



Above: Omar Rolf von Ehrenfels and Max Brod with Ehrenfels's son Mou'min in Tarasp (Switzerland), 1963. Cited in Umar R. von Ehrenfels, "Vier Erinnerungen an Max Brod," Die Tat 34, no. 45 (Feb. 22, 1969): 29. Source: E-Newspaper Archives.

Below: Franz Karl Ginzkey, Hatschi-Bratschis Luftballon: Eine Dichtung für Kinder von Franz Karl Ginzkey. Mit vielen Bildern von Ernst Dombrowski (Salzburg: Anton Pustet, 1933). Inside cover and p. 8 (depicting Hatschi Bratschi). Source: Austrian National Library.

Diversifying Modern Austrian History: Exploring Parallels and Intersections between Jewish and Muslim Histories in Austria

by Omar T. Nasr and Tim Corbett

Abstract

Jews and Muslims have lived in the territory of modern-day Austria for centuries untold, yet often continue to be construed as the essential “other.” This essay explores a selection of sometimes divergent, sometimes convergent historical experiences amongst these two broad population groups, focusing specifically on demographic diversity, community-building, discrimination and persecution, and the post-war situation. The ultimate aim is to illuminate paradigmatically through the Austrian case study the complex multicultural mosaic of historical Central Europe, the understanding of which, so our contention, sheds a critical light on the often divisive present-day debates concerning immigration and diversity in Austria and Central Europe more broadly. It furthermore opens up a hitherto understudied field of historical research, namely the entangled history of Jews and Muslims in modern Europe.

1 Introduction

Among the many myths on which a sense of Austrian “nationhood” was belatedly established in the years following Nazi rule, one of the most tenacious was the notion that Austria is – and always has been – essentially white, Catholic, and German.¹ In reality, throughout the millennium that “Austria” has existed as a political construct, the lands included under this name (we are here concerned primarily with the territory of the present-day republic)

¹ In lieu of in-depth citations on these broad issues, please refer generally to the series “Contemporary Austrian Studies,” accessed February 15, 2023, <https://www.uibk.ac.at/iup/verlagsverzeichnis/contemporary-austrian-studies.html>. The statistics on contemporary demographics cited in this essay are drawn from “Statistik Austria,” accessed February 15, 2023, <https://www.statistik.at/>.

have been shaped by a great diversity of peoples, languages, cultures, and religions and marked by constant migration flows that persist into the present day. Jews constituted probably the most visible and certainly one of the most beleaguered groups construed as a “minority” in pre-Holocaust Austrian history. Yet, this position has in contemporary Austrian society to a large degree shifted onto the country’s large and substantially post-migrant Muslim population.²

This essay is dedicated to highlighting the diversity of Austrian society past and present by exploring some of the parallels and intersections between Jewish and Muslim histories in the territory of modern Austria. To this end, it explores a selection of sometimes divergent, sometimes convergent historical experiences amongst these two broad population groups, focusing especially on the following topoi: demographic diversity, community-building, discrimination and persecution, and the post-war situation. The ultimate aim is to illuminate paradigmatically the complex multicultural mosaic of historical Central Europe, the understanding of which, so our contention, sheds a critical light on the often divisive present-day debates concerning immigration and diversity in Austria and Central Europe more broadly.

2 Demographic Diversity

Both in the past and present, Jews and Muslims, as indeed Austrians generally, have been conceived in varying terms, with no clear definition applying to all the members of each given group nor clearly delineating the one group from the other. Islam and Judaism are usually regarded first and foremost as religions, but like Christianity, neither follows a monolithic dogma, thus, throughout its history, Austria has been home to many different Jews and Judaisms (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Chassidic, Bucharan, Reform, and so on) and different Muslims and iterations of Islam (mainly Sunni and Shi’i and multiple sub-groups of each). At the same time, the followers of both these denominations in Austria have often been perceived and/or viewed themselves additionally or alternatively in “national” or “ethnic” terms and are thus crucially often

² The term “post-migration” refers not just to the migration experience of first-generation migrants themselves, but also the interactive, transformative relationship that arises as a result between the migrant communities (and their descendants) and their new home countries, see Erol Yildiz and Marc Hill, eds. *Nach der Migration: Postmigrantisches Perspektiven jenseits der Parallelgesellschaft* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015).

perceived as “non-native” peoples, in explicit contrast to white, Christian (whether Catholic or Protestant), German-speaking Austrians.

