**Digital Archive of the Disability Rights Movement in Austria**

<http://bidok.uibk.ac.at/projekte/behindertenbewegung/>

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## **Background and Aim**

The history of the Disability Rights Movement in Austria dates back to as early as the 1920s. Since then, activists of the disability community have courageously struggled for civil rights, legal protection of disabled people’s livelihood as well as for independent living. However, their initiatives remained - for the longest time - a severely understudied phenomenon that begged for systematic engagement of the public and the academy. It is a rich and multi-faceted history that allows for investigations into Austrian history and society at large, as well as for glimpses and first-hand accounts into the intricate dilemmas and challenges that the disability community has faced in Austria. Already in the interwar period (1918-1938), self-help movements of people with disabilities focused on securing a minimum level of existence, including financial support and basic human rights and protections. Strongly weakened by the onslaught on disabled life through the Nazi “Aktion T4” and “wild euthanasia” measures with which physicians and nurses irreversibly decimated the disabled population in annexed Austria, activists continued to raise demands for participation, protection, and dignity after the end of World War II. In the 1970s, new social movements evolved on a global scale that also inspired men and women with disabilities in Austria. In particular, Austrian activists joined the global push for securing the category of “disability” as a feature to be protected under universal human rights. This led to the founding of a powerful grassroots initiative, the *Independent Living Movement*. No systematic research has been carried out up to this date that investigates the history of disability activism and the disability movement in the context of Austrian disability policy. Our project aims to close this gap. We hope to store contemporary history for future generations as a way to write our own history and to provide an archive for investigation, critical reflection but also celebration and empowerment in view of what we accomplished against sometimes seemingly insurmountable odds and barriers. From the very beginning, we envisioned the project to be fundamentally participatory and worked to interconnect academia and activism as going hand in hand because: “Nothing about us without us!”

## **Building the Digital Archive**

Volker Schönwiese, a founding member of the Austrian *Independent Living Movement* and retired Professor for Inclusive Education and Disability Studies at the University of Innsbruck, initiated the development of the Digital Archive in 2015. A team of disabled and non-disabled scholars of the Universities of Innsbruck and Vienna collaboratively elaborated the archive’s content. For three years, the project received funding by the University of Salzburg, the project BIDOK (a digital library on inclusion and disability) and the Centre for Independent Living in Tyrol. The Digital Archive is deeply motivated by the wish to capture the brave voices and initiatives that took place in the name of the *Independent Living Movement*. In line with other oral history projects that seek to develop “empathy, understanding and respect through testimony” (USC Shoah Foundation), the accounts we feature offer engagement with history from the “margins” of society, thereby educating Austrian society about shared moments in history through the lens of disabled co-citizens.

At the core of our efforts to reconstruct and analyze the history of our movement, we carried out in-depth interviews with 14 Austrian activists of the *Independent Living Movement*. . The interviews were transcribed and coded according to thematic categories. We strictly adhered to the principles of communicative validation which means that the transcriptions of the interviews as well as the thematic codes were presented to the interviewees for debate and approval. This step was not only important from a methodological viewpoint but also to make sure that the interviewees had agency and a say in the process of publishing their memories and reflections. The interviews provided an entry point into reconstructing the milestones of our history since the 1970s and were comprehensively complemented by research in public and private archives. We also included historical material dating back to the 1920s and 1930s, in order to give a rich overview of the 100-year history of the Disability Rights Movement in Austria. Currently, our team focuses on reconstructing the life and political activism of Siegfried Braun who fought for the rights of people with disabilities in Austria in the 1920s and ‘30s. The archive is an ever-expanding project that welcomes thorough engagement with past and present activists.

### **Content**

The Digital Archive, published within the framework of the digital library bidok, is a dedicated [website](http://bidok.uibk.ac.at/projekte/behindertenbewegung/index.html) that provides its users with a wealth of selected documents and materials. The archive offers:

1. A[timeline](http://bidok.uibk.ac.at/projekte/behindertenbewegung/zeitleiste.htm) from 1920 to 2014 that features more than 100 events as well as documents that give background information and context on the events that we chose to highlight prominently in this chronology.
2. [Interviews](http://bidok.uibk.ac.at/projekte/behindertenbewegung/interviews/index.html) that were videotaped with 14 participants and span a length in total of more than 50 hours. Video sequences are organized according to content categories as well as according to the chronological timeline. A search function enables the user to look for film snippets that deal with particular themes or events.
3. Digitized full collection of [the journal “LOS”](http://bidok.uibk.ac.at/projekte/behindertenbewegung/zeitschrift-los.html) (“Onwards”) which was a sounding board for the *Independent Living Movement* from 1983 to 1992. The journal reported on current activities of the movement and published special issues on topics like segregation in education, euthanasia, disabled sexuality, independent living or the hunger strike for a comprehensive long-term care benefit in Austria.
4. Information regarding[further research](http://bidok.uibk.ac.at/projekte/behindertenbewegung/forschung.html) on the Disability Rights Movement in German-speaking countries, that offers extended literature lists and research projects. This research database also includes the digitized full collection of the journal “The Cripple”, published between 1927-1938, including each original text in full length.
5. A comprehensive [introductory text](http://bidok.uibk.ac.at/projekte/behindertenbewegung/geschichte.html).

## **Spreading the Word**

Between 2017 and 2021, the team gave a total of twelve public presentations on the Digital Archive that took place all over Austria. We invited regional activists to attend these presentations and participate in discussions afterwards. In 2020, [a special issue of the quarterly “Stimme der Minderheiten”](https://stimme.minderheiten.at/wordpress/index.php/stimme/2020/2816) (“Voice of minorities”) was published which featured articles that all reflected on the 100-year-history of the Disability Rights Movement in Austria. In 2021, another publication in the journal Disability & Society prominently introduced the Digital Archive with the contribution: [“ `Don’t forget about self-help´ the fight for disability rights in Austria in the 1920s and 1930s](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687599.2021.1976111?scroll=top&needAccess=true)”.

## **Adhering to Accessibility Criteria**

The Digital Archive is accessible according to WCAG 2.0 criteria. A full and detailed [report](http://bidok.uibk.ac.at/ueberuns/technik/wcag2.html) is available. Transcripts of the 14 interviews are fully available. Work is still going on to make the historic material which was digitized more accessible to users with visual impairments. For the public presentations, locations were selected that were accessible for participants with mobility impairments and sign language interpretation was provided if needed. All articles for the special edition of the quarterly “Stimme der Minderheiten” were translated into plain language to make the history also available to persons with learning difficulties. The publication is available in print as well as in fully accessible digital formats.

## **Project Team and Interviewees**

**Project Team**

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**Interviewees**

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