

Shock waves in Austrian cultural and media circles

"It is not just that new Austrian government has no idea of art, they hate it"

Sacked publisher Jochen Jung speaks in Berlin

Stefan Steinberg
10 March 2000

The ascension to power of Jörg Haider's ultra-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria as part of a coalition government, and the general rightward turn of official Austrian political life, are already bearing rotten fruit.

At a meeting at the Literature Haus in Berlin this week publisher Jochen Jung related the details of his dismissal from his post as long-time business manager for the Residenz Publishing House in Salzburg. Residenz Publishers is the most respected publishing house in that country, specialising in contemporary Austrian and foreign literature. On February 1 the Residenz board of directors sacked Jung on the basis of a six-page plan which he had presented to the board for the further development of the publishing company.

The main accusation against Jung was that he was endangering the future of the firm by favouring the works of foreign authors. He was given a day to clear out his desk and then banned from ever again entering the premises. Jung reported in Berlin that it was no accident that his dismissal coincided with the preparations by the "moderate" conservative People's Party (ÖVP) to form a coalition government with Haider's Freedom Party.

Residenz Publishing House was founded in 1956 and in 1983 was taken over by the Austrian State Publishing House. Jung had worked for the publishers for 25 years and was responsible for choosing new authors and pieces of literature. Jung personally promoted the works of Peter Handke and Thomas Bernhard, two of Austria's most well-known literary figures. In Berlin he outlined the role he played in changing the original philosophy of the publishers,

which was to publish exclusively modern Austrian authors. Jung sought ways of introducing a broader spectrum of authors, including a number of non-Austrian authors who have in the meantime acquired international fame.

Jung indicated that the problems he met in encouraging new independent, foreign authors were not new. He referred to recurring resistance to his work from official circles summed up in the accusation made against him on a number of occasions: "Why are you deserting our Austrian literature?" Difficulties intensified with the state take-over of the publishers in 1983. State pressure and the imposition of increasingly commercial priorities for the work of the house led Jung to his present conviction that "the state is also nothing other than a company".

Jung pointed to the decline over the past years in the fields of Austrian culture and artistic criticism. He indicated the fears of many over further government reprisals against those active in the field of the arts. According to Jung: "It is not just that the new Austrian government has no idea of art, they hate it." In protest at Jung's sacking, nearly 40 authors have pledged to boycott the publishing house.

Jung is not the only victim of a surge of nationalism in boardrooms which has accompanied the formation of the new regime in Vienna. At the beginning of February a local newspaper in Austria, the *Oberösterreichischen Nachrichten*, sacked one of its editors, Gerhard Marschall, for overtly political reasons. Marschall was criticised by the paper's publisher for a number of commentaries he wrote

unfavourable to the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition, as well as critical articles about Austrian state President Thomas Klestil. Marschall's original notice to quit read as follows: "because of new political relations he is no longer acceptable."

A speaker for the Austrian journalists trade union, Astrid Zimmermann, said that in her opinion Marschall's case was just the tip of the iceberg. "Following the lurch to the right in Austria, there are indications that a different type of reporting is wished for—not only in the newspapers but also in the different forms of electronic media."

The participation of the FPÖ in government has provoked a wave of disquiet and heated discussion amongst intellectuals and those active in the arts in Austria. Gerard Mortier, the artistic director of the Salzburg arts festival, originally announced plans to quit his post in protest at the participation in government of Haider's party. "For me, the Freedom Party is a fascist party in the literal sense of the term," he told a press conference, declaring that he planned to stand down in September after this year's festival.

Mortier, who is Belgian, has lived in Austria for the past 10 years. He said he had received letters calling him an "idiot immigrant worker". "I am now an immigrant worker. I thought we belonged to Europe, but that era is over and the xenophobia continually expressed by the Freedom Party is a big burden for our public," he said. One should bear in mind that "the audience which comes to the Salzburg festival is comprised ... 70 percent of foreigners," he noted. "The cultural program of the [new] government totally contradicts the program of the Salzburg festival," he added. Following a campaign by other artists to persuade him to stay, Mortier has now announced he is willing to stay at his post.

Another casualty of the new government in Vienna is the cancelling of the Ingeborg Bachmann prize, Austria's premier literary award to promising new writers. The annual prize is named after one of Austria's most prominent poets and writers. Up until now it has been financially supported (120,000 Austrian schillings) by the Austrian state of Carinthia, which is currently run by the FPÖ and Haider. Following the confirmation of FPÖ participation in government, the poet's sister declared that the family were no longer prepared to allow the competition to

continue under the name of Ingeborg Bachmann. The response on the part of Haider was immediate. He announced the immediate cancellation of any financial support and said that award giving "was on the way out and sterile".

All in all, the FPÖ has made no secret of its hostility to the arts and in the past has run a public poster campaign against prominent artists Elfriede Jelinek and Claus Peymann. The party has denounced representatives of the Vienna group of artists as "child pornographers" and organised protests against a series of Mystery Plays organised by dramatist Hermann Nitsch. Much of the current anger on the part of leading intellectuals has been aimed at the willingness of the ÖVP to enter into government with Haider's party. The education minister in the new coalition, Elisabeth Gehrler, and the state secretary responsible for the arts, Frank Morak, are both members of the ÖVP, and in the past both have declared that they would never participate in a government including members of the FPÖ.

That the threat to the arts was not merely restricted to the policies of the current Austrian government was emphasised by a number of other speakers at the meeting in Berlin. Increasing commercial pressure is also making itself felt in Germany. The continued existence of a number of smaller publishing houses—in particular a number which specialise in East European literature and the consequences of the collapse of Stalinism for society in eastern and western European countries—are threatened either with closure or drastic reorganisation involving the loss of many jobs. The invariable result is a loss of quality and the increasing difficulty of including foreign authors in the publishers' programmes.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact