

The history of Schaarschmidt's Restaurant,  
your living-room away from home in the heart of Leipzig

What a century!

The 1980s came to an end rather spectacularly, especially here in Leipzig (but of course also in all other parts of the former Eastern Germany, the German Democratic Republic).

I vividly remember the voices of the hundreds of thousands of the protesters peacefully circling the Leipzig city center: "Gorbi, Gorbi ...", "We are the people ...!"

And we all were so incredibly lucky that no shots were fired. That was highly unusual and completely unheard-of. A peaceful revolution had never happened before, neither in Europe nor in Germany, neither during the times of the Cold War nor during the centuries before. Incredible, unbelievable, and unimaginable until then!

My name is Werner Schaarschmidt. In October 1989, I had been working at the Hotel Astoria in Leipzig for nearly 16 years. When the wall came down, I urgently wanted to leave the well-trodden paths in the East behind and start anew elsewhere, preferably in Western Germany. The possibilities in my profession were incredibly promising. One month later, in November 1989, I was crashing at Aunt Inge's and Uncle Udo's place in Bad Neuenahr, making plans for my professional future. Everything seemed possible, right here, right now. There were lots of magnificent restaurants in that region, even two star-decorated eateries, Steinheuers "Poststuben" in Bad Neuenahr and the "St. Peter" in Ahrweiler. I was certain that they would appreciate a new, dedicated employee.

The real excitement, however, started on November 28th. In the afternoon, we were having a cup of coffee, when Aunt Inge, smiling, put a glossy magazine on the table. The front page left me dumbfounded.

I gaped at the headline: "Schaarschmidt, full steam ahead to new shores".

Only after a moment I realized that this wasn't a photoshopped joke or whatnot. The magazine was the gastronomy review of the Bonn region, called "Bonner Gastronomierundschau". The person on the title was Mike Schaarschmidt (unfortunately he died much too early, in July 2019), the owner of a star-decorated fine inn in Germany's then-capital, Bonn. Together with a partner, my namesake was about to invest a lot of money in a new restaurant.

Full steam ahead to new shores, indeed.

Unfortunately, that steamer sank, but that's another story. We got to know each other very well, really, until 4 o'clock in the morning.

"Wouldn't something like that suit you, too? You do like your job, you're an excellent waiter, and the time seems to be right", my aunt Inge asked me back when in 1989. From that day on, my days and nights became increasingly shorter. I pondered, I calculated, I doubted (a lot!) – and finally, I decided to take the plunge. Yes, I wanted to start my own business, I wanted my own restaurant. On December 11, 1989, I applied for a trade licence at the Leipzig city council in the trade office, P.O. Box 780 in the last days of the GDR. For an administration fee of 30.00 Ostmark, I received my trade licence only a few weeks later, on March 20, 1990. Almost 30 years ago. It's stamped and signed by Ms. Kronisch, Deputy of the SBBM for HuV, whatever that means.

Anyway, the title page depicting Mr. Schaarschmidt from Bonn hung on our wall

from that day on, as an incentive. These were crazy times, nobody knew what would happen next.

Next, steps were taken. There are always next steps to be taken. These, however, were way more exciting than every scavenger hunt of my childhood days. During the evenings, I was on duty at the Astoria. During the days, I went hunting for a suitable place for my restaurant-to-be. How I found this place? "But that's another story," as a famous colleague of mine puts it, Irma's favorite barkeeper in Paris from one of my favorite movies, "Irma la Douce", featuring the incomparable Shirley Maclaine.

In April 1990, the time had come.

We bought the restaurant "Parkdiele" in Coppistraße 32 from the East German trade organisation's stock in Leipzig and became tenants at the address. I think I remember a rent of 165.00 Ostmark, or was it 125.00? As this neighbourhood was formerly known as the "French Quarter", Leipzig's older inhabitants of Leipzig were still familiar with the street's former name, Lothringer Straße (Lorraine street). But, you guessed it, this is another story. Anyway, the old house plaque with the inscription "Lothringer 32" adorned our staircase for a long time. Too bad it's gone, it was a beautiful piece of our cultural heritage.

