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The Emigrants' Story: Where It Began

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BREMERHAVEN, Germany

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- The slogan at the entrance to the new museum of emigration says it all: "Over seven million people departed from here to an unknown world."

Well, maybe not completely unknown, at least probably not for those among the seven million who departed in the 20th century and had some inkling of where they were going.

Still, here in the age of discount air fares and Hotmail and 24-hour news channels, the motto serves as a reminder just how wrenching, how much of a risk, a break from a familiar life, emigration was for earlier generations, and how much grit and stamina were required to undertake it.

Why so many did undertake it is one of the questions that the museum, known in German as Auswanderer Haus, or Emigration House, which opened in this busy port city a few weeks ago, is intended to answer. The spacious, modern building, framed in latticed wood, overlooks Bremerhaven's Old Port, created in 1837 in large part to take advantage of the wave of emigration to America that began around then.

"We want young people to know about people who took this step, to leave their homes for the unknown world," said Andreas Heller, the architect who designed the Bremerhaven museum, describing emigration as "a long journey, and maybe a journey with no coming back."

If the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York Harbor tells the story of arrivals, the museum in Bremerhaven tells the story at the opposite end of the experience: the departure, not just to the United States

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but to Canada

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Brazil

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Argentina

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and Australia

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as well. But why a museum just now, so many years after large-scale European emigration to North America stopped?

The question is all the more pertinent because Bremerhaven is not the only German city to have the idea of an emigration museum, though it is the first in Germany, and in Europe as a whole, to open one. In Hamburg also, two hours by train from here and the other major German point of departure for the "unknown world," another emigration museum is planned for 2007.

"In our global village, people are looking for their roots," said Lisa Kosok, the museum director in Hamburg.

While people look for roots - not a simple matter in Germany, where the search for roots, at least until recently, meant almost exclusively the roots of the country's Hitlerian disaster - cities look for identities. So for Bremerhaven and Hamburg, the emigration theme provides a catalyst to revitalize run-down districts and lends to the quest for something normative in the German past, something not associated with aggression and genocide.

The brochure for the Hamburg museum has a picture of a man on horseback, wearing a 10-gallon hat and jeans, with the caption, "Perhaps it is also his history, or the history of his parents or grandparents."

A couple of pages later comes a sepia-toned photograph of people in long coats and felt hats getting ready to board the ship that will take them, unexpectedly, toward cowboyhood. The contrast between the worlds, and the transition from one to the other, are what the German emigration museums aim to illustrate.

In all, some 12 million people departed from Bremerhaven and Hamburg for the Western Hemisphere between the mid-19th century and 1974, when seaports as points of departure were entirely replaced by airports. Many of them were Germans, motivated by poverty, ambition, adventure, family quarrels and, especially after the Nazis came to power in 1933, by persecution. But many millions more were from the East - Russia

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Poland

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and the Baltic States - lured to Germany by what could be called entrepreneurs of emigration.

Bremerhaven in this sense largely came into existence as a major port to satisfy the emigration demand. Hamburg, a far more ancient city, was already Germany's major port in the 19th century, but the emigration business resulted in a major expansion there, too, largely because of the activities of one man.

He was Albert Ballin, almost unknown in the United States, but a major figure in the peopling of North America. Mr. Ballin was a Jew who took over his father's ticket-booking business and built up an island in the middle of the Elbe River intended to provide transit services to emigrants, especially those from the East.

Eventually, Mr. Ballin became the general director of HAPAG, now called Hapag-Lloyd, which remains one of Europe's biggest shipping companies.

The complex Mr. Ballin built on Veddel Island in Hamburg, now an area of warehouses and itself a neighborhood for recent Turkish and other immigrants to Germany, once contained some 30 buildings, including dormitories, a hospital, a bathhouse, churches and a synagogue, most of which have been demolished. But parts of one building, a one-story former sleeping barracks, remain, and it is there that the future BallinStadt, or Ballin City, Museum, will be built.

Old photographs, which are available at the planned museum's Web site, www.ballinstadt.de <<http://www.ballinstadt.de>>, show a kind of self-contained village, where thousands of people could stay for a few days waiting for their ships to leave.

Hamburg is behind Bremerhaven in the emigration museum race because, as Ms. Kosok explained, something in the neighborhood of 9 million euros, or \$11 million, out of a total of about 18 million euros for the whole project, has not yet been raised.

Meanwhile, Bremerhaven's Auswanderer Haus is already taking visitors through a sort of reproduction of the emigration experience - waiting on the quay on a cold November morning, climbing up the gangway, settling into a third-class cabin - and introducing them to a specific immigrant.

Each visitor gets a magnetic card with the story of one of 15 such people - from Johann Nikalaus, an 18-year-old farmer who left from Bremerhaven in 1848, to Hertha Nathorff, the niece of Albert Einstein, who fled the Nazis in 1939.

The idea is to remove the emigration experience from the abstract, to make it as tangible as the collection of old suitcases that passengers took with them containing the few items from the old world that they took with them to the new.

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