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Richard Wadani Obituary

28 Apr 2020

Richard Wadani, deserter from the German Wehrmacht, honorary chairman and long-standing spokesperson of the committee “Justice for the Victims of Nazi Court Martial”, passed away in Vienna on the night of 19 April 2020. He was one of the last surviving deserters from the German Wehrmacht – barely anyone could convey as well as he could what it meant to refuse to fight for Nazism and Adolf Hitler at that time. For most deserters, that decision was a death sentence.

For Hannah Lessing, Secretary General of the National Fund, the loss of Richard Wadani has created a great void:

"With the death of Richard Wadani, Austria has lost a tireless campaigner for the recognition of the rights of Wehrmacht deserters. Himself a deserter and true antifascist, he inspired generations of people to stand up for our democracy".



Hannah Lessing and Richard Wadani at the “Festival of Joy” on Vienna’s Heldenplatz in 2017. (c) Isabelle Ouvrard

Richard Wadani was born in Prague to Austrian parents on 11 October 1922. He was politically active from a young age, having been influenced by his social democratic environment. In 1938, political developments forced the family to leave Czechoslovakia and move to Austria, his mother's homeland. In 1939, at the age of 17, he joined the German Wehrmacht. From the very outset he resolved not to fight for Hitler's Germany. His first attempt at desertion in Russia in 1942 failed. In 1944 he succeeded in defecting to the Americans near Aachen. He managed to reach England, where he enlisted in the Czechoslovakian exile army to contribute to the liberation of his homeland. When the war was over he returned to his mother in Vienna. He worked as a chauffeur and then as a sports teacher until his retirement.

Richard Wadani was a lifelong warrior: he had the courage to resist the current of the age and to act in accordance with his convictions. He did not shy away from resistance during the Nazi era, when he dared to follow his convictions and desert of his own volition. He described his motivations to the National Fund:

“I did not lose any assets and was not subjected to persecution until I fled. I was a deserter and merely risked my life so I no longer had to fight for Hitler's Germany and thus against Austria.”

After the war, when the few surviving Wehrmacht deserters were subjected to accusations of cowardice and treason against the fatherland, Richard Wadani ultimately decided to openly address the decades of injustice:

“Deserters did not begin to suffer injustice until after the war; we were insulted as traitors to the fatherland for decades. We were also discriminated against by Austrian officialdom. Life under the weight of this psychological burden has never been easy for us deserters.”

Yet, although it was not easy, Richard Wadani tirelessly reminded the public of the fates of the Wehrmacht deserters, thus contributing to a historical reassessment and belated recognition of the victims of Nazi court martial.

In 2002, the National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism officially recognized the Wehrmacht deserters as victims of National Socialism. This was followed in 2005 by the Recognition Act, which put deserters on an equal footing with other Nazi victim groups under social law, and in 2009 by the so-called Recognition and Rehabilitation Act for Victims of Nazi court martial.

In 2014, the City of Vienna, with the support of the National Fund, erected a monument on Ballhausplatz to the victims of Nazi court martial – one of the speakers at the opening ceremony was Richard Wadani, who had received the Decoration of Honor of the Republic of Austria for Services to the Liberation of Austria in 2007. Wadani always accepted these belated but important gestures of recognition on behalf all those who could not do so themselves. Until the very end, he stood up for the cause of deserters and conscientious objectors and passed on his memories as a surviving eyewitness.

Our thoughts are with Richard Wadani's wife Sieglinde, who always stood by his side, and his family.

