



The Goths in Rome

LATIN LOVERS, GENTLE LANDSCAPES, ANCIENT CITIES AND SEDUCTIVE COOKING - SINCE THE ROMANTICS, GERMANS HAVE JOURNEYED TO ITALY TO WRITE POETRY UNDER OLIVE TREES, UNEARTH THE ROOTS OF WESTERN CIVILISATION OR JUST LEARN HOW TO HAVE FUN

BY ANETTE STÜHRMANN On September 3, 1786, at three in the morning, Johann Wolfgang Goethe set off to Italy to escape his tedious bureaucratic job as a minister in Weimar, the beginning of two carefree and happy years. He explored the ancient city of Rome, lost himself in the beauty of Naples, and decided that 'Sicily holds the key to everything' (*Italian Journey*). Goethe had dreamt of Italy since he was a child, and his dreams seemed to have become reality. While living in a house on the Corso in Rome, now named Casa di Goethe, Goethe became part of painter Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein's lively circle of German artists. In Rome, he began writing creatively after 10 barren years, and he found another kind of fulfilment through his romantic attachment to a young woman, after a sexually frustrating relationship with Charlotte von Stein.

More than 200 years later, Goethe's fellow countrymen and countrywomen seem to be just as enchanted with the country where, according to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*, 'Lemon trees blossom and golden oranges glow in the dark.' In all, German tourists spend about nine billion euros per year in Italy, more than any other nationality. Beach towel wars against French, British, and American tourists have been fought on the Adriatic coast for decades. Even the political jet-set latched on to the trend. Left-wing German politicians, particularly the Kohl-era opposition in the 1980s and members of the SPD-Green coalition in Gerhard Schröder's government after 1998, were so fond of Italy that they used to make domestic and international headlines as the 'Tuscany Faction'.

While critics disparage the likes of Joschka Fischer, Otto Schily and Oskar Lafontaine for their taste in a bohemian lifestyle, supporters claim that they merely appreciate the region's simplicity. Former interior minister Schily owns a villa in the hills south of Siena where he tends to his olive trees, and talks with an old friend who runs a local restaurant. Schily recommended the region to Fischer years ago when they were still Green party buddies. The ex-foreign minister became a dedicated member of the faction, and these days keeps fit by jogging through the hills when not lecturing in the US. Lafontaine, who left the SPD for Die Linke, spends his holidays in Capannori near Lucca. Ex-chancellor Schröder doesn't visit Tuscany so often, but belongs to the faction because of his Italian Brioni suits. In the summer of 2003, politicians' holidays in Italy took on a political dimension: While still chancellor, Schröder decided to cancel his vacation on the Adriatic coast, after the Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi compared a German EU parliamentarian to a Nazi concentration camp guard.

Italy is not going out of fashion: After years of recession in the tourist industry, the number of Germans visiting Italy - 8.7 million in 2006 - is again on the rise. Experts even speak of a renaissance of German tourism in Italy. In Italy's tourist centres, menus are translated into German, and Venice claims more Germans by square meters than any other foreign nationals. Donna Leon's crime stories are most popular amongst German readers, who don't hesitate to travel to Venice to retrace every step of her fictitious Commissario Brunetti's. There are Italian

restaurants all over Berlin, *belegte Brötchen mit Mozzarella* has become Germany's best-loved sandwich, and Berliners have relinquished their old *Milchkaffee* habits to become *Cappuccino* and *Latte* aficionados. So what is the German fascination for Italy all about?

The German longing for Italy

There is, of course, the German fondness for warmer weather and beautiful landscapes as well as better food - Italian wines and Mediterranean cooking. But Germans also harbour a romantic longing for the Italian lifestyle - or their perception of that lifestyle, fostered by Goethe. Ursula Bongaerts, director of the Casa di Goethe in Rome, was part of the museum's planning team years before it opened in 1997. She moved to Rome for professional reasons and learned Italian for her job with the Goethe Museum. She did not go to Italy to fulfil any longing for spiritual and cultural rebirth, but she acknowledges 'that the classical longing for Italy in Goethe's sense still exists. Our roots are here in Italy. That was the reason for Goethe's journey, after all. Italians and Germans have a similar history. We are still linked very closely.'

