

A TALE OF ONE CITY



Aneta Pasikowska's evocative large paintings on linen have decorated the windows of some of Görlitz's empty buildings and the nave of the city's late Gothic St Peter's church these past months. They tell the tale of dislocation and loss that is one part of the story of this remarkable city.

On the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the second world war, hidden europe reports from the once divided city of Görlitz that sits astride an international border. German Görlitz and Polish Zgorzelec had little in common during the years after the war, but now they are forging a common future. And in the accompanying feature immediately following, Tim Locke unravels an intriguing tale of one family's connections with Görlitz.

It is one of those unsung cities of which all Europe really should be more proud. It features in few guidebooks, yet much of Görlitz is picture perfect. The city walls and ramparts, the studied perfection of its two town squares, the quiet riverside walks along the banks of the Neiße, and an ensemble of fine buildings that captures, within the compass of a few streets, many of the most striking architectural genres of the last few centuries. It is a city of enveloping calm, except perhaps at this time of year, when the aldermen and civil officials in Görlitz get a little jittery, anxiously checking the city's bank account to see if the annual windfall has arrived. For some years, usually in early May, an anonymous donation

of a million marks has arrived in the bank account of the Lower Silesian city.

No one knows the origin of this handsome benefaction, but the city fathers speculate that perhaps it comes from someone who had left the city years ago and has made good since. We shall probably never know. The German mark has been consigned to numismatic history, supplanted by the Euro, but still the donations arrive. The first was in 1995, and there is a natural apprehension this year that the donor might have decided to limit his or her benevolence to an arithmetically neat ten years. If the civic demeanour is unduly gloomy in Görlitz in mid May 2005, we shall know why.

The fifteenth meridian east of Greenwich cuts through the very centre of Görlitz, as does the German – Polish border, which is defined not by the meridian but by the River Neiße, or the Nysa as it is called in Polish on the east bank. At least, that is how it has been since the end of the second world war, when politicians imposed a new order on this part of Europe and delineated a border that uncomfortably separated Görlitz from its Silesian hinterland. Görlitz stayed German, the only city in Silesia that was to remain German territory. The eastern part of the city on the east bank of the river, now renamed Zgorzelec, was assigned to Poland.

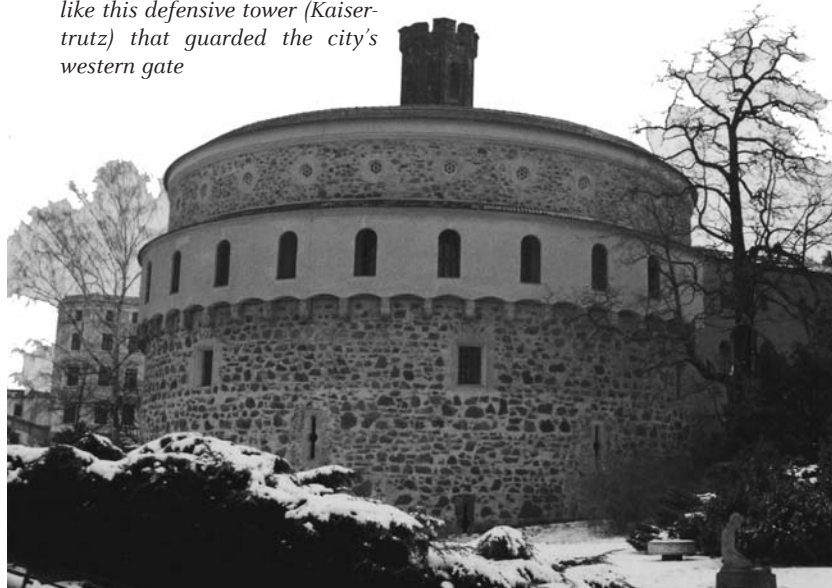
Despite a common history, and the fact that the German Democratic Republic and

Poland nominally had some ideological ties, the two sides of divided Görlitz grew apart. As if to emphasise that sense of separation, Görlitz and Zgorzelec even found themselves in different time zones for part of each year, an accidental by-product of the curiosity that the German Democratic Republic and neighbouring Poland never saw eye to eye on the matter of clocks!

