



Bremerhaven was the port of departure for over seven million emigrants in the mid-nineteenth century, not only Germans (3.8 million), but also from other countries in Eastern Europe (3.4 million). For 25 years an association based in this city fought to build an emigration museum as part of a comprehensive port regeneration project. A year and a half ago the museum finally opened its doors.

BREMERHAVEN

The triumph of German perseverance

For more than seven million emigrants in the nineteenth century Bremerhaven was “the last city before New York.” For 25 years a group of Friends of the German Emigration Museum endeavored to compile information on this part of their city’s history. Now that history has been brought to life.

Bremerhaven boasts the most recent emigration museum to be built in Europe. The museum is part of a larger project designed to transform the entire degraded port area of Bremerhaven into a new tourist attraction. The building, which cost 23 million euros, is divided into three levels covering a total of 8,000 square meters: 4,400 square meters are set aside for offices, administration and other internal services and the remaining 3,500 are devoted to exhibition space. Funding for the project came from different sources: 66% was contributed by the State, or Land, of Bremen and 33% by the Bremerhaven city government. The museum was built 100% by a public company; in other words, the two government institutions are the actual owners but it is managed by a private company not guided by economic criteria. The restaurant, cleaning, maintenance and other services are the responsibility of the association, which places great importance on human relations. The money brought in from merchandise sold

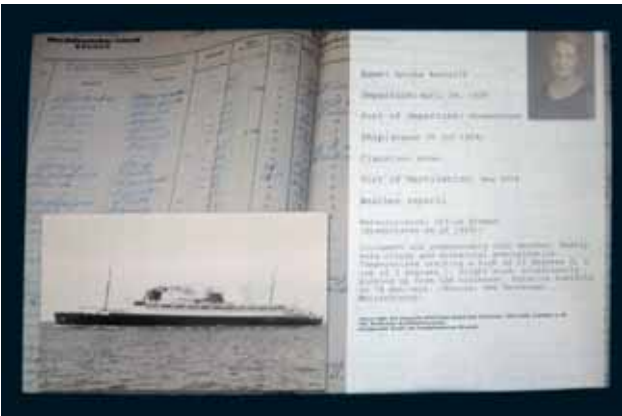
at the shop, together with ticket sales and restaurant proceeds, cover all museum expenses.

During its first year 220,000 visitors came through the door of the museum, 2% from America. The future goal, however, is to attract 5-8% visitors from America. The average number of visitors per day is 600, although some days have drawn up to 2,000. And due to special school programs, the numbers don’t drop in the winter months. The figures are very significant for a city of only 120,000, and all of the initial expectations have been exceeded.

One of the features of this museum is that visitors “become” emigrants by reliving the experience of so many people who left from this port bound for the New World.

Product of tenacity

Although it only took nine months to build the structure, the most difficult and tedious part was the two decades from the idea to the final embodiment of the museum. Before it was eventually approved, the project was presented to the various political parties on 45 occasions. A public tender was issued for the



Different views of Bremerhaven.

construction of the building, and was awarded to architect Andrés Heller, who is still linked to the center and takes part in museum operations.

The real founding fathers of the project were the Friends of the German Emigration Museum, a group of people who for 25 years promoted the idea and made sure it became a reality. In 2000 the Hannover Trade Fair served as a catalyst to breathe life into a somewhat dormant project. Several cities in the area presented initiatives at the Hannover Exposition and Bremerhaven organized an exhibit on emigration, which was brought to the attention of the Heller architectural firm. The event served to compile a wide range of material with a number of people becoming actively involved in the project. When the temporary exhibition was over, the organizers wanted to make use of all the material collected, thus adding fuel to the idea of creating a museum to attract tourism to the area.

By that time Bremerhaven had become a poor, run-down city with an unemployment rate of 27%. Thus, numerous initiatives were undertaken to transform the area into a tourist attraction. Seven ports were built, along with a sailing museum, a fishing museum and an aquarium. Standing out among all these initiatives is the

flamboyant modern building housing the German Emigration Center, inaugurated on August 7th 2005.

International workforce

The museum employs 70 people from Germany and Eastern European countries such as Poland and Russia. There are also staff members from both Israel and Palestine, countries which represent a number of the museum's visitors. The staff rotates through all the different jobs, including ticket sales, shop assistant and waiting tables at the restaurant.

The research team began with three staff and now there are nine people participating in research-related tasks. At first the academic community had certain hesitations with regard to the work being done at the center; it was considered more a profit-making museum, but the perception has been shifting little by little. After only one year in operation changes have already been proposed. Although the museum was originally designed to pursue other interests geared toward the general public, the management has seen the need to bolster the academic aspect. Thus, the number of researchers working at the center today has increased threefold and the doctorate program is now in the initial stages.