



Haider, Jörg (1950-2008)

by Nikolai Endres

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On October 11, 2008, a heavily intoxicated Jörg Haider crashed his car while driving twice the speed limit. Thus, a remarkable but ambiguous political career came to an end.

Haider was a right-wing Austrian politician who had been featured on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, caricatured as neo-Nazi industrialist Richard Dressier played by Alan Bates in the movie *The Sum of All Fears* (2002, directed by Phil Alden Robinson), and had shaken hands with Saddam Hussein before the American invasion of Iraq.

The last thing Haider--who was variously described as chauvinistic, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, populist, and charismatic--did before he died was visit a gay bar.

Haider matters to glbtq culture in several but contradictory respects. First, persistent rumors about his sexuality did not harm his political career, thus suggesting that homosexuality has ceased to be a major issue in Austria. However, the fact that no mainstream Austrian politician or journalist dared to out Haider may suggest the opposite: that homosexuality is so taboo as to be unspeakable.

Perhaps most pointedly, Haider did great damage to the Austrian glbtq community. In opposing pro-gay policies he reinforced the stereotype of hypocritical politicians who privately enjoy the freedoms won by the glbtq movement while taking public positions against the movement.

Biography

Haider was born January 26, 1950 in Bad Goisern in the Salzkammergut, an area known to many Americans as the location of the film *The Sound of Music* (1965, directed by Robert Wise).

Haider was raised in a climate of denial, resentment, and poverty. His parents, a shoemaker and a teacher, had been ardent supporters of fascism who, after World War II, were punished for their political activities. His father, who had joined Adolf Hitler's party in 1929 at age 15, was sentenced to help exhume corpses in a concentration camp, while his mother was barred from teaching for a few years.

While in high school, Haider excelled in all subjects and flirted with becoming an actor. He joined a right-wing fraternity, then completed his mandatory military service, and enrolled at the University of Vienna to study law and politics. As a college student, he joined a pan-Germanic, right-wing, mock-dueling fraternity.

He received his Ph.D. in 1973 and then taught in the University of Vienna's Department of Constitutional Law.

In 1976, Haider married Claudia Hoffmann, a fellow student. The couple soon produced two daughters, Ulrike and Cornelia. He insisted that his wife interrupt her studies and stay home in order to rear them.



Jörg Haider in 2007.
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Haider turned down a Fulbright fellowship at Columbia University in New York City in order to pursue a political career.

Political Rise and Fall

In 1971, Haider became the leader of the youth movement of the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ, or Freedom Party), a party founded more or less on nationalistic, anti-clerical, and anti-socialist ideals. Since many German liberals were also fervent nationalists, the party included members from both sides of the political spectrum.

In 1980, at age 29, Haider was elected to the Austrian parliament and immediately began to oppose his more liberal colleagues.

When his party formed a coalition with the liberal SPÖ (Social Democrats) in 1983, Haider's hopes for a cabinet post were frustrated.

In 1986, having become a millionaire through an inheritance, Haider ousted the left-leaning head of the FPÖ to become president of the party. After his victory, shouts of "Sieg Heil" from some of his supporters reverberated through the arena where the party was meeting.

Upon Haider's election, the Social Democrats ended the coalition with the FPÖ. However, his party more than doubled its vote in the subsequent election.

In 1989 Haider became governor of the southern province of Carinthia after breaking the SPÖ's decade-long grip on power there.

In 1991, however, he lost the post as the result of a highly provocative speech in the provincial legislature in which he seemed to be defending Hitler's labor policies. He declared, for example, that "In the Third Reich, they pursued a proper employment policy, which is more than could be said about the government in Vienna these days."

In 1993, in response to Haider's support for a xenophobic referendum called "Austria First" (which failed), left-leaning members of the FPÖ split from the party to found their own party, the Liberal Forum, which proffered progressive views on such issues as drugs, abortion, and homosexuality.

In 1999, Haider was reelected governor when his party captured the most votes in the state election.

That same year, in the federal election, the FPÖ received more votes than the ÖVP (Austria's conservative party). Those two parties then formed a governing coalition, which led to the ostracism of Austria by many foreign countries. For example, all fourteen other members of the European Union ceased cooperating with Vienna. To the international democratic community, Haider had become a pariah.

