

English Summary

Walter Ulreich / Wolfgang Wehapp
Die Geschichte der PUCH-Fahrräder
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1. Beginnings of Bicycle Manufacturing in Austria and Styria (1885 – 1889)

High wheel bicycles first appeared in Austria-Hungary in 1880. Since they were originally imported from England, they were called “bicycles”. The word Fahrrad came later (though in Swiss German, Velo became the established term). Regular production of high wheel bicycles in Austria-Hungary began in Jan Kohout’s factory for agricultural machines in Smíchov, near Prague, in 1880, following English designs. Kohout’s sons Josef and Petr made a name for themselves and the bicycles as successful racers. Smaller makers before 1885, such as Valentin Wiegeler in Korpitsch near Villach, only became known locally.

In Vienna, Karl Greger’s Velociped-Fabrik started making high wheel bicycles in 1884 under the brand name ‘Austria’; the annual output seems to have reached 300–400 bicycles. In 1896, Greger was mentioned as “the oldest bicycle factory of Austria and one of the largest on the continent”, and as “founder of the bicycle industry in Austria-Hungary”. At about the same time as Greger, Carl Goldeband and the sewing-machine factory of H. Wagner also began making bicycles in Vienna. In the years from 1885 to 1889, there is good evidence that bicycles were also being made by Mathias Allmer, Josef Benesch und Josef Eigler in Graz, Johann Jax in Linz, Josef Fritsch in Eger (Cheb), Julius Mickerts und Otto Schäffler in Vienna, Nicolaus Heid in Stockerau, near Vienna and G. A. Waeger in Brno.

2. Johann Puch – Machine Fitter’s Apprentice to Bicycle Industry Pioneer (1889 – 1897)

Janez Puh was born as the son of a small farmer on 27 June 1862 in Sakušak, which is in the present-day municipality of Juršinci, near Ptuj in Slovenia. At the time, Slovenia belonged to Austria; the German name for Ptuj is Pettau and of course Puh became famous under the German version of his name: Johannes Puch. He was apprenticed to a locksmith in the nearby village of Rotman, and then moved as a journeyman first to Maribor (German: Marburg) and then in 1878 to the Schlossermeister (master locksmith/machine fitter) Anton Gerschack.

Following his three-year military service in Graz, Puch became the head craftsman in the bicycle section of the sewing-machine business of Luchscheider. The next year, 1888, he went to work for Benedict Albl, who made him the foreman of his factory on Lendplatz. But only one year later he branched out on his own: he rented or bought a greenhouse with a gardener’s cottage in Strauchergasse 18a, and converted the buildings into a workshop and warehouse. The same year, Puch – probably encouraged by his friend and

patron Victor Kalmann – visited the first big bicycle exhibition in the Crystal Palace in Leipzig. At that time the trend towards safety bicycles was already well under way. Puch collected important ideas and made deals. He became the official agent of the English company Humber & Co. and of Winklhofer and Jänicke in Chemnitz.

In June 1889, Puch obtained permission to use the converted greenhouse for his business. A book of “machine sales” contains information on the first bicycles sold. Puch’s own “Styria” bicycles were all sold between mid-March and mid-May of 1890; before that there are only entries for imported models.

1889 also saw changes in Puch’s family life. On 18 September in Graz cathedral, he married Maria Anna Reinitzhuber, the twenty-year-old daughter of his landlord. Puch’s best man was Victor Kalmann; and it was a double wedding along with Puch’s friend from Maribor, Franz Neger. Neger was originally from Eibiswald in western Styria, and had moved to Maribor, where he had been active as a “Bicycle Instructor” since 1886. He met his future wife through Puch; she was a foster daughter of the Reinitzhuber family. Because of this, Neger is often referred to as Puch’s brother-in-law. Neger was the agent of Styria bicycles in Maribor and began manufacturing bicycles himself in 1892.

A full description of the first Styria Safety Bicycles can be found in a trade magazine from 20 March 1890. Here we can read that the bicycle has the “popular five-cornered frame shape” and is made out of English weldless steel tubing. Two models, No. 1 and No. 2, are mentioned; presumably there were also a high wheel bicycle, a tricycle and a tandem in the range.

In May 1891, Puch opened a second factory in Karlauerstraße in the district of Gries. In July, the company was converted from the sole proprietorship into ‘Johann Puch & Comp.’, an OHG (registered partnership) in which Puch and Kalmann were equal partners. A July 1891 description of the current range reveals that the company has expanded its repertoire to eight models. We know that around this time Puch was experimenting with aluminium brazing. Some racing bicycles were fitted with aluminium parts, but these developments never went beyond the experimental stage.

The new factory grew in size. It had access to water power, and special tools and enamelling stoves were imported from England – and with them, Puch also hired experienced British workers to operate them properly.

