

# CREATING AND DEALING WITH CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE ERZGEBIRGE REGION – A FIELD REPORT

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## ABSTRACT

In summer 2009 I carried out initial field research for my dissertation project<sup>1</sup> in the Erzgebirge, a mountain range divided by the Czech-German border – which separates it into a Saxon and Bohemian side – and which is famous for handmade wood arts. Initially my research concerned the question if, and if so how, property claims on wood arts are negotiated in international, national, and local contexts. The ongoing preparation for Montanregion Erzgebirge (the Erzgebirge Mining Region) to be nominated as a UNESCO Cultural Landscape widened my interest. Using this example of World Heritage in the making I enquire who the initiators are, what possible resistance there is, how the selection processes for entry onto the preliminary list of artefacts unfolds, and how the selected elements are interpreted.

KEYWORDS: cultural heritage • folk art • property claims • UNESCO cultural landscape • Erzgebirge

## INTRODUCTION

The Christmas Season 2006 was busy, as usual, for the shopkeepers in Seiffen, a little village on the German side of the Erzgebirge. However, this year it was not only collectors and lovers of the famous handicraft who were looking for nutcrackers, smoking men, pyramids, Christmas angels, arched candle stands. This time there were also journalists from national radio stations and newspapers reporting from Seiffen, the self-proclaimed heart of the Weihnachtsland (Christmas Land) (cf. Schramm 2002; Friedreich 2005). The reason was a rather small shop run by a businessman from a city close to Bremen in the western part of Germany. He was offering the same array of products as the locals. The differences, however, were the lower prices and the fact that all articles were produced by Asian manufactures. The outrage among the local artisans and shop keepers found expression in public contempt: the *Kleine Bergparade* (little mountain parade)<sup>2</sup> stopped outside the shop and turned their backs with ostentation. These local events drew nationwide attention to the region across the entire political spectrum: the rather left wing Berlin daily *Die Tageszeitung* reported ironically on the

“Chinese angels without souls” (cf. Gerlach 2006) and the far right National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) called for legal action against the “presumably illegal competition from abroad” (NPD-Fraktion 2006).

## INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

In 1992, and long before the NPD’s demand, the Verband erzgebirgischer Kunsthandwerker und Spielzeughersteller e.V. (the Erzgebirge Association of Artisans and Toy Makers) had registered a trademark with the name *Original Erzgebirge – Holzkunst mit Herz* (Original Erzgebirge – Wood Art with Heart). In 2006 they added another design patent called *Original statt Plagiat – Deutsche Handwerkskunst* (Original instead of Plagiarism – German Handicraft).

International competition is nothing new for the artisans from the Erzgebirge and can be traced back to the late 19th century. An integral part of the collective memory is the case of a Japanese professor of art who, in the 1920s, tried to transfer secret know-how of toy production, the so called *Reifendrehen* (Bilz 1987), to Japan, with only the intervention of some artisans preventing him from doing so (Schramm 2002: 120). After the Second World War, Seiffen and the Erzgebirge came into the Soviet sphere of influence, where commercial and intellectual property claims were radically questioned. The jurisdiction of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), however, did not follow all guidelines from Moscow (Wießner 2007: 252f). This became obvious with several national and international trademarks, which were meant to protect GDR production from competitors in West Germany and Asia, particularly because the production of toys and decorations was supposed to become the main export article of the GDR in order to bring in foreign currency (Schramm 2002: 142). In 1984 GDR law made the registration of geographical indicators possible. The Erzgebirge geographical indicator could be applied only on the German side of the German-Czech border, and there only within specific geographical coordinates (Schramm 2002: 144).

After the wall came down in 1989 the Verband erzgebirgischer Kunsthandwerker und Spielzeughersteller e.V. became the legal representative for about 80 artisans. The aim was to develop a marketing strategy and to ban cheaper copies. This led to the Original Erzgebirge trademark, mentioned above. In a newspaper interview, the executive of the association commented on the Chinese copies:

In principle what comes from China is just painted wood [...]. But for us it is all about our figurines, our cultural treasure, which is plagiarised by the Chinese. (Gerlach 2006)

## INVENTING FOLK ART

The cultural treasure – more often referred to as cultural heritage – of Erzgebirge wood art is directly linked to mining in the region. Mining started with the discovery of rich silver deposits in medieval times and continued in Seiffen until the middle of the 19th century. Even in the heyday of mining, low incomes forced many mine workers to produce wooden household articles, and later toys and room decorations as a cottage

industry. The goods were distributed via traders at the fairs in Leipzig and Nuremberg. Due to the low wages earned for the comparatively high quality of the products, wooden toys from the Erzgebirge were soon exported all over Europe and later even to the USA (Auerbach 2000: 13f). The figurines and motifs were strongly influenced by the mining environment and gave the goods a specific character, such as the *Schwibbogen* (arched candle stand) and smoking men in traditional miner's clothes.

