

Ludwig Leichhardt found in Berlin!

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Ludwig Leichhardt III at home in Berlin. Picture: Adam Berry *Source: Supplied*



The church where Ludwig Leichhardt was taught by the pastor in Zaue, Germany. Picture: Adam Berry *Source: Supplied*



Leichhardt's initials carved initials in a tree in Trebatsch, Germany. Picture: Adam Berry *Source: Supplied*

LUDWIG Leichhardt leads the way through his humble first-floor Berlin flat to his office, where souvenirs and gifts proudly adorn the back wall. What can't be hung or framed is kept in a wooden cabinet opposite.

"This is my 'Australian room,'" the 73-year-old retired engineer declares in a wondrously guttural voice that belongs to another century. He points to a large linen wall-hanging depicting a map of Australia. "A friend of mine found it in Poland and sent it to me," he says. A clip-on kangaroo and koala from a bygone era cling precariously to one hem. There are oils of outback landscapes painted for him by an Australian woman living with a German fellow in Newcastle; a didgeridoo he bought in Sydney; an Akubra donated by a Berlin restaurant called Billabong. Leichhardt seems pleased to be able to show his room off. "It's what I do," he says wryly.

There are perks to being Ludwig Leichhardt III, the great-great-grand-nephew of one of Australia's most famous explorers and scientists: friends and strangers tend to want to give you things. Ludwig III doesn't remember all of the donors. He shows me the silver coin featuring a portrait of his forebear against a map of Queensland released earlier this year by the Perth Mint. He presents the commemorative stamps released in Australia and Germany in October. He pulls from a shelf the newly published paperback *Where is Dr Leichhardt?* in which author Darrell Lewis has scribbled a personal greeting to him. There are many other examples, but Ludwig III is a giver, too. With a hint of dry humour, he says he recently spent hours fact-checking a Hamburg journalist's crime thriller loosely based on the explorer being the subject of an assassination plot.

Much more intriguing are the newly translated writings of his intrepid ancestor, published by the Queensland Museum. One of the translators, Tom Darragh, handed him a copy of *The Leichhardt Diaries: Early Travels in Australia during 1842-1844* on a recent stopover in Berlin. Darragh, a retired scientist from Melbourne, was amazed at Ludwig III's striking resemblance to his namesake. "Somebody said, 'You'll recognise him. He looks just like Ludwig Leichhardt'," Darragh laughs, recalling how he identified him in a busy Berlin train station.

Some might call it destiny; Ludwig III seems to think so. "I have the same Christian name, the same last name and the same looks. That is a commitment I am bound to," he says. Leichhardt's disappearance in 1848 in far inland Australia is a great mystery of colonial history that remains unsolved, 200 years after the explorer's birth. His memory and achievements are preserved and honoured in this modest Berlin home - and in the town and region where he was raised, the Leichhardt legacy is being revived.

Leichhardt's adventures and fate were too remote to matter to most of his 20th-century descendants. In the aftermath of World War II, they had more immediate concerns. Ludwig III was about five when his family fled the city where he was born, known now as Szczecin in Poland, and resettled in East Germany. "Everything we had from Leichhardt remained under the rubble," he says.

Ludwig III was in his teens when he learnt about the exploits of his forebear and he became fixated, devouring information wherever he could find it. But this fervent interest cast him as an outsider in his family. Neither of his brothers - now deceased - were intrigued. Rosemaria, Ludwig III's wife of 54 years, explains his predicament. "It sometimes got on his family's nerves because it was always his main topic. That's why the family wasn't into it so much. They were often saying, 'Oh, you and your Australia, you and your Leichhardt!'" That goes for the younger generation, too. "We were hoping our grandchildren might be interested, but so far, nothing."

Ludwig III reckons Leichhardt's skills as a botanist, zoologist and geologist can be likened to those of his contemporary, the polymath fellow Prussian Alexander von Humboldt. "For me it was always fascinating that he was a universal scientist, a general researcher like Humboldt," he says. Humboldt made his name with discoveries in South America and is to this day a household name. Berlin's oldest university is named after him and his brother, Wilhelm, a prominent politician.

