



NATIONALFONDS

DER REPUBLIK ÖSTERREICH FÜR OPFER DES NATIONALSOZIALISMUS

Toronto IHRA MMWG, 09 October 2013



View of the exterior of Block 17

The Austrian national exhibition has been located in Block 17 in Auschwitz I since 1978. (© HBF/STEFANIK)

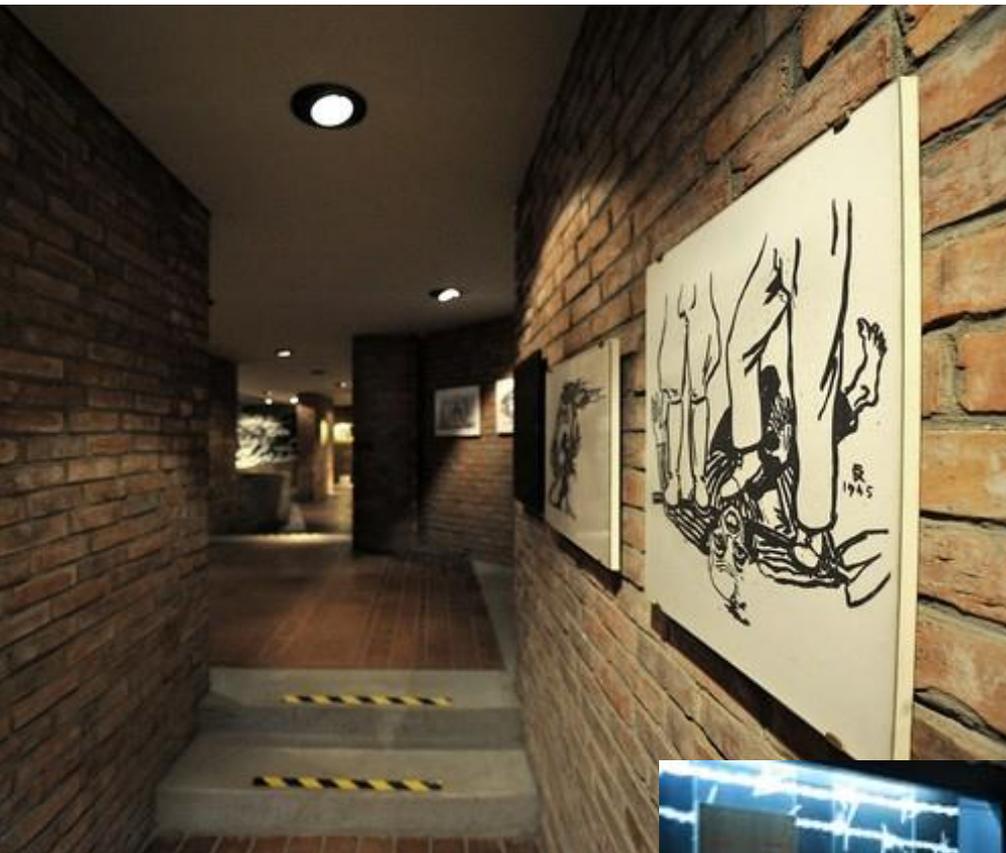




Foyer of the 1978 Austrian national exhibition



**Area of remembrance
Glass windows by Prof. Heinrich Sussmann**



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**Views of the
1978 Austrian national exhibition**



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Block 17

Hannah M. Lessing

“The renewal of the Austrian exhibition in Auschwitz-Birkenau”

IHRA Meeting Memorials and Museums Working Group (MMWG)

Toronto

09 October 2013

15 min.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to present to the members of the IHRA's Memorials and Museums Working Group (MMWG) a further update about the progress in the ongoing project of redesigning the Austrian exhibition in Auschwitz.

The **National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism** was established in order to express the moral responsibility of the Republic of Austria towards all victims of National Socialism.