An important factor in sales was the sporting success of the bicycles, and as well as running his business, Puch himself was an active racer. This led to a crisis in 1892: riding as a pacemaker, he contracted a serious case of pneumonia and was critically ill. The episode left him with a heart problem that troubled him for the rest of his life. After recovering, he resumed his hectic work schedule. However, he also recruited his friend Victor Rumpf as a new partner and works manager. Rumpf had been working up till then as a mechanical engineer at the Andritz Machine Factory. The Puch brand was now very popular with racing cyclists: in 1892 alone, 136 prizes were won on Puch bicycles, including 10 championships.

Riding on this wave of success, Puch expanded, bringing in the Styrian Escompte-Bank as an investor and limited partner in 1894, and opening branches for sales and repairs in Vienna, Berlin and Budapest in 1895. Puch's older brother Martin, also an experienced racing cyclist, became head of the Budapest branch. The company became the main sponsor of the second Trieste–Graz–Vienna race, with the sum of 1000 Kronen. The winner, on a Styria, was Josef Fischer, who also came first in the Vienna–Salzburg race. Styria racing bicycles were also victorious in Berlin with Arthur Heimann, and in Parma with Gabrielli, while in Paris, a German tandem team set a world record. Probably the crowning achievement of Puch in the racing arena was the triumph of Franz Gerger in the 1895 Bordeaux-Paris.

In 1895 the Puch factory in Graz employed 330 workers, who manufactured 6000–6500 bicycles. Following a period of industrial unrest related to the Badeni riots, shiftwork was introduced at the beginning of 1896. The price list for that year records 19 models.

3. Intermezzo with and against Dürkopp (1897 – 1899)

Puch continued his expansion strategy and in 1896, he bought the Köstenbaum Mill in Baumgasse (now Köstenbaumgasse), adjacent to his existing factory in Karlauerstraße. However, he overstretched himself financially with the investment, and he had to look around for a strategic partner. He found one in the Bielefeld Machine Factory, previously known as Dürkopp, in Germany. The company already had a branch in Vienna, which they had expanded into an assembly plant in 1891 to avoid the Austrian import tariff.

The new catalogue issued in March gave the impression of continuity. The most striking feature of the 1897 Styria models is that all the men's bicycles now have a horizontal top tube; in 1896, only the racing models had had one. The new Ladies' Model V is presented as the "lightest ladies' bicycle for reform dress" – this also had a horizontal top tube and demonstrates that the new ladies' fashions including bloomers was now acceptable.

Another new item in the 1897 catalogue is a folding military bicycle. The Model 1a, still 'with the panther', is now called the 'precision machine', has an eccentric chain tensioner and etched decorations on the front fork blades. At this time, Puch used a large variety of tyres.

In the course of the year, rumours arose that the company was to be taken over completely by the Germans. These were officially denied as late as October; but in reality, the acquisition was already being prepared. The companies' register records that on 15 January 1897 the Escompte Bank sold its interest to the Bielefeld Machine Factory, which brought the company 600,000 gulden in fresh capital. What followed over the next year was the removal of the entire top management around Johann Puch. Puch himself ceased to be a partner in July; the power of representation (Prokura) of Kalmann and Koneczny was revoked in October. Of Puch's old guard, only Victor Rumpf, who had taken the side of the new owners' representative, Richard Kaselowsky, remained.

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Koneczny joined the Graziosa Bicycle Works as an authorized representative (Prokurist), but the company went out of business not long after, in 1901. The others stayed with Puch. On his departure from the old company, he had signed a two years' competition clause. However, his close associates Anton Werner and Martin Nöthig founded the Bicycle Works Anton Werner & Comp. in Laubgasse 8 – and at the end of November 1898 they began producing bicycles in a factory building belonging to Johann Puch in Laubgasse, around the corner from the old site. The new company made no secret of the connection to Puch and also sold its bicycles under the name 'Styria Original'.

As it was bound to, the choice of name caused confusion – two separate companies producing bicycles called Styria and Styria Original – and a fight over the trademark rights. The legal tussle over the use of the names Puch and Styria went on for over a year, until an agreement was reached in 1899. But as soon as that was done, Johann Puch announced that he had bought Anton Werner & Comp.; and now he was back in the ring with the company renamed as "Johann Puch – Erste Steiermärkische Fahrrad-Fabriks AG" (Johann Puch – First Styrian Bicycle Factory AG). For the next ten years, the two competing companies would exist side by side, both with "Puch" in their names.

4. Puch Strikes Back (1899 – 1914)

Johann Puch – Erste Steiermärkische Fahrrad-Fabriks AG was entered into the companies' register on 27 September 1899. In the company's advertising, the brand Puch-Rad, i.e. Puch Bicycle, was emphasized.

The new company's first catalogue presented innovations such as a narrow chainset, easy-to-change sprockets, a new rear dropout design and improved ball bearing hubs. Otherwise, the product range is much the same as in 1897, though certain models such as the transport tricycle and military bicycles are gone. All models now have Continental pneumatic tyres and the design details are specified by Puch. At that time, the new factory was at the southern edge of the city, so the company also kept a sales showroom in the city centre, at Joanneumring 20. There were branches in Vienna at Praterstraße 33 and Kärntnerring 6, and cycling schools at Taborstraße 8 and Neustiftgasse 66.

