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FOREIGN MINISTER Avigdor Liberman and Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz. (Courtesy Austrian FM, Tatic)



AUSTRIAN FOREIGN Minister Sebastian Kurz, Danielle Speira, a former TV anchor and director of the Jewish Museum Vienna with Paul Chaim Eisenberg, the chief rabbi of Vienna. (Courtesy S. Laster)

Constant up and down

A glance at the bumpy bilateral relations between the two countries, on the occasion of the first visit of Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz

• By SAMUEL LASTER

On April 22, Sebastian Kurz, the youngest foreign minister in the world, is going to arrive for a visit in Israel. The date could not be more symbolic, with Passover and Mimouna just having passed. The foreign minister stands for a new era, new symbolism and a new tone between Vienna and Jerusalem.

For a long time, a glass of water was the symbol for the ambivalence of Israel toward Austria: In the year 1973, prime minister Golda Meir wanted to convince Austrian chancellor Bruno Kreisky not to close the Schönau transit camp near Baden, in which thousands of Soviet Jews had their first experience with the West before transferring to Israel. Israel's current ambassador in Vienna, Zvi Heifetz, went through this transit camp as well. The background was an attack of Palestinian terrorists in Mar- chegg which ended without bloodshed because Kreisky promised the closure of the camp. Golda Meir made a pilgrimage to Kreisky's villa and was given the cold shoulder.

"I did not even get a glass of water," she said in Israel. President Shimon Peres later denied the negative treatment in a book, however Golda Meir insisted on her version.

Shortly after, in the fall of 1973 the Yom Kippur War broke out. Kreisky knew in advance of Egyptian war plans but withheld the information from his Israeli friends. This added to the skepticism. For the relations between Austria and the state of the Jews, the Jewish Kreisky was a portent. Austrian President Heinz Fischer has always been Kreisky's most faithful admirer, and shares his politi-

cal views.

On March 31, President Shimon Peres paid a state visit to Vienna. The oldest active president in the world and Nobel peace laureate has been politically active since 1952, having held virtually every office in Israeli politics.

A deep friendship connects Peres with Fischer, as had previously been the case with the great humanist Kreisky, who, as a "critic of Israel," is, with his anti-Semitic sayings ("If the Jews are a people, then a bad people") admittedly rather controversial in Israel.

Kreisky made Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat socially acceptable, struggled and fought for peace in the Middle East, for the "two-state solution" which has become a basic doctrine today. Kreisky's interior minister at that time, Karl Blecha, negotiated deals with terrorist groups, and later interior minister Erwin Lang enjoyed the company of right-wing extremists such as Martin Hohmann, who was excluded from the German center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party, when it comes to criticism of Israel.

DURING THE tenure of federal president Kurt Waldheim, Austrian-Israeli relations were in a trough. Federal chancellor Franz Vranitzky got Austria out of its pariah status with a historic speech in 1991. Under Schüssel's black-blue government with Jörg Haider from 2000 on, another low was reached. The "Washington Agreement" with Stuart Eizenstadt and efforts at restitution related to the Holocaust after that, brought a new relaxation. However while the right-wing Freedom Party of Austria

(FPÖ) of Heinz-Christian Strache likes to pose as being pro-Israeli, a decision of the Vienna City Council against Israel's actions against the "Gaza flotilla" which was in the service of the Hamas, where tragically nine people were killed, was a hint to this direction. Austria's vote for the "state of Palestine" at the UN was a hint on the federal level. Israel seems to receive anti-Semitism from the Right and the Left. "The rightists love Israel and hate the Jews, the leftists love the Jews and hate Israel for its policy," was how an Israeli diplomat put it.

But lately, it happens indeed that an Austrian foreign minister, in discussions with Jewish listeners, is urged to push Eastern neighbors to a greater awareness in dealing with the past. This was what the flabbergasted former foreign and current minister of finance Michael Spindelegger got to hear in the synagogue of Rabbi Arthur Schner in New York. Could Austria be an "avant-garde of memory", ritualizing similar German-Israeli relations and seemingly being caught in their past. In the 1950s, at the beginning of these relations, the emotions between Vienna and Jerusalem were a predominant part of diplomacy. The Holocaust seemed too recent and Austria not ready to venture out of its "victim role."

In the year 2014, relations are rated "excellent" in Jerusalem and Vienna. Be it technology transfer, student exchanges, the use of young civil servants at the Holocaust memorial site Yad Vashem or old people's homes, as well as academic co-operation such as between the University of Innsbruck and Israeli research institutes called ALANI - all this is can be entered on the credit side. Pilgrimages from

Upper Austria show a deep bond which seems to be extensive.

5,700 "Pass-Österreicher" (Holder of Austrian passports) live in Israel, with ancestors and roots in the Alpine republic. The burden of Austria's role in the Nazi era seems to be no longer an issue for young Israelis.

In Israel, memory has become an institution, it is a reason for the state to lead thousands of young people to Auschwitz every year. Young Israelis with Austrian backgrounds drink coffee from Vienna, eat Mozartkugeln, or fly to Tyrol and Salzburg to go skiing.

Austria's current foreign minister, Sebastian Kurz, will seek to improve these relations during his imminent visit in Israel as well. It is, again and again, the nuances that dominate the navigation on the Vienna-Jerusalem route. Thus, for example, the representation of the Viennese Jewish community when visiting Jerusalem is going to be a bit more heavyweight than usual.

The visit is about Austria's special responsibility toward its past, as Kurz stresses repeatedly. This is all that Austria currently has to offer. A role as a mediator in the Middle East conflict does not seem realistic.

Austria would have an important intermediary role which Kurz might occupy if he wants to live up to his dream role of becoming a great foreign minister.

The author is a veteran observer of Austrian-Israeli relations. He moved to Austria the year Bruno Kreisky was elected as chancellor (1970), returned to Israel to serve in the army, exploring the Bekaa Valley in a tank in 1982. He founded Die Juedische (Ha'atar Hayehudi, www.juedische.at) in 2003.