



Chapter 24

Zonta in Europe – the non-districted period (1930–1962)¹

European clubs (1930–1945)

Austria

The Zonta Club of Vienna was the first European Zonta club. Interested women were found by Zontian Norah de Kresz, a Canadian pianist married to Hungarian violinist Geza de Kresz. As early as 2 March 1930, Zonta club number 107 was chartered in Vienna with 26 members. Lydia Sicher became club president. Soon after, the convention in Seattle adopted the name Zonta International, but American Zontians felt they wouldn't soon meet European Zontians at conventions because it was very difficult to earn a living in Austria, which meant members likely didn't have the money for a voyage to the U.S.

No one knew in 1930 how fast the political situation in Europe would change. In 1938, after the Anschluss (the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany), the state authorities seized the Vienna Zonta club's documents, and, as nearly half the members were Jewish, there are no documents on club activities from the War years. While the Zonta Club of Vienna no longer officially existed, Zonta International never disbanded it. In 1956, Austria regained its sovereignty, and the Zonta Club of Vienna was again officially recognized by Zonta International, with its original club number.

Edith Fischer, a member of the Zonta Club of Boston, visited Europe each year on a business trip. Fischer inspired a group of women to organize a Zonta club in Salzburg in 1936 with Elfriede Sanches-Jülg as charter president. This club closed in 1938 after the Anschluss and is not included in the official Zonta International roster of club presidents. It probably was organized but never chartered.²

Germany

A member of the Zonta Club of New York, Elisabeth McK. Scott, from the American Association of Foreign Affairs in New York, started the second European club in Hamburg where she ended her 1930 journey to Europe. The editor of the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* newspaper gave her the names of several business and university women, and on 6 January 1931, with Hamburg-Amerika Post Publisher Magdalene Schoch as president, the Zonta Club of Hamburg was

¹ Research compiled by Eva Nielsen

² 1969-1970 annual report to Zonta Club of Vienna by Edith Weiss.

launched. The club, number 118, had 39 charter members. The Zonta club became incorporated in Hamburg, but after Hitler and the Nazis had taken power, the club was ordered to exclude its Jewish members, which the Hamburg Zontians did not want to do. As a result, they decided not to be incorporated any longer but to continue to meet secretly in private, despite the danger. After World War II and the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), the Zonta Club of Hamburg re-formed in 1949 but had to wait until 1956 for official recognition and to receive its previous number.

In 1981, 50 years after the charter ceremony, Past International President France de la Chaise-Mutin claimed the Zonta Club of Hamburg was the only European club that had existed continuously for 50 years. Harriet Wegener, Zonta Club of Hamburg president for 18 years beginning in 1937, wrote a brief history of the club to be published in *The Zontian*.³

The Zonta International Directory mentions a club in Dresden, Germany, which was closed in 1933.⁴ The directory also mentions a club in Warsaw, Poland, that had been established in the 1930s but was closed by World War II. Most likely, these clubs were organized but never chartered.

The Nordic clubs (1935–1945)

Denmark, Sweden and Iceland

Zonta came to Denmark in 1935 with the formation of the Zonta Club of Copenhagen (club number 135), followed in 1937 by the Zonta Club of Aalborg (club number 154).

Sweden joined Zonta when Zonta International chartered the Zonta Club of Stockholm as club number 136 in May 1935, followed in 1939 by the Zonta Club of Gothenburg (club number 171). In November 1941, the Zonta Club of Reykjavik (club number 176), was formed in Iceland.

Members of Zonta took the Zonta mission from place to place when they were on holidays, business trips, or visiting friends, acquaintances and business contacts. Edith Fischer, together with Gudrun Carlson from the Zonta Club of Chicago, was involved in organizing more European clubs. Gerda Mundt and Else Illum from Copenhagen had visited Zonta clubs on business trips to the U.S. Kirstine Fabricius, from the Zonta Club of Copenhagen, had business contacts in Aalborg, and Zonta International President Mary Moyers McElroy was active in starting the Zonta club in Reykjavik.

In 1929, Gudrun Carlson was one of the three highest ranking women in the entire U.S. foreign service. She was U.S. trade commissioner to Norway, a position based on her ability, personality, training and experience.⁵

In 1933, the Zonta International board had discussed the establishment of five Zonta districts in Europe, but the political situation in central Europe put a stop to these deliberations and to establishing new Zonta clubs in Germany.

Long distance correspondence was slow, and overseas travel remained expensive. Establishing overseas Zonta clubs was quite costly, and at the international convention in Chicago in 1933, Nina Price, chair of the International Relations Committee, mentioned that many U.S. Zontians

³ *The Zontian*, September 1973 edition.

⁴ Page 10 of the District XIV membership directory from 1975.