You don't even have to go to Italy to get into Italian culture. Many Germans belong to Italian literature, language, and cultural clubs and love Italian opera, even if they don't understand a word of it. Giuliano Camedda is an Italian entertainer, who makes a good living off of the German obsession with Italy. 'In Germany, it's easier to make money. In Italy they are very critical and not always reliable,' he says

about the job prospects in the two countries. He is originally from Sardinia and has lived in Lörrach in southern Germany for about 15 years. Camedda imitates Eros Ramazzotti and Adriano Celentano in his shows across Europe, in the US, and in Russia. 'German audiences love stories about Italian stars. They have fun, they are fascinated by the Italian vivacity, humour, spirit, language, and accent.'

Learning Italian is constantly en vogue. High schools all over Berlin teach Italian as a second or third foreign language. Daniela Marcantonio has been teaching Italian at the Carl von Ossietzky Gymnasium in Pankow since 2000. Her students like her because she is a 'genuine Italian with passion and spirit' and because the Italian lessons with her are more fun than with a German teacher. Marcantonio thinks that her students chose Italian because of their parents' own fascination for her country: 'Often they have visited Italy, speak a little Italian ... Out of my 77 students 11 have Italian names - Laura, Lavinia, Sophia, Lisa.' The West German Guidos of the 1960s and 1970s have grown up, and the East German Marios have come of age, but Germans are still fond of christening their *bambinos* with Italian names, at least in Pankow.

Infatuation with Italy is so deeply rooted in the German mentality that the erection of a wall and 50 years of separation couldn't suppress it. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, many East Germans chose Italy as their first foreign destination. Typically, east-

ern writer Ingo Schulze's novel *Simple Stories* recounts an East German couple's emblematic first trip to Italy in February of 1990. Peter Michalek and his Gesellschaft der Freunde Italiens (The Society of the Friends of Italy) in Friedrichshain could be right out of one of Schulze's stories. Michalek loves Italian music, especially Antonello Venditti. His favourite author is Italo Calvino. From 1972 to 1978 and from 1983 to 1985, Michalek lived as an East German diplomat in Rome. He enjoyed his life there tremendously, speaks Italian fluently, reads the Italian newspapers online every day, has travelled through all the regions of Italy extensively, and organises two annual trips to Italy for a group of 50 to 60 society members. Shortly after German reunification, he says, East Germans flocked to Italy. 'From 1991 to 1993 former GDR citizens' enthusiasm for visiting Italy was immense. This superficial initial interest in the country was more or less satisfied by the vast number of low-budget tours. From north to south in five days, sitting on the bus the whole journey. They were put in the cheapest hotels and served the worst food imaginable. At that time, I took a private family trip through northern Italy. We stayed in a cheap place, but we had ordered our food in advance, simple but nice food. And then there was this busload from Chemnitz with 30 people sitting at a big table. They were just getting the very basic meal with spaghetti, no extras. They were staring enviously at our table the whole time.'

Italy without the Italians

Like Goethe more than 200 years before them, most of today's Germans don't normally get more than a glimpse of the country, and even less of its inhabitants. While Goethe was infatuated with the Mediterranean way of life and intoxicated by what he thought was the meaning of Italy, he hardly mingled with the locals - after all, as he wrote in *Italian Journey*, he wanted to 'discover' himself 'in the objects', not the objects themselves. What Goethe wrote in his *Diary of the Journey*, before he had even reached Venice and weeks before he actually arrived in Rome, is what you might hear Germans say today: 'So far I've only seen two Italian cities and have hardly talked to a single human being, but I already know my Italians pretty well. They're like our courtiers who think they're the top people in the world.' And a little later he concludes: 'All in all, a really good people, you only have to see the children and common folk.'

