

Austria's no to nuclear power.

In the late 60s the Austrian government decided to start a nuclear energy program. A planning company for nuclear power plants was established.

At the time I was working in a small biological research department at the Institute for Radiation Protection in the Austrian Reactor Center near Vienna. Since I knew about many unsolved problems in connection with radioactive waste and the biological hazards of ionizing radiation, I spoke out openly against the project of a nuclear power reactor. I became part of the tiny antinuclear "movement" from its beginnings. I remember our first rally in 1971, to the construction site in Zwentendorf. There were about one dozen participants.

The German "Kraftwerksunion" (AEG and SIEMENS) began the construction of the first nuclear power plant in Zwentendorf on the Danube, about 20 miles upstream of the capital, Vienna, in 1972. It was designed as a boiling water reactor with a capacity of 700 MW(e), that was expected to generate about 10% of the Austrian electricity production.

In early 1974, a company was founded to build a second nuclear plant in Austria. The small but steadily growing antinuclear movement, which had existed since the late sixties, now concentrated its efforts on this second nuclear plant.

The major political parties - the ruling Socialist Party and the conservative People's Party (which at that time was the major opposition party) - were harmoniously pro-nuclear. Only the small opposition Liberal Party took a critical position with respect to nuclear power.

By 1985, the official 1975 energy plans projected that there would be three nuclear power stations with a total capacity of 3000 MW.

In the winter of 1974, plans to begin construction of the second nuclear power plant were postponed, partly because the increase in electricity demand slowed down and partly because of the massive local protests against the project.

In autumn 1976 the government launched an information campaign about nuclear power with a view to justifying and palliating the nuclear program. The outcome however, was just the contrary. For the first time some newspapers featured articles critical of nuclear power, and the antinuclear movement was enormously stimulated. It turned out that, contrary to previous concepts, Austria could not "solve" its nuclear waste problem by export to other countries. The issue of nuclear waste storage stimulated massive local opposition in the regions proposed for that purpose. Newspapers began to cover the nuclear issue extensively. For the first time it was possible to publicly question in earnest the starting up of the almost completed plant in Zwentendorf without being branded as an utter idiot.

There were many reasons for protesting against nuclear power. Perhaps the most important were:

- * The hazards to human health connected with the release of radioactivity.
 - * A number of unresolved technical problems of the reactor.
 - * The unsettled and unsolvable problems of nuclear waste management and disposal.
 - * The connections between the so called peaceful nuclear energy and the military nuclear industry.
- We were aware of the fact that our opposition against the expansion of the nuclear industry (and

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plutonium production) in our country was also a contribution to the fight against the horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons.

* Inadequate emergency planning, the necessity for and impossibility of evacuating several cities in case of a nuclear catastrophe.

Many activities took place. In April 1977 for example, there was an International Conference for a Non-Nuclear Future, held in Salzburg, Austria, organized by several non-governmental organizations from different countries. Incidentally, a delegation from Gensuikin also participated, supporting our campaign against the Zwentendorf plant.

In autumn 1977, big demonstrations in Zwentendorf and several Austrian cities took place. In December 1977 the opponents uncovered plans of secret fuel imports for the Zwentendorf reactor announcing action to prevent the transport. To avoid trouble with opponents, the shipment was postponed to early 1978, and military helicopters were used to transport the fuel elements to the site, which was barricaded by police forces. It is important to note that all antinuclear demonstrations and activities in Austria have been completely non-violent.

Nuclear power in general and starting up the first nuclear plant in particular had become a burning political issue. The government passed the decision on nuclear power on to parliament. The Socialists were sure they would come to a mutual agreement with the major opposition party because the latter's most influential groups were clearly in favour of nuclear power. A report on nuclear energy was submitted to parliament by the government. This report was presented as the summary of an impressive mass of written material and information which had accumulated in the information campaign. It was extremely pro-nuclear and biased and proved that the government had completely ignored a number of important facts that had come up in its own information campaign. The early charge by nuclear opponents that the official information campaign had been planned to deceive the public thus turned out to be true.

In the subsequent parliamentary hearings several questionable safety aspects of the Zwentendorf site and plant construction and also the lack of important studies (e.g., there was no radioecological expertise) were disclosed by nuclear opponents. The People's Party reconsidered its position. Its leader, Dr. Taus, declared that while he was still in favour of nuclear power, he was for the time being against the Zwentendorf nuclear plant because of a lack of safety in a number of aspects.

The anti-nuclear minority among voters was by now big enough to tilt any general election against any party that could be regarded as the culprit for putting Zwentendorf into operation. The Socialists under Chancellor Kreisky did not now dare to bring the decision before parliament since support from the People's Party was uncertain and the Socialist MPs from the westernmost province (Vorarlberg) were not in a position to support their party's nuclear policy. The Vorarlbergers had just successfully fought a desperate fight against neighbouring Switzerland's R uthi project; Switzerland proposed to construct a nuclear power station in the immediate proximity of the Austrian border. The Vorarlberg population was overwhelmingly anti-nuclear and fearing that the opening of an Austrian nuclear power station would weaken their negotiating position with Switzerland.