The next item on the agenda for Johann Puch was the step into producing motor vehicles. Though first experiments were done in 1900, it was not until 1906 that the first automobile was offered for sale. But in the meantime, the company developed motorcycles. From 1903, a single-cylinder model went on sale, followed by a two-cylinder machine in 1905.

The bicycle catalogue for 1901 is impressively large (see Appendix) and introduced the Puch Patented Steel Chainwheel – a solid chainwheel with decorative engraving, which became a hallmark of bicycles from this period and especially from Austrian-Hungarian manufacturers. Puch once again got involved in the racing scene, which had suffered a dip in interest at the turn of the century. However, in his newspaper advertising, the emphasis steadily shifted from bicycles to motorcycles. Also reflecting this trend, the catalogue for

1904 devoted only about half of its space to bicycles. By 1907, there were automobiles as well as motorcycles, and the bicycle range was reduced to 7 models.

In 1907, unrest bubbled up once again in the workforce. The trouble came to a head over the so-called “master issue” – the harsh treatment of workers by the master craftsmen. While Puch apparently weathered the storm without too much trouble, events at the Styria factory escalated. Director Rumpf decided to clamp down hard, and provoked strikes, which were overshadowed by violence. Production was disturbed for five months. In the end, the workers achieved a Pyrrhic victory. The boycott campaigns and disruption did lasting damage to business. The company also struggled because of its decision to withdraw from racing (which had been taken before the strikes), and because it had failed to develop motorised vehicles in time. All of these factors taken together meant that Johann Puch regained his position as the leading manufacturer in Graz.

By 1911, Puch needed another injection of capital and once again had to struggle to keep control of his business. He succeeded, but at the cost of working day and night in the engineering office and the factory. This was good for the company, but bad for his health. As he suffered another bout of ill-health, he wrote: “The engine in my chest is an older model. It is starting to slow down.”

After a short holiday, he was back at work. The number of employees in the company reached a new high of over 1000 workers in 1912. But Puch’s next health crisis was not long in coming. When the aviation pioneer Eduard Nittner flew from Wiener Neustadt to Graz, Puch drove out to meet him. Watching the plane descend in a steep dive, the excitement was too much for Puch and he suffered another heart attack.

In the spring of 1913, the new machine shed in Fuhrhofgasse (a continuation of Laubgasse; today both are part of Puchstraße) went into operation. The new catalogue presented the Gentleman Luxury Model II. This was an elegant design with a tastefully engraved chainwheel, and etched decorations on the frame, head tube, fork crown, fork blades and handlebars. There was a rim brake on the front wheel, and nickel-plated rims with coloured stripes.

Now the founder retired, at the relatively young age of 49, from managing the company. Or at least from the day-to-day business, since he became chair of the board of directors in 1914. But he withdrew into private life. He had no children, and passed his time with a trotting stable (located near the factory) and dog breeding. On 19 July 1914, Puch was in Zagreb for a trotting race, when he suffered a stroke and died in his hotel. He passed away in the arms of the Croatian racing cyclist Emil Meniga.

Much has been written about Johannes Puch’s significance for the Austrian and European bicycle industries. He was neither a radical innovator nor a brilliant manager, but he was a mechanical talent who picked up on what was technically possible and turned it into reliably marketable products. He got important strategic decisions right, for example by promoting his bicycles through racing from the beginning. This helped him to beat the

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competition in Graz – effectively the Coventry of Austria-Hungary – and to build up a company and brands that were known internationally and had a long life both in the bicycle and motor-vehicle sectors.

In an obituary, the social-democratic paper “Arbeiterwille” (the ‘will of the workers’) gave him good marks as an employer. He was a moderate who was not tempted to polarize his relationship with the workers or throw his weight around, but always supported peaceful solutions to disputes.

In the place where he used to work, he was remembered with respect. His name and his factories became essential parts of local identity. A change in the corporate philosophy certainly came with the closure of the bicycle factory and the takeover by Magna in 1998.

In 2002, the name Puch finally disappeared from the company, which is now called Magna Steyr. But around 2003, when Graz became European Capital of Culture, new efforts were made to preserve the memories of Puch history; for example, with the opening of a Puch museum on the site of the original factory in Puchstraße. And also in his childhood home, the region of present-day Slovenia known as Stajerska, among the hills of Slovenska Gorica (in German: the Windische Bühel, in the Untersteiermark / Lower Styria), he was rediscovered in the 1990s, following Slovenia’s independence. Communist Yugoslavia had viewed him less favourably as an economic migrant who had served the forces of capitalist industry.

Ideologically, Puch cannot really be claimed by one or the other nationalist tendency. On the one hand, he was not an active Slovene patriot, he used the German version of his name and he socialized and did business in the German-nationalist (deutschnational) circles of the Graz cycling clubs. But on the other, there is no evidence that he disowned his roots. We do know that all of his closest friends and business associates came from different regions of the Dual Monarchy. We can agree with the Puch researcher Kristina Šamperl Purg that Johann Puch was an internationally successful inventor, businessman and manager who was from Slovenia but was at home in the multi-national state of Austria-Hungary and retained his Slovenian identity.