So Görlitz was on the edge of things, a tough call for a once proud city which had held pole position in central European trade. For Görlitz lay astride the Via Regia, in times past one of the great Carolingian highways that traders used to cross Germany, coming from Poland and Russia in the east and France and Spain in the west. Many a pilgrim bound for Santiago de Compostela trod the Via Regia through Görlitz. If the Via Regia brought cloth, dyes, political and ecclesiastical influence, then the north – south route through Görlitz traded an even more sought after commodity: amber. The palazzos on the city's Lower Market Square (*Untermarkt*) attest to the wealth that the precious fossilised resin brought to Görlitz. So traders from the Baltic, taking the Neiße valley route south to Italy and the Balkans, had perforce to go through Görlitz. Few places were as blessed or so rich in international contacts. Amber amulets were traded for the finest cloths. Pilgrims from L'viv and Kraków passing through Görlitz on the route to Santiago knew it as a place to buy amber rosary beads.

Individual buildings attest to Görlitz' history, and particularly its pivotal position in European trade. The city has, in its central area alone, more than 3000 listed and protected buildings, even more than Quedlinburg in the Harz mountains, which is often proclaimed, and with much justification, as Europe's most perfectly preserved mediaeval small town. Renaissance Görlitz was deeply influenced by one man, the city's architect Wendel Roskopf. He was born in Görlitz, became one of the most accomplished architects of his day, and examples of his work

Görlitz protected its mercantile might with ample fortifications, like this defensive tower (Kaisertrutz) that guarded the city's western gate



abound in Lower Silesia, Lusatia and Bohemia. But nowhere more than in his home city of Görlitz. Roskopf's monogram can be seen above some of the magnificent early sixteenth century portals. But variety is the watchword in Görlitz, as Gothic pointed arcades with ribbed vaults vie with baroque façades.

In the nineteenth century, Görlitz benefited again from its happy location along major trade routes. The railway from Berlin arrived in the 1860s, giving new access to Prussian markets, and the city thrived on its position midway between the great cities of Dresden and Breslau (nowadays Wrocław in Poland). Industrial magnates built great villas in the leafy avenues outside the old town walls, and the heart of the city continued to evolve. The city accumulated a great library, it had its own academy of sciences, and a considerable publishing industry developed, serving the scientific, industrial and cultural interests of Görlitz and its hinterland in Lusatia and Lower Silesia. Catholic, Lutheran and Jewish lives were happily intertwined. Industry fostered commerce, and the city was one of the first to secure a department store. Even today, visitors go to Görlitz for its Karstadt store, a masterpiece of central European art nouveau. It was said that, before the first world war, Görlitz was one of the richest cities between the Rhine and Russia.

But there is another side to Görlitz. During much of the twentieth century it was massively neglected. During the years of the Weimar Republic, inflation took its toll and many businesses collapsed. At the start of May 2005 Görlitz will mark the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the second world war. True, it somehow escaped the ravages of destruction during that conflict, though all but one of the city's many bridges across the Neiße were destroyed by retreating German troops on 7 May 1945. In the aftermath of the war, both Görlitz and neighbouring Zgorzelec became cities of the dispossessed. The entire eastern half of the city, on the Polish bank of the river, was evacuated, the German population leaving their homes and retreating to the west bank of the Neiße. Many left the Görlitz region altogether, preferring to make their new homes in Dresden or

We arrived at Zgorzelec's main railway station on the only evening train from Germany on 30 April. Finding a way out of the station, which looks for all the world as though no train has stopped here for years, was not easy. There is a footbridge which leads around the edge of the abandoned and shuttered station buildings, broken glass everywhere, and three men with empty bottles sitting in the very last of the evening sunshine. A half hour walk later, and approaching the east bank of the river, there is the predictable scatter of stalls and kiosks which, even in the darkness, are still doing a brisk trade in cigarettes, as Germans rush to catch the last bargains before Poland joins the European Union.

