

Angel Aids Race Toward Past



REVIVED A construction worker removes rubble from a house under restoration in the old market square of Görlitz. Behind him, at right, is the renovated Rathaus, or town hall.

By MARK LANDLER

GÖRLITZ, Germany
TOWN officials here began to wring their hands when February passed, then March, without a word, let alone the expected transfer of money into the municipal coffers.

Each year since 1995, an anonymous benefactor has given one million German marks, the equivalent of \$590,000, to this secluded city on the eastern edge of Germany. The money has helped finance the restoration of Görlitz's Old Quarter - one of the most important, least celebrated repositories of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque architecture in Germany.

This year, though, the cash did not turn up. Sensing that the town's luck might have run out, the mayor, Rolf Karbaum, sent a letter to a lawyer who represents the benefactor in early April, more than a month after the donation was normally deposited. "I told him that we are realistic and we know that all fairy tales must come to an end," he said.

A few days later, the cash was wired, and the mayor was able to tell his citizens that the fairy tale had another chapter.

There is something magical about Görlitz, a town of 60,000 on the Polish border that fairly thrums with history. A prosperous trading center in the Middle Ages, a genteel Prussian retirement community in the 19th century, a city bisected into German and Polish halves by borders redrawn after World War II, Görlitz wears its past in many layers of architecture.

In the more than 12 years since German reunification, about half of the town's buildings have been painstakingly restored. Financed by public and private money, including the cash from the mystery donor, Görlitz has become one of the most unorthodox urban renewal projects in Europe.

"In no other German city can you find all the architectural styles in one place," said

Gottfried Kiesow, chairman of the German Landmark Preservation Foundation. He considers Görlitz the most beautiful city in Germany, even over architectural jewels like Heidelberg or Rothenberg.

What makes Görlitz so precious, from a restoration perspective, is that it was spared both the destruction of World War II and the predatory development of West Germany's postwar boom.

"The East Germans didn't do anything good for Görlitz's architecture," Professor Kiesow said, "but they didn't do any damage either. When there is too much money, you end up with a city like Cologne, which has a beautiful cathedral but is surrounded by ugly modern buildings."

Görlitz was neglected by the Communist government for decades after World War II, which is not in itself unusual. Even more prominent cities like Dresden stagnated during that period. But because of its bucolic seclusion, it was almost completely ignored, living as if suspended in amber. By the time the authorities in East Berlin began hatching plans to tear down the Old Quarter and move residents into cinder-block apartments, the Berlin Wall was knocked down instead.

In 1991, Görlitz was named one of five model former East German cities, which made it eligible for millions of dollars in state funding for public works projects. Four years later, it drew the attention of Germany's landmark preservation authority, as well as that of the anonymous benefactor.

None of this largesse has shielded Görlitz from the vagaries of post-unification Germany. Like other former East German cities, it has a corroded industrial base and an unemployment rate of more than 20 percent. Many of its young people have fled to the west to look for work.

Indeed, Görlitz feels a bit like a museum in the making - a city racing toward its glorious past, when it sat on a medieval trading route that stretched from Spain to Russia, and its wealthy merchants built grand villas. The restoration work gives it at least the aura of a place on the move.

The pounding of hammers and the whir of drills echo through the squares and winding streets of the old town. Pedestrians must pick their way through a gantlet of detours, where workmen are laying bricks on the street or ladders are propped up against the sides of houses.

Some of the projects are remarkably ambitious. Steffen Wehler, a native of Görlitz, is moving his family from a rented house in the suburbs to a crumbling 16th-century craftsman's house in the town center that he is restoring. Mr. Wehler, a 37-year-old investment adviser, envisions a home that will encompass his family's interests: a sprawling apartment, offices for him and his partners, and a ground-floor shop for his wife, who wants to sell arts and crafts.

"We wanted to move back to town, and we like the atmosphere and flair of the old houses," Mr. Wehler said. "Where else would you find a place in the middle of town with a large courtyard and a cellar?"

More than 3,500 such buildings have been granted landmark status, which protects them from being altered or torn down. About half the structures in the old town -an area that covers 25 square blocks - have been restored to their original style. That gives

the neighborhood a gap-toothed charm, with meticulously repainted houses standing next to ramshackle, peeling ones.

