

**Good to remember in times of “nuclear renaissance“ - 30 years ago in Austria:**

## **The first-ever national referendum and Atomic Energy Prohibition Act worldwide**

**When the people said “no“ to the ready-built NPP at Zwentendorf in 1978**

*The Austrian people has prevailed over its rulers.*

*The committed over the bureaucrats,*

*the penniless over the money-bags/plutocrats,*

*common sense over “I know better“ experts.*

(Günther Nenning, a well-known writer, trade unionist, Socialist Party member but cross-over intellectual, commenting the referendum in “Profil“, Nov. 11, 1978)

In January 1978, the then chancellor Bruno Kreisky had stated that the nuclear energy issue was “*by no means appropriate for a vote by the people*“. Six months later, after he and his governing Socialist Party (SPÖ) had failed to reach an agreement with the opposition\*, he announced the first-ever referendum in the country’s Second Republic’s, i.e. post-World War Two history. A referendum on that very issue and, in particular, on the Zwentendorf nuclear power plant, located some 35 kms west of Austria’s capital, Vienna (mind the westerly winds!), entirely finished, complete with the fuel rods in the reactor’s core and ready for start-up.

On November 5, a wave of joy surged through the hearts of the opponents of nuclear energy: 50,47% of the voters had answered “no“ to the question whether the country’s first nuclear power plant should be put into operation.

“*By an extremely narrow majority...*“ was the tenor of the pro-nukes’ reactions. A very narrow majority? Indeed so. However, an overwhelming majority when you consider the dynamics of how public opinion had developed: When the referendum was announced at the end of June, the official polls said that around two thirds intended to vote in favour, one third against the Zwentendorf NPP. And this turn-around of public opinion within a mere four months had been reached with ridiculous financial means in the face of the “nuclear behemoth“: the government, the business *and* the workers’ unions, and the National Austrian Utility (*Verbund AG*). These had spent more on their pro-nuclear campaign than the state’s budget had provided for solar, geothermal and wind energy during 1974-1977!

### **How can you win in the face of such powerful adversaries?**

The opponents’ victory was of course due to a number of factors: relative unity; sustained, steady commitment; a capacity to reinforce, and take advantage of, the controversies between the three political parties represented in Parliament, and their often opportunistic positions; fighting with arguments and humour; non-violence. The state’s forces practised non-violence, too. Physical non-violence, that is. As for moral non-violence, things were a bit different: diffamation of, and pressure on, antinuclear activists was omnipresent. A week before the vote, for example, chancellor Kreisky said about the Zwentendorf opponents: “*Among these people, you have nothing but fascists and leftist extremists that have succeeded in seducing a number of respectable persons.*“ The chancellor’s words were spread throughout the country by the National Television and Radio Network (ORF) in the evening, and next morning by the newspapers. For everything a chancellor says will be broadcast – the tens of thousands of

antinuclear activists, who were just ordinary citizens and desperately wanted to publicly contradict Kreisky's enormity, were not anywhere near to getting such a broad echo...

### **From their own pockets**

However, the various no-nukes groups had one major moral strength, besides imagination and humour: unity and mutual tolerance. Between leftist and rightist and centre tendencies, there were of course divergences. Still, the activists within the two main umbrella organisations, the Initiative of Austrian Opponents to NPPs (IÖAG)\*\* and the Stop Zwentendorf Association\*\*, always stayed open-minded enough to use information material worked out by the other, for instance.

At innumerable stands out in the streets and squares, thousands of socialist, Christian, liberal, leninist, maoist and most of all independent activists sold the IÖAG's gazette *INITIATIV* and various brochures, distributed flyers, stickers, etc. Students took them back home to their villages. A young mother in Vorarlberg province wrote the chancellor a letter per day, in which she mingled everyday impressions and scientific arguments. A teacher paid a month's salary to buy a copy of the film "Living With Nuclear Energy" produced by a Swiss citizens' group. In the run-up to the 5 November decision, he did his usual job during the day, while in the evening he travelled up and down the central regions in order to show the film and discuss with people in villages and towns, coming back home between one and three a.m. and doing the same again the night after.

