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**Reaching out to the victims and combating  
anti-Semitism: the Austrian National Fund  
and the ITF on Holocaust Education**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Margit Schwarz, born 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 1895.  
Pianist, married to a dentist.  
13<sup>th</sup> of July 1923 – birth of her son.  
Resident in Josefstadt, Vienna.  
Summer resort in Reichenau.  
December 1939 – flight of her only son to Palestine.  
1<sup>st</sup> of October 1942, no. 1158 on transport number 43.  
Deportation to Theresienstadt.  
6<sup>th</sup> of October 1944, transport number Eo 1016.  
Deportation to Auschwitz.  
She was gassed upon arrival.  
She was one of the countless women who were murdered  
in Auschwitz.

This woman was my grandmother.  
I dedicate this lecture to her name.

First of all, I would like to thank you for allowing me the honor of speaking to you here today.

Reaching out to the victims – during my last thirteen years as Secretary General of the National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism, this is what I have always felt to be our most important task. Reaching out to the victims – that means

- actively remembering the fate of all the women, men and children who shared my grandmother's fate – all those who disappeared, all those who were murdered
- and being there for those who survived.

In these thirteen years I have listened to the stories of many survivors – and I have also been confronted with many different reactions from people living in present day Austria.

Although more than 60 years have passed since the fall of National Socialist rule in Austria and Germany, nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism are sadly topics which also influence and affect our present society. This is illustrated by incidents which have occurred even in the most recent past:

Only a short while ago, last month, in the German town of Passau, on the Austrian border, an attack was carried out on the Passau Chief of Police, Alois Mannichl – a man who is well known for his determined actions against the extreme right wing. The Bavarian and Austrian Neo-Nazi Scenes are known to be closely connected.

An incident like this could well have also taken place in Austria, where right wing and nationalist behaviour and comments are still considered acceptable in many circles. In this connection I recall the political success of the late Jörg Haider, who, using expressions such as the “good employment policies of the Third Reich”, gained not only criticism but also an alarming amount of support. It cannot have escaped those who have followed Austria's domestic politics over the past years that the subject of National Socialism is, in Austria even more than in Germany, a long way from being sufficiently processed.

Within the vast subject of Austria's confrontation with her past and the question of acknowledgment of responsibility as well as the complex story of compensation measures, there are several issues on which a detailed elaboration would seem appropriate. In my capacity as Secretary General of the National Fund and the General Settlement Fund, I would like to focus on the work of the National Fund and Austria's efforts in combating anti-Semitism.

I would like to outline for you the path which Austria has taken since 1938 and also offer you an insight into the tasks and the work undertaken by the National

Fund and the *Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Research and Remembrance*.

As the subjects of Jews, the Holocaust in Austria and combating anti-Semitism are tightly interlinked, I would like to start by giving you a brief historical overview of

## I. The development of Jewish life in Austria before 1938

In the Austrian revolution of 1848, intellectual Austrian Jews for the first time fought openly for the emancipation of the Jews in Austria. In 1849, Emperor Franz Joseph mentioned the Jewish community in a speech for the first time. The year 1852, when a provisional Community law was passed, can be considered as the creation of the Jewish community in Austria. In 1867, Austrian Jews were included in the citizens laws as equal to all other citizens. Consequently, the Jewish community expanded rapidly. Whereas in 1860 only 6.200 Jews had been registered in Vienna, in 1870 the number had risen to 40.200 and later, at the turn of the last century, there were 147.000.

This century of positive development and growth of the Jewish community was accompanied by a rise in anti-Semitism and discrimination in the inter war period. In 1938, approximately 200.000 Jews lived in Austria, most of them in Vienna.

## II. National Socialism in Austria

In 2008, Austria remembered the so called “Anschluss”, when Nazi German troops entered Austria on 12<sup>th</sup> of March 1938 70 years ago – which, it is now recognized, was warmly welcomed by many of Austria’s citizens.

“Kristallnacht” – the night of the 9<sup>th</sup> November 1938, when widespread anti-Semitic sentiments culminated in a night of terror – dramatically heralded the imminent genocide in Germany and Austria. All but one Viennese synagogues were completely destroyed; most were burned down. Many Jewish businesses were plundered that night and forced to close down. In Austria, the onslaught against the Jewish population was often more brutal than in Germany: I remember a survivor – she was then a girl of 8, daughter of a Jew and a so-called

Aryan – she recalled her experience of the invasion: her uncle, a brother of her mother, had participated in the invasion as a German soldier. When he came to Vienna and realized the extent of the terrible acts of violence against the Jewish population, he convinced his sister to send the niece to Germany with him – he considered her safer in Germany than in Austria.

