Letter from Israel

Mary Kreutzer

Editor's Note: Mary Kreutzer edits the magazine of the Austrian League of Human Rights and is co-founder of the Austrian section of Wadi, an NGO that supports women's projects in Northern Iraq. She travelled to Israel in October 2006 to make a documentary film on the life of the Austrian survivor of the Shoah, Karl Pfeifer. Pfeifer is an Austrian journalist and former editor of the Jewish community's newspaper, Die Gemeinde. He has published several books, including a selection of his articles under the title Nicht immer ganz bequem [Not always quite accommodating] (Vienna: Verlag Der Apfel, 1996).

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'What is *this*?' The horrified young border police officer at Ben-Gurion Airport seems not to believe her eyes. She stares at the visas – from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey – in my entirely stamped passport. But after a few short minutes I am allowed to collect my luggage and jump a cab to Jerusalem. It is my first trip to Israel – I am making a film about the Austrian Holocaust survivor Karl Pfeifer.

I got to know him six years ago when I was asked by the editor of the Austrian communist weekly, *Volksstimme*, to write about his court case against the right extremist editor of the newspaper *Zur Zeit* for defamation. (Pfeifer lost and the case has gone to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg which will shortly deliver its verdict). Karl is an untiring fighter against anti-Semitism and the Austrian myth of having been 'the first victim of the Nazis.' The country remains in denial about its active participation in the Second World War and in the Shoah and has not confronted its past as Germany has. The consequences of this denial continue to haunt Austria. In interview, Pfeifer has said:

> Today Austrian anti-Semitism is not violent to the extent that Jews are being killed but violence is perpetrated against non-European foreigners and easily identifiable Jews who sometimes are insulted or pushed down on the sidewalk. They do not, however, complain to the police. Jewish cemeteries are desecrated, but the Jewish communities usually do not publicize this. The

> police often brush these violations aside, claiming these are acts carried out by drunken youngsters who cannot be found (...) When trying to analyze the fragmented expressions of Austrian anti-Semitism, first and foremost, one central characteristic of the country must be understood. This is the specific Austrian syndrome of suppressing memories of its institutional and popular behaviour during the national socialist era – an attitude radically different from how the Germans tried to come to terms with their Nazi past. Many of the events in Austria since the end of World War II, including what is happening today, are incomprehensible to an outsider who is unaware of this important difference' (*Austria, the Jews and Anti-Semitism: Ambivalence and Ambiguity: An Interview with Karl Pfeifer,*' by Manfred Gerstenfeld).

A group of us decided to produce a documentary about his life to mark his eightieth birthday, in 2008. Filming took us to Baden, his hometown, where he was driven out by the Nazis in 1938 when ten years old. On to Budapest, the city from which he escaped to Palestine in 1943 – on one of the last three children-transports and as a member of the left-Zionist HaShomer HaZair. And now we are in Haifa, walking down the boardwalk, as Karl talks of the 19th of January 1943 – the day he and 50 other Jewish kids from all over Eastern Europe arrived after a risky and exhausting journey through Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey and Syria. 'Some Jews gave us money through the fence. Later we were allowed to go to town, and I remember a sales clerk bestowed on us a whole bar of chocolate. Isn't that crazy? It was 1943! And I remember Hannah Senesh came to see us – she was later executed by the Nazis during her rescue mission in Budapest in 1944, at the age of 23.'

Two months before, I was sitting horrified in my Viennese apartment as Hezbollah rockets dropped on civilians in Haifa and Israeli bombs dropped on civilians in Beirut. I was desperate – calling friends in Haifa and friends in Beirut. The contrast with today feels unreal. I am sitting in the Neptune Restaurant in Haifa, enjoying a plate of grilled shrimps and the idyllic view over the beach, watching the fishers empty their flues, the elderly go through their gymnastic exercise in the water, and a group of teenagers listen to rap-music through their mobile phones.

We have lunch with Karl's friends of the Palmach, the elite force of the Haganah, the Jewish underground army. 'Most of us had lost our families in the Shoah. So the Palmach became like a new family for us,' says Dina Maestro. Afterwards we drive to their Kibbutz near Tivon, Scha'ar HaAmakim. In Haifa, and also in the Kibbutz, we are shown the impact of the Hezbollah rockets. Neima Schalev told us, 'Some of

us didn't leave our houses during the Lebanon war. My husband and I couldn't even rush to the protection-cellar, because we are too old for that, and the rockets came too fast.' Neima came to Palestine in 1943 with the children-transport – she and Uri, her husband, were among Karl's first friends in the Kibbutz. Asked about her participation in the Palmach, she modestly shrugs it off. 'I only transported arms, trying not to be caught by the British soldiers.'

