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In his inauguration speech as the new governor of California in 2003, Arnold Schwarzenegger claimed that he "saw the Soviet tanks rolling through the streets of Austria" as a boy. This was a peculiar statement, as Schwarzenegger was born in 1947 in the Austrian province of Styria, which was under British control following the defeat of the Nazis who had ruled Austria during World War II. It is possible that Schwarzenegger (as a *very* young boy) visited the Soviet-administered zone around Vienna before the last tanks departed in 1955 and that he has an exceptionally good memory. It is also possible that he simply made up the story, which is not unlikely given the "Styrian oak's" generous relationship with the truth. In any case, Schwarzenegger must be appalled by the Styrian capital and Austria's second-biggest city, Graz, being the site of one of Europe's most intriguing electoral phenomena of recent years: the local chapter of the Austrian Communist Party, KPÖ (*Kommunistische Partei Österreichs*), has emerged as the city's second-

strongest party, earning 20 percent of the popular vote. This is not only remarkable for the fact that no other Communist Party has comparable success in any major Western European city today, but also, and even more so, for the fact that the Austrian Communist Party hovers nationwide around a pitiful 1 percent. The second-best recent election result for the KPÖ in an Austrian city hails from the old steel town of Linz: 1.7 percent. In the capital city of Vienna it was 1.1 percent.

What is the secret of the KPÖ in Graz? Passing through Styria between a bookfair in Ljubljana and a weekend-long meeting in Vienna, I decided to pay the provincial capital a visit in order to find out more.

Graz is a pleasant city. The Mur, one of Austria's main rivers, has picturesque banks and serves as the town's artery; the Main Square boasts an attractive mixture of Baroque and classicist buildings; the *Kunsthaus*, the art museum, is a prime example of bold, modern (and some would say, ugly) European architecture; the annual "Styrian Autumn" festival (*steirischer herbst*) draws cutting-edge artists from across the world; and the city's two main football clubs, Sturm and GAK, counted among the country's finest before they were ruined by megalomaniac presidents.

There is some old industry in town, mainly the Magna Steyr (formerly Steyr-Daimler-Puch) factory, where vehicles of all sorts have been produced since the early twentieth century. Simmering-Graz-Pauka, today Siemens Austria, also a manufacturer of vehicles and heavy machinery, and Andritz, a plant engineering site, are still operating as well. There has never been much else. Graz has always counted as a very bourgeois city, and support for the Nazis was strong during their seven-year reign.

Graz is surrounded by beautiful mountains with some of Austria's last undomesticated forests, which present themselves in lush green as I visit in May. The vicinity to Hungary and Slovenia (or, as some people still prefer to call it, the former Yugoslavia) is as evident as a slight sense of isolation; Graz lies in the far southeast

corner of the German-speaking world, and, unlike in Western Austria where I grew up, German cities are far.

The last time I visited Graz was in 2009, when I gave a couple of talks organized by folks from the autonomist and anarchist milieu. I remember that I was struck by the innumerable KPÖ posters announcing a talk by Tariq Ali – without doubt better attended than mine – who was presented as "one of the most influential intellectuals of our time". The KPÖ was strong back then, but not as strong as it is now. I was impressed that the party would invite Ali, that he would come, and that his visit would be advertised in such a grand manner; surely, no one in Graz could have missed it. Responsible for the invitation was the KPÖ's "Association for Education", the *Bildungsverein*. I figure that it is a place as good as any to start my on-site investigation into the workings of Graz's communism, and so I head for the party's headquarters at Lagergasse 98.

I am received by Leo Kühberger, a heavily tattooed doctor of history, who has been working as a coordinator for the *Bildungsverein* since 2006. He stresses the fact that he is not a party member, and his sympathies for autonomist Marxism shine through quickly. Kühberger acknowledges that occupying a fairly important post for the party as a non-member hasn't been without controversy but adds that he has never felt restricted in his work. I guess this gives the party an edge when meeting accusations of authoritarianism.

