



AUSTRIAN CANADIAN COUNCIL History of the ACC



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1994: The Austrian-Canadian Council is established

The Austrian-Canadian Council (ACC) was established in the summer of 1994 as an umbrella organization of the more than twenty Austrian clubs and societies across Canada. Its mandate is to inform Canadians about Austrian culture and learning, giving them an appreciation of Austrian studies, Austrian graphic and performing arts and Austrian intellectual life and literature.

It also acts as a sponsor of Austrian scholarly and cultural activities in Canada.



Book Launch

The initiative for establishing this organization came from Dr. Walther Lichem, then Austrian Ambassador to Canada. In September 1994, he approached the President of the Austrian Society Ottawa, Roland K. Pirker, with the proposal to organize such a national organization.

In the course of the following months Mr. Pirker contacted almost all presidents of Austrian clubs and societies across Canada about this suggestion and received such a favourable response that a few months later all necessary legal preparations could be made by the law firm of Lang Michener in Toronto to establish the ACC as a charitable organization. Mr. Frank Stronach covered the legal fees for the incorporation of the new group and served as the first Honorary Chairman of the Council from 1994 to 1998. The first four members of the Board of Directors to sign the incorporation documents were Roland K. Pirker (President, Austrian Society Ottawa), Gerhard (Garry) Bonner (President, Austrian International Club Kingston), Hans (John) Raschke (President, Austrian-Canadian Society Toronto) and Otto Heberlein (Vice-President, Austrian Society Ottawa).





Inaugural Meeting of the Austrian Canadian Congress

On February 14, 1995 the Austrian-Canadian Council held its inaugural meeting at the Sheraton Hotel in Toronto. During this meeting Garry Bonner was elected to act as the first president. The Austrian Federal Chancellor, Dr. Franz Vranitzky, who was on a state visit to Canada at that time, opened the meeting. Many presidents and representatives of Austrian clubs and societies from across the country attended and took part in writing a new chapter in the history of the Austrian community in Canada.



Inaugural Meeting of the Austrian Canadian Congress

As a national representative of the Austrian community in Canada, the Austrian-Canadian Council sees itself as a partner of the Austrian Embassy in Ottawa, and collaborates with it in a variety of educational and cultural projects of interest to our two countries. The Council is a charitable non-political organization, staffed only by volunteers.

Though Dr. Lichem and the Austrian Embassy secured a one-time grant from the Austrian Federal Government for the funding of its first few projects, for the first four years of the Council's operation Directors of the Board paid the expenses usually associated

with running a national office out of their own pockets. To this day, all travel expenses as well as other expenditures are borne by the officers and directors themselves.



Inaugural Meeting of the Austrian Canadian Congress



Inaugural Meeting of the Austrian Canadian Congress





Inaugural Meeting of the Austrian Canadian Congress

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1995: International Symposium on “Austrian Immigration to Canada” held at Carleton University

Concurrent with the initiative to establish the Austrian-Canadian Council, Ambassador Lichem also conceived of a major research project to study Austrian immigration to Canada, with the intent that an appropriate volume could be published in time for the Austrian millennium celebrations of 1996. Dr. Franz Szabo, then professor of Austrian history at Carleton University, agreed to oversee the project, and an international research team was put in place to conduct the study. As a preliminary to the publication of the projected volume, a major symposium was held at Carleton University in Ottawa on May 19–21, 1995.

The ACC played a significant role in sponsoring this conference, together with Carleton University, the Austrian Embassy and Heritage Canada. Papers were presented at the Symposium by both Austrian and Canadian scholars, and the proceedings were subsequently published by Carleton University Press in 1996. More than 150 persons from across the country attended the Symposium. The occasion was also used for an ACC meeting with many presidents and representatives from Austrian clubs and societies taking part.

The principal volume, edited by Frederick C. Engelmann, Manfred Prokop and Franz A. J. Szabo was the first systematic study of Austrian immigration to Canada in any language. A companion volume, *Austrian Immigration to Canada: Selected Essays*, edited by Franz A.J. Szabo, published the remaining presentations from the 1995 conference.

