Image not found or type unknown

# 10th Anniversary of the National Fund of the Republic of Austria – Building Bridges

04 May 2005

Commemorative ceremony at the parliament / Review of ten years of work in service of the Austrian victims of National Socialism

“The unremitting task of the National Fund must be to keep the memories of the crimes of National Socialism alive and to acknowledge the suffering of the victims”, said Dr. Andreas Kohl, Chairperson of the National Fund of the Republic of Austria, at the commemorative ceremony in remembrance of the victims of National Socialism in the historical assembly hall, which is held this year under the motto “Paths of reconciliation – 10th anniversary of the National Fund”. The Secretary General of the National Fund, Hannah M. Lessing, added, “The National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism is not an institution that should take stock. Facts and figures simply do not suffice to measure the success of our difficult and responsibility-laden task. At most they are quantifiable evidence of our actions.”

Originally conceived by lawmakers as a temporary institution, the National Fund has, in fact, developed into an institution whose tasks far exceed those of its statutory mandate, i.e. making the gesture payments: distributing to so-called looted gold funds, compensating seized tenancy rights, providing administrative support to the General Settlement Fund and funding a multitude of projects in the fields of art, education and science.

## The Inception of the Austrian National Fund

The National Fund was established with the parliamentary directorate on 30 June 1995 as the result of a process of reassessment in Austria, which took place on a societal and political level over a period of several decades. A few years earlier, in 1991, the incumbent Federal Chancellor Dr. Franz Vranitzky stated in a speech before the National Council “We acknowledge all of our history and the deeds of all parts of our people, the good as well as the evil. As we lay claim to the good, so must we apologize to the survivors and the descendants of the dead for the evil.”
This paved the way for political discussion and, following a joint motion for a resolution by all parliamentary factions and several debates, a legislative motion for the National Fund Law was finally submitted by Dr. Peter Kostela, today a public prosecutor, and National Council President Dr. Andreas Khol. The National Fund was called into being on the occasion of the Republic’s 50th anniversary to officially express in the form of a “gesture payment” Austria’s regret for and acknowledgement of the persecution of the victims during the years of Nazi rule.

## The Work of the Austrian National Fund

The National Fund has seen itself as more than a mere disburser of payments from the very outset. Instead, it is a real service provider for thousands of former Austrians scattered throughout the world. The top priority is, and has always been, to reach as many survivors as possible so that they are able to receive this late recognition from the Republic.  Secretary General Hannah Lessing has put this into action during her many business trips. To date, the National Fund has been able to establish contact with over 30,000 affected persons and new applications continue to be received even now, ten years later. It was a deliberate choice not to impose a deadline for applications.
For the first time, the National Fund has also addressed groups of victims that had previously received only little and insufficient acknowledgement by the Republic of Austria: for example, the so-called children of Spiegelgrund, homosexuals, deserters from the German Armed Forces or ethnic groups such as the Roma and Sinti. Here a few facts and figures from ten years’ work of the National Fund: to date the gesture payment of 5,078 euros has been paid to 29,461 persons; 30,372 applications were and are currently being processed. Staff have written over 330,000 letters and made millions of telephone calls.

## Building a Symbolic Bridge to the Victims of the Nazis

In the National Fund’s day-to-day work, personal contact with the applicants takes on an important role. The survivors had the opportunity to tell a representative of “official” Austria their story and that of their friends and family for the first time and to let their emotions run free. “Building this symbolic bridge from Austria to the victims throughout the world could only be realized through the work of the National Fund,” said Hannah Lessing. As the first and only Austrian information point at that time we have tried to send the message that we have the goodwill to reestablish the connection with the former homeland, while also bearing in mind the fact, as already voiced by the former President of the National Council and present Federal President, that pain, fear and loss of the family and former homeland can never be ‘set right’ again”.

The many letters and contacts (18,000 people visited the National Fund in person) are a testimony to the fact that the National Fund has been able to do this in part, and they have also provided relief in the face of the often difficult and burdensome work of the staff during the course of the last ten years. For example a woman from the USA who had been persecuted on racial grounds wrote: “My daughter will accompany me on a trip to Vienna this summer. I will travel to Döbling, where I was born, to Türkenschanzpark where I lived with my husband. (…) I will go up to the Kahlenberg mountain where I used to enjoy running. I’ll fly back to New York grateful that I saw Vienna once more in my lifetime.”

However, the wishes of those victims who do not wish to accept Austria’s gesture due to their suffering at the hands of the Nazis and have no desire to reconcile themselves with the Austria of today are also to be respected.