Goethe's perception of Italy as 'a society where everyone does nothing but enjoy himself' (*Italian Journey*) is a cliché still nurtured today. The new director of the Italienisches Kulturinstitut in Berlin, Angelo Bolaffi, a professor of political philosophy from Rome who taught at the Free University in the early 1980s, is an expert on German-Italian prejudices. In an article from 2000, '*Eine besondere Beziehung*,' he suggests that Germans love Italy without respecting the Italians, and that the Italians have respect for the Germans, but no love. Germans

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perceive Italy as being essentially disorganized and chaotic and Italians criticize Germans for being over-efficient. Bolaffi says: 'German-Italian relations are very complicated. We are diametrically opposed. We attract and repel each other at the same time. We see in the other what we would like to be, but are not.'

'Personally, I would call it the perfect combination,' says Nicole Andries, a Berlin art historian who fell in love with Italy on a visit to Tuscany when she was 18 and speaks fluent Italian. She studied for a year in Pisa thanks to the Erasmus programme and although she pays regular visits, she misses her earlier life in Italy. 'Of course, the Latin mentality is at odds with the German mindset. But I think we somehow complement one another: They have that playfulness we lack. Many Germans are not aware of it, but we are pretty repressed. We don't know how to communicate. And then you go to Italy, meet the people and feel liberated. Even the most uptight German will relax there. Just sit in a train: In two minutes someone will be babbling with you and two minutes after that, without noticing it, you'll find yourself deep in a conversation. It's liberating!' Although she acknowledges the downside of a macho, loud and verbose society ('the mobile phone rage there, it was amazing, everyone was constantly phoning, very loud, at machine-gun volume'), and doesn't disown her own people's genius ('this typical German quest for truth'), she simply feels at home in Italy. 'I feel completely at ease there. As a German you're totally

welcome - no prejudices related to the war and Nazi times. People just like you without reservation - very different from my experience in other countries, including England and France, where it takes much more time to be accepted.' As for Italian men: 'Of course men talk a lot of nonsense but the codes are clear to me. Those complements, I know how to take them. I know how to give them, too! In Italy the street is a stage and the people are great comedians. People dramatise their feelings and it's wonderful. You just have to know the codes. Of course some Germans may not read the clues, and some misunderstandings may ensue.'

Opposites attract

Daniela Marcantonio definitely agrees that Germans and Italians can easily misunderstand one another. Back when her German husband understood almost no Italian, she took him to Italy to visit her family. 'While I was talking to my mother, my husband automatically assumed that we were arguing, although we were just having a comfortable talk ... I guess we are much louder!' She says these contrasts in character and philosophy are probably why Italians and Germans seem to be so attracted to each other. 'I know so many Italians who married Germans, like me!'

Dorothea Kolland had her own love affair with Italy and an Italian. Her conclusion: Italians are more passionate and less reliable. The head of the Neukölln

Culture Department studied literature and music in Florence in 1969 and 1970. Like Goethe, she wanted to return to the source of European culture. 'I had read *Wilhelm Meister* and sung Mignon's songs with passion.' She met a man from Naples with whom she had an affair for almost half a year, and who desperately wanted to marry her. At about the same time she met a German man. She married the German, because he was more reliable and the couple had a similar approach to life. 'Italian men love to flirt and compliment you. And they have beautiful eyes. They also cherish you a lot. Alfonso, my Italian boyfriend, promised a lot and did not always mean what he said. Whereas my German boyfriend, who is my husband today, was too shy to tell me that he loved me or even liked me. He is more careful with his promises.'

Teutonic reliability and rigidity versus Italian chaos and spontaneity - do the clichés really hold when it comes to Berlin - which, let's face it, offers its own sub-arctic version of the *dolce vita*? In the past, Germans visited Italy as tourists and Italians came to Germany to work. But now, every summer, an ever-larger horde of Italian tourists overruns the German capital - drawn by its nightlife, art and history. Hotel bookings by Italians have more than tripled since 1997 (from 150,000 to 520,000). And thousands stay longer. Creatives, gays, hipsters - ironically, they feel more liberated here than at home. What would Goethe have said about that?