



The closing payments from the General Settlement Fund have commenced

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On Wednesday 8th July 2009 the General Settlement Fund for Victims of National Socialism commenced the disbursement of the closing payments. On the previous day, the Board of Trustees, to which both the presidency of the National Council and representatives of the Federal Government, as well as victims' associations and representatives of the religious communities belong, had decided the final payment quotas. These quotas govern the aliquot distribution of the available means on the basis of the determined property loss. This share amounts to 10.56 percent of the determined losses in the claims-based process, 17.16 percent in the equity-based process and 20.74 percent for insurance policies.

So far, the independent Claims Committee has decided 20,537 of the total of 20,700 applications, containing approximately 120,000 individual claims, and recognized property losses of over 1.5 billion US Dollars. In total, the Fund - as was arranged by the Washington Agreement with the victims' associations - has 210 million US Dollars (around 151 million Euros) at its disposal.

Since 2005, the General Settlement Fund has paid 139 million US Dollars to around 14,000 applicants and 4,000 heirs in the form of initial disbursements, so-called advance payments. Approximately 30 percent of all claims concerned occupational and educational losses, 20 percent liquidated businesses. The remaining 50 percent are related to the other categories of property - bank accounts, stocks, bonds, mortgages, moveable property, insurance policies, real estate, insofar as no in rem restitution has been granted pursuant to the General Settlement Fund Law, and other losses and damages.

Previous Austrian restitution policy, which after 1945 followed the principle of solely restituting property which was still available, is also reflected in these numbers. The aim and task of the General Settlement Fund was therefore to close the gaps and inadequacies in Austrian legislation which have (consequently) arisen and thus contribute to a "comprehensive resolution of open questions of compensation".

In comparison with other national or international compensation measures, according to which only few categories of assets could be claimed or the compensation took place in the form of a lump sum payment, the terms of reference for the individual payments for damages in ten categories were incomparably more complex. To this end, the in-house research team of the General Settlement Fund obtained around 70,000 different documents from various Austrian archives. "From the outset, the processing of applications was a race against time, in order to fulfil the requirements of the Washington Agreement" said the Secretary General of the General Settlement Fund, Hannah Lessing, "as the great majority of applicants was born before 1945. These applicants, who were, for the most part directly affected by the persecution were to be prioritised."

Along with the compensation of so-called slave and forced laborers by the Reconciliation Fund, for whom a total of 436 million was made available, the Washington Agreement also constituted a package of restitution and compensation measures: The General Settlement Fund provides, on the one hand, for monetary compensation of property losses and, on the other hand, for in rem restitution of seized properties which are publicly-owned today. Additionally, 150 million US Dollars were resolved for the compensation of seized tenancy rights and disbursed by the National Fund and further social measures for victims of National Socialism were implemented.

In May 2009 Stuart Eizenstat, who led the negotiations for the USA in 2001, described the work of the General Settlement Fund as a "world-class standard for justice". According to Hannah Lessing "It was, however, clear from the outset that the pain and injustice suffered by the victims of National Socialism cannot be compensated or 'wiedergutmacht'. We cannot give anyone back their lost childhood, their murdered family. I am, however, convinced, that the attempt to face up to this moral responsibility is not only important for the surviving victims but also for society as a whole".