

TOYMAKERS OF THE ERZGEBIRGE

DON HEIMBURGER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DON HEIMBURGER

When the mines played out, the miners turned to wood and the region's toy industry was born



The first product that Kerstin Drechsel's Werkstätten Flade of Olbernhau offered was six small flaxen-haired angels that her father designed in 1990. "And they're still selling today," she says, as she points to her latest lavish all-color catalog which is more than 100 pages and offers a distinctive line of miniature angels with hair and as many as a dozen meticulously-made music boxes.

Werkstätten Flade, located in the Erzgebirge, and begun by her mother Traute, is now Drechsel's everyday concern as she – and about 150 other Erzgebirge families – strive to bring Christmas toys and decorations to market, just as they have done for the past 300 years.

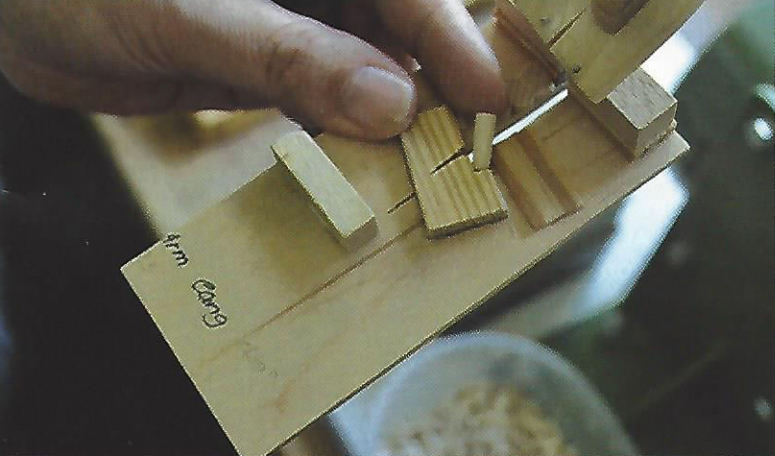
Europe's earliest mining district was located in this region as early as 2,500 B.C., with additional mining deposits found in the fifteenth century. As a result, miners in the area had steady jobs, some residents became wealthy, and houses, castles and churches were well-made and sturdy. But silver and tin mining largely came to a standstill in the seventeenth century, especially after the Thirty Years' War.

Due to the sharp decline of the mining industry and because the search for new ore deposits proved fruitless, the population had to resort to other occupations. Agricultural yields were low, however, and the demand for wood from the local forests was reduced by the closure of smelters.

The forests then came to the rescue: the manufacture of wooden Christmas decorations and toys developed, and numerous families found the resources for these goods, secured the skills necessary to produce intricate pieces, and developed a market for their products.

While many families began toy production much earlier, Drechsel's story is similar to most entrepreneurs who

LEFT: A WOMAN APPLIES GOLD TRIM TO A SMALL DETAIL THAT HELPS MAKE THE PRODUCTS OF WERKSTÄTTEN FLADE SO ATTRACTIVE.



have carved out their own niche in this cottage industry. Today the people of the Erzgebirge region are well-known and admired for their craftsmanship and attention to fine detail. But those skills come with time and a lot of practice.

"I grew up in an environment consumed in the broadest sense with both the tradition as well as the future of technological and product development in Erzgebirge toy making," Drechsel says. "I myself was a museologist; I was jolted out of my professional field in 1990. The political turn of events was the impetus for our family to start our own company which was never possible before. My mother founded the company, and I took over the Flade workshop from her in 1992."

After graduating from high school, Drechsel became an apprentice as a wood turner to acquire the technological and practical knowledge she would need to work in the trade. "We started a workshop in my parents' house in 1990, and my former bedroom was assembly, painting, office, shipping, and sample room all in one," she explains. "We moved into our new building in 1994," she continued, which required an investment of 1.3 million Deutschmarks. "I will have it all paid off in 2019," she adds. Today the firm has 11 employees.

From the start, production of her product line was not problematic, but she also had to set up a distribution system that worked. "From the beginning we've supplied directly to dealers with no middleman," she says.

ABOVE LEFT: THE LEHRER IS A PIECE OF WOOD WITH PRE-FORMED SLOTS THAT ALLOW WORKERS TO MAKE ANGLE CUTS IN THE WOOD THAT FORMS A FIGURE. ABOVE RIGHT: THE BODIES OF SMALL TOY ROCKING HORSES ARE GIVEN A BASE COAT OF WHITE PAINT BEFORE OTHER PARTS ARE ATTACHED. WOODEN HORSES, ONCE SHAPED AND SANDED, ARE PAINTED BY HAND TO GIVE THE FINAL DETAILS TO A PRODUCT.



"It's time-consuming, tedious, and requires a lot of patience and perseverance. It's a never-ending process."

