Introduction

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This supplement to *Digestive Diseases* presents the contributions to the symposium *A Period of Darkness – The University of Vienna's Medical School and the Nazi Regime*, which took place on 6th September 1998 in conjunction with the 11th World Congress of Gastroenterology held in Vienna, in the presence of a broader public. The symposium's primary subject was the University of Vienna's Medical Faculty's sinister history in the years of the National Socialist regime, but it also focused upon the course of events during that unprecedented period of darkness at the University and in Austria in general. As all this cannot be viewed in isolation from the cultural, socioeconomic and political climate in the antecedent decades, the contributions did not leave these decades out of consideration.

What made us organize the symposium? I have to admit that we needed a push. The push came, 5 years ago, in the form of a letter by Leslie Bernstein, then Chairman of the Ethics Committee for the American College of Gastroenterology. The question was raised whether the College could support the World Congress to be held in Vienna in view of the way in which the University of Vienna's Medical School faced its role played in the Nazi years. This question, together with other doubts expressed about the University of Vienna's and Austria's dealings with its past, prompted us to demonstrate, by means of a symposium, that considerable efforts are being made here in Vienna to face that past.

For many years, official Austria denied having had to do anything with Nazism and the Holocaust. This attitude was assumed with no regard for the facts that Nazism was as much an Austrian phenomenon as it was a German

one and that the Nazi ideology emanated to a good part from the specific climate to which the young Austrian, Hitler, was exposed in his Viennese years before 1913. In that period, Hitler's object of admiration was Karl Lueger, the leader of the *Christlichsoziale Partei* (Christian-Social Party) and Mayor of Vienna, who sought to discredit Liberal and Social-Democratic political power by invoking anti-Semitic prejudices, who excluded Jewish civil servants from further professional advancement, and who complained about the appointment of too many Jews to the faculty of the University of Vienna.

In the Austria of 1938, Nazism would not have had its triumph without the deeply embedded Catholic anti-Semitism, the lingering crisis of identity resulting from Austria's defeat by the Prussians and her subsequent exclusion from the German Confederation in 1866, the Austrian Germans' concern of being marginalized in the Austro-Hungarian empire by the Slavs, the crushing collapse of the empire in 1918, the panic fear of the economically threatened middle and upper classes to fall prey to a Bolshevik revolution, and the depression and mass unemployment of the 1930s. Finally, the Nazi triumph of 1938 would not have been possible if the young Austrian Republic had not been destroyed 4 years earlier. After shutting down parliament in March 1933 and brutally overthrowing the Social-Democrats in February 1934, the leaders of the Christian-Social Party had established, with the Catholic church's and Mussolini's blessings, their authoritarian *Ständestaat* (Corporate State). It was this Fascist state, imagining itself as representing the true German-Christian culture, which from 1936 onwards gradually sided with Hitler and finally was forced to hand itself over to Hitler.

In March 1938, Hitler was welcomed frantically as The Saviour by a good proportion of Austrians in general and university men in particular. This, together with the facts that the ensuing barbarities in the streets against Jewish compatriots needed no great organizational efforts from the side of the Nazi party (excesses at the universities had been customary long before 1938), that no less than 20% of the Austrian electorate became members and aspirants of the Nazi party, and that Austrians played prominent roles in the Holocaust were disclaimed or repressed in the unconscious in the years following Hitler's defeat.

It has to be credited to Austria's past president, Waldheim, who in his curriculum gave the impression that the potentially embarrassing aspects of his wartime career were not just behind him but had simply never existed, that official Austria was forced to reshape her version of the past. Forty-six years after Hitler-Germany's

defeat, the head of an Austrian government admitted that Austria and the Austrians had been involved in the deeds of the Nazi regime.

The contents of this supplement will demonstrate that thorough investigations have been carried out to elucidate the University of Vienna's and its Medical School's as well as Austria's roles during the unprecedented period of darkness in our history and its aftermaths.

The reaction by wide sections of the public including the faculty of the University of Vienna's Medical School to the most recent political development in Austria, i.e. the formation of the coalition government between the *Österreichische Volkspartei*, the successor of the old Christian-Social Party, and the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, the populist and xenophobic party with strong ties to the German nationalist and Nazi past, shows that it is not only partisans of the Social-Democrats and the environmentalists who are ready to counter threats to humanity.