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Box 5, Folder 9, Statement on Pope John Paul II's Visit to Austria,  
23-28 June 1988.



## STATEMENT

BY

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DIRECTOR OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE, ON  
POPE JOHN PAUL'S VISIT TO AUSTRIA, JUNE 23-28, 1988

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The essential issue in Austrian-Jewish relations, as I see it, is that for most of the past 50 years the majority of the Austrian people have perceived themselves as victims of Nazism, and have denied or repressed knowledge of Austria's complicity in incubating anti-Semitism which culminated in the Nazi holocaust.

In that perspective, Pope John Paul II's declaration to the Austrian Jewish community today in which he repudiated anti-Semitism and "anti-Jewish activity" is a positive, constructive statement, of particular importance to shaping the conscience of the next generation of young Austrians. "We must remember the Shoah, and make certain that it is never repeated," is a Papal sign that the Austrian pattern, including that of the Austrian Catholic Church, of denial and repression must come to an end.

The strength of these affirmations, however, risk being weakened or contradicted by morally ambiguous statements that the Pope made on the first day of his arrival in Austria. Assertions that Austria was a "victim" of the "cruel tyranny" of the Nazis, and referring explicitly only to Catholics as victims of Nazi persecutions and ignoring the 200,000 Austrian Jews who were the singular objects of Nazi destruction could well lead to moral confusion and worse. These traditionalist Austrians who have persisted in the delusion of their victimization and who have refused to face their active role in the Nazi war machine--including President Kurt Waldheim--may well take comfort from that selective reading of Austrian history.

Given the present agitated Middle East crisis, one might regard as balanced the Pope's clearcut support of the right of the Jewish people to a homeland, the security of the State of Israel, while encouraging in general terms the right of the Palestinian people to a "homeland."

The several brief contacts between Pope John Paul II and Kurt Waldheim in his capacity as President of Austria were, I believe, held to "a minimum protocol level," as the Vatican's spokesman had earlier announced they would be.

In sum, I share the views of Paul Grosz, president of the Austrian Jewish community, who declared following the Papal audience, "The atmosphere was good, but the content of what happened is still not where we want to be."