



**„SÄUBERUNGEN“**  
**AN ÖSTERREICHISCHEN**  
**HOCHSCHULEN**  
**1934–1945**

VORAUSSETZUNGEN, PROZESSE, FOLGEN

**JOHANNES KOLL (HG.)**

**böhlau**



Johannes Koll (Hg.)

# **„Säuberungen“ an österreichischen Hochschulen 1934–1945**

Voraussetzungen, Prozesse, Folgen



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## From Vienna to Malta

Interview with former student of the Vienna University for World Trade  
Robert Eder\*

### Preliminary remarks



Abb. 1: Robert Eder im November 2013.

Robert Eder was 20 years old when Austria was annexed to the Third Reich in the wake of the *Anschluss* of March 1938. He and his brother Hans had to give up their studies at the Vienna University for World Trade (*Hochschule für Welthandel*) and were deprived of their cars, flat, factory, and properties. Via Italy Eder emigrated to Malta, which had been administered since the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Great Britain. Here, he and his family survived the Second World War.<sup>1</sup>

In November 2013, I had the opportunity to interview Robert Eder at his residence in Malta. The interview took several days. The 96-year-old man was eager to tell his personal experiences with the turbulent past of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Upon arriving from the airport

at night, it was not even five minutes before he phoned me in the hotel inviting me for the first conversation at his home. Thanks to his good health and a remarkable capacity for remembering, he managed to sketch European history in the course of the following days from a personal point of view. His experiences ranged from Austria and Hitler's Germany to British Malta and the independent republic of Malta.

Johannes Koll

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\* I would like to thank Dr. Carmen Gruber (Vienna) for assistance in editing the text.

1 For the biographies of Robert and Hans Eder see also the respective entries in the Memorial Book for Victims of National Socialism at the Hochschule für Welthandel 1938–1945, <http://gedenkbuch.wu.ac.at/> [6. März 2017].

## The Interview

### Before the *Anschluss*

How was your life in Vienna in the interwar period which embraced your childhood and youth?

My father was a hat maker. He owned a factory in the *Mariabilfer Straße*, right opposite the famous store *Gerngroß*. Later my father's factory moved approximately half a mile away to the *Neubaugasse*. In the same street we lived in a flat of the *Neubauhof*. Next to us and on the same floor of that nice building lived my grandparents who up to the *Anschluss* ran a coffeehouse. As its name indicates, the *Café Neubauhof* also was situated in that building.

My parents considered education very important. After primary school I attended secondary school, a *Realgymnasium*. At a commercial academy,<sup>2</sup> I passed the final examinations. Afterwards I inscribed to the *Hochschule für Welthandel*<sup>3</sup> like my brother Hans had done the year before. Between the winter term 1936/37 and the *Anschluss*, the annexation of Austria to the Third Reich in March 1938, I was a student of this university specialized in economy and business.

Did you and your family participate in the life of the Jewish community of Vienna?

On Sabbath, we regularly went to the synagogue. My father Hermann (Hersch) exercised the function of warden or something like that in the synagogue at the *Neudeggasse* which was responsible for the Jews living in the VII<sup>th</sup> and VIII<sup>th</sup> districts of Vienna called *Neubau* and *Josefstadt*.<sup>4</sup> My parents spoke Yiddish with each other, but I, Hans and our sister Lisbeth were brought up in standard German. As I didn't have much opportunity to talk German since we left Austria in 1938, however, English has become my principal language.

As we are talking about languages: For getting a foothold outside Austria, it was helpful that I had learnt English and French in school. In connection with emigration to Malta, I have learnt Italian and Maltese in addition.

2 The so called *Handelsakademie VIII* was situated at Hamerlingplatz 5/6 in Vienna, just 0.7 miles from Eder's residence *Neubauhof*.

3 At that time, the *Hochschule für Welthandel* was situated in the *Währinger Park* in Vienna.

4 In November 1939, this synagogue was destroyed by the Nazi-regime.

What do you remember of your links to the *Hochschule für Welthandel*?

During the three semesters which I was allowed to study at this university I did not attend regularly many lectures and courses, because besides my studies I had to work in my father's factory. Furthermore, I was exempted from examinations on bookkeeping, English and French and other subjects which I had passed already at the commercial academy. The last examinations which I passed at the *Hochschule für Welthandel* took place in February 1938, just a few weeks before the German army invaded Austria.

When the *Anschluss* actually came, I went to the 'Welthandel' in order to register for the summer term as I had done the previous semesters. But at the *Hochschule* I was told: "No Jews here". I don't feel that I was expelled from my university. Officially they never forbade me to come back. But the quoted sentence was enough to me. It made unambiguously clear that I was not welcome any longer. In fact, I never entered the building in the *Währinger Park* again. Thus, due to the *Anschluss*, I was deprived of the opportunity to finish my studies. The same is true for my brother. Obviously, the administrative aspects of the removal of our names from the register of students took some time: It was only in September 1938 that the 'Welthandel' issued a transcript which represented our official dismissal.

Did you experience any violence against you or other Jews before the *Anschluss* took place?

Never. In school, there was no difference between Jewish and non-Jewish pupils. Among the latter, I had many friends. Affiliation to a religious community didn't matter at that time. In this context it is indicative that also non-Jewish friends brought books to me when I had to spend half a year in a sanatorium in the mountainous area of the *Semmering* in order to recover from an illness. Thanks to their support I passed all the exams of that year. I didn't encounter discrimination before March 1938. The takeover of power by the Nazi-regime changed the situation radically, of course. Just after the *Anschluss* I was forced one evening to paint "Jewish shop" on the window of a shop that was run by a Jew.

### 1938/39

What did happen to you and your family after the invasion of Austria by the German army on 12 March 1938?

On the first day after the *Anschluss* my father went to his factory as he had done so many times before. At the entrance the bookkeeper of his firm who was wearing the badge of the NSDAP told him: "Don't come in here." When my father asked if he might take some papers from his office, he was told by the same man: "No, you must not take anything from here." That was it. I think that my father never came back to the factory. After a certain time, the firm was closed. The people who had taken over the business from my father were incapable of keeping it up. The firm was "aryanized" as they called it, and we were deprived of our property.

Also our cars were taken away. I had a Steyr. On one day, a man with a swastika armband came to me and gave me the order to render him the key of the car. After three days, he came back and told me that he had had a crash, and that it was my task to repair the car at my expense. My brother also had a car, a Nash. This American vehicle was confiscated by the *Geheime Staatspolizei*.

Finally our flat was given to someone who obviously was no friend of the Jews – otherwise he wouldn't have got this flat. The Nazis knew everything in advance, they were well prepared.

How were your living conditions in Austria after the *Anschluss*?

In effect, we couldn't do much before we left Vienna. Basically we prepared emigration to Malta. Contrary to many other co-religionists, we were not faced with harassment by employees of the National Socialist offices when organizing the necessary documents. We were not starving, because we had still some money from the business. But the factory was gone, and our cars were taken away. Like all other Jews, finally, we had to declare our properties in spring 1938. From then on, we could no longer autonomously dispose of our possessions. Generally speaking, we didn't spend much money before leaving the country. We never went to restaurants, for example. Anyway, there was no perspective for an amelioration of the situation after March 1938.

Which options did you have at that time?

As my father told the Jewish community of Vienna in May 1938, he thought about emigrating to distant countries – to Persia, Australia, Turkey, Canada and to the Dutch Indies.<sup>5</sup> At that time my parents would have signed anything to go anywhere. All that counted was to get out of National Socialist Germany. But which countries

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5 Cf. archive of the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien, Jerusalem, A/W 2589/43, No. 16846.

wanted to take in Jews at that time? Finally all of us went to Malta where we had commercial relations.

How did you get to Malta?

Just before the *Anschluss* took place, my brother Hans was on this Mediterranean island on a business trip. When the German army invaded Austria, we told him to stay in Malta and to prepare the relocation of the rest of our family. In fact, Hans collected some money so that we could start to build up a new life on the Maltese island.

After my brother had provided the indispensable permit, I could leave the country in which there was no future for us. With just ten *Schilling* in my pockets, I took the train from Vienna to Italy, and from Sicily I crossed the Mediterranean Sea by a ferry boat. Thanks to the visa for Malta which I possessed in connection with our business, I didn't have any problems regarding my documents when passing through Italy. Thus, I reached Malta in September 1938. Later also my sister, my parents and my grandparents came to Malta after Hans and I had arranged everything on the ground.

From then on, we didn't have any connections with Austria and with people whom we had met before in Austria.

### **On Malta during the Second World War**

How did you install yourself in Malta?

