

In Berlin, the past is with us

Travel in Germany is an emotional experience

By STEVE FORRESTER
The Daily Astorian

A trip to Germany is emotional. The past is palpably present. My wife and I discovered that in our recent visits to Berlin, Dresden, Bayreuth, Nuremberg and other cities.

People and places are the joy and insight of travel. On our trip through Germany, Budapest and Prague, we had the good fortune to meet an array of provocative, interesting guides. They included an Astoria man who has spent 17 years in Berlin, a Dresden native who bears scars of the repressive Soviet GDR (German Democratic Republic) and a young Ph.D. candidate who brought the Nuremberg Trials alive.



A world city

The images of Berlin in my head were of the Wall, the Brandenburg Gate and ruins at the end of World War II. It is much more than that. Berlin is heavily forested, with abundant park lands. Because some 65 percent of Berlin was destroyed in the war, it is largely a new city, but with many magnificent restorations. It has a relatively low population density and excellent public transportation.

My wife noticed that Berlin resembles Washington, D.C. Both are low-rise cities with extensive embassy footprints. It is a world city.

A confession

Most of all, Berlin is a sort of confessional. Evidence of the war and of the Nazi regime that started that war are all around. Unlike Japan, postwar Germany is exceptionally open about the panoply of Nazi horrors. Even the park around Richard Wagner's opera house in Bayreuth is akin to the Catholic confession box.

At 41, Preston Meyer, is an experienced Berlin travel guide. He is also a member of the Astoria High School class of 1993. Preston showed us the site where physicians decided whether disabled people would live or be shipped away for experiments before a death from neglect. In a park, he pointed out a stark monument to the homosexuals who were arrested by the Nazis.

One of the most startling moments was seeing the vacant lot, under which was Hitler's bunker — where he and Eva Braun committed suicide and were incinerated. Today it is a sort of parking lot, but with an interpretative plaque.

On our Sunday walk through Berlin, its pending elections were apparent. Preston pointed out the campaign posters of the far right, racial purity party.

On the recommendation of an Astoria friend, we visited the Berlin Museum. After seeing rooms that cover the close of World War I and the Weimar period, the rise of Hitler (including a scale model of Auschwitz) and World War II, and the allied occupation, we left, emotionally exhausted.

Surrender

While we traveled, The New Yorker published an article titled "Where Germans Make Peace with their Dead." It is about a sort of therapy that is attracting people seeking emotional answers. Describing the participants, Burkhard Bilger wrote: "Most were middle aged Germans ... unaccustomed to self-pity and allergic to national pride. ... Theirs was a country responsible for history's bloodiest war and most efficient mass murder ..."

Preston showed us the place where all that ended — Karlshorst. In a former officers mess hall the German surrender was signed. Outside the building, Soviet tanks are displayed. Inside is an exhibit about what happened in this building on May 8, 1945. In a large hall are the tables and chairs where the Allied powers sat and the small table at which German Field Marshal Keitel and two others were brought to sign the surrender document.

Emotional baggage

If the Nazi past is emotional baggage, so is the Soviet occupation of East Germany. We heard about this from two guides. Cosima, a woman in her late 40s, said: "I wasted half my life under Communist rule." She described how she was singled out as a Catholic in kindergarten and as a high school graduate not recommended for college because of her religion.

She added this poignant observation: "The Communists created ruins with no weapons."

Cosima recommended a book titled "Stasiland," which describes the vestiges of the notorious East German secret police, the Stasi. Anna Funder writes that the Stasi's ratio of spies and informants to population was higher than Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia. "After the Wall fell, the German media called East Germany 'the most perfected surveillance state of all time.'"



This informational plaque explains Hitler's bunker where he and Eva Braun committed suicide and were incinerated.



Former Astorian Preston Meyer at the Jewish Memorial, Berlin. He is an experienced travel guide in the city.



This portion of the Berlin Wall has been preserved against souvenir hunters.

Opera history

Seeing Bayreuth and Wagner's Festspielhaus was the big draw of this tour. With a Scotsman from Edinburgh, we took the German-language tour. Sitting in the auditorium was being inside one of opera's time capsules — a space that has been filled by big, exquisite voices for 140 years. Like many outsized icons, this one has modest proportions. Walls are earth tones. It lacks the glitter that typically festoons opera houses. We were thrilled to be shown into the orchestra pit and to stand on the stage.

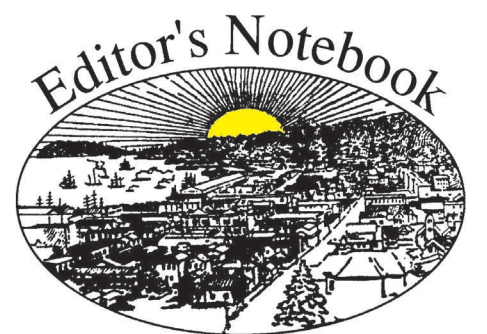
Outside the opera house is a panel with a simple label, "Introduction." Two extensive paragraphs describe Wagner's condemnation of Jews and how Nazis took inspiration from his music. It also confessed his heirs' cooperation in Hitler's oppression of the Festspielhaus. Next to this panel are some

230 panels titled "Silenced Voices." They picture and describe singers and conductors who were not allowed to perform there because they were Jewish or gay.

Curtain calls

Seeing live music theater abroad is an adventure. In Budapest, we enjoyed Hungarian operetta, specifically "The Gypsy Princess," composed by Emmerich Kalman in 1915. Our seatmates included family groups, sometimes of three generations. The woman next to me hummed the tunes. A man behind me hummed the tunes. A man behind me hummed the tunes before they were spoken. Rhythmic clapping led to some 15 minutes of curtain calls.

Steve Forrester is the former editor and publisher of The Daily Astorian. He is president of the EO Media Group board of directors.



East Germany was 'the most perfected surveillance state of all time.'



Underneath this parking lot was the Führerbunker, where Adolf Hitler spent his last weeks. Following Hitler's suicide and that of Eva Braun, their bodies were incinerated in this space.



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