A severe economic crisis at the end of the 19th century made toy production a object of the social and political strategies of the government and of the so-called folk art movement (cf. Korff 1992; Schürch 2008), the latter an initiative started by intellectuals, such as early folklorists, as an integral part of the German nation-building process. In addition to a vocational school for toy makers, which was founded in 1852, the Saxon Ministry of the Interior commissioned an investigation, carried out by a local delegation. Their survey suggested "a modest improvement of the artistic form". The aim was to conserve the inherited local folk fantasy and develop it into an authentic folk art. Truly artistic beauty was not necessary (cf. Schramm 2002: 121).<sup>3</sup> Folk art was considered the healthy and original counterpart to the artificial and harmful outcome of industrial production. However, the aesthetic appreciation of consumers needed to be trained for this new type of art. This task was undertaken by local historical associations, the so-called *Heimatspfleger*. However, not even their rhetoric could entirely cover up the fact that it was "an economic policy, in case of needs even welfare, but not an effort to take care of art" (Spamer 1943: 82, cited from Korff 1992: 43) as the German ethnographer Spamer phrased it. Nevertheless, the folk art concept succeeded as the wood art at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris proves. Wood art handicraft is a good example of how folk art as an ideological construction (Korff 1992) serves specific social political interests by turning a commodity into a value laden folk art object – without, naturally, removing its commodity status.

The production of toys was widespread on both the Saxon and Bohemian sides of the mountain range. Until 1916 there was even a vocational school for toy makers in the Bohemian city of Oberleutensdorf, today Litvinov (Pokorná 2002: 75). The exchange between Saxon and Bohemian artisans was vital, as the German language prevailed on both sides of the border: until the end of the Second World War Bohemian Erzgebirge was mainly populated by a German-speaking minority. Nevertheless there were distinct differences as far as production methods and motifs were concerned. In addition, and in contrast to the state-promoted Saxon artisans, Bohemian handicraft did not belong to the national cultural inventory of the young Czechoslovakian state of the interwar years (interview with Dr. Libuše Pokorná, director of the District Museum in Most, Czech Republic, July 17, 2009).

The conquest of the so-called Sudetenland by Nazi Germany after the Munich treaty in 1938 was welcomed by the majority of the local German population (Brandes 2001). However, thus far I have no information about the consequences, if any, that the German occupation had on the situation of the wood artisans and the evaluation of their work during that period. After the expulsion of the German population from Bohemia at the end of the Second World War, a state-ordered settlement of Slovakian and Roma populations took place in the region (Wiedemann 2007). As none of these groups had ties to the local toy handicraft, production was completely disrupted.

## NATIONAL COMPETITION

The founding of several manufacturing sites in the Czech Republic in the 1990s did not indicate a revival of Bohemian toy production. Some enterprising German producers had outsourced parts of their production to the Czech side of the border in order to benefit from lower wages. According to Verband erzgebirgischer Kunsthandwerker und Spielzeughersteller e.V. rules, production on the Czech side is prohibited if you wish to use the Original Erzgebirge trademark (cf. Verband erzgebirgischer Kunsthandwerker und Spielzeughersteller e.V.). As not all artisans are members of the association, some still produce in the Czech Republic. This is done clandestinely, since it is not well liked among the collectors and their artisan colleagues who are afraid of price dumping.

Driving along the border I found a single Czech artisan who produces little smoking men, not exclusively for the German, but also the Czech, market by using motifs such as the figure of Good Soldier Švejk from Czech literature.<sup>4</sup> It is not expected that cultural property claims will be articulated towards this individual artisan.

## LOCAL PROPERTY CLAIMS

In addition to national and international property claims, my interest is also in local claims, particularly those articulated in the course of the re-privatisation of collectivised manufactures. Here, however, I learnt that according to a specific exception in GDR jurisdiction, manufactures with less than 10 employees were allowed to stay private. So in the end, only a few manufactures were collectivised and later reclaimed by their former owners. What happened in this case to family motifs or creations developed in a cooperative setting?