At ten in the evening, the road bridge that connects the two halves of this divided city is closed to traffic. From both the German and the Polish banks, good humoured crowds begin to gather on the bridge. To the north the old town skyline is floodlit. A brass band plays, and two men in suits push through the heaving crowds, and, as the clocks strike twelve, the mayor of Zgorzelec and the mayor of Görlitz shake hands. All attempts at giving speeches are drowned by the cheering assembly, for Poland has been admitted to that growing band of countries that make up the European Union. By one in the morning, most of the crowds have dispersed, and a celebratory performance of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* is well underway.

Berlin, where they were free of the daily reminders of what had once been their Silesian lives. In their place, migrants from Poland's lost eastern territories came to Zgorzelec, people who knew nothing of Silesia. These newcomers dreamt of their time on the rich farmsteads around Lviv and stared out across the Neiße to the turreted skyline of the Görlitz old town (*Altstadt*), which was another world that they never once visited. Görlitz itself declined into obscurity, and the façades crumbled. Strangely the synagogue survived, being one of the few in Germany not have been destroyed by the Nazis. It clearly had luck on its side for the East German government left it equally untouched as part of the decaying fabric of a once beautiful city. But Görlitz had long since lost its entire Jewish population, and like so many of the fine buildings in the old town, the synagogue lay silent.

From the fifties to the eighties the respective city councils on each side of the Neiße

viewed each other with nothing but suspicion. Hardly anyone crossed the one bridge that remained across the river, about a kilometre upstream from the old town. Then came the events of 1989, and the ensuing political changes that led to a thawing of relations between Görlitz and Zgorzelec. But Görlitz still felt itself even more on the edge of things as it was not only the easternmost and remotest city in a newly unified Germany, but it also sat uncomfortably on the outer boundary of the European Union.

The tide began to turn in the mid nineties, and in the last ten years, Görlitz and Zgorzelec have transformed themselves into shining models of cooperation, a process which was enormously abetted by Poland's accession to the European Union on 1 May 2004 (see box on page 25). Today there are all manner of collaborative ventures, from bilingual schools attended by children from both the German and Polish communities to joint sporting fixtures. And, most conspicuously, the pedestrian bridge that linked the old city centre of Görlitz with the Polish east bank has been reconstructed, symbol once more of a unified city. The annual donations from the anonymous benefactor began and left their mark on the city, where an extravagance of baroque, Gothic and Renaissance architecture is being restored to its former glory. Poles even venture across the river, and on the April evening when the Pope died and in the days thereafter, citizens from both banks of the river gathered with candles on the newly rebuilt old town bridge. Passports are still checked, but only in the most desultory manner, and citizens of both Görlitz and Zgorzelec now look forward to the time, two or three years hence, when Poland is due to join the Schengen group of nations and border formalities will be dispensed with altogether. And, for both communities, 2010 looms large, the year for which this most amiable of small cities has applied to be recognised Europe's capital of culture. Huge progress, indeed, for a city that is still largely unknown outside its local region.

DETAILS

Görlitz

Görlitz will one day be every bit as celebrated as Kraków, Cork or Carcassonne. Now is the time to visit, before the crowds arrive. The city is about 3hrs 15mins by train from Berlin, normally requiring a change of train at Cottbus with about ten connections daily. There are very cheap twice daily trains direct from Wrocław to both Zgorzelec and Görlitz. The city also has trains about hourly from Dresden, normally taking ninety minutes. Train times are on www.bahn.de. Taeter Tours have just started running twice daily non stop coach services to Görlitz from both Dresden and Wrocław, though it is worth noting that in Görlitz these express buses stop only at the motorway junction just north of the city. Details on www.appixportale.de/taeter-tours. The nearest international airports, with approximate distances by road, are Dresden (105 km), Wrocław (170 km), Prague (170 km) and Berlin (230 km).

