



PHOTOS BY RALPH ANDREAS

Going His Way

500 Years Later, Retracing
Luther's Steps to the Reformation

By JAMES RESTON JR.
Special to The Washington Post

Wittenberg, Holy Roman Empire, 1517. A young monk marches up to the castle church and nails a piece of parchment to the massive wooden door. He is Martin Luther, and the parchment is his famous 95 theses, written in Latin. With this document, an open challenge to the power and practices of the Roman

Catholic Church, the brash cleric sets off one of the greatest upheavals in human history: the Protestant Reformation.

Wittenberg, Germany, 2009. I walk down the long, cobblestoned Collegienstrasse to All Saints' Church, the castle church that stands at one end of the street, eager to see the famous door on which Luther's world-changing protest once hung. But as I approach the elaborate iron gate at the church entrance, I come face to

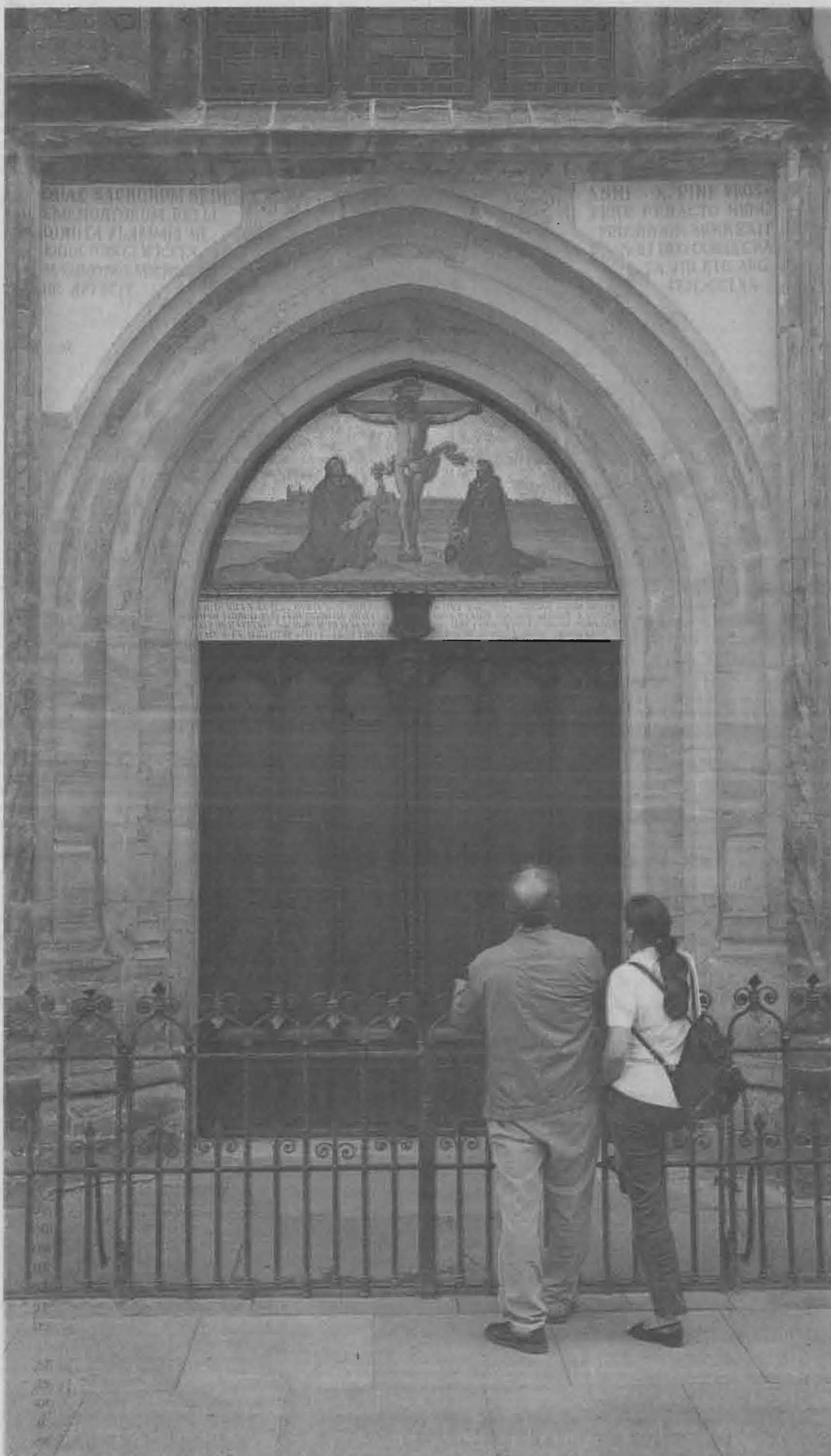


Above: The church where Martin Luther nailed his theses. The door stands at the end of Wittenberg's Collegienstrasse. A nearby shop of souvenirs of the reformer.

face not with an ancient door of wood burned in 1760 — but with a stolid, polished heavy dark metal, permanently engraved with the text of Luther's theses, in Old German.