To be sure, the various Jewish and Muslim population groups that have inhabited Austria throughout history often had a (post)migration background. Yet, Jews have inhabited the region since the Roman era, while Muslim populations in the region date as far back as the ninth century, and not just since the immigration of “guest workers” after World War Two, as is popularly assumed.³ The presence of both Jews and Muslims, therefore, significantly predates not only the modern “nations” in the region, but even the nebulous “Ostarrichi document” of 996, on the basis of which a new Austrian “national” identity was invented after 1945. Demographically and culturally, both population groups have thus formed a constitutive part of Austrian history for centuries. Nevertheless, the myth of a solely Christian or – increasingly after the Holocaust – an extended “Judeo-Christian” culture in Central Europe remains unfortunately widespread, as reflected in contemporary Austrian political discourse, particularly amongst the right wing.

An immediate contrast between the Jewish and Muslim populations in the territory of modern Austria can be found in their relative size and proportion, which stand in inverse relation to one another in the past and the present: The Habsburg Empire in its final decades was home to several million Jews, who made up about a fifth of the world Jewish population in 1900, with Vienna constituting one of the world’s greatest Jewish metropolises before the Holocaust. Conversely, the Muslim population in the present-day territory of Austria, while negligible before the twentieth century, has grown steadily since the 1970s, reaching approximately 745,000 individuals in 2021, about 8.3 percent of the total population. Meanwhile, the post-Holocaust Jewish population of Austria has never exceeded about 0.1 percent of the population.

Another contrast can be found in the historical places of origin of Jews and Muslims, respectively: In the early modern and modern periods, Jews primarily migrated to Austria from the lands of the Holy Roman Empire, Hungary, and Poland, while before the mid-twentieth century, especially following the Treaty of Passarowitz in 1718, Muslims mainly migrated to Austria from

³ Smail Balić, “Zur Geschichte der Muslime in Österreich I: Lebensräume und Konfliktfelder,” in *Islam zwischen Selbstbild und Klischee: Eine Religion im österreichischen Schulbuch*, ed. Susanne Heine, Kölner Veröffentlichungen Zur Religionsgeschichte, vol. 26 (Cologne: Böhlau, 1995), 23–35.

the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire, with an increasing number coming from Egypt.⁴ The Muslim population of the Habsburg Empire finally rose to over half a million following the occupation of Bosnia and Hercegovina in 1878.

This gradual growth in the size and significance of Muslims in Habsburg Austria found a Jewish parallel, however, in Sephardi migration to present-day Austria, particularly Vienna, in the modern period. The Sephardi migrants constituted a distinct “community” with a distinct religious, cultural, and linguistic makeup, moreover sharing many cultural and economic ties to the Muslim-majority communities of the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires from which they hailed. Finally, while Ashkenazi Jews were legally and socially ostracized before the granting of general emancipation in Austria with the December Constitution of 1867, the Sephardim generally enjoyed greater social privileges alongside an elevated economic status on account of their Ottoman citizenship.