Several prominent foreign scientists were invited by the government to state their case for nuclear energy. Among them was Dr. Teller, the famous and infamous "father of the hydrogen bomb". But his lecture at the University of Vienna had to be cancelled because of strong student opposition.

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The declaration of this conference is still of high relevance.

In June 1978 the Socialist Chancellor, Dr. Kreisky, who had earlier called the nuclear issue an extremely inappropriate one for a referendum, announced a referendum for November 5 declaring that he was sure there would be a clear majority in favour of nuclear power.

The pro-nuclear forces went into the battle with enormous backing. The state-owned utilities alone spent AS 30 million (US\$ 2 million) of taxpayer's money. Further tens of millions were poured into the campaign by the industrialists' association, by the trade union umbrella organisation and the Socialist Party. The anti-nuclear groups had only their own savings and their commitment at their disposal but their action was very effective. An impressive diversity of groups joined in, e.g. Mothers against Nuclear Power, Teachers against N.P., Physicists against N.P., Biologists, Geologist, Physicians, Pupils, Catholics, Artists, Trade Unionists against Nuclear Power and others. A number of coordination centers - one of them run by the Austrian Students' Union - and two umbrella organizations were established. Cooperation between scientists and citizen groups was excellent.

A small but effective group of dissenting "Socialists against Zwentendorf" was at times threatened with "severe consequences", which made them still more determined to ignore party discipline. Their main slogan was: "Yes to the Kreisky Government, no to Zwentendorf".

A few weeks before the date referendum, opinion polls still showed a substantial (though steadily decreasing) majority in favour of the plant. Meanwhile, nuclear critics made further disclosures. They made public that welding seams of the pressure vessel in the Zwentendorf plant had been placed in high-tension areas, thus violating Austrian safety regulations; they also found out that early expertises (which were suppressed later on) had, for hydrogeological reasons, declared Zwentendorf to be one of the least suitable sites for the construction of a nuclear plant.

The nuclear problem was covered extensively in the large newspapers, where experts from several fields discussed the most important issues from all angles.

The Trade Union President, Anton Benya, set to work many thousands of his organization's functionaries to persuade industrial workers to vote "yes" in the referendum; likewise, Chancellor Dr. Kreisky used all his prestige to the same end.

There was little hope for an anti-nuclear majority. But the unthinkable happened: on November 5, the referendum resulted in a narrow majority against the plant. Nearly two thirds of the voters went to the polls. Of these 3.26 million 49.5% voted for, 50.5% against nuclear power. The enthusiasm and the dedication of the anti-nuclear movement had won, the propaganda machinery - and the pressure exerted by the establishment were defeated. This was in itself a remarkable event in Austria's post-war history.

A tiny majority of less than 20 000 votes brought the rejection of nuclear energy in our country. This is a very important result. It showed the activists that their work and dedication had been worthwhile, that every meeting, every discussion, every pamphlet had been decisive for the victory. We learned that nothing is without effect and that it is essential to fight even when the prospects of success are bad.

An analysis of the referendum results has shown that the anti-nuclear majority was due to the votes of the younger generation and especially young women and people with an above average educational level.

Although NO and YES had also become political issues, the outcome reflects by no means political preferences and dislikes. A regional analysis shows that wherever anti-nuclear activists had been able to operate extensively, the ballot was influenced accordingly.

A strong antinuclear majority emerged in Vorarlberg, the small westernmost province which had successfully fought against a Swiss nuclear power plant (see above); a strong local majority (89%)

against the plant also arose in the area in northern Lower Austria suggested for radioactive waste disposal.

There was a surprisingly large number of noes in the area around the plant (Tullnerfeld) and the village of Zwentendorf itself, which had been a pro-nuclear stronghold, since a number of Zwentendorfers worked at the plant and the locals had been subjected to a massive pro-nuclear propaganda for many years.

Pro-nuclear propaganda, however expensive, had its grip only in regions which, for lack of manpower and of financial resources, had to be neglected by anti-nuclear activists.

There is no doubt that if there had been equal opportunities in public information, the result would have been an even more pronounced rejection of nuclear power.

The (Socialist) government and the political parties reacted promptly: a few weeks after the referendum on December 15, 1978, the Austrian parliament unanimously passed a law prohibiting the use of nuclear energy for the production of electricity in our country.

This democratic decision turned Austria from one of the last industrialized countries without nuclear power into the first industrialized country without nuclear power.