A Christmas pyramid that was designed and construed by several artisans working for a collectivised manufacturer was the reason for severe tension, as property claims from different sides were articulated. It nearly led to a legal conflict, although due to the lack of an appropriate legal instruments, an internal solution was eventually found.<sup>5</sup> As confirmed by most artisans I talked to, the question of who owns which form and motif holds great conflict potential, not only in the case of re-privatisation. After 1990, the array of products expanded enormously and pressure increased to create a distinct 'handwriting' within the framework of typical Erzgebirge folk art. The Chinese production not only copies this, it has partially developed its own method of crafting, as one artisan told me with open admiration. The fact that a businessman from West Germany bought Expertic, the former GDR certification mark, and now sells his Asian products under this formerly highly prestigious trademark, upsets artisans, traders and collectors alike.

Returning to internal competition: in general, conflicts are negotiated among the artisans themselves, sometimes with support of Dregeno Seiffen e.G., the local trade association. Conflicts carried out in courts of law are rather exceptional. Reasons lie in the high costs and also in the burden to prove the novelty of a creation. This problem is also linked to the folk art character of the products. One executive told me about his attempt to sue a competitor for copying his smoking men:

When the judge asked me “What is so new about your smoking men when you just told me about the 200 years of tradition?” I was ready to shoot him. But later I realised he just wanted to understand everything properly and be correct.<sup>6</sup>

This case was eventually resolved in court, although I am far more interested in situations in which property claims are not based on or negotiated in legal institutions. Instead of understanding property as a purely legal term, my anthropological approach sees property rather as a social category, or, as Chris Hann phrases it, property should be seen “as directing attention to a vast field of cultural as well as social relations, to the symbolic as well as the material contexts within things are recognized and personal as well as collective identities made” (Hann 1998: 5).

## CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE MAKING

During the course of my investigations it became apparent that the research field had widened when the historical *Reifendrehwerk* (rotating mechanism), now located at the open air museum in Seiffen, was included on a preliminary list for a UNESCO World Heritage application. The *Reifendrehwerk* is still used in toy manufacture and room decorations. The unique *Reifendrehen* wood turning technique is performed here for tourists and groups of young students from nearby high schools.

The *Reifendrehwerk* is one of 34 objects and sites considered when forming the putative Erzgebirge Mining Region UNESCO Cultural Landscape.<sup>7</sup> The heritage potential of each individual object or site is to be investigated in pilot studies within the Erzgebirge Mining Region UNESCO World Heritage Project, at the University of Freiberg, Saxony. These investigations will be carried out only after the approval of the local authorities. The relevant authorities in Seiffen have not decided yet if they want to participate in the studies and the World Heritage nomination process.

According to the realisation study prepared by the Freiberg UNESCO Project, each site or object needs to have at least one of seven features: a) mining monument, b) mining environment with the respective flora and fauna, c) mining cities with profane or sacred buildings, d) art, handicraft, music, and literature, e) folk art and tradition, f) education, science, technique or district policy, g) influence on economic and infrastructural development (cf. Albrecht et al. 2007: 23f). Seiffen’s rotation mechanism comes under g). Another town in the Erzgebirge region, Schneeberg, is also listed for its old town and a historical collection of wood carvings, which come under d) and e). Why was Schneeberg’s wood art collection listed, but not that of Erzgebirge toy museum in Seiffen?<sup>8</sup> Which criteria and considerations formed the basis for this decision? Who decides, and what consequences might the UNESCO certification of a single collection have on other villages, which are also associated with wood art handicraft?

Following the application from the state of Saxony, the Kultusministerkonferenz (Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs) registered the Erzgebirge Mining Region on Germany’s UNESCO Tentative List (cf. UNESCO a). Commissioned by the Saxon State Department of Science and Art, a feasibility study was carried out by the University of Freiberg Institute for the History of Science and Technology, in 2001. Promising results lead to further initiatives such as the founding of the Förderverein Montanregion Erzgebirge (Erzgebirge Mining Region Development

Association) in 2003. The association consists of the University of Freiberg, Erzgebirge regional management, the University of Freiberg Institute for the History of Science and Technology, and SAXONIA, a regional development fund run by the city of Freiberg and the respective administrative district (cf. SAXONIA). The founding of the association was supported by several enterprises, members of the federal parliament and local politicians. It aims for a nomination to World Heritage status in 2012.

