"A Moving Historical Moment" Unites South Bend, Indiana, with Arzberg, Germany

Citizens from Arzberg, in the middle of the 19th century, left their home in search of a new existence. In South Bend, they found a new home that enabled them to live a life in peace and freedom.

Citizens from South Bend, in the year 2002, came to Arzberg from Indiana in search of their historic roots. In Arzberg, they found citizens who welcomed them in friendship, and thereby expressed their thanks to the American people.

The citizens of Arzberg and the citizens of South Bend set here a symbol of friendship and solidarity between the German and the American people.

-Inscription on Arzberg-South Bend Memorial

This summer, the City Fest of Arzberg in Bavaria, Germany, was dedicated to a celebration of the historical link between Arzberg and South Bend, Indiana. Gabrielle Robinson, director of international programs at Indiana University South Bend renewed the contact between the two cities after she had visited Arzberg while conducting research for a forthcoming book on nineteenth-century German immigration to the South Bend area (Arcadia Press, 2003).

In the nineteenth century, approximately 10 percent of the Arzberg population emigrated, most of them to South Bend. The reasons so many people left Arzberg mirrored conditions in the rest of Germany at the time: industrialization, rural poverty, overpopulation, oppressive laws and taxation, political repression, and instability.

Arzberg immigrants played an important role in the development of South Bend. They were among the first to start the many businesses, services, and trades that established South Bend as a center of commerce. Little Arzberg, once the name for the area around Marion and Michigan Streets, was the location of Turner Hall, of which 8 of the 10 founders were from Arzberg. On the east side of South Bend around Zion Church, then at the edge of town, was the Hoyt neighborhood, named after the Haid, a remote area around Arzberg. Many family names, such as Meussel, Elbel, Troeger, Lang, Loehler, and Rockstroh are still prominent both in Arzberg and South Bend today. The family of two-term Governor Henry Frederick Schricker also originally came from there.

Arzberg is beautifully situated in the hills of the Fichtelgebirge, literally “spruce mountains,” just a few miles from the Czech border. It is first mentioned in print in 1286, but it became a city in 1408. Arzberg lived under many rulers: Prussia, France, and Bavaria. The Protestant “castle-church” dominates the town and can be reached only by steep and narrow passageways by which, through the centuries, the townspeople fled attackers, seeking the safety of the church.

On June 15, the city hall of Arzberg was packed to overflowing, and speeches had to be transmitted to the crowded square outside. Speakers included Mayor Winfried Geppert, Chief County Executive Peter Seisser, and Robinson. The celebration was, as the local paper reported, a most “moving historical moment.” The guests of honor were 14 South Benders whose ancestors had emigrated from Arzberg. Festivities included the opening of an exhibit on the South Bend–Arzberg connection in City Hall, the unveiling of a memorial, and a church service, such as their forefathers had before leaving for America. All South Bend guests entered their names into the Golden Book of Arzberg.

Gabrielle Robinson presents the Key to the City of South Bend to Arzberg Mayor Winfried Geppert and County Executive Peter Seisser (seated).

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Geppert noted that this was a moving occasion for both sides and a truly historical day that brought families from both cities together. Seisser greeted the South Bend guests as “dear relatives” and expressed the hope that contacts such as these could help heal the pain from the terror of September 11. Robinson also noted that in the shadow of recent world events, it becomes even more important to strengthen such contacts between peoples and nations. She conveyed the greetings of South Bend Mayor Stephen Luecke, who expressed his pride in the contributions that the people of Arzberg had made to the growth and development of South Bend. On behalf of Mayor Luecke, Robinson presented the golden key and flag of the city of South Bend, as well as an American flag, to Mayor Geppert. In turn, each South Bend guest received a memorial plate of Arzberg china made especially for the occasion. This was followed by the ceremonial unveiling of the memorial, permanently installed in front of the city hall.

In one of the many moving moments of the visit, Marjorie Roessler Kinney of the South Bend group showed a copy of an old picture she had brought to one of the uniformed “Schuetzen,” or marksmen, at the festival, and he recognized his mother in the picture. He took her home to meet his mother and grandmother, where she saw the original picture and heard how she was related to various Arzberg families. It was the experience of a lifetime, she said.

At Robinson’s invitation, Erwin Scherer, archivist at the Arzberg Lutheran Church, has already visited South Bend’s Northern Indiana Center for History to help transcribe letters of Arzberg immigrants. South Bend hopes to strengthen the bonds between the two cities and return Arzberg hospitality and friendship when a delegation from Arzberg visits South Bend.

—Gabrielle Robinson
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