Kühberger also relates an anecdote or two about the Tariq Ali visit and some other high-profile guests such as Harry Cleaver, Silvia Federici, and Billy Bragg. He then shows me the *Bildungsverein* program for June 2013, presented in a neat eight-page folder. It starts with someone reading texts by the early-twentieth-century Jewish satirist Kurt Tucholsky and ends with the former German Red Army Faction member-turned-book publisher Karl-Heinz Dellwo presenting a new volume about the socialist student leader Rudi Dutschke. Among June's other talks, one addresses a Nazi extermination camp in Trieste, Italy, and another Raiffeisen, once

an association of cooperatives and today one of Austria's biggest banks. Kühberger says that the *Bildungsverein* organizes five to six events a month. That's about seventy a year, which isn't bad by any standards. Finally, Kühberger shows me the latest project initiated by him and his vacationing colleague Samuel Stuhlpfarrer, a lending library that shelves books on contemporary antifascist youth culture and the current economic crisis next to Marxist classics.

After my visit with Kühberger, I take a stroll around Lagergasse 98, which is a compound consisting of several buildings situated around a leafy courtyard in the borough of Gries, a KPÖ stronghold. Both the municipal and the provincial party chapter, that is the Graz KPÖ and the Styrian KPÖ, have their offices here. The Styrian KPÖ has close ties to the Graz chapter and has benefited from the latter's success. After an absence of 35 years, the KPÖ reentered the Styrian parliament in 2005. This makes Styria the only Austrian province with Communists as members of parliament.

Apart from the *Bildungsverein* and the party offices, Lagergasse 98 also includes artists' workshops, a theater, a cafe, the "Institute for Child, Youth, and Family", and the "Pensioners' Central Association." Most groups sit in the *Volkshaus*, or, the "People's House". Next to its entrance, the KPÖ's logo adorns a metal sign. It sports a hammer and sickle above an Austrian flag, which conveniently consists of two red bars against a white background, underscoring the old communist symbol. Entering the building, I run into Manfred Eber, who I recognize as a former KPÖ chairman of Tyrol, the Austrian province I was born in. It turns out that he is a Graz native and that he returned to the city in 2006 as a district secretary. We chat about common acquaintances from Innsbruck, Tyrol's capital, where the left is small enough for anarchists, autonomists, and communists to all know one another. Eber confirms that the conditions of working for the KPÖ in Graz don't compare to the situation in Tyrol. I'm not surprised. The events of the KPÖ student section in Innsbruck always consisted of the exact same three people.

KPÖ can provide, which also means that I would like to see leftist parties showing more interest in studying its electoral achievements. At the same time, the limits of this approach are obvious when we talk about revolutionary perspectives. Prominent Styrian KPÖ members themselves, such as the provincial MP Claudia Klimt-Weithaler, have hinted at the KPÖ being a successor to the last "truly" Social Democratic era in Austria, which is commonly associated with the chancellorship of Bruno Kreisky in the 1970s. This is fine when one wants to defend the social welfare state – it is not very promising when one wants to smash capitalism. Furthermore, the usual party politics syndromes – phraseology, professionalization, and top-down structures – have all become obvious during the 48 hours I have spent in Graz. In the end, one's assessment of the local KPÖ will depend on the old question of "reform vs. revolution". In any case, Arnold Schwarzenegger, with his imagined Soviet tank trauma, will not be happy. That alone is a good thing.

Before leaving the *Volkshaus*, I pick up flyers of Radio Helsinki, Graz's "free radio" (why it is named after the Finnish capital escapes me), a pamphlet about the Nazi annexation of Austria entitled "1938: The *Anschluss* that wasn't one", and party-related journals. The *Grazer Stadtblatt* (literally, the "Graz Town Paper") and the *Steirische Volksstimme* (the "Styrian People's Voice") are the kind of low-cost publications you can pick up for free in any Austrian town. The layout makes you think that the computer age never happened. The issues that are available contain recipes for potato dishes and advice on how to prevent a cold. Meanwhile, the journals of the Communist Youth (*Kommunistische Jugend*) and the Communist Student Association (*Kommunistischer StudentInnenverband*) are colorful and eye-catching with graffiti-style headers, imaginative variations on red stars, and photoshopped versions of the iconic Che Guevara image. One of them, *Rotcrowd* (the "red crowd"), is subtitled "Journal for Self-determination in All Aspects of Life." Another, *vorneweg* ("ahead", or, in a freer translation, "leading the way"), features an interview with Derbst One, a 19-year old rapper from Germany who states that "the German proletariat is without any class consciousness whatsoever", and an article explaining why it is counterproductive for animal rights activists to go vegetarian and why the world's happiest goats live in Cuba.