Until recently, most of the celebration of Leichhardt has been in the land of his death, not the land of his birth. In Australia's bicentenary year, 1988, Ludwig III flew to Sydney where he gave a speech about his ancestor at a University of NSW conference to mark the 175th anniversary of Leichhardt's birth. He recalls the hero's welcome he was given as if it were yesterday. "It was fantastic. The newspapers were writing: 'Leichhardt's back!'" He presented a relief of his uncle to the inner-west suburb of Leichhardt on behalf of the Liga für Völkerfreundschaft (International Friendship League), which had funded and organised his trip; East Germany also gave a bronze bust of the explorer, now in Parliament House in Canberra, for which Ludwig III was the model. A picture of the bust adorns the cover of one of the four books he's written on Leichhardt since 2005. "I am proud of my books, but others are writing more," he says, touching the snow-white beard he grew for the sitting and decided to keep.

Ludwig III's flat may be a repository of all things Leichhardt, but step outside and it's a vastly different story. In this neighbourhood, having "LEICHHARDT" emblazoned on a door rings no bells in the consciousness of Berliners. Ludwig III mounts a plausible defence. "My neighbours have no idea about Leichhardt. I don't like to present myself as a Leichhardt here in Berlin," he says. "Leichhardt belongs to Brandenburg." Brandenburg was Leichhardt's home state; back then, before the German provinces integrated into a single nation state, it was part of the kingdom of Prussia. So I hit the road, where, 90 minutes southeast of Berlin, "Leichhardt country" beckons.

Trebatsch, population 616, is built on swamplands close to the vast Schwielochsee (lake). It's a world away from the arid outback that the explorer and scientist encountered on his expeditions. In a street named after him, a large stone with a plaque in front of a duplex marks the spot where Leichhardt is said to have been born. His baptismal record is in a register that dates back to 1810, kept at the local church. Friedrich Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt was baptised on December 5, 1813. His godfather, Pastor Anton Rodelius, played a key role in his early education and under his tutelage the bright child developed his early love of nature. He went on to study natural sciences in Berlin and moved to England in 1837 for further study. In 1842 he arrived in Sydney, intent on exploring inland Australia.

But even in Brandenburg, says Professor Anja Schwarz from the University of Potsdam, half of the population - including academics at her own university - would be hard-pressed to identify Leichhardt. "Leichhardt is pretty obscure for Germans," she says. "I think generally most people don't know him because everything he did happened somewhere else and somehow he was forgotten." Even so, Schwarz is among a small team of Australian and German researchers currently examining Leichhardt and his legacies.

Lothar Gosche, 78, says the translated title of his latest book on the explorer, *Missing, Silenced, But Not Forgotten*, reflects current attitudes. "He got lost in Australia but he was lost in Germany too. A veil of silence was drawn over him because he didn't want to be drafted to the Prussian military, but nevertheless we haven't forgotten him." Gosche argues that Leichhardt's failure to complete his military service in Prussia is only one reason for the explorer's obscurity in his own country: his discoveries were overshadowed by Germany's interest in its African colonies, and he failed to publish his scientific results in Germany.

Then there is the long shadow cast over him by Hitler: the dictator learnt of the Prussian explorer's origins and ordered Trebatsch to be renamed "Leichhardt" in 1937; so it remained until 1945. "They [the Nazis] argued that was a way to set a memorial to the famous explorer, but actually they just wanted to get rid of the Slavic names," Gosche says. "They did the same with many other villages in our region; [it was part of] the Aryanisation of these places."