3 Community-Building

The concept of “community,” while ubiquitous today in academic, political, and popular discourse, often remains poorly defined. In the Austrian political context, the definition of a “religious community” (*Religionsgesellschaft*) is a distinctly legal matter: Unlike in other countries, certainly in the English-speaking world, religious communities in Austria are constituted as legally recognized public-law bodies acting essentially as intermediaries between the state and their members. The process by which religious denominations become chartered has since 1874 been regulated by the *“Anerkennungsgesetz”* (Recognition Law). The constitution of each recognized community is subsequently regulated with a specific law, in this context specifically the *“Israelitengesetz”* (Israelite Law) recognizing a “Jewish community” and the *“Islamgesetz”* (Islam Law) recognizing a “Muslim community” since 1890 and 1912, respectively.⁵

⁴ Marcel Chahrour, “The ‘Mecca of Medicine.’ Students from the Arab world at the Medical Faculty of the University of Vienna 1848–1960,” in *Strukturen und Netzwerke: Medizin und Wissenschaft in Wien 1848–1955*, eds. Daniela Angetter, Birgit Nemeč, Herbert Posch, Christiane Druml, and Paul Weindling (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2018), 487–509.

⁵ The respective laws can be found under the Austrian government’s register of laws: “Rechtsinformationssystem des Bundes,” accessed February 15, 2023, <https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/>.

Naturally, such official definitions do not necessarily or accurately reflect the self-identification of “communities” in reality, though they are constitutive of homogenous community concepts in the popular imagination. While hundreds of centralized Jewish representative bodies – so-called *Israelitische Kultusgemeinden* – were established across Habsburg Austria from the 1890s onwards, in which the vast majority of self-identifying Jews were members, an *Islamische Kultusgemeinde* was not officially founded until 1979. This, however, should not lead to the fallacy that the Islamic religious community (“*Religionsgesellschaft*”) as a whole was only founded in 1979, as it was already officially recognized in 1912.⁶ To be sure, Muslims had already settled in Austria before 1979, formed cultural and religious associations, and thus self-identified as an Austrian Muslim community many decades prior to 1979.⁷

Consequently, by the interwar period, when a vibrant Jewish culture was flourishing in Austria, a small yet energetic Muslim community had also emerged, like the Jewish population predominantly located in Vienna but also in university cities like Graz and Innsbruck. Muslims in interwar Vienna formed various intellectual, political, and religious organizations and endeavored to partake in Viennese cultural life. Despite its ultimate failure due to the rise of Nazism and the outbreak of World War Two, a mosque construction project in Vienna serves as an emblematic reminder of the determination to make Vienna a spiritual abode for the interwar Muslim community.⁸

⁶ Rijad Dautović, “40 Jahre seit der Wiederherstellung der IRG-Wien: Warum die Islamische Religionsgemeinde Wien nicht erst 1979 gegründet wurde,” in *Die Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich, 1909–1979–2019: Beiträge zu einem neuen Blick auf ihre Geschichte und Entwicklung*, ed. Farid Hafez and Rijad Dautović (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2019), 99–124.

⁷ Rijad Dautović, “Islamitisch akademischer Verein ‘Zvijezda’: Über den 1904 gegründeten ersten muslimischen Verein in Österreich,” *Wiener Geschichtsblätter* 74, no. 4 (2019): 397–406; Marcel Chahrour, “Politics in Exile – Egyptian Political Opposition in Austria 1880–1945: The Ägyptische Nationalpartei and the Islamische Kulturbund and Its Activities in Austria in the Interwar-Period,” in *Egypt and Austria IV: Crossroads*, eds. Johanna Holaubek, Hana Navrátilová, and Wolf B. Oerter (Prague: Set Out, 2008), 247–261.

⁸ Omar Nasr, “The ‘Islamischer Kulturbund’ in Vienna and Its Role in Organising the Muslim Community in Interwar Austria” (Master’s thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2021).