Görlitz is remarkably well provided for with accommodation in all price ranges. For a couple of days of pampered luxury, no better place than the baroque market trading hall, which reopened its doors in May last year as a smart hotel. Online at www.boerse-goerlitz.de, the *Hotel Börse* in the Lower Market Square (*Untermarkt*) has singles from €60 and doubles from €85. *Zum Sechsten Gebot* is a guest house just off the market square, run by the same company as the *Hotel Börse*, and online at the same website. Singles are from €49 and doubles from €60. The *Hotel Tuchmacher* is on a quiet corner near St Peter's Church, but is a step up in price, with rooms from €85. The hotel is online at www.tuchmacher.de. Finally, Görlitz has a quite remarkable youth hostel, mentioned in the next article, with bed and breakfast from just €15. Its website is at www.jh-goerlitz.de. Görlitz has an excellent town website on www.goerlitz.de. ■

Ephraim's villa

A GÖRLITZ PORTRAIT BY TIM LOCKE

For me the word Görlitz has always conjured up distant, glamorous but ultimately tragic family history: a Germanic side of myself that I never really fathomed until I visited the town. The house I grew up in, in southeast London, was full of what seemed enigmatic mementos of a world I had never encountered: tomes of yellowing piano music, which I myself play, bearing the purple rubber stamp of a Görlitz bookshop; a faded sepia portrait of my great-grandparents Martin and Hildegard Ephraim; a certificate presented by the Kaiser bestowing the Freedom of the city of Görlitz upon Martin Ephraim; and a photo of a vast mansion that once belonged to my family.

Martin Ephraim, born in 1860, was a Jewish magnate whose father had moved to Görlitz and made a fortune in iron — from nails to railway components. By the turn of the twentieth century, Martin Ephraim was at the heart of Görlitz's cultural life. In 1907 he built himself a fine villa, the first Jugendstil (art nouveau) house in Görlitz. He contributed to the railway station, synagogue and art gallery. He also donated archaeological finds, paintings, porcelain and painted folksy furniture from the local Oberlausitz (Upper Lusatia) culture to the museum. Despite his religion, he married a Lutheran, Hildegard Rauthe, an alderman's daughter and one of the first German women to go to university; they brought their children up as Lutherans too.

Ephraim's villa was sold at the height of the German hyper-inflation of the 1920s — the proceeds they got after the exchange of



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a portrait of Martin Ephraim by Max Kowarzik (around 1905)

contracts was, as the family legend goes, 'just enough to buy a basket of cherries'. The Ephraims moved out of town, building another house at the nearby mountain resort of Schreiberhau (Szklarska Poręba now in Poland). Then came the Third Reich, and the family's world was turned upside down.

