

Interview with Bruno Kreisky and Stephan Verosta on the conclusion of the State Treaty (Vienna, 1980)

Caption: In 1980, in an interview with the Austrian Federal Press Service, the Austrian Chancellor, Bruno Kreisky, and the former Ambassador, Stephen Verosta, describe the negotiations on the Austrian State Treaty held in Moscow in 1955.

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Bruno Kreisky recalls

Interview of the Federal Press Service with Federal Chancellor Bruno Kreisky and Professor Stephan Verosta, former ambassador, on the negotiations conducted in 1955 by an Austrian Government delegation at Moscow, the outcome being the conclusion of the State Treaty with Austria.

Interviewer: Federal Chancellor Kreisky, in your capacity as State Secretary in the Federal Ministry for Foreign Affairs you were in 1955 by far the youngest member of the Austrian Government delegation to Moscow. You are now also the sole survivor of this delegation, a real stroke of luck for the historian of modern affairs or for the journalist. Likewise Professor Verosta, today an academic but then head of the Foreign Ministry's international law branch and acting as legal adviser to the Government, was there.

How at that date did matters stand? Were the members of the delegation, Federal Chancellor Julius Raab, Vice-Chancellor Adolf Schärf, Federal Foreign Minister Leopold Figl, and yourself, convinced that you would return from Moscow with the State Treaty?

Federal Chancellor: No, by no means. A series of discussions, in which there was no unanimity as to whether a large or a small delegation should be sent to Moscow, preceded its composition and departure. It was not clear what the Soviet Union wanted from us. Vice-Chancellor Schärf told me how some members of the Government thought that only a small delegation, Raab and Kreisky perhaps, should go. Whereupon I said, "Either the Russians want to tell us something highly unpleasant, in which case it makes sense for a very strong delegation to travel to Moscow so as to be in a position if necessary also to say no, because it is essential to be able to cope with a 'Hacha Situation' (1), or there is a constructive reason behind this invitation. Then too the delegation ought to be so strong that it can say yes right away".

Finally the Federal Government decided to delegate Federal Chancellor Raab, Vice-Chancellor Schärf, Foreign Minister Figl, and myself to go to Moscow. Other members of the party were the head of the Political Department, Schöner, the head of the Foreign Ministry's international law branch, Verosta, and the Federal Chancellor's personal assistant, Steiner, who subsequently became ambassador and today is a member of the *Nationalrat*.

So we knew nothing at all. And let me add in parenthesis what a former Communist journalist once told me — in the editorial Offices of the *Volksstimme* there was great jubilation as it was assumed that we had been summoned to Moscow to hear a demand for Communists to be included in the Austrian Federal Government, failing which the Iron Curtain would come down at the river Enns, that is, at the border between the Soviet and American Occupation Zones. Let me repeat once more: We flew to Moscow without knowing exactly what was awaiting us.

Interviewer: How was the reception at Moscow? Could you perhaps already draw some conclusion from it?

Federal Chancellor: We flew in two aircraft from Vöslau to Moscow. When we arrived, something totally unexpected happened — the senior functionaries of the Soviet Union were there to welcome us, personalities whom we knew only from the newspapers. The band of the Moscow Guards Battalion had been paraded for our benefit and played the Austrian national anthem by heart. It was a reception like a state visit, and I told Vice-Chancellor Schärf, "If they greet us with so much fuss, then they can't send us home again with none at all." So from the official and large-scale welcome at Moscow it could be concluded that something special by way of proposals, perhaps very important proposals on the part of the Soviet Union, and probably of a friendly nature, lay ahead of us.

Interviewer: How did the talks then develop? Was apparent from the start a readiness to meet Austria halfway?

Federal Chancellor: For the moment things had not got as far as that. First the Austrian ambassador at Moscow, Dr. Bischoff, sprang a further surprise on us, saying that he was at his wit's end because he had too little room at the embassy for the coming reception. He had as usual invited all the leading personalities in

the Soviet hierarchy, but he had of course not counted on all of them coming. Now, though, whoever had received an invitation had accepted and he could not imagine how he was going to fit them all in. We again realized that a greater event must be impending.

