

Hannah M. Lessing:

“Austrian measures for Victims of National Socialism and their legacy”

Holocaust Era Assets Conference

Prague, 27 June 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen,

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

In my capacity as Secretary General of the National Fund of the Republic of Austria, I would like to provide you with a brief overview of Austria's present efforts in recognizing and supporting victims of National Socialism and introduce you to the work of the National Fund.

There are still many surviving victims of National Socialist persecution alive today – to give you an impression: approx. **30.000** persons have been in contact with the National Fund since 1995. Today their ages range from 64 to over 100. It is Austria's responsibility to support these people who had to suffer so much many years ago and to enable them a life of dignity in their latter years.

Let me first introduce to you the measures for victims provided by the Austrian Federation.

Retirement Benefits

**according to §§ 500 ff of the General Social Security Act,
the so called “Begünstigtenpension”**

enable persons persecuted by the National Socialist regime, who had to emigrate and did not collect insurance months in Austria, to pay **contributions to the pension system at a preferential rate**. For the time of emigration, contributions can be **retroactively purchased**.

Persons who have been granted the so called “Begünstigtenpension” are also entitled to receive a

Nursing Allowance, the so called “Pflegegeld”,

if they need assistance in their daily life and must rely on a caregiver to perform daily necessities such as cooking, eating or dressing. According to the different needs, applicants are entitled to receive payments in categories between **level 1** and **level 7** (which range from EUR **154,20** to EUR **1.655,80** at present).

In addition, victims can also receive

**Pension payments according to the Austrian Victims’ Welfare Act,
the so called “Opferfürsorgegesetz”:**

They are eligible to receive **Victims’ pension benefits** – the so called **“Opferrente”**, if they were subject to

- at least 6 months of severe confinement (such as concentration camp, forced labour camp etc.) or
- at least 1 year of captivity or arrest or
- if there is evidence of damage to health related to persecution.

In the case of low income, it is possible to apply for **Support benefits**, the so called “**Unterhaltsrente**”.

Dependants of recipients of victims’ pension benefits are eligible to receive **Surviving dependants’ pensions**, the so called “**Hinterbliebenenpension**”.

In the last years, several **amendments** have been made **to the Victims’ Welfare Act** to adjust the measures for victims taking their special living conditions into consideration.

Through the

Assistance Fund, the so called “ Hilfsfonds ”,

created in 1988, the amount of **300 million Austrian Schilling** was paid out to the Committee for Jewish Claims on Austria for projects focusing on the care of former Austrian Holocaust victims and their families.

Moreover, after the conclusion of the 300 million Schilling grant in 2008, the Committee for Jewish Claims on Austria received a further grant of **2 million Euros** from the Federal Ministry for Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection. Provincial funds which make contributions towards medical and disability-related expenses of former Austrian Holocaust victims and their dependants are endowed from these means.

Since 1945, through the Victims’ Welfare Act and the Assistance Fund, a total amount of **800 million Euros** has been paid out in the field of victims’ welfare.

I would also like to mention some

Further measures for victims

which the Republic of Austria has issued to groups of victims on historical occasions in order to express Austria's responsibility through one-time payments to the amount of 1.000 Euros:

In **2005**, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Austria's liberation from National Socialist tyranny, the **Liberation Memorial Allocation** – the so called "**Befreiungserinnerungszuwendung**" was effected, and in **2008**, on the occasion on the 70th anniversary of the so called Anschluss, the **Memorial Allocation** – the so called "**Erinnerungszuwendung**" was issued.

All the measures I have mentioned have been paid out by Austrian federal institutions. Rather than representing a personal recognition, the material need of the applicants stood in the foreground.

It was not until 1995 that an institution was established which was solely responsible for the comprehensive care and support of the victims:

The

National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism

was created as a first acknowledgement of a collective responsibility by the official Austria. The team of the National Fund worked hard to build a **bridge** to the surviving victims:

- From the Austria they had fled – to the Austria of today.
- From the victim who has the need to talk – to the person, who is willing to listen.
- From the older – to the younger.

Reaching out to the victims – during my last fourteen years as Secretary General of the National Fund, this is what I have always felt to be our most important task. Because regardless of how important the financial aid and compensation payments may be to the victims, support in the emotional and social fields is of at least equal importance.

Reaching out to the victims therefore means both: **recognition and support.**

The National Fund offers material help as well as personal recognition through a **Symbolic Payment of 5.087,10 USD** paid to each victim of National Socialism of Austrian origin. Through this payment, the particular responsibility of the Republic of Austria for the suffered injustice is being expressed.

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 in Austria which recognizes **every single victim group.**

In case of social need, there is the possibility of a **further gesture payment:** The symbolic payment can be paid a second and a third time. In many countries where victims had to flee to due to National Socialist persecution, they have to live under difficult social circumstances and with insufficient medical care.

Even if many of them do receive pension payments and other support from Austria, there is often additional and urgent need which they have to cope with. As people are growing older, our help is needed today even more than some years ago. For these people, the additional payments from the National Fund are an important help.

Since 1995, more than **€ 150 million** have been paid out by the National Fund to approx. **30.000** individuals now living today in more than **75** countries. We always have to bear in mind that behind these dry statistics of payment lie the fates of individuals and their families.

In addition to individual payments, the National Fund also supports

Projects:

- Some projects of the National Fund serve, on the one hand, to **benefit the victims** of National Socialism.

The support of victims' organizations such as **AMCHA** or **ESRA** has always been of particular importance to us. Such organizations offer the victims, who during the course of their painful past are often retraumatized, psychological and social support. Only through this can people, who not only suffered in body but also in soul, be helped in achieving a better quality of life.

Other projects

- promote **academic research** on National Socialism and the fate of its victims as a reminder of National Socialist injustice or
- preserve the **memory of the victims**: No fate of a victim and no life story may ever be forgotten.

The **conveyance of a historical consciousness** is a part of the educational mission of the National Fund. For this reason, it is important for us to create a bridge to the present, to the society in which we now live and to sharpen and keep alive our sensibility regarding radical political developments. In this regard, the subsidization of **school projects** and **programs for teacher training** is of great importance.

Since 1998, the National Fund manages the moneys transferred to it from the **International Fund for Victims of National Socialism** (“**looted gold Fund**”). From these funds, projects as well as needy individuals can also be supported.

Since 1996, a total of **700** projects have been subsidized by the National Fund with **16 million Euros**.

Although more than 60 years have passed since the fall of National Socialism in Austria and Germany, nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism are sadly still today topics which influence and affect the Austrian society.

Through its work, the National Fund has been able to make a contribution to reconciliation, remembrance and Holocaust education as well as to Austria's efforts in supporting the surviving victims of National Socialism. Nevertheless, there is still much which has to be done: Support for the victims is still desperately needed, and political education is an ongoing process which Austria must continue to work on in order to provide a stable basis for the future.

Thank you.