4 Discrimination and Persecution

As abstractions, Jews and Muslims present twin pillars of exclusion in the construction of a “white” and “Christian” identity regime in modern Austria, as elsewhere in Europe. As Farid Hafez has explored, Jews and Muslims were both imagined as “inherently opposed to European values,” albeit by the nineteenth century the “Jewish Oriental” was imagined to be the “enemy within” (as were Protestants at crucial moments like the Counterreformation), while the “Muslim Oriental” was “located outside of the borders of Europe.”⁹

This finding is borne out by the long history of violent exclusion and persecution suffered by Jews within Austria since the Middle Ages, while by the fifteenth century, the principal external menace had been identified as the Ottoman Empire. Following the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and the Ottoman military advances in Southeastern Europe resulting in two sieges of Vienna in 1529 and 1683, the “Turks” were firmly imprinted in the collective consciousness of the Catholic Habsburg lands as the preeminent external threat. In parallel to the “Jews” within, the “Turks” were of unequivocal importance in demarcating the “other” without, both abstractions (“Jews” and “Turks”) serving over the centuries – albeit in constantly mutating forms – to conversely define the Catholic, German-speaking “we” in Austria.¹⁰

Indeed, the term “Turks” was at various stages of Austrian history applied to various groups hailing from the Ottoman Empire, not just Muslims, but also Greeks, Armenians, and notably Sephardic Jews.¹¹ Similarly, the abstracted “*Türkengefahr*” (Turkish danger), as a cultural trope, has historically been applied to perceived enemies within (Habsburg) Austria as disparate as (Jewish) democrats during the 1848 revolutions, (Jewish) liberal politicians in the 1880s, and (Jewish) socialists under the “Austrofascist” regime in the 1930s.¹²

⁹ Farid Hafez, “From ‘Jewification’ to ‘Islamization’: Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in Austrian Politics Then and Now,” *ReOrient* 4, no. 2 (2019): 199–202.

¹⁰ Simon Hadler, “Europe’s Other? The Turks and Shifting Borders of Memory,” *European Review of History/Revue Européenne d’histoire* 24, no. 4 (2017): 507–526.

¹¹ Franz Fillafer, “Österreichislam,” in *Habsburg Neu Denken: Vielfalt und Ambivalenz in Zentral-europa – 30 Kulturwissenschaftliche Stichworte*, ed. Johannes Feichtinger and Heidemarie Uhl (Vienna: Böhlau, 2016), 163–170, here 165.

¹² Simon Hadler, “Feindschaften,” in *Habsburg Neu Denken: Vielfalt und Ambivalenz in Zentral-europa – 30 Kulturwissenschaftliche Stichworte*, eds. Johannes Feichtinger and Heidemarie Uhl (Vienna: Böhlau, 2016), 59–65, here 63–64.

The intertwining of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim ideologies in modern Austrian culture is succinctly demonstrated in the 1933 edition of Franz Karl Ginzkey's (1871–1963) children's book *Hatschi Bratschis Luftballon*, a story originally published in 1904 about an evil "Turk" called Hatschi Bratschi who kidnaps Christian children from Central Europe. The 1933 edition included new illustrations by Ernst Dombrowski (1896–1985) that incorporated explicitly antisemitic motifs, blending them with barbaric stereotypes of the "Oriental Muslim." Notably, both Ginzkey and Dombrowski were Austrian members of the Nazi Party. *Hatschi Bratschis Luftballon* continues to be sold today, the most recent edition having been published in 2011, though it has come under increasing criticism in recent years for its racist stereotyping.

Austria's large and influential Jewish population of the interwar period was almost entirely decimated in the Holocaust, being either driven into exile or murdered. The fate of Austria's Muslim population under Nazi rule was more checkered. Muslim civilians in Austria during this period were organized in a few associations, the most important being the *Islamische Gemeinde zu Wien* (Islamic Community in Vienna), which was only able to operate under the strict control of the Nazis.¹³ While some members supported the regime – mainly for political reasons such as anti-colonial and anti-Soviet aspirations – others helped save Jews by granting them membership in the association, thus passing them off as Muslims.¹⁴

Meanwhile, anti-Nazi Muslims in Austria were forced to flee, such as Baron Omar Rolf von Ehrenfels (1901–1980), a Christian convert to Islam, who was the inaugural president of the "*Islamischer Kulturbund Wien*", the main Muslim association of interwar Austria, and from 1933 onward an outspoken activist and voice against rising antisemitism and Nazism. On the eve of the *Anschluß* in 1938, Ehrenfels was holding a lecture in Prague, where he had been in close friendship with Max Brod, a renowned Jewish intellectual and editor