The Austrian companies which had planned the Zwentendorf and St.Pantaleon plants were dissolved, and contracts for uranium enrichment with TECHSNAB EXPORT (USSR) and the US Department of Energy (DOE) were cancelled. The contract with the French COGEMA reprocessing company was terminated by the selling of the shares to German and Belgian electricity companies.

Only a few months after the referendum the accident at the Three Mile Island plant near Harrisburg, USA, occurred, and many people in our country realised that the NO had been a wise decision.

Ever since its completion, the nuclear power plant at Zwentendorf has been standing idle. More than ten years ago I suggested making it a museum for obsolete technology.

I still think this could be a good solution.

The utilities have worked out studies and recommendations to transform the nuclear plant into a conventional plant fired with natural gas. This would be extremely wasteful because there is no use for such a lot of waste heat in the vicinity of the plant.

Several initiatives have been made by the nuclear lobby, the electricity companies and trade unions to overcome the bar on Zwentendorf, but they have not succeeded. The definitive end of their dreams came with the Chernobyl accident.

The outcome of the Austrian referendum, however insignificant as it may seem from an international point of view, is nevertheless a ray of hope in the struggle to correct the suicidal course our industrial societies have embarked upon.

PRESENT ANTINUCLEAR ACTIVITIES IN AUSTRIA

The Chernobyl accident stimulated a new wave of activities against nuclear power, also in Austria.

Nuclear power plants in neighbouring countries

The Austrian people realised that nuclear power stations in neighbouring countries are a menace to life and health even when these reactors are a long distance away.

THE REPROCESSING PLANT IN WACKERSDORF, GERMANY

There is growing opposition against a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant which is under construction near Wackersdorf in Bavaria. The licensing procedure makes it possible for citizens including Austrian citizens, to raise objections against this project. There has been most positive response in Austria (and of course in Germany): According to the Bavarian licensing board, about 420,000 Austrian citizens have signed or filed individual objections against the plant. Also, the heads of some Austrian provincial governments and even the Federal Minister of the Environment have submitted objections. The participation of leading politicians in antinuclear activities is quite a novelty in our country.

The opposition against the reprocessing plant by Austrian members of government is very important for the local German activists, who have been branded as troublemakers, extremists or enemies of democracy by leading members of their government. The participation in the licensing procedure of representatives of Austrian Federal Ministeries (Ministry of the Environment, Ministry of Justice) side by side with citizens in itself represents a new stage of development in the struggle against the nuclear industry.

Besides the health hazards, caused by routine emissions of radioactivity and the risk of accidents of potentially catastrophic dimensions, the prime concern is the mass production of plutonium. Reprocessing plants are a link between the civilian and military nuclear industries. They offer the possibility of diversion of fissile material. Control is of necessity inadequate.

The main reason for the reprocessing project in Germany is the legal requirement for the nuclear power industry to make sure that their spent fuel elements can be either disposed of safely or will be reprocessed. Since there is no site and no safe technology so far to dispose of high-level radioactive waste, the construction of a reprocessing plant is necessary for the nuclear industry (at least in Germany).

Conversely, it is unavoidable to stop reprocessing, if we want to phase out nuclear power and prevent horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons as well.

Anti Atom International

After the Chernobyl accident, activist groups from several European countries founded Anti Atom International (AAI). The aim of this Organization is to collect and distribute information as well as to coordinate international action against nuclear industry.

In autumn 1988 there will be the tenth anniversary of the successful referendum and Austria's No to nuclear power. This will be the occasion for country-wide actions and appeals to the Austrian government, to take measures against nuclear power on an international level.

THE AUSTRIAN EXAMPLE

There are several differences between Japan and Austria concerning the chances of antinuclear action. Perhaps the two most important facts are:

The population of Japan is about ten times the population of Austria.

Japan already has many nuclear installations, which have been operating for many years.

In spite of these differences, several lessons I think, can be learned from the Austrian example:

- It is worthwhile fighting against strong opponents, even if there appears to be no chance of success.
- Nothing is without effect.
- The few thousand votes that decided the referendum against nuclear power were a clear enough proof that every activist and every action had been indispensable.
- Perhaps the most important insight is that powerful organisations such as electricity companies, big political parties and trade unions are the last to learn the lesson. Changes must be forced upon them by the public which is by no means an easy task.
- In the long run personal communication, though slow and laborious, is effective. There is no alternative to information and motivation of the public, if we want our hope for a non-nuclear future in a liveable world to become reality.

Personal communication is a process that increases exponentially. At the beginning it is hard to observe any effect, but when critical awareness builds up in the population, there may be a sudden change of mind. Small countries have an advantage insofar as this process is less time-consuming in a smaller society than in a larger one.

At present an antinuclear awareness is growing both in Japan and all over the world. I am confident that in the long run we will succeed in bringing about a future without atomic energy.