5. Austro-Hungarian Military Cycling up to 1918

The Austro-Hungarian Army set up the Military School for Fencing and Physical Training Instructors in Wiener Neustadt in 1881 and the following year they included cycling in the curriculum. At first, they used standard off-the-shelf bicycles. A manoeuvre report from 1893 mentions Meteor from Benedict Albl and safety bicycles from Puch, Dürkopp, Reichenstein Bros., Humber, and Winklhofer & Jänicke. Even a few high wheel bicycles were still in use.

In 1894, Johannes Puch & Comp. offered a military bicycle, which can be seen in the

catalogue with a sabre in a holster on the handlebars and a carbine carried under the top tube, held at the head and seat tubes.

The breakthrough in military use of bicycles came with the long-distance race from Vienna to Berlin in 1893. The previous year, there had been a race over this distance by officers on horseback, in which the winner came in after 71 hours: but now the winner of the bicycle race covered the distance in less than half that time. This demonstration persuaded the army leaders of both countries, who had been sceptical, that bicycles had military potential. The Austrian-Hungarian armies proceeded to test bicycles extensively in the 1894 autumn manoeuvres.

Military cycling came to Graz in the form of courses held in 1895/96, and the city then became established as the main centre for training army cyclists. In a change of policy, the army now began training existing soldiers as specialist cyclists; particularly orderlies and messengers, but bicycles were also used for a variety of other functions that had previously been the preserve of the cavalry. The performance of the cyclists in manoeuvres is praised in reports from 1895; worries that the pneumatic tyres would not stand up to hard use were dispelled.

The industry quickly scented the new market opportunity: the Austrian Arms Factory Company (Österreichische Waffenfabriksgesellschaft, ÖWG) in Steyr, Upper Austria, provided a set of bicycles to the Graz training school free of charge. These were special Swift models with a higher than normal bottom bracket; the bare metal parts were given a dark brown coating. Bicycles supplied by Puch also met with a favourable reaction. In 1894, Puch Model VIII bicycles were delivered to the school in Wiener Neustadt and were fully approved as suitable for military use. However, this does not appear to have resulted in a large order.

In 1896, the Imperial War Ministry ordered 60 Model E military bicycles from the ÖWG. Although these turned out to have many deficiencies, further orders for Model XII bicycles were placed in the following year. The company seems to have had an advantage as a major supplier of firearms and was also able to train gunsmiths in the maintenance of the bicycles. Around this time, several armies had begun to use folding bicycles, and the Austrians followed suit with designs inspired by French and Italian versions. Puch found an ally in Philipp Czeipek, an instructor at the infantry cadet school in Graz, who patented a design for a folding bicycle. Puch produced some prototypes of this design, which were used in the Kaiser's manoeuvre in 1896 near Csakathurn/Čakovec. The war ministry had ordered the army to assemble a special detachment of cyclists for the exercise, and their performance was very positively received. The design was also successfully tested by the Swiss army.

A rivalry then ensued between Czeipek, who actively promoted his patented folding bicycle, and his fellow instructor Franz Smutny who openly supported the ÖWG models. The new 1897 model of the folding bicycle with 26" wheels weighed only 12.5 kg, and Czeipek claimed that it could be folded in 30 seconds and unfolded even more quickly. In addi-

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tion, it was possible to attach a seat for a passenger behind the saddle. And the definitive advantage was that the bicycle could be carried across difficult terrain like a rucksack. A very different view was expressed in an official report to the ministry. The folding mechanism came at the cost of strength and stiffness; the folding and unfolding process was unwieldy and the bicycle was uncomfortable to carry, the report said.

That put paid to the folding bicycle's prospects for the time being. Some years passed before the army applied itself to the problem again. In 1906, the ministry requested both the ÖWG and the Styria Bicycle Works (at this point under the ownership of Dürkopp, without Puch) to produce prototypes based on the Italian Rossi-Melli, and the resulting bicycles were then ordered in small numbers the following year. These bicycles were a success and by the outbreak of the First World War, they had replaced the conventional non-folding models as standard equipment.

Johann Puch (at this time not involved in his original company, but in the one founded with Anton Werner; see Chapters 3 and 4) tried to get a slice of this business and patented a folding bike that could be converted into a stretcher trailer, pulled by another bicycle; this invention was used by the army. In 1913 the army tested a folding bicycle from the Puch works (after the reunification of his companies), but it was not approved by the ministry.

At the beginning of the First World War, the army had about 450 folding bicycles. During the war, the only larger orders we know of were for bicycles from the ÖWG. Cyclist companies were first saw active service on the Russian border near Gorlice. In 1915, the units were transferred to the Italian front and attached to the garrisons in Monfalcone, Cormons, Rovigno und Gradisca. As a report by an officer shows, the companies were located mostly in the high mountains, where the bicycles were useless. At the time of the breakthrough in the Battle of Caporetto in late 1917, all commands regretted the lack of large cyclist formations. The horrific toll of the war can be seen in the numbers from the Bicycle Club in Bruck an der Mur. Of the 113 male members, 76 were conscripted. Fourteen of them were killed, 36 wounded and five captured. The fallen included many successful racing cyclists such as the Graz Olympian Adolf Kofler and the Croatian Franz Gregl. Altogether, it is estimated that 250,000 soldiers served on bicycles, mostly as messengers, on all sides in the war.

