Encountering the real Jörg Haider

Klaus Neumann

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The life and death of Jörg Haider, the most influential and charismatic politician of Europe’s far right, raises uncomfortable questions, writes Klaus Neumann

Even after his death, Haider’s image was omnipresent, with BZÖ posters from the last federal elections still on display. Klaus Neumann

“IF YOU WANT to understand anything about Kärnten, you need to be there on 10 October,” I was told more than once. Eighty-eight years ago, on 10 October 1920, a majority of voters in the southern part of Kärnten (Carinthia) voted to remain with the fledgling republic of Austria rather than join Yugoslavia – or what was then called the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. They chose Austria even though the majority of those who were asked to vote in the referendum spoke Slovenian, rather than German, as a first language.

Prior to that vote, Kärnten militias had repelled invading Yugoslav forces in what is called the Abwehrkampf. Since 1920, the German-speaking population of Kärnten has celebrated both the outcome of the referendum and the Abwehrkampf, which – so the story goes – allowed the vote to take place. They celebrate the fact that Kärnten did not become Koroška. They ignore the fact that the referendum was won only because a substantial number of Slovenian-speaking voters trusted assurances that the German-speaking majority would respect their culture and language. The ethnic Slovenes who voted with the majority wanted Kärnten and Koroška to be part of the new democratic Austria.

On 10 October 2008, two official commemorations took place in Klagenfurt, the capital city of Kärnten. The first was held in front of a war memorial at Annabichl cemetery, the second at Landhaushof, in the centre of Klagenfurt, in front of the Memorial for Kärnten’s Unity, which celebrates the Abwehrkampf and the referendum. Both involved a brass band and a guard of honour provided by the Austrian army, representatives of veterans’ associations carrying large flags, a male choir and groups of people wearing traditional costumes that signify the uniqueness of (German) Kärnten’s culture. On both occasions, the Landeshauptmann – state premier – Jörg Haider, delivered the main address.

Two weeks earlier, Haider had been responsible for the most unexpected outcome of the Austrian federal elections, when his party, the BZÖ, won 10.7 per cent of the vote nationwide (38.5 per cent in Kärnten), a vast improvement on the 4.1 per cent it had scored in 2006. The result had been widely interpreted as a vote for Haider rather than for a particular political program. Having been written off as somebody who would see out his days in the backwaters of Kärnten’s state politics, he was once again a force to be reckoned with. Maybe Austria’s highest political office, which had once narrowly eluded him, was still within his reach.

Of course I knew about Jörg Haider. I knew him to be the most influential politician of Europe’s far right. I knew about his career, and about the various controversies sparked by him. And I knew what his political opponents said about him. Only a few days earlier, Haider’s policies had once again caused outrage in Austria and beyond, when his government had set up a Sonderanstalt für verdächtige Asylbewerber in a remote village to accommodate asylum seekers suspected of having been engaged in criminal activities.

I didn’t know, though, what Jörg Haider looked like close-up. He was fairly short, tanned, with an open face, full
of energy, and looking younger than his 58 years. He did not appear to be in the grip of minders, and seemed to be in total control of the proceedings at Landhaus. He shook hands and engaged in small talk with members of the public with the same ease with which he played his part in the commemorative ritual. There was no doubt in my mind that he had charisma and that he knew exactly how to use it to his best advantage.

Above: A striking number of young men attended the ceremony at Landhaus – including Stefan Petzner, who all but outed himself as Haider’s lover and succeeded him as leader of the BZÖ. Photo: Klaus Neumann

To encounter the “real” Jörg Haider was an unsettling experience. Far more unsettling, however, was the context within which this encounter took place. I witnessed, and couldn’t help being part of, a superb performance, in which folkloric elements and a poem recited by two primary school students were seamlessly integrated into a rigid military protocol, and in which seemingly spontaneous deviations from the script made us, the participants, forget that there was a script at all. Haider gave almost the same speech he had given at Annabichl cemetery, adjusted slightly to suit the setting. While essentially reiterating the same points, he calibrated his statements to be just a fraction more polemical, thereby prompting his audience to applaud during their delivery. I couldn’t help but admire his skill, and the ingenuity of the performance to which he contributed.

But it was also a chilling experience: one which made me think of images depicting happy Germans waving flags bearing the swastika, carrying torches and participating in closely choreographed rallies. Over the years, Haider, himself the son of a Nazi, had often rightly been accused of drawing on fascist vocabulary and sentiments. His speech at Landhaus was objectionable because he employed a good deal of anti-Slovenian rhetoric, yet he did not come across as a neofascist. But the secret of fascism wasn’t its ideology; rather, it was how a particular ideology could have such wide appeal. On 10 October 2008, I was able to catch a glimpse of the synergies that are possible between a leader and his people.