¹³ Rijad Dautović, "40 Jahre seit der Wiederherstellung der IRG-Wien: Warum die Islamische Religionsgemeinde Wien nicht erst 1979 gegründet wurde," in *Die Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich, 1909–1979–2019: Beiträge zu einem neuen Blick auf ihre Geschichte und Entwicklung*, eds. Farid Hafez and Rijad Dautović (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2019), 99–124.

¹⁴ Rijad Dautović, "Islamische Gemeinde zu Wien' (1942–1945): Zwischen Kollaboration und Judenrettung," presentation at the annual conference of the Austrian Studies Association, New Orleans, 2022.

of the anti-Nazi liberal democratic newspaper, the *Prager Tagblatt*, for which Ehrenfels also wrote regularly. Following the *Anschluss*, Max Brod received information that his Muslim friend was wanted by the Nazis as his name was on one of their notorious blacklists. Ehrenfels was alerted by his Jewish friend, Brod, who despite being in danger himself assisted Ehrenfels in his successful escape to India. Shortly after that, Brod had to escape as well. They were only to meet again about three decades later.¹⁵

There were also examples of entanglements between Jewish and Muslim fates during the Holocaust in Austria. For example, Leopold Weiss alias Muhammad Asad (1900–1992), a celebrated convert from Judaism to Islam who resided in India, endeavored to rescue his Jewish family from Austria. Yet, his attempt to procure a visa to India was rejected by the British colonial administration due to Asad’s involvement in Muslim anti-colonial circles in India. His family was subsequently murdered in a concentration camp.¹⁶ Finally, Muslim soldiers, like Jewish soldiers, participated greatly in the Allied war efforts, for example in the Red Army’s conquest of Vienna in April 1945, and Muslim POWs can be found in the records of concentration camps on Austrian territory.¹⁷

5 The Postwar Situation

The Jewish population that reestablished itself in the Second Austrian Republic after 1945 consisted once again to a great degree of migrants, this time mainly DPs, refugees, and immigrants from Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The latter group, today organized as the *Verein Bucharischer Juden Österreichs* (Association of Bukharan Jews in Austria) and constituting about a third of the Jewish community membership, not only originally hailed from Muslim-majority countries, but also spoke regional languages like Farsi and practiced a form of Judaism that emerged in interaction with local variants of Islam,

¹⁵ U. R. von Ehrenfels to Roy C. Bates, Box 2, Professional Correspondence Series, Folder 26, Roy C. Bates (Kurt Bauchwitz) Papers, German and Jewish Intellectual Emigre Collection, M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives, University Libraries, University at Albany, State University of New York.

¹⁶ Margit Franz, *Gateway India: Deutschsprachiges Exil in Indien zwischen britischer Kolonialherrschaft, Maharadschas und Gandhi* (Graz: Clio, 2015).

¹⁷ Jeff Eden, *God Save the USSR: Soviet Muslims and the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 112–117.

thus presenting deep cultural intersections with some (post-)migrant portions of Austria's Muslim population today.¹⁸

Like surviving Jews, the Muslim populations of Central and Eastern Europe were scattered across DP camps after the war, including in Austria. Many decided to stay in Austria and to (re-)establish Muslim communal life, especially in Salzburg and Carinthia, but also in Vienna.¹⁹ The Muslim population of Austria then grew substantially following the labor migration treaties with Turkey and Yugoslavia in 1962 and 1964. Muslims from other countries also migrated to Austria in search of educational and career opportunities, with many deciding to stay and make Austria their new home. Presently, Austria is home to a large – and growing – Muslim population, most of whom are already second, third, fourth, and occasionally fifth-generation. Today making up 8.3 percent of the total population, Muslims have thus become conspicuously visible in contemporary Austrian society.