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1996: The Austrian-Canadian Council establishes a charitable foundation

The one-time grant from the Austrian Federal Government for funding the initial projects of the ACC marked the beginning of the Council's financial resource base for sponsoring Austria-related activities in Canada. On May 22, 1996 the ACC Executive decided to appoint Professor Franz Szabo, Executive Director of its Foundation Programme, and charged him with drawing up plans and guidelines for ACC sponsorships.

The Foundation had a rocky beginning, as a professional fundraiser hired by the Austrian-Canadian Council unable to produce the results desired. As a consequence, in April 1998, the matter was taken in hand by Roland K. Pirker, who— together with his wife Burgie and his children Rebecca and Rolando and members of the Friends of Austria, Angie and Julie Lacombe—began to organize charitable bingo fund-raisers at the Overbrook Bingo Palace in Ottawa.

Since 1998 these volunteers have organized more than 380 events and have raised a total of some \$200,000. This undertaking has become the most successful fund-raising activity of the ACC, and the proceeds have been the backbone of the ACC's sponsorship programme ever since. With the proceeds the ACC was able to finance the magazine on an ongoing basis and to support, in part, many other educational projects such as the Klimt exhibition in Ottawa, the Albertina exhibition in Toronto, the Hugo Wolf Symposium in Ottawa, just to name a few.

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1996: The ACC establishes thesis and dissertation prizes in Austrian Studies

Among the first initiatives of the ACC's Foundation Programme was the creation of a series of dissertation prizes to encourage scholarly work in the field of Austrian Studies at Canadian universities. These included the sponsorship of a Ph.D. Thesis prize of \$1,000 or M.A. Thesis prizes of \$ 500 (up to a total of \$1,500) in the field of Austrian literature, or comparative literature with an Austrian dimension, and a Ph.D. Thesis prize of \$1,000 or M.A. Thesis prizes of \$ 500 (up to a total of \$ 1,500) in the field of "Austrian Studies" (that is, all social sciences, humanities and related fields). An academic adjudication committee consisting of three eminent senior Canadian professors of Austrian Studies was established to assess the applicants.

The first winner of the Austrian-Canadian Council Dissertation Prize for Austrian Literature (1996) was Dr. Jürgen Heizmann. He was awarded the Prize by ACC President Garry Bonner at a ceremony held at the Austrian Embassy Residence in January 1997 for his dissertation "Antike und Moderne in Hermann Brochs Tod des Vergil: Über Dichtung und Wissenschaft, Utopie und Ideologie," which was completed at the University of Montreal.

In the following year, the second winner of the Austrian-Canadian Council Dissertation Prize for Austrian Literature was Ms. Brigitte Gerdes. She was awarded the Prize by Ambassador Dr. Lichem at a ceremony conducted at the Austria Vancouver Club in October 1998 for her thesis "Johann Nestroy's Der Talisman: An English Performance Translation," written at the University of Alberta.

In 1998, the Prize went to Dr. Jill Scott. She accepted the award from ACC President Roland K. Pirker at a ceremony at the Residence of the Austrian Ambassador on March 12, 1999 for her thesis "Electra after Freud: Death, Hysteria and Mourning." Dr. Scott received her degree from the University of Toronto. The fourth holder of the Dissertation Prize was Dr. Alexandra Heberger. Dr. Heberger was awarded the prize on January 21, 2003 by the Regional Representative of the ACC, Mr. Peter Strausz (President, The Friends of Austria Inc.-Manitoba) at a ceremony in the office of the Dean of Arts at the

University of Manitoba. Dr. Heberger's dissertation, "Der Mythos Mann in ausgewählten Prosawerken von Elfriede Jelinek," was completed at the University of Waterloo.

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1996: The ACC assists in the mounting of the North American premiere of an opera

The ACC was proud to be one of the co-sponsors of the North American premiere of the opera "The Emperor of Atlantis" by Viktor Ullmann, performed at the National Art Centre in Ottawa. This play was also made possible by ARBOS (a theatre and music company based in Klagenfurt and Salzburg, Austria), the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Austrian Embassy, the Embassy of Israel and B'nai Brith of Canada.

October 22, 1996: North American premiere of the opera "The Emperor of Atlantis" at the National Arts Centre. Left to right: The Hon. Hedy Fry (Secretary of State for the Status of Women and Multicultural Affairs), H.E. Dr. Walther Lichem and H. E. David Sultan (Ambassador of Israel).

