

Trailing Martin Luther

Worms is the place where Luther's movement went from ecclesiastical to political. A memorial to Luther is shown here.

Author retraces steps of famous reformer

By James Reston Jr., Special to The Washington Post

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A statue in Wittenberg's market square depicts Martin Luther with a copy of the New Testament, which he translated into German. The city is bracing for the invasion of Lutheran pilgrims for the Luther Jubilee.





Luther Timeline

1498-1501: Martin Luther receives his secondary education in Eisenach, famously singing for his bread in the streets.

1501: Enters the University of Erfurt. Three years later, a terrifying thunderstorm persuades him to switch from law to the ministry. After earning a degree in theology, he joins the Augustinian order of monks.

1508: Arrives in Wittenberg to teach theology at the university.

1517: On Oct. 31, nails his 95 theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, the first step in the Reformation.

1519: In June, debates Catholic theology in Leipzig with Johann Eck, the most famous Catholic theologian in Germany - and loses.

1521: Palm Sunday: Sets out from Wittenberg on Palm Sunday in a covered wagon, planning to preach all the way to Worms.

- April 16: A huge crowd cheers his arrival in Worms. Later he confronts Emperor Charles V, saying, "Here I stand. I can do no other."
- May 4: Arrives at Wartburg Castle, high above the town of Eisenach, where he will live incognito for months as "Knight George," in protective custody, and where he will translate the New Testament from Greek into German in a mere 10 weeks.

1525: Marries Katharina von Bora, breaking a 1,000-year tradition of priestly celibacy. They raise their family in a house in Wittenberg given to them by Luther's great protector, Frederick the Wise.

- James Reston Jr.

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, cobblestone 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 face not with an ancient door of wood - it burned in 1760 - but with a stolid portal of 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 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 "Luther tourism," now coming to a head in what Germans have

dubbed the Luther Decade. This jubilee began last year, which marked 500 years since Luther arrived in this town to teach theology at the university, and will culminate in 2017, with the 500th anniversary of the posting of his theses.

Retracing Luther's journey

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.

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 authentic indulgence form with a blank for the purchaser's name and the price paid. This document, the prod for Luther's anger, entitled the bearer to escape a certain number of days in purgatory, depending on how much he was willing to shell out. There also are 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 also are 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.

Knocking back a few

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 resides (on the edges of dark clouds) or what shape he can take (a fly leaving its smudge on the page of a book). At the Black Eagle he spoke 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, 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 *Spargel karte*, 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 regularly performed there, as is Bach's Reformation cantata, inspired by Luther's great hymn.

Over the years, Luther visited Leipzig 17 times. Even in his day, when it was a town of only 10,000, it was well known for its trade fair because it was a crossroads for trading routes between Russia and Paris. It also was a center of German publishing, where the printer Melchior Lotter churned out Luther tracts and indulgence forms with equal vigor. Luther's German translation of the New Testament sold out immediately at a Leipzig fair in September 1521. In a classy Old World restaurant called the Thueringer Hof, you can see an original note Luther wrote to the owner, thanking him for his contribution of 100 guilders to the Reformation cause. And the owner of the Auerbachs Keller, the subterranean drinking hall off the central market that's famously described in a scene in Goethe's "Faust," is said to have been a friend of Luther's and to have remarked that the reformer was "worthy of immortality." A prized possession of the Leipzig History Museum, the symbol of Luther's discarding of the tradition of priestly celibacy, is the wedding ring of his wife, the former nun Katharina von Bora.

Two years before his journey to Worms, in June 1519, Luther had a famous debate over Catholic theology in Leipzig with a renowned academic, Johann Eck. Historians generally agree that Luther lost on points. The heavyweight bout took place in

the great hall of the Pleissenburg Castle in central Leipzig. That old pile had been torn down at the end of the 19th century, replaced by the current town hall. Another authentic relic gone. And not the only one. A monumental statue of Luther with his fellow reformer, Philipp Melanchthon, had once graced a downtown square, but the Nazis tore it down toward the end of World War II and used the metal for bullets.

On to Weimar, Erfurt

After Leipzig, I was finally on back roads that meandered languidly over the gentle rolling hills of Thuringia, a patchwork of lush green and mustard-yellow fields stretching to the horizon. For a few hours I tarried in Naumburg, another jewel of a town where Luther had preached on his way to Worms and in whose cathedral he later consecrated the first evangelical bishop of the region. On the town's expansive market square, under brilliant afternoon sunshine, I enjoyed an impressive dessert at an ice cream shop that offered 53 concoctions of fruit, ice cream and liquor. Soon my mind started wandering.

And it wandered still further when I reached Weimar. In front of the classy Elephant Hotel, where Adolf Hitler had been a frequent guest in the 1930s, a crowd had gathered around an elegant couple in a Rolls-Royce who seemed to evoke perfectly the aristocratic spirit of the 1920s. The famous hotel's art deco design also fit the retrograde feel of the place.

There is so much history, art and culture in Weimar that it was hard to stay focused on Luther. Though he preached in the castle church on the way to Worms, he now takes a back seat here to Goethe, Schiller, Nietzsche, Liszt and Bach. Largely because of Goethe, who so symbolizes German culture, Weimar has always been a special case and has been largely untouched by the vagaries of history. But it has its dark side. Before I moved on, I drove five miles up the hill and spent several hours at the Buchenwald concentration camp, three weeks before President Barack Obama made the same grim pilgrimage.

