

## Historic Heuersdorf

Jeffrey H. Michel  
Energy Coordinator of Heuersdorf  
jeffrey.michel@gmx.net

Germany produces more than a quarter of its electricity from vast fields of low-grade lignite fuel. This "brown coal" was formed during recent geological periods, permitting it to be extracted using surface mining techniques. The yearly earthmoving task of extracting 180 million tons of lignite from beneath 900 million tons of soil and rock is equivalent to excavating the original Suez Canal 15 times. This epic undertaking would deserve a gala performance of Guiseppe Verdi's *Aida* every four weeks, were it not for the relentless destruction of natural landscapes and historic monuments it entails.

Since 1924, over 300 villages have been devastated by gigantic bucket-wheel excavators burrowing through some of Germany's most fertile soil. The mining corporation RWE (operating in the Rhineland), the US-owned MIBRAG (in Middle Germany to the south of Berlin), and the Swedish state enterprise Vattenfall Europe (in Lusatia to the east) are planning new lignite power stations to compensate for nuclear phase-out. Only rarely are cultural landmarks spared or relocated in the process of mining. Most recently, the entire village of Horno near the Polish border was devastated by Vattenfall despite nominal legal protection both as a historic architectural ensemble and as a Sorb minority community.

Mining resettlement was instituted in the Third Reich as a wartime expedient. More than 100,000 people have since been relocated from their traditional homelands into new residential subdivisions. This policy is defended by German federal and state authorities as a necessary measure for enhancing national energy security.

In the year 2000, however, the medieval community of Heuersdorf south of Leipzig won a milestone court case by demonstrating that European power trading had rendered its resettlement unnecessary. The 52 million tons of lignite beneath the village nevertheless equates to electricity sales exceeding two billion euros at the nearby Lippendorf power plant. The destruction of Heuersdorf thus remains a lucrative prospect for MIBRAG and the plant operator Vattenfall. A devastation law (*Heuersdorfgesetz*) passed by the parliamentary assembly of Saxony on April 22, 2004, is currently

being contested by the village council before the state constitutional court.

Heuersdorf probably originated as a farming settlement that expanded into a rural community in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> Century, when 4,000 villages were chartered in the principality of Meissen. The oldest structure is the Emmaus Church, built largely of field stone, that was first chronicled in 1297. The absence of large windows identifies it as a fortified church, perhaps the oldest in Saxony. Radioactive carbon dating has yet to be performed on the rafter construction, which employs a remarkable arrangement of buttressing beams to support the cupola. Horizontal grooves chiseled into one cornerstone depict the devil's futile attempts to claw his way into the building. The church now defends the northern access to the town from the assault of MIBRAG excavating equipment. A number of sturdy three-sided brick farm houses closer to the mine have already been vacated, however.

The origins of the second, Tabor Church are difficult to unravel. The present structure is exemplary for regional period architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, with opposing galleries suitable for performing the two-choir works of Johann Sebastian Bach. The previous building it replaced contained a bell inscribed with the year 1388. The church stands at the southern boundary in what was once Grosshermsdorf, which was administratively united with Heuersdorf to the north in 1935. A number of houses erected along the main connecting thoroughfare merged the villages, thus defining a distinct phase of development. A subsequent chapter is evident in scattered collectivized farm buildings added after the war.

Heuersdorf remained an intact Christian community during the Marxist regime of 1945 to 1989, with congregation members maintaining and restoring both churches. Yet Lutheran officials are now condoning the demolition of these structures under the assumption of employment benefits. In fact, however, the devastation of the neighboring village of Breunsdorf in 1995 has not diminished the emigration of young people from the region. The jobless rate persists at over 23 percent, or about 2.3 times the national average, because of mining rationalization and limited occupational alternatives.

A number of events surrounding Heuersdorf contribute to an understanding of German history. Grosshermsdorf was initially an outpost of a neighboring town that was destroyed during the Hussite Wars in the early 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Martin Luther's wife Katharina von Bora was born in Lippendorf and returned as a widow

to the nearby farming manor at Zöllsdorf, which was devastated in 1981 by the same Schleenhain mine that currently encroaches on Heuersdorf. At least one Heuersdorf family traces its lineage to the Thirty Years' War. The villagers were forced to billet soldiers during the decisive battle of Lützen in 1632, at which the Swedish king Gustavus II Adolphus was killed shortly before his army swept to final victory.

Grosshermsdorf contains the brickwork residence (*Rittergut*) of a feudal knight and the timbered homesteads of several farmers who succeeded in freeing themselves from his indenture. The burgeoning local economy attracted blacksmiths, saddlers, and other non-propertyied tradesmen to auxiliary buildings flanking the residence. A manor house on the opposite side of the courtyard was subsequently converted for use as a schoolhouse and town hall.

The most famous historic figure from the village is Alexander Clarus Heinze, a delegate to the Dresdner Parliament of 1848/49 and the ill-fated commander of the Communal Guards in Germany's unsuccessful democratic revolution.

Heuersdorf has housed families displaced by mining and postwar refugees from eastern Europe. In 2001, it was the venue of the Third Climate Conference of the German Youth (after Bonn and Berlin) that analyzed and criticized the excessive greenhouse gas emissions of lignite power generation.

Following German reunification in 1990, Heuersdorf had about 320 inhabitants. Its current population has been reduced to less than 150 by MIBRAG resettlement campaigns. The sizeable financial compensation offered by the mining company cannot be willed to heirs, explaining the predominance of elderly people who have left the village.

The remaining population is intent on preserving the 43 registered edifices in the embattled community. The legal outcome of this conflict could be of incalculable importance for maintaining the historic fabric of other regions. RWE plans the destruction of 18 additional villages in the Rhineland for its Garzweiler II mine. MIBRAG and Vattenfall have not issued corresponding details for eastern Germany, but they have already announced the construction of three new lignite power plants.

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