The restaurant in question wasn't much of a restaurant anymore. It strongly resembled a pigsty in shambles. But it wasn't the first pigsty I had seen in our quarter Gohlis. The location resided in a house that, like so many others, was waiting patiently for someone to take care of it. Of course we still have quite a few pictures from that time ... I'm certain, though, that you wouldn't really want to see them. That would spoil your appetite for a very long time. Those pictures, however, would also show that sooner or later the whole thing would have collapsed (even if quite a lot of people seem to have forgotten that nowadays). They would also show how trusting and blue-eyed we were. Guardian angels are needed for everything. During these times, I needed them desperately, but I also felt their presence strongly. Some are still present right now, after all those years.

So, there was only one thing that helped here: Lean in. Go big or go home.

Our Russian friends from the Red Army, our "caviar suppliers" (yet another story), were the first to help us out. Indeed, after only two or three days everything was cleared out. Tables, chairs, counter, kitchen, floor and cellar with coal, everything got loaded on a truck which was probably old already during the Great Patriotic War. A lot of this stuff was of use to the guys from the barracks. Everything else was laid to rest in the landfill located behind the grounds of the new Leipzig Trade Fair. The inhabitants of the house were happy to witness our activities, „At long last, somebody's doing something here, it's about time.“

It was also about time for us to decide which style we wanted to adopt.

„Sophisticated home-style cooking“, so far, so good. But what's our specific flavor of „sophisticated home-style“? And how far will my money and that of my parents go? We knew a lot of craftsmen in Leipzig, the connections were established through our workplace, the Hotel Astoria, and were put to a hard test. To make a long story short: After a visit to our construction site-to-be, neither the Wirth company, nor the carpentry master Klier nor others were willing to build something nice for us. The reasons they gave were plentiful. Perhaps they just thought: "He must be insane. That's a dump! He hasn't even got a bank to finance his project, either. And who knows how things will turn out, after all ...“

Things were indeed about to take a turn for the worse. Soon, it dawned upon us

how much of a dump this place really was.

First, we started to tear out the old lino floor covering. Yuck. A smelly affair. In some spots, we found that we were able to see right down into the basement. A careless step, and you'd have found yourself ten feet under. The same in the kitchen. And the showers. And the ladies' room, where whole walls collapsed at the touch of a finger. Yikes. During the next months, I formed a strong bond with a strong bride from the west who went by the name of HILTI. Everything that did not disappear at the count of three got knocked down by me and her.

Sounds familiar? I'm certain some of you have had similar experiences.

But that's not all, our famous soccer coach Uli Hoeness would say, not by a long shot!

Until then we had believed everyone and everything. This was about to change rather soon: The property at 32, Coppistraße was by no means "nationally owned", as we had been assured. As a matter of fact, the children of the former owners still lived in the house, as they still do today.

Construction came to a grinding halt.

Now it was time to write to the owners, finker a bit, and go on a holiday. What a waste of time.

And then again came one of those special days. Business was really slow at the restaurant „City“ at the Hotel Astoria. This was quite unusual – before the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was always seated to capacity ("I'm sorry, did you really just say you don't have a reservation?" was among the standard responses).

During that early evening, I was the only one from my shift working the restaurant. My mind was on the construction site.

The two men seated at table #31 were busy with themselves. Only when one of them had finished his beer I went to their table and asked for their order. And then. We probably talked half the evening about yesterday, today and tomorrow, and about the opportunities opening up everywhere. The two of them often laughed heartily, and a little later, I found out why. I had told them about my plans. Max and no, not Moritz, but Michael from Allgaeu. Max is Countess Pocci's husband, (Hartmann Verbandstoffe, Pocci Castle on Lake Starnberg, great-great-grandfather Franz von Pocci, among others, master of ceremonies of King Ludwig's parents, Schwangau Castle ... and many more). The other one was Michael Baron Beck von Peccoz, heir to the castle and castle brewery in Au in der Hallertau.

Of course my antics made them laugh.

„What do you do, and where?“ The very next day, the two of them took a walk with me around my construction site. „What exactly are your gastronomic plans? And what about the house, it's in ruins.“ - „Well, yes, uhmmm, I want to do sophisticated traditional cooking, Saxon and international cuisine. Nice wines, of course, beer, and everything has to be very cosy and comfy. I've travelled a lot, from Hamburg to Cologne and have seen many nice places. But I haven't found anything that I really, thoroughly liked,“ I said. „Well, then come visit us in Munich and Au in der Hallertau, we're certain that you'll find something there that's to your liking.“

I would go to Bavaria many times, but this first visit was probably the most important of them all.