In general it is important to note that we belonged to the lucky Jews who managed to escape from Nazi Germany. But of course, starting a new life in a new environment poses problems. One problem was that finally we didn't get our furniture from the *Neubauhof*. The ship containing our possessions did arrive at the harbor of Malta just on the day before the war broke out. Unfortunately, the ship returned to Germany without unloading the cargo. Obviously its captain feared that the ship and its cargo might be confiscated by the British authorities in Malta after the outbreak of hostilities between Germany and Great Britain. Later my parents found out that our belongings were distributed among German families who had been bombed out by Allied forces.

In the beginning, we lived in a pension in the capital Valletta. Then we rented a flat in Msida. In the same building we built up a factory. The machines for producing hats were imported from Italy. Later we took a flat in Sliema, but the factory remained in the same place as before.

The British authorities did not raise problems. With regard to our venture to build up a factory in Malta they turned out to be cooperative.

Did you have contacts with other Jews on Malta?

For centuries there has been a Jewish community in Malta. After we had arrived on the island, we regularly went to the local synagogue and participated in Jewish festivities like we had done before in Vienna. One's nationality and country of origin didn't play any role for the Jewish community. I would like to add that some Jews of Maltese as well as of non-Maltese origin supported us via financial backing or by making contacts for us.

Today, the local Jewish community is not big any more. In 2000, the Jewish Foundation of Malta, of which I am still president, renovated the synagogue. Furthermore it holds responsibility for the maintenance of the Jewish cemetery.

I assume that you lost German citizenship after you had left the *Ostmark*. What happened thereafter?

After five years, we received a British passport for which we had applied before. Although Malta was a fortress and the British did not like many foreigners on this island, we were granted British citizenship by the government in London. One might say that we were an asset to the Maltese economy due to our factory. And since our arrival on the island we had proven sufficiently that we in no way constituted a danger to British interests in this region. When Malta became independent in 1964, I automatically became a Maltese citizen.

How did you experience the siege and the air raids on Malta carried out by the Italian and German armies between 1940 and 1942?

Since the beginning of the war the Germans living on the island were regarded as enemy aliens by the British authorities. Therefore also the Jews who had come to Malta from Germany and Austria were under their surveillance. In this sense, we had to keep a diary in which we laid out what we did in the course of the day, where we went, to whom we talked and so on. Once a week we had to show it to a British office that kept tabs on foreigners. After all, we were not deported to Africa when the war started because we were in possession of permits.

When Italy started to attack Malta in 1940, we were interned in a camp on the island. After several weeks, however, we were released under the precondition that we

had to come back if Germany joined the war against Malta. In fact, we went to the camp on our own accord after Germany had taken up air attacks on Malta in the context of their war in North Africa in the next year. We were interned again, this time for two years. In fact, all of us were detained. My mother Helene and my sister were separated from me, my father and my brother. Of course, being interned was not pleasant. But on the whole, we were treated relatively well in the camps. Let me give some examples. My mother and Lisbeth were allowed to visit the male members of our family once a week. We could bring private things like books to the camps. Once they took me to the dentist, other inmates were brought to a hospital when necessary – under guard of course. Food was okay, nobody starved. Regularly, a Rabbi came to the camp in order to celebrate services with us. Finally, it was during the internment that I learnt Italian from an Italian fellow inmate as mentioned before. Thus in no way the British camps in Malta can be compared to the concentration camps which the Nazis ran in their realm. Here the internment was based exclusively on security reasons, it did not follow the logic of punishment let alone the mass killing and extermination of the Third Reich.

Even before it became clear that the Germans would not succeed in conquering Malta we were released for good. The Brits knew that we were no friends of the Nazis, they realized that we did not pose a danger to them. Just on the contrary, our fate was tied to Allied warfare – as Jews, we had everything to fear from a German invasion. In this sense I once asked the British commander during one of the internments what would happen to us if the Axis powers succeeded in invading the island. He told me literally: “Listen, if I have to leave Malta, I will take you with me. I won’t leave you here.” Fortunately, the British army didn’t have to abandon Malta during the war. The commander was displaced to Africa. But we could stay on Malta. Thus the whole family survived the Holocaust and the Second World War. This has also to be ascribed to the fact that we went to shelters when the air raids sirens sounded.

### **After the War**

How did life go on for you after the end of the war?