By 1941, 130.000 Jews had been able to flee, leaving behind all their belongings. After the so called „final solution“ only 2000 Jews still remaining in Austria survived. All others – more than 47.000 men, women and children – were deported and murdered.

### III. Post-war Austria

After the war, Austria didn't attempt to confront its past and didn't invite back those who had fled.

Some came back of their own volition, such as my father – who came back from Palestine as early as spring 1947. He left Austria in late 1939, when war had already been declared. He succeeded in reaching Trieste from where he had a passage on a ship to Palestine. His mother, my grandmother, wasn't able to escape. In 1942 she was deported to Theresienstadt, and in 1944 to Auschwitz where she perished.

After many years of deprivation and great hardship, the surviving Austrian victims did not receive the recognition to which they should have been entitled. The 536,000 former National Socialists represented a considerable number of potential voters. However, the victims of National Socialism who had returned constituted perhaps one hundredth of this number – consequently, their interests were largely neglected in the new society.

During these years, the reconstruction of a country in ruins was of primary importance. Post-war society was more interested in rebuilding the country and looking to the future than reflecting on the past and taking responsibility for its involvement in National Socialist atrocities.

An Austrian survivor of the concentration camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück, who came back to her hometown Vienna in 1945, told me:

“After our return from the concentration camp Austria didn’t exactly welcome us with open arms – after I came home the state gave me no help whatsoever: I was given no support and had to wait for 15 years for a flat of my own.

In the concentration camp, we had often imagined what our liberation would be like, what our lives would be like. We dreamt of building a new Austria, a new society. We dreamt of a life in freedom, of a society that would welcome us. But it wasn’t that way. The post-war Austria wasn’t interested in us.”

True to Austria’s Freudian tradition, the role played by many Austrians in the persecution of Jews and the deprivation of their rights was initially successfully suppressed for many years.

For a long time, Austria relied heavily on the Moscow Declaration in which the governments of the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union and the United States agreed in October 1943.

Based on a strategy to weaken Germany and to instigate anti-Nazi resistance in Austria, the Allies declared Austria to be the first victim of Hitler’s aggression. At the same time, however, they reminded Austria of her culpability for her participation in the war at the side of Hitlerite Germany and warned that at the end of the war the treatment of Austria would necessarily be influenced by her own contribution to her liberation.

The official Austrian attitude after the war somewhat overemphasized the quantity and importance of the Austrian resistance against National Socialism and did not give enough weight to the participation of large parts of the Austrian population in welcoming the German troops and on the activities of the National Socialists already operating inside Austria before the so called “Anschluss”. The fact that prominent National Socialist perpetrators were Austrians and that parts of the Austrian population benefited from the “aryanization” of Jewish property were underexposed.

As a country occupied by Nazi Germany and liberated by the Allies, post-war Austria could, as a consequence, not be held legally responsible for the criminal acts carried out by the Nazi regime on Austrian territory.

This standpoint strongly influenced Austria's post war approach to restitution and indemnification for the victims of National Socialist persecution: In fact, the Austrian authorities willingly assumed the role as the first victim of the aggressive policies of Hitler's Germany. This legal position, soon to be called the "Victim's Theory", that understood the so called Anschluss as belligerent occupation, became a synonym for Austria's reluctance to face its responsibility. For many years, Austrian society did not deal with the role it played in the National Socialist Regime – the subject was effectively overshadowed by a taboo.

It was a long time before Austria dared look in the mirror and question its role during the years 1938 to 1945. This also becomes apparent when we consider the manner in which this period was dealt with by artists in the post-war era and how these offerings were received by the Austrian public. Here are two illustrative examples of prominent artistic figures which some of you might already know:

With the creation of the figure "Herr Karl" in 1961, Helmut Qualtinger – the legendary Austrian actor, writer and satirist – caused a scandal and provoked furious reactions. In a one hour monologue about the character Herr Karl, Qualtinger portrayed a typical Viennese *petit bourgeois* who embodied the voice of the people – at first glance good natured, harmless and naive but behind the facade an opportunist, a turncoat who changes his political views in accordance with the prevailing government for his own advantage and gain. Within a few years, he moves from a socialist stance to a conservative Christian stance, after the war he mutates from a National Socialist to an upstanding democrat.

