

## EUROPA NOSTRA CONFERENCE, STRASBOURG 9—12 June, 1982

by *Susan Gold*

In 1982 it was my turn to represent the Ancient Monuments Society at the Europa Nostra Conference in Strasbourg. I had attended first in 1978 in Hamburg when Europa Nostra was new to me, while the city was an old friend. Since then I had come to know the people who run Europa Nostra and some of those who attend the conferences while in 1982 the city was new to me and proved to be an enchanting experience. These facts may be reflected in this report.

We hit the first of the many spells of fine, hot weather last summer. The city looked its best. One had heard that the Alsations, though of German stock, are fierce French patriots, yet, on superficial acquaintance at least, the Alsace does strike one as a corner of France which will forever have a German flavour—the atmosphere, the buildings, the food, the patios, all are more German than French.

Strasbourg is also the seat of the Council of Europe and one of the three meeting places of the European Parliament—an institution with peripatetic habits. But not until one has witnessed its re-arrival and, incidentally, has been turned out of one's hotel where one thought one had a firm booking, does one realize what these moves involve: not only delegates; their secretaries, their very files and typewriters, all take part in what one Strasbourgeoise, to whom I chatted over a cup of coffee one evening, called "*le démenagement le plus affreux du monde*".

On arrival one is struck immediately by the tremendously high roof spaces of four or five storeys, lit either by rows of dormers or by open galleries. This, we were told, is due to the constant danger of sieges on the one hand and flooding on the other in the past when the roof was the only safe storage space. These roofs are covered by rounded tiles giving a curious fishscale effect. The river Ill makes a central thoroughfare while its canals surround the city. The river divides to form an island, La Petite France, which is the most charming (and most touristy) part.

Louis XIV was the monarch who joined Alsace to France and in the southern part the great Vauban has built La Grande Ecluse—a barrage dam of two storeys with a flat roof from which one has one of the most spectacular views and realizes the dominance of the pink sandstone cathedral of Nôtre Dame, one of the great masterpieces of Flamboyant Gothic. When we were there it was almost completely ensconced in scaffolding but fortunately the South Portal was free and one could meet, in the stone, the Wise Virgins and the Foolish Virgins with their tempter, a marvellous portrait of a useless, late-mediaeval dandy. Our stay coincided with the beginning of the annual music festival and some of us were fortunate in being able to attend the

opening concert, Bach's B Minor Mass performed in the Cathedral.

Next to the Cathedral is the Château des Rohan, a magnificent 18th century building, now a museum of paintings, the decorative arts and ceramics, where the opening session took place in the Synod Room.

We were welcomed by the Mayor, M. Pflimlin, who acknowledged the debt the city owed to Lord Duncan-Sandys, President of Europa Nostra, who had been instrumental in restoring the city after suffering war damage. But industrial pollution was a far greater danger now and this was what had damaged the Cathedral. Lord Duncan-Sandys replied and, speaking as usual with ease in English, French and German, told of the advances made since the milestone of Architectural Heritage year in 1975, but warned that there was no room for complacency. After further speeches by Herr Franz Karasek, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Dr. Olaf Schwenke, Vice-Chairman of the Cultural Committee of the European Parliament and Mr. Jakob Aano, Chairman of the Committee on Culture and Education of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, we adjourned to the Hôtel de Ville for a reception given by the City of Strasbourg.

And so the conference got under way; meetings were held in the Palais de l'Europe, built in the northern part of the town, next to a park where Napoleon had built a charming Orangerie for the Empress Marie-Louise and where we walked during breaks in the stifling summer heat. In the Palais all was serene and air-conditioned. The building is popularly known as "le Carré de l'Est" (a well-known cheese!) because of its square shape. Its best feature, an asymmetrical, copper-covered edifice faintly reminiscent of a chapter house, is set in the quadrangle and hidden from view. Most of the copper on the roof seems to have been replaced by felt. In the meeting room the fenestration was total and slides and films showed to disadvantage. Some speakers fell foul of the simultaneous translators and on one occasion the Head Interpreter descended from his eyrie to the floor of the assembly and made an impassioned speech imploring delegates to speak more slowly, louder and more clearly and to let him have advance copies of their speeches, or, at least, of proper names and place names. But on the whole the business went forward with dispatch under Lord Duncan-Sandys' able chairmanship.

There were few surprises, delegates reported progress on the whole, some successes and some failures, all counselled against complacency. I discerned four main strands:

**1. Concern for the problems of small towns and villages;** these were especially stressed by Dr. Otto Carlsson, a Vice-President of Europa Nostra and of the German Heimatbund and, incident-

tally, an Hon. Life Fellow of the Ancient Monuments Society. He observed that villages were losing their identity, that traditional materials like wood and thatch were increasingly being replaced by cement and corrugated iron which might be cheaper, but only in the short run. Villagers were frequently their own worst enemies in their aspirations to "modernity" but he thought that the present recession was favourable to the preservation of villages. Dr. H. Langer-Hansel, Director of Austria Nostra urged co-operation between Alpine regions which shared similar problems.

