

4 LEIPZIG – A CITY IN PICTURES

A SHORT INTRODUCTION

Leipzig's first millennium is already over. Its existence under this name dates back to at least 1015, when it was recorded as a castle in a medieval chronicle. True, this area now home to over half a million people had already been inhabited long beforehand by a succession of tribal societies. However, the town of Leipzig was only officially founded when the settlement surrounding the castle was chartered in 1165 by Otto the Rich, a prince from the House of Wettin, in his role as Margrave of Meissen.

Local development was buoyed by the fact that the surrounding plain criss-crossed by several streams and rivers afforded safe passage. Taking advantage of this, two ancient transcontinental routes intersected there: the Via Imperii stretching from north to south, and the Via Regia from western to eastern Europe. This prompted the emergence of a market which was increasingly granted protection and support by regional rulers and even the emperor. An imperial edict dated 1507 stipulated that all merchandise passing within a radius of 115 kilometres of Leipzig had to be offered for sale there. This ushered in an economic boom from which the city still profits to this day. Buying and selling soon led to wealth, and 250 years ago Leipzig was described as »the city where so many industrious outsiders arrived with staff in hand and, thanks to their talent, hard work and God's blessings, acquired tons of gold.« People from Holland, Italy, France, Greece and Russia proved a boon to both the economy and everyday life. This international momentum furthered not just the university founded in 1409 but also architecture, fashion, music and literature. It's no coincidence that the construction of Germany's first long-distance railway began in Leipzig in the 1830s – or that a century later, Europe's first motorway intersection was built on its outskirts.

The industrial era beginning in the 19th century had a lasting impact on Leipzig's cityscape. Karl Heine, a tireless visionary, built roads and a canal, and drained marshlands so that new factories all connected to the railway network could be erected. Since there was no longer enough room for goods to be sold at the Leipzig Fair, the trade show was introduced where samples of mass-produced items were displayed in exhibition buildings in the city centre. A separate construction and industry trade fair was launched at a purpose-built venue in the suburbs. Furthermore, Leipzig became an eminent centre of publishing thanks to its long-flourishing wholesale book trade, modern printing plants, printing press manufacture, and last but not least the founding of the German Library (now the National Library).

These days, Leipzig can be seen in a new light. With the building stock and the natural surroundings suffering terribly in the Nazi period (not least because of the world war it triggered) and under the Soviet-era East German regime, the inhabitants' determination not to put up with this creeping destruction any longer ushered in a new chapter of development in autumn 1989. Although architectural witnesses of the past are still preserved as monuments, the scars and losses are far less visible than they once were, and no one can fail to notice the all-embracing process of renewal. The oracle's prophecy has come true yet again: every fifty years, Leipzig is a different city.

Bernd Weinkauff