

# Opening the Door to Luther

## September 20-30, 2000

*By Tim Frakes*

### **Wednesday, September 20**

Traveling alone, I set off for a visit to Lutherland. The purpose of the trip is to produce a documentary on the life of Martin Luther in the German reformation cities of Eisenach, Erfurt, Eisleben Coburg and Wittenberg. Martin Luther, of course, was the 16th century Augustinian monk who sparked the Protestant reformation by nailing his 95 theses to the door of Wittenberg's Castle Church.



Several years ago, travel expert and public television host Rick Steves and I were working on a project in Los Angeles. Rick is known for his "Travels in Europe" guide books and TV show on PBS. Since Martin Luther is at the center of the Lutheran story and Rick is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) most famous travel expert, it seemed the two should go together. Rick agreed and three years later the project took off.

From the beginning, my basic idea was to create an entertaining education tool for Sunday school. Specifically, I dreamed up a suburban Lutheran congregation in Texas. My target audience was the husband of a 35 year old woman originally from Minnesota. Her husband is Texan and does not know much about the Lutheran church. Now that their two kids are out of diapers, the wife has persuaded her husband to come to church with her and the kids. Signing up for the new members class, the husband will learn why Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation changed the course of western civilization.

Typically, our United Airlines flight to Frankfurt, Germany was delayed an hour and a half to change a tire. I sat next to a German about my age. He spoke perfect English and we talked about business, politics and the differences between life in America and Germany. He was flying home after a software convention in Fargo, North Dakota. Further evidence of the new globalized economy.

### **Thursday, September 21**

Sporting a new tire, our Boeing 747 touched down in Frankfort at dawn. Light rain was falling and the skies were grey. After collecting my luggage and renting a car, (a blue Ford station wagon) I made my first stab at driving on Germany's famous Autobahn. In Germany all highways lead to Ausfhart. Actually the German word *Ausfhart* means *exit*. No matter where

you drive, signs with an arrow seem to point you to this mythical village.

My plan was to meet my colleague Kurt Reichardt and his wife, Joyce in Worms, 60 kilometers south of Frankfurt on the banks of the Rhine River. Kurt and Joyce had flown over the week before to scout out the various Luther locations. After a few uneasy turns in the rain, I was able to get my bearings and head south. Turning on the car radio, I was surprised to hear the *Back Street Boys*. American music dominates the German airwaves.



Worms.

Worms is an ancient city. Built by the Romans, Worms (pronounced *Vorms*) has a lot of charm. As you enter the city from the East, you drive over the Rhine and under tall gates that once formed a wall around the city. Here Holy Roman Emperor Charles I called Martin Luther to account for his writings before the Imperial Diet. His accusers insisted Luther recant his teachings that called into question the Popes fund raising methods, notably the sale of indulgences. Luther's famous response, "*Here I stand, I can do no other.*" was a shot heard round the world. Today, a plaque marks the spot where Luther spoke. Next to the actual spot is the enormous St. Peter's Cathedral. Built in 1200, it was standing 300 years before Luther got there.

After meeting up with Kurt and Joyce, we toured the city and had lunch. Then we drove to Ebenkoben, a city 30 kilometers to the south. Kurt's cousin, Werner, lives in this incredibly beautiful hamlet in Germany's Pfälzer wine growing region. Werner and his wife had lunch waiting for us. I also got to sample one of Germany's famous beers. Very good.

My hotel was in the nearby village of Edesheim. It was like something out of a dream. Lush, green vineyards surround the quaint town. Narrow cobblestone streets, red tiled roofs and a church steeple make the little old men and women on bicycles fit right in. With jet lag kicking into high gear, I hung on till dinner and then crashed.

## Friday, September 22

At dawn I jumped into the car and drove out to the vineyards and up a hill overlooking Edesheim. Like the fairytales, morning fog surrounded the town. As the sun came up, it quickly burned off revealing the church steeple backed by rolling hills and high mountains in the background. If I had not gotten in on tape, no one would believe that such places exist.

After breakfast we did a bit of site seeing and drove to St. Martin, a tiny village in the foothills. Even more charming than Edesheim, St. Martin is bracketed by mountains and two mediaeval castles. I need to come back some day with Julie.



location with me in Germany.