The FPÖ's success came soon after the presidency of Kurt Waldheim, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, and the controversy over his attempt to hide some aspects of his service as an intelligence officer in World War II. An independent international commission of historians found Waldheim guilty of knowing about, though not participating in, crimes against humanity.

In this atmosphere of suspicion about Austria's denial of its fascist past, many politicians abroad saw the FPÖ as right-wing and neo-Nazi.

In 2000, Haider resigned the presidency of the FPÖ, but he continued to exert powerful influence on the party. Two years later, Haider's party suffered its worst defeat ever at the polls, receiving only 10% of the vote, a double-digit loss. When he attempted to reclaim the party's leadership, he was rebuffed.

In 2005, Haider left the FPÖ and founded the Bündnis Zukunft Österreich (BZÖ), or Alliance for the Future of Austria, a party with a new name but basically the same ideals as the FPÖ. (Ironically, one of the reasons Haider gave for leaving the FPÖ was its extreme nationalism.)

At the federal election on September 28, 2008, two weeks before Haider's demise, his party received over 10% of the vote, which together with the FPÖ tally of 18% amounted to a strong showing for the right-wing parties.

The Social Democrats and the Conservative Party received a majority of seats, but since they had been in a highly unsuccessful coalition that ended prematurely, analysts are unsure about the stability of Austria's political future.

Funeral and Aftermath

Haider's funeral was attended by Austria's political and clerical elite, including the president, the chancellor of the country, all the governors, and several bishops, as well as by various dignitaries from all over the world.

Problematically, the son of Libyan president Gaddafi, representatives of right-wing fraternities, and separatist politicians from Northern Italy also showed up. They were vivid reminders of Haider's questionable dedication to democracy and European integration.

Haider's premature death elevated him to the status of a martyr. Indeed, his supporters have established a Haider cult. Some journalists have even spoken of a "Diana effect," referring to the outpouring of grief after Britain's Princess Diana died, also in a car accident.

And because Haider was alone in his vehicle, in the middle of the night in foggy conditions, speculation about possible foul play and conspiracies immediately began to swirl.

Much was also made about the poignant symbolism of his wrecked car, a Volkswagen Phaeton. The mythological Phaeton hubristically lost control of his sun chariot and plunged to his death. Phaeton, driving at reckless speed, set the world on fire with his actions and came to a tragic end.

Controversy

Haider was a polarizing figure with an absolutist worldview that divided people into winners or losers. The list of his resentments was long: the construction of new mosques, European integration, multiculturalism, Western support of Israel, feminism, "Polish laziness," political correctness.

Haider called concentration camps "punishment camps," attended ceremonies by former members of the Waffen-SS, used racial slurs, and paired former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill with Communist dictator Stalin as the two politicians for whom he felt the most contempt.

He also liked to travel to "rogue" countries such as Libya and Iraq. Right before the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, for example, he paid homage to Saddam Hussein on a trip he recalled in his richly illustrated book *Visiting Saddam: In the "Realm of Evil."*

Haider became an issue even in the United States. (Haider traveled repeatedly to the United States and modeled his party program, called *Contract with Austria*, after former Republican Speaker of the House of

Representatives Newt Gingrich's *Contract with America*.) In her early Senate campaign in 2000, Hillary Clinton brought up her then opponent Mayor Rudy Giuliani's meeting with Haider the year before, while John McCain, in his first presidential campaign in 2000, criticized the European Union sanctions against Austria as counterproductive.

Yet Haider also sometimes apologized and could deprecate himself, although contrition was not his strong suit. Klaus Ottomeyer draws attention to his practice of "the inconsequential denial": habitually making inflammatory comments only to follow them with weak disclaimers. In this practice, he was able to send his supporters a strong message while also guaranteeing himself a spotlight in the media twice--once for the outrageous statement and again for the disclaimer.

Sexuality

Haider was survived by his wife and two daughters. Despite his marriage, however, his homosexuality (or bisexuality) was an open secret.

Some rumors of his homosexuality were based on stereotypes: his good looks, his fashion sense, his perennially tanned skin, his sporty cars, and his youthful all-male entourage (nicknamed Haider's Buberlpartie or "boy party"). He frequently posed nude from the waist up. He sometimes wore a tiny bikini bathing suit and gave interviews in skin-tight spandex shorts patterned in hot purple, red, and orange.