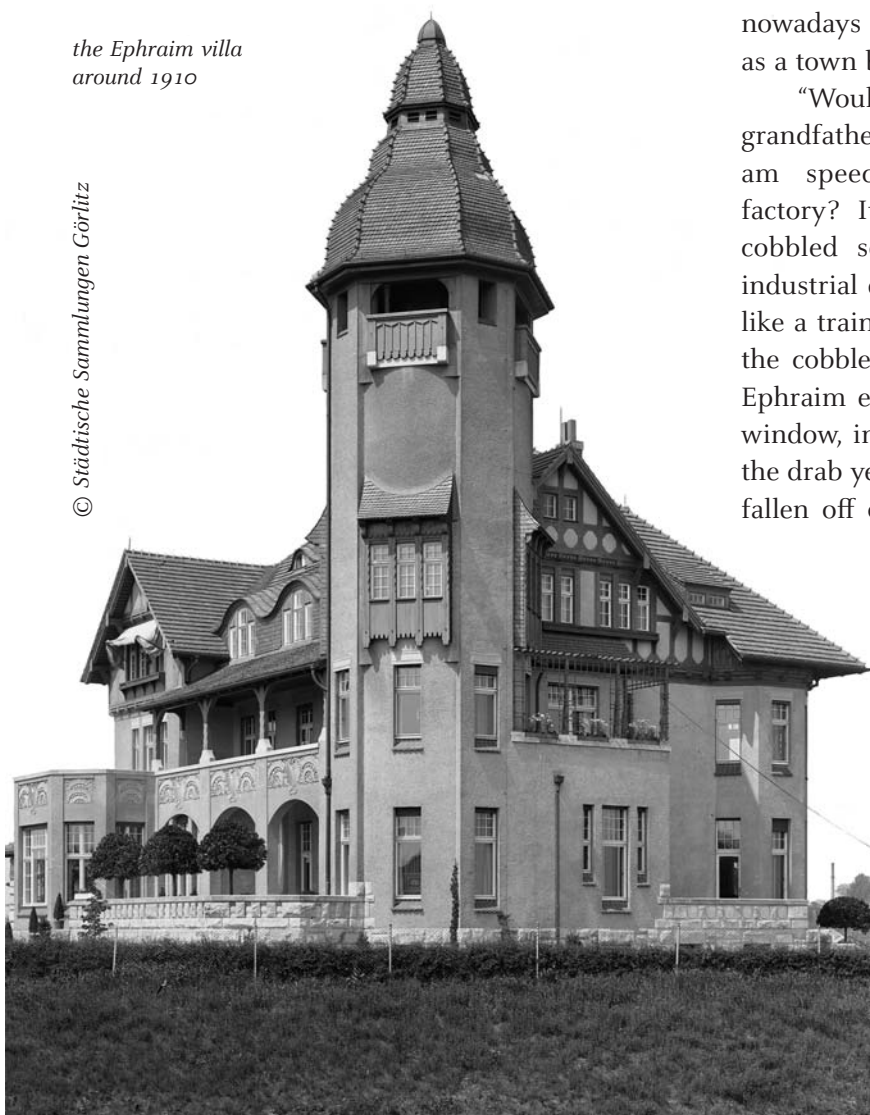
That hypothetical basket of cherries for me stood for a lost world, to which there could surely be no return. My sense of doom was underlined by discovering among my mother's papers a message written by her mother, Vera Neumeyer (the Ephraims' youngest daughter), which she threw out of a train en route to a Polish concentration camp in 1942 and which was eventually forwarded to my mother, who

had escaped on a Kindertransport to England. Vera wrote her final farewell, recording travelling through Görlitz that morning and glimpsing her childhood home. Martin Ephraim himself died in Theresienstadt (Terezín) camp in 1944.

Some sixty years on, I ventured to Görlitz to find what shreds of the Ephraim existence might have survived. The railway station doesn't look like it has changed: it is a Jugendstil gem, with gracious curves and period lamps. A ten minute walk from here is Goethestraße and the Ephraims' house. And it's still very much there, just like the photo that has intrigued me all my life. Now it is a youth hostel, surely one of the architecturally strangest in all Europe. Behind railings rises a preposterous, tower embellished fantasy, with great curved lintels, rustic balconies and turrets.

*the Ephraim villa
around 1910*

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Frank Usemann — father-in-law of the present hostel warden, and a retired history teacher — welcomes me for a guided tour. The German and then Russian armies used the house as a headquarters, but it is astonishingly well preserved inside, at least on its ground floor: ME — Martin Ephraim's monogram — is still cut in glass panels in the front door, while the galleried hall is resplendent with carved woodwork, beaten bronze lamps, panels bearing painted cherubs and stained glass windows of the nearby Ruhmeshalle and the three muses. Leading off are the billiard room and breakfast room, with a riot of zigzag mosaics and carved wood. Something must have compelled the successive forces that commandeered the place to look after it. Herr Usemann gives every school party a talk about the Ephraims: in the Communist DDR days he had to call this lecture 'the story of a capitalist'; nowadays he focuses more on Martin Ephraim as a town benefactor and victim of the Nazis.