Saying goodbye to Werner, Kurt, Joyce and I headed back to Worms to meet up with Rick Steves and begin shooting our video. As planned, Rick arrived and we got our work done. We shot at the St. Peter's Cathedral, and near the banks of the Rhine River. In the afternoon we drove north toward Marburg. Our hotel was in the town of Wolf Hausen. Here we met up with our principal photographer, Peter Rummel. Rick and Peter had been in Europe for the past month shooting new episodes of Rick's *Travels in Europe*. Since Peter was already in Europe, we didn't need to spend money to fly him over. It saved us quite a bit. After dinner we had a late night script meeting and then finally to bed.

### Saturday, September 23

The next morning we drove up to the Marburg Castle north of Frankfurt. In 1529 Luther met at the castle with other Protestant reformers including Ulrich Zwingli to hash out their differences. Then as now, they weren't able to do it.

The castle, of course, is spectacular. It sits on a hill top overlooking a city filled with red tile roofs. After the castle, we drove down the narrow winding streets to the town square. It was market day and local merchants were selling everything from produce to clothing.



Our next stop was two hours to the west, deep in the heart of Luther country. Eisenach was the town where Luther grew up. While attending St. George's boarding school he lived in a house that has been turned into a museum reflecting his life and work. Our hotel that night was 15 or 20 kilometers further west in the town Tabarz inside the former East Germany. Ten years ago, of course, it was off limits to westerners. The hotel formerly housed the Stazi, or East German police. During the communist regime, the Stazi were infamous for their spying tactics and habit of keeping dossiers on everyone. Today the lodge is a very innocent hotel. The only holdover is a local beer once favored by the Stazi. They still serve it in the restaurant.



## **Sunday, September 24**

Sunday morning was devoted to shooting in Erfurt. This was the town where Luther spent his formative years at the Augustinian monastery. A huge Catholic cathedral still stands in the impressive town square. We recorded footage inside and out. Rick, Peter and I then hired a carriage that took us across town to the monastery. Riding through the town pulled by horses gives you an idea of what the 16th century might have felt like. Erfurt is very old. There is a modern street car system, but the charm of old houses and narrow streets has not been diminished. In the afternoon we visited a Lutheran church in town that dates to Luther's time. In other words, Luther preached here. The old building also has an organ that J.S. Bach was supposed to have played. We schmoozed the curator and they let us record a scene with Rick playing "A Mighty Fortress" on the old instrument. Very fun.

**Eisleben home where  
Luther was born.**

Back at our hotel in Tabarz, we also discovered another relic from the cold war. Our waitress, Rick nick-named this glum, poker faces girl, Stazi Rose. Nobody seems to have told her the wall has come down.

## **Monday, September 25**

6:30 a.m. This morning, after much discussion we decided to split our crew into two units. Kurt, Joyce, and I drove three hours south to the Coburg Castle. Rick and Peter went back to Erfurt to continue production there. The Augsburg confession is a cornerstone document of the Lutheran faith. While it was being written, Luther sat on the side lines in the Coburg Castle. He was considered an outlaw at the time and his presence at the meeting where the confession was being written probably would have resulted in his arrest. Like the castle in Marburg, the Coburg was spectacular. Like all castles, it sits on a hill overlooking the town making it easy to dump hot oil on the neighboring prince's invading surfs.



**writing of the Augsburg Confession.**

In the afternoon we drove north back to Erfurt to meet up with Rick and Peter at the Augustinian monastery. We recorded lots of footage including the cell or room where Luther stayed. Very Spartan accommodations. You really had to want to be a monk. That evening Rick used one of his travel tips and paid a taxi five Marks to drive us to our hotel in Erfurt. We just drove behind him. By this time I was just about out of Marks myself. Trying to find a place to eat dinner with nothing but an American Express card near the Erfurt airport is not easy. Everywhere we went we were met with blank stares. We finally did find a place and ate like pigs. In fact, we did I eat pig.