I also find a glossy brochure that details the Graz KPÖ's policies under the header "We Are All Graz: Proposals for a Social and Ecological City". Each topic ("Safe and humane labor", "People with special needs", "A healthy life for all of us", etc.) contains a list of concrete "proposals". These include a minimum wage of 10 euros per hour, the usage of open source software in administration and schooling, free public transport for students and apprentices, the expansion of non-commercial meeting places, and mandatory parental leave for fathers.

From the *Volkshaus* I head to the *Rathaus*, literally the "Council House", the seat of local government. All of the political parties

represented in the city council have offices here. I have an appointment with Werner

Savernik, a council member for the Social Democrats. I want to get a Social Democratic perspective on how the KPÖ was able to outmaneuver the Social Democrats on the left, why the demise of the Social Democrats in Graz has been so significant (from 43 percent in 1988 to 15 in 2012), and how all this ties in with the history of working-class politics in Austria.

In the beginning, the Austrian Social Democrats were organized in the *Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei* (SDAP), founded in 1889. The SDAP was banned in 1934 by the Austrofascists. When the Nazis seized power four years later, the ban was upheld. In 1945, the Social Democratic party was revived under the name *Sozialistische Partei Österreichs* (SPÖ); in 1991, it changed its name to *Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*.

One reason for the historical strength of the Austrian Social Democrats was their relative openness to radical currents within the party. This made it hard for the KPÖ, founded in November 1918, to grow. The Austrian Social Democrats even stood for their own brand of socialist theory, the so-called Austromarxism, whose main principles were formulated by Otto Bauer in the 1920s. Bauer passionately emphasized the need for a broad "proletarian front", reaching from moderate and reformist factions to radicals. The "dictatorship of the proletariat" was still referenced as a possible means to fight the bourgeoisie in the SDAP party program of 1926, a time in which practically all other Social Democrats in Europe shunned such ideas. When Austrian workers rose against the Austrofascists in 1934, many SDAP members were on the frontlines. Working-class compounds dominated by Social Democrats, like the Karl-Marx-Hof in Vienna, were bastions of resistance.

The KPÖ (also forced into illegality) played an increasingly important role during Nazi rule. With most prominent Social Democrats in exile, rank and file Communists organizing underground were responsible for some of the most effective resistance

comes with lightning speed: "You would have someone to turn to if you ran into problems." "And," she adds, "there is a sense of community." She stresses that I would be able to attend KPÖ-organized talks, discussions, and festivals, which – and this seems important to her – are appreciated way beyond the circle of KPÖ members, even KPÖ voters. Her arguments sound reasonable; especially if I had an argument with my landlord or wanted to attend a Tariq Ali talk. But, at this point, I am not considering moving back to Austria.

Finally, I dare return to the level of national politics, but I speak of the "left" this time to avoid any suspicions regarding the "internal party affairs". I pick up on a euphoric statement by Kahr about how the time was ripe for "a strong leftist movement in the country". I ask her why such a movement doesn't exist yet. This is the only occasion during our conversation when Kahr takes a moment to contemplate. Hesitatingly, she quotes the lack of adequate leaders. "Maybe if Ernest Kaltenegger was younger…" Moments later, however, she has regained her optimism and declares that "things can often happen faster than you think".

There are indeed some indications that things might change. All of Austria's Communist Youth and Communist Students Association groups, for example, no matter the position of their respective mother party chapters, increasingly orient themselves toward the "Graz model" these days. Maybe the slick covers of their journals are the beginning of something bigger.

The interview ends. Kahr shakes my hand and thanks me for my interest in her party. "This can't be taken for granted." I tell her that I can send the quotes I want to use for authorization. She says that I can write what I want. At least no one can accuse the Graz KPÖ of attempted censorship.

