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Academics Withdraw Support for Holocaust Center

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
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VIENNA (AP) -- A renowned group of academics has withdrawn its support for an Austrian Holocaust research center in the latest fallout from a dispute with the city's Jewish community.

The Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies began provisional operations in January after being stymied for years by a lack of funding. Its purpose, among other things, is to give researchers 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, an organization representing the city's Jewish Community.

Earlier this month, important officials of the center -- including Anton Pelinka, the former chairman of the executive committee, and business manager Ingo Zechner -- announced they were quitting, citing concern that scholars would not be able to do independent research due to archive restrictions imposed by the Jewish community.

In a letter obtained by The Associated Press Tuesday, 12 of the institute's 15-member international academic advisory board said they, too, were dropping out.

"The International Advisory Board of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute has noted with increasing concern that the conditions under which the institute could carry out its work with the necessary degree of scholarly independence can no longer be met," the academics wrote in the letter, which was dated Monday.

"On the basis of the information available to us, and in view of the resignations ... we conclude that the board no longer serves a useful purpose."

The letter was co-signed by, among others, Yehuda Bauer, professor of Holocaust Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, David Bankier, head of the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem and Tom Segev, an Israeli historian, journalist and Wiesenthal biographer.

Bauer, who was honorary chairman of the advisory board, said in an e-mail to the AP that he and others who resigned doubted that constructive academic work was possible in the current atmosphere.

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"Like my colleagues, I agreed to become the honorary chairman of the (academic advisory board) on the assumption it would be a cooperative venture between the state, the city, the university and the (Jewish Community Vienna)," Bauer wrote.

"The controversies that then arose and led to the resignations of a number of leading personalities was the opposite of what I, and other colleagues, had expected."

On the day of his resignation, 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.

Georg Graf, professor at the University of Salzburg and the institute's new executive committee chairman, said he "greatly regretted" the resignation of the board members, adding he had the impression their decision was based on a lack of information.

"The board members have expressed concern that they see the institute's research independence at risk," Graf wrote in an e-mail. "But these fears lack a realistic basis."

Graf said a "satisfactory solution" had been found regarding access to the Jewish community's archive, describing it as one that secures the independence and autonomy of research at the center.

Brigitte Bailer, Graf's deputy on the new executive committee, confirmed that the archive issue had been resolved and expressed confidence the center would still become an acclaimed institution. She added that "one-sided misinformation" by Pelinka had influenced board members.

Ariel Muzicant, president of the Jewish Community Vienna, lashed out at Pelinka, accusing him of making a mess of things.

"But we'll also get through this," Muzicant said.

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