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## The makings of history / Institutional chaos

By [Tom Segev](#)

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A major scandal has sparked an uproar in Vienna's Jewish community, with reverberations all the way to Washington and Jerusalem. It all started when the "Nazi hunter," Simon Wiesenthal, who lived for most of his life in Austria and died in 2005, decided to bequeath his vast archive to an institute for the study of anti-Semitism, racism and the Holocaust. Austria does not have such an institute, so this was an opportunity to create one. A number of organizations and research facilities, including Israel's Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. joined forces with existing Austrian institutes and Vienna's Jewish community to establish the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies. The Austrian government tried to dodge the demand that it finance the project's operating costs - budgeted at an estimated 3.5 million euros per year - but eventually gave in. The city of Vienna is also donating funds. The Austrians suggested housing the institute in one of Vienna's countless gaudy palaces.

And then, right on cue, the fighting began, everyone bad-mouthed everyone else, and this week the whole project imploded with a big bang. Now, it is unclear whether there will even be an institute.

Beyond the intrigue and scheming, a debate has arisen over who has the right to use the historic archive of Vienna's Jewish community. The community is willing to open only part of this archive to scholars, and the founders of the new institute claim the community is trying to censor history. Among other things, the information in the archive documents internal squabbles in the community, as well as details concerning its property and business associations. Some people are worried that Holocaust deniers might pry into the community's files - and who knows what they will find? Meanwhile, Vienna's Jews are struggling to come to terms with the story of someone who was once one of their leading figures, the late Benjamin Muremelstein, who was accused of collaborating with the Nazis.

The storm of accusations Advertisement has brought to light another story: The catalog of names of people who belonged to the city's Jewish community before the Holocaust, the majority of whom are no longer living, somehow wound up in Salt Lake City, where Mormons baptized them by proxy into the

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Vienna's Jewish community moved part of its archives in the 1950s for safekeeping to the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, in Jerusalem. In those days nobody thought the community would make a comeback. Although to this day it is not very pleasant to be a Jew in Austria, the community, nearly all of which is in Vienna, has indeed rebounded: It numbers between 10,000 and 20,000, depending on who you ask. Furthermore, the head of the community, Ariel Muzicant, claims that its archival files were transferred to Jerusalem temporarily - on loan, as it were. The Israelis counter that the files belong at the Central Archive, because the number of former Austrians living in Israel is greater than the number of Jews in Vienna. This is a fascinating argument between Israelis and Jews outside it, at whose center is a challenge to Israel's presumption of being the focal point for Jews the world over.

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