Jews also remain conspicuously visible in public consciousness today, despite their minimal numbers following the Holocaust, partly as an abstraction, but also due to the disproportionate cultural attention paid to Jewish history as a result of the Holocaust. Since the 1970s, however, political and social discourse in Austria has increasingly shifted away from Jews and towards the topic of “Islam,” particularly amongst the right wing. While antisemitism has by no means ceased to exist, Muslims today undoubtedly constitute the primary target for the construction of “otherness” in Austrian politics. Indeed, the boom in interest in Jewish history and culture in Austria in recent years, which has been attributed at least in part to the general shame predominating today about the Holocaust as Austria's “original sin,”²⁰ has most recently also led to a problematic tendency to instrumentalize the Holocaust to justify exclusionary anti-refugee, anti-immigrant, and anti-

¹⁸ Ariane Sadjed, “(Re-)Covering a Mutual Language: Persianate Muslims and Jews in Austria,” *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion* 24 (2024), Special Issue: Change and Its Discontents: Religious Organizations and Religious Life in Central and Eastern Europe, eds. Olga Breskaya and Siniša Zrinščak (forthcoming).

¹⁹ Rijad Dautovi, “Eine Islamische Gemeinde im Kärnten der Nachkriegszeit?” (manuscript under review).

²⁰ Jérôme Segal and Ian Mansfield, “Contention and Discontent Surrounding Religion in Noughties’ [sic] Austria,” *Austrian Studies* 19 (2011): 52–67, here 65.

Muslim politics, as though antisemitism were an issue “imported” into Austria by Muslims.²¹

While anti-Jewish sentiments amongst Austria’s Muslim population do exist, often relating to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, this tendency to shift the blame for antisemitism onto the Muslim population and thus to sow discord between two often marginalized groups in Austrian society is worrying indeed – especially considering that neo-Nazi violence has been no less an issue in Austria in recent decades.²² In recent times, there have moreover been concerted efforts by Austrian Muslim organizations to address and counter antisemitism within Muslim communities. Unfortunately, comparable endeavors to combat Islamophobia in Austria to date remain relatively limited.²³

6 Conclusion

This brief essay has highlighted numerous points of convergence and divergence in the Jewish and Muslim histories of Austria over the past centuries. For all the differences in geographic and temporal patterns of migration, Jews and Muslims in Austria evidently share the common experience both of looking back on a long history in this country and at the same time of being consistently construed as the quintessential “other.” While Austria’s Jewish history, from the cultural heyday of the fin-de-siècle to the annihilation of the Holocaust, has been thoroughly explored in historiography, the historic Muslim populations of the country, their entanglements in Austrian culture and society, and their experiences of war and persecution, evidently remain a research desideratum, as does the entanglement of Jewish and Muslim histories in modern Austria and Europe.

The kind of comparative approach to Austrian history we have briefly highlighted here invites a deeper engagement with the cultural complexity of the region in the past and present, beyond the Manichean discourses of “majority/minority” or “autochthonous/foreign” that continue to dominate

²¹ Dirk Rupnow, “Austria’s Year of Memory and Commemoration 2018: A Review,” *Contemporary Austrian Studies* 28 (2019): 222–236.

²² Evelyn Adunka, *Die vierte Gemeinde: Die Wiener Juden in der Zeit von 1945 bis heute* (Vienna: Philo, 2000), 452–459.

²³ Muslimische Jugend Österreich, ed., *MuslimInnen gegen Antisemitismus: Gedenken, Begegnen, Bewegen* (Vienna: Al Hamra, 2019).

today.²⁴ For all the differences – and occasional antagonisms – between Jewish and Muslim histories in Austria, the commonalities invite reflection upon and solidarity with other smaller population groups construed as religious, ethnic, or social “others” in the past and present. Finally, the complexity of these entangled histories serves as a stark reminder not to allow one group’s tragic history to be used as justification for another group’s stigmatization.

²⁴ Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: Sage, 2015).