6. Troubled Times and Another War, 1918 – 1945

In the First World War, the Puch works was an important supplier of vehicles for the Austrian and Hungarian armies. With around 1000 employees, the company also made aeroplane engines. The 1915 catalogue appears largely unaffected by the war and shows the accustomed range of luxury and racing bicycles.

After the war, when the former domestic market of Austria-Hungary had more or less

ceased to exist, the Puch works fell into the hands of speculators, but the manager they installed, an Italian called Giovanni Marcellino, saved the business. In 1919 a newly-built bicycle factory went into operation and was soon equipped with modern machine tools. In 1922, the factory was converted to mass production.

Exports grew to 19,013 bicycles in 1927, of which the largest share went to Hungary (12,159) and the rest to Yugoslavia, Poland and Romania. In 1928 the Puch Works AG and the Austrian Automobile Factory AG were merged under the new ownership of Austro-Daimler Motors AG to form 'Austro-Daimler-Puchwerke AG'. Automobile production was discontinued while production of bicycles and motorcycles expanded. At this time the Puch works had a total of 1200 employees in all areas.

During the war and in the inter-war period, the range of bicycles on the market seems to have contracted around the basic "Waffenrad" design; on the other hand, many of the bicycles made by Puch were sold under sub-brands and own brands of the retailers; wholesalers also assembled bicycles themselves. The motive for this seems to be connected to undercutting of cartel prices, though we have not found clear evidence to explain this strategy; the economic times were turbulent, not to say desperate.

One result of the upheavals in business and finance was that after a series of bank mergers, the majority share in the Puch works was held by the Creditanstalt. The competitor Styria Bicycle Works suffered a harsher fate: after Dürkopp withdrew their participation in 1922, the company was traded on the Vienna stock exchange; in 1927, a majority was acquired by Steyr Werke AG and the Graz factory was closed in 1932.

In 1934 the Austrian automotive and bicycle industries were reorganized from the ground up: Puch was merged with Steyr to form Steyr-Daimler-Puch AG. The next year, the group's bicycle manufacturing was concentrated in Graz. From this time on, the 'Steyr Waffenrad' became a product made by Puch in Graz. The Graz factory profited from the reorganisation: the number of people on the payroll grew to 2000 in 1938, and the volume of bicycles produced reached a new high of 86,000 in 1936.

In 1938, Puch finally stopped using Roman numerals for its frame numbers. The firm then reacted to the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany on 12 March 1938 by registering a new trademark: "Ostmark-Puch". The so-called "Anschluss" brought more competition, but also, with the end of export controls, access to a larger market. Civilian bicycle manufacturing was then reduced significantly due to the war: as part of the War Production Programme (Kriegsfertigungsprogramm), the company was only allowed to operate at 75% of its peacetime capacity.

The Steyr-Daimler-Puch works were then merged into the "Reichswerke Hermann Göring", which became the largest armaments producer of the "Ostmark". A new factory was built in Thondorf, on the east side of the Mur, and was used to produce engines for tanks and aeroplanes. But at the same time, 140,000 military bicycles were made between 1938 and 1945. From 1940–44, another 77,000 bicycles came from the factory in Radom

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in Poland. Typical features of the military models included a higher bottom bracket, a slightly shorter top tube and a particularly high saddle.

In the last years of the war, the production of essential war materials was transferred to underground factories in Peggau, north of Graz, and in Wagna, near Leibnitz, to the south. These factories were supplied with slave labour from the concentration camp at Mauthausen. Both of the Graz factories, but most of all the new engine factory in Thondorf – which is the modern-day site of Magna Steyr – were targets of allied aerial bombing from 1942 onwards, and suffered major damage.

7. Post-War: Rebuilding

After the end of the Second World War, the Puch works was taken over first by the Red Army and then by the British army; the latter was the occupying force in Styria until 1955. Though some of the machines had been removed, about 300 employees went back to work in the summer of 1945. The first things they manufactured were cigarette lighters and ice skates for the occupying troops.

Gradually, the company also began making bicycles again. At first, they were shipped without tyres, because there was a shortage of rubber. By the end of the year, the old factory had turned out 8,164 ladies’ and men’s bikes, as well as large amounts of single bicycle parts. In 1946, the output already reached 50,000 bicycles – two models, a standard and a touring bike, each in ladies’ and men’s versions.

Because many suppliers had been lost, the company had to make 90% of the components in-house. This contrasts dramatically with the state of affairs in the 1980s, when only the frames and forks were still manufactured by Puch. Within the company as a whole, there was a shift in emphasis towards motorized vehicles. In 1945, bicycles were responsible for 45% of income, but this proportion sank continuously with the growth of motorcycles and later motor scooters (1952), then mopeds (1954) and cars (1957).