The potential World Heritage region does not end at the national border: the Erzgebirge Mining Region Cultural Landscape is conceptualised as a bi-national site including three mining galleries, a historical trench used for water supply, a historical building which used to house the royal Bohemian mint, and an ore mining deposit in the Czech part of the Erzgebirge. The district museum in the Czech city Most is the official Czech counterpart in the bi-national application. On its website, a large body of information on the selected objects is made available. In contrast to their German partner, the issue of the Czech-German relationship is brought up in the texts “Was wir gemeinsam haben” (What unites us) and “Was uns voneinander trennt” (What divides us) (cf. Oblastní muzeum v Mostě a; b). The former refers primarily to the geographical conditions, the historical relationship from medieval times and the Bohemian and Saxon nobility to the beginning of the 20th century. The latter relates to the recent history from the Second World War to the end of the Soviet era. A picture of historical toys made by Bohemian artisans is meant to illustrate the following statement:

Along with the destiny of the indigenous population of the Bohemian side of the Erzgebirge, the fate of indigenous folklore, rites and customs was sealed. Manufacturing sectors typical for the Erzgebirge were lost; among others, toy and textile production. (Cf. Oblastní muzeum v Mostě b)

The expelled German-speaking population is identified here as the “indigenous population” whose history is linked with the objects selected to become world heritage. This raises the question of if, and if so how, this group is to be considered within the concept of the Erzgebirge Mining Region Cultural Landscape?

#### A HOT INTERPRETATION OF TOXIC HERITAGE?

Among the pre-selected sites there are several mines and galleries which were used intensely for mining uranium ore in the period between 1945 and 1990. In the course of the Cold War arms race, uranium ore was needed for the Soviet Union’s nuclear program. In search of uranium ore, the Soviet army explored many mining regions in their sphere of influence, under conditions of the utmost secrecy, in, among others, in Romania, Poland and the Soviet zone of post-war Germany. Finding rich deposits in Saxon Erzgebirge, and in the neighbouring province of Thuringia, had enormous consequences for the local populations. In almost no other part of the world was uranium ore extracted in areas of population density similar to those in the Erzgebirge and in Thuringia. In the early years of the undertaking, house owners were expropriated, villages were demolished and many people were conscripted to work in the mines under the poorest conditions and with no protection from the radiation (cf. Wismut 2008). In the 1950s more than 130,000 people worked for SAG Wismut, the Soviet mining corpo-

ration which, in 1954, became the Soviet-German joint stock company SDAG Wismut. In 45 years more than 213,000 tons of uranium were produced, making the GDR the third largest uranium producer in the world, following the United States and Canada. After the reunification of Germany and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the mines were closed and the decontamination of the heavily polluted environment began.

The initiative for a UNESCO Cultural Landscape also comprises the uranium ore mine close to the village of Hartenstein, called Object 09, along with Galleries 371 and 382 (Albrecht et al. 2007: 79). But what about the toxic heritage, which the contaminated environment held and still holds for the people, flora, and fauna of the region? Can the selection of the uranium ore mines be interpreted as an uncomfortable, or “dissonant heritage” (Tunbridge, Ashworth 1996)? Taking this aspect into account the uranium ore galleries might not only be seen as artefacts of engineering skill, or expressions of the most recent mining period in a more than 800-year continuum, but also as Cold War sites. The Cold War is defined by Uzzell and Ballantyne (1998: 157) as a “placeless war” located in propaganda battles. Therefore, Cold War sites differ from other war sites “in as much as they are often not in themselves scenes of conflict and death” (ibid.). Considering the uranium ore mines as Cold War sites, Uzzell’s and Ballantyne’s statement does not hold true for every case: particularly in the early years of the Wismut corporation, the ruthless rush for uranium ore cost many lives, and radioactive contamination continues to cause severe problems in the present.

How will the Wismut corporation be interpreted in the course of the nomination process? Possibly from a technical point of view, focusing on the sophisticated engineering, or perhaps with a “hot interpretation”<sup>9</sup> (ibid.) by referring to it as a Cold War site with devastating consequences for all living creatures in the near surroundings?

## FUTURE PROSPECTS

My field research in the Erzgebirge has raised new issues that expand previous focus on wood art to an entire series of artefacts and objects preselected for UNESCO World Heritage nomination. Considering the nomination process as a meta-cultural operation (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006), I identify parallels to the construction of folk art from traded toys and interior room decorations. Embedded either in nation building discourse of the 19th and early 20th century, or in current discourse on “heritage-ification” (Hemme et al. 2007), in both cases actors from politics and academia have assigned value to selected objects to improve the social-economic situation of the region by consumption and tourism.