So much for authenticity. Still, the door is beautiful, as is everything in this spruced-up town. Twenty-five years ago, Wittenberg was a gray, grimy, heavily polluted place in what was then the German Democratic Republic, or East Germany. Since then, however, it has experienced a miraculous transformation. Today it is a focal point of "other tourism," now coming to a head in Wittenberg as Germans have dubbed the Luther Decade. This jubilee began last year, which marks 500 years since Luther arrived in this town to study theology at the university, and will culminate in 2017, with the 500th anniversary of his death.

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Following Luther, From Wittenberg to Worms

LUTHER, From Page F1

posting of his theses.

While I was writing a book last year on the pivotal years 1520-36, I found myself longing to retrace Luther's epic journey in 1521 from Wittenberg to the city of Worms, where he was to face the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, at the famous Diet of Worms to defend himself against the charge of heresy. And so here I was, in early May, standing on a street of charming houses and neat little shops that had all been cleaned and freshly painted in pastel colors. I gazed up at the lofty tower of the church, which dominates Wittenberg. A band of old German script encircled it: a stanza from Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," considered the anthem of the Reformation. It probably wasn't put there during Luther's lifetime, I thought.

For authenticity, I headed for the Lutherhaus, a treasure trove of Luther relics, books and paintings at the opposite end of Collegienstrasse. This was Luther's home after the Diet of Worms, given to him by his great protector, the elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise. In a tower of the house was the room where Luther experienced his revelation of "justification by faith alone" and planned his challenge to the papacy. That tower no longer exists, but excavators did discover the great reformer's toilet a few years ago. The eager tourist can now peer at it through a little window on the ground floor.

I was more interested in other curiosities in the museum, such as an

bearer to escape a certain number of days in purgatory, depending on how much he was willing to shell out. There are also various depictions of Luther over the centuries, showing how differently each age came to view the reformer.

"All the world is coming to Wittenberg, I hear," I said to the director of the Lutherhaus.

"Yes," Stephan Rhein replied, "we hope and we fear." When Rhein came to Wittenberg in the early 1990s to consider taking the job at the Lutherhaus, he came with the mayor of his West German town. Wittenberg had only one drab restaurant then, and only one rooming house.

"That is the first and last time I ever had to sleep in the same bed with my lord mayor," Rhein joked. Now he is bracing for the invasion of Lutheran pilgrims for the Luther Jubilee.

The paintings of Lucas Cranach are also prominently on display. Known as the "photographer of the Reformation," Cranach painted Luther many times. Perhaps his most interesting painting here, however, is his epic depiction of the Ten Commandments. In each of its 10 panels, a grotesque monster hovers over a potential sinner.

Not everything about my visit to Wittenberg was about the mind or the soul, however. With much anticipation I went in search of Luther's pub, the Black Eagle. That is where the reformer went nearly every evening after supper for many rounds of bock beer, entertaining his drinking pals with discourses on such weighty subjects as where the devil

his immortal words: "He who drinks much beer sleeps well; he who sleeps well does not sin; and he who does not sin goes to heaven."

To my disappointment, the Black Eagle, too, is a thing of the past. But it has been replaced by the Black Bear (Zum Schwarzen Bar), where you can find plenty of dark beer served by lusty maidens dressed in costumes of Luther's day. It was white asparagus season in Germany, and I ordered a delicious creamed asparagus soup off the special Spargelkarte, or asparagus menu. The specialty of this watering hole, however, is the potato. No fewer than 63 items on the menu featured the humble tuber, including the one I ordered, called Himmel und Erde (heaven and earth): mashed potato with bacon, onions and apple. I slept well after my heavy meal at the Black Bear.

With his customary theatricality, Luther set out in a covered wagon from Wittenberg on Palm Sunday 1521, accompanied by several fellow Augustinian monks. His 320-mile journey to Worms took 23 days, and along the way he preached in various churches to enthusiastic and ever-larger crowds. His first stop was Leipzig. That city today is bustling and modern, bearing few signs of the devastating firebombing it suffered in World War II. It promotes itself as the city of Johann Sebastian Bach and highlights the world-class musical events that take place in its storied concert hall, the Gewandhaus. Felix Mendelssohn's Reformation Symphony No. 5 is

