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August 23, 2007

## Austrian Interns Run Into U.S. Visa Problems

By [JENNIFER STEINHAUER](#)

LOS ANGELES, Aug. 22 — An unusual program that allows Austrians to volunteer in Holocaust institutions in the United States in lieu of serving in the Austrian military has been disrupted because of difficulties in obtaining visas from the American government.

Officials with the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust said the visa application for a prospective Austrian intern had been rejected twice since May and was on a final appeal. The museum was informed by the [immigration](#) authorities that the program was not considered a legitimate cultural exchange.

Other Holocaust institutions, including the Leo Baeck Institute in New York City and the Virginia Holocaust Museum in Richmond, have reported similar difficulties in the past four years.

“We really feel like David versus Goliath here,” said Mark Rothman, executive director of the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust. “We are trying to bring someone into the country who wants to do good and he is screened out.”

Since 1992, the Austrian government, which requires 18-year-old men to serve one year in the military, has offered a select few the chance to participate in the program. Known as Gedenkdienst in German, the program allows the young men to volunteer in institutions around the world that are focused on Holocaust remembrance or studies. (The Austrian government pays them a small stipend for living expenses.)

Of the roughly 40,000 Austrians who are of draft age each year, 30,000 do the military service, 10,000 perform civic services and 25 are accepted into a Holocaust remembrance program, about 5 of them a year in the United States, said Wolfgang Renezeder, a spokesman for the Austrian Embassy in Washington.

“They are highly motivated young people,” said Mr. Renezeder, who said the interns serving in other countries were not encountering visa problems.

The participating museums and cultural organizations are often working on small budgets and greatly appreciate the interns, who help translate documents from the archives, give tours and meet with Austrian and other Holocaust survivors.

But applicants in the United States are now having a hard time getting the type of visa that American officials advised the program were necessary, namely one that allows cultural exchange and work for a limited period.

The application for the Los Angeles intern, Valentin Hofer, was submitted in mid-May, Mr. Rothman said. The museum heard nothing until late June, when immigration officials requested more information, which was submitted, he said. The rejection was received this month.

“If Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust loses its administrative appeal,” Mr. Rothman said, “we most certainly will sue the [Department of Homeland Security](#) to correct this miscarriage of justice.”

At the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, which accepts two interns a year, two applications have been lingering for five months, with no word as to their status, said Emil Rennert, an intern who runs the center’s Austrian heritage collection.

The Virginia Holocaust Museum has more or less given up on the program, said Timothy Hensley, the librarian there, because the visa process has gotten too difficult.

“This is going on pretty much everywhere,” Mr. Hensley said. “We have tried three times since 2003, and every year it gets more complicated and weird. Since 9/11, the information you provide for the program has suddenly become inauthentic. We get lots of questions about whether our program is valid.”

The process took so many months, Mr. Hensley said, that potential interns took positions in other countries.

“You have this whole problem with immigration thinking, ‘Why is this person coming to the country and not being paid?’ ” he said. “But they are getting a work visa and that is just the way the program is set up. It has been disappointing.”

At the Museum of Tolerance, also in Los Angeles, a recent intern’s visa process took six months, making it impossible for him to complete the yearlong program. The museum’s director, Liebe Geft, said it would continue seeking the Austrian interns.

“As long as our organization is able to host this program, I intend to start this process earlier,” Ms. Geft said.

Marie Sebrechts, the West Coast spokeswoman for Citizenship and Immigration Services, an agency within the Department of Homeland Security, said there was no inherent reason that the Austrian applications had been denied or delayed. She said the agency typically had a two-month processing time.

Such delays, she said, generally have to do “with security clearance.” Ms. Sebrechts added: “It is true that there are more security checks since 9/11,” but it terms of the Holocaust program, “Nobody had noticed any trends.”

Mr. Hofer, the prospective Los Angeles intern, reached by phone in [Austria](#), said he was confused, but remained hopeful.

“I am not a terrorist and I don’t have any Nazi relatives,” he said. “I expected a positive decision. I didn’t even think about what would happen if there was a denial.”

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