

1956

In 1956, the year I turned eleven, there were two experiences, above all others, that left indelible marks on my memory.

The first event occurred in May: The Socialist Party's May Day rallies held in front of the Town Hall in those days were really large-scale events. Council housing blocks were seas of red-white-and-red flags, and important thoroughfares, reserved for the masses that came from all parts of Vienna to converge on the Town Hall and then march back again, were closed to all traffic, even public traffic, until 2 p.m.

In my quarter of the town, Kaisermühlen, too, a large troop always assembled and marched off. In the vanguard were the flag-bearers, these were followed by people with banners, and these, in turn, by the long tail of those who confined themselves to waving little flags. For invalids, old people and children lorries were provided, and so, in 1956, I was sitting on the open loading area of one of them and enjoying the drive to Town Hall Square. Once arrived, we stood in front of the Burgtheater and watched all those thousands that had assembled in front of the Town Hall and the large hustings erected there, as well as those thousands that were still marching up in flocks and filling the square to bursting point. I do not remember the speeches that were delivered, although they must have been peppery enough in view of the upcoming election. But the event that burnt itself into my memory was this: One of the troops that came up were carrying a banner, and shouting its slogan at the top of their voices: 'Austria is not yet free; there is still the People's Party [the Socialist Party's main rival, and also its coalition partner]!'

This 'Austria is not yet free!' just a year after Figl's redeeming 'Austria is free!' traumatised me to such an extent that for the rest of my life I found it impossible to vote Socialist in any election, although I had staunch adherents of this party among my relatives who did attempt to influence me. This is just one example that shows how it is possible to lose a potential future voter even in his childhood.

The second event I alluded to took place in December. After the Hungarian people had revolted against the Soviet occupiers and the Hungarian puppet regime in October, and after the Soviet army had invaded Hungary and crushed the revolt in November, hundreds

of thousands of Hungarians fled to Austria from where they fanned out across the rest of the world.

An eleven-year-old refugee found his way into my class. Due to our inability to speak Hungarian and his inability to speak German or English (at the time Hungarian schoolchildren received instruction in Russian instead of English) communication was restricted to gestures and facial expressions.

Krampus [a beast-like demon in Alpine folklore; on 6 December he appears as St Nicholas's companion] and St Nicholas happen to be close associates here with us, Krampus bringing blows with him and St Nicholas bringing sweets, and this seems to have inspired our form teacher to come up with the idea of a little festivity. In early December, everybody drew a name to whose bearer he was supposed to give a present, and in exchange he would receive one from somebody else. The packages all wandered into a bag that reappeared the next day, when pupils from a senior class came in disguised as Krampus and St Nicholas with the higher mission to spread fear and joy, and now everybody received his present. The Hungarian boy, who could not participate in this scheme, was the only one to receive his present, not from another pupil, but the form teacher himself. It was decorated with a little Krampus covered in black fur. Before our Hungarian comrade opened the package, he tore off the Krampus, placed it on the table, pounded it with his fist and shouted 'Pfui Russky! Pfui Russky!'

And there were tears of fury and desperation in his eyes. This scene was so fraught with emotion that I shall never forget it.

Erwin Kohaut ©

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