Leaving Graz the next morning, I still find the KPÖ's success remarkable. I also believe that the threat of neoliberalism and the extreme right in Europe requires some kind of bulwark on the parliamentary level. This is something that parties like the Graz

part of the Communists in the region. I have no reason to doubt the genuineness of their communist convictions, which would imply joy over the expansion of communist ideas and principles. Yet, one of the stickers I found in the *Volkshaus* might be more revealing than I initially thought. It features Karl Marx wearing a traditional Styrian costume. Playing on the stereotype of Styrians being "stubborn" it reads: "Typically Styrian: Stubbornly for Social Justice". The line reminds me of autonomist friends in Tyrol who call the local KPÖ members "lederhosen Communists". In the Tyrolean case, of course, this wasn't of much help. The Styrian theme, however, might have played into the KPÖ's local success – while keeping the party relatively separated from the outside world. Unfortunately, I don't get to discuss this with Kahr given the sensitivity of the party politics issue. She even claims not to remember occupying a rather significant post (vice-chairwoman) in the national leadership in 2003–2004, only conceding that "If you've looked it up, it's probably true".

Moving on to other topics, Kahr relates that the most important aspect of politics are the "methods" (a statement probably welcomed by those who accuse the party of having abandoned ideology) and that the KPÖ abides by a three-step approach: concrete aid for the people; fighting for what's possible within the parliamentarian realm; and, if need be, engagement in extra-parliamentarian grassroots movements. I confront her with the critique of my operaist friends. She won't have any of it. Rather than individualizing problems and undermining collective resistance, the KPÖ encourages the latter. The KPÖ does not solve people's problems for them, the party rather assists them in solving their problems themselves. I lack the time to do a thorough empirical study of the claim.

My next question for Kahr is a hypothetical one: if I was to return to Austria – where I haven't lived in nearly twenty years – and decided to move to Graz, how would my life there be different compared to other Austrian towns? As usual, Kahr's response

against the Nazis on Austrian territory. This earned them the respect of a significant minority among the population, which is why the KPÖ had its biggest electoral success after the end of the war. Its influence waned, however, when Austria became independent in 1955. The party lost its last seats in the Austrian parliament in 1959, and it soon disappeared from most provincial and municipal governing bodies as well. By the 1960s, it had basically became irrelevant in domestic politics and turned into an ultra-loyal Austrian representative of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. This guaranteed funds and resources that far outweighed its actual significance. It was not least thanks to these resources that compounds like the one in Graz could be maintained throughout the decades.

The fact that the party never managed to capitalize on its resources might be an indication for simple political incompetence. Graz, however, was always a little different. When the KPÖ had dropped under 1 percent of the popular vote in practically all of Austria, it still managed to gather a steady 3–4 percent in Graz. This was enough for having at least one party member consistently represented in the municipal council since World War II. No one I asked could explain this relative historical strength of the KPÖ, as obvious reasons (for example, strong industry) were missing, but it is commonly referred to as an important reason for the unlikely success of the party in Graz in recent years: the fact that the party had never completely vanished from the political arena made it less outlandish to vote for one of the few Communist parties in Western Europe that had refused to change its name after the 1989 collapse of real socialism in the East.

The years following 1989 were of course turbulent ones for the KPÖ as well. Party leaders replaced one another in rapid succession, the torrent of public critique for the KPÖ's dogged loyalty to Moscow was relentless, an investigation into the party's assets was launched, and one of the main party buildings in Vienna was occupied by autonomist activists (the Ernst-Kirchweger-Haus, EKH, is

today Austria's most famous squat). Nonetheless, the party stuck to its name and to Marxism as its ideological foundation, perhaps because things could hardly get any worse: the KPÖ had long been Austria's most marginalized historical party.

Meeting the Social Democrat Werner Savernik was a surprise. Jovial, casually dressed, and well tanned, he reminded me of the physical education teachers in our high school. It seemed fitting that "surfing" and "diving" were listed among his hobbies on the SPÖ's online presentation. We were on a first-name basis within seconds, which is rare in formal Austrian settings. Had I been forced to guess, I would have certainly taken Savernik for a Green Party member. His opinion of the Greens, however, was low, at least with respect to the Graz chapter. He identified its "chaotic state" as one of the main reasons for the Communists' strength. While the Greens usually collected many "protest votes" on the left-liberal end of the parliamentary spectrum in Austria, the Communists had established themselves as the more attractive alternative in Graz.

