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Simon Wiesenthal Prize goes to contemporary witnesses Lily Ebert, Zwi Nigal, Karl Pfeifer and Liliana Segre

Central Austrian Investigative Office for Post-War Justice and Jewish Forum for Democracy and Against Anti-Semitism also honoured

12 May 2022

Vienna (PC) - The four contemporary witnesses Lily Ebert, Zwi Nigal, Karl Pfeifer and Liliana Segre were awarded the Simon Wiesenthal Prize for their engagement against antisemitism and for education about the Holocaust. Secondary prizes went to the Central Austrian Investigative Office for Post-War Justice and the Jewish Forum for Democracy and Against Anti-Semitism.

President of the National Council and Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of the National Fund Wolfgang Sobotka emphasised the importance of civil society commitment at the award ceremony in the Parliament at the Hofburg. He said that it must be a matter of concern for all democrats to stand up against antisemitism. The prize was awarded for the first time in memory of the architect, publicist and writer Simon Wiesenthal.


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Civil society engagement against antsemitism following Wiesenthal's example

In his introductory remarks on Simon Wiesenthal as a person, historian Gerhard Botz underlined the unbroken energy with which Wiesenthal had thrown himself into the task of helping survivors and tracking down Nazi criminals after his liberation from the Mauthausen concentration camp. Wiesenthal achieved widespread fame through his search for *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Adolf Eichmann. In 1961, he revived the *Bund Jüdischer Verfolgter des Naziregimes*, which he had founded in Linz in 1947, as the Jewish Documentation Center in Vienna, thus creating an institution that cooperated with domestic and foreign political authorities abroad. In Austria, however, Wiesenthal long fell on deaf ears and met rejection. For Gerhard Botz, Simon Wiesenthal was a "truly genuine Austrian, indeed a great Austrian citizen of the world".

The Simon Wiesenthal Prize is endowed with a total of 30,000 euros and will be awarded annually in the future as a sign of Austria's special historical responsibility. The National Fund of the Republic for Victims of National Socialism, established at the Austrian Parliament, is the responsible entity. In a conversation with moderator Rebekka Salzer, the Secretary General of the National Fund, Hannah Lessing, and the President of the Jewish Community Vienna and the Jewish Religious Society Austria, Oskar Deutsch, explained the background of the prize. Hannah Lessing said that the idea had arisen during a trip by the President of the National Council to Israel, where he had met the granddaughter of Simon Wiesenthal. Lessing was particularly pleased with the high number of applications. The 284 submissions from more than 30 countries, she said, were proof of the extremely high level of interest both at home and abroad. The prize, which Lessing sees as carrying on the legacy of the victims of the Holocaust, could also serve as an international example of best practice.

The selection of the award winners was not easy, reported Oskar Deutsch, who is also a member of the jury. For him, a person or an initiative was particularly worthy of being awarded if commitment had been for several years or a large number of people had been reached. For Deutsch, the number and diversity of the applications make it visible that many people are committed to combating antisemitism. In this respect, the prize could have a positive influence. Nevertheless, the fight against antisemitism is never over. Each and every individual must make a contribution, he appealed.

In his speech, the President of the National Council, Wolfgang Sobotka, also emphasised the importance of civil society engagement. 77 years after the Shoah, antisemitism is once again appearing more openly, especially on the Internet. It must be a matter of concern for all democrats to stand up against it. For as long as there is no civil courage on every soccer field, in every pub and in every conversation as soon as antisemitic statements or deeds are recognised, this anti-democratic attitude cannot be fought. The Simon Wiesenthal Prize was created, he said, to honour people for precisely this civil society engagement. The prize and its name are also intended to acknowledge Simon Wiesenthal and his work in showing where Austria needed to start in coming to terms with its history.

Main prize for four contemporary witnesses

The main prize went to Lily Ebert, Zwi Nigal, Karl Pfeifer and Liliana Segre, and thus to all four nominated contemporary witnesses together. The jury wanted to honour their life's work, explained Katharina von Schnurbein, Chairperson of the Simon Wiesenthal Prize jury and Antisemitism Officer of the EU Commission. The prize winners come from four different countries, explained von Schnurbein, and have dedicated their lives in many ways to education and remembrance of the Shoah. This year, they will be honored with the main prize on behalf of all contemporary witnesses.