**2. Tax concessions for owners of historic buildings;** Mr. Lloyd Warburton, Secretary of the International Union of Historic Houses Associations, mentioned this particularly in his impressive report on 20 years of conservation work. It was the main theme of what was, by general consent, one of the most interesting papers of the conference given by Mr. Henrik Hauboe of Bygnings Frednings Foreningen of Denmark. There, in 1978, the Association of Privately Owned Listed Buildings, BYFO for short, was formed. Accepting as facts of life that, when fighting for a cause, it is necessary to enlist as much support as possible, this association comprises owners of all listed buildings, not just large estates and castles—further, that in arguing a case with any government it is best to stick to the existing legal framework and, finally, that no politician will be seen to identify with a policy which requires cutting the budget of hospitals and schools and giving the money thus saved to the upkeep of castles and country houses, BYFO did the following: they found a way of proving that the Exchequer will actually be better off by allowing owners of historic buildings to spend a computer-calculated amount of "decay-per-year" and deduct it from their income before tax is assessed. There is not enough room here to describe the scheme in detail, but information is available from BYFO, PO Box 60, DE2730, Herlev, Denmark.

**3. Aid for Historical Buildings which can cross frontiers;** Mr. Lloyd Warburton urged the setting up of a European Revolving Fund. Mr. Jakob Aano spoke at the opening session of a project to make EEC funds available to countries outside the union. Dr. Carlsson urged aid for buildings in disaster areas. These ideas came to my mind very strongly when, later in the year, I visited the area in Southern Yugoslavia which was devastated by an earthquake in 1979. In Kotor only the facades of some of the Venetian patrician palaces remain and entire streets have been blocked off because it is dangerous to walk in them. Buda, a typical mediaeval town of the Eastern Mediterranean huddles forlorn and almost uninhabited on its hill. The worst hit was the old Turkish town of Ulcinj where only the rubble has been

cleared and some of the buildings still lie where they fell over three years ago. Some of these buildings are of a construction type only to be met with in the Balkans and, as many of them are in Albania and therefore inaccessible, this represents a considerable loss to the European heritage.

**4. Politics in Conservation;** this came up several times. Mr. George Lemos of the National Trust of Greece mentioned this problem and it was from him that we heard some of the most horrific stories, e.g. the opening to the public of the monastery on Mount Athos complete with four lane approach road and the mining of Bauxite in the bay of Delphi. Even more apparent was the problem in a speech by Dr. Udo Klaus, President of the German Heimatbund. In Germany conservation had always been the preserve of the political Right, the extreme Right in the inter-war period. It has now become the preserve of the Left. The very conservative founder-members of what claims to be one of the oldest conservation movements in Europe and the "Green" environmentalists, who prevent the building of nuclear power stations, make strange bed-fellows. Yet areas of agreement must be found, common causes advanced. How fortunate we are in this country where conservation has never become political to any extent!

The conference moved to its close with the adoption of the final resolutions and the Annual General Meeting of *Europa Nostra*. It was suggested that we meet again in Lisbon in 1984.

The AGM was followed by a guided coach tour of Strasbourg. Seeing a largely pedestrianized town from a coach presents certain problems and the local tour operators who attempted this cannot be said to have solved them completely.

The last day's programme was an excursion through Alsace.

After the initial confusion about the starting point we had a glorious day. We visited Rosenheim, Obernai and Barr where we were received by the Mayor in a charming original 18th century ensemble of a small manor house and adjoining buildings. We continued to Riquewiesh and Colmar where the weather broke at last and we saw Matthias Gruenewald's Issenheim altar painting to the accompaniment of thunder and lightning which heightened the picture's drama. Again it was familiar from reproductions but I had never realized the full complexity of this polyptych of several layers which comprises statuary as well as paintings. There was an excellent model in the Colmar museum, a former monastic church. If we had seen nothing else the day would still have been well spent.

But we had one more pleasure in store—a reception at Klingenthal by Dr. Toepfer of the Johann Wolfgang von Goethe Foundation. Was he, I asked Dr. Carlsson, the same Dr. Toepfer who had taken us on a forced march across the Lueneburg Heath

near Hamburg in 1978? The same, replied Dr. Carlsson. The sky had cleared as we approached the little 18th century chateau set in a lake and restored, modernized and converted to a luxurious hostel for students and staff of the university of Strasbourg by Dr. Marie Paule Stintzi. We returned to Strasbourg in excellent spirits and much refreshed by the good food and wine.

The four days of the conference had been interesting and invigorating. As usual, the most useful part was meeting and talking, often late into the night, with other delegates. It seemed to me that we in Britain have more to give than to learn where conservation is concerned.

Our grateful thanks are due to the City of Strasbourg, the Council of Europe, the town of Barr and the Goethe Foundation for the hospitality we received, to Lord Duncan-Sandys for his courteous yet firm chairmanship, but above all to Freda Smith who, in spite of her recent illness, had not only managed to plan and arrange the conference, but to actually be present.