All of these volunteers often felt knocked down and depressed by the pro-nuclear PR machine permanently at work in the press, on the radio and on TV. Still, it was the personal commitment of so many unknowns similar to themselves that proved stronger and convinced ever more people. And, of course, a number of well-known personalities: medicine Nobel laureate and zoologist Konrad Lorenz; university professors; „Physicians Opposed to Zwentendorf“, „Artists...“, „Teachers...“, „Mothers...“, „Farmers Opposed to Zwentendorf“,...

### **Secret reports coming out**

These developments went hand in hand with an increasing awareness among journalists except the papers then belonging to the party in power, the SPÖ. One typical case is that of the information weekly *Profil*. Its editor was in favour of the Zwentendorf NPP but tolerated staff members publishing critical articles. Summing up the campaign in an editorial on the eve of November 5, he couldn't help concluding: *“It seems that the deeper a journalist digs into the question of nuclear power, the more reasons he will discover to become sceptical about it.”*

How come? Well, “by coincidence“ or thanks to “leaks“, some journalists discovered strange things about pro-nuclear PR. For example, a mere ten days before the referendum, *Profil* got access to a document that had been kept secret for 18(!) years. It was a study done by the National Geological Institute in 1960 in order to determine possible nuclear construction sites in Austria. The official experts had established four categories of sites: “best suited“, „well-suited“, “suited with reservations“, “not suited“. And they had classified Zwentendorf in this last and worst category, mostly due to risks from earthquakes. Now, the pro-nuclear voices from all sides had been proclaiming that *“the experts consider(ed) the Zwentendorf plant to be one of the safest, or indeed the safest, in the world“*, incidentally playing on the nationalist fiddle. At the same time, they had denigrated Dr Alexander Tollmann, professor of

geology at Vienna University, who had spoken out against operation of the plant precisely because, among other reasons, he considered the site to be exposed to high seismic risk.

Such hidden information exists in any country. It was through the courage and sense of responsibility of a few journalists and civil servants that the Austrian population came to know it and thus was able to judge on which side there were the lies and the camouflage, and on which, rather, there were honesty, responsibility and disinterested commitment.

### **Legislative consequences, and efforts to undermine the referendum**

One month after the Zwentendorf vote, Parliament unanimously voted the Atomic Energy Prohibition Act (Dec. 13, 1978) proposed by chancellor Kreisky. None of the three parties there could afford to oppose this law at that moment. A great number of influential people in the parties and in interest groups, however, were hardly hiding their firm intention to topple the “no“ vote, and immediately started working toward a second referendum in which they were determined not to be taken by surprise again. The most powerful of these circles were the Industrialists’ Union, weighing heavily within the conservative Christian-Democrats (ÖVP), and the unitary Workers and Employees Union (ÖGB), highly influential within the SPÖ.

While Vienna’s SPÖ mayor Leopold Gratz had recognized after the nuclear industry’s first big shock experience, the accident at Three Mile Island/Harrisburg in March 1979, that this “*confirmed the maturity Austrians had shown on November 5, 1978*“, as early as 1980 the pronuclear agitators launched a “popular petition“\*\*\*\* for the repeal of the Atomic Energy Prohibition Act of December 1978.

Though dwindled down to a few groups and persons, the antinuclear movement and some true nuke-skeptics within the political parties managed to ward off all the attempts to topple that Act and have a second referendum, until, finally, the Chernobyl cloud, much of which rained out over Austria, stopped all those efforts once for all.

