

#WeRemember on the 75th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz

27 Jan 2020

The 27 January 2020 marks the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. Over a period of a few days this place and the memory of the victims of the Nazi crimes will be the focus of attention.

The President of the National Council Wolfgang Sobotka paid a visit to the memorial at Auschwitz-Birkenau on 20 January 2020, accompanied by Hannah Lessing, the Secretary General of the National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism. During his visit Mr Sobotka laid a wreath in front of the execution wall near Block 11 in memory of the victims, before proceeding to the site of the former death camp at Birkenau.

75 years on from the liberation of the camp by the Red Army there are few people left who experienced this moment first hand and are able to recall it. Soon, it will fall entirely to the subsequent generation to commemorate the victims. Together with Secretary General Hannah Lessing, in Auschwitz and Vienna the staff of the National Fund are sending a signal in memory of the victims.


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Preparations for the upcoming Austrian exhibition

National Council President Mr Sobotka also took the opportunity to see for himself the ongoing renovation work on Block 17 that has been underway since autumn 2019 and is being carried out by the National Fund in preparation for the new Austrian national exhibition.

The first stage involves demolishing the former exhibition dating from 1978 on the ground floor – the exhibition itself was dismantled and documented in 2013 – and the rooms previously occupied by the exhibition of the former Yugoslavia. The basement and the attic are also in need of renovation and the ceilings between the basement and the ground floor and the ground floor and first floor will have to be reinforced.

The renewal, which is being coordinated by the National Fund, is taking place under special circumstances: the building is subject to strict monument protection and listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. For conservation reasons, all debris from the demolition will be kept and archaeologically examined to determine whether it contains any original substance. Conservation measures have also been put in place to preserve original paintwork or graffiti.



Building site at Block 17 in the former main camp at Auschwitz, 7 October 2019. (c) Nationalfonds

The planned exhibition will be dedicated to the fate of the Austrians who were deported to the Auschwitz camp complex. Of the 18,000 to 20,000 estimated Austrian deportees, only 1,500 survived.

The exhibition concept, “Far Removed. Austria and Auschwitz” conveys the chasm between life and death in the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau and outside the camp in Austria. The victims of Nazi persecution are in the foreground but the exhibition also addresses the subjects of Austrian perpetration and complicity.

During his visit to Auschwitz, Mr Sobotka also addressed the role of the Republic of Austria and of the Parliament. “As President of the National Council, it is my task to take a a clear stance to counter anti-democratic tendencies and to provide an alternative that is effective for society as a whole. For a peaceful coexistence on equal terms – in Austria and in Europe.” The President of the National Council also stressed the special historical responsibility to commemorate the millions of murdered Jews, as well as the responsibility towards their families and descendants. With the National Fund, which was established 25 years ago, the Parliament has created an institution that will make it possible to live up to this responsibility today and in the future.