Lily Ebert was born in Hungary in 1923 and survived the Auschwitz concentration camp. Today, her great-grandson runs a TikTok account for her with over 1.6 million followers. Zwi Nigal, born in Vienna in 1923, fought in the British army against Nazi Germany, among other activities. Today he lectures at schools in Austria and Germany. Karl Pfeifer was born in Baden bei Wien in 1928 and fled from the National Socialists to Hungary and Palestine. He campaigns against antisemitism in his journalistic work. Liliana Segre comes from Milan and was deported to Auschwitz in 1944 at the age of 13. To this day, she is active as a contemporary witness on television, in theatres and schools, and in the Italian Parliament.

Karl Pfeifer accepted the award on behalf of all four contemporary witnesses. He recalled that when he returned to Austria 71 years ago, he had to realise that the hatred of Jews had not disappeared. The country is a different one today. The fact that he is standing here today and accepting the award shows that some things have changed. "With patience and understanding, prejudice and hatred of Jews can be pushed back. We want to continue working on this together," Pfeifer said. The other award winners expressed their gratitude in a video message. Zwi Nigal, for example, described it as satisfying that his generation had changed something and that Jews today have a place where they are welcomed with open arms. Liliana Segre was moved and proud to have won the Simon Wiesenthal Prize after so many years.

Central Austrian Investigative Office receives prize for Holocaust education

The Central Austrian Investigative Office for Post-War Justice was awarded the Simon Wiesenthal Prize for civil society commitment to Holocaust education. Collecting files of the Austrian judiciary on the handling of Nazi crimes, it aims to contribute to the safeguarding of this part of Europe's legal cultural heritage. As such, this work is entirely in the spirit of Wiesenthal and also faces similar hostility and difficulties, emphasised contemporary history professor Barbara Stelzl-Marx at the award ceremony.

Claudia Kuretsidis-Haider of the Central Austrian Investigative Office for Post-War Justice explained that the vast number of court documents from the postwar justice system provides information about crimes, crime scenes, perpetrators and victims. Her institution aims to process this hidden knowledge and make it available to researchers and the public. The prize is both a motivation and an obligation to continue the work in the spirit of Simon Wiesenthal.

RE.F.U.G.I.U.S and Zikaron BaSalon, two other initiatives dedicated to Holocaust remembrance, were nominated in this category. The RE.F.U.G.I.U.S. project is dedicated to making the death marches of Hungarian Jews visible. The social initiative Zikaron BaSalon offers a personal way to commemorate and address the Holocaust at home.

Jewish Forum for Democracy and Against Anti-Semitism awarded prize for engagement against antisemitism

The award for civil society engagement against antisemitism went to the Jewish Forum for Democracy and Against Anti-Semitism (JFDA). The initiative was begun in 2008 by Levi Salomon and founded with the support of Lala Süsskind and the Jewish Community of Berlin. In addition to educational and public relations work, the JFDA carries out independent monitoring of antisemitic incidents. The JFDA contributes to the strengthening of democratic statehood, promotes interreligious and intercultural exchange and helps persecuted people, emphasised the Vice-President of the European Jewish Congress Ariel Muzicant, who presented the award.

In his acceptance speech, Levi Salomon said that his initiative primarily observes. Many of the events they have witnessed on the streets were extremely worrying, he noted. It is, therefore, necessary to draw attention to various phenomena and raise public awareness, he said. As such, the JFDA provides didactic material and addresses the target group of adolescents and young adults in particular.

Also nominated in this category were the Swedish Committee Against Antisemitism, which produces digital information and educational material for schoolchildren and other target groups, and Andreas Kahrs and Daniel Lörcher for their commemorative work at the German soccer club Borussia Dortmund.

The call for entries for the Simon Wiesenthal Prize 2022 starts already on May 12, 2022. Details and conditions of participation are available at www.wiesenthalpreis.at.

NOTE: Photos from this event can be found on the Parliament website.

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