

Austria's 1970s-Era "Ghost" Plant That Never Opened, Now A Global Symbol Of Nuclear Resistance

Long before Fukushima, or even Chernobyl, Austrians pulled the plug on nuclear power with a 1978 referendum. The physical legacy of that narrow vote is a completed – but never used – power plant called Zwentendorf, now open to the public.

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E.ON has already unplugged several of its nuclear facilities

ZWENTENDORF, Austria – Finding the Zwentendorf is no easy task. Located south of the Danube, about an hour's drive from Vienna, the abandoned nuclear power plant is tucked

away in a rural landscape that looks almost fake. Cold and concrete, the building is a mausoleum of sorts, a monument to Austria's thwarted nuclear ambitions, which died on the vine thanks to a 1978 referendum.

Nowadays this same area of lower Austria features an almost complete range of energy alternatives — projects that presumably would not have been needed had the Zwentendorf been allowed to operate. There is a hydroelectric plant, a bio-ethanol station operated by the multinational sugar company Agrana, and plenty of solar panels. There is also a waste incinerator built opposite the abandoned nuclear plant.

Back in 1978, the rest of the world commiserated with Austria – which had invested millions in the project and was suddenly obliged to give up its dreams of joining the nuclear elite. But since Japan's Fukushima nuclear disaster, people are now looking at Austria as a pioneer. Austria's chancellor, Werner Fayman, recently called for "a major public debate on nuclear energy not just in Europe, but in the world as a whole."

Awakened by the Japanese nuclear crisis, journalists and inquiring minds are looking not just at the 33-year-old referendum, but at the physical legacy of that vote: the Zwentendorf. There, visitors can see the same kind of pressurized water reactor as the ones Westinghouse made for Fukushima. Except that Zwentendorf's was built between 1972 and 1976 by the German firm Siemens, and uses a technology that is supposed to be "three times safer," says Stephan Zach, a spokesperson with EVN, the Austrian energy company that bought the facility and recently opened it to the public.

EVN acquired Zwentendorf "because it was a piece of Austrian history," said Zach. The company's goal was turn it into a symbol of Austria's decision to reject nuclear power and embrace renewable energy sources.

A spooky maze, private parties

Polls suggest an overwhelming majority of Austrians support investment in renewable energy sources, which already meet 27% of the country's electricity needs. In the European Union as a whole, renewables account for just 9% of the power grid.

For now, visitors mainly focus on Zwentendorf's spooky entrails. Inside the old plant is a maze of metallic pipes, gloomy corridors and blind alleys. Abandoned radiation suits hang at the entrance like ghosts of bygone times.

Perched precariously on a metal platform that stretches across a 40-meter-deep fuel pit, one man explains the workings of the facility to two German film directors looking for locations.

Except for a recent visit by film star Dolph Lundgren, Hollywood has yet to take much notice of Zwentendorf. The facility has, however, become a popular place for private parties, for which EVN occasionally rents out the space.

Nevertheless, most people continue to associate Zwentendorf with the 1978 referendum battle. “The state and the industries imposed their choice as if it was an unquestionable necessity,” Freda Meissner-Blau, 85, recalls. Meissner-Blau represented the Green Party in the 1986 presidential election, which she lost to conservative Kurt Waldheim.

In the early 1970s, Meissner-Blau was “euphoric about nuclear power.” Quite by accident, however, she stumbled upon the thorny issue of nuclear waste while translating documents for Euratom. That was enough to change her mind and join the anti-nuclear movement, which had been launched by doctors and scientists and was supported by Nobel prize-winning biologist Konrad Lorenz.

The Chancellor at the time, Social Democrat Bruno Kreisky, planned to build seven nuclear plants. The idea enjoyed backing from the Conservative party, business leaders and unions. Aware of the nuclear waste issue, however, Kreisky inquired with Iran and China about possible solutions. In the end he agreed to organize a referendum, which he lost by a narrow margin.

Meissner-Blau recalls: “It was unbelievable: we had won against all the big powers.”

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