



EUROPEAN ORGANISATION OF
PRISON AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

EUROPRIS INTERVIEW

EuroPris talks with

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EuroPris: Could you tell us about your career path? Why have you chosen to work in the prison and correctional field?

My career started as a trainee judge and later (2007) as a judge at the Regional Court in Krems/Donau, seconded to the Federal Ministry of Justice. In 2011 I started working as a public prosecutor, then as a senior public prosecutor at the Public Prosecutor's Office for Combatting Economic Crimes and Corruption. In 2014 I had another chance to take up a job in the Federal Ministry of Justice and so I started working as a Personal Advisor of the Federal Minister of Justice. During this period, my work focused on the prison service administration and my interest in this field awakened.

How many Prison establishments do you oversee?

Austria has 27 prisons and 13 outposts:

- 7 prisons for male adult offenders,
- 1 prison for male juvenile offenders,
- 1 prison for female adult offenders,
- 3 institutions for male persons in precautionary forensic measures
- 15 remand prisons.

On an average, the 27 Austrian prisons and their 13 outposts have detained 8.800 persons over the last few years.

How many prisoners are in prison at the moment in Austria?

On the 1st of October 2018, Austria had a prison population of 9.099 persons. However, the actual number of inmates held in penitentiary institutions was 8.332 persons, whereas the rest of the inmates either were serving a sentence by electronically monitored home detention or were accommodated in psychiatric hospitals. The prison density in Austria is currently about 94%.

How many staff do you manage?

In addition to structural and technical infrastructure, prison staff members are the important "backbone" for implementing custodial sanctions.

The Austrian Systems provides a wide range of trainings and treatments, in order to force the re-integration of sentenced persons into society after their release. In addition to prison guards, what is the largest group among the whole prison staff, also (for example) psychologists, psychiatrists,

administration staff, social-workers, pedagogues, nurses, doctors, teachers, pastors are concerned with the different tasks of working with prisoners.

The Austrian correctional service employs a total staff of over 3,700 (full-time equivalent). About 3.035 are prison guards and 300 work in the wide field of care (mostly institution doctors, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, trainers and care workers as well as those providing spiritual welfare; so-called supporting or professional service). The members of the professional service represent about 11% of correctional personnel. The rate of women is about 61%. They provide professional care for prisoners from a medical, psychological, social worker and educational perspective and are directly employed by the judicial system. Furthermore, another 275 specialised persons are provided by a judicial support agency (JBA) to work in the Austrian prisons.

What are in your opinion the required attributes and qualifications of someone wanting to be a prison officer?

In general, the Austrian prison staff members strive to make a positive difference in the lives of the inmates, so they are able to live a better and healthier life after their release.

Achieving the main goal of re-integration is a major challenge for the prison staff, so that prison guards do a lot more than just monitor the prisoners. In Austrian prison, prison guards have to take care of the prisoners and support them in their every-day life. Besides, the prison guards mainly run the workshops and operational units and give the prisoners guidance in doing their work. Prison guards also guide prisoners to reflect about their situation and reconsider things, as well as they discuss and motivate. Furthermore prison guards have to escort inmates, for example to a court, an administration office or an external medical care institution. Last, but not least prison guards are in charge to keep up the security and order in the prison.

To become a Prison guard, it is necessary to apply in one of the 27 Austrian prisons. The requirements to be admitted as prison guard are (among others)

- the Austrian citizenship,
- a completed vocational training (certificate of apprenticeship) or a certificate of a higher school,
- an adequate state of health and
- passing a multi-level aptitude test.

Moreover, a human and empathic attitude, mental strength, social competence, the ability to work in a team, adaptability and stress-tolerance is required.

What is your opinion on the role of women in the European correctional field?

It should be taken for granted that women can act in every field of the penal system such as the fact that their participation is essential for a successful progress. To my opinion, a balanced gender relation is inevitable in the correctional field therefore we are constantly trying to set incentives for women in order to increase their number among prison staff.

What is the biggest concern with regards to security in prisons in your country?

The increasing presence of foreigners changed the everyday life in the Austrian prisons. This development means new challenges for the prison staff, but also for the administration. In the past, there was no need that prison staff is able to speak in foreign languages.

Nowadays good language skills are a highly required must-have, and also having migration experience is an advantage when applying for a job in prison. Still, there are only a few prison guards, who self-experienced migration.

The educational program was adapted to this new situation and prison-officers in training are informed about “foreign cultures” and are taught the English language. As voluntary further training, prison staff has the possibility to attend courses on migration and about foreigners in Austrian prisons. Many employees are interested in this topic and attend those trainings.

A second challenge is the fact, that inmates get more and more violent and have a lack of respect towards prison staff. The non-compliance of instructions, provocations, insults, spitting and physical attacks of inmates against prison staff determines the daily routine in prison. It is understandable hard to do proper and good work in this setting.

What do you consider to be the biggest achievements for your service in 2018? What challenges you had to overcome?

Starting from the year 2016 there was a significant increase of the number of the mentally ill offenders without criminal responsibility, according to article 21/1 of the Austrian Penal Law (§ 21 Abs. 1 StGB), and therefore we needed to develop alternative strategies, since there were no spatial and personal resources available for an adequate treatment of this clientele. Moreover, the scarce funding of the prison administration combined with the take-over of increasingly complicated tasks concerning the treatment of the inmates set for us an additional challenge. Nevertheless, in 2017 we achieved to launch the plan for the extension of the Forensic Centre Asten, an institution for involuntary forensic placement and treatment of mentally ill offenders.

What are the challenges for your service for the coming year?

The biggest challenge for us remains also for the next year the forensic placement for mentally ill offenders. At this point, I should also mention the continuation of the Insourcing-Strategy, which already started before 2010, according to which the accommodation and treatment of mentally ill offenders without criminal responsibility, should take place in facilities belonging to the prison administration. The treatment of the mentally ill offenders in external psychiatric clinics, which was until now often necessary – also due to the lack of space – is being considered not only as frequently very demanding but also very expensive.

In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges for the European prison and correctional services at the moment?

To my opinion, there are two developments, which set a challenge for the European prison administrations: On the one hand, the treatment of the inmates, which becomes increasingly difficult due to language barriers. On the other hand, the adequate treatment of the mentally ill inmates in the penal institutions. An additional challenge both for the prison administration and for the prison staff is the Radicalisation – of any kind. I personally think that we can overcome all the aforementioned challenges only through mutual cooperation.

What benefits do you see being linked to an organisation such as EuroPris?

The membership in an international network as EuroPris leads to a frequent exchange of not only experiences but also best practice models, which contributes significantly to a further development of the national penal systems. I also consider the promotion of equal standards among the penal systems of the member countries as an additional advantage.

Do your prisons engage with NGO's / Charities?

The cooperation with NGOs and other non-profit associations makes a sufficient contribution to the aim of resocialisation and completes the already existing various offers of the prison administration.

What part of this job do you personally find most satisfying? Most challenging? What do you like and not like about working in the correctional field?

Working in the prison administration is highly characterized by an interdisciplinary cooperation, which can often be quite challenging. Nevertheless, I recognise there is a big chance of covering all the important aspects of the aim of resocialisation. Moreover, through our work we contribute significantly both to security and to society, which sets to my opinion a challenge but also gives a feeling of satisfaction.

If you could be remembered for one thing whilst being in charge what would it be?

One issue, which probably will always be associated with me, is the reorganisation of the prison administration in Austria.