By 1949, the company was making a more diverse range of touring, luxury and sports bicycles, some under the main brands such as Puch and Steyr and some not. The 50th anniversary was celebrated with an elegant sports model S 50. Besides the existing brands, the name Styria was revived, and was used for the standard touring models. 1949 also saw the introduction of a new model, the S 60, and the option of Sturmey-Archer 3-speed hubs.

The year 1952 brought two important new models. The Bergmeister was a successor to the Super Sport, and the first model that was close to being a real road-racing machine. At the other end of the spectrum, the traditional black roadster, the Steyr Waffenrad, was revived.

In the following year, 1953, the Jungmeister was presented as the new top model for young

riders. This effectively rounded out the catalogue, and the range then stayed essentially unchanged until 1960. The only notable new model in this period was the California, in 1956.

In the first post-war years, exports were affected by fluctuating demand in the foreign markets. Names such as “Van Zwalun” and “Ralley J.W. Sport, Stanleyville” in the trademarks register suggest a significant export trade to Africa.

1953 brought a major milestone in the form of a contract with the American retail chain Sears, Roebuck & Company, which was to last until 1974. This was not the only export channel to the USA; under the labels Allstate and J. C. Higgins, both bicycles and mopeds found their way to independent dealers and mail-order catalogues.

Output hit a peak in 1955 with 119,859 bicycles; another high point was reached with 195,480 freewheel hubs produced in 1959. The majority of 3-speed hubs and freewheel hubs, as well as 70% of the bicycles produced, went to the USA; the USA accounted for 97% of Puch exports. Puch’s share of the bicycle import market in the USA reached 8.3 %.

Around 1950 the company had contracts with 26 wholesalers and 452 retail outlets. Puch not only set up a new racing team (see Part 10, Racing Successes, p. 311) but also invested in the promotion of cycling as a popular sport and leisure activity, for example with the ‘Day of the Bicycle’. Marketing programmes steadily increased the emphasis on health and fitness as motives for cycling.

August 1959 brought a new production record of approximately 700 bicycles per day. 75 % of these were destined for export, mainly to the USA. The company believed in a revival of cycling in America. Legend has it that the managing director was deeply involved in this strategy and once persuaded President Kennedy to ride through New York on a Puch bicycle. For Puch workers, the company was a world of its own to which they were fiercely loyal. The company had an excellent training programme for apprentices. Management personnel was recruited in-house. There was a strong works council and the company provided social and health services well in excess of the minimum. For the time being, the “Puch family” was reality. But like the bicycle factory, it was not destined to last forever.

8. Industrial Bicycle Production – Last Decades (1960 – 1987)

At the beginning of the 1960s, the product range was still modest. There was the basic Styria model, the Markenrad (brand bicycle) or the Waffenrad, and then the Luxus (luxury) model. From 1962, the range of general-purpose bicycles was rounded off by the Exquisit. The S 70, which was developed from an American export model, was offered in maroon, green and steel blue. Top of the range was the Bergmeister, with 10-speed derailleur gears as standard.

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The company released some numbers in 1966. They were making 900 bicycles per day; 4800 people, including 1200 women and 280 apprentices, were working in the Graz factories. Altogether, 2.6 million bicycles had been built since 1945. Three-quarters of the bicycles produced were exported. There was a definite trend towards sports bikes. By 1970, 70% of the bicycles produced were destined for the USA, mainly due to the partnership with Sears. Puch was exporting to 90 countries and was the leading import brand in Denmark, Sweden, the UK, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Spain. A future market was identified in West Africa, where Puch set up a factory in the then Republic of Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) to assemble its highly popular mopeds and also bicycles.

Puch pursued an active strategy in the USA, and founded the Steyr-Daimler-Puch of America Corporation in 1976. The range of bicycles had 16 models, including the top model Royal Force and the folding bike Break Away. The company positioned itself strongly on quality and service: for example, in the UK, Puch gave a 10-year guarantee on frame and forks, free insurance for 12 months and an annual check-up.

The bicycle market was recovering, and Puch decided on the one hand to enter the market for competition racing bicycles and, on the other, to promote the new breed of light-weight, racing-style sports models.

The British and American markets had priority, for example with the top-of-the-range Mistral Ultima, which was only released in Austria in 1978. The same applied to the youth models such as the Freestyle BMX bike at the end of the 70s and mountain bikes. While in the USA the first mountain bike was introduced in 1981 (at first as an out-sourced product), only one mountain bike was ever sold in Austria – in the very last Puch catalogue, in 1987.

In 1980, bicycle production in Graz reached its last peak: 310,000 bicycles were made. But this was only half the maximum capacity. And subsequently, the numbers went downhill – from 248,000 units in 1981, sales fell to 127,000 in 1986.

Efforts to improve the brand's position in the segments sport, leisure, cycle tourism, and everyday mobility either did not bring string results or never got past the prototype or small series stage – despite the fact that the design department under Fritz Spekner was not only turning out fine racing machines but also produced a whole range of interesting studies for city bikes, racing and sports bikes and even a motor-assisted all-terrain bike.