It is not surprising that in an Austria which defined itself by the victim's theory, this early and bold confrontation with its role as perpetrator was met by many with feelings of discomfort and even anger.

In comparison, many Austrians much preferred – and some still do – to identify with a figure such as the "Bockerer" (the recalcitrant) – a Viennese expression for a nonconformist, stubborn man, who performs small acts of resistance in his own way. The eponymous film celebrated great success in 1981; the notion of the "Bockerer" remains well known and well-loved in Austria today.

Austria's reluctance to grapple with its Nazi past was not only evident in its post-war art – it also became apparent in the field of education. For many years

after the war the teaching of contemporary history essentially omitted the 1930s and the wartime period. It was not until the 1970s that education on National Socialism and the Holocaust was for the first time formally introduced into the curriculum for Austrian schools. In cooperation with historians, survivors went into schools, informing pupils of their personal history and their experiences of persecution.

A substantial change in the official Austrian position towards its National Socialist past was triggered by the academic research institutions of Contemporary History since the 1960s, particularly historical research carried out by the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (DOEW).

The overall atmosphere changed considerably during the presidential election campaign in 1986. It was overshadowed by a discussion on the accountability of Dr. Kurt Waldheim, former Secretary General of the United Nations, for his actions in World War II. His statement: *“I only did my duty”* gave way to a major discussion on the “why” and “how” of history as well as the realization that an in depth discussion was urgently required. The debate was followed by intensive historical research and commemorative activities particularly on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the so called “Anschluss” in 1988. This commemoration marked a new beginning in the development of an Austrian culture of Holocaust remembrance.

One of the benchmarks of this period was then-Chancellor Dr. Franz Vranitzky’s courageous stance, which indicated the imminence of a great change in Austria. I will quote from his speech in July 1991:

“Many Austrians participated in the machinery of oppression and persecution of the Third Reich, some of them at the forefront. [...] Today, we cannot deny a shared moral responsibility for the acts of our fellow citizens. [...] We stand up for all the facts of our history and all the acts of all our people – the good ones and the evil ones – and just as we take account of the good ones, we have to apologise for the bad ones – to the survivors as well as the to descendants of the dead.“

As you can see, the notion that a society can only flourish through awareness of its true history lay dormant in Austria for too long. It is only during the last two decades, that the Austrian public has started to seriously face up to the role played by its citizens in perpetrating the unspeakable crimes of the National So-

cialist regime. The victim's paradigm has increasingly lost its relevance though it still persists among parts of the Austrian population.

In the wake of this new political era of dealing with the past, Austria has left behind her purely legal interpretation of compensation for the victims, and, in view of a more ethical interpretation, has started to assume her moral responsibility for the crimes perpetrated under the Nazi regime.

It was only with this turnaround that the foundations were laid for an attempt at reconciliation.

A further decisive development was marked by the establishment of the Austrian Historical Commission in 1998, which carried out thorough research on the seizure of property during National Socialism and restitution and indemnification and the deficiencies thereof after 1945. The results of the research carried out by 160 experts were published in 54 books and summarized in the commission's final report of 2003. ([www.historikerkommission.gv.at](http://www.historikerkommission.gv.at))

The Historical Commission delivered the basic information necessary for various initiatives starting with the Reconciliation Fund and followed by the Washington Agreement, the General Settlement Fund administered by the National Fund, the Future Fund and the Scholarship Fund as well as commemorative payments carried out by the National Fund.

These initiatives dramatically changed the landscape of Austria's confrontation with its National Socialist past and the way in which it honoured its responsibility stemming from the participation of a great number of Austrian individuals, companies and institutions in Nazi War Crimes including the Holocaust.

#### IV. The National Fund

The idea of the National Fund took root on the occasion of the Republic of Austria's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. The former President of the National Assembly, who was also the chairman of the board of trustees of the National Fund, today's federal president Dr. Heinz Fischer, said, that

“the establishment of the National Fund should represent the recognition of our moral responsibility and the wrong inflicted on humanity in



Austria by Nazism, and recognise that special help should be given to the victims, while recognising the fact that the suffering can in no way be 'repaired'."

