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Peace Leaflets A Starting point for Dialogue

A MACABRE JOKE

Three weeks before the end of World War II, my home town of Attnang-Puchheim was the target of an American bombing raid. The air raid warning came too late. As a result, over 700 people were killed and 53% of all buildings were destroyed or damaged.

An eyewitness reported: "When it was all over, there was an unbelievable silence. Not a bird could be heard singing, not even the leaves in the trees were rustling. Only a day before, the old tree-lined Land Strasse, with its many pear trees in full flower, had been a sight to see. It was a gruelling experience."

Two young families were living in my parent's home. The fathers were in the army, the mothers were taking shelter in the basement during the bombing raid. When the fathers returned from the war, they found no home, no wives, no children...

Who counts the suffering, who knows the names?

Forty-five years later I was visited by an American air force chaplain with the rank of colonel. I showed him and his wife the memorial in the cemetery of the old part of Attnang and gave him a short recap of the catastrophe. Afterwards his wife asked me: "How can you still like Americans?" I answered with another question: "I cannot understand how you can still like the Austrians, knowing that a man named Adolf Hitler was born here."

Even today I always get a strange feeling when I recall that this serious conversation ended in laughter.