⁵ *The Zontian* Dec.-Feb. 1993-94, p. 6

had begun regarding international extension as “an octopus that swallows five or six US dollars per capita that might be better used for local service”. Global economic crises were deep and United States banks were closed for a period that year to protect the national economy.⁶

The non-districted European Zonta clubs were not a central part of Zonta International; they operated independently. Delegates could rarely afford to attend conventions personally. The clubs had no representatives on Zonta International’s board, but in 1933, they were represented on the International Relations Committee by Magdalene Schoch from Hamburg and Anna Spitzmuller from Vienna. A note in *The Zontian* from 1938 says Thora Pedersen, from the Zonta Club of Aalborg, Nathalie Krebs, from the Zonta Club of Copenhagen, and Gurli Hartmann-Ericson, from the Zonta Club of Stockholm, were members of the Zonta International Relations Committee. The Nazi regime, World War II and the German occupation of Denmark in 1940 meant that only Gurli Hartmann-Ericson continued as a member of the committee.

Before the War, Danish and Swedish Zontians had visited each other regularly, but the War put an end to the visits. At least one member of the Zonta Club of Copenhagen was a refugee in Sweden because of her Jewish origin. She was welcomed in the Zonta Club of Gothenburg as an honorary member during the years of the War.

Nordic and European meetings (1945–1962)

- 1947: Nordic meeting No. 1 in Copenhagen, Denmark
- 1948: Nordic meeting No. 2 in Stockholm, Sweden
- 1949: Nordic meeting No. 3 in Oslo, Norway
- 1950: Nordic meeting No. 4 in Malmo, Sweden
- 1951: Nordic meeting No. 5 in Helsinki, Finland
- 1952: Nordic meeting No. 6 in Aalborg, Denmark
- 1953: Nordic meeting No. 7 in Gothenburg, Sweden
- 1954: Nordic meeting No. 8 in Uppsala, Sweden
- 1955: European meeting No. 1 in Zurich, Switzerland (Nordic and European clubs)
- 1956: Nordic Meeting No. 9 in Oslo, Norway (only for club presidents and secretaries)
- 1957: European meeting No. 2 in Paris, France (Nordic and European clubs)
 - Zonta International President Emma L. Conlon attended
 - On the agenda: Zonta’s organization in Europe
- 1958: Nordic meeting No 10. in Helsinki, Finland
 - The Nordic Council was adopted as a forerunner for a proper district board
- 1959: European meeting No. 3 in Copenhagen, Denmark (Nordic and European clubs)
 - Past International President Emma L. Conlon attended and took part in a panel-debate on refugees
- 1960: Nordic meeting No. 11 in Reykjavik, Iceland (for club presidents and secretaries)
- 1961: Oslo (Nordic clubs) and Vienna (remaining European clubs)
- 1962: International Convention
 - The International Board approved the creation of two districts in Europe: District XIII comprising the Nordic clubs, and District XIV comprising the remaining European clubs.

The Nordic clubs (1945–1962)

The period from 1945 to 1962 saw the growth of Zonta clubs in the Nordic countries:

- In Sweden, there were only two clubs in 1945; at the end of the period, there were 14.

⁶ de Langis

- In 1947, the Zonta Club of Helsinki was chartered as the first Zonta club in Finland. The club was established in 1934 as the Thursday club⁷ but it did not adopt Zonta's principles until 1947. In 1962, there were 11 Zonta clubs in Finland.
- In Norway, the Zonta Club of Oslo, chartered in 1947, started information meetings in Bergen in 1956, which led to the organization of the Zonta Club of Bergen in 1958.
- In Iceland, the Zonta Club of Reykjavik was the SOM club for a new club in Akureyri, organized in April 1948 and chartered in July 1949.
- In Denmark, the Zonta Club of Copenhagen and the Zonta Club of Aalborg were the only Zonta clubs.

Until the end of the 1940s, the number of Zonta clubs established in each of the Nordic countries had been similar; but in the 1950s, Zonta International chartered many more clubs in Finland and Sweden than in Denmark, Norway and Iceland. Differences in dedication and in understanding of the Zonta International rules among the members in the different countries seem to be the only explanation.

The Nordic and European clubs were still non-districted, but the link to Zonta International grew stronger during this period. Few participated in Zonta's international conventions in the beginning (one participant attended in 1937 and one in 1944). However, from 1954, the Nordic clubs sent delegates to each convention.

Clubs, particularly in Finland and Sweden, wanted to be districted to gain influence at Zonta's international level. However, at the same time, they wanted, to a certain extent, to adhere to their own procedures and rules. In particular, the Zonta Club of Copenhagen I formulated its own understanding, described in the club's meeting minutes as follows:

The American clubs work for women's rights and service; in this country, other associations work for women's rights and because of our legislation, we do not need service projects. We can work for international understanding and peace. The most important thing in Zonta is to meet businesswomen in leadership positions in Denmark and occasionally abroad.

