

Keynote Speech
by the President of the National Council of the Republic of Austria,
Ms Barbara Prammer

London, 16 February 2009

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my capacity as President of the National Council, I am also Chair of the National Fund and the General Settlement Fund – two closely interconnected institutions that make symbolic gesture payments to victims of National Socialism and extend compensation payments. Moreover, the National Fund is one of the central institutions of commemorative and remembrance work in Austria, which is supported through project-specific subsidisation.

These institutions were set up in 1995 and 2001, respectively – much too late to be able to extend comprehensive compensation. However, their establishment did generate a major political signal backed by consensus on Austria's co-responsibility.

For this reason, I may report with satisfaction that the agreement to form a new government in Austria clearly delineates the next steps Austria will take in facing its past:

We will speed up the final payments under the General Settlement Fund.

We are firmly intentioned to continue supporting socially vulnerable victims of National Socialism.

We will continue the work of the National Fund.

We are committed to a common effort to restore and preserve the Jewish cemeteries.

We have an agreement on the speedy establishment and the sharing of running costs of the Simon Wiesenthal Institute.

And we will renew the Austria Pavilion at Auschwitz.

For this reason, my work has for many years been closely involved with the issue of National Socialism, with questions relating to compensation and, last but not least, with the consequences of our shared European history.

In this, it is my firm conviction that addressing this question is not merely the task of elites or educational workers. Rather, it is a task for Austria's society in its entirety, as it is a task for other European and non-European societies.

Recently, this task has once more acquired heightened urgency, since the following, well-known argument is put forward ever more often:

“Why can't we stop commemorating the Holocaust? Why should we keep stirring up old wounds? Why can't we once and for all draw a line under all the terrible events

that humiliated, tortured and cost the lives of millions of European Jews, Roma and Sinti, of the gay and disabled and all the other victims of Nazi terror? Why can't we think about the future, which is already difficult enough for us and our children?"

These questions are asked by younger and older citizens alike. How is this possible, given that we may not have done enough but certainly have done more than ever before in recent years?

I believe that part of the answer lies in our own perception problem. We know that many initiatives have been taken in the past few years. There are many active teachers, pupils, students, historians, projects that keep the memory of the National Socialist crimes and the victims alive.

What we do not see, however, is that which is NOT happening. We do not see the silence that is still pervasive in too many classrooms; the ignorance of too many regarding our history; the intellectual laziness that sometimes forgets to connect our present to our past.

At this point, we should also scrutinise the role of families, as the concepts and views perpetuated by them lay a foundation not be underestimated for the value systems of many youngsters.

Furthermore, and in particular in view of current public discussions, we have to admit that secondary anti-Semitism is emerging with increasing vehemence. Its strategies are denial, relativisation and downplaying, always accompanied by the demand to draw the "final line" under the past that I have alluded to earlier in my presentation. The question remains of how we can deal with these developments. And our answer is still the same: remembering the Holocaust must never stop. Cultivating sensitivity and a sense of conscience for all the visible and invisible developments that led to this unprecedented human tragedy must never stop. Not for us Austrians, and not only for Austria, either.

This remembrance and our activities, for example in the field of political education, must invariably lead to a confrontation with right-wing extremism and anti-Semitism in our societies. It must invariably lead to the question of how to deal both with young people who defend and postulate such ideas and with older individuals who obviously have not drawn any lessons from history.

Moreover, it must also lead us to the question of how to combat any form of anti-Semitism, no matter whether religious, racial or secondary in nature; of how much we allow a relativisation of the break in civilisation that is National Socialism to crop up in political debates and publicity generated by the media; and of how latent anti-Semitism also emerges in discussions of the Middle East conflict.

The current debates above all show that clearcut positions, such as those quite justly demanded by Federal Chancellor Merkel, are sometimes lacking. This refers not only to Holocaust denial; questioning Israel's right to exist, too, is in itself an act of anti-Semitism.

Consequently, political discussions should not focus solely on the prosecution of those who deny the Holocaust or re-engage in National Socialist activities. In Austria,

these matters are regulated by the Prohibition Act adopted in 1945. Rather, it is all about political responsibility, about certain attitudes, about a specific environment. We must not equate the limits to what is acceptable, and above all to what is desirable by society, with the limits to what may be prosecuted under criminal law. There are emerging patterns of action that, while far away from this legal limit, must still be decisively condemned. Therefore the question must not only be whether a politician's behaviour is indictable and of relevance under criminal law. Rather, we must ask ourselves what sort of opinions such a person may foster with his or her political activities, what sort of historical revisionism he or she may declare acceptable, and in what kind of environment he or she might operate. In my opinion, this is an area where a great deal of sensitisation work still remains to be done.

I am observing the situation very closely and will continue to speak up in this discussion with all due urgency. There must be no backtracking in the consensus of the Austrian Republic, for which we have struggled so long and which was arrived at so late.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

allow me to return once more to Austria and the local situation:

Yes, the State of Austria was the first country that fell victim to Nazi aggression. Austria was wiped from the map. But there were all too many Austrians, too, who participated, assisted, supported, accepted or turned a blind eye to the unspeakable crimes committed by the National Socialist regime. The victims were citizens of Austria and citizens of other countries who were persecuted on our territory. Those who committed or helped to commit these heinous crimes were all too often people from our cities and villages, people from our cultural and social backgrounds, with our upbringing, from our society.

It took Austrian society unduly long to develop the necessary degree of sensitivity to shoulder this responsibility. Although much has happened since, this challenge has not yet been met fully even today.

There are still those who refuse to face the truth and thus fail to accept responsibility. This is true for society as a whole, but also for some representatives of the political class.

In this regard, I would also like to emphasise the responsibility of civil society. Without an active civil society, we are bound to fail in our task. And to be frank: civil society in Austria, but also in other countries, sometimes seems to be lacking in vibrancy and commitment.

So the task has not been fulfilled yet. There remains a huge challenge in the field of political education, for the research necessary to provide a basis for this education, and with respect to commemorating the events and developments that have led to the Holocaust. We should learn and know more about the individual lives and fates of Holocaust victims.

But this is a task that calls for partners.

These should not only be institutes concerned with contemporary history, victims' associations or restitution and compensation bodies. Rather, the task lies in winning over the people as partners in confronting the issue in a way that is supported and endorsed by civil society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

almost every day, we are notably faced with the importance of creating awareness and sensitivity towards this issue.

Thus our efforts must not flag, as it is our responsibility to make the vision of a solidary society reality – of a society that embraces humanity, not exclusion.

Communicating knowledge of the historical facts, fostering a basic understanding of the causes and events before, during and after the National Socialist regime as well as an understanding of the subtle forms anti-Semitism all contribute to nurturing a critical public that clearly repudiates all attempts at denial, downplaying or relativisation.

To concur with a dictum of Jean Paul Sartre: "Anti-Semitism is not among the categories of thought protected by the right to free speech."