In this context, the National Fund is not only entrusted with the task of providing recognition, compensation and support for victims of the Holocaust in Austria. In recent years, **memory and remembrance** have increasingly moved to the forefront of our work. Today, the **conveyance of a historical awareness** is an essential part of the mission of the National Fund.

It is because of this depth of experience with commemoration projects that the National Fund was entrusted by the Austrian Federal Government with the coordination of all matters pertaining to the **redesign of the Austrian exhibition in block 17 of the former concentration and extermination camp at the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau.**

Why renew the Austrian exhibition?

The **present Austrian national exhibition** was opened in **March 1978**. However, Austria's role during the National Socialist regime as currently portrayed in this exhibition does not correspond with the historical and political identity of present-day Austria.

Particularly the thesis propagated by the present exhibition presenting Austria as the "*first victim of National Socialism*" is no longer a view held by official Austria.

For years now, people in Austria and beyond – visitors, academics and victims' organizations – have been calling for the renewal of the outdated Austrian exhibition.

The new national exhibition is intended to reflect Austria's change in attitude towards her past. The **aim of the redesign** is therefore to express a **fitting and up-to-date culture of remembrance.**

The process

The redesign is being **financed** by the Austrian Ministry of Science and the Ministry of Education as well as the National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism and the Future Fund of the Republic of Austria and the Federal provinces. The National Fund has been entrusted with the coordination of the project as a whole. In this way synergies can be found, expertise merged and important partnerships formed.

[Steering Committee]

At the very outset of the project, a **Steering Committee** was established. It is **composed of** representatives from Federal Ministries and Federal provinces as well as from the Future Fund of the Republic of Austria and the National Fund.

Its main duties lie in **wording the targets and framework conditions** for carrying out the project, allocating resources and **approving and allocating the budget**.

[Advisory Boards]

In order to ensure that the planned exhibition has both a solid scientific foundation and is met with broad social consensus, in late 2009 and early 2010, **two advisory committees** were established to assist in the redesign:

- The **Academic Advisory Board** – composed of experts from the fields of science, the culture of remembrance and memorial site education – is chaired by **Wolfgang Neugebauer**, a former director of the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance.
- The **Societal Advisory Board** is composed of representatives from victims' organizations, religious communities, civilian service organizations, parliamentary factions and ministries. It is chaired by **Herta Neiß** from the *Austrian Camp Association of Auschwitz Survivors* (the so called *Lagergemeinschaft Auschwitz*)

The National Fund provides these project bodies with administrative support in their work.

In close coordination with the management of the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, the **thematic emphases** of the new Austrian exhibition were determined:

- The new exhibition will depict the **historical background to the persecution and deportation** of Austrians to Auschwitz and the National Socialist rule in Austria.
- It will portray Austrians as **persecutees** in Auschwitz, but it will also show
- Austrians as **perpetrators** in Auschwitz, and
- it will describe Austrian **resistance** in Auschwitz.

An important question was

How to deal with the current exhibition of 1978:

The **present exhibition** from 1978 will not be forgotten in the new exhibition: There will be citation and a short analysis of its contents and several elements shall be retained.

In preparation for its disassembly, the present exhibition, which was largely **designed by Auschwitz survivors**, was photographed and inventoried. It will be preserved as **a part of Austrian contemporary history**.

All information is administrated in a database at the National Fund. In order that the exhibition also be accessible later, a **documentary publication** is being prepared – containing photos and recollections of the exhibition designers of the time as well as statements of renowned historians.

In keeping with the existing exhibition, an **area of remembrance** shall be retained in memory of the Austrian victims, enabling **both individual and collective acts of remembrance**.

The **glass windows, which were created by Auschwitz survivor Heinrich Sussmann**, will also be preserved. Tribute will be paid to the design concept of 1978 by **intentionally incorporating the existing architecture** into the new exhibition.

Structural restoration of Block 17

Before the redesign of the exhibition can start, the building of block 17 – which **Austria shares with the successor states of the former Yugoslavia** – must be renovated. The ground floor houses the Austrian exhibition; the first floor is reserved for the successor states.

