

## International Drehorgel Freunde Berline e.V. “The Cold War, Berlin and Organ Grinders”

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During the summer of 1990 over three hundred organ grinders celebrated the opening of the Berlin Wall separating East and West Berlin with a parade of drehorgels (crank organs) down the Unter den Linden from Brandenburg Gate to Alexander Platz. During the parade the organs were playing the song *Unter den Linden*, composed by the famous Berlin organ grinder Paul Linke, commemorating the important historically famous thoroughfare. Members of the procession included well known organ builders Kurt Niemuth, Josef Raffin, Rudolf Bruns and Axel Stuber (Figure 1) who had built a special 31-key organ with a façade decorated with a likeness of the Brandenburg Gate for the event. Interestingly enough 1990 was also the 200th anniversary of organ grinders in Berlin.



Figure 1. Axel Stuber cranking the 31-key organ with a Brandenburg Gate façade.

The Berlin Post Office, to commemorate the anniversary, issued a special organ grinder stamp with the likeness of an old Berlin organ grinder in honor of past and present organ builders and grinders that had gone before and those still keeping the craft well and alive (Figures 2 & 3). This was the last stamp issued by the Berlin Post Office which was soon afterwards, with the reunification of Germany, integrated into the National Post Office of Germany.

The first Berlin Organ builder was one Adolf Kummer (1756-1824). His first barrel organ, built in 1790, had 18 keys which was later increased to 20 keys. Beginning in the 1860s the Bacigalupo family arrived from Italy and built what are generally regarded by col-

lectors as the nicest and best organs over their four generations of practicing the trade of organ building. Drehorgels have been built in Berlin continuously since that time.



Figure 2. The commemorative Berlin organ grinder stamp.

By 1900 Berlin had over 2000 organ grinders. These individuals played not only in public places but also in the open areas of walk-up tenement houses of three or four floors which formed squares with an open space in the middle. There they would play the popular music of the day for the Berliners too poor to attend the opera houses, concert halls and other musical presentations. The people listening to these grinders would stand on their porches above the open area and throw money down to indicate their approval. These tenements with their open interior areas may still be seen in that portion of Berlin that was in the Eastern, or Russian, Sector of the City. Fortunately,



today, many of these buildings are undergoing renovation and refurbishing with modern amenities, including elevators reaching to the upper floors.



Figure 3. A pleased Berlin organ grinder displaying a likeness of the new stamp.

A group of West Berlin organ grinders started meeting for the annual festivals organized by Richard Wolf in 1980 while Berlin was in the grips of cold war politics remaining from World War II. The year 1987 was the 750th Anniversary of Berlin as a city, and wanting to participate in

the Anniversary sixteen West Berlin organ grinders gathered to discuss what action they might take to celebrate it. As a result of their discussions they met with the Mayor of West Berlin for over two hours telling him they wanted to organize the biggest organ grinder Festival the city had ever seen with 250 to 300 Organ Grinders. The group wanted to hold the festival in front of the Brandenburg Gate because the street behind the Gate (Unter den Linden) was in the Eastern Sector and therefore closed to West Berliners.

This street, pre-war, was unquestionably the most famous street in Berlin because of its location and being inhabited with many organ grinders regularly playing there.

The Mayor was not supportive of the application for the Festival, saying:

Because the city is divided; and, the Russians say East Berlin is the Capitol of Germany while West Berlin is part of the free world—if I permit you to hold such a festival in front of the Brandenburg Gate it will certainly create a problem with Moscow. We don't want to make any additional problems between Washington and Moscow. Why don't you create an international Association of Organ Grinders with membership open to all Grinders from all over the world? Give the dates to the District Court and by gaining their permission we can give you money and you will not have to pay the City Tax every year. Also, if there is a political problem we can say that it is a private event.

On January 28, 1987 the sixteen organ grinders met with their attorney, who by chance was also the Mayor of the District of Berlin-Charlottenburg, and wrote the regulations for the International Drehorgel Freunde Berlin e.V. The first president of the Club also held the position of Chief of the Tourist Office but insisted he would accept the position for only three years and at that time a new President would have to be elected. The celebration at the Brandenburg Gate did not take place in 1987; however, beginning in 1988, International Festivals were held in Berlin-Charlottenburg with parades on the Kurfurstendamm and around the Gedächtniskirche until 1990 when the parade down the "Unter den Linden" took place.



Figure 4. A recent group of Berlin organ grinders celebrating the festival.

Today, the Berlin Club sponsors an Internationale Festival for organ grinders in Berlin the first Saturday in July in even numbered years with local rallies in Berlin in the odd numbered years. These Festivals are always held in one of the colorful sectors composing greater Berlin and are attended by organ grinders from throughout the World.

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