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The Austrian National Library restitutes 2,255 books to the National Fund of the Republic of Austria

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Österreichische
Nationalbibliothek
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The Austrian National Library today restituted 2,255 books – which it had acquired unlawfully during the Nazi period and are now considered “heirless” – to the National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism, in accordance with the provisions of the Art Restitution Act. It subsequently repurchased the books for 75,000 euros.

During a remembrance ceremony held in the oratory of the Austrian National Library the Chairman of the National Fund’s Board of Trustees, National Council President Wolfgang Sobotka, the General Director of the Austrian National Library, Johanna Rachinger, and the Secretary General of the National Fund, Hannah Lessing, stressed the importance of this form of restitution. It paved the way for other museums and libraries to do the same, due to the inexpediency of a public auction of the “heirless” books.

Johanna Rachinger was keen to stress that, “The restitution of the books looted during the Nazi era is not only a legal obligation but also a moral one. I’m glad, therefore, that with today’s restitution and simultaneous repurchase of 2,255 heirless books we have been able to take a further significant step towards fully addressing this injustice.”

Hannah Lessing recalled the 1998 Washington Principles relating to Nazi-confiscated artworks: “Heirless” books had been a subject of discussion at the international looted art conference held in Berlin in November, she continued. “I have experienced myself the joy of having a book returned that was looted from family members 80 years ago. Despite intensive research efforts, the books being assigned to the National Fund from the holdings of the Austrian National Library today are unable to be returned to the heirs of their former owners; but it is nice that they will now have a permanent home in the library.”

“Nazism and the so-called ‘Anschluss’ of Austria in March 1938 signaled the onset of one of the darkest chapters of Austrian history. For decades, Austria was anchored in the collective memory as the ‘first victim’ of the Nazi regime and was far too reluctant to examine its role as a perpetrator of Nazi crimes. The work of the National Fund to put right these injustices – albeit very belatedly – is an exceptional achievement”, stated National Council President Wolfgang Sobotka.

For the most part the collection consisted of judaica and hebraica. Some of the books originated from holdings that had been destined for the Nazi planned but unrealized “Central Library of the Universities” and the “Führer’s Library” in Linz; others from holdings that had been accumulated and stored at a synagogue in Trieste, coming later into the possession of the National Library.

The Provenance Report produced by the National Library in December 2003 listed around 52,000 individual items as potential “Nazi loot”. According to the Library, approx. 49,000 of these were returned to their previous owners or their heirs. The first batch of around 8,300 “heirless” books that could not be restituted were assigned to the National Fund and simultaneously repurchased for the Library in 2010.

The Art Restitution Act gave the National Fund a mandate to monetize “heirless” publicly-owned art objects to benefit the victims of National Socialism in1998/99. It stipulated that all avenues must be exhausted in the attempt to trace and contact potential restitution beneficiaries before the items are sold. In order to meet this requirement the National Fund operates an art database (www.artrestitution.at) to support the art restitution bodies of the Federation and the City of Vienna in their search for heirs. Objects whose owners can no longer be ascertained are assigned to the National Fund to be sold. The National Fund uses the proceeds from such sales to benefit the victims of National Socialism.