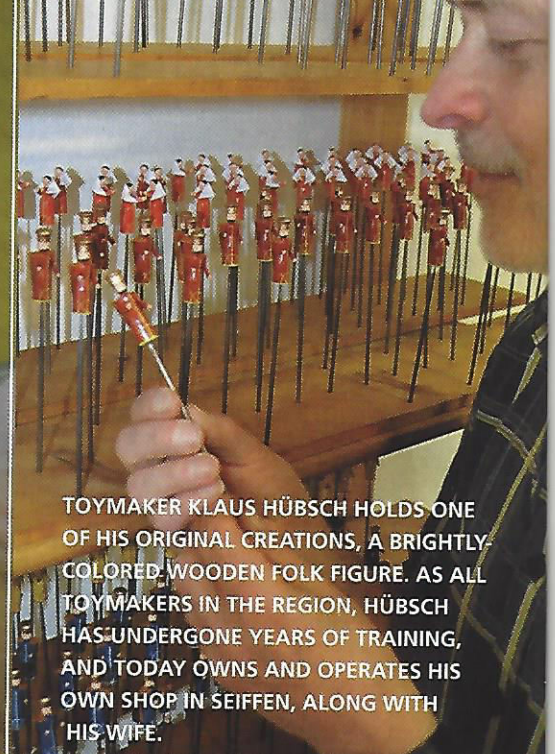
Employees need three years of professional training, Drechsel says, and "to work in my company requires a talent for ultra-precise work and an equal measure of independence and team spirit." A simple figure like an angel holding a candle may require dozens of wood cuts, and a master cutting box called a *Lehrer* must be constructed for each cut on a figure so the cut is made precisely at the correct angle.

Despite the difficulties in running the business, in the end, Drechsel says it is a great honor for her to perpetuate her parent's legacy.

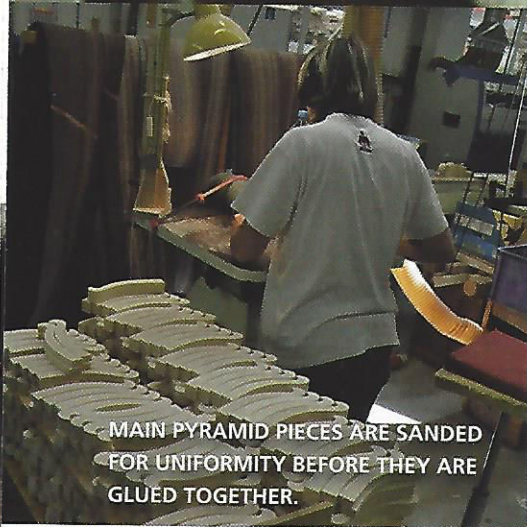
Toymaker Klaus Hübsch of the firm K. Hübsch, Seiffener Handwerk, operates a small shop on Hauptstrasse in downtown Seiffen where he displays his many individual designs of tall, brightly-colored pyramids, a variety of wooden folk figures, and spinning montages.



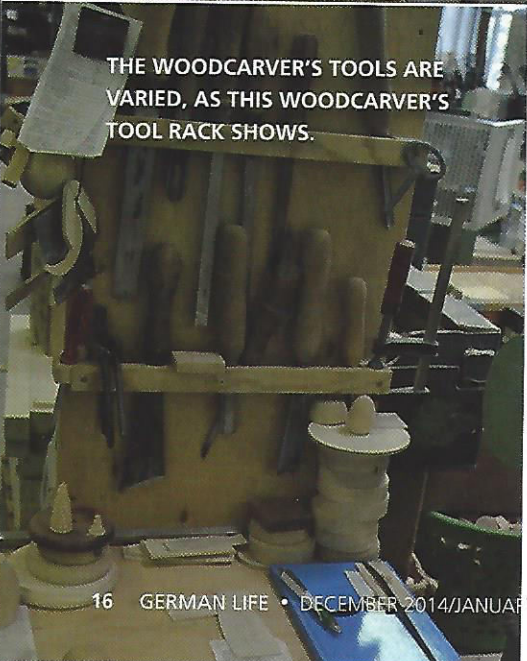
AT LEAST 150 BLOOMS ARE SET BY TWEEZERS WITH GLUE ONTO EACH FLOWER TREE OFFERED BY THE COMPANY; THE BLOOMS ARE ALSO MADE FROM WOOD.



TOYMAKER KLAUS HÜBSCH HOLDS ONE OF HIS ORIGINAL CREATIONS, A BRIGHTLY COLORED WOODEN FOLK FIGURE. AS ALL TOYMAKERS IN THE REGION, HÜBSCH HAS UNDERGONE YEARS OF TRAINING, AND TODAY OWNS AND OPERATES HIS OWN SHOP IN SEIFFEN, ALONG WITH HIS WIFE.