A day later, in the old town of Erfurt, I went in search of Martinshoerchen, Erfurt's unique testimonial to the reformer. It's a flaky croissant filled with fruit jam, and generally it's available only on St. Martin's Day, Nov. 11. But the local tourism officials are pushing Erfurt's bakers to produce it year-round. St. Martin's Day celebrates another Martin, St. Martin of Tours, a 5th-century saint who clove his garment with a sword and gave half to a freezing soldier, then dreamed that Jesus was wearing half of his coat.

In Luther's time, Erfurt was the fourth-largest town in the German-speaking world. With a population of 24,000, it was twice the size of Frankfurt and Leipzig, and its university had the largest student body in central Europe. Luther studied law there until a terrifying thunderstorm persuaded him to switch from the law to the ministry, much to his father's dismay. Erfurt University closed in 1816, but the cathedral, where Luther was ordained, and the Augustinian monastery, where he lived and gave his first sermon, still stand. On his journey to Worms, Luther preached here to a church so packed that its balcony nearly collapsed under the weight of the throng, forcing his admirers to jump out the windows.

Old town Erfurt is so inviting for a stroll because only about 5% of the city was destroyed in the war. One of the losses, however, was the Augustinian monastery. In February 1945, a British bomb demolished it, killing 237 people huddled inside. It has been completely restored, perhaps to too fine a polish. Inside, you can see a replica of the cell where Luther lived under the harsh rules of the Augustinian order and where he began to develop his doubts and his anger. "You are a fool," his confessor said to him once. "God is not angry with you, but you are angry with Him."

Dining with special guests

Down the road in Eisenach, I stayed at a hotel whose enterprising owner hailed from West Germany. Every Friday and Saturday, he turns his establishment into the "Lutherstube," and the place becomes very bawdy indeed. "Silenzio!" cried a hefty waitress, pounding a big stick on the floor the night I was there. "Are all the cups full?" A three-hour feeding orgy of multiple courses followed. A cow's horn filled with mead was passed around the table, and the oldest person was required to give a toast. If the toast displeased the assemblage, the horn was filled again and the elder was required to drain it down.

At this bacchanal, the owner took on the role of Martin Luther, instructing the diners on the devil's ways in words taken directly from Luther's Tischreden, or table talk.

This was the kind of scene I had hoped to find at the Black Eagle in Wittenberg. My delightful dinner partner for the evening was none other than Luther's wife, Katharina von Bora herself. (Actually she was the much-photographed belle of Eisenach, Alexandra Husemeyer, a guide at the local Lutherhaus who often plays the reformer's wife in re-enactments.) The evening ended with a very large waitress dancing on a tabletop with random guests.

The next day, I drove through the strategic lowlands known as the Fulda Gap. Though my only problem was getting stuck in traffic on a clogged autobahn, NATO military planners had for 50 years imagined a massive Soviet tank attack across this ground. Three hours later, I passed over the Rhine River into Worms.

Coming here on the trail of Luther is largely a symbolic act, because 80% of Worms was destroyed in World War II and hastily rebuilt in the 1950s. Luther arrived on April 16, 1521, and an immense crowd cheered him as he rode into town. The medieval gate through which he entered, called the Martinspforte, has been reconstructed. Down the Kaemmerstrasse (now a shopping arcade), next to Worms Cathedral, once stood the bishop's palace, where Luther's emperor and antagonist, Charles V, awaited him. At this famous confrontation, Luther offered his defense, supposedly ending with the immortal line, "Here I stand. I can do no other." His listeners were unconvinced, but would deliberate over his fate for several days. As Luther left the throne room of the palace, Spanish soldiers followed him hissing, "Burn him!"

If Wittenberg is the hot spot for the Luther Jubilee, Worms is the place where his movement metamorphosed from ecclesiastical to political. A fascinating statue here shows Luther in a heroic stance, one foot in front of the other, above two victims of the Inquisition's fire, Jan Hus and Savonarola.

Like planets in different orbits, the Imperial Cathedral of St. Peter, consecrated in 1110, stands opposite the spare Reformation Church. (The town is split roughly in half between Catholics and Protestants.) On the back wall of the rebuilt evangelical church is a modern frieze of Luther standing before Charles. To the church's longtime pastor, Harald Storch, the Luther Jubilee needs to be clear-eyed and honest about the darker aspects of Luther's life, especially the reformer's negative attitude toward Turks and Mennonites and his vitriol toward Jews, as well as his incitement to the slaughter of peasants in the so-called Peasants War. To do otherwise, said the pastor, "would be a sort of idolatry." Still, it gnawed at him that the Roman Catholic ban on Luther "and all his followers" is still in effect.

Across the street, I asked the provost of the Worms cathedral, Monsignor Engelbert Priess, about this. The subject was clearly a touchy one.

"The time has not yet come to lift the ban," he said.

It seems that authenticity can be both material and mental. The provost spoke with the authentic zeal of a priest intent on protecting the purity of the Roman Catholic Church.

Reston is the author of "Defenders of the Faith: Charles V, Suleyman the Magnificent, and the Battle for Europe, 1520-1536" (Penguin).

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