In 1987, the last, incomplete year of production, the catalogue showed a variety of cyclist types chasing the models of their desires – including a typical Alpine hunter with a Tyrolean hat and a pair of binoculars, pursuing the first mountain bike.

In the autumn of 1984, the management decided to steer the cycles section of Puch towards a spin-out. This provoked immediate protests from the workers' council, which feared the company would be filleted and broken up. The traditionally strong workers' representation had its way and prevented a selloff. Even the solution that many former

employees later said they would have favoured – reorganizing the bicycle production as a pared-down company in its own right, either in the existing factory or on a green-field site – was not chosen. Instead, the division was closed down completely and its assets were sold. The decision was probably taken at the behest of the owner Creditanstalt-Bankverein, which wanted to draw a line under several years of losses. The last bicycle left the production line on 5 August 1987.

After a series of spin-outs of different divisions, the Puch Works was finally taken over in 1998 by the Canadian automotive supplier Magna. The name Puch disappeared in 2001 with the merger of Steyr Daimler Puch Fahrzeugtechnik AG & Co. KG into Magna Steyr Fahrzeugtechnik AG & Co KG. Now the name Puch only survives in street names and a couple of museums. But still, Puch bicycles are a common sight around the streets of Graz and indeed other parts of Austria; and recently, with the new wave of cycling culture, they have often been lovingly restored or upcycled.

9. Postwar Racing Bikes

In the late 1940s, the racing team of the Graz Junior bicycle company had a dominant place in Austrian racing. Puch didn't want to just leave this area to the competition, so they started their own racing team. The bikes were initially made on Italian frames, but soon Puch began building their own racing bikes from scratch. The first commercial model was presented in 1952 on the back of the team's performance in the 1951 Tour of Austria, and introduced the model name Bergmeister ('mountain champion'). First with 8-speed and then 10-speed derailleur gears, this model remained in the range until the mid 1970s.

In the meantime, the fitness boom of the 1960s and 70s in the USA, which brought a new phase of interest in cycle racing, generated a gigantic demand for racing bikes. The 1973 oil crisis further stimulated demand. The American bicycle industry was unprepared for this surge, and for a time, huge numbers of racing bikes were imported from Europe. All the big European manufacturers were involved. Puch created special export models that were later introduced on the home market. At times, as much as two-thirds of Puch's total output was shipped to the USA; until 1975, under the Sears brand for the retail chain of that name, and under the brand J. C. Higgins for specialized cycle shops.

In 1975, when the Sears order came to an end, Puch presented the new 10-speed sports model Free Spirit. The following year, a complete range of racing bikes was presented under the name Austro-Daimler: Ultima super leicht, super leicht, Inter 10, Vent Noir (mixte), SL and S. The top model Ultima super leicht was built with Reynolds chrome-molybdenum frame tubes and high-end components from Campagnolo, Cinelli and Clement.

On the home market, the company was more restrained. The 1976 range presented three new models – Cavette, Brigadier and Royal Force – as racing bikes, though only the latter

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really deserved the name. The frame with Reynolds tubes and Duralumin parts brought the weight down below 10 kg. This model remained in the range, with modifications, until the end.

The best-known Puch racing bike was the Ultima. As its name implies, from 1978 to 1987 it was always the best that Puch had to offer. It was also the first bicycle for which only the frame and forks were made by Puch (with Reynolds manganese-molybdenum steel tubes). All the other components were Italian-made (Campagnolo, Cinelli). In 1977, the recommended retail price was \$ 1,275; in Austria, the Mistral Ultima cost 22,859 Schilling in 1980 and 29,500 Schilling in 1985 – almost as much as a small motorcycle.

The Mistral Ultima had a special variant from 1981 to 1986, in the form of the made-to-order Mistral Ultima Bergmaschine: this was a specialized version for mountain road racing, which used a split seat tube as a way of shortening the wheelbase. It was fitted with Campagnolo Super record parts, with a specially machined lightweight chainwheel, and came in at 8.25 kg. In the USA it was sold under the name Everest.

In the upper middle range, Puch offered the 12-speed Force XII from 1980, and from 1984 to 1987 the Competition, with Shimano components. There were also budget versions of the Mistral, such as the Mistral SE (1979 – 1983), the export model Mistral SE and the Mistral Tour de France, as well as the entry-level Mistral EL, made with Puch high-tensile steel tubes. The lowest price point was occupied by the Mistral E from 1979 to 1982, and the Mistral A from 1982. In 1986, there was also a Mistral Lady Sport. Even more model names were created for the American market. Olympian, Michelle, Meteor Luxe, Alpina and Luzern appeared in 1981; Maxima and Starlight in 1982. Apart from the name, these were mostly identical to European models.

Later on the names were radically reduced to 3-digit numbers followed by A-D for Austro-Daimler. In 1988, after the sale to Piaggio, more new names were used, such as the Mistral Pursuit in Midnight Black, the Laser in Midnight Blue or the red Force II, all with chrome-molybdenum frames and Shimano or Chang Star parts.

As a special model, Puch unveiled the aluminium racing bike Alutron in 1978. The whole bicycle weighed in at just 8.4 kg; the 59-cm frame weighed 1.4 kg. For the first time, the frame tubes were glued into the lugs instead of being brazed – this was done by adapting an adhesive system from the aircraft industry. However, the adhesive turned out to be unreliable in practice, so that rivets were added. The model never went into full series production.

Another model that was made to order like the Ultima Bergmaschine was the Mistral Ultima Zeitfahrmaschine time-trial bicycle, made only in 1986. From 1979 onwards, the catalogues of Steyr-Daimler-Puch also included framesets in various sizes and paint schemes.

In 1988, the catalogue of the Austrian importer Thalinger offered almost unchanged

Puch racing bicycles. The models Ultima, Professional, Competition, Royal Force, Lady Sport and Leader were made with Italian Columbus tubes instead of Reynolds, but were still painted in the same style as before.

In the following year, a major restyling of the racing bike range was done. The colour schemes were modernised and soft colour transitions replaced the plain colour blocks of earlier designs. A big change was also the switch from Campagnolo to Shimano components in the high-end models. In 1990 the same models were refreshed with new paint schemes and updated components. The prices of the racing bike models had fallen each year from 1988; a sign of declining quality. From 1991, only entry-level models were offered. And that was the end of the long and fascinating story of Puch racing bicycles.

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10. Racing Successes

At the turn of the century, cycle racing and especially Graz as a centre of the sport lost ground, while in France the Tour (1903) and in Italy the Giro (1909) got under way. The Styria Bicycle Works gave up their racing team and Puch also eased off on their involvement in competitive sport. Puch only got back into racing in a serious way after the Second World War, and had a semi-professional team from 1950 on; this move was helped along by watching the racing success of their local competition Junior Bicycles and the inauguration of the Tour of Austria in 1949. The first Puch rider to make a name for himself was Karl Cerkovnik. In the 1951 Tour of Austria, despite injuries, he won the King of the Mountains title. This inspired the name of the first Puch racing bike, the Bergmeister (mountain champion).

The autobiography of Josef "Joschi" Stadler paints a mixed picture of the early phase of the racing team: he complained of a lack of discipline, of egoism and 'every man for himself'. But the foursome of top riders Stefan Mascha, Heinz Klöckl, Edi Ignatowicz und Franz Durlacher had much more positive memories. They rode to the top of the Austrian scene and also tasted international success: in 1958 Richard Durlacher won the Milk Race in the UK as well as the Tour of Austria; Stefan Mascha, who came to the team from Vienna, won the Tour of Austria in 1959 and 1961.

The buildings by the sports ground opposite the old factory in Puchstraße were not only home to the road racing team, but also to artistic cyclists and the bicycle polo team. In this period, Styria, besides Vorarlberg, was a leading region in indoor bicycle sports.

In the mid-1970s, at the same time as producing a new line of racing bikes, Puch again revived its involvement in racing. The company sponsored races, provided equipment for riders and in 1978, formed an amateur team that won the national championship in the 4-man team category. In the following years the team rode practically all the important races in Austria and won many of them.

The team's biggest win was also its swan-song: when the World Road Race Champion-

ships came to Austria in 1987, the Puch team of Helmut Wechselberger, Hans Lienhart, Mario Traxl and Bernhard Rassinger rode to third place in the 100-km team time trial and won Austria's first world championship medal.

In the USA there were racing successes too. Puch began sponsoring riders there in 1976, including Connie Carpenter Phinney (b. 1957 in Madison, Wisconsin). One of the most successful women riders in the USA, she won the Coors Classic for the second time in 1982. In 1984 – no longer on a Puch – she had her biggest victory in the women's road race at the Los Angeles Olympics. In the sprint, she pipped her compatriot Rebecca Twigg at the line by using a bike throw. On a smaller scale, Puch also supported amateur/junior teams in England (Kirkby C.C.) and Switzerland (Allegro Puch).

From 1980 to 1985, Puch also was a sponsor of professional teams, which were based in Germany, Switzerland and France. The most colourful of these was the 1980 formation Puch-Sem, which included 20 riders from Portugal, France, Germany, Switzerland, Norway and the USA under the management of Rudi Altig and Jean de Garibaldi. Riding for the team, Dietrich "Didi" Thurau came third in Paris-Roubaix and the squad's oldest rider, Joaquim Agostinho, made fifth place in the Tour de France at the age of 37. In the team ranking, Puch-Sem came third.

The most successful pro team was Puch Wolber in 1981, which brought together riders from France, Switzerland and Germany, as well as the Austrian Gerhard Schönbacher, around the two-time Tour champion (1975, 1977) Bernard Thévenet. Schönbacher also rode in the next year's team Puch Erotex – along with Harry Maier and Gerhard Zadbilek under manager Serge Lange –, and again in 1984 for Puch Rivat Campagnolo. He became known for winning the Lanterne Rouge twice, in 1979 and 1980. Finally, in 1982 the Belgian team Masta – Puch – Marc Zeepcentrale made a short appearance.