The most decisive issue – and the most telling about nuclear energy and its promoters – had already been at the heart of the pro & con campaigns prior to Nov. 5, 1978: the advocates of a second vote knew they could hardly win sufficient political and popular support without presenting some “solution“ for the Zwentendorf NPP’s would-be radioactive waste. Local populations in various Austrian districts had put up such fierce resistance against waste deposit plans before the first vote that the Zwentendorf promoters now, in 1980 and the following years, just didn’t dare propose another domestic storage site. Yet their search abroad resulted in fiascos that became the laugh of the nation. Beneath the hilarity, though, loomed a malaise about the irresponsibility and recklessness of the Austrian nuclear lobby. In voluntary blindness, ministers, Verbund Utility CEOs and others travelled one country after the other in official or semi-official missions, preparing and sometimes concluding contracts for future Austrian high-level waste to be stored. Dictatorships were the favourite target countries: while pronuclear propagandists had diffamated Zwentendorf opponents to be “*Moscow’s agents*“, they now did not see a problem in concluding a contract with the Soviet regime in order to have Austrian N waste stored somewhere in the Ural Mountains or in Siberia. Another time, newspaper headlines announced that “*China will store Zwentendorf waste in Gobi desert*“. Two other cherished destinations were the Shah’s Iran – with ayatollah Khomeiny’s islamist regime following a few months later –, and Egypt. The land of the pyramids however recalled – not very luckily for the N waste dealers – a comparison one of Austria’s most popular scientists had used with great success during the 1977-78 campaign

already: “*Had the Pharaohs built nuclear power plants for 30 years’ electricity production, today’s humanity would still have to take care of their waste.*” (Bernd Lötsch, now head of the National Museum of Natural History, Vienna)

### **Windows opened by the 1978 Zwentendorf victory**

Zwentendorf is an experience that teaches just how many energies can be liberated by a single positive event:

- **Renewable energy and efficiency development:** Right after the 1978 referendum, “do-it-yourself solar construction groups“ were formed, first in Styria province, from where they spread all over the country. There were „teething troubles“, of course. But it was this popular movement from which developed a solar thermal technology business which has made Austria one of the international market leaders in the field, letting far behind a country like France, where nuclear domination has been stifling all the alternatives as deep as into the very minds of many people. And the enterprising spirit of that popular movement toward practical alternative technology largely boosted, too, the whole renewable energy and efficiency economy which has created so many future-resistant jobs and a number of model communities well on their way toward self-sufficiency, like Güssing, in Burgenland province. – N.B. On the whole, official Austrian energy policy, on the regional and even more so on the federal level, is hardly any better than in comparable countries. This topic would require a separate article, though.
- **Nuclear lobby disbanded:** The longer the NPP on the banks of the Danube stayed closed, the more its personnel started to look for jobs elsewhere. When Chernobyl gave the re-opening plans the final blow, the last organised associations promoting Zwentendorf and N power in Austria vanished. The importance and prestige of reactor safety institutes and similar ones, established at a few Austrian universities, declined. Their personnel decreased. So did students’ numbers. What had been, as in other countries, the pride of modern Austrian science from the late 1950s on, was soon to lose the word “nuclear“ from its name, Seibersdorf Austrian Nuclear Research Centre. However, remnants of Austria’s one-time N lobby still exist here and there, at times praising the Czech or Slovakian Temelin or Mohovce NPPs’ “*undoubted safety*“ and trying of course to influence Austrian politicians behind the scenes. With the present hype about “nuclear renaissance“, these scattered figures are meeting with some renewed interest in the media. Mind, too, that Vienna is the seat of the **International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)**, and no Austrian government or parliament majority has been willing to bow out the world’s foremost nuclear lobbying institution. (Such “prestige“ to host a UN agency, isn’t it? And so much money...).
- **Chernobyl – relatively open information policy and quite strict measures** (1986ff.): The “Chernobyl blitz“ struck when the Zwentendorf promoters, some of them ministers in the SPÖ-led government, were as active as ever since November 1978 to bring about a second referendum. It is not surprising, therefore, that at first, federal information policy and safety measures were stained with secrecy, disinformation, contradictory statements, and delays. As a surge went through the population that swayed to the “no“ position almost all of those hesitantly believing in nuclear power, it became quickly clear to decision-makers that the nuclear game was over, and information and public discussion channels opened wider. N.B., though: Neither did Austria require that the Soviet Union (or Russia, later on) compensate for the calculable cost of Chernobyl consequences in Austria, nor has the Ministry of Health ever commissioned a comprehensive epidemiological study on the health

effects – although it is no secret that thyroid troubles, including cancer, multiplied a few years after the Chernobyl fallout had come down.

