



# Wiener Neustädter Flugzeugwerke

by

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Located about thirty miles south of Vienna is the charming city of Wiener Neustädt. It was founded in 1194 by Duke Leopold V of Austria and named, “Novus Civitas” (now Wiener Neustädt). In 1459 it was the birthplace of Emperor Maximillion I of Austria. As was true with nearly all of the early European cities and towns, a castle was built to serve as a fortress (and often a dungeon) in times of war. The castle still stands and today it is the home of the *Weiner Neustädter Military Academy*.

Wiener Neustädt has long been an industrial center for the production of locomotives, heavy machinery and textiles. During WWII the Siegel Locomotivefabrik was a major producer of locomotive engines. The plant, while heavily damaged during WWII has been rebuilt and operates under the name of Rogik Hallen. The air raid shelter for the employees still stands nearby, nearly hidden by undergrowth. To the west of the Siegel plant was the RAX Werke which manufactured V2 rocket engines. Having supplied military hardware throughout Austria’s history, Wiener Neustädt has seen the best and worst of times.

On 9 March 1938, the Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg announced a plebiscite on the independence of Austria. Hitler viewed this as an opportunity to take control of the Austrian State, and on the morning of 12 March 1938 troops of the German Wehrmacht and the SS crossed the German-Austrian border. On 13 March Hitler announced in Linz, Anschluss (Annexation) of Austria into the German Reich. These words set in motion a number of actions which impacted Austria in many ways, political, industrial and otherwise.

Very early, before WWII, Hitler and the German military hierarchy realized the need to expand its ability to produce military hardware, and to acquire the material needed to support its ambitions. The takeover of Austria, especially Vienna and the surrounding area would go a long way toward fulfilling this need. The depression had left thousands of skilled workers of all trades out of work, and the industrial facilities available in the Vienna area made the exploitation a ready target. From the oil refineries along the Danube, to the chemical works, machine shops and suppliers of all sorts in the city, Vienna and the surrounding towns were gold mines. With this in mind, the area became

a major center for the production of military hardware and support material for the Germans.

After the invasion of Poland by the German forces on 1 September 1939, followed by the declaration of war against them by Great Britain two days later, the industrial resources of Vienna became increasingly important to the German war machine. At that time they were safely out of the range of enemy bombers and land forces, and they would remain safe for the time being. With the passage of time the United States entered the war, and as the performance of the British and American aircraft improved they were no longer safe.

The first aircraft production in Wiener Neustädt was begun in 1914 by the *Oesterreichische Flugzeug Fabrik Aktiengesellschaft* (Austrian Aircraft Factory, Incorporated). During WWI it produced the Oeffag C1 and C2 biplanes and Albatros D II and D III models. After the end of WWI in November 1918, the Treaty of Versailles forbid military aircraft construction in the plant and all material therein was seized or destroyed. In 1927 Daimler Motors moved into the facility to produce bus and automobile bodies. In 1933 the facility was moved to Styer, and soon the sport biplane company in another of the buildings was shut down because of production difficulties. Times were tough in Wiener Neustädt.

In 1935, through the initiative of several well known Wiener Neustädt WWI fliers including pilot Julius Agri, engineers Lampich and Meindl, the *Wiener Neustädter Flughavengesellschaft* (Wiener Neustädt Airport Company) was created. This was followed by Lampich and Meindl building a series of sport planes with a staff of around 40 persons. In time the facility was expanded to maintain and repair aircraft, but for most purposes, the aircraft industry had ceased to exist.

In early 1938, this was about to change in ways no one could have imagined. It did not take long for the Luftwaffe to take advantage of the opportunities associated with the Annexation of Austria.

On 28 March 1938, a few days after the annexation became effective. Generalfeldmarschall Herman Göring and Generalluftzeugmeister Ernst Udet visited the *Wiener Neustädter Flughavengesellschaft*. They must have been impressed for on 16 May, operations of this plant were taken over and the facility at 120 Wienerstrasse was renamed *Wiener Neustädter Flugzeugwerke* (Wiener Neustädt Airplane Factory). This was soon followed by orders for the construction of barracks, hangars and other production facilities, and the WNF became an important part of the German war machine. This action brought with it the opportunity for employment, something

welcomed by the large number of unemployed workers in Wiener Neustädt. The plant soon became an object of great prestige for those living in the area. Agri, Lampich and Meindl went on to play important roles in the short life of WNF.

Situated northwest of Wiener Neustädt, the *Wiener Neustädter Flugzeugwerke* grew at a rapid pace with many hangars and other buildings under construction at the same time. The WNF organization was initially made up of two plants, Werke 1 at 120 Wienerstrasse, and Werke 2 on Pottendorfer Strasse, both in Wiener Neustädt. Over time, there were other plants at various locations associated directly with WNF. Werke 1 became a city in itself with nothing left to chance. At the same time production facilities were being put in place, construction of employee housing was underway in the vicinity of the plants to accommodate the hundreds of workers that would be needed. With typical German thoroughness for organization and detail, the plants were laid out for maximum efficiency; they were light, open and uncluttered. Tooling and production facilities were first class in every respect, with women and young people employed in many of the departments.