The uneven pace of restoration is dictated by the ownership of the houses. Some are owned by longtime residents who have neither the means nor the desire to undertake a costly renovation. Others have been bought by real estate developers from western Germany, who see the potential for Görlitz to become a tourist destination and want to establish a foothold.

Georg Rittmannsperger's family came here by accident when his parents drove through the town on their way to the Czech Republic in 1992. Beguiled by the old houses, Mr. Rittmannsperger's father began to buy properties, including an ancient pharmacy that holds court on one of the market squares, the Untermarkt, and that dates to the 1550's.

With a grant of \$57,600 out of the anonymous donor's annual gift, as well as money from the state and the landmark preservation foundation, Mr. Rittmannsperger's family restored the building to its original Renaissance splendor, chipping away plaster to uncover two colorful sundials on the exterior wall.

Today, the building houses a cafe on the ground floor, as well as apartments, a wine dealer and the offices of a software company. The employees work under a richly decorated wooden Renaissance ceiling, which was exposed when a drop ceiling, installed in recent decades, was removed.

All told, the project cost more than \$1.7 million, some of which came from the Rittmannsperger family, which also redevelops vintage town houses in western German cities. Across the street, the family is restoring a Gothic merchant's house that dates to the 15th century.

When the building is completed, Mr. Rittmannsperger said, it will house shops and offices for an academic institute affiliated with the Technical University of Dresden and with the landmark preservation foundation.

"This is not a speculative venture; we would be happy to break even," said Mr. Rittmannsperger, a genial 28-year-old who moved to Görlitz four years ago to oversee his family's eight properties here.

Mr. Wehler, by contrast, is a prodigal son. He grew up in Görlitz, living some of his childhood years in the old town. But he moved to the western city of Bremen after unification.

In 1996, married with two children, Mr. Wehler returned to his hometown to set himself up in business. For less than \$90,000, he bought a 16th-century house in his old neighborhood, as well as an adjacent old house, built centuries later.

Refurbishing the houses will cost nearly \$700,000, Mr. Wehler estimates. He hopes to defray some of that by obtaining a grant from the annual donation made by the anonymous donor. That money would go toward restoring two painted wooden ceilings, which he uncovered.

Mr. Wehler is also applying for grants from the city, the state of Saxony, and the German Landmark Preservation Foundation. That money would finance the restoration of other historical details, like the doors, the floorboards, and the stucco

ceiling of a baroque room that he plans to use as his living room. All told, he figures he can defray about \$200,000 of the cost of the project.

Because the house has landmark status, Mr. Wehler must adhere to strict design restrictions on the facade and exterior. Even the color must be approved by the historic preservation authority.

"We were so inexperienced and naïve," he said. "We had absolutely no idea what it means to buy a listed property. I don't know if we would have done it had we known all this beforehand."

The hope of most people here is that Görlitz's well-preserved architecture will finally put it on the European tourist routes. They point out that it can be reached in a few hours by car from Berlin or Prague.

Aside from the attention of curious western Germans, however, Görlitz remains a hidden treasure. The locals grouse that the state of Saxony is more concerned about promoting its main cities, Dresden and Leipzig.

Things may not get better soon, as Germany's economic downturn is eating away its generous state subsidies. Mayor Karbaum noted that Görlitz will run its first budget deficit in recent memory. That is one reason he counts on the annual gift from the town's anonymous benefactor.

Mr. Karbaum said the donation was worth far more than \$590,000 a year, since it encouraged other public and private philanthropy. Over the nine years of the gifts, he estimated, Görlitz has attracted nearly \$55 million for historic restoration that it would not have otherwise.

Each year, the German news media engage in a guessing game about the identity of the benefactor. Professor Kiesow believes it is an older person who was born in Görlitz, but fled the Nazi regime and lives abroad. Others believe it is a wealthy western German with roots in the east.

Mayor Karbaum will not play the game.

"I don't want to know the identity of the person," he said, sitting in the medieval town hall, lavishly restored with those anonymous funds. "My impression is that it must be someone who loves this city very much. It must also be someone who follows what's going on here very closely."



Matthias Rietschel for The New York Times
HISTORY IN THE REMAKING
A worker lays bricks in the
Untermarkt.



Matthias Rietschel for The New York Times
Georg Rittmannsperger renovated
a 16th-century pharmacy,
uncovering Renaissance sundials
and a painted ceiling.