The "protest votes" argument is a common one. Until the 1980s, the SPÖ and the conservative Austrian People's Party, ÖVP (*Österreichische Volkspartei*), regularly shared 90% of the popular vote (or more) in any Austrian election, be it national, provincial, or municipal. This created the infamous "Proporz system", perhaps the most characteristic feature of Austrian post-World War II politics. The term "Proporz" relates to "proportional representation". In the Austrian context, this means that the two leading parties divided up all public posts between them. If there were two high schools in a town, one would have a headmaster from the SPÖ and the other one from the ÖVP; if they were two sports clubs, one would be associated with the Social Democrats, the other with the Conservatives; there are even two party-related automobile clubs in Austria, so when your car breaks down you can either call the Social Democratic or the Conservative tow truck. Unsurprisingly, the Proporz system led to plenty of frustrating bureaucracy, com-

Kahr now wants to know "where I'm coming from" and states that she doesn't discuss "internal party affairs" with journalists. I tell her that I'm not interested in internal party affairs, but that it is an open secret that the relationship between the Styrian KPÖ and the national leadership is strained (in fact, they hardly talk), and that this relates to a question that, naturally, is on everybody's mind: If the success of the KPÖ in Graz is based on a very clear, and in fact rather simple, model (credibility, reliability, accessibility, and talented leaders), then why does i seem so difficult to replicate this? Why are there no other KPÖ chapters in Austria that have at least some success?

Kahr softens and suggests that other party chapters lack both the experience, the confidence, the patience, and perhaps the commitment that is needed. Leftist friends from different parts of Austria I have spoken to were more direct: all of the other KPÖ chapters simply lack charismatic figureheads, are stuck in ideological and sectarian infighting, and lack the actual motivation to be a political player in the real world. As far as the national leadership is concerned, it is widely critiqued for never having understood the concept of "meeting the people". Instead, it jealously guards lofty ideals that no one cares about. Still, the almost complete lack of contact between the KPÖ in Graz/Styria and other KPÖ chapters in Austria is striking. Alfred Strutzenberger – who has practically fallen silent since Kahr's arrival – confirmed to me that no other KPÖ chapters send delegates to study the "Graz model" and that overall exchange between them is poor.

The more I reflect upon this the more I feel that the lack of interest is perhaps not merely one-sided. Perhaps, the Graz KPÖ is not so interested in an exchange of this kind either. It might cherish the extraordinary role that it plays in the context of Communist politics in Austria, and, indeed, in Western Europe; the more insignificant other KPÖ party chapters and the national leadership are, the more spectacular does the success in Graz and Styria appear. I am not suggesting that isolation is a conscious strategy on

Strutzenberger is a pleasant man to talk to. He has been working for the party since 1998 and has experienced most of the rise of the KPÖ first-hand. When asked about the reasons for the success, he names what pretty much everyone else names, friend or foe: credibility, accessibility, reliability, and talented leaders. I ask about the name debate. He says that accusations of being closet Stalinists will always haunt parties with a communist foundation, no matter the name, and that it is important to be open about one's convictions and not to engage in "false advertising". We also chat about the history of the KPÖ in Graz (once again, no convincing answer for its relative historical strength can be provided), the critiques formulated by other parties (to the "buying votes" accusation Strutzenberger retorts that "If it's that easy, why don't they do it themselves?"), and the beginnings of working as a Communist in the *Rathaus* (which was a challenge, but one that the party mastered).

Eventually, Elke Kahr arrives and reminds me that the attitude towards smoking still differs between Austria and Sweden. With a nonchalant "You have to excuse me!" she lights a Marlboro, which, apparently, was denied to her during the meeting. As predicted by everyone I had talked to, Kahr is engaging, gregarious, and spirited. At the same time, the leisurely chat I had with Alfred Strutzenberger is replaced by a professional politician-meets-the-media routine. I'd like to think that I have prepared some fairly interesting questions for a comradely leftist dialogue, but I never even get to articulate them, since Kahr unfailingly interrupts me every time she hears a term that allows her to reproduce familiar responses. "Ideology? – We stand on solid Marxist grounds." "Social work? – That's the critique of those who aren't in touch with the people." "The KPÖ's past? – The KPÖ has nothing to blame itself for other than putting too much trust in people who betrayed communist ideals."

