

History of Republikanischer Club – Neues Österreich

Republikanischer Club – Neues Österreich (“Republican Club – New Austria”) was established in 1986 during the Waldheim Affair. Both as candidate as well as later as the elected Austrian Federal President, Kurt Waldheim was not capable of explaining his dubious past in the National Socialist period. He denied, he belittled and he got annoyed. *He’d only done “his duty”,* he would snap. At the time the conservative People’s Party ÖVP which had nominated him for the Presidential elections, spoke of a “*campaign*” against their candidate by the “*East Coast*” ...

The aim of the founders of Republikanischer Club – Neues Österreich (Kuno Knöbl, Peter Kreisky, Doron Rabinovici, Rubina Möhring, Daniel and Miriam Charim, Silvio Lehmann, Ruth Beckermann, Gustav Glaser, Gaby Lansky and many more) was to raise awareness of the participation of Austrians in the crimes committed under National Socialism, for “*the Waldheim affair was only the occasion but not the cause of our controversy. Waldheim was only a symbol; he was not the actual problem but its unsavoury symbol*”, said Doron Rabinovici, in an essay in 1990¹. In order to address the “*actual problem*” what continued to be at stake was to get a public debate underway. The Club’s activity is described as “*to shed a light on Austria’s most recent history and to promote its discussion in the present.*”

At a press conference in 1986, Fred Sinowatz, the Federal Chancellor at the time and a Social Democrat, made the following remark about Kurt Waldheim’s election: “*So we note that Kurt Waldheim never was a member of the SA, but only his horse.*” This statement prompted Kuno Knöbl, the Club’s spiritual father and then a director at the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation, to come up with the idea of a Trojan horse named Kurt Waldheim – a wooden horse from the belly of which “*the spectres of the past would come crawling*”. When his idea was discussed at a meeting, the sculptor Alfred Hrdlicka produced a sketch which was to become the logo of Republikanischer Club – Neues Österreich. The “*Waldheim Wooden Horse*” itself was built within a fortnight by a theatre workshop commissioned by the group “*Neues Österreich*”. In an essay published later Kuno Knöbl wrote, “*The group ‘Neues Österreich’ had called for a demonstration at 2 pm at Stephansplatz. We reached the square via Seilerstätte and Singerstraße. The horse was covered in sheets. At 2:30 pm it was standing on the loading platform of a truck – unveiled, big, new, unique, hovering at a height of 6 metres and looking down at the passers-by, on its head the SA cap painted by Manfred Deix in reference to the remark made by Fred Sinowatz. Microphones, orderlies, friends, people ... Rosa JOCHMANN was one of the first speakers ... to a crowd of 5000 people. An hour later we counted 10000 and when the wondrous event was mentioned in a radio broadcast, Graben and Kärntner Straße soon became packed with people. A little later: the wooden horse was standing outside the State Opera, just opposite the ÖVP headquarters. Texts written by Peter Handke and Elfriede Jelinek were read, speeches were given by Doron Rabinovici, Peter Kreisky and Silvio Lehmann...*” ²

¹ See: Essay „Nestbeschmutzer?“ <http://www.repclub.at/geschichte/>

² Kuno Knöbl in the anthology „Von der Kunst der Nestbeschmutzung“, 2009, ed. by Brigitte Lehmann, Doron Rabinovici, Sibylle Summer, Löcker Verlag.

Afterwards the wooden horse accompanied Kurt Waldheim on one of his rare official visits abroad to Rome and within Austria to the Salzburg Festival. Today it is considered a historical landmark of active citizenship which even made its way to the museum as part of the 2005 exhibition at the Vienna Jewish Museum. The disassembled parts of the “Waldheim Wooden Horse” are kept on the premises of Republikanischer Club - Neues Österreich, at Rockgasse 1, 1010 Wien.

The name “Neues Österreich” (New Austria) was chosen in reference to the first anti-Nazi newspaper published after 1945 which was also called *Neues Österreich*.³ The activists of Republikanischer Club – Neues Österreich wanted to take the debate to the public sphere from the start. They organised vigils such as the one on Stephansplatz, they called for additional demonstrations, they took public debates to the streets etc. The memorial year of 50 years after the Anschluss in 1988 was another occasion to hold discussions and these too proved there was a growing need for them.

In 1986 Jörg Haider became chairman of the right-wing Freedom Party FPÖ. In spite of his statement in 1988 that Austria was an “*ideological miscarriage*” and his belittlement of National Socialist crimes in 1991 when he referred to the Nazis’ “*orderly employment policy*”, Jörg Haider – just like other right-wing populists in Europe – was able to score significant gains in subsequent elections. A petition for a referendum about foreigners launched by FPÖ in 1992 mobilised a broad alliance against it. On 23 January 1993 a “*sea of lights*” took place on the historically charged Heldenplatz. Alongside SOS Mitmensch, Republikanischer Club – Neues Österreich was one of the main organisers of the 2nd Republic’s biggest demonstration with more than 300000 people attending.

On 4 February 2000 ÖVP and FPÖ formed a coalition government. This sparked massive protests leading to the famous Thursday Demonstrations and their continuation until 2006. Preparations for a mass rally by Demokratische Offensive on 19 February 2000 took place on the Club’s premises which formed part of Demokratische Offensive. Again almost 300000 people assembled on Heldenplatz – just two weeks after the formation of the ÖVP/FPÖ government.

Since 1989 the Club’s premises at Rockgasse in the centre of Vienna have become a well-known venue for regular public debates. Attached to the Club’s rooms is Café Hebenstreit which is deliberately named after the Viennese Democrat Franz Hebenstreit who was executed in 1795⁴. Addressed are issues such as right-wing populism, racism, xenophobia and sexism. Another focus is placed on critical reflections about social circumstances and economic developments as well as issues regarding ecological sustainability. For the current programme see the website of Republikanischer Club – Neues Österreich: www.repclub.at.

³ For more information see: “*Über einen Namen*” by Sibylle Summer and Kuno Knöbl, <http://www.repclub.at/geschichte/>

⁴ For more information see: „*Die gedichtete Revolution des Franz Hebenstreit*“ by Alexander Emanuely, <http://www.repclub.at/publikationen/>