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AUSTRIA TO TEAR DOWN HITLER BIRTH HOUSE

GOVT WANTS TO PREVENT BUILDING FROM BECOMING NEO-NAZI SHRINE

VIENNA: The house in Austria where Adolf Hitler was born is to be torn down to stop it from becoming a neo-Nazi shrine, the government said yesterday, after years of bitter legal wrangling with the current owner. "The Hitler house will be torn down. The foundations can remain but a new building will be erected. It will be used by either a charity or the local authorities," Interior Minister Wolfgang Sobotka told Austrian newspaper Die Presse. "In any case, there shall be no further connection with Adolf Hitler because otherwise the myth of the birth house will be upheld."

He said the decision was based on the recommendations of a 13-member expert committee tasked with deciding what to do with the controversial building in the quaint northern town of Braunau am Inn. The government hopes this will bring to an end a difficult chapter regarding the large yellow corner house where Hitler was born on April 20, 1889. Although he only spent the first few weeks of his life at Number 15 Salzburger Vorstadt Street, the address has become a pilgrimage site for Nazi sympathizers from around the world who pose in front of the three-storey building with the Hitler salute.

Stigma 'Not Deserved'

The property has been empty since 2011 when the government became embroiled in a dispute with owner and local resident Gerlinde Pommer. Her family has owned the 800-sq-m building for more than a century, except for a brief period during the Nazi regime when Hitler's private secretary Martin Bormann bought the building for four times its value in 1938. After the war, the house was returned to the Pommers in the 1950s. In 1972, the Austrian government signed a lease with Gerlinde Pommer in 1972 and turned the premises into a center for

people with disabilities.

But the arrangement came to an abrupt end five years ago when Pommer unexpectedly refused to grant permission for much-needed renovation works. The famously elusive owner also rejected a purchase offer made by the increasingly exasperated interior ministry. In July, the government approved a legislation amendment to seize the house from Pommer who continues to net Á4,800 (around \$5,300) in rent every month.

The interior ministry said yesterday that the expropriation bill would be debated in parliament this week and could enter into force by the end of the year. "There is now a clear perspective regarding the future of the building under the ownership of the Austrian republic," ministry spokesman Karl-Heinz Grundboeck told AFP. The issue has sparked heated debate among Braunau's 17,000 residents. Some wanted it to become a refugee centre, others a museum dedicated to Austria's liberation from Nazi rule.

A number of cultural organizations previously opposed the building's demolition because it is part of the historic city center and therefore under heritage protection. Every year on Hitler's birthday, anti-fascist protesters organize a rally outside the building at 15 Salzburger Vorstadt Street, next to a memorial stone reading: "For Peace, Freedom and Democracy. Never Again Fascism, Millions of Dead Warn."

But locals resent the attention, dismayed that their pastel-colored town is known for being the cradle of one of the world's most reviled political figures, rather than for its Gothic architecture or pretty river. "The people here don't deserve this stigma," district commissioner Georg Wojak told AFP in an interview last year. "Braunau's only crime was that Hitler was born here." — AFP



BRAUNAU AM INN, Austria: This Sept 27, 2012 file picture shows an exterior view of Adolf Hitler's birth house. — AP



NEW YORK: Jim Kowalczyk plays with Jimbo, a 1500-pound Kodiak bear, in this photo at the Orphaned Wildlife Center in Otisville, NY. — AP

MAN GRABS ATTENTION FOR HUGGING BEARS

OTISVILLE: Bear hugs are nothing. Jim Kowalczyk hugs bears. Kowalczyk lies on the ground as his 1,500-pound bear buddy, Jimbo, rests a heavy paw on his waist. He feeds Jimbo a marshmallow from his mouth and laughs as a big bear tongue slobbers on his ear. If that sounds suicidal, consider that Kowalczyk and his wife, Susan, have cared for Jimbo for almost 23 years, since the Kodiak bear first came to the couple's upstate New York haven for injured or unwanted animals as a bottle-feeding cub. "He'll play with you all day if you have the time," Kowalczyk says after a recent horseplay session, adding that it's fortunate the bear doesn't throw his weight around casually. "If he lays on you, you've got a problem."

Jimbo is among the 11 bears living at the couple's nonprofit Orphaned Wildlife Center 60 miles northwest of New York City. One of them, a black bear named Frankie, was born in the wild and found his way here in 2012 after being hit by a car. The rest of the bears here were born in captivity, eight of them Syrian brown bears or mixes that came from a breeding program. Jimbo came from a West Coast game farm with an injured leg. There are plenty of wildlife rehabilitators and other centers that care for bears. But Kowalczyk has grabbed attention for his hands-on approach.

One Facebook video of him playing with Jimbo has received more than 16 million views. Kowalczyk describes it as if it was something as natural as petting your dog. The bears are like his children, he says, and they have never injured him. "There's no false pretenses like there are with

people and stuff," Kowalczyk says. "What you see is what you get." The couple has been rehabilitating squirrels, ducks, deer, mink and other animals together since the early 1990s. The main goal is to release animals, but the bears here cannot be released because of injuries or because they are too accustomed to captivity.

Bears are in 57-year-old Susan Kowalczyk's bloodline. Her father, Albert Rix, was a well-known circus veteran from Germany who raised Syrian brown bears. Jim, 60, is a retired corrections officer. The Kowalczyks funded the venture out of their own pockets until creating the nonprofit last year, which allows them to take donations. It's still just them, plus director Kerry Clair, who handles administrative duties. The videos help with exposure. But experts are pretty clear: Do not get up close with bears, like Kowalczyk does.

Even with captive bears, there's a chance their instincts will take over, says Matt Merchant, senior wildlife biologist with New York's Department of Environmental Conservation. Plus, there are inherent dangers of rolling around with an animal that's three-quarters of a ton. "I don't think people get a lot of good information or education from that kind of behavior," Merchant says. "They'd be better off watching a naturalist show off bears in the wild, or just going out and hiking around and seeing them on their own." Sitting on the ground next to Jimbo, Kowalczyk shrugs at the thought of personal danger from his bear buddies. "They're content, they're happy. If they weren't," Kowalczyk pauses as Jimbo licks him, "you would know it." — AP