

Statement of
Ms. Barbara Prammer
President of the Austrian Parliament
On the occasion of the
Opening of the ITF Plenary Session
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Chairman, Ambassador Ferdinand Trauttmansdorff

Honorary Chairman, Prof Yehuda Bauer

Academic Advisor, Prof. Dina Porat

Executive Secretary, Kathrin Meyer

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- I am glad to welcome you today at the plenary hall of the Austrian National Council. By welcoming the Holocaust Task Force in the Austrian Parliament, we intentionally want to give a signal to the Austrian Public and beyond. We want to underline that remembering the Holocaust and combating anti-Semitism are a task for all. It is not a task of a few who are specially engaged and trained.
- It is a task for the entire Austrian society as it is a task for other European and non-European societies.

- This task has become more urgent again, since we hear the following well known argument more often recently: “Why can’t we stop commemorating the Holocaust? Why should we keep stirring in old wounds? Why can’t we set a conclusive stroke under all the terrible events that humiliated, tortured and cost the lives of millions of European Jews, Roma and Sinti, gay and handicapped and other victims of the Nazi terror? Why can’t we think about the future that is hard enough for us and our children?”
- These questions are asked by younger and older citizens alike. How is that possible, given that we have maybe not done enough, but we have done more than ever before in recent years?
- I believe that part of the answer is our own perception problem. We know that many initiatives have been taken in recent years. There are many active teachers, pupils, students, historians, projects who keep the memory of the Nazi crimes alive.
- What we do not see, however, is that which is NOT happening. What we do not see is the silence that is still pervasive in too many classrooms. The ignorance of many regarding our history. And the intellectual laziness that sometimes forgets to connect our present to our past.

- The question remains how we can deal with these developments. And our answer is still the same: Remembering the Holocaust must never stop. Cultivating the sensitivity and conscience for all those visible and invisible developments that led to this unprecedented human tragedy can never stop. Not for us Austrians and not for Austria.
- Yes, the state Austria was the first victim of Nazi aggression outside Germany. Austria was wiped out from the map. But it was also all too many Austrians who participated, assisted, supported accepted or turned a blind eye on the unspeakable crimes committed by the National Socialist regime. The victims were citizens of Austria and those from other countries who were persecuted on our territory. Those who committed or helped to commit these most terrible crimes were all too often people from our cities and villages, people from our cultural and social backgrounds, our up-bringing, and our society.
- It took the Austrian society unduly long to develop the necessary sensitivity for this responsibility. Although much has happened since, still today, this challenge has not yet been met.
- There are still those who are not facing the truth and who are thus failing their responsibility. This is true for society as a whole, but also for some in the political class. All too often this failure comes in the disguise of comparing the dead of the Holocaust with those of other historical crimes.

- In this regard I would also like to underline the responsibility of civil society. Without an active civil society we are bound to fail in our task. And to be frank: Civil society in Austria sometimes seems to be not very lively.

- So the task has not been fulfilled. There remains a huge challenge in the field of political education, in the necessary research providing the basis for this education and in commemorating the events and the developments leading to the Holocaust. We should learn and know more about the individual lives and fates of the victims of the Holocaust.

- But for this task it needs partners. The Holocaust Task Force is such a partner. It provides us with the necessary expertise, the know-how and collective wisdom of those with a longstanding experience in the different areas of the Task Force's activities and objectives.

- And the task needs commitment too. I am happy in this regard to be able to report to you that the agreement to form a new governing coalition in Austria has spelled out clearly the next steps Austria will take in facing its past:
 - We will speed up the final payments in the context of the General settlement fund by setting apart from the fund the last and possibly most complicated cases.
 - We have a clear commitment to continue to support socially vulnerable victims of National Socialism.
 - We will continue the work of the National Fund.

- We are committed to a common effort to restore and preserve the Jewish cemeteries.
- We have an agreement on the speedy establishment and the sharing of running costs of the Wiesenthal-Institute.
- And we will renew the Austria-Pavilion in Auschwitz.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- The process of creating awareness can be enhanced by mainstreaming the culture of Holocaust education, Remembrance and Research; this means that the Task Force and we, the member countries, will have to take additional efforts to reach out to the broad public and in particular to the young generations. Only when they share our conviction, we will be successful.

- I wish this conference every success in achieving this important goal.