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Session 2: Education on the Holocaust and on anti-Semitism

**Statement by the Head of the Austrian Delegation, Ambassador
Hans Winkler**

**Civic Education and Teachers' Training on the subject of "National Socialism
and the Holocaust"**

In 1966, the Philosopher Theodor Adorno said: *"The demand that Auschwitz must not happen again is the first demand we must make to education. It precedes every other demand by so much that I do not think I must justify it. I cannot understand why people have paid so little attention to this demand up to today. To justify this demand would be a monstrosity, given the monstrosity of what happened"*.

Even if, in committing ourselves to tolerance education, we can never be sure of doing enough, and of always doing everything right, we can say that the last decades have seen, in Europe and in the wider world, great efforts to respond to Theodor Adornos warning reminder.

The 2000 Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust was a milestone in this respect. It founded the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, a unique network of concerned governments, NGOs and experts which committed itself to a clear message: By keeping alive the memory of the crimes of the national socialist regime, we draw the lessons for the present and the future. All forms of anti-Semitism are unacceptable and must be fought wherever they occur.

In Austria, since 1978 civic education is mandated in schools of all types, as a principle to be implemented in the framework of as many subjects as possible.

In the development of civic education, human rights, tolerance education and learning from history have played an ever-increasing role. This was enhanced substantially through the setting up in 1997 of a Service Centre for Human Rights education by the Ministries for Education and for Foreign Affairs, together with a Human Rights NGO, the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Human Rights. This Service Centre supplies teachers with education materials and possibilities for training in human rights and tolerance education.

Of similar significance was an act declaring 5 May, the day of the liberation of the Mauthausen Concentration Camp, an Austrian-wide Day of against violence and racism in remembrance of the victims of National Socialism. This the Austrian parliament did by unanimous vote, also in 1997.

An instruction to schools on this subject says: *“All teachers are called upon to remember the victims of National Socialism and to reflect upon the patterns of thought and mentality lying at the root of National Socialism as regards the way they present a danger to democracy.”*

To give you an insight into civic education activities: For the school year of 2005/2006 the Ministry of Education offers material for 46 different political topics, for example “Flight and Asylum”, “Women’s Rights-Human Rights”, “Violence and Racism”, “Roma and Sinti”, “Genocide in the 20th century” or “Consequences of National Socialism”.

2005 is of special significance in the context of civic education and tolerance education. On the one hand because the commemoration events 1945 – 2005 have given a special impulse to activities dealing with contemporary history. On the other hand because the Council of Europe declared 2005 the European Year of Citizenship through Education. Nationally, Austria has assigned each month of this year a special topic, e. g. “Living and learning democracy” (in January), “Democracy and minorities: The past and present of Roma and Sinti” (February), “Human Rights and Tolerance” (November).

As regards education on the Shoah, Austria strives for a continuous increase in quality of education programmes, based on ever better training of teachers.

The specific project of the Federal Ministry for Education “National Socialism and the Holocaust: Remembrance and the Present” was inaugurated in 2000 and has several specificities:

- It is not directed at teachers of history alone (for whom the subject matter is an obligatory part of their general course of studies) but, on a voluntary basis, to teachers of all subjects in all types of school. This includes pre-school and primary school teachers and those dealing with adult education. The voluntary principle proves a success insofar as there are constantly more applications than can be granted.
- The project aims at establishing strong links between learning about the past and learning for social behaviour and interaction in the present and future.
- The project consists of an international, national, and local tier, respectively.
- The core of the international tier is made up by the cooperation with the Israeli Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, Yad Vashem and its International School for Holocaust Studies. Since 2000, 50 Austrian teachers annually take part in seminars of two weeks each in Yad Vashem. These are accompanied by preparatory as well as after-events in Austria.
- Nationally, so-called “core seminars” are held, annual events of several days each, which provide for the meeting of experts from the different specialities such as history, literature or sociology, with teachers. This provides a forum for an on-going debate on approaches to the topic of National Socialism and the Holocaust in the Austrian education system. The focus is on the significance of the subject for the present and the options as well as the limits for approaching it.
- On the local level, training is conducted in the framework of so-called “decentralized networks”. These consist of scholars, and representatives of memorials, museums and private associations who are committed to research and remembrance on the impact of the Nazi regime throughout Austria's regions.

Here, the last decades have seen the unfolding of many dedicated activities of the scientific community and civil society. The teachers who have gone through these training programmes and then engage in activities continuously strengthen these local networks.

The introduction of the local dimension, letting the past come alive against the background of the local, personal environment has proved to be one promising approach in Holocaust education. In this, we have learned a lot from others. Let me mention, as examples, the innovative didactic methods of Yad Vashem, of the Washington Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Museum of Tolerance of the Wiesenthal Centre in Los Angeles.

The last years have seen the carrying out of many individual projects at Austrian schools in which pupils themselves have often displayed great commitment and initiative. In many instances, they have done research on the history of their school, town, or neighbourhood, or the personal histories of former pupils, teachers and neighbours who were persecuted for racial or political reasons. Former pupils who were forced into exile were invited by schools to give lectures and meet with the present generation. For some of those who were, at the time, not able to finish their school because of the persecution, symbolic honorary graduation ceremonies were organized.

The interest and commitment of so many of the young leaves us with hope for the future.

However the classroom, to be sure, must not be the only place for tolerance education to take place. The call is also for political leaders, civil society and the family to do their part.