An awkward moment arises when I ask Kahr about the relationship between the Styrian KPÖ and the national party leadership.

placency, and corruption. Since the late 1980s, rapid cultural developments, new communication technologies, and the crisis of representative democracy have led to more and more Austrians, especially young ones, to vote for formerly small or entirely new parties: the Greens, the right-wing Freedom Party, the Pirate Party, and others.

Werner Savernik didn't hesitate to compare the Communists to all of them. It was not only the Greens the KPÖ was competing with, also the right-wingers. Savernik figured that many people in Graz would vote for the right-wing opposition in one election and for the Communists in the next. This is not an isolated opinion. It is confirmed by voter transition analysis and even by Communist Party members themselves. For Savernik, the fluctuation is no coincidence. He sees the KPÖ using the same "populist" means that the Austrian far right is known for. The latter's late hero, Jörg Haider, under whose leadership the Freedom Party rose nationwide from 5 percent in 1985 to 27 percent in 1999, was known to generously shower events, enterprises, and even individuals with party money. This practice was particularly pronounced in Carinthia, the southernmost Austrian province and Styria's western neighbor, which Haider, on the back of a whopping support of nearly 50 percent, governed as a kind of personal fiefdom for ten years, before smashing his official Volkswagen Phaeton on a summer night in October 2008. Haider, who drove 142 km/h in a 70 km/h zone with his blood alcohol level three times above the legal limit did not survive the crash. The comparisons drawn by Savernik to the KPÖ did, of course, not concern the accident. They concerned the use of party money as handouts, since the Graz KPÖ regularly uses party money to support people in need. Savernik calls this "buying votes". This was his strongest critique of the party, which he also accused of a destructive "politics of noncompliance" and of having a frighteningly outdated party program. Nonetheless, he stressed several times that the KPÖ's individual representatives were "genuine" and "honorable".

The "vote buying" is a serious allegation, not least because it targets a mainstay of the KPÖ success: providing direct help for those who require it. Since the KPÖ's influence on local politics began to rise in Graz with ever better election results in the late 1990s, the party has used its position and resources to install a kind of unofficial social welfare service. While other parties use their offices for party meetings and the like, the Communists are using theirs as a people's help desk. Appointments are recommended, but no one is sent away, five days a week – Wednesday afternoons, when party officials try to catch up on administrative and other duties, are the only exceptions.

Every day, the benches outside the KPÖ office are filled with people looking for support because they have lost their job, can't cover their medical bills, or are short on their rent. I passed the office on my way to Savernik. Two people, a man in his mid-40s wearing a tracksuit, and a young woman with a stroller, were waiting their turns. Savernik calls this degrading. The Communists call it *bürgernah*, "being close to the citizen".

There is one particular issue in which the Communists have excelled: housing. Since 1998, when the KPÖ received an unprecedented 8 percent of the vote in the municipal elections, a KPÖ member chairs the city's housing department, and the party has fought hard for defending public estates and preventing the rapid privatization of the housing market that characterizes pretty much every other European city. The party also helps individuals who need bigger or better flats, who require unaffordable renovations, or who have run into problems with their landlord. One of the Communists' most notorious slogans appeared in 2003, when Graz served as the "European Capital of Culture", a title bestowed every year by the European Union. While Europe's high society was mingling at fancy cultural events, the KPÖ posted a clear message all over town: "A bathroom in every apartment, that's culture, too."

According to party lore, the decision to focus on housing dates back to the 1980s, when the then chairman Ernest Kaltenegger de-

sible for some of the worst hardship among working-class families. Some people lose all their money with disastrous consequences for themselves and their loved ones. The KPÖ officials know this because of their *Bürgernähe*: numerous people who turn to them for help tell them heart-wrenching stories.

I check my watch. My appointment with Elke Kahr is approaching. Once again, I head for the *Rathaus*.

