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Europe

A Potsdam story
When east meets west

Nov 15th 2007 | POTSDAM
From The Economist print edition

A revealing argument about a footpath

THE footpath by the Griebnitzsee, in Potsdam, has seen a lot of history. Kings and kaisers lived around here. Harry Truman ordered the bombing of Hiroshima from a lakeside villa in 1945 while attending the Potsdam conference. His neighbours were Josef Stalin and Winston Churchill (later replaced by Clement Attlee). The Berlin Wall ran along the Griebnitzsee after 1961. The meandering lakeside trails were turned into a corridor for border guards and their dogs. When the wall fell, cyclists and pedestrians took over.

History has not ended quite yet. With German unification, the waterfront mansions acquired rich new occupants, many of them Wessis who saw the path as their private property. Last month they escalated a low-intensity conflict with those they deem to be trespassers by barring the way with plastic tape and hiring private security guards, whom the Potsdam police soon removed. The city, backed by most of its 150,000 citizens, wants the footpath to be a public park. That would be an assault on property rights, say the owners. "Maybe some people want to enjoy the footpath," says Hans Ensing, a Dutch developer who owns one of three houses built by a modernist, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. "But a larger group wants to enjoy basic human rights." If need be, he will go to the European human-rights court.

In the early 20th century New Babelsberg, as the area was then known, served as Berlin's version of the Hamptons, populated in summer by a "bankers' train" bearing (often Jewish) financiers and other professionals. After the Nazis expelled the Jews, their homes were taken on in some cases by stars at the Babelsberg film studios. The communists kept up the film connection but stamped out the glamour: a film and television school occupied several villas. Unification brought a new bourgeoisie—and a messy property register.

Heirs of displaced Jews are entitled to reclaim plots right down to the water's edge. Most have sold these to the new owners (Mr Ensing's house was built for a Dresdner Bank director, Georg Mosler). The federal government took over the rest of the buffer strip along the Wall, but some owners bought bits adjoining their plots cheaply. Of 80 owners along the footpath, some 35 now have rights to the water's edge. In exchange for a proper right of way, the city is offering to let them enlarge their gardens and restore the boathouses that once lined the lake.

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But some ten owners are still at odds with the city.

For some old-timers, this is a reprise of the class war that made communism necessary in the first place. "Thousands of people use this footpath," says one strolling pensioner, who misses the East German regime. "It's not just for capitalists born with golden spoons in their mouths." From Mr Ensing's point of view, Potsdam's property grab is the behaviour of a "disguised dictatorship".

Such polarisation is not the norm in Potsdam. The ex-communist Left Party is the largest on the city council, but the mayor is a *Wessi*. Universities and sexy industries like media and biotech keep the population young and the economy humming. Potsdam is not emptying out like so many other east German cities; its population is growing by 1,000 a year. A recent survey named it the country's child-friendliest city.

As the footpath feud suggests, the cultures of eastern and western Germany may not have melded yet, but the young are more easygoing. Lisa Teichmann, a young lawyer from Brandenburg, suggests there are points on both sides. Mr Ensing has offered, if his rights are upheld, to restore Mies's original wall. But most Potsdamers are tired of walls.

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