And what happened next?

In January 91, we wrote the last letter: Either we reach an agreement in the short term, or I'll look for something new.

And then everything happened very quickly. We reached an agreement. I went to the bank and borrowed money. A lot. I guess they would have given me a million even. Crazy times... For the first time in my life, I had real debts. Oh my God. In Eastern Germany, we did not take out loans. Everything was paid out of our pockets. Who can sleep with debts?

Next, we had to figure out what exactly we meant by "sopisticated home-style cooking".

But now things really picked up speed. First of all, we placed the orders for the heating, for plumbing, for concrete and plaster work and for the new windows. Did we also need an electrical installation? Of course we did. Only the best. The boys in the family, Helga's family from Binz, have pushed themselves very hard. Thank you all! Thank you so much, Horst, Herbert, Günter, and Jacko.

And more than ever, I spent the mornings at the Astoria, the evenings at my construction site, or vice versa.

Next, I set off for Munich to meet Max Kühne. We met in Schwabing, at the café "Extrablatt". What a place, life was raging here morning, noon and night. A pity that the place has closed its doors. Max wanted to go on a resto-crawl with me. The first restaurant was less than 100 meters away from the „Extrablatt“, the „Georgenhof“ in the Georgenstraße in Schwabing which had only recently opened. It still exists today. Should you ever be in Schwabing, a visit is worthwhile. We looked at maybe five or six more restaurants. For me, however, it was clear: I wanted something like the "Georgenhof", with its wood-paneled walls and the heavy oak tables.

"Okay", Max said, "then let's get going. I know the guy who built this." Less than two hours later, we were sitting in Au/Hallertau with the Voit family at the coffee table in their carpentry workshop.

Just a stone's throw from the castle and the castle brewery of Baron Beck zu Beccoz. Today, both the castle and its brewery are firmly in the hands of the Chinese. The carpentry shop isn't. Yet. Unbelievable!

Well, the rest is quickly told. I spent half a day with Mr. Voit, outlining my dreams. There was a tour on the construction site, calculations were made, and the building began.

I deliberately won't say a thing about my experiences concerning the construction work in the restaurant. You certainly have had your own experiences. Maybe it's worth an extra story (or rather a hefty tome).

I can hardly believe it, but on June 9, 2020, in a few months, the restaurant Schaarschmidt's celebrates its 28th birthday. "My God, time flies," I hear the old people say.

Many people in Leipzig believe that Schaarschmidt's restaurant has always existed. American tourists were told by their tourguides that the restaurant already exists since the eighteen hundreds. "That's true, and it even had the same innkeeper all the way!" I replied.

What is true is that the building was owned by the Dammann family and was completed in 1910. From the very first day, it also housed gastronomy, namely a small café/restaurant called "Parkdiele", conveniently located opposite the Bretschneiderpark.

In the middle of the 1920s, the first houses were built opposite in the Renkwitzstraße and thus ended the days of the park and the walkers.

The owner of the café from 1924-1927 had a daughter (which, as it turned out, was an aunt of Biggi, my colleague from the Astoria). From that old lady I learned that in the upper part of today's restaurant at that time the landlords' apartment was located. With tears in her eyes she showed me the place in the small gallery where her bed once stood. (Table 15)

Unfortunately, she had no photos from that time, because her family had been bombed out twice in the 1940s during the war in Leipzig.

War, bombed out...?

I am utterly grateful that we know such kind of things only from TV, even though, in my opinion, the pandemic that is currently gripping the world resembles a war in some ways. One thing is for sure: There will be no winners and many things are no longer as they once were.

But we won't let it get us down - and

"Beyond the horizon, a new day dawns", as German singer and "Panic President" Udo Lindenberg puts it.

Wherever the journey of Schaarschmidt's restaurant may take it, I wish it a good journey at all times. May there always be people in the future who feel connected to the restaurant, who love and care for it, who are the soul of the restaurant and not only work here to make a couple of bucks ... and may the Schaarschmidt's continue to have such exceptionally nice guests!

Thank you.