

## Traditions around the 1<sup>st</sup> of May in Austria



*Red carnation [1]*

The 1<sup>st</sup> of May in Austria is interesting for two reasons: It is celebrated as a Labor Day and there is also the tradition of the Maypole (Maibaum).

### Labor Day

The 1<sup>st</sup> of May has been celebrated as a Labor Day all over the world since 1890.

This all started in May 1886 in the USA, when workers in Chicago were striking for an 8-hour workday, what ended in a violent police operation, where 17 people died and over 100 were hurt.

In 1888, The American Federation of Labor (AFL) decided to make another move on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May. They chose this date, because it was a so-called “Moving Day”, a traditionally due day for changes for employment contracts and job changes. They wanted to implement possible changes in the new contracts.

In 1889, the International Congress of Workers (Internationaler Arbeiterkongress) decided in Paris to organize a big international manifestation and joined the date, chosen by the AFL.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 1890 millions of workers in Europe went out and demonstrated for an 8-hour workday, as well as general voting rights and support for retirees, invalids, widows, and orphans.

Since 1919, the 1<sup>st</sup> of May is a national holiday in Austria. In the regime of Dollfuß the demonstrations on the street were forbidden and the day was abused to celebrate the new leader. In 1938 the name was changed into the “German Labor Day” (Tag der deutschen Arbeit).

After the Second World War the 1<sup>st</sup> of May started again to be a national holiday.

Until today, the 1<sup>st</sup> of May is seen as a day of action of the Labor Movement.

A famous symbol for the 1<sup>st</sup> of May celebrations is the red carnation. In the beginning days it was forbidden to carry flags, so the red carnation in the buttonhole was the sign for the common cause.

This day is most important for the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ). Victor Adler allied 1888/1889 different social democratic groups and is seen as the founder of the Social Democrat Labor Party (SDAP), from which later the Austrian Social Democratic Party arose. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 1890 the



*Rathausplatz Vienna, 1<sup>st</sup> of May [2]*

SDAP was able to mobilize the workers to go on the streets.

Until 1934 and after 1946 it was the Social Democratic Party that organized the biggest 1<sup>st</sup> of May celebrations. The other political parties are also organizing celebrations.

The biggest event is the demonstration on the Rathausplatz in Vienna, which is followed by a festival in the Prater with concerts, activities and fireworks.

## Maypole

The Maypole as we know it today has a long tradition. It can be traced back to the 16th century. First as a Maypole carrying figurines (Figurenmaibaum) in a picture by the artist Donauer, then, in later years (1743, 1767) the Maypole was presented in pictures and votive tablets.

Already in the Middle Ages spring was welcomed with greenery and the freshly felled trees were the center of courtly dances. Later, the trees were set up as trees of honor for officers and princes.

Because of the heathen origin of the tradition the church has tried to forbid the Maypole and the customs in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Those Maypoles, very often quite tall, towering the villages and towns today remind us of the merry month of May, the Month of Delight. A couple of days preceding May 1<sup>st</sup> the Maypole is chosen and the tree (mostly fir) is felled and de-branched in the woods, getting rid of all the twigs - only conserving the tree top. Finally one to three wreaths are suspended from the top decorated with colorful ribbons. The



*Maypole in Gmunden [3]*

straight pole stands for growth revival in the spring.

For the putting up of the Maypole the villagers come together and celebrate. There is food and drinks, the village band is playing and people are dancing around the tree.

Up to the present day it is vital to guard the pole as, due to tradition the young men of the neighboring village will try to steal the Maypole. It may only be returned to where it belongs if a number of rounds of beer and good food are being bought as a kind of ransom - though it's the being put to shame that is feared most.



*Boy climbing a smaller Maypole [4]*

Another custom connected with the Maypole is the climbing of the tree (Maibaum kraxeln). Men and women try to climb the tree. The only aid they are allowed to use is pitch or resin on hands and feet. The goal is to reach the top of the tree and bring back a ribbon. The best climber will win a price.

At the end of May the Maypole will be cut again. Sometimes there is also a smaller celebration.

## References:

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