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## “He didn’t always make it easy” – In Memoriam Karl Pfeifer

11 Jan 2023

Holocaust survivor Karl Pfeifer passed away in Vienna on 6 January 2023. A journalist and surviving eyewitness, he was a tireless crusader in the fight against antisemitism for many decades.



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Karl Pfeifer was born in 1928 into a Jewish family from Baden near Vienna. In 1938, he fled to Hungary with his parents, finally managing to escape to Palestine as a teenager. In 1951, he returned home to Austria, where he began his career as a journalist. From 1982, he was Editor-in-Chief of *Gemeinde*, the official mouthpiece of the Vienna Jewish Community (IKG). He made a name for himself with his critical and fearless reporting denouncing the trivialization of the Nazis' crimes and resurgence of Nazi ideology – true to the title of his first book *Nicht immer ganz bequem* ("He didn't always make it easy") released in 1996.

Until 2005, he was Vienna correspondent for Israeli radio and worked as a freelance journalist for international magazines, all the while campaigning tirelessly against antisemitism.

Just last year, Karl Pfeifer and three other contemporary eyewitnesses – Lily Ebert (Great Britain), Zwi Nigal (Israel) and Liliana Segre (Italy) – were the first recipients of the Simon Wiesenthal Prize, which was inaugurated in 2021. This award was a long-deserved tribute to his outstanding engagement in combatting antisemitism and educating people about the Holocaust.

At the award ceremony on 11 May 2022, Karl Pfeifer accepted the main prize on behalf of all four laureates in a ceremony held at the Parliament in Vienna's *Hofburg* Imperial Palace – for him, this was the final accolade in a life that was well and truly dedicated to the memory of the Shoah. The fact that he received it at the Austrian Parliament meant a lot to him.

In his acceptance speech, he stressed that hatred towards Jews is a problem endemic to the *whole* of society, and he closed with a sentence from the Proverbs of the Fathers: "It is not for you to complete the task. But nor are you free to abandon it". Karl Pfeifer remained true to this principle throughout the course of his life.

National Council President **Wolfgang Sobotka** paid tribute: "He was a tireless advocate for democracy and campaigner against hatred towards Jews. Regardless of whether it was old or new antisemitism, whether from the right or the left, whether in or emanating from countries abroad, but above all in Austria, Karl Pfeifer did not waver: he saw antisemitism and called it out, in the face of all resistance. Simon Wiesenthal once said: 'The foundation of democracy is truth'. And this journalist stood up for this truth with conviction. As President of the National Council, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to meet him and to present him with the first Simon Wiesenthal Prize. For decades he was subject to hostility and, like many others, received the recognition he deserved far too late. The loss of Karl Pfeifer creates a void, a void that grows with each contemporary witness who leaves us. We and the generations to come must try and fill this void and carry his convictions forward into the future. My thoughts are now with his wife Dagmar, who encouraged and supported him always."

The chair of the Simon Wiesenthal Prize jury, **Katharina von Schnurbein**, also paid tribute to Karl Pfeifer's significant role in shaping political awareness: "It is often said that the fight *against* antisemitism is always also a fight *for* democracy. Few have made this symbiosis clearer than Karl Pfeifer. As a contemporary witness and admonisher, he has influenced generations of students and helped countless young people to develop a strong socio-political compass. I am glad that we could award him the main prize of the Simon Wiesenthal Prize for his dedication in 2021, together with three other surviving eyewitnesses. In his speech, he recalled his realisation upon returning after the Shoah that the hatred of Jews in Austria had not dissipated. The fact that he was now standing in the Parliament and receiving the prize showed how much things had changed. With patience and understanding, prejudice and hatred towards the Jews can be diminished. That is what we want to continue to work towards.' This, Karl Pfeifer's legacy, is an incentive and covenant for us as the jury of the Simon Wiesenthal Prize."

For **Hannah Lessing**, Secretary General of the National Fund, Karl Pfeifer had been a role model since their days in the Jewish youth organisation: "He was an uncompromising warrior, determined, fearless and unflinching – a worthy recipient of the Simon Wiesenthal Prize. With Karl Pfeifer, we have lost an important eyewitness and eloquent prolocutor against hatred. His work will be carried on by the younger generations."

## Links

- Parliament press release on the death of Karl Pfeifer
- Video: Karl Pfeiffer at the Simon Wiesenthal Award ceremony on 11 May 2022