- **The Hainburg battle** (1984-85): The frustrated Zwentendorf advocates were happy to pursue their conventional supply-oriented energy policy by, e.g., pushing for new big hydro-electric plants in rare Alpine valleys and on the small still free-flowing portion of the Danube, and blaming „*those that prevented a ready-built nuclear power plant from being used*“. Thus, throughout December 1984, thousands came to occupy the dense forests near Hainburg town in one of the largest floodplains remaining in Central Europe until the government gave in, thus clearing the path for the creation of the **Danube Auen National Park** (IUCN category II). The fighting knowhow and morale that helped win that struggle would hardly have been possible without the Zwentendorf victory.
  - **Transboundary antinuclear fights – Wackersdorf reprocessing plant (G) stopped** (1985-89): Having got rid of Austria's domestic nuclear programme, and with awareness heightened everywhere by Chernobyl, especially in the more democratic European countries, the Austrian antinuclear organisations had energy to fight nuclear projects across the borders. Joining hands with the German resisters, they helped prevent what would have been Germany's first commercial reprocessing plant for highly radioactive waste, and the country's entrance into the plutonium economy, at Wackersdorf, Bavaria. 440 000 written objections by Austrian citizens, local and regional governments (just as many as from all of Germany itself), and an inflammatory one-hour speech against the reprocessing project by the Austrian environment minister Marilies Flemming in the official public hearing on foreign territory: all that would have been unthinkable without the Chernobyl shock wave, and without the emancipating Zwentendorf experience. – Thereafter, Austrian no-nukes groups did mark some points, too, against the **Temelin, Bohunice, Mohovce and Krsko NPPs** in former Soviet satellite states. The alliance of the Western nucleocrats and of the Eastern nuclear complex come down nearly unchanged from stalinist Soviet times, under the gloating eye of the EU Commission and many national politicians has been one of the factors making these fights even more difficult than the previous ones. Cowardly and partly awkward action by Austrian governments, and probably secret hopes for the nuclear electricity that Austria is now indeed importing, are further factors in this.
  - **Putting a brake on the EU's pro-nuclear stance?**  
The Austrian antinuclear tradition that began with the Zwentendorf referendum has had some positive “fallout“ on nuclear policy within the EU councils and the European Parliament. Today, with the attempts for **EURATOM reform** blocked, it seems that Austria is increasingly “under nuclear influence“ rather than influencing the European Atomic Community. And even a question the Salzburg-based regional non-nukes group PLAGÉ posed as early as 1994, before Austria's accession to the EU, may come up again: If the worst came to the worst, would the Austrian Atomic Energy Prohibition Act of 1978, even in the reinforced version of the 1999 Constitutional Law for a Nuclear-Free Austria, withstand a legal complaint before the European Court of Justice – when, as we know, EU law in case of conflict overrules even the national constitutions? A growing coalition of Austrian NGOs therefore are calling for the country's **withdrawal from EURATOM**, which is legally feasible according to three expert reports. (See WISE N.M., no. xxx.) **30 years after the good-bye to Zwentendorf NPP, we want Austria to say good-bye to EURATOM!**
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\* ÖVP: *Österreichische Volkspartei*, Christian-Democrats; always rivalling with the SPÖ for the top.

FPÖ: *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, “Freedom“ Party; substantially, then, liberal nationalists; today, just nationalists, rather.

\*\* *Initiative Österreichischer AKW-Gegner*, from centre to left-wing; *ARGE Nein zu Zwentendorf*, from centre to right-wing.

\*\*\* *Volksbegehren* in Austrian political terminology. Not binding for the parliamentarians, differently from the *Volksabstimmung* (referendum).

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**Heinz Stockinger** is a lecturer in French language and culture at Salzburg University and chair of the Independent Salzburg Platform Against Nuclear Dangers (PLAGE). In 1977-78, he was on the Steering Committee of the *Initiative Österreichischer AKW-Gegner*, one of the two national antinuclear umbrella organisations.

PS: There were to be as many as seven NPPs alongside the small country's rivers (front page of the *Kurier*, one of the two main daily papers, May 17, 1975), and three of them by 1990!