"Austria and the World at the Dawn of 2010"
Report of a New Year's Listening Post

Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives,' that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following interrelated themes:

Theme 1: Engagement vs. Resignation
The group feels a sense of resignation. In their everyday roles participants are very much concerned with helping to increase awareness of teachers, politicians, journalists and adolescents. One-to-one work seems to be effective but on a large scale this sort of work seems to have no real impact on society. There is a general feeling of being unable to change society. This is accompanied by the image of an icebear in the climate change. Threats emerging from right-wing extremism in Austria and other European countries apparently cannot be brought to a standstill. There is an inner struggle between the attempt to keep up feelings of motivation and resignation.

Theme 2: Spread of Violence and Resulting Anxiety
A letter to the editor of a national newspaper shows that parts of Austrian society is being encouraged by various groups to act out hateful impulses. A young girl who was denied asylum in Austria experiences verbal attacks. How is it possible that such a harmless person is felt to be such a big threat to the Austrians? An Austrian politician called the construction of an asylum center in Burgenland (region in Austria) the "greatest attack on Austria in history". There is some sort of shifting going on. This is a very real issue. Aggression appears to be acted out more frequently, particularly by young people. This preoccupies the group. Participants are afraid. In their various roles they are quite concerned with the anxiety resulting from unfiltered violence, verbal as well as physical. This concern is brought to the fore by reference to actual events in Austria. People seem less able to sublimate. Austrian leaders and politicians are not setting enough boundaries.

Theme 3: Major Changes in Political Discourse (Public Life)
The political discourse has been changing. Agitation against immigrants, minorities

seems not only permitted but welcome. The term 'Überfremdung', i.e. the sense many Austrians have that there are too many foreigners living in Austria is discussed by participants. The term was constitutionally banned in 1990 but eight years later a political party won influence by parading it in public. In other countries this would have led to the party being banned. This change in the political climate started with the end of the Kreisky Era. Kreisky was an integrative figure. After Kreisky there were no longer any boundaries. During elections the term is used strategically to draw attention to the political party employing the term. At the same time the gap between classes of society seems to be increasing. The traditionally educated middle-class and the masses are drifting further and further apart. This is mirrored by the group discussion.

Theme 4: Major Changes at Work (Roles at Work)
For roles at work, general pressure seems to be increasing. Tasks are becoming increasingly complex. The last generation seems to have been confronted with less complexity. They seem to have had less individual responsibility. Participants have a sense of being overwhelmed by the increasing complexity of today's world. There is lack of clarity which participants perceive as problematic. Colleagues are busy with their private lives. This is experienced as a threat. People use their roles within their families to protect themselves. Participants report having more than one profession. Job changes are confusing and often unbearable. This topic seems to have been forgotten during the third part of the listening post. In the private sector there is a loss of values. Statements made by leaders cannot be taken seriously. Commitments are often broken off. Leaders are thus not seen as role models, primarily because of the clear gap between their statements (ideals) and what they actually do. Management staff often appears opportunistic. Their behavior is inhomogeneous. Actions tend to be arbitrary. People are not concerned with the consequences of their actions. Loss of values seems to be the cause of a moral crisis. At the same time, social workers and therapists seem to benefit from this crisis by an increased need for consultation. Patients talk to therapists about being fired from work. In one office six people were fired just before Christmas.

Theme 5: Major Changes in Relationships (Private Life)
An increasing number of people have short relationships with partners. There is a great variety in relationships and private constellations. Most modern relationships demand more energy than the traditional kinds of relationships. There is therefore a lack of energy to be invested in other things, whether in work or political activity. At the same time, there is no real personal identity. Partners are no longer as committed to one another.

Theme 6: Youth
Aggression in adolescents is an important issue. Teachers today are increasingly concerned with helping students become aware of their latent aggression. Teaching facts is thus of less importance. Students of social work are from families which are protective, have values and can afford to be engaged with social issues in a creative manner. Teachers are often frightened by their own prejudices towards adolescents. The fact that everyone today can study at university is paradoxical. It's as if you had acquired the right to park but there are no parking lots. Student demonstrations. Participants feel that they have left the students to themselves. Yet they too are left to themselves.

Group discussion on student protests. These protests were something positive, better in any case than a complete loss of values. Yet they were diffuse and not effective. They were not well organized. At the same time, adolescents enjoy economic stability. They are also for the most part psychologically stable. Private life is also often stable. There

are, in short, areas of life that offer stability. Even if it all seems a bit 'Biedermeier' (adapted and cliché), we can be happy about that too in such times as these. 'Biedermeier' is, after all, healthy conventionality. When they were sons and daughters, participants had much less security. They had little orientation and were much more in the position to have to find out what to do in life. Today's students are more adapted and less disoriented. They have the power to create their own future. This brings about a feeling of confidence in the group.

Theme 7: Loss of Containment and Values
The continual loss of values leads to a longing for new ones. There is a general loss of commitment and accountability. Leaders set weak examples. They say one thing and do another. Yet nobody reacts to this. They cannot give us the safety we long for. There are no positive role models. Leaders are arbitrarily chosen. They are generally opportunistic.

