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## Peace Initiatives

**Situated in the heart of Europe Austria was located at the borders to many communist countries and was, in some way, always close to conflicts. Guiding and Scouting is part of the society and therefore their members were involved in all these wars and conflicts - but mainly as humanitarian helpers and peacekeepers.**

During the World War I Austrian Guides and Scouts were working in the field of first aid, in the health service of the country. In spite the fact that there was war, new groups were founded who tried to keep international relations – in this case even with the enemy. This made some of these groups suspicious for the national authorities.

Within the country they had to face the time of civil wars, of polarisation of the society, of poverty and unemployment. They managed to keep out of the political war – as an association, while single persons declared themselves as active in the conflict on one or the other side.

Guides and Scouts ran projects for the poor, tried to organise food for families in need and the most important thing was that they helped their young members to grow up in a sense of belonging and being needed. A big help was the clear value system that is expressed in the Guide and Scout promise and law. For many of the young people in these days of civil war and of polarisation the Guide and Scout law gave them a help for orientation – and in this way a help to inner peace.

When Nazis took over in Austria and the country became part of the "German Reich", Guiding and Scouting was forbidden – but although it was dangerous, young people met in groups to keep the relationship, to support each other against terror and hate.

Some young men, being soldiers, managed to keep in touch with their friends. They knew from Jamborees before the war, and they exchanged news with soldiers from "the other side". Scouts managed to save British pilots that were shot down, hid some of them and lead them to the border to escape. And when the war was obviously lost for the German army and the allies were close enough to reach them, it happened that Austrian Guides and Scouts put on their Scout Uniform and went to meet the allies and showed them a safe way to the country. This was most dangerous, as the Nazis executed even children, when they refused to fight in these last days. However, these actions of several Guides and Scouts saved the life of many soldiers and lives of the civil society.

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After the war new life started. The country was damaged, people were starving, but there was hope for a better life and Guides and Scouts were an expression of this hope. Although Austria was divided into 4 zones, Guides and Scouts managed to overcome these borders and formed one Austrian Scout movement and one Austrian Guide movement – a signal for civil society. Guides and Scouts played an active role in rebuilding the country, forming a civil society and healing the wounds of the war.

A signal for this new self-confidence of the movement was that Austria hosted the Jamboree 1951 only 6 years after the war and still in an occupied country with lack of food and nutrition and technical supply. This was the time when Guides and Scouts went for summer camps even with goats, to ensure to have enough milk for children.

In 1956 during the Hungarian uproar 200.000 people came across the border to Austria becoming refugees. The Red Cross contacted the movement for help. Guides and Scouts were engaged in collecting, packing and distributing food, blankets and other items. The groups and families opened their meeting places and houses to host the refugees.

Helping refugees became a mayor task in the years to come. The Czechoslovakians, the Polish, later the Romanians, people from Bosnia and Kosovo – just to mention the mayor conflicts – refugees came and Guides and Scouts opened their meeting places, their camp sites and houses. Guides and Scouts were among the first to travel to Romania to bring help there. The Austrian Guides and Scouts built homes for orphans and for handicapped.

Since the very first beginning the Austrian Guides and Scouts were active partners for the new Guide and Scout movements in their neighbourhood (Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland). The movement started co-operations mainly in the field of leader training. Austria hosted leaders from Hungary, Latvia, Belarus, Czech Republic, Yugoslavia (later mainly from Slovenia and Croatia) and of course there was a vivid exchange of the young ones through meetings and camps.

Working for peace also means working for justice in the world and for distribution of the goods we have. As an educational movement the Austrian Guides and Scouts were active in this field. There is the tradition of "Helping with Heart and Hand" were the association chooses projects mainly in the third world to help and to work together. There were many African projects (schools, orphanages, food, tree-plant projects and health activities), projects in Asia (schools, water, food and nutrition) and also projects in South America (schools, orphanages for street children). In Europe the movement concentrated up to now on projects in Romania and former Yugoslavia.

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Austrian groups had common projects with Latvia in the field of food and nutrition (building world citizenship) and were finally honoured by FAO for what they had developed together.

Another field where Austrian Guides and Scouts are active is the help after catastrophes like earth quakes in Italy, in Yugoslavia, in Turkey and in Armenia or after the Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine and Belarus. That help is mostly not organised nationally, but groups of Guides and Scouts put up effective organisations and enough goods to help effectively.

Building peace is reached through specific education of children and young people. Through the Guide and Scout programme they develop an attitude that supports peace, for peace has to grow within the people. The association is always strongly involved in peacekeeping initiatives so that the members have a good example. Single persons, groups and the association – the whole movement is steadily active to promote peace through active help and mutual understanding.

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ÖSTERREICHS*****Some examples ...***

Each year the Austrian Guides and Scouts choose a **Helping-with-Heart-and-Hand-Project**, which is supported through gaining money by various youth activities and by creating consciousness (support of schools, orphanages, nutrition and health activities). During the last years the association supported projects in Africa, Asia, South America and Eastern Europe.

Since 1988 the Austrian Guides and Scouts help to distribute the **Peacelight from Bethlehem** to other countries. Each year delegations of several countries come to Vienna to get the Peacelight and to bring it to their countries. The light even was distributed to Eastern Europe before communism broke down in these countries.

The Austrian Girl Guides and Boy Scouts started their **Peace Packs** activity on September 17th, 1994 (World Peace Day) and prepared until December 8th, 1994 more than 700 big boxes filled with 3.500 Peace Packs for more than 3.500 Bosnian children, who lived as refugees in Croatia.

One week before Christmas 1994 10 Austrian Guide and Scout leaders went to Zagreb to distribute together with UNHCR Zagreb and "Suncokret" – a humanitarian centre – the Peace Packs to the children. Each Peace Pack included underwear, T-shirts, pencils, exercise books, a toy, a personal letter or a drawing.

The Austrian Peace Pack activity was finalised by a nice closing ceremony on December 8th, at the United Nations Vienna, with delegations of all Austrian Guide and Scout groups who had supported the project.

In winter 2003 the Austrian Guides and Scouts collected several thousand signatures against the war in Iraq. The resolution **No War In Iraq** with the signatures was presented to the Austrian State Department.

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