Elke Kahr is the new cornerstone of the KPÖ in Graz. Fifty-one years old, she has been a KPÖ member for thirty years. She became a municipal council member in 1993, and has been the party's front figure since 2005, when Ernest Kaltenegger moved on to the provincial level. Following in Kaltenegger's footsteps was far from an easy task. The shock result of 2003, when the KPÖ won 20.8 percent in the municipal elections, seemed impossible to repeat in 2008. And, indeed, numbers dropped to almost half, 11.2 percent. This, however, still meant that support for the KPÖ was ten times higher in Graz than in any other Austrian city – a fact that Kahr never ceased to stress when refusing to call the result a "loss".

Kahr retained the trust of the party, led the KPÖ through four years in the *Rathaus*, and topped the list for the municipal elections again in 2012. This time, she struck back with an unexpected 19.8 percent, basically mirroring the 2003 miracle result. By doing so, Elke Kahr stepped out of Ernest Kaltenegger's shadow and forced observers to admit that the KPÖ success in Graz could no longer be considered a fluke. The party had become a serious contender even for a future mayor's office. Local journalists used this to raise the question of the party's name again, suggesting that the major obstacle for reaching the number one position in town was the term "communism" and the baggage that came with it. Yet, changing the name of the party still doesn't seem to be in the cards, as I would soon be told.

When I arrive at the *Rathaus*, I learn that Kahr will be late as she is stuck in a meeting. I am referred to one of her colleagues in the Communists' *Rathaus* team, Alfred Strutzenberger.

the two are willing to share their critique of the KPÖ. It is harsh. They accuse the party of focusing on "social welfare" instead of "class struggle", of individualizing social problems and undermining the emergence of collective resistance, of lacking any presence in the factories, and of creating a cozy leftist niche where folks can groom their political identity without doing anything. The worker sums this up by stating that the "the Communist Party is much more party than communist". It reminds of something a young anarchist in town told me the day before: "Have you noticed that the Communist Party members never speak of communism unless they are asked?" Upon reflection, he seemed to have a point. In my discussion with the worker and the unemployed worker, I admit that I'm not categorically opposed to "the neutral journalist thing", but that I'd make sure their critique was included. We end the evening by discussing the open air Green Day concert they are going to attend the following day in Vienna, a birthday present for their 13-year old daughter – presumably, a future worker.

The next morning, I head out to *Triestersiedlung*, a large settlement of municipal apartment buildings where Elke Kahr's reputation, so I'm told, equals that of a saint. I meet few people, but find myself taken by the innovative urban planning of the Social Democrats of old, who placed peaceful meadows between quaint four-story multifamily residences surrounded by bushes and flower beds.

As I reach the settlement's northern end, I am reminded of its neighbor: the Graz-Karlau prison, Austria's third-biggest. Facing an enormous white wall topped with rolls of barb wire, I notice another establishment of interest: a bleak concrete building with a colorful neon sign offering *Glücksspiel*, that is, various forms of "poor man's gambling" such as one-arm bandits. For almost ten years, the KPÖ has been campaigning for the prohibition of such venues. An issue of the *Steirische Volksstimme* I picked up in the *Volkshaus* carries an article entitled "Poor Man's Gambling: The Way to Misery". According to the Communists, gambling is respon-

clared that a small party had to focus on one particular issue, since trying to be involved in everything would leave it with no actual influence on anything. Kaltenegger decided on housing, a topic that concerns many citizens in a very concrete way. The "tenants' hotline" has been a hugely popular feature of the KPÖ's profile since 1996 and is prominently advertised in practically all of the party's publications. It is an around-the-clock telephone service that tenants can turn to with any problem regarding their housing situation. The idea was born after a Graz KPÖ delegation had visited French Communist Party comrades in Lille where a similar system was in place.

Ernest Kaltenegger is a legendary figure among local Communists and consistently named as the single most important reason for the Graz KPÖ's success. Not only did Kaltenegger's suggestion to focus on one particular topic pay off, but he also managed to appear as a "different", or, perhaps more importantly, a "credible" and "trustworthy" politician. While other city officials were chauffeured around town in expensive cars, Kaltenegger rode the tram or his bicycle. While others voted for higher salaries for themselves, Kaltenegger gave most of his salary to social projects, keeping only the average wage of an Austrian worker. While others promised monumental things before the elections without ever living up to their announcements, Kaltenegger calmly explained what the Communists were able to do and held his word. While others reiterated boring political slogans, Kaltenegger spoke the language of the people.