In September 1995, I was granted the honour of being appointed Secretary General of this Fund, with the task of building it up and commencing work with the survivors.

As was soon to become apparent, special help was desperately needed. Over the years, the victims of National Socialism had grown to believe that they had been entirely forgotten. That no one had any interest in their fates and those of their families. That no one would ever acknowledge their suffering. Some were even convinced that the Austrian authorities were still run by Nazis.

The team of the National Fund worked hard to build a bridge and reach out to these people.

- From the Austria they had fled – to the Austria of today.
- From the victim who needs to talk – to the person who is willing to listen.
- From the old – to the young.

In reaching out to them we were – and still are – able to walk with them over this bridge and reassure them that their suffering has not been forgotten.

The National Fund gives material help through the payment of a symbolic lump-sum of approx. 5.000 USD to each victim of National Socialism of Austrian origin.

I would like to point out that the National Fund is giving this symbolic gesture not only to Jewish persecutees. It is the first Fund which recognizes every single victim group – not only Jews but also Roma and Sinti, political persecutees, the mentally and physically handicapped, so called a-socials and for the first time also people persecuted for being homosexual and men who refused to serve in the German Army.

Since 1995, more than € 150 million have been paid out to 30.000 individuals now living in more than 75 countries. One has to bear in mind that behind

these dry statistics of payment lie the fates of individuals and their families and friends.

## V. Austria today: Combating anti-Semitism – preventive activities and challenges for the future

Today the Jewish Community in Austria has approx. 8000 registered members. Only about 1000 are from the pre-war Jewish community. Most of today's community are immigrants from Russia, Persia and elsewhere. Even though the numbers are small, we have a very lively community.

Life for Jews in Austria has flourished in recent years, but it was many years before the official Austria actively confronted her past and survivors around the world and the Jewish community itself received compensation for destroyed and seized property.

The Austrian population, including the younger generation, has come a long way in its willingness and ability to face the Holocaust as part of its historical identity. However, Austria – publicly and privately – still has a long way to go.

For this reason, a central function of the National Fund – in addition to its work for the surviving victims of National Socialism – is to raise awareness among the wider population through educational policies and to work against radical developments concerning racism and anti-Semitism.

Although substantial efforts have been made in this regard in Austria, more must still be undertaken to prevent developments corresponding to the historic developments that paved the way to the Holocaust.

This includes attempts to combat anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia and other forms of extremism prone to violence and hate. It also includes making further effort in the field of discriminatory attitudes based on race, ethnic origin, religion or culture, which are often migration related. Efforts are under way to enhance ongoing projects and institutions for example the “Menschenrechtsbeirat” (Human Rights Advisory Council) attached to the Federal Ministry for Interior Affairs.

Today, Austria participates actively in international co-operative endeavours. This includes undertakings within the human rights system of the United Nations, the European Union, the Council of Europe as well as the OSCE.

In addition, Austria co-operates with national and international NGO's to combat racism and discrimination and engages in related awareness-raising. A co-operative programme between the Austrian police and the Anti-Defamation League has been considered highly valuable and successful.

Since the 1970s, the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance has monitored and analyzed right-wing extremism and neo-Nazi activities in Austria. It publishes the results of that research (in books as well as on its website [www.doew.at](http://www.doew.at)) and in doing so promotes an anti-Nazi and anti-racist stance in Austrian civil society. Furthermore, it shares its findings with the state authorities and is able to help with the criminal prosecutions for Neo-Nazism and Holocaust denial.

Since 1945, Austrian criminal legislation against Nazi and Neo-nazi activities including Holocaust denial has been relatively successful. Holocaust Denial as one form of disclaiming or trivializing National Socialist genocide and crimes against humanity is specifically forbidden by the last amendment to the so called "Verbotsgesetz" (or *law against National Socialist activities*) in 1992. The cases of David Irving, who was arrested in 2005 and sentenced to three years in prison for his attitudes amounting to Holocaust denial, and Gerd Honsik, a prominent Neo Nazi who was extradited from Spain to Austria for (further) prosecution in 2007, are two recent examples of the way in which this law has been implemented by the Austrian courts.

Early legislation after the war was less effective because of high minimum sentences and reluctance of public prosecutors to prosecute persons for relatively minor contraventions. Furthermore, the original wording of the law concerning Holocaust Denial proved to be inadequate.

