

Mr. President,

Let me first pay tribute to you and to the Government of the Czech Republic for the preparation of Holocaust Era Assets Conference. Your longstanding experience, including your most appreciated of the International Holocaust Task Force in 2007 will guarantee a successful outcome of this important event. I also would like to express my gratitude to the Delegation of the USA for their drafting initiative on what is to become the Terezin Declaration, an exercise in which Austria had the privilege to participate.

Mr. President,

As we all know, the issues at the 1998 Washington Conference were Restitution and Compensation for Holocaust victims, very important, and indeed among the reasons why we gather here today. But even more important, I feel is the fate of the victims, who suffered unprecedented physical and emotional trauma during their ordeal: they have by now reached an advanced age. It is imperative to respect their personal dignity and to address their social welfare needs. We shall therefore appeal to the Participating States to strongly support both public and private efforts in their respective countries to enable them to live in dignity with the necessary basic care that it implies.

With the years following 1945 we have realized and addressed the enormous difficulties victims of the Holocaust have been facing. We have been in touch with survivors originating from Austria, close to 30.000 of whom are living today in more than 72 countries. Their psychological and physical health is very precarious. Traumata do not disappear over the years; their negative impacts tend to worsen. The older the survivors get, the more their state of health will demonstrate the hell they had to endure. It is our responsibility to ensure that the last years of a victims' life can be spent in dignity.

In responding to these needs, Austria provides, in accordance with the Austrian Victims' Welfare Act, in force since 1945, pension payments for victims having been Austrian nationals on March 13, 1938 or resided in Austria for an uninterrupted period of 10 years prior to this date. Under the same conditions Austria also offers pensions for surviving dependants. In the case of declining health related to persecution a claim for an increase in the victims' pension benefits may be filed.

During the last years several provisions have been added to the Welfare Act:

- When applying for pensions, Austrian citizenship is no longer required;
- victims who left Austria due to political persecution and therefore are residing abroad, may benefit of nursing allowances to the same extent as Austrians;
- Pension payments for dependants were significantly improved and
- the damage of health degree for accessing victims' assistance benefits was lowered to 20%.

Furthermore, the Committee for Jewish Claims on Austria receives regular financial contributions for medical and social welfare support. For this year 1.8 million Euros have been pledged. Also the Jewish Community of Vienna has received substantial subsidies for social welfare purposes, this year amounting to approximately 1 million Euro. All in all, 800 million Euros have been spent on victims' assistance since 1945.

I am very pleased to state here that in these days, on initiative of the Jewish Community of Vienna, the Committee for Jewish Claims on Austria and the Central Committee of Jews from Austria in Israel the Austrian Parliament is about to widen the scope of our social security legislation providing benefits for victims of persecution born before 8 May 1945, if one of their parents was residing in Austria on 12 March 1938. Also these victims will be entitled to receive

pensions under easier conditions, equaling additional annual costs amounting to 1.9 million Euros.

Mr. President,

Post-war Austria started to face the full extent of the involvement of Austrians in the Holocaust with too much of a delay in order to allow us to be proud of achievements in the field of Holocaust era restitution. In full awareness of the importance to shed light on this dark chapter of Austria's history and to document restitution carried out in the years after WW II, the Federal Government decided in 1998 to establish a Commission of Experts. Their findings, statistics and historical estimates of currently surviving victims were the basis of recent restitution and compensation programs adopted in 2000/2001. Among these programs, the National Fund of the Republic of Austria provided for lump-sum payments to almost 30,000 individuals and their relatives who were persecuted by the NS regime. The General Settlement Fund Law of 2001 created the legal basis for dealing with the still-open financial claims of Holocaust victims as well as for *in rem* restitution of state property. Over 130.000 victims of slave and forced labour who had been deported to present day Austria during the NS era received payments through the Reconciliation Fund. After the conclusion of the fund's activities the remaining funds were used to support humanitarian projects, remembrance projects, and research activities (incl. grants). As a follow-up fund, the Austrian Future Fund is operating since January 2006.