The difficulty about managing the guests was solved after all; there was a bit of a crush. During the reception a lot of toasts, as is customary in the Soviet Union, were proposed and the tenor of them was warm friendship for Austria. The biggest surprise was however still to come, for at the end Prime Minister Marshal Bulganin rose and stated that the Soviet Union had invited us so as to establish the prerequisites for conclusion of the Austrian State Treaty and to discuss its conditions with us. Where-upon everything was completely clear.

It should be noted that, with the exception of Krushchev who was at a peasant conference outside Moscow, every one of the Soviet Union's highest functionaries, including Bulganin, Mikoyan, Molotov, Kaganovich, and Malenkov, was at the reception. It ended eventually in a very gay and relaxed atmosphere. No wonder! After ten years of fruitless negotiations about the State Treaty we were at last sighting land.

Interviewer: Who were your immediate negotiating partners? How were the roles allocated between them?

Federal Chancellor: Our immediate negotiating partners were Molotov on political and Mikoyan on economic matters. A perfect division of labour seemed to operate between them. In addition Vice-Ministers Gummykin and Semonov as well as Tunkin, a senior diplomat, had leading parts to play. Negotiations began already next morning, and the going was relatively hard. The Austrian delegation intimated completely unequivocally its wishes on still outstanding problems of the State Treaty. In the afternoon only Foreign Minister Figl, myself, and our officials negotiated with the Russian delegation while Federal Chancellor Raab and Vice-Chancellor Schärf went through a sightseeing programme. During the negotiations every remark made by one delegation was translated into respectively Russian or German, so there was always time enough for reflection and deliberation.

Interviewer: The most difficult problem was that of the so-called German assets. An agreement on the subject had been reached by the Allies among themselves, but one that was distinctly disadvantageous to Austria. For example, the Soviet Union was to receive for a period of thirty years concessions in Austrian oil fields equivalent to 60% of the oil extraction for 1947 together with buildings and equipment and in addition 60% of the assets belonging to the Danube Shipping Company (DDSG). How did you succeed in getting away from this agreement and arriving at a far better solution for Austria?

Federal Chancellor: In the first place agreement was very soon reached that Austria could settle the amount of 150 million dollars for redemption by delivery of goods. We would not indeed have been in a position to raise the redemption sum in dollars because we did not dispose over the requisite foreign exchange. The real difficulty was over oil, but about that too agreement was comparatively quickly achieved. Months before, in Geneva, I had talked to Gummykin, now a member of the Soviet delegation, on the subject of redemptive deliveries and told him of Austrian wishes in the matter, so that the Soviet negotiators knew already what we had in mind.

At Moscow we put forward the argument that the Soviet Union was everywhere making a stand against the Great Powers' so-called oil imperialism and yet, contrary to this attitude, it wanted to impose on us a burden that came very close to this imperialism.

Interviewer: How did the question of Austria's neutrality arise? At the Berlin Conference still, little more than a year before, the Austrian declaration that no military bases would be allowed on Austrian soil and that the country would not enter into any military alliances had scrupulously avoided the term 'neutrality', and it is known that the Western Powers also did not think much of neutrality on the part of Austria.

Federal Chancellor: It would be better for Professor Verosta to answer this question.

Professor Verosta: Austria's neutrality was broached as long ago as 1946-7, among other things through

remarks made by Federal President Dr. Renner. In 1947 however the atmosphere of the Cold War froze the expression of any such ideas. Our formula ran approximately along the line that permanent neutrality can only be established if the state who declares it does want it, its neighbours agree, and a minimum of confidence exists among the Great Powers. Neutrality creates not only an obligation for the state which pronounces the declaration of neutrality, but also a tie between those states that recognize it, this being the obligation to exclude in the case of tensions and conflicts the neutral state from their disputes. Switzerland succeeded in that for a hundred and fifty years. Belgium's neutrality was infringed, but in no way terminated thereby. On the contrary, the Powers who had guaranteed Belgian neutrality went to war on account of the breach. Moreover the international obligation among the Powers and their recognition of Belgian and Swiss neutrality were embodied in all the post-World War One peace treaties named after Paris suburbs.