In 1946, aged 18, Karl joined the Jewish underground army. He wants to show us some of photographs of himself from those days and so we go to the Palmach-Museum in Tel Aviv. We go on a two-hour guided tour, organised mostly for the young soldiers of the IDF. Karl is not impressed. The show is crowned by a hokey love-story. 'We were never like that. We only wanted to survive. No army in the world ever had a better motivation than ours: If we lose the war for our own state, they will kill us.' Why – we ask him again and again – did you return to Austria, the country of the perpetrators? He quips, 'Because of my low blood pressure. In Austria I get upset once a day, minimum, and that's quite healthy.' In more serious attempts to explain his return in 1951, Karl points to his desire to understand what had happened. 'Maybe coming back was the greatest fault in my live.'

Pfeifer never rests. He collaborates with the Documentation Center for Austrian Resistance and writes for Austrian, Hungarian, British and Israeli magazines and newspapers. One such is Israel-Nachrichten the last German-language weekly in Israel. We visit its office in Tel Aviv and meet editor-in-chief, Alice Schwarz-Gardos. Born in Vienna in 1916 she escaped to Palestine in 1939. 90 years old, she is physically and mentally hyper-active. She greets us. 'I'm sorry to keep you waiting, I had to finish the edition and mail it to the printing plant.' We ask her about the debate in Germany about participation in the UN force in Lebanon – which could lead to German soldiers shooting at Jews. She laughs. 'This debate is not of interest in Israel. We have other problems at the moment, such as the Iranian fantasies of extermination.'

After Karl flew back to Vienna we stayed on and explored Iraqi Israel. My friends and I co-founded a NGO strengthening women-rights in Northern Iraq and we have visited the country three times since the liberation of 2003. We have Iraqi friends in Vienna, from northern Iraq, from Baghdad, and from the south. Not all of them could be described as great friends of Israel, but all of them gave us the assignment to look for Iraqis. Some remember their Jewish neighbours who were expelled from Iraq in 1951-2. 'Tell us what they are doing now and what they think

about Iraq – search for them!' [See Rayyan Al-Shawaf's review of Abbas Shiblak's *Iraqi Jews: A History of a Mass Exodus*, in this issue of Democratiya – Ed.]

The security situation being calm, we took the public bus to the suburb of Gilo and visited the House of the Zionist Movement in Iraq to meet Avraham Kehila, the founder of the small documentation center. He was twelve years old in 1941 when pogroms terrorised Baghdad's Jewish community. The mob organised by Rashid Ali al-Gaylani murdered and raped Iraqi Jews, and destroyed their houses. But, like many others, Kehila's family was protected by Muslim neighbours.

After the traumatising experience of the pogroms the reactions of the Jews were diverse. Some dreamt of a socialist revolution which would automatically end discrimination and so became communists. Others joined the Zionist youth movement. Kehila opted for the latter, but says 'I'm Iraqi. I was born in Iraq. But I'm also Israeli.'

Shimon Ballas, on the other hand, did become a communist. We visited him in his apartment in a very nice suburb of Tel Aviv. He left Iraq in 1951, and is now an author. Actually, we had already 'seen' Shimon – in the film Forget Baghdad, the tale of four Jewish Iraqi communists living in Israel. A wonderful film, but I remember not being convinced by the documentary's claim that Mossad had organised a series of bombings in Baghdad in 1950 that killed three persons in the Shemtov Synagogue and which finally led to the emigration of around 130,000 Iraqi Jews to Israel. But Ballas insists on the Mossad theory. He is a brilliant intellectual, but I still can't believe it.

The next evening we are invited to an extraordinarily delicious Iraqi dinner at the house of a friend, in Tel Aviv. These are Zionist Iraqis and I try to find a polite way of asking our host about the bombings as I am told he worked for the Mossad and helped organise the evacuation of the Iraqi Jews in 1951 and 1952. He smiles. 'Nobody knows, there has been no proof, and most probably there never will be.' After the 1967 war, the Ba'athists started executing a large number of the remaining Jews. In his book Republic of Fear, Kanan Makiya describes the hanging of Jews in Baghdad's public squares in 1969.

The visit passes in a whirl of conversations. Conversations with Avraham Kehila about his niece, who still lives in Baghdad, having converted to Islam in the early 1950s to marry her beloved husband. After the regime fell, Kehila tells us, he could

finally get in contact with his niece and exchange letters and phone-calls – but the terrible security situation in Baghdad has thrown its shadow over their shared joy about the new Iraq. Conversations with our friend Sari Bashi, a bright Iraqi-American-Israeli lawyer, from Tel Aviv who defends Palestinians in Israeli courts. Conversations with our beloved friend Leonardo Cohen – not a singer, but a young secular Mexican-Israeli Zionist, an expert on Ethiopian history, and it turns out, an expert on showing visitors around Jerusalem.

The sense of possibility I felt in these conversations, and in the enthusiasm of my Iraqi friends when I bring news of their old neighbours, fades quickly on my return to Vienna. We take the train downtown and see sprayed swastikas. I call my grandma to tell her I'm back safely. She doesn't want to hear about my journey. 'You know it, I don't like *them*.' Welcome back, I think to myself. I decide to call my Iraqi friends instead, and talk to them of all I saw and heard in Israel.