Kaltenegger, now in his 60s, is a gentle and soft-spoken man with rimless glasses, a slight potbelly, and a teddy-bear charm. The story I hear from one party worker about lonely upper-class women in their 50s lining up for a dance with Kaltenegger at fundraisers sounds credible. What's statistically ensured is that the KPÖ's second-best results in Graz are reached in the upper-class neighborhood of Rudolfstraße. The best belong to the relatively poor inner city borough of Gries whose migrant population is indicated

by shops offering intriguing supplies such as "Turkish-Croatian Oriential Foods". As a seasoned local journalist puts it, the KPÖ's public image has become so appealing that it is "sexy" to vote for them even – or especially – among some of the city's wealthiest residents. In any case, if the statistics published by the Austrian SORA Institute can be trusted, the KPÖ is not the strongest party among the Graz working class. This distinction goes, as in many other Austrian towns, to the right-wing Freedom Party.

Recently, Kaltenegger declared his retreat from politics for health reasons. After lifting the Graz party to success, he had also paved the way for the KPÖ to reenter Styria's parliament in 2005, when he ran as the top candidate in the provincial elections. His successor in Graz is Elke Kahr, who displays all of the same personal qualities: savvy in housing questions, open, warm, likeable. Kahr, as well as all other KPÖ officials, also continue Kaltenegger's practice of giving away a significant amount of their income. In Kahr's case, 70 percent of her salary of 70.000 euros a year (after tax) go to social causes. That is a total of 45.000 euros. The KPÖ also holds an annual "Day of Open Accounts", on which interested citizens can investigate the party officials' finances.

I am looking forward to a meeting with Elke Kahr, but my appointment is only for the next day – a Wednesday afternoon, when the KPÖ officials have time for such things.

My meeting with Werner Savernik, the energetic politician representing a new Social Democratic generation, ends with him promising a big comeback for his party, which, unlike the KPÖ, wasn't just "buying votes" but actually addressed the underlying issues of poverty and other social problems. This is a bold statement coming from the member of a party whose leaders have been responsible for many of the neoliberal reforms implemented in Austria since the 1980s and who have long been referred to as "pinstripe suit socialists". Then again, who knows what the Saverniks can do? My prime interest at this point, however – now that I have heard a Social Democratic perspective – is how the

town's radical left perceives the role of the KPÖ. I would soon be presented with two rather differing opinions.

First, I go to visit Austria's most renowned anarchist historian, Reinhard Müller, who treats me to a tour of his impressive private archive filling a fifth-story flat in a central Graz apartment building. The home of Müller and his wife, Beatrix Müller-Kampel, a literary historian, is just across the hall. Müller tells me that he has known Ernest Kaltenegger since the 1970s, when Kaltenegger was working at the only bookstore in town where Müller could find anarchist literature. Even at the time, Kaltenegger was interested in housing issues and assisted many squatters when the first wave of the European squatting movement swept through town. Müller's reservations to party politics as an anarchist are clear, but he makes a point of not condemning the KPÖ, stressing that within the possibilities of the parliamentarian framework they have done good things. He also tells me about two anarchists who decided to run on their ballot, citing the principle of "localism": an engagement in projects that so immediately concern local communities that direct contact between the electorate and the delegates remains possible, while rejecting any higher electoral level inevitably leading to alienation between the two.

I meet a different sentiment when I sit down for dinner with old friends from Tyrol – diehard operaists involved with the German journal *Wildcat* whose name is as telling as it sounds. No *Wildcat* article is ever signed, and my friends seem to have embraced the principle of anonymity throughout, preferring me to refer to them only as "worker" and "unemployed worker" in this article. They moved to Graz a few years ago. The worker found employment at the Magna Steyr auto factory. The unemployed worker was given the runaround by employment offices and job trainers, all to no avail. The worker is hesitant to talk to me about the article, since he questions my intentions. He makes it clear that he doesn't want me to do "the neutral journalist thing". Eventually, though, not least due to the more lenient approach of the unemployed worker,