These synergies, more than anything else, made the performance appear to be entirely natural. They were partly orchestrated: the 10 October commemoration was also highly sophisticated political theatre, in which words, actions and paraphernalia were skilfully employed to create a powerful impression. But the directors of that performance had to contend with the fears and desires and memories of the audience – which could be tapped, for sure, but which also needed to be kept in check. So the success of the performance depended on somebody who intuitively knew how to listen to a mood and find the right tone to respond. Haider did not manipulate those who followed and loved him (nor those who despised him but who often, it seemed, were as fixated on him as were his most ardent disciples). Rather, he engaged with them.

The crowd did not represent a cross-section of the population. For one, it included a large number of politicians and senior public servants. There were far more men than women present. I was most struck by the large number of young men, many of them wearing the brown loden jacket of the traditional Kärntner Anzug, the Carinthian national dress. To be at Landhaus and to listen to the Landeshauptmann was also cool. One man in particular caught my eye: a tall, tanned, intense-looking boyish young man, who appeared to be another version of Haider, only thirty years younger.

Barely twelve hours after his speech at Landhaus, Haider was dead. For the first twenty-four hours after his death, the news bulletins on the radio and on television said he had come from a function, that he was on his way home to celebrate his mother’s ninetieth birthday, that earlier he had sent his driver home to allow him to get some well-earned rest, that his car had crashed at 1.15 in the morning some ten kilometres outside Klagenfurt, and that he had worn a seatbelt.

Early in the morning on 11 October, eight or nine hours after Haider’s death, I went for a walk through Klagenfurt. Many buildings still flew the flags that had marked the commemorations the previous day. A television van was parked outside the seat of the state government, where a few candles had been placed next to the entrance. Young men wearing suits and black ties went into and out of the building. Overall, Haider’s death seemed to have barely registered.

Immediately after returning to my hotel I watched a special news bulletin put together by the ORF, the Austrian public broadcaster. It showed footage of several women carrying flowers and solemnly approaching the state government offices. A reporter explained that since the news of Haider’s death had become known in the
morning, a procession of mourners had come to leave flowers and light candles. I knew this to be untrue: there had been no flowers and only a few candles when I had visited the site earlier. While it’s possible that several women wearing flowers had indeed appeared in the short time that had passed since my walk, it looked as if the scene shown on television had been staged and that the impression it gave of a stream of mourners was patently false.

Above: Candles at the entrance to the state government offices, about 36 hours after Haider’s death.
Photo: Klaus Neumann

By the evening of 11 October, black flags had appeared all over Klagenfurt. There were hundreds if not thousands of candles burning in front of the government offices. People had left not only flowers but also letters and pictures. One lane of the section of the road where the accident had taken place was closed for traffic because of an impromptu memorial consisting of candles and messages, which dwarfed the one in front of the state government office, attracting thousands of pilgrims, some of whom came even in the middle of the night to pay their respects. The reality had quickly surpassed the scene staged by the ORF camera team. The observation of a politician, who was later to be elected the new Landeshauptmann, that Haider’s death had caused the sun to fall from Kärnten’s sky, did not seem to be hyperbole.

On the morning of 11 October, the ORF broadcast live a press conference in which the police and leading representatives of Haider’s party talked about the circumstances of his death. The young man who now offered himself as Haider’s successor was none other than the one I had noticed a day earlier at Landhaushof: Stefan Petzner, a 27-year-old who had been discovered by Haider, had quickly risen through the party ranks and had managed the BZÖ’s recent successful federal election campaign. During the press conference he broke down, appealing with tears in his eyes to “Jörg, wherever you are.” Such a public show of emotions may have initially encouraged others to mourn their Landesvater (literally: the father of the state) in a similar fashion. But once again, the publicly demonstrated grief of ordinary people made Petzner’s emotional outburst appear to be rather modest. (A few days later, however, Petzner went one step further when tearfully describing his special relationship with Haider in an interview with Krone Television.) Many of those signing condolence books at the state government offices were sobbing when they left the building; an ambulance was stationed next to the building so that the more severe cases could receive immediate treatment.

Over the days leading up to Haider’s funeral, the collective outpouring of grief intensified rather than abated. This was despite the fact that the narrative which had been told in the first hours after his death had changed substantially. Haider hadn’t been at an official function related to the 10 October commemorations but at a gay bar; he had had a noisy argument with Petzner, who appeared to be his lover, and who had possibly tried to call Haider’s mobile at the time of the accident; he had driven recklessly, completely drunk and more than 70 kilometres above the speed limit. Yet none of these revelations seemed to matter, even though Haider’s bisexuality had never been openly discussed by the Austrian media and should have come as a surprise to at least some of his socially conservative followers. Instead, many of those devastated by Haider’s death were now searching for an explanation that would make sense to them. Conspiracy theories spread quickly: they detailed how Haider had been killed by Mossad, how the accident had been set up, or how his drink had been spiked.

Now, almost three weeks after Haider’s death, Kärnten slowly returns to normal. The journalists speculate about who will be Haider’s heir, and about the outcome of the state elections in early 2009. But the most interesting question is not either of the obvious ones – Who will replace Haider? Who will benefit from his untimely death? – but rather: when do the emotional energies that became highly visible for a short while after Haider’s death make their next appearance? •