Viktor Ullmann (1898–1944) was a promising Austrian composer, a pupil of Arnold Schönberg and an orchestra leader under Alexander Zemlinsky. He worked in Vienna and Prague, but was murdered by the Nazis at Auschwitz in October 1944. He wrote the opera while interned in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. The manuscript miraculously survived, and the work received its world premiere in Amsterdam in 1975.

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1997: The ACC plays a major role in establishing a Centre for Austrian Studies in Canada

Another important milestone in the history of the ACC came in 1996. That year a large delegation of Austrian university presidents was touring Canada, and during a debriefing session with Ambassador Lichem and Professor Szabo in Montreal prior to their return to Austria, the proposal was made that a Centre for Austrian Studies be established at some university in Canada.

Discussions also centered on the nature of the incentive package that the Republic of Austria could offer a Canadian university to establish such a centre, and on the question which Canadian universities should be canvassed for possible interest in the project. Professor Szabo was asked to undertake an assessment study of the major Canadian universities, with the aim of developing a short list of institutions to be contacted.

Upon the completion of the assessment study, the ACC was asked to become involved as intermediary in the process in January 1997. ACC President Garry Bonner agreed to do so on behalf of the Council and commissioned Professor Szabo to undertake the appropriate correspondence with the universities selected under the ACC banner. Four universities—the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, Carleton University and McMaster University—were the finalists, and the ACC's assessment of their proposals was subsequently considered by an inter-ministerial meeting of relevant Austrian officials in Vienna in July 1997. The proposal of the University of Alberta was accepted as being the best, and in March 1998 an appropriate Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the University and the Austrian government to establish a new “Canadian Centre for Austrian and Central European Studies” (CCAuCES). At the same time, Professor Szabo was appointed Director of the new Centre. In April 1998 the Embassies of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia also joined in supporting this new Centre. The Centre was formally opened on September 8, 1998 by the Austrian Federal Minister of Science and Transportation, Dr. Casper Einem, and his Canadian counterpart, The Honourable Ronald Duhamel, Secretary of State for Science, Research and Development, The

Honourable Clint Dunford, Minister of Advanced Education and Career Development in the Government of Alberta, Dr. Roderick D. Fraser, President of the University of Alberta, and Dr. Patricia Clements, Dean of the University's Faculty of Arts. Many members of the Austrian-Canadian Council from across the country traveled to Edmonton to attend this ceremony. The ACC also used this occasion for another national meeting of the Council. ACC Secretary Roland K. Pirker served as the master of ceremonies during an initial ACC meeting held on September 6, 1998 at Edmonton's new City Hall. During that ceremony ACC President Garry Bonner received the official document from a member of City Council that proclaimed September 6-12, 1998 as "Austria Week" in Edmonton. A subsequent meeting of the Council held at the University of Alberta sketched out guidelines and policy directions for future ACC activities.

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1997: The Viennese Winter Ball Ottawa is established

The Austrian-Canadian Council wanted to establish a quintessential Austrian event that would bring Austrian culture to Ottawa, but would also serve as a major fundraiser for charitable causes.

In 1996 Ambassador Dr. Walther Lichem, Roland K. Pirker, Garry Bonner and Otto Heberlein tried to organize a Viennese Ball in Ottawa. Unfortunately, due to budgetary restraints in the ACC, this attempt failed. However, two leading Ottawa citizens—Mrs. Penny Scott and Mr. Dave Wallace—came through and launched the most glamorous event of the year, "The Viennese Winter Ball Ottawa," held under the patronage of the Austrian Ambassador to Canada. Since 1999 the Austrian Society Ottawa under the leadership of its President, Roland K. Pirker, has been part of the organizing committee, and the Austrian Society's Schrammel Quartet consisting of Edmund Wyslouzil, Hans Wyslouzil, Hermann Griesseier and Alois Platzer has entertained the Ball's participants

since its inception in 1997. This cultural event has raised \$400,000 to date. The proceeds have been benefitting two Ottawa charities, “The Junior Thirteen String Orchestra” and “The Champions for Children Foundation.” Former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and his wife Aline, many ministers and other high-ranking officials in the Ottawa-Gatineau region have enjoyed the wonderful ambience of this showy and much-sought-after event, which is held every February during Winterlude at the National Gallery of Canada.

