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## AFP News Briefs List

### Austrian Wehrmacht deserters campaign for justice by

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In Austria and Nazi Germany during World War II, any soldier who deserted Hitler's army and was caught faced execution.

"At the front, a man can die, as a deserter he must die," Adolf Hitler wrote in his epic "Mein Kampf", and the Nazis put around 15,000 deserters to death, including between 1,200-1,400 Austrians.

One who escaped was Lance Corporal Richard Wadani, now 87, who deserted a number of times before eventually fleeing to France where he joined the British allies.

And he recalled how he was received on his return to Austria after the war ended.

"When I turned up at the employment agency wearing my British army uniform, I was turned away with the words: 'How could you dare serve in a foreign army?'," Wadani said.

Some 70 years after the outbreak of World War II, Austria's deserters like Wadani are still fighting against being branded as cowards and traitors. An exhibition opened in Vienna this week to once again call attention to their plight.

Anonymous letters that Wadani received, including a card written in 1988 in which his "neighbours" accused him of being a coward and bombarded him with insults, form part of the display.

So, too, is a video in which Helga Peskoller Emperger recalls how she and her mother were arrested by the Gestapo on November 11, 1944, in Villach in the southern province of Carinthia for sheltering members of the resistance.

Emperger was just 16 and imprisoned until April 1945. Her mother Maria was executed on December 23, 1944.

The exhibition, being shown in the Nestroyhof, a former Jewish theatre shut down by the Nazis after the annexation of Austria in 1938, is entitled, "The law as it was back then: soldiers and civilians in the courts of the Wehrmacht."

The WWII deserters "are at the very crux of Austria's post-war lie, because if the country was, as is still officially claimed, the first victim of Hitler's Germany, then the Wehrmacht would have been an occupying army and desertion an act of civil obligation," said Thomas Geldmacher, organiser of the exhibition and head of a group campaigning for justice for the deserters.

"We're calling for the annulment of the verdicts of the Nazis' military tribunals, the rapid settlement of deserters' claims for aid as victims and a sign of respect for the deserters in the form of a memorial," he said.

By contrast, many of those who supported the Nazi regime are no longer stigmatised today.

Photographs showing parades of former Wehrmacht soldiers who still hold regular reunions in Austria, proudly wearing their uniforms and their Nazi medals, are also part of the exhibition, a version of which has already toured several German cities.

Leopold Breitler, who was appointed judge of the Nazi military tribunal in Vienna in 1944, sentenced 20 soldiers to death for mutilating each other in order to avoid being sent into battle.

The youths were all executed by firing squad in Kagran, north of Vienna. The site, now a park, contains no plaque or other sign in memory of their fate.

But Breitler, who was suspected of participating in crimes against humanity, merely faced a month's detention after the war. Then in 1946, he opened a law practice where he worked until he retired in 1963.

Breitler "wasn't a member of the Nazi party, but he helped radicalise military justice at the time," Geldmacher said.

While Germany is considering a bill to rehabilitate deserters from Hitler's army and those who refused to serve in the final throes of the Nazi regime, Wadani says Austria has still not fully come to terms with its wartime past.

"There was a Recognition Act in 2005 rehabilitating the victims of the Nazi regime, but not a word was said about deserters."



A visitor looks at pictures at an exhibition about civilians who had been sentenced by the Nazis in Austria during of the Second World War, at the Nestroy Theater in Vienna.

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