

Taking Responsibility. Sending a Signal.

National Fund, General Settlement Fund, Fund for the Restoration of the Jewish Cemeteries in Austria: despite the many differences between these Funds – their origins, their tasks, their structure and their working methods – there is one thing they have in common: they are proof that Austria is coming to terms with the darkest sides of its history – the years of National Socialist rule – and has been for a while; that it is assuming responsibility for the victims of this regime, a regime which was also supported by many Austrian citizens.

The National Fund, with its payments to all Austrian victims of National Socialism as a gesture of recognition; the General Settlement Fund, with its payments for losses of assets suffered as a result of National Socialist persecution and the possibility of restitution of property; and, finally, the Fund for the Restoration of the Jewish Cemeteries in Austria, with its efforts to nurture a cultural, religious and also emotionally important element of Austria's history – they are all striving towards the same goal: that dealing with Austrian history not be limited to speeches on special occasions but manifested in a practical way, which can be felt by the victims and their descendents and demonstrates that they have not been forgotten.

The work of the General Settlement Fund is largely completed; the gesture payments by the National Fund are also becoming less frequent. Only a handful of eyewitnesses still survive to bring us closer to their experiences. But this does not mean that the time has come to draw the frequently called for line under the past ("Schlusstrich"). On the contrary, with the advent of a new generation, focus shifts towards safeguarding recollections for the collective memory. Remembrance work and learning from the mistakes of the past form part of a political learning process which each generation must absolve for itself. Today's children and young people are at the heart of this learning process, for it is they who will shape the society of tomorrow. The National Fund renders a contribution by funding projects and publishing the life stories of survivors. The redesign of the Austrian exhibition in Auschwitz concentration camp, coordinated by the National Fund, also sends an important political signal that Austria no longer sees itself only as the first victim of Hitlerite Germany.

The National Fund and the General Settlement Fund place special importance on good communication with the applicants. Over the years, the expert knowledge of its staff and their experience in dealing with the victims has seen its development into a reliable and competent information and support point in questions of National Socialism, property seizure, compensation and restitution. In addition, the documents collected during the course of the application processing have grown into a unique archive, from which not only historians but also researchers from other disciplines will profit. All three Funds – the Fund for the Restoration of the Jewish Cemeteries in Austria, projected to span 20 years; the National Fund, with the realignment of its main points of focus; and the General Settlement Fund, which stands on the cusp of completing its work – remain indispensable elements in Austria's efforts to responsibly come to terms with her past.