Andre Parade, 52, a local history teacher, tells how his wife's family moved to Trebatsch in 1874 and bought land from Adolph Leichhardt, the explorer's brother. The aunt and uncle of Parade's wife - both born during World War II - still have "Leichhardt" listed on their birth certificates. A letter from the cultural association of communist East Germany dating from the 1960s, kept in Trebatsch's Ludwig Leichhardt Museum, documents the "fear of association" that developed thereafter. It reads: "One should really think about honouring Leichhardt since he has been flattered by the Nazis." Parade says: "It was difficult to speak for Leichhardt after [the war] without being suspected to be a follower of the Nazis. Even in the '60s there were still reservations."

Things began to change in the 1970s after East Germany was admitted to the United Nations, and the publication in 1972 of the first government-approved biography of Leichhardt. The book, by Heinz Haufe, became a bestseller. Andrew Hurley, a senior lecturer in International Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney, who is delving into Leichhardt's legacy, says Haufe's biography was part of a remarkable comeback for Leichhardt in East Germany. "There were five or six print runs," Hurley says. "There must have been a kind of imaginative armchair travel that East German readers could participate in by consuming that book. But then the fall of the Wall came and sales of the book just plummeted."

Parade, who chairs the Ludwig Leichhardt Society, says the years thereafter were also difficult for Leichhardt enthusiasts. "Nobody had money for a full-time position in the museum. Who wanted to spend money to keep a museum running? People wanted to travel and buy fancy clothes from the West." But interest has revived again and Leichhardt could be the economic saviour for a region whose population has been in steady decline since the end of World War II.

Plans for the year-long 200th anniversary in 2013 began eight years ago, says local regional office director and Leichhardt enthusiast Bernd Boschan, adding: "We have been infected by [his] personality and his achievements." There is talk of establishing a four-star, 100-bed hotel; a camping site, renovated and renamed after Leichhardt, boasts a small menagerie including two red-necked wallabies, Jack and Jill, brought from the local zoo. Two hundred straw kangaroos have been dotted around the region to get people talking. A new bright red dahlia, said to be Leichhardt's favourite flower, was propagated and named for him. Even the 50km path that Leichhardt trod every weekend to finish his schooling has been converted into a walking and cycling track named after him.

The celebrations culminated on Leichhardt's 200th birthday, October 23, when a memorial in the form of a 3m-high glass, stainless steel and bronze stele designed by Australian artist Sue Hayward was unveiled at Goyatz, a few metres offshore in the waters of Schwielochsee. At a three-day Australian event there was Vegemite, a German version of damper, and entertainment inspired by the Bee Gees and Kylie Minogue.

Plans for next year include opening a Ludwig Leichhardt Foundation to raise money to fund exchanges for school and university students. "We made a big step to make Leichhardt better known but we know there is still a lot to do," Boschan says. The foundation will fund the establishment of the Leichhardt Academy in 2017, which will encourage joint projects between universities in Brandenburg and Australia. "We want to honour the historic achievements in research and discovery in both countries as well as establish scientific symposiums in universities and in schools," Boschan says. "Our goal is that Leichhardt will find his way back into the school books so that the younger generation can value him the same way as Humboldt."

Back in Berlin, a weary Ludwig III is pleased about the publicity garnered for his forebear, but it's been a gruelling year, with his attendance required at events up to four times a month. "For me personally there has to come a time of quiet for Leichhardt. It's nice when he becomes better known and I am happy to help with this, but after this, no more."

When he's not on the trail of Leichhardt, Ludwig III is happiest pottering in a garden plot a short drive from his flat. But it seems he is not quite through: he hands me a copy of an email received the week before from Dan Baschiera, an academic and Leichhardt enthusiast from the Northern Territory, who has a new documentary coming out. Baschiera will make another attempt, in July, to find the explorer's final resting place and he hopes Ludwig III will be there.

The Berlin pensioner has his own ideas about where Leichhardt met his fate. "I can imagine that he was at the border of the Simpson Desert trying to avoid it and then walked along mountain sides where he then died from a natural disaster." Either way, he wishes all the Leichhardt truth-seekers well in their quest. "I have the hope they will find something." He folds the letter and clutches it in his big hands. There's a glint in his eye. "If they find something, I would like to be there."