As is well known from Simon Wiesenthal's accounts, the prosecution of war criminals and Nazi perpetrators after the war was subject to serious deficiencies. After allied occupation had ended and the so called "Volksgerichte" (peoples' tribunals) had been abolished in 1955, essentially standard Austrian criminal law was applied to prosecute Nazi War Criminals.

Recent examples demonstrate how reticent post-war Austria was in pursuing the perpetrators – the case of Erna Wallisch, a concentration camp supervisor who died last year without ever been punished, is a fitting example of this: It seems almost ironic that the story of this perpetrator only found its way into the media in the commemorative year 2008, whereas media interest in the preceding 70 years had been less than negligible.

Still there remain perpetrators, both male and female, who live undisturbed among us and who, in part, have never been held to account for their actions during National Socialism. One example of this is the infamous National Socialist doctor Heinrich Gross, who carried out cruel and torturous experiments on children in the sanatorium “Am Spiegelgrund”. Many of these children were killed, but Heinrich Gross was able to resume a more than successful career in post-war Austria. His crimes only became the subject of discussion when he had been deemed too fragile to serve a prison sentence. Gross lived and died a free man.

We can’t even begin to imagine what this reticent perusal of the perpetrators meant to the surviving victims.

## VI. Projects

In accordance with its underlying legislation, the National Fund also subsidizes projects which not only benefit the victims of National Socialism, but also promote academic research on National Socialism and the fate of its victims as a reminder of National Socialist injustice and to preserve the memory of the victims.

Since 1998, the National Fund has been managing the funds from the International Fund for Victims of National Socialism (“looted gold”). Projects can also be supported from these funds.

The National Fund tries to contribute towards the victims’ reconciliation with modern Austria, not only through the personal recognition of the victims and the compensation payments, but also by supporting projects.

Therefore it is of great importance to the National Fund to support a large variety of projects:

- projects providing physical and psychiatric care to Holocaust survivors,
- projects supporting the activities of Jewish communities,
- projects of commemoration, such as the erection of memorials,
- educational projects, such as a Viennese secondary school's publication of the biographies of 104 Jewish pupils who had been expelled from this school; and
- projects conducting academic research into the Nazi period in Austria, such as support for an electronic database being compiled by the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance – "*List of Names of the Austrian Holocaust Victims*" – of those who were murdered.

A total of 700 projects have been subsidized by the National Fund with € 16 million since 1996.

It is our aim to facilitate reconciliation and to fight against forgetting. The survivors are nearly all seventy already, many are older. Their voices as contemporary witnesses are growing fainter. The generation of our children and grandchildren will soon no longer have the opportunity to speak to these people in person. We have to document their experiences, to safeguard them for the collective memory.

School projects and projects involving the younger generation are therefore an important tool in moulding the society of the future.

The fact that so many commemorative and educational projects have been subsidized by the National Fund has been a motivating factor for similar projects in Austria: A project which was dedicated to the documentation of the fate of Jewish people who had lived in one single Viennese street – "Servitengasse" – inspired other projects: People began to ask what had happened to *their* neighbours and so similar projects were created.

The National Fund's activities in the field of project development have contributed to the subsequent change in the public consciousness which has taken place in Austria over the past years. This contribution to commemoration in order to reach a higher state of political awareness will also be a major task for the National Fund for the future.

## VII. The Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research

The Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research was initiated by Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson in 1998; it consists of government representatives, as well as representatives from governmental and non-governmental organizations. Its purpose is to place political and social leaders' support behind the need for Holocaust education, remembrance and research both nationally and internationally.

As I have outlined above, Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research in Austria had been hampered for many years by the "Victims theory" which essentially absolved Austria of any substantial responsibility for the crimes of Nazi Germany, including the Holocaust. This paradigm dominated the official Austrian stance for a long time. Austrian efforts in the field of Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, however laudable, therefore remained relatively isolated until the second half of the 1980s.

Since 2001, Austria has been an active member of the ITF, the coordination office of which is located at the National Fund. The Task Force currently (2010) has 27 member countries: Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the United States.

Professor Yehuda Bauer, former chair of the Yad Vashem Research Institute in Jerusalem, is the Task Force's Honorary Chairman. Membership of the Task Force is open to all countries. Members must be committed to the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust.

Austria assumed Chairmanship of the Task Force on a date very significant for Austria – March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008, 70 years to the day after the so called "Anschluss". At a ceremony held in Prague, the former Czech Chairman Ambassador Milos Pojar handed over the Chairmanship to Ambassador Ferdinand Trauttmansdorff.

