

INTERNATIONAL *March* OF THE LIVING

Keeping the flame of memory alive



**"WHEN YOU LISTEN TO A WITNESS YOU BECOME
A WITNESS" (ELIE WIESEL 1928-2016)**

Preserving the Memory of the Holocaust Through Education

Austrian Education Minister Sonja Hammerschmid has been instrumental in the country's participation with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and teaching the Shoah to Austrian students

• By DAVID BRUMMER

Jerusalem Post: Can you explain what kind of educational programs are in place to help keep alive the memory of the Holocaust and its Jewish victims?

Sonja Hammerschmid: The National Socialist era and the Holocaust have left their mark on Europe's and Austria's cultural memory like no other lieu de mémoire in European history. The critical examination of the crimes against humanity that occurred in the Shoah during the Nazi regime, and memory of the victims, the resistance and those who came to the aid of those being persecuted, are all a part of today's Austrian identity.

In light of the special responsibility that Austria bears as a consequence of its recent history, the Federal Ministry of Education, through its erinnern.at association, is encouraging and facilitating an appropriate examination of the National Socialist era and the Holocaust in Austrian schools.

Teaching and learning about the Holocaust is an integral part of the school curricula for history in grades eight and 11 and 12 of all school types.

Ongoing erinnern.at activities include education and training for Austrian teachers, development of teaching materials in accordance with the most recent standards of

media education and the online information hub. This includes two-week training courses for Austrian teachers at the International School for Holocaust Studies Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, which have been run since 2000.

The training courses give teachers the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the Israeli Holocaust narrative. Participation obliges teachers to pass their knowledge on and to continue their involvement. This year approximately 650 participants will have benefited from these seminars.

An annual seminar with survivors gives teachers the unique opportunity to meet them and learn about their life stories and many survivors still visit school classes to share their experiences with pupils.

The Central Seminar is an annual event that runs over several days, bringing together stakeholders in education and science and providing representatives from additional relevant disciplines (historical research, literary studies, sociology, etc.) with the chance to meet up with teachers, education experts, textbook authors and students. This is where the fundamental debate on an appropriate approach to the subject of National Socialism and the Holocaust in the Austrian education system takes place (involving around 1,500 teachers to date).

My ministry and erinnern.at both play an active role in the Interna-

tional Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, to which we ascribe our highest importance.

Post: Is it correct to say that socially and culturally, Austria has some very mixed schools – many with a large proportion of immigrants? If so, are there particular challenges to teaching about the Holocaust under these conditions?

SH: Schools deal with this diversity in many subject matters, as well as in teaching about the Holocaust. There is no indication of specific opposition to any subjects of teaching from any specific group. Of course, schools reflect the general discussions and controversies within a society and teachers cope with these challenges.

There is a considerable risk of groups and movements seeking refuge in simple “we” constructions and trying to legitimize and distinguish themselves through enemy images. This is a big topic also on the level of the European Union. We need to recognize the chances and enrichments that diverse societies offer.

Post: The extreme right wing is seeing a renaissance in much of Europe; How is that tackled vis-à-vis Holocaust education in Austria?

SH: School curricula in Austria include Holocaust education within history education in every school form. Teaching materials and textbooks address the meaning of this

important part of Austrian history for today.

Contemporary relevant political and societal issues are also dealt with in civics education. Schools offer a safe space for exploration of sensitive issues and teachers are trained to address these questions without attempting indoctrination. The *erinnern.at* organization developed a schoolbook to address the topics of antisemitism, racism and intolerance with school kids and we invest considerable effort into teacher training in order to support teachers in dealing with radicalization.

Post: *Do you feel that given its history, Austria is in a unique position to teach not only other European countries, but also others throughout the world about the dangers of turning political anger into legally enshrined intolerance and victimization?*

SH: Every country and society has its own episodes of painful history, be it connected to events of mass violence, to colonialism or others. Austria and Austrian schools need to confront the long history of antisemitism, including before the rise of the Nazis, and especially the involvement of so many Austrians in atrocities during World War II – and foremost the Holocaust.

What is learned from this history depends on the questions that are posed, and these questions vary from time to time and from group to group. Each age cohort brings forward new and specific questions and academic histories, archives and museums. Educational institutions like schools and *erinnern.at* also provide the resources and competencies that are needed. We in Austria feel privileged to learn from the experiences of other countries – like Israel – and we gladly invite others to share ours.

Here the IHRA plays an important role. This supranational network is of utmost importance for exchange and discussion in the fields of education,



Austrian Education Minister Sonja Hammerschmid
(BUNDESKANZLERAMT ÖSTERREICH /
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remembrance and research pertaining to the Holocaust and the time of National Socialism.

Post: *The number of Holocaust survivors is diminishing annually. What plans are in place for when there are no longer those living remnants of the past able to give first-hand testimony of what they witnessed and experienced?*

SH: Fortunately, many survivors visit schools annually and survivors and teachers meet at the annual seminar for contemporary witnesses to the Holocaust that is offered by my ministry through *erinnern.at*.

In addition to this, we have been providing learning programs for schools for several years now that are based on videotaped testimonies of Holocaust survivors. Research

has proven that this is well received by pupils and teachers as well, and our *erinnern.at* institute currently is active in an international cooperative effort on the development of an innovative learning app based on video testimonies. An international expert conference was held by *erinnern.at* earlier this year.

There are also plans for a project to establish a comprehensive website-based collection of all available video testimonies of Holocaust survivors in Austria. In this we are partnering with the USC Shoah Foundation Institute in Los Angeles, among others.

Post: *Can you share a personal experience about interactions you had with Holocaust education or survivors? What kind of effect did it have on you?*

SH: I was born in Upper Austria, the federal province which – through sites such as the former concentration camp Mauthausen, and with Gusen and Ebensee and painful incidents such as the “Mühlviertler Hasenjagd” – will forever be associated with the National Socialist history of Austria.

This has deeply affected me and it encourages me in my efforts to provide adequate Holocaust education in schools. As former rector of the University for Veterinary Medicine, I initiated research of the history of the institution.

Post: *If you could send a message, particularly to the younger participants of this year's March of the Living, what would it be?*

SH: Listen empathetically to what survivors have to tell. Carefully explore the sites of Nazi crimes and thoroughly analyze what happened in society and politics in the past that allowed all these crimes to take place and caused so much pain.

Carefully consider developments in your world today and do what you can to stand up courageously against hate, discrimination and racism. •