## Tuesday, September 26

Another long drive through the German country side took us to Eisleben. This was the town where Luther was born and where he ended up dying. I can't over emphasize the charm of these little towns. Each one is worth a visit just by itself. We had lunch on the town square and then toured his death house. Luther had gone to Eisleben to mediate a dispute. He hadn't been feeling well to begin with and kicked the bucket two blocks from the house where he was born. Nice book ends. In the death house we bumped into an American Lutheran from South Carolina. He really seemed thrilled about our project and couldn't wait to use it in his confirmation class. The exchange gave me a feeling that we are on the right track with this thing.



That evening we finally made it in to Wittenberg, the town where Luther and his buddies engineered their reforms. Wittenberg's Castle Church, which still stands today, is the place where he nailed his 95 thesis to the door. Wittenberg is wonderful. Two huge old churches at each end of town. In between is a large cobble stone square lined with shops and restaurants. The main attraction is Luther Hall. Formerly a University, Luther did most of his work here. It was home. Today Luther Hall is a nice museum full of Lutheran history.



## September 27-29

Our last three days were spent in Wittenberg. After the first day we finished all the on-camera work and said good bye to Rick and Peter. They took the train north to Berlin and flew back home. They had been shooting for a month straight in London and now Germany. After they left, Kurt and I met with Luther expert Martin Treu at Luther Hall. In addition to the Luther show, we also want to produce a shorter video on his wife Kaitie Luther. She was quite a story herself. As a nun in a convent, Katie and her fellow nuns heard about Luther and fled in the dark of night. Showing up in Wittenberg the nuns were taken in by Luther and his friends. In those days the affair was looked upon as scandalous. Things really got juicy when Luther married one of them, Katie. Prior to this, priest couldn't marry. Luther and his friends changed all that. At least, outside the Catholic Church. We also got some local actors to dress up in period costume and record a few scenes from Luthers day. Together with a horse drawn cart and the picturesque backdrop of Wittenberg, it may actually look like the 16th century.

Each morning I had the pleasure of taking a run through Wittenberg. The weather was great. ~~Word and thought he'll in hand go. Children in dog their own beautiful shoes.~~ Shop keepers sweeping the cobblestones and fruit sellers setting up tables in the market square. It was like something out of

a Hollywood movie or television commercial.

One morning after breakfast Kurt, Joyce and I drove to the medieval city of Torgau. This is the city where Katie Luther is buried in the city cathedral. We then visited the ruins of a convent where she lived prior to meeting Luther.

It has been ten years almost to the day, since German reunification. It is clear that a lot has changed here. Travelers can still witness evidence of the former communist state in larger cities like Halle. As you drive through, grey, concrete apartment blocks line the road. Industry seems to be closer to the villages than in the west. But where ever we went, the winds of drastic change were blowing. Streets were new. Brick sidewalks were newly laid. Castles and historic churches were often showed in scaffolding. The Luther Hall in Wittenberg, for example, is scheduled to close for two years for renovations. Every once in a while you see a tiny old Trabant, the former Soviet style car popular before the fall. But for the most part, cars are as new as the infrastructure. The West Germans have poured millions of Deutsche Marks into the economy here. Apparently there is some grumbling from West Germans because retiring East Germans were able to tap into the west's pension fund. On the whole though, it still looks like reunification will be good for all parties concerned.

### **Saturday, September 30**

My last day in Germany consisted of a six hour drive to Frankfurt. I would be remiss if I didn't mention the famous German Autobahn. Wow, they go fast. At 140 kilometers per hour (about 82 mph) cars passed me like I was standing still. You can only pass in Germany on the left, not on the right. So you have to keep an eye on your rear view mirror for somebody pulling up behind. If you don't pull over, they flash their lights at you. It keeps you on your toes.

Another thing you see on the Autobahn are the windmill. In this US presidential campaign there is a lot of talk about alternative energy sources. The Germans are ahead of us in this respect. Their windmill system is quite impressive. Usually placed near a line of high power lines, these things look like huge airplane props mounted on very tall towers. The blades nearly reach the ground and rotate according to the wind direction. I don't no how much energy they generate, but what ever it is, it's cheep and clean.

### **Sunday, October 1**

While Germany was not as exotic as some places I've been, it certainly is beautiful. The people were great for the most part. I would defiantly come back again, hopefully with Julie. As a descendant of German speaking grandparents, my visit was eye opening. Being in the "Old Country" as it were, really does help one understand who they were and who I am. At least it did for me.