterminated in hospitals and asylums.

The extent and depth of the horror of that era for the most part exceeds our understanding, but there are small insights into day-to-day banalities that suddenly rip up the curtain of distance and go straight to the heart: the son of Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss, who as a child lived with his parents in a villa on the edge of the camp, said that his mother often told him not to eat strawberries from the garden because they were too grey. One day he understood that the grey colour was due to ashes from the crematorium ovens, which wafted down from the chimneys whenever it was windy and were then also inhaled by everyone. Most commandants, SS guards and prisoners in the camps – perpetrators and victims – therefore carried in

their lungs ash particles from the people who had been murdered.

Following a world war that was destructive beyond measure, for whose outbreak and length the Nazis were solely responsible, they drove the deluded “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles” into an unparalleled, abject downfall and into an appalling self-destruction.

The main culprits such as Hitler, Göbbels, Göring and Himmler evaded responsibility by committing suicide. If ever arrogance and madness went before a fall, this applies to the Nazis and their idea of National Socialism in 1945.

Then came the Austrian rebirth known as the zero hour. That naturally could not be the case for large parts of the population, because the intellectual and practical brutality, the depressing self-betrayal of what people had cheered only yesterday, the contempt for humanity, which for millions of people who had been subjugated all over the country were the result of deformation under Nazi rule, obviously could not be made to disappear when the Second Republic was founded simply by pressing a delete key. Instead, they continued to fester in many people’s minds, thoughts and behaviour, and, as we know, in motes and beams, tragically until the present day.

We owe our liberation to the Allied armies. People in Austria would not have been able – and for a long time would not have been willing – to free themselves by their own efforts. A majority gratefully welcomed democracy as a redemption, but for those who ran aground on the rubble of their own fanaticism and erroneous beliefs, democracy was the symbolic space of their humiliation. In this situation, characterised by diametrically opposing attitudes, it is remarkable that every political group for the most part agreed not to invite the Jews, who had been cast out, robbed and outlawed – if not murdered in the concentration camps or elsewhere – to return to Austria to participate in the country's moral, cultural and economic reconstruction.

There were hardly any feelings of guilt about them, either. It was not until 1991 that Federal Chancellor Vranitzky made the first admission of guilt and invited the Jews to return, 46 years after the end of Nazi domination.

It took tremendous courage, willingness to face death and fidelity to principles to join the resistance or to act decently and with character, if only in certain difficult situations, during the Nazi terror. I admire all of those righteous people and feel the utmost gratitude, and what they did cannot be overestimated, but these days there is no acceptable excuse for failing to oppose racism and xenophobia in politics – or in the

workplace, at the regulars' table, on the football pitch, on social media and in clubs and associations. There's no risk of torture and death, though admittedly, there may be disadvantages at work, but in return we will have an Austria of much higher quality.

Let's not forget that domination by the National Socialists began not with Auschwitz but with the exclusion of people who were considered to be disturbing and harmful. And because many people agreed with this, the Nazis were free to act and the humanitarian catastrophe continued to spread.

I'd like to tell my younger listeners what Bruno Kreisky emphatically said to me during our first meeting in 1970: *“For you and every one of your generation in Austria, who were fortunate enough to grow up in peace, freedom and prosperity, cowardice is not an option – if only out of gratitude for your own good luck. So please, all your life, remember to show solidarity with the weak and with those suffering injustice.”*

Ladies and gentlemen, democracy must be the precise opposite of everything that National Socialism stood for. It is the highest obligation of every democratically legitimised government to honour and protect the basis of its existence, namely democracy and its constitution, in all of their aspects. This means

safeguarding them against being weakened and undermined – including the precious asset of free reporting in independent media. This is not limited to the ORF, but does particularly apply to it.

Democracy should always be an arena for truthfulness.

Truthfulness in providing information to citizens about all relevant issues and during political debate, truth when analysing the historical causes of national developments and global upheaval. I would like to shed some light on an age-old phenomenon that has existed since the days of bread and circuses: populism. There is no doubt that it is a sub-species of not being bound by truthfulness. What makes populism so hostile to democracy is its claim of being the sole representative of what is called “the people”, while the diversity of opinion in a democracy is not recognised as an attribute. Populism is oriented not to the facts but to the state of mind and resentments of certain groups of voters, whose feelings are often first created or at least promoted by the efforts of those influential populists and their affiliated media. Populist manipulators deny their actual thoughts and knowledge in favour of what is most useful for electoral purposes, openly contorting themselves into people whose acquaintances will often say you’d be astonished if you got to know them because in private life they are completely different.

The problems of this planet, with all of its amazing and immeasurable beauty, quality and wealth of opportunity, which is so seriously threatened by human stupidity, greed, malice and dull ignorance, do not deserve to be camouflaged. Nor should we deny the climate disaster that is killing at least 400,000 people each year, because there is no doubt we are poisoning the Earth, befouling its rivers and polluting the air. There must be no denial of the end of full employment due to digitisation and robotisation, no denial that one central basis of our prosperity and comfort – from the mobile phone to jeans – is the misery and unscrupulous exploitation of workers, including countless children, in the Third World. No less than 48 million of them are slaves.

People! We live in one of the safest, richest and most privileged places on Earth. We hit the jackpot in the lottery of where to be born. But now we must be prepared to pay fair prices and over the long term share with those who have been forced to flee the catastrophic conditions in their countries. We must contribute to making it possible for them to have a reasonably dignified existence in peace, including a fair income, medical care, clean water and healthy food in their home regions. This suppression, this blocking out, this looking the other way in the face of horrifying facts, along with America or Austria First

positions, will naturally magnify the disaster. Almost without exception, coming to grips with global problems and threats requires global efforts, connecting in solidarity and joining forces, and fierce compassion.

I would ask those of you who do not agree with this analysis to reorient yourselves to the merciless facts and allow yourselves to engage in a learning process and a transformation. Do it out of love for your children and grandchildren. Being mistaken from time to time is nothing to be ashamed of in politics or in life. But one shouldn't stick to mistakes once one knows better.

Now I would like to tell you about another remarkable event from my own life. I thought for decades that I was somewhat better than other people. Smarter, more talented, funnier, entitled to be proud. I was arrogant and narcissistic and always judgmental of others, and this did me no good, until one day I was sitting in the London Underground and took a look around me. Very different people with very different skin colours were sitting and standing there, and I was hearing very different languages. A sort of bolt out of the blue struck my consciousness, and I realised that each of these women and men, old and young, hopeful and despairing, are also myself and that it is not German, English, Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic or Swahili that is our true mother tongue but rather that the

world's mother tongue is and should be empathy. It allows us to recognise ourselves in every other person and to feel intimately and lovingly connected to them and subsequently to heed that realisation in all of our thoughts and actions.

Empathy!