Perhaps I may recall to mind that as from 1950 work was proceeding on a history of the First Republic. I took for my theme the European function of the Austrian state. The article was written in the years 1952-3 and the book, edited by Heinrich Benedikt, was published in 1954. I commented on the self-confidence of the Austrians who now took a positive attitude towards their country and were ready to implement such a pacificatory European function. By way of a Big Coalition (2) lasting ten years we had made on the four Great Powers the firm impression that we wanted and were in a position to exercise such a peacekeeping European function, and so in Moscow too the impression predominated that the Austrians were quite a decent lot of people on whom reliance could be placed.

We had heard unofficially that there had been discussion of the subject among the Soviet leadership and that Molotov in particular was against neutrality on the part of Austria. In the end, though, a decision in favour of such neutrality had manifestly won the day. Molotov strictly adhered to this decision and not for a moment did he during the negotiations convey the idea that he had any reservations. He also had all details at his fingertips and rarely needed any information from his advisers.

I remember that only on two occasions did he address a question to these same advisers, this being when we asked how many Austrian nationals there still were in the Soviet Union as prisoners of war and how many war criminals were still held in the Soviet Union. The answer given him to both these questions subsequently proved erroneous. It was due, the Soviet experts explained, to reports from the individual camps being inexact.

I may add that on our departure from Vöslau Dr. Schöner and myself were distinctly more optimistic as to the outcome of the Moscow talks than were the politicians although no one knew precisely what the Russians actually had in mind. That becomes clear from a conversation I had with the American ambassador to Vienna, Thompson, shortly before our flight. He asked me why the delegation was taking a legal adviser, myself, along. The possibility could not be excluded, I replied, that the Russians might make us an interesting proposal which could render necessary the presence of an international lawyer to give his opinion. After the start of the negotiations, though, I was really convinced that the Soviet Union meant to conclude the State Treaty.

Federal Chancellor: I thought in the first place that the term 'neutrality' should be avoided because I feared that the Soviet Union would be able to vary its interpretation according to need. I wanted use of the term 'freedom from alliances' and in addition to enter into an obligation that Austria would not allow foreign military bases on its territory. For Molotov this did not go far enough. I, on the other hand, wanted for all contingencies to exclude the possibility of the term 'neutrality' being variously interpreted. Eventually Dr. Verosta had the splendid idea that discussion should turn on a neutrality as practised by Switzerland. That would do away with all difficulties of interpretation.

The proposal was at once accepted by the Russian delegation. I am convinced that we also rendered the Swiss a great service, even if they did not at all like their country being mentioned. In fact, though, Swiss neutrality was thereby for the first time confirmed and recognized in an official Soviet document.

Professor Verosta: At the Moscow talks the Soviet Union endowed neutrality with a higher standing.

Interviewer: In Austria the foremost point of interest at the time was the departure of the Occupation Forces. People wanted, after more than ten years, at last to see the backs of the foreign soldiery. Molotov, having at the Berlin Conference still linked the departure of the Occupation Forces with a German peace treaty, for the first time in February 1955 hinted in the course of a speech to the Supreme Soviet that another solution was possible. How did matters proceed at the talks? Did the Soviets display any readiness to meet us half-way or did the Austrian delegation need to push very firmly for a solution to this question?

Federal Chancellor: The problem of how long the Occupation Forces should continue to remain in Austria created great difficulties. After tough negotiations, during which the Austrian delegation insisted on a speedy departure of the Occupation Forces, agreement was reached that they should have left the country ninety days after the ratification of the State Treaty.

The Russians incidentally were the first to withdraw their troops. On 25 October the last foreign soldier, a British general, left Austrian soil. On 26 October 1955 the Neutrality Law had its passage through Parliament.

Dr. Schöner and Dr. Verosta had had another splendid idea. They took the line that the declaration of neutrality could only follow the withdrawal of the Occupation Forces so as not to create the impression that Austrian neutrality had been an integral part of the Moscow negotiations, a prerequisite so to speak for agreement over the State Treaty, meaning that it had been thrust on the Austrian people from outside. Such an impression must not be allowed to arise because then the notion of Austrian neutrality would be depreciated.

Professor Verosta: The disinclination of the Soviet Union to evacuate occupied territory was very great and their distrust of such a solution considerable. Years ago Gromyko had said on the occasion of a United Nations General Assembly, "We withdrew from Trieste with the result that it became an Anglo-American base. We would not like to have the same experience in Austria." This remark by Gromyko is typical of the difficulties which existed inside the Soviet leadership on the subject of a withdrawal by the Occupation Forces.