Mr. President,

One of the major issues to be addressed by this Conference regards heirless property. Unfortunately, as we all know, the wrong having been done 70 years ago can never be repaired or compensated for, but at least some measures can reach and indeed have reached survivors and their families. However, as we are painfully aware, some families have been totally wiped out. Not one heir remains alive, but their property still remains. Nevertheless, it has been noted that heirless property can serve as the basis for addressing the material necessities of needy Holocaust survivors and to ensure ongoing education about the Holocaust, its causes and consequences. Austria has addressed these issues in different ways, in particular with regard to Art found at the Kartause Mauerbach and the Art Restitution Law of 1998, according which heirless property will be handed over to the National Fund for organizing a sale and devoting the proceeds for the needs of victims.

Mr. President,

I would like to share with you some views on the restitution of Nazi-looted art in Austria. When I came to office in 2007, I gave the restitution of Nazi-looted art, an issue I am deeply devoted to, priority on my agenda.

Although since 1945 Austria had taken various steps to return Nazi-looted art, complete restitution had not been achieved. In 1997, with the seizing of two Schiele-paintings from the "Leopold Museum Privatstiftung" in New York, a new discussion elapsed about aryanisation, looting and restitution of works and led, a few months before the 1998 Washington Conference, to the establishment of the Commission for Provenance Research of the Federal Ministry for Culture in February 1998. Its task was – and still is – to report systematically on the provenience of all items of the Federal Museums purchased during or after the Nazi-period until today, in order to locate all Nazi-looted objects. The next step was to enact the Art Restitution Act in December 1998, empowering the Federal Minister for Education, Arts and Culture (and other Federal Ministers responsible for federal collections) to transfer the ownership of Nazi-looted to the victims and their heirs and constitutes the *Art* Restitution Advisory Board. As to now, the Advisory Board has recommended in nearly 200 cases the

return, encompassing roughly 10,000 objects, ranging from important works of art as paintings, drawings to bird skins, vehicles, books, letters, stamps and all kinds of personal belongings. Some of these objects are of relatively low value, but they all reflect the life of the victims, their ideas, passions, interests. Therefore, they are worth to be identified and resituated, whatever their economic value may be. All recommendations are published in full length in the internet (www.provenienzforschung.gv.at), to make the decisions as transparent as possible.

I would also like to mention two important partners, the Jewish Community Vienna, which searches for the legal successors of rightful owners, and the Austrian National Fund, which designed an Art Database (www.artrestitution.at) to enable victims of Nazi art theft to search for seized art objects.

Finally, I am pleased to inform you, that last week a draft amendment to the Art Restitution Act of 1998 was presented in Parliament. It will reflect the experiences of the last eleven years of art restitution and adjust the law. It will widen the field of application to all moveable objects owned by Republic of Austria, even if they are not part of federal collections. It will also clarify some open questions of legal interpretation.

Mr. President,

We have come a long way towards mainstreaming the readiness of the Austrian population at large, including young generations, to face the Holocaust as part of their historical identity. Since the Washington Conference 1998, efforts to improve Holocaust Education have been remarkably intensified under the responsibility of my Ministry: Every curriculum for history teaching and for citizenship education in grades 8 and 11 requires profound dealing with National Socialism and the Holocaust. We promote and facilitate the integration of Holocaust education into teacher training by the Ministry's organisation [_erinnern.at_](http://www.erinnern.at). For 20 years now we pursue a program of survivors' encounters with pupils in Austrian schools. In the sad awareness, that direct witnesses of the Holocaust will soon be no longer with us, we are deeply invested in securing survivors' testimonies for future pupil-generations by developing audio-visual learning material. In doing so, we are fortunate to cooperate with international partners as Yad Vashem and the Shoah Foundation Institute.

Memorial Sites and the Jewish Museums play an important role in education. Almost 100.000 students from Austria and from abroad visit the memorial site of Mauthausen annually. Since 1997 the 5th of May, marking the liberation of the Concentration Camp of Mauthausen, is the official Austrian day of Remembrance. To honour this day, Austrian schools engage in commemorative projects in order to foster remembrance as well as respect for the victims and for their descendants. The recent shocking events at the former concentration camp Ebensee illuminated beyond any doubt the necessity to increase awareness of and preventive sensitivity for any developments that led to the Holocaust.

We consider it a great privilege that Austria, in the Year of Remembrance 2008, was entrusted with the Chair of the ITF. I wish to underline its paramount importance for the worldwide fostering of Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research and would like to advocate for the follow-up mechanisms of this Conference to closely co-operate with this international institution.

In concluding, Mr. President, I would like to underline the importance of the follow up process and thus to express the wish that this important Conference lead to sustainable results.

Thank you, Mr. President.