

SPIEGEL ONLINE - July 11, 2007, 05:47 PM

URL: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,493599,00.html>

BUREAUCRACY AND EVIL

Vienna Confronts Its Holocaust History

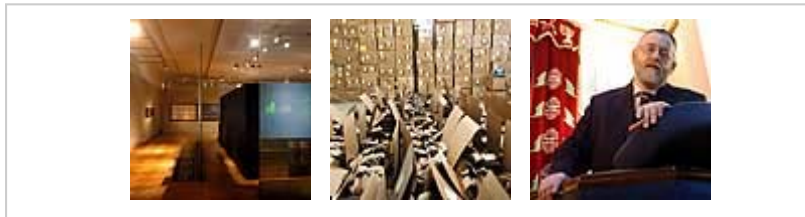
By Marion Kraske in Vienna

A new exhibition at Vienna's Jewish Museum presents the world's largest collection of Jewish Holocaust-related documents. The documents are invaluable to Holocaust historians and survivors -- and may lead to a new surge in restitution and compensation claims.

Rabbi Paul Eisenberg, a stout 67-year-old man with an impressive gray beard, is in his element. He stands on a stage flanked with gray velvet curtains and passionately performs songs by "the great Jewish singer and storyteller" Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, conducting the orchestra and swaying in time to the music. Between songs, he tells stories about Carlebach, himself and life.

The hall in the Jewish community center in Vienna is filled to capacity. Teenagers in polo shirts and older people in formal dress watch the show, enthralled. To get here, they've had to patiently file past two Hebrew-speaking security guards, opening their bags and presenting their ID.

PHOTO GALLERY: NEW HOLOCAUST EXHIBITION IN VIENNA



[Click on a picture to launch the image gallery \(7 Photos\)](#)

Vienna's Jewish community numbered as many as 200,000 people before World War II and was at the time the second largest in Europe after Warsaw's. Today, a mere 7,500 Jews live here. A small number went to school here as children; others arrived from Hungary and Czechoslovakia during the 1950s. Uzbeks and Georgians "trickled" into the country after the fall of the Iron Curtain, explains Rabbi Eisenberg, adding, "We're very multi-cultural and diverse."

There are Jewish kindergartens, three full-time schools and a home for the elderly. In the Leopoldstadt district, within view of St. Stephen's Cathedral, there are kosher butchers, kosher bakeries and kosher restaurants. There are also orthodox Jews here: When their children ride their bicycles in the Prater park, their sidelocks blow in the wind.

A History of Suffering

More than 60 years after the Holocaust, Vienna's Jewish community has started to thrive again. Now a new exhibition in the city's [Jewish Museum](#) shows what the community has suffered over the last three centuries.

On display are old documents, photographs, identification papers, visa applications, petitions and public announcements -- things that give a flavor of everyday Jewish life in the Austrian capital. The show, which has already attracted considerable attention, may be the best-preserved collection of materials pertaining to Jewish life before the Holocaust.

The treasure trove of documents was discovered by chance in the summer of 2000. Eight hundred cartons lay forgotten for decades in a deserted apartment house belonging to the community, as

dust piled up and mold ate its way through the paper.

For seven years, experts surveyed and sorted the mountains of paper. "Every box yielded a new gem," says the director of the community archive, Lothar Hölbling. Now the documents are being made available to the public for the first time, in collaboration with the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP) in Jerusalem.

"Ordnung Muss Sein" ("There Must Be Order") is the show's ambiguous title. The collection features 500,000 pages of documents from the period between 1938 and 1945 alone. That makes the Vienna archive the world's largest Jewish collection of data from the era of National Socialism.

'A Nation's Lost Holocaust History'

"Until now, the history of Jewish persecution was written almost exclusively on the basis of documents left by the National Socialist perpetrators," says Paul Shapiro, the director of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Now the victims' files can also be seen in what the *New York Times* describes as "A nation's lost Holocaust history."

The show reveals what some Jews did in order to escape their country and the terror of the Nazis after the "Anschluss" or annexation of Austria by Germany in 1938. Desperate parents completed questionnaires for *Kindertransporte* ("children's transports") to arrange their children's escape: Little Erika Hausmann, for example, was to be sent to her brother in Palestine or to an aunt in London.

Others struggled to obtain exit visas. Sixty-two-year-old Marianne Pallak hoped to go to Cuba. Those who were lucky, as she was, received their papers with a stamp from local police and the eagle insignia of the German Reich. Many, as British naval documents attest, crossed the ocean to Uruguay, Paraguay or Brazil.

The community helped with preparations for the voyages whenever it could. Special courses allowed Jews to quickly learn practical professions, which they needed to emigrate to countries such as the United States. Those who had been robbed of their property or banned from their professions received clothing and food. Ill and weak children were sent to vacation homes. They lay in the sun, their gaunt bodies spread out on deck chairs, taking a brief holiday from the growing nightmare.

In February 1941, deportations from Vienna Aspeng Station began. The names on the lists are meticulously recorded in 45 weathered files: a thousand people per transport.

The Jewish community itself had to prepare the mass expulsion of the Jews -- and later their deportation -- with bureaucratic efficiency. The community was forced "to administer its own death," as the curator-in-chief of the Jewish Museum, Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, puts it.

Evidence of a Terrible Crime

"We spent years searching for these lists," says Viennese historian Gerhard Ungar from the Documentation Center of Austrian Resistance (DÖW). "With these files, we finally hold in our hands the documentary evidence for a monumental violent crime."

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Besides their historical significance, the newly surfaced files also have a practical use: For Holocaust survivors and relatives of Holocaust victims, they represent an aid in the search for lost relatives or in the difficult process of building a legal case for compensation or restitution claims. Ever since a law on the restitution of stolen art works was introduced in 1998, cases have been multiplying of Holocaust survivors or their legal heirs



demanding the return of confiscated property. "We receive about a thousand queries every month," says Ingo Zechner, the director of the Holocaust Victims' Information and Support Center. "We can hardly keep up with processing the queries."

Austria's Nazi past is now haunting the famous art collection at the Albertina, an important Vienna museum. According to the Albertina's director, Klaus Schröder, internal investigations have revealed that the museum holds about 3,600 posters which it obtained illegitimately.

The former owner of the posters, a nephew of the Jewish art collector Julius Paul, was expelled from Vienna in 1938. He sold the art posters for a few pfennigs apiece. The mostly *fin de siècle* prints are now worth an estimated €7.5 million (\$10.2 million). The process of returning them could amount to the largest restitution case in 50 years.

"Ordnung Muss Sein" runs until October 21, 2007 at the [Jewish Museum Vienna](#).

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- ▶ Official Web Site of the Jewish Museum Vienna
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