Theme 8: Control
Two things raise the issue of control in the group: the question whether anyone has checked, i.e. 'controlled' whether the coffee is hot and the announcement of the group convenor that a protocol of the listening post is taken and will be published as an anonymous report. Does this mean that we are saying things we do not mean and by thus suppressing aggression? Does what we say really represent Austrian society? Or does it represent only a small part? That part which is middle class and generally not violent? Are we just using clichés? Or do we mean what we say? Would we speak differently if we were not being observed? There are various opinions in the group. Some think that the report makes us more disciplined, others think that we are wearing masks inside of us. We are all being observed, the public is watching us. Before a client comes to our office he or she googles us.

Theme 9: Guilt and Shame
Some professions are experienced as strenuous (political scientists, historians, teachers, therapists). Other professions seem easier (art, university, aesthetics). Because of this feelings of shame emerge in one part of the group. A large part of the group feels comfortable. There is a slight sense of guilt in the air.

Theme 10: Dissolution of Identity and the Lack of Values and Orientation
The great narratives are in the past. This is both fortunate and unfortunate. There is no idea about society or a political movement to identify with. Although each person can work for him or herself they generally cannot influence society. We especially cannot influence racism and right-wing tendencies spreading larger parts of society. It is difficult to react. Whatever we do seems of no avail. There are no ideologies, no values.

Theme 11. Boundaries and Containment
Parts of the group experience feelings of uneasiness due to the harmonious interaction in the group. People seem merely to adapt to one another. Parts of the group are glad that polite manners and order prevails. The state is coming apart at the seams. There was the example of the young girl who did not receive asylum in Austria and was publicly attacked in major medias, the violence of the reactions are preoccupying. Especially before elections and during crises. We in the group feel that we cannot influence society as much as we would like. We are afraid of a kind of psychological retreat (cynicism, 'Biedermeier', alcoholism, political delusion).

Theme 12: Political Thinking
We lack the ability to think analytically. Did we ever learn to think politically?

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and, developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.

Hypothesis 1

Economic and Societal Splitting

Because of the widening gap in society between different social strata, parts of society are drifting further and further apart. They no longer have anything to do with one another. Individuals feel isolated. The group mirrors this process in its discussion. There is fear of contact which encourages splitting and projective tendencies. An integrative figure is missing, a figure that can ease the disappointment due to the failure of the great narratives and the confusion arising there from. Mass aggression management is changing. Scapegoating was forbidden yesterday and yet today it is part of the political discourse. Because of this people feel increasingly pressured to repair society. There is great uncertainty about what is 'correct behavior' without becoming a kind of 'virtue terrorist'. Civil courage and initiative are increasingly suffocated by this situation. Problems having to do with life are delegated to students. They are supposed to be unconventional. What they do tends to be disappointing. They are also isolated because the older generation cannot provide support because they are mostly concerned with their own private issues.

Hypothesis 2

Identity and Political Thinking

Because of the threats due to the inability of politicians to sublimate their aggression, members of society experience utter confusion. They regress to earlier stages in development (for example private issues being carried out at the workplace) and confine their relationships to a primary group (family, virtual groups, leisure groups) where they can confirm their identity albeit in a limited manner. Manifest fear can be controlled. Unconscious struggles seem to be a longing to be noticed.

Hypothesis 3

Icebears in the Climate Change (How to Cope with Changes?

Because of rapid changes in society, members of society are forced to adjust their identities very quickly. They feel that they are not quick enough in developing new and complex identities. They feel powerless, like icebears in the climate change. Facing the enormous number of new possibilities causes on the one hand utter confusion and feelings of being overwhelmed, on the other hand an unconscious guilt for being part of

the privileged part of society preoccupied with merely 'luxuriuos' conflicts. There is a strong sense of lifelessness.

At this point in time, members of society seem to be more preoccupied with adolescents than with their own morale and political actions. Issues of lifelessness vs. vitality, confusion vs. orientation seem to be projected on adolescents. Perhaps members of society unconsciously reflect on their own 'vital cells'. Perhaps the middle-aged middle class can become less preoccupied and more reflective, perhaps they can develop new perspectives for society, perhaps they can regain some 'courage'.

Hypothesis 4

Civilization and its Discontents

Austria is relatively wealthy, its society is orderly, it is a small 'comfort zone' with hardly any influence in world politics, it enjoys financial and political security. This is why there are many immigrants in Austria. Because of all this members of society feel alarmed about their scapegoating tendencies and feel an urge to create a 'secure zone for the weak', similar to the listening post on a snowy Friday morning. It is difficult to bear the big gaps in society. The Waldorff pupil vs. peripheral areas, residents vs. foreigners, unrestrained persons vs. adapted persons, engaged persons vs. persons with a tendency to withdraw from society. These differences create feelings of uneasiness, i.e. feelings of guilt about being able to live comfortably (even in groups) while others are isolated and die alone. Another part may be the general 'uneasiness of civilization' which is the price we pay for culture and shared values.

Group Convener: Simon Severino
Protocol: Verena Tatra
Organization: Martin Engelberg