To give you an idea of some of Austria's most recent endeavours in support of Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, let me provide you with a short

## VIII. Overview of Austrian activities within the scope of the ITF

### 1. Holocaust Education

During the last two decades, attempts to improve Holocaust Education have intensified, mainly sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Education.

#### **The School Curriculum:**

The state specifies the core-curriculum for the various types of schools and every curriculum for history and for citizenship education demands that National Socialism, the Holocaust and surrounding issues are covered. This affects around 200.000 pupils each year.

#### **Teacher training:**

Teachers are trained in universities and in universities of applied sciences in 3 to 5 years (BA and MA-diploma). As universities are autonomous, there is no national curriculum for teacher training. The challenge for the Ministry is therefore to promote and facilitate the integration of Holocaust education into the current teacher training. This is why special emphasis is placed on In-service-training, development of educational material and support services: Although further training is not compulsory, several hundred teachers annually attend seminars on issues related to the Holocaust. To gain a more comprehensive response, the Ministry of Education founded the organization *erinnern.at* (2000).

#### **The main activities are:**

- 2 annual teacher seminars in Yad Vashem
- programme “survivors in classrooms”
- annual conferences as an interface between academics and educators
- Creation of a DVD by *erinnern.at* called “*The Legacy*”. It is a learning tool for Austrian Schoolteachers, based on survivors’ testimonies. It was realized in cooperation with the Shoa Foundation at the University of California.

Textbooks are reviewed by the Ministry of Education. In the past years a shift has become noticeable in the portrayal of the Holocaust and National Social-

ism towards telling the human stories of victims but also dealing critically with Austrian perpetrators and bystanders. Although the initial results of this work are encouraging, many publications still require revision.

A major challenge for the years to come is how to deal with the fact that the survivors are getting older and will soon no longer be able to appear as a “survivor in the classroom”, a program which has proven extremely positive over the last decades.

The development of DVD’s and the use of testimonies such as used by the Shoa Foundation from Steven Spielberg are of greatest importance. It is the responsibility of my generation to find the ways and means to preserve the survivors’ voices.

Memorial Sites and the Jewish Museums play an important role in education. They are visited each year by a considerable number of students. The memorial site of Mauthausen annually receives almost 100.000 students, 60 % from Austria and 40 % from abroad. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry for Interior Affairs co-operate closely to enhance the quality of the pedagogical programs.

#### **Institutions supporting education:**

The public debate on Austria’s history and memory encourages numerous local, regional and individual projects and initiatives in which schools are involved.

It is important to state that private or corporate funding is not common in Austria. Therefore realisation of the majority of projects relies on public funding by local or provincial authorities, the state and institutions such as the National Fund or the Future Fund.

Let me mention just a few relevant Institutions carrying out substantial activities in the fields, among others, of research, publications, exhibitions and learning sites:

- Austrian Memorial sites at concentration camps and other sites commemorating the Holocaust such as Mauthausen concentration camp and so called “Nebenlager” (satellite camps) like Ebensee and Hartheim castle (euthanasia) offer active ongoing education programmes, exhibitions and projects.



- DOEW (Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance)
- Jewish Museums in Vienna (with its exposition site Judenplatz) and in Hohenems
- Central European Center for Research and Documentation (Centropa)

## **2. Holocaust remembrance**

The events organized by public and non-governmental institutions in the field of remembrance have multiplied and intensified during the last two decades. Further efforts, however, are necessary in order to develop a sustainable culture of remembrance for present and future generations.

Two very important projects, the new Austrian exhibitions at the Auschwitz memorial and at the Mauthausen memorial are currently in the planning stages and will be realized in the upcoming years.

The activities of all the institutions and initiatives mentioned contributed to the subsequent change in public consciousness in Austria which has taken place during the past years. This contribution to commemoration, aimed at reaching a higher state of political awareness, will also be a major task for the future.

### **Mauthausen**

Since 1946, an annual Commemoration Ceremony has taken place at the former Concentration Camp of Mauthausen on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, the day of the liberation of the Camp. It is usually attended by up to 10.000 people. Several victims' organizations organize the march of survivors on the "Appellplatz". The solemn ceremony is also attended by political representatives and diplomats.

