

Unveiling of a commemorative plaque for the Austrian Centre
124 Westbourne Terrace in Paddington
Thursday, 13 October 2016
Statement by Ambassador Dr. Martin Eichtinger

Councillor Freeman,
Professor Dr. Brinson,
Mrs. Sonja Frank,
Chairman O'Neill,
Director Elisabeth Kögler,
and all of you whose families are connected to the Austrian Centre or
to the story of Austrian exile in the UK,
Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to be with you today at this historic place which is of particular importance and relevance for Austria and her history: The Austrian Centre which we are going to commemorate with the unveiling of a plaque was the most important social, cultural and political hub for Austrian exiles from the Nazis.

Let me begin by thanking Councillor Freeman and Westminster Council for supporting this project from its outset and for joining us today for this most memorable event.

I would also like to pay tribute to Mrs. Sonja Frank, granddaughter of Fanni and Ludwig Grossmann, two members of the Young Austrians, for her personal contributions over so many years and for being the chronicler of the Young Austrians. I have fond memories of the opening of the exhibition Young Austria last November at the London School of Economics, an exhibition which was presented earlier in 2012 in Vienna. I would like to congratulate her on the publication of the highly successful book "Young Austria, Austrians in British Exile 1938 - 1947- For a free, democratic and independent Austria."

I would also like to thank Professor Charmian Brinson, co-founder of the Research Centre of German and Austrian Exile Studies at the Institute of Modern Languages Research at University of London and his co-authors Marietta Bearman, Richard Dove, Anthony Grenville and Jennifer Taylor for publishing in 2007 the book "Out of Austria - The Austrian Centre in London in World War II", thereby preserving the memory of this historic place and its people for eternity.

Last, but not least, I would like to congratulate Director Elisabeth Kögler and her team on the achievement of making this plaque become reality and for honouring the memory of this historic site. It must also be mentioned that we owe it to the financial support of the Future Fund of the Republic of Austria that this plaque can be unveiled today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Some 30.000 refugees from Austria came to Britain before or immediately after the Anschluss in 1938.

Amongst these Austrian refugees were the members of the Free Austrian Movement, who were actively planning to establish a free, democratic and independent Austria after its liberation.

As time moves on, it is ever more important to help keep alive the memory of what happened to Austrian citizens almost 80 years ago and thus to help the younger generations of today to draw the lessons from that darkest of chapters of Austrian history and encourage them to secure a stable future based on respect for democracy, human rights and rule of law.

As Head of the Office of the Austrian Special Representative for payments to former forced and slave labourers of the Nazi regime in the year 2000, it was a privilege for me to be able to contribute to providing a belated measure of justice to the victims of this dreadful period of our history.

The Austrian Centre, the organisation of Austrian refugees which was established in 1939 under the honorary presidency of Sigmund Freud, had up to 3,000 members. It helped these refugees to keep their culture alive and to organise political, social and cultural activities in exile.

After the war, several hundred Young Austrians returned to Austria to help build the free country we enjoy today. They deserve our gratitude for their efforts.

We must never cease to value the freedom and democracy which we enjoy today and we must always continue to work towards preserving them.

This is particularly important today when Europe experiences the most severe refugee crisis since World War II and when terrorists and extremists threaten peace in Europe and fight our shared values.

As Austrian Ambassador to the country which gave refuge to so many Austrians I put a particular emphasis on addressing Austria's history and to meet survivors who built a life in the United Kingdom.

The plaque for the Austrian Centre should remind us of our personal responsibility to act when we are being called upon.

When opening the exhibition on Young Austrians last year, I quoted Elie Wiesel as I did in my foreword in the exhibition's catalogue. I would like to do it also here.

He said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: "Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must - at that moment - become the center of the universe."

It is a particular honour for me that - on behalf of the Republic of Austria - I will now unveil the commemorative plaque for the Austrian Centre.

Thank you for your attention!

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