As the entire **building needs structural restoration**, it is understood that Austria and the former states of Yugoslavia work together on this project.

In **2012**, I was invited to the ***Conference on Renewing the “Ex-Yugoslav” Pavilion in Auschwitz-Birkenau***¹ which took place in **Belgrade** on 4 June. This international meeting of experts was hosted by the Ministry of Culture, Media and Information Society of Serbia, with the support and participation of the UNESCO Venice Office.

Since then, **three further meetings** of the successor states of former Yugoslavia have already taken place.

In December 2012, the National Fund joined the meeting in Sarajevo to present the results of the structural investigations and the renovation concept.

¹ "Holocaust education and museum development in South-East Europe: renewing the "Ex-Yugoslav" Pavilion in Auschwitz-Birkenau."

It has been agreed that the restoration of the building will be financed in advance by the National Fund – the total costs for the works will then be shared proportionally between all users of the building.

I am glad to say that I experienced the meetings as very constructive and successful, and I would like to point out that we owe **special thanks to the UNESCO** for supporting us in this coordination process.

It is understood that essentially all processes are to be agreed with the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau. At this point, I would like to **extend our thanks to the State Museum** under its **director Piotr Cywinski** for **all the support and the excellent cooperation.**

Auschwitz-Foundation

In addition to the renewal of the Austrian national exhibition, the Austrian Federal Government has resolved to **support the foundation for the upkeep of the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau**, established on the initiative of the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau. This foundation is endowed with international funds.

The Republic of Austria is contributing an amount of **6 million Euros** towards the upkeep of the memorial. The National Fund was entrusted with disbursing the funds². This amount is to be used to endow the foundation and also to cover the Austrian contribution towards the renovations on block 17.

² Amendment to the National Fund Law, Federal Law Gazette I 128/2011.

Activities in 2013

2013 was dedicated to dealing with technical and administrative matters. We focused on establishing the extent of the renovation work required on the building.

- The **structural report on block 17** will be finished this year:
A detailed investigation of the structural condition of block 17 was necessary. A **construction statistician** was commissioned by the National Fund to determine the actual state of the entire building and to outline the necessary measures to secure the building.
- This October, conservation investigations are planned to assess the historical substance of the building: Its walls, floors and ceilings contain a wealth of historical information such as prisoners' drawings which might be on the walls and must be protected.
- At the moment we are in the process of commissioning a project coordinator.
- This fall, we hope to reach an **agreement** with the State Museum **on the extent and the implementation of the renovation work (organization contract)**
- Also this fall, in October, the current **exhibition will be dismantled** in order to prepare the building for the restoration work.

- In summer 2013, we issued the call to tender for the **curatorship and academic direction** for the exhibition concept.

The **curator and the scientific director** will be in charge of the narrative and shall determine the **emphases of the exhibition's contents**. The new exhibition should be of a **high scientific standard** and, at the same time, it should **be aimed at a wide audience**. Due to this demanded high standard and the special requirements, the call to tender had to be withdrawn and will be started anew with modified parameters.

Further Outlook

From **2014**, we will begin to implement the plans:

- Once the curator and the scientific director have been appointed, work can begin on **realizing** the project
- There will be a further **call to tender to obtain the exhibition architect** responsible for realizing this exhibition concept in cooperation with a graphic designer.
- In **2015**, the **renovation work should be finished**:
In the year of the 70th anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz concentration camp and the 70th Anniversary of the End of WWII a preview of the new **exhibition will be presented to the public in Austria**.
 - The **OPENING of the Austrian exhibition in Block 17** in Auschwitz is scheduled for **2016**.

As this brief overview has shown, we **still have a long way to go**.
I will be glad to keep you informed about our further progress.

On the end of our journey, the Austrian exhibition at the Auschwitz Memorial will hopefully be a dignified symbol for a country learning from a dark history and willing to face up to its **responsibility**.

It will serve first and foremost as a place of remembrance of the Holocaust, but also as an expression of the change in historical awareness in Austria.

Thank you.