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1998: OeCulture magazine launched

The magazine OeCulture began as another initiative of the Austrian Embassy in the spring of 1996. Conceived by Ambassador Lichem and then First Secretary, Mag. Hermine Poppeller, the ACC was quick to offer its cosponsorship of the project. Dr. Manfred Prokop, Professor of German at the University of Alberta, was appointed editor shortly thereafter, and the first issue of the magazine appeared in the spring of 1998.

The publication of the magazine remained a joint project of the ACC and the Austrian Embassy during 1998 and 1999, but beginning in the year 2000 the ACC, under the leadership of Roland Pirker, assumed full responsibility for its publication. The magazine is currently printed once or twice a year in Ottawa. To date, 14 issues have appeared in the period from 1998 to 2004.

OeCulture has found great resonance among its readers. Financial support for its publication comes not only from the Austrian clubs and individual memberships, but also from the Austrian Society Ottawa and the Friends of Austria Ottawa. The Austrian Embassy continues to be active in the magazine’s distribution and contributes the mailing costs for each issue. It is distributed throughout Canada, the U.S., Austria and elsewhere in Europe. The magazine features articles on cultural and scholarly matters pertaining to Austria-related activities in Canada, but also carries stories on

individual Austrian immigrants who came to Canada after World Wars I and II. Many of these Austrian immigrants not only made great contributions to Canada's economic development, but also to the social and cultural fabric of Canada.

Through this magazine the historical contributions of these people have received recognition in both the Austrian and the broader Canadian communities.

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1999: ACC sets up Manfred Wirth Endowment for the benefit of the Canadian Centre for Austrian and Central European Studies

In December 1998, Ambassador Dr. Lichem, on behalf of the ACC, solicited financial support for the Council in numerous letters addressed to Canadian companies with an Austrian connection. Soon an Austrian immigrant by the name of Dr. Manfred Wirth came forward after having received this letter and having read in the magazine about the establishment of the Canadian Centre for Central and East European Studies at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. Dr. Wirth, President of M.F. Wirth Rail Corporation in Montreal, contacted ACC president Roland K. Pirker on October 25, 1999 and told him that he was prepared to make a large donation to this Centre through the ACC. Mr Pirker, who was on a film assignment at that time, passed the information on to Austrian Ambassador Dr. Walther Lichem.

Independently, Dr. Wirth related to the Ambassador that he was delighted to see the establishment of the Canadian Centre for Austrian and Central European Studies in Edmonton because it reminded him of the multicultural society which characterized Austria when he was growing up there.

Dr. Wirth proposed to establish an endowment fund for the Canadian Centre for Austrian and Central European Studies by donating 8,900 Nortel shares to the ACC, worth \$1,000.000 at that time. By the time

Mr. Pirker returned from his assignment and called a special meeting of the Council to examine ways and means to set up the endowment fund, the value of the donation had already grown to \$1.3 million. During a meeting in Ottawa held at the Bank of Montreal on in which many ACC representatives from across the country took part, Mr. Dave Wallace and Mr. Robert Fallenbuchl from BMO Harris Private Banking in Ottawa volunteered their expertise to help set up an investment plan January 10, 2000, benefitting the new Centre at the University of Alberta.

In February 2002 Dr. Manfred Wirth contributed an additional \$1.1 million for the benefit of the Centre directly to the University of Alberta, which therefore set up a Wirth Endowment of its own. In February and March 2003 Dr. Wirth was in the process of making a further, even larger donation to this endowment when he passed away. Shortly thereafter, his son, Mr. Alfred G. Wirth, President and Director of Wirth Associates of Toronto, in accordance with his father's original intentions, pledged an additional \$7.5 million to the University of Alberta's Wirth Endowment, with the targeted sum to be fulfilled by the end of 2006. The ACC-administered fund will be transferred to the University of Alberta in 2009, so that the total value of the Wirth Endowment will at that point be approximately \$10 million. To acknowledge this tremendous contribution, the Canadian Centre for Austrian and Central European Studies was formally renamed "Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies" by the University of Alberta on October 29, 2003. Several other prominent Austrian immigrants—among them Mr. Joseph Kuchar and Dr. Joseph and Mrs. Melitta Kandler—have donated additional funds to the Institute, assuring the long-time existence of this important Canadian institute of learning.