In 2005, on the occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the camp, three liberators and some 5 liberated survivors took part in the ceremony. In a heartbreaking scene the camps gates were opened by the survivors from the inside and they greeted their liberators once again, 60 years later.

During the last years, a culture of commemoration has been developed not only in Mauthausen, but also in approx. 40 satellite camps and other memorial sites. Today, different events are being organized mainly by local initiatives and private interest groups.

**Mauthausen Concentration Camp as a Memorial Site**

It is the aim of Mauthausen Memorial Site to serve both as a site of mourning for Nazi victims and as a documentation centre. At the same time, the memorial site must also act as a place of learning. As such, Mauthausen is a site to inform the generations to come.

**Remembrance at the Parliament**

In 1997, in the European Year against Racism and Xenophobia, another step was taken by the Austrian Parliament to honour the victims of National Socialism through the decision to hold an annual day of remembrance. The date agreed upon was the 5th of May, the day of the liberation of the concentration camp of Mauthausen. In particular, this commemorative day has since been honoured in schools to raise awareness of the fate of those murdered and persecuted by the Nazis. In commemoration of this special day, a session joined by the upper house, the lower house and the Austrian government is held every year at the Austrian Parliament. In 2008, the commemoration was dedicated to the children who fell victim to National Socialism.

**“Letter to the Stars”**

Since 2005, the organisation “Letter to the Stars” sponsored publicly and privately organizes encounters between survivors from around all the world and Austrian schoolchildren.

**“Nacht des Schweigens”**

70 years after the so called “Anschluss” on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2008, the “Night of Silence” was organized by Austrian Catholic youth organisations: At the “Heldenplatz” – the same place where the “Anschluss” had been celebrated 70 years before – thousands of candles were lit in memory of the more than 100.000 Austrian victims of National Socialism. The event was joined by the Jewish Student movement and many other youth organisations.

**IX. Conclusion: the possibility of reconciliation**

In present day Austria, the question is often posed:

“Why are we to spend so long dealing with the past and will it at some point have been long enough?”

To me, the answer to this question is clear: Even today in Austria, our National Socialist past is often the cause of intense discussion. This is clearly illustrated by the election which took place in Austria last autumn, when a right wing party – the FPÖ, or Freedom Party – became the third strongest party of the Republic. Not only the result of this election, but also the reactions and events which followed clearly illustrated how far Austria still has to go in processing its National Socialist history.

There is still too much which remains unsaid, too many taboos which still burden the Republic today. To attentive spectators, there are recurrent indications which demonstrate how necessary it is to uphold and perpetuate the memories of the past.

This confrontation with our past is at the same time also a confrontation with our future. Today, many people in Austria, above all young people have understood that only an open and critical examination of what happened in the past can help us to understand: if we learn what people *were* capable of we will be able to understand what people *are* capable of. It is through the efforts of the last years that it has been possible to improve our understanding.

Looking back over the last years, I have come to recognize that there has been a change: we have been able to encourage people in Austria to consider their country's past with more objectivity and understanding. And I have come to recognize that reconciliation is an ongoing process on which we must continue to work.

Austria's and the ITF's biggest challenge will be, 70 years after the Holocaust, to reach out to a wider public and to spread our message to the populations of the ITF member countries and beyond.

In Austria we are now trying to take further steps towards reconciliation with the victims of National Socialism. Reconciliation – that means: supporting the surviving victims, treating them with respect and giving them the recognition which they deserve; keeping the memories of the victims alive and ensuring that our history is dealt with and maintained in a responsible way in both our present and future societies.

We must ensure that, in our modern society, remembrance remains an active process. We must continue in our endeavours to convey to people the intensity

of survivors' experiences and to reach out to them on an emotional level. Remembrance must not be allowed to become an empty husk, a soulless formality – we owe this not only to the victims but also to subsequent generations. This will be one of our most difficult tasks for the future.

From the outset, it was clear to us at the National Fund that some things cannot be compensated: we can never replace a lost childhood, give back a murdered family. Each and every payment made to the victims can and must remain a gesture.

In the course of my work, I have experienced again and again the importance of at least attempting to set things right. I am convinced that this attempt is not only important for the surviving victims but also for the descendents of the perpetrators and for society as a whole.

Reconciliation is not something that comes easily:  
It has to be sought – and we will not stop trying.

Thank you.  
Shalom.

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*Hannah M. Lessing*  
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