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Austrian Holocaust Institute Loses Key Members

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
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VIENNA (AP) -- Key members of an Austrian Holocaust research center have quit in a dispute with the city's Jewish community.

The Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies began provisional operations in January after being bogged down for years with funding problems. Its aim, among other things, is to give scholars from around the world unique access to roughly 8,000 files of the late [Nazi hunter](#) Simon Wiesenthal and to parts of a vast archive belonging to the Jewish Community Vienna. But reluctance by the Jewish community to provide full access to its trove of historic information had crippled the center over the past 10 months.

On Friday, frustrated by a lack of progress, Ingo Zechner, the institute's business manager, announced he was quitting.

"The concept of the (institute) is based on goals that can't be realized in the given situation," Zechner said in a statement.

In a telephone interview with The Associated Press, Zechner explained that the biggest problem was that the Jewish community had agreed to only open the 1919 to 1970 section of its archival material and only a limited selection from those years. It had also insisted on reserving the right to remove pieces at will, he said.

"This is about censorship of material," Zechner said, adding that independent research would not be possible under such restrictive conditions. "This is really not easy for me, but we fought for months," added Zechner, who has worked on the project for the past seven years.

The institute's executive committee, under Anton Pelinka's leadership, resigned in protest in July, but it continued to attend negotiation sessions with the Jewish community in the hope that a compromise could be reached. That process appeared to end Thursday night when Pelinka and three other executive committee members said they were leaving the project for good.

In an e-mail to the AP, Pelinka said his decision also was based on the fact that independent research would not be guaranteed due to the restrictions insisted on by the Jewish community.

"It is not the end of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute, but it is the end of the institute as it was designed by the majority of the outgoing executive board," Pelinka said.

A new executive board was elected Thursday following a meeting of all groups involved

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in the project. It now includes Ariel Muzicant, the head of the Jewish community.

"The lending agreement between the (Jewish Community Vienna) and the (Vienna Wiesenthal Institute) related to the archive is ready for signature and will be signed soon," the Jewish community said in a statement announcing the formation of the new committee.

"I wish the new executive board all the best -- but I am very skeptical," Pelinka said.

Wiesenthal, who died in his Vienna home in September 2005 at the age of 96, had been personally involved in planning the center.

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