In 1947, I married Annette Barnstein, a descendant of a Jewish family from Greece. She was ten years younger than me. Although her family moved to the United States, we decided to reside in Malta. We have two children who both are living in the United Kingdom. In 2002 my wife passed away. She was buried in the Jewish cemetery of Malta.

After the Second World War, we first continued to produce hats on Malta. When hats went out of style, we decided to open a fashion store called HARO. The name

reflects the first two letters of the first names of Hans and me. In fact, though, Hans hardly concerned himself with the shop. It was rather my business and that of my parents until they retired. Our enterprise grew slowly but steadily. At the height of our business expansion we had five shops with a sales staff of approximately 20 persons. We were known for selling clothes of high quality. Over the course of time such products couldn't compete any more with cheap articles of low quality. Furthermore, our products were so durable that customers didn't feel the need to often buy new clothes. For these reasons, we gradually reduced the number of shops. When I retired, the last HARO-shop was closed down.

What about the other members of your family?

I am the only one of the family who stayed in Malta. My sister married a sergeant of the British army. After the wedding, they left Malta and settled in the United Kingdom. Only later did she return to Malta where she passed away in 1996. Also the postwar biography of my brother is not restricted to Malta. Already in Vienna, he had had a Jewish girlfriend. With her younger sister Helga this girl exiled to France after the *Anschluss*. When the Germans occupied France in spring 1940, both of them were hidden in a catholic monastery. There, they managed to survive the Second World War. When Hans went to France after the war in order to look for his girlfriend, he found out that in the meantime she had become a nun. Instead he married her younger sister. As Helga didn't like living on Malta, my brother's family took up residence in France. Later they settled in England because Hans wanted his children to grow up there. My own children, as explained above, are also living in Great Britain. Both of them are married, both of them have children. In the meantime I have even become a great-grandfather.

Did you ever receive compensation for the prosecution from which you suffered during the Nazi period?

In the beginning I was granted benefits from different institutions like American charity organizations. After a certain time, however, it dried up. I also received financial compensation from the German and the Austrian governments but I do not remember the details. Some years ago, I was named an honorary citizen of the Austrian republic.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, at the moment the respective certificate is not accessible to me.

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<sup>6</sup> This statement couldn't be verified.

Were the events following the *Anschluss* of Austria a topic for discussion within your family?

All of us were lucky that we escaped with our lives. We had lost our properties, but after all we survived the anti-Jewish persecution of the National Socialist regime and the war. In the years following our emigration, we were busy organizing our lives in Malta. Since we left Austria, we had plans for the future. There was no time for sitting around and mourning the past.

Did you ever return to Vienna after the Second World War?

When my children were 15, 16 years old, they wanted to see where I came from. We took a car and visited the house where I had been living with my family until 1938, the primary school near our flat in the *Neubaugasse*, the above mentioned secondary school and the commercial academy, and my former university. But neither I nor any other member of my family ever thought about returning to Austria. We didn't have any more ties to my native country after we left in 1938. Certainly it wouldn't have been easy to start all over again in postwar Austria, and we had installed ourselves successfully in Malta. Thus there was no reason to go back to Austria.

As far as I remember, my parents didn't even go one single time to this country for a visit. They had suffered a lot in the last months before they could leave Nazi Germany. They had lost all they had built up in the preceding years when they had been told from one day to the next: "Give me the key of your factory and never come back." Like my grandparents they stayed in Malta up to the end of their lives. Here they are buried in the Jewish cemetery.

Did you ever think about moving to England?

No, I never did. I had gotten used to living in Malta, and life is very easy here. Here we were relatively big fishes in a small pond. Through the HARO-shops I earned some esteem. Even long after the shops had been closed down I was called "Mister Haro" on the street time and again. If you go to another place you don't know anybody, you have to find out how things work. I didn't want to start once again a new life. So there never was any reason to go to another country after the war was over.

How would you describe your current situation?

In former times I had an active life. At the age of 96, however, activities are rather limited. I sit in my room, play with the dog, go out for a walk and return home. Apart from talking to Carmen and Charlie Galea, who take care of me since a couple of years ago, I read magazines and the newspaper every day. As television doesn't offer interesting programs, I prefer reading to watching TV. Thus I have read with much interest *The Hare with Amber Eyes* by Edmund de Waal. This *hidden inheritance*, as the subtitle goes, tells the story of the Jewish family Ephrussi who lost their banking company, their prestigious *Palais* in the heart of Vienna and all of their property following the *Anschluss*.