

Show sheds light on Austria's Wehrmacht deserters

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1 of 1

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By [Petra Spescha](#)

VIENNA (Reuters Life!) - When Richard Wadani returned home to Austria from Britain in 1946, he was not hailed as a hero who fought the Nazis but branded a coward.

Wadani risked his life to desert the Wehrmacht (German army) in 1944 and join the British army to fight the Nazis. When he turned up seeking work in Austria after the war wearing his British

uniform, the official at the labor office yelled at him: "How dare you serve in a foreign army?"

Some 70 years after World War Two began, an exhibition in the Austrian capital of Vienna is trying to shed light on the lives of people like Wadani -- whose fates have been swept under the carpet for decades in the Alpine republic.

There are no memorials for army deserters in Austria. Even mainstream politicians are reluctant to support attempts to rehabilitate them, saying "desertion is still a crime."

"Deserters are still branded as cowards and traitors," said Thomas Geldmacher, curator of an exhibition about the fate of Austrians who deserted the Nazi Wehrmacht.

That attitude remains widespread despite Austria's 1946 formal declaration that all convictions passed under Nazi military justice were null and void and a 2003 amendment guaranteeing benefits and pension claims to deserters and other victims of the Nazis.

But the absence of an open debate about deserters and the lingering attitudes toward them means that few know about their rights. Only 19 deserters have been granted the allowances, and some only after waiting years for approval, Geldmacher says.

"Deserters have not been fully rehabilitated because society and the persons concerned still do not know about it," Geldmacher told Reuters.

Germany's parliament on Tuesday passed a law that explicitly rehabilitates the last group of deserters not covered by previous legislation, drawing a line under decades of intense discussion about reversing the verdicts handed down by Adolf Hitler's Nazi war machine.

To bring some of the awareness those debates have created in Germany to Austria is among the main goals of the exhibition in Vienna's Theater Nestroyhof, Hamakom, Geldmacher says.

Around 1.3 million Austrians served in the German Wehrmacht after their country was annexed by Germany in 1938. About 1,200 to 1,400 Austrian deserters were executed during World War Two.

(Reporting by Petra Spescha, editing by Paul Casciato)

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