MAIN PYRAMID PIECES ARE SANDED FOR UNIFORMITY BEFORE THEY ARE GLUED TOGETHER.



THE WOODCARVER'S TOOLS ARE VARIED, AS THIS WOODCARVER'S TOOL RACK SHOWS.

An interesting fact about Hübsch figures is that they have noses on them; whereas many toymakers just paint noses on to designate they are there. The toymaker also offers a custom pyramid service where he will add specific figures or accessories to any of ten basic pyramid styles. Paper is also used for capes or headpieces on his figures.

His father started making toys in 1950 under what he calls “very primitive and grueling” conditions. Klaus Hübsch learned his trade through apprenticeships that taught him the basic skills, and he says he closely observed friends and colleagues and continuously honed his skills ten to fifteen years to become confident in what he was doing.

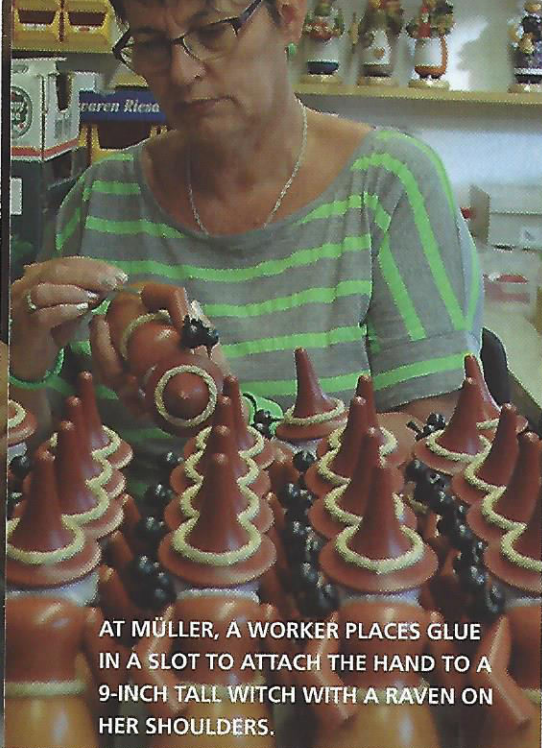
His first products, made in his own home in 1978, were “smoking” houses that were sold in low volume, but then in 1990 he began making traditional figures and pyramids that were sought after by collectors. After the reunification of Germany, he was able to purchase machines, tools, and more materials to take his business in a new direction. By 1990, he adds, the selling environment dramatically changed, and more competition came into the picture.

Hübsch sells his products only to individuals, and he has only one store location, but he does travel to the Lübeck Christmas Market every year to display his wares during Advent, while his wife handles the shop in Seiffen. He says he is happy with his decision to be in business for himself “because I can be independent in so many ways, and can immediately incorporate my customer’s wishes” into products. What will he do when he retires? “There are no successors even on the distant horizon,” he reports.

A prominent toymaker in Seiffen is Müller, who has been at their craft for 115 years. “Our family-run company was founded by my great-grandfather Edmund Oswald Müller in 1899,” states Ringo Müller, who now runs the company with his mother and his sister, Anja Hatz-Müller. With 40 employees, they make 430 different products which are shipped worldwide.

The firm, which owns a 2,150-foot modern showroom in Seiffen, uses 35 different types of wood for their products, including exotic woods from North America and Asia; all of the wood is certified and comes from sustainable resources. Most of the wood they use, however, comes from local sources.

A large, modern two-story manufacturing plant sits further up the road, and the



AT MÜLLER, A WORKER PLACES GLUE IN A SLOT TO ATTACH THE HAND TO A 9-INCH TALL WITCH WITH A RAVEN ON HER SHOULDERS.



ONE OF THE NEWER CHRISTMAS SCHWIBBOGENS OFFERED BY MÜLLER IN A LIMITED EDITION IS ONE THAT USES THE DRESDEN FRAUENKIRCHE AS THE CENTERPIECE. IT ALSO MAKES MUSIC BOXES WITH THE FRAUENKIRCHE FEATURED ON THE TOP.

firm has sales representatives in the USA, Japan, and Korea, as well as wholesale accounts in most European countries and Canada, Switzerland, and Hong Kong. Not surprisingly, they sell 70 to 80 percent of their product in the last quarter of the year, which is also the busiest time for them.

“Our ancestors (male relatives) were all woodworkers for many generations,” Müller says. During GDR times, Müller’s mother worked in a government office and his sister worked in the textile industry before she moved back home. After two years of training (including Saturdays), his class was the last one to finish training as a wooden toymaker under the GDR.

After 40 years under the rule of the GDR, but still as a private company, Müller had to renew most of its woodworking machinery. The company added more advanced equipment like CNC milling machines to do new and extraordinary designs. The total investment up to 1999 was 5 million Deutschmarks, and since then they’