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Holocaust Museum Appeals Visa Denial For Volunteer

(CBS) LOS ANGELES The Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust claimed Thursday that a federal agency is using post-9/11 security as an excuse to deny foreigners the opportunity to volunteer at the museum.

The museum is appealing a visa denial for Valentin Hofer, an Austrian who chose to fulfill his country's national service requirement by volunteering at the Holocaust Museum, according to museum officials.

In denying the visa, the Citizenship and Immigration Service, which is part of the Department of Homeland Security, said Hofer, who has studied Holocaust history at an Austrian museum and speaks fluent English, lacked "competence," according to museum representatives.

CIS spokeswoman Marie Sebrechts told The New York Times there was no inherent reason that applications for Hofer and other Austrians have been denied or delayed, but that the agency has a two-month processing time and delays are related to security concerns.

"It is true that there are more security checks since 9/11," Sebrechts told the newspaper.

But the museum claims Homeland Security has made numerous mistakes in denying cultural exchange visas to Austrians hoping to do volunteer work in the United States. A provision of Austrian law allows its citizens to fulfill their military obligations through service in Holocaust institutions abroad.

"Here we have someone born and bred in a country with its own, difficult World War II history, trying to spend a year working at a museum dedicated to Holocaust commemoration, reconciliation and education," said Mark A. Rothman, the museum's executive director. "This inexplicable denial frustrates the intention of this young man to strengthen relations between his country and ours."

"The primary reason for Mr. Hofer's denial was USCIS's determination the visa would not, in fact, foster cultural exchange," Rothman added. "If work with our museum doesn't constitute a cultural exchange under American law, I don't know what would."

The Austrian government created Austrian Holocaust Memorial Service in 1991 to recognize Austria's role in the Holocaust.

Since then, about 150 volunteers, mostly in their 20s, have worked in various countries in lieu of military service, including the United States at the U.S. Holocaust Museum and the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

Since Sept. 11, however, immigration authorities have raised repeated roadblocks to those seeking visas for these volunteers, according to the museum.

The museum is challenging the agency's determination that Hofer's preparation was insufficient to demonstrate his competence.

"Valentin Hofer couldn't be better prepared for his service year with the L.A. Museum," said E. Randol Schoenberg, chairman of the museum's board. "Mr. Hofer completed an extensive course of study and worked for several months at an Austrian museum that had itself been a Nazi euthanasia camp during the second World War. He is a gifted honor student and fluent in English."

We all understand the need for post-9/11 security and the added administrative burden that puts on immigration officials," Rothman said. "But where is the justice when they hand down arbitrary and capricious denials of good people who bring good

will and understanding to our nation because they can't take the time to understand the facts?"

Holocaust survivors founded the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust in the early 1960s as a permanent repository for their personal artifacts from the Holocaust and the world the Nazis destroyed.

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