Interviewer: Was there during the duration of the Moscow talks communication with the Western Allies who had, of course, to give their assent to the arrangements with the Soviet Union?

Federal Chancellor: Officials kept the Western Allies constantly in the picture and in addition our politicians passed information to the Western Allies informally at the various receptions given during the negotiations. At one of them Mikoyan asked me why I was looking so thoughtful. "Because I am weighing up", I answered, "what the Western Powers are going to say to the outcome of these Moscow negotiations." To which he retorted, "You can rest quite reassured about that. They have no choice other than to agree with the arrangements. They have so often promised you the State Treaty that now there is nothing they can do except to acquiesce."

Interviewer: Were you after the conclusion of the talks completely certain that for all practical purposes you had the State Treaty in your pocket? Did you anticipate more protracted negotiations with the other Allies or with a conclusion to them within a few weeks?

Federal Chancellor: Yes, we were completely certain that we had the State Treaty in our pocket. On how long the negotiations would last between the Ambassadors, which it was agreed should be held in Vienna, we were not clear. The conviction on our side was that we had achieved the best that was capable of being achieved. That was the opinion in Austria too. We flew back to Vienna and reported to our party committees who unanimously sanctioned all the arrangements that we had agreed at Moscow.

Professor Verosta: The Russians were very co-operative at the ambassadors' conference. Difficulties arose only over formulation of the passage in the Preamble where there was to be reference to Austria's share of responsibility for participation in the Second World War.

Federal Chancellor: The predominant view among the Austrians was that a change in the formula must be reached during the ambassadors' conference. My opinion was that for the time being discussion of this problem should be left aside and an attempt made to seek direct agreement on it with Molotov. And that then is what came off.

Professor Verosta: It was Molotov indeed who kept it up his sleeve as a sensation for the conference of Foreign Ministers which followed on that between the ambassadors. "Our ambassadors", he said "have done good work. There are no points left open. We could proceed to the signature of the Treaty. Has anyone any proposal to make or does anyone still wish to speak?" Hereupon Foreign Minister Figl rose and requested deletion of the controversial formula about Austria's coresponsibility for participation in the Second World War, and all the Foreign Ministers agreed.

For the rest it was the Russians who were by far the friendliest during the negotiations between the Foreign Ministers. Secretary of State Dulles, for instance, called for an allowance of only two minutes' speech by each Foreign Minister on the ceremonial occasion of the State Treaty's signature. Molotov said he understood the Secretary of State's words to mean that the Foreign Ministers should not speak too long. The day would however be for the host country Austria, for the Four Powers, and for peace in Europe of such great significance that he must express himself against a limitation on the time for speakers. In fact, when it came to his turn during the ceremony, Molotov did speak for twelve minutes whereas the Secretary of State confined himself to the two minutes' limit.

Interviewer: Today it is easier than in 1955 clearly to grasp the importance of the Austrian State Treaty. You, Federal Chancellor, in your last governmental declaration paid tribute to its international significance. Was it at that date apparent to members of the Austrian delegation that the conclusion of the State Treaty was, as it were, a kind of signal for new possibilities of détente?

Federal Chancellor: To us it was clear that after the passage of years there was here a document signed by all the four Great Powers and that this could perhaps signify a new phase in international politics, the period which was later called 'The Thaw'.

Professor Verosta: I would like furthermore to refer to the outstanding importance of the provision whereby the Great Powers expressly agreed on the admission of Austria to the United Nations. Had we not had that in the Treaty, the admission itself might have encountered difficulties. It was, after all, a matter — and that immediately following signature of the Treaty — of admission as a fully-fledged UN member for a permanently neutral state. As everyone knows, Switzerland has to this day not joined the United Nations.

(1) A reference to the situation with which in 1939 the President of Czechoslovakia found himself faced by Hitler. It ended with Hacha's capitulation and was the beginning of the end for Czechoslovak independence.

(2) Since 1945 the Federal Government had been composed from members of the two major parties (Austrian People's Party, Austrian Socialist Party) which enjoyed an overwhelming majority in Parliament and was known as the 'Big Coalition'.