The number one priority was maximum production, and in many ways this was enhanced by the attention given to making life for workers as comfortable and interesting as possible. The social services available to WNF employees were varied and comprehensive. They ranged from very complete medical care in-house, to child care, and all sorts of sports and recreational facilities. One could learn to fly gliders, play in the Werkes band, workout in a gym, or swim in the large outdoor swimming pool, and for some the opportunity to enjoy a retreat at Kreuzberg. There was something for everyone.

Recognizing the possibility of an eventual aerial attack, a very comprehensive air raid shelter system was put in place, equipped with complete medical facilities and recovery equipment. In addition to the building of air raid protection facilities, precautions were taken against the possibility aerial attack. Light flak gun batteries were placed on the roofs of some buildings and other points around the complex. They were manned by factory workers under the command of the Luftwaffe. Other heavier Anti-Aircraft Artillery batteries were located in the area.

In keeping with the German understanding of the needs and benefits of recognizing and rewarding individuals, the Nazi Part was never far from the scene. The workers of the *Wiener Neustädter Flugzeugwerke* were recipients of all sorts of diplomas and other recognition for a job well done. The swastika and the name of Adolph Hitler were always a prominent part of each presentation.

Production of Messerschmitt 109s was begun in 1938, with the first production 109E models rolling out early in 1939, followed by the G and H models and prototypes for the 109K. The Wiener Neustädt facility was the largest producer of ME-109s. This complex, accessible only to the Fifteenth Air Force, originally consisted of seven plants. Werke I and Werke II were located at Wiener Neustädt, Werke III at Fischamend, Werke IV at Bruno, Werke V at Klagenfurt, Werke VI at Obergrafendorf and Werke VII at Belgrade/ Zemun. The plants at Styer and Atzgerdorf, while not part of WNF, were considered so by the Air Force for purposes of attack. In addition to the production facilities at Werke I there were those engaged in the major repair of JU-88s and HE-111 bombers, they were an important part of the overall function of the plant. Damaged aircraft were dismantled and shipped by rail to the plant where they were put back to new condition.

The WNF plant became a jewel for the German propaganda machine, it was widely publicized and the foreign press was eagerly escorted through the plant to show the world the greatness of the German production capabilities. Over 8,500 ME-109s of all series were produced at WNF.

All of this changed on 13 August 1943 when the city of Wiener Neustädt and the WNF were struck by 88 bombers of the United States Air Force flying from North African bases. On 1 October 1943, both were again targets. WNF sustained so much damage that 505 of the production were halted and 79 individuals were killed. This was followed by an attack on 24 October with much more damage. The most destructive of all raids occurred on 2 November 1943, when WNF I and II were bombed for the fourth time. One hundred and two people were killed and a hospital was hit along with many houses. WNF was so badly damaged that ME-109 production at the plant fell to 80 in November and 37 in December. By now, many of the buildings were no more than a pile of ruins, along with the dreams of the German military. WNF was down, but not out, and by March 1944 its production was to 360 planes a month, and 443 in April. The last major attack on WNF took place on 30 May 1944.

The 460<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group had Wiener Neustädt as a target four times. The first was on 23 April 1944 when the Airdrome North (this was adjacent to WNF) was hit, and then on 10 May the *Wiener Neustädter Flugzeugwerke* was the target. The Wollersdorf airdrome was hit on 24 May, with the last 460<sup>th</sup> raid on 26 March 1945 when the Group hit the Wiener Neustädt Marshaling Yard.

As the war progressed the German military realized that no production facility, refinery, railway or anything else was safe from destruction by the U S Army Air Forces. In an effort to offset this, especially where the production of aircraft was concerned they turned

to decentralization. Aircraft production became in some ways a “cottage industry”. The many small parts suppliers in the surrounding towns and villages were expanded in an effort to replace the capabilities lost with the destruction of the main plants.

Between October 1943 and July 1944, WNF operations were dispersed to at least fifteen sites. Those known to the Allies were subject to attack by the Fifteenth Air Force. A number of the processes were, at various times, moved from Werke I and II at Zwölfaxing, Bad Voslau, Neudorf, and Neunkirchfen/Rohrbach. However, instead of solving a problem, these movements had adverse effects on production. This decentralization was not limited to WNF. From other plants, assembly lines were set up in forests, tunnels, and other underground facilities in Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and other locations.

The day came however, that in spite of efforts to continue the production of aircraft, tanks and other requirements of war, it came to an end. Wiener Neustädt, like Vienna, Berlin and so many cities in Europe then had another battle to fight, the rebuilding of everything held near and dear to them. Today, Wiener Neustädt has few reminders of its destruction in WWII, but just enough remain that the futility of war is not forgotten. For forty four years, some of the bombed out structures of the once mighty *Wiener Neustädter Flugzeugwerke* could be seen, standing like tombstones in a deserted graveyard. Finally, in a gesture of faith in the future, they were taken down in 1989.

Today, the site of the *Wiener Neustädter Flugzeugwerke* shows few signs of its historic past, and it is easy in one’s mind to slip back to those prewar days of the Wiener Neustadt city airport. The few exceptions are piles of rubble of a once mighty aircraft plant, and on occasion the roar of WWII military aircraft can be heard when planes of that era are displayed at air shows. Today these sounds are peaceful, but sure to bring back memories to some of darker times when they brought only fear. As in prewar days, only a few small buildings and hangars are to be found, but the site is still a popular center for aviation enthusiasts. Its purpose is again peaceful.

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