



Account of the book presentation "Exile in Africa"

28 May 2014

On 10 April 2014 in Vienna's Palais Mollard, the National Fund presented the third volume of the series "Erinnerungen. Lebensgeschichten von Opfern des Nationalsozialismus" [Lives Remembered. Life Stories of Victims of National Socialism], which is devoted to the subject "exile in Africa".

The Austrian National Library's majestic baroque rooms at Palais Mollard, Herrengasse, provided a worthy setting for the presentation, which was dedicated to a special group of Austrian victims of the Nazi regime: those whose flight took them to Africa. Indeed, it is by no means a coincidence that Palais Mollard, home to the Vienna Globe Museum, was chosen to host the exhibition, with its globes serving to symbolize the escape routes and sometimes lifelong migration of the persecutees. Several photographs for the book "Exile in Africa" were also taken at the Museum. The historian and ORF television presenter Claudia Unterweger guided the audience through the evening and musical interludes were provided by the Senegalese Griot Jali Keba Cissokho with his Kora.

In her welcome address, the Secretary General of the National Fund, Hannah Lessing, spoke of the meaning of exile and the loss of "home", in particular the "extraordinary challenges" faced by the 85 Austrian survivors of National Socialism, who, as Central Europeans of the 1930s, had unexpectedly had to find their way in a completely alien world. "Of nearly 30,000 people who have been recognized as victims of National Socialism by the National Fund since 1996, the majority now live abroad, scattered across 75 countries throughout the world." It was therefore a matter very close to the heart of the National Fund to publish these stories as a legacy for the subsequent generations, she concluded.

The editor of this series and Scientific Director of the National Fund, Renate Meissner presented the new volume, describing how it evolved and its contents in her words of introduction. Volume 3 was the first of four planned volumes of the series which the National Fund has been publishing since 2011, "Erinnerungen / Lives Remembered". These will deal with life in exile beyond Europe. Across 240 pages, this volume documented nine life stories, describing escapes which could not be more different. For some of the Austrian exiles Africa was little more than a temporary place of refuge; for others it became their new home. Dr. Meissner emphasized the importance of preserving memories in various forms, particularly in view of the ever decreasing numbers of surviving eyewitnesses, who "bring history closer to us, indeed, they are literally the embodiment of history".

By way of a selection of recordings, videos and readings the audience was introduced to five life stories of Austrian survivors whose flight from the Nazis took them to Africa. Michaela Niklas, a member of the editorial team, described to the audience the life of Madeleine Lopato, reading several extracts from the book in English. Madeleine Lopato's life and flight saw her move from Poland to Brussels and onward to Paris before her arrival in Cape Town. Just months after getting married her husband was arrested in Brussels and deported. Madelaine Lopato's son René, who never got the chance to meet his father, had to be left in the care of strangers. She and her son emigrated to South Africa with her second husband in 1950.

Mirjam Langer, another member of the editorial team, used audio excerpts from an interview recorded with Susanne Wolff to give a brief insight into Mrs. Wolff's turbulent life. She was born into a bourgeois family in Vienna with a cook and a butler. Following the Anschluss in 1938 she fled aged 18 to Kenya where she married a complete stranger and had to get used to a simple lifestyle entirely at odds with that to which she had previously been accustomed. Due to the political turbulence caused by decolonization she left Kenya, returning via England to Austria, ending up in Kitzbühl.

Maria Ecker from erinnern.at provided an account of the project "Neue Heimat Israel" / "New homeland Israel", for which Amnon Berthold Klein was interviewed. He arrived in Israel "illegally" on a ship with his mother but the British Mandate Government refused to grant them permission to disembark, instead interning the refugees in Mauritius where Amnon Berthold Klein's mother died of typhoid fever, leaving him to fend for himself. Today, Mr. Klein lives in Israel.

The historian and university professor Albert Lichtblau (University of Salzburg) showed an excerpt from a film about Norbert Abeles, who escaped to England on a Kindertransport, where he was initially able to train as an agricultural worker before being detained as an "enemy alien". Ultimately, he was able to complete an apprenticeship as a locksmith at night school. In 1956 he emigrated to Africa with his Austrian first wife, as it was difficult to pursue a career in Austria with his British vocational training. Having spent over 50 years living in sub-Saharan Africa, where he taught at numerous technical high schools, today he lives in Malawi with his second wife Jane.

With the help of an excerpt from his documentary "Flucht ins Ungewisse" ("Flight into the Unknown"), part of the ORF Series Menschen und Mächte ("People and Powers"), filmmaker Tom Matzek (ORF, Universum History) discussed Doris Lurie and her life in South Africa, a "land devoid of simple truths", according to Matzek. Doris Lurie's escape took her from Vienna through Switzerland, France, England and finally to South Africa, where she was soon to experience firsthand the rise of the apartheid regime, the subsequent civil rights movement and a renewed feeling of imperilment due to these political circumstances.

Following the presentation, Claudia Unterweger led a discussion with Tom Matzek and Albert Lichtblau on the unique aspects of exile in Africa – arrival in a colonial society, which "functioned" according to its own special set of rules, the alien way of life, the climate, disease etc. Despite an initially perhaps "privileged" start as Europeans in an African country, embedded in a Jewish community, they were refugees from Austria who had found themselves outlawed overnight. This feeling of uncertainty often prevailed due to the political circumstances in the country of exile, as it did for Doris Lurie in South Africa, for example. According to Lichtblau, during the process of decolonization in the 1950s the "whites" suddenly found themselves exposed and may had to leave the country, a fate that suffered by Susanne Wolff in Kenya. As such, there were cases where the initial flight from Austria was followed by further emigrations.

The much-discussed subject "integration" was also addressed, as was the singularity of Africa as a place of colonization, missionary work and refuge, as well as the modern reversal of the old escape routes and Europe's correspondent historical obligation or "debt of gratitude" towards these modern refugees. With the "globalization of Holocaust memories" these memories are now also featured in memorials in African countries such as Ruanda, stated Lichtblau, whose fields of academic interest also include genocide research. The comprehensive and in-depth academic study of the Shoah has gone on to prove invaluable for understanding the structures of subsequent genocides and being able to recognize the warning signs.

Volume 3 documents the autobiographical recollections of a group of fascinating individuals whose experiences and journeys through life, in all of their tumult and incongruence, serve to illuminate lesser known areas of Austrian history and bear witness to the consequences of exile. These stories are now safeguarded for the collective memory. This acknowledgement of the long shadow of the past can also be interpreted as an active safekeeping of memories by passing on these stories to future generations.