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1999: The Austrian Councils of North America are established

The ACC is registered in Canada as a charitable organization and is totally independent of its counterparts in the U.S. And Mexico, the Austrian-American Council (AAC) and the Austrian-Mexican Council (AMC).

In 1999, the three organizations—under the leadership of ACC presidents Garry Bonner and Roland K. Pirker, AAC president Juliana Belcsak and AMC president Aurel Zoepnek-Twardowski—formed a loose association, the Austrian Councils of North America.

Almost every year since then, Juliana Belcsak has organized a conference in the U.S. Where representatives from the three countries have not only exchanged ideas, but have also discussed pressing issues which have arisen in North America's Austrian communities.

Among the topics discussed were fund-raising and social issues. In view of the rapidly aging membership in our Austrian clubs and the low levels of immigration from Austria to North America, the national presidents have been searching for ways in which the Austrian cultural identity can be passed on to the next generation of Austrians on this continent.

In 2001 the Austrian-Canadian Council developed its own logo, incorporating all three partners of the Austrian Councils of North America in the design.

Canadian representatives attended the following conferences:

September 1996 (New York City):

Garry Bonner
John Raschke

October 31 – November 3, 1996 (Los Angeles):

Garry Bonner

October 13–15, 2000 (East Rutherford, N.J.):

Roland K. Pirker

April 26-28, 2002 (Washington, D.C.):

Roland and Walburga (Burgie) Pirker

November 2003 (New York City):

Inga Michalek

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2001: The Austrian-Canadian Council establishes an Awards Program

In January 2001 Roland K. Pirker and Garry Bonner set up criteria for the establishment of an ACC awards program as a means of giving recognition to persons either within and outside the Austrian-Canadian Council's members for outstanding contributions in promoting the work of a club or society and in furthering the aims and purposes of the Council. The ACC also wanted to acknowledge and honour members of Austrian clubs across the country for their individual outstanding contributions, for having worked tirelessly and silently in the background, without ever having received much recognition. The Awards Program became an instant success due to the overwhelming demand for it expressed by Austrian clubs across Canada.

Once a nomination from either a president or a director of a club has been received by the ACC, the awards chairman and a jury assess how the nominees fit the ACC criteria and, award either a gold, a silver or a bronze medal.

The full list of awards presented by the Austrian Canadian Council can be found on the page [ACC Award Recipients](#)

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2002: Meetings of the Auslandsösterreicher-Weltbund

The Auslandsösterreicher-Weltbund (AÖWB) meetings were held in Vienna on September 1–4, 2002.

For the first time, the Austrian-Canadian Council was also present at this event. Roland K. Pirker, the ACC president, had been invited by President Fritz Molden and President Gustav Chlestil to participate in the

merger of the and the Auslandsösterreicherwerk Weltbund, respectively.

In one of these meetings, he gave a report outlining the work of the ACC as well as the efforts undertaken by the approximately twenty Austrian clubs and societies in Canada. The activities reported met with great admiration and respect by all delegates and Government representatives. Roland K. Pirker was invited to represent Canada at future meetings of the AÖWB in Austria.

Credit for the ACC's achievement at this Weltbund meeting must also be given to Dr. Sepp Fröschl from Montreal. He had been part of the board of directors of the Weltbund for many years, and his hard and diligent work prepared a smoother entrance by the ACC into the larger organization.

The ACC was present at the AÖWB Presidents' Conference in Vienna on May 1–2, 2003. During that meeting ACC delegate Roland K. Pirker became officially an AÖWB Board member representing the twenty Austrian clubs and societies in Canada.

The following ACC members attended additional meetings of the Auslandsösterreicher-Weltbund:

September 5 – 7, 2003 in Graz:

Roland and Walburga (Burgie) Pirker
Walter Schachenhofer (Club Austria Edmonton)
Robert Jüthner-Krtschan (Johann Strauss Foundation Edmonton)
Franx Meixner (Austrian-Canadian Society Calgary)

May 1 – 2, 2004, in Vienna:

Roland K. Pirker

May 14 – 15, 2005, in Vienna:

Roland K. Pirker

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