How will the UNESCO certification as the Erzgebirge Mining Region relate to other long established notions of the Erzgebirge, such as that of the Weihnachtsland? The Erzgebirge is famous nationwide for its Christmas spirit, including specific culinary items and the well known wood art handicraft (cf. Schramm 2002; Friedreich 2005). The wood artisans especially make their living from the Christmas trade. How do they perceive the nomination plans? Do they fear a possible interference of the two images, Weihnachtsland and Montanregion Erzgebirge, or do they expect a fruitful integration? Since Dresden’s Elbe Valley was removed from the UNESCO list in 2009, the benefit of UNESCO World Heritage status has been questioned. At the TICCIH conference<sup>10</sup> held

in Freiberg, the vice chairman of the Erzgebirge Mining Region Development Association, who is also the director of the Institute for the History of Science and Technology, made reference to the current events. He explained that the Dresden case makes it necessary to prove that World Heritage status does not constrain, but rather enhances, development. In her presentation, a research fellow from the Institute identified concerns about the World Heritage nomination:

The extensive procedure [of studies carried out by the Institute] is needed to eliminate prejudices within the project. The population is especially concerned that the economy in this region would be restricted and jobs would be endangered. To reduce these fears, studies of communication and marketing strategies were commissioned to make this ambitious project more popular in society. (Ehrentraut 2009)

Who advocates and who opposes World Heritage status, and how do these two sides argue? And what about the Czech side: who are the actors, and how and where is the planned nomination discussed? A national comparison as well as investigations into the different actors' groups will be tasks for my unfolding fieldwork.

#### NOTES

1 This paper, as well as my ongoing dissertation research, is associated with the Göttingen Interdisciplinary Research Group on Cultural Property, directed by Regina Bendix and Kilian Bizer, and funded by the German Research Foundation. All translations from German sources are mine. For correcting my English, as well as for inspiring comments, I thank Regina Bendix. My gratitude goes also to all lecturers and fellow students from the Summer University in Tartu 2009 for sharing their interesting research studies and ideas with me.

2 The *Kleine Bergparade* (little mountain parade) takes place every first Saturday in Advent and has been performed by the Berg- und Hüttenknappschaft Seiffen e.V. (the local mining association) and the Lebendiges Spielzeug children's costume group since 1991. Members of the parade are dressed in traditional regional mining costumes and walk through the main street of the village. The parade marks the starting point of the annual Christmas market. Members of the mining association are not, in fact, mine workers since the galleries in the Seiffen area were closed in the 1850s, however, members take care of those galleries that are open to visitors.

3 Obviously, the distinctions drawn between folk craft, folk art, 'true' beauty and perhaps just quaintness were customary at the time, and while not tenable from a scholarly perspective either then or now, they continue to reverberate in the present.

4 Central character from picaresque novel *The Fateful Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk During the World War* by Czech author Jaroslav Hašek (written between 1921 and 1923).

5 Interview with the executive of one of the manufacturing sites involved in the conflict, July 15, 2009.

6 Ibid.

7 Cultural Landscapes worthy of protection as a UNESCO World Heritage Site have to be "combined works of nature and of men" and can fall into the three main categories: a) clearly defined landscape designed and created intentionally by man; b) organically evolved landscapes, which can be either a fossil landscape where evolutionary processes came to an end, or a continuing landscape that retains an active social role in contemporary society closely associated with the traditional way of life, and in which the evolutionary process is still in progress. At the same time it exhibits significant material evidence of its evolution over time; c) the associative cultural landscape. The inclusion of such landscapes on the World Heritage List is justifiable by virtue of

the powerful religious, artistic or cultural associations of the natural element rather than material cultural evidence, which may be insignificant or even absent. (cf. UNESCO b).

8 The wood art in Seiffen can be distinguished from that of Schneeberg as it is mainly turned and not carved.

9 David Uzzell introduced the concept of hot interpretation in opposition to a presentation of heritage sites as a purely cognitive experience. Where appropriate, he makes a strong stand for a hot interpretation of heritage by addressing the affective side of the visitor's personality (cf. Uzzell, Ballantyne 1998).

10 The XIV TICCIH (The International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage) international conference held in Freiberg from August 30 to September 5, 2009 under the title Industrial Heritage: Ecology and Economy.

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