"Would you like now to see your great-grandfather's factory?" asks Herr Usemann. I am speechless. That railway component factory? It still exists. At the bottom of a cobbled service road leading into a small industrial estate is a spectral looking structure like a train shed, with remains of rails set into the cobbles. Incredibly the very Jewish name Ephraim embellishes it, over the great arched window, in faded but indelible black paint on the drab yellow-grey cement, later signs having fallen off or been removed. I peer inside the grubby windows: astonishingly it's still in use as a factory.

Martin Ephraim was the main benefactor of the neo-classical Ruhmeshalle 'Hall of Fame' (known today as the Dom Kultury), the memorial hall, gallery and museum of 1902 that stands monumental, domed and magnificent on the Polish side of town. He donated a frieze — ironically commemorating war — for the outside. His name, along with the other benefactors, originally appeared inside but was removed by the Nazis. Also

gone, presumably soon after 1918 when such a memorial would have seemed grotesquely out of place, was an ultra-patriotic statue of the two Kaisers (“Mit Gott Fürs Kaiserreich”), replaced by an incongruous mirror and a statue of motherhood. But all the other details are there: the friezes, the coloured-glass dome, the railings round the upper gallery. After 1945 it had lost all its art and museum collections and found itself seemingly stranded on the Polish side of a new border, and it still stands forlorn and woefully underused. The mirror tantalises me: it is definitely covering something up; since then, it has been removed, and beneath is a huge portrait of Martin Ephraim. Roundels depicting the four Ephraim children have since been discovered above doorways too.

The sole fragment of Martin Ephraim’s handwriting that my family still has is a poignantly fitting quotation from Martin Luther, translating as: “If I knew the world would end tomorrow, I would still plant my apple tree today.” Just before he died, he gave this to a friend who went to Auschwitz and survived. On the back of this scrap of paper, Martin’s friend wrote “this helped in Auschwitz”. Despite all the massive upheavals of the twentieth century, an awareness has dawned on me that the Ephraims planted seeds that have indeed born fruit. The Ephraims have not vanished off the face of the earth. Martin Ephraim’s portrait, donated to the town in the 1920s but handed back to him by the Nazis in 1933, hangs once more for public view in the Kaisertrutz museum, on the German side. Here one of the museum curators, Jasper von Richthofen, showed me some of the archaeology and other artefacts donated by Martin Ephraim — the Nazis and Russians swiped most of the more portable items, but what’s left has a special accession code prefix (E — for Ephraim). At the Schlesisches Museum, Marius Winzeler showed us more: paintings and decorated peasant cupboards. The synagogue Martin Ephraim helped to endow, in Otto-Müller Straße, is being revamped as an art gallery, and there is even a Martin-Ephraim Straße. And the hostel, the Ephraims’ villa, is the cheapest place to stay in town: my wife and I spent an exquisitely poignant night there as



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the Ruhmeshalle around 1905 (today’s Dom Kultur)

the only guests, in the company of the benign ghosts of the Ephraims. ■

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Jewish Görlitz

The two preceding pieces on Görlitz allude to the city’s Jewish dimension, and to the principal synagogue on Otto-Müller Straße. It is a sign of the onetime vitality of Jewish life in the city that the community outgrew its two original meeting places. Until 1853, the city’s Jews gathered for daily prayers at 10 Nikolaistraße, and that road formed the focal point for Jewish life in the city. From 1853, the community met in a synagogue in Langenstraße.

By the early twentieth century, the city’s practising Jews numbered several hundred, so in May 1909 the foundation stone of the magnificent new synagogue on Otto-Müller Straße was laid. Within a year or two, the 550 seat synagogue was completed. But even though Jewish life in Görlitz ended with Nazi persecution, a small relic of that past remains. That is the mikvah, once used for ritual cleansing, at 6 Nikolaistraße. It is fed by local springwater, and has been redeployed to a more secular use. The Destille restaurant is now housed in the building and, during the winter season, when fresh carp is eaten as a great delicacy in the region, the former mikvah comes into its own as an ideal place to store the live fish!