Haider himself denied being gay. Since Austrians, like citizens of many European countries, find prying into the private lives of celebrities distasteful, his denial was taken at face value by many of his followers.

Some, no doubt, preferred to be in denial about homosexuality. "Haider could be having sex in front of the cameras with a man, and Austrians would pretend not to see it," observed a spokesperson for Homosexuelle Initiative Wien (HOSI, Austria's premier gay and lesbian association).

To his credit, as Rechtskomitee LAMBDA (Austria's glbtq rights organization) noted in an obituary, Haider never publicly railed against gay people (perhaps because he was so vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy).

Still, as a member of parliament he voted against relaxing anti-gay legislation. He also refused to recognize persecution for sexual orientation as sufficient for granting political asylum, and he did not stop other party representatives from making homophobic remarks.

As early as 1991, however, a number of intellectuals began to expose Haider's hypocrisy, most notably Nobel laureate in literature Elfriede Jelinek, German gay activist Rosa von Praunheim, and Viennese artist Jochen Herdieckerhoff.

A subliminal outing occurred in 1999, when the ÖVP in Carinthia published a flyer that showed Haider with a long Pinocchio nose, but the "P" was replaced with an "F" (alluding to the logo of Haider's party). In Carinthia's southern neighbor, Italy, a *finocchio* refers not to the proverbial liar but translates as "faggot." The move was widely denounced by gay organizations, although several ÖVP officials denied that the ad had any homophobic intent.

In response to a 2000 article in the Berlin newspaper *tageszeitung*, in which Herdieckerhoff more explicitly outed Haider to a large audience, HOSI only reluctantly supported the outing. Haider was not a role model for other gay people in his lack of solidarity with glbtq culture; therefore, HOSI "expelled" him from the gay community.

Sex

On the night he died, Haider had visited the gay bar Zum Stadtkrämer in Klagenfurt, where someone took pictures of Haider consorting in beautiful company.

Haider apparently preferred young men, including minors. A number of newspapers suggestively reported that he frequently travelled to nearby Slovakia, where the age of consent is fifteen rather than eighteen.

After Haider's death, the 27-year-old Stefan Petzner, a cosmetics specialist and Haider's successor as leader of the BZÖ, cryptically stated that Haider was his lover. In countless tearful confessions, all captured on prime-time television, he lamented the loss of the love of his life (with whom he apparently quarreled before Haider, alone, went to Stadtkrämer).

"Er war mein Lebensmensch," Petzner said, which translates as either "he was the man of my life" or "he was my role model." He added that Haider's wife "did not object" to their relationship.

Legacy

Haider's political ascendancy is but one of a number of controversies that have recently tarnished Austria's international reputation.

After World War II, Hitler's country of birth saw itself as his "first victim," conveniently forgetting that a large majority of the country had supported the *Anschluss* in 1938. Austria fairly recently elected a president with a dark Nazi past; and anti-democratic parties consistently receive a high percentage of votes.

In 1995, the Cardinal of Vienna Hans Hermann Groër resigned in disgrace after allegations of child abuse. In 2004, child pornography was discovered in the Catholic seminary of St. Pölten. In 2008, the news of incest monster Josef Fritzl went around the world.

It is probably too early to tell what long-term impact Haider and his political views will have. Despite their attempt to canonize him, his party followers are greatly disoriented. A one-man show deprived of its charismatic president, the BZÖ may very well sink into oblivion.

Haider's sexuality will continue to be debated. The Austrian glbtq community is now focusing on many of the issues Haider's sexuality raised, including questions of outing and hypocrisy. Haider not only lied about his true relationships with his male entourage but also presented himself as a homophobic law and order politician. As a HOSI spokesman perceptively pointed out, Haider thrived in a climate where people are afraid to out gay hypocrites because doing so would reflect (negatively) on their own sexuality.

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Nikolai Endres received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 2000. As an associate professor at Western Kentucky University, he teaches Great Books, British literature, classics, mythology, and gay and lesbian studies. He has published on Plato, Petronius, Gustave Flaubert, Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary Renault, Gore Vidal, Patricia Nell Warren, and others. His next project is a "queer" reading of the myth and music of Richard Wagner. He is also working on a book-length study of Platonic love as a homoerotic code in the modern gay novel.