Stockholm had a similar stance, noted in the statement:

We underlined very strongly that we did not like the idea of charity. We told [Gudrun Carlson] and all others about the social system in Sweden and that philanthropy was not part of our system. [However,] in the board, we debated how we could help a friend in difficulties. It should not look like charity out of pity....We helped refugee women in many ways.⁸

Nordic meetings were held regularly from 1947. At the 1950 meeting in Malmö, Sweden, clubs agreed to have the same goals and objectives, but that each club could organize as the members wanted, which was not always consistent with Zonta International rules. Clubs had a negative attitude toward service projects — above all to international service; however, some clubs had local service projects, involving education or providing help to disabled individuals. Members repeatedly said they wanted to be Zontians because of the national and the international network and fellowship. To be able to get in touch with each other, clubs decided to publish a Nordic roster in the early fifties. In 1958, the Nordic clubs formed the Nordic Zonta Council, which functioned as a district board until the formation of District XIII, the Nordic District, in 1962.

⁷ Clubs were often referred to by the day on which they met.

⁸ *Stockholm I s historia inför klubbens 80 års jubileum 2015*

European clubs (1945–1962)

Zonta cooperated closely with the United Nations from its founding in 1945. “Action for World Peace” was Zonta’s program theme for the 1946–1947 biennium, which appealed to European business and professional women. Exciting growth for Zonta in Europe began. As had happened before the War, women from a country with established Zonta clubs often started new clubs when they traveled to their country of origin or were abroad on business.

The Swiss Zontian, Magda Lang, worked as a consular employee in several regions of the U.S. and Canada. During a holiday in her homeland, she gathered interested women together in Bern. Among them were Katharina Renfer, godmother to future District XIV Governor Cornelia Klausner and aunt to future Zonta International President Sonia Renfer, and Marie-Louise Wild, who played a significant role in the formation of District XIV. The first Swiss club was chartered in Bern in 1948.

The Zonta Club of Hamburg was re-launched in 1949 and officially recognized 1956 during Zonta International President Emma L. Conlon’s biennium, when the first two European clubs, the Zonta Clubs of Vienna and Hamburg, obtained their pre-war charter numbers.

Zonta Club of Reykjavik member, Ellen Sighvatsson, was the prime mover in organizing the clubs in London and Paris. She gave the following testimony about the start of the London and Paris clubs:

In 1948, I was asked if I would go to England and help organize a club in London, as I was going there on business anyway. I was also asked to go to Paris. In three weeks, we had the making of a Zonta club in London. Zonta International President from 1948 to 1950, Elizabeth Armstrong Judge, called me every night to get a progress report, and in another week, the Zonta Club of Paris was on its way. I had the pleasure and the honor to represent Zonta International at the charter ceremony in London (1949). For Paris (1950), we asked a Copenhagen Zontian to go, as I could not manage anymore.⁹

Soon, the existing clubs sponsored new clubs in their countries. In 1962, there were 19 European clubs in addition to the 31 Nordic clubs.

Marian de Forest’s vision had become a reality. The old world was linked with the new. Now, administration had to follow. Marie-Louise Wild, from the Zonta Club of Bern, was asked to function as a liaison between Zonta’s headquarters in Chicago and the Region Middle Europe. She served as the first representative of the region from 1956 to 1961 and chaired meetings in 1957 in Paris and 1959 in Copenhagen.

European meetings

The first European meeting took place in Zürich in 1955. Many American Zontians were present, along with Zonta International President Emma L. Conlon. On the agenda was Zonta’s organization in Europe – could and would Zonta establish two districts there? As no decision was reached, the Nordic club presidents discussed the idea again at the European meeting in Paris in 1957.

The third Inter-European Zonta Conference was held in Copenhagen from 19 to 31 May in 1959 at the Tre Falke hotel. European and Nordic club representatives held short meetings

⁹ Ellen Sighvatsson’s notes in District 13 Archive. No further information is in the archive.

simultaneously. The most important decision made was that European meetings would be held only every fourth year, not every second, as the organization had been doing to that time.

Karen-Margrethe Ahlmann-Ohlsen, from the Zonta Club of Copenhagen, who also served as chief of the International Relations Committee in the Danish Red Cross, gave a lecture on the refugee situation in Europe (1959 was the UN's International Year of the Refugee), and Maaghild Haarberg from the Zonta Club of Oslo and Emma Conlon from the U.S. debated the refugee problem. The Nordic clubs recommended and the Zonta International Board adopted the Displaced Persons in Wuppertal and the Anne Frank Village as a Zonta International service project for 1960–62. With donations received, a house was built in Anne Frank Village. This housing development for refugee families was established near Wuppertal in West Germany with funds donated by the Belgian priest and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Father Pire.

Zonta in Europe, at the time, was becoming an extensive organization. A pre-convention Zonta International board meeting in 1960 in Toronto included a debate and decision to create two new districts in Europe.

The 1961 conferences were held in Oslo and Vienna. Zonta International President Ellen Harris attended the Nordic meeting in Oslo. Discussions about establishing the two European districts were on the agenda. Finally, in 1962, District XIII (clubs in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) and District XIV (clubs in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, England and France) were voted for and adopted by the Zonta International Board at the international convention in New Orleans.