

## **TONSPUR 76\_expanded: Karen Werner's "HAUS", Plus A Group Of Works Circling About Holocaust Postmemory And The Stranger.**

As it said in the invitation to "HAUS", part I, which I also had the pleasure to introduce, the project began as an inquiry into Karen Werner's family's house on Novaragasse in Vienna's second district. Allow me to remind you to what I said in November last year, namely that Novaragasse was named in 1862 after the battle at Novara west of Milano when Austrian General Radetzky defeated Sardinian and Piedmontese troops in 1849 and prevented a national union of Italy — if only for another ten years. Thus Novaragasse celebrates war and violence along with Habsburgian nationalism.

A hundred years ago, Novaragasse formed a central part of Jewish Vienna, namely of the famous Mazzesinsel. Violence returned to Novaragasse not as a commemoration, rather as brutal reality in 1939 when Jews were concentrated here, in the city's second district, and forced to live in so-called "Sammelwohnungen" or "Judenhäusern", crowded communal apartments, before deportation. One such "Judenhaus" was Novaragasse 40, in which Karen's great-grandmother and grandfather lived and where Karen's mother was in utero. 221 people were deported and killed from Novaragasse 40.

Like in "HAUS", part I, there are a multiplicity of layers in Karen's expanded "HAUS" piece, a number of voices, a number of sounds, a number of languages, diverse contents: religious ones, historical ones, personal ones. Partly they create chaos, partly they create calmness. I'd like to elaborate on these layers from my point of view.

Why all these layers? I assume this is because the diversity of memory and memories. Memories are not monolithic. They vary. Depending on when one remembers, the memory is clear, or only vague. Depending on who remembers, memories differ more or less from one another. Depending on why one remembers, one detail or the other will be omitted from the memory. Depending on whether one actively remembers or is passively reminded, the memory can be welcome or unwelcome. Memories can surface at random, be triggered by an emotion or an association, or else they have to be recalled consciously. They maybe of an episodic or schematic nature. There are personal and collective memories. There are memory communities; in the present case a Jewish one, an Austrian one, and — maybe — a hyphenated Jewish-Austrian one.

The memory of the Nazi era and the Shoah belong overridingly to today's secular strategies against forgetting. Though, remembering the trauma has become extremely ritualized among Jews and non-Jews alike: November 9 commemorates the November pogrom of 1938; January 27 the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp by the Red Army; the 27th day of Nissan (April/May) in Israel the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising — these are all cornerstones of the collective culture of remembrance. However, the more ritualized the commemoration

becomes, whether it is during dubious mass visits by school children to Auschwitz or during festivals the course of which is dictated by politics, the more questionable the sustainability of such commemorations seems. The writer Elfriede Jelinek expressed this as such: “Countless times we think of the victims of the Third Reich, and then slink away from them again on tiptoes”. For how deep are these rituals that commemorate the ultimate atrocity? How formulaic and flat have they become in the present, in which, every day, we succeed in marginalizing humanitarian catastrophes?

Karen’s commemoration does not come on tiptoes. Hers is not a formulaic one. As said, she collected diverse memories. The multiplicity of sound layers matches the multifaceted complex of memories. The tones and sounds weave a network of memories which incorporates the whole variety of those memories. So, in fact Karen created a sound panorama of memories, a composition of memories, even more: a composition with memories.

When listening to Karen’s new expanded piece “HAUS”, part II, I wondered why one hears a door being closed at the beginning and at the end. What was it that was closed? The process of digging into personal history, the process of digging into collective history? Was history itself closed — in the sense that this specific chapter in history is over and the dealings with it have come to an end? Is, consequentially, memory closed or are the diverse memories closed — better maybe: closed off?

While reflecting on the sound of the closing door and its possible meaning, I suddenly realized: Before you can close a door, you have to open it, or it has to be opened first by someone or maybe also by something. That’s a dialectic condition. So maybe this is what it is about: A door had to be opened, a gateway to memories. You close the door behind you and find the room where it leads filled with memories. You walk from one memory to the next, you question them, you examine them, they extract, then detract, they become intermingled, intertwined, they are so powerful. But in a way they are abstract, they are part of specific situations and specific people, which already have been or will be stored in time. Karen, as I interpret it, created a storage. She has opened the door to the house of memories, to Novaragasse 40, and searched for the concrete, a re-collection of the past, an “Einsammlung” as you call it in German. She has left or will leave the house of memories, because she is not at home in this house, nor in this country or on this continent. The door is closed.

But inside the memories are kept. Thus, Karen has turned Novaragasse 40 into a storageroom of and for memories. The sound of the closing door reminds us that it is our all responsibility to open the door again and again.

Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, February 2018