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LEIPZIG RESEARCH TEXT

Leipzig's great coffee tradition (last update: 30 January 2023)

Coffee and Leipzig are inseparable. It was in the Saxon metropolis where the first palm court musicians of Germany entertained their guests: Georg Philipp Telemann made music in the coffee shops at the Market Square together with the collegium musicum, founded in 1701. For more than two decades Johann Sebastian Bach visited the "Zimmermannsche Kaffeehaus" in Katharinenstrasse twice a week. His Coffee Cantata is seen as the highlight of Saxon palm court music of the 18th century. The lyrics had been written by the Leipzig poet Christian Friedrich Henrici (pen name Picander) in 1732. Even the canon "C-a-f-f-e-e" was invented in the "coffee country of Saxony". The composer was a concerned music teacher from Zittau, who wrote the song to warn his pupils from the harmful effects of the "brown Turkish drink".

In the first half of the 18th century, while in other places cannonballs were cast, Leipzig became the most important place of coffee-mill production. After the first load of coffee beans had arrived in Leipzig in 1693, more and more coffee shops began to open. Consequently, Europe's oldest coffee shop (after the Café Procope in Paris) is in Leipzig. Adam Heinrich Schütze opened the Baroque "Coffe Baum" in Kleine Fleischergasse 4 in 1694 and sold the first coffee drink.

In the course of the following three centuries this became the place where the intellectual elite of the city met to enjoy the popular drink. Among the guests there was the literature professor Johann Christoph Gottsched just like the painter Max Klinger, the poet E. T. A. Hoffmann or the composer Richard Wagner. Also Goethe, Lessing, Bach and Grieg were often here. In a room in the ground-floor (now: Schumann Room) Robert Schumann regularly met his circle of friends between 1828 and 1844. Even revolutionaries like Robert Blum, Karl Liebknecht and August Bebel established their "second living-room" here. In 1990 Helmut Kohl and Lothar de Maizière discussed the chances of German unification in this place.

The sandstone relief above the entrance into "Coffe Baum" is famous. A Turk with a big coffee is proffering a cup of coffee to a cherub. This symbolises the encounter of Christian occident with Islamic orient. No less a person than August the Strong is said to have been the donator of this relief – in 1720, in gratitude for amorous services provided by the landlady.

On the third floor there is the coffee museum – one of the most important world-wide. In 15 rooms more than 500 selected exhibits from 300 years of Saxon coffee and cultural history are presented. Among the table-roasters and coffee-mills from different epochs, a high-tech sample-roaster is the attraction for visitors. Due to major renovations the “Coffe Baum” is closed until further notice. The museum can be visited on an official or private tour. More information can be found on the website of the Museum of City History: www.stadtgeschichtliches-museum-leipzig.de/en/

Real bean coffee and original Meissen porcelain have always been the most outstanding identification marks of the “Coffee-Saxons”, who got their nickname from Frederic the Great during the Seven Years War. The lack of coffee had resulted in a lack of motivation among the Saxon soldiers, and they refused to fight complaining: “Ohne Gaffee gönne mer nich gämpfn!”, which means in English something like: No coffee, no fighting! The insulting remark of the Prussian monarch, who called them “Coffee-Saxons”, did not disturb them in the least, as feasting on cake and coffee suited their taste much better than fighting on Europe’s battle fields. In most cases they had been defeated anyway or fought on the wrong side.

So they were sided with Prussia during the battle near Jena and Auerstedt and defeated by Napoleon. Seven years later they had changed allies and were on Napoleon’s side during the Battle of Nations near Leipzig – and lost again.

But how do they like their coffee in Leipzig? “Siesse muss d’r Coffe sein”, says a Saxon proverbial expression, which means that the coffee must be sweet. When the caffeine drink is too weak the spoiled Coffee-Saxons despise it as “Plempe” or “Lorke”. As in hard times even the coffee fans of the wealthier classes had to count their coffee beans, they served so-called “sword coffee” when they had guests. The concentration of the coffee was so low, that the blue swords from the bottom of the Meissen porcelain cups could shimmer through. Since 1729 this is also called “Blümchenkaffee” – the coffee is so weak that you can see the little flowers (Blümchen) on the bottom of the cup. An anecdote from the 18th century tells us about an economical host who roasted and ground fourteen beans for fifteen “Schälchen Heessen” (cups of the hot drink).

The basic rule for a good Leipzig cup of coffee could be the following historic statement of cardinal Talleyrand:

*“The coffee must be
As black as the devil
As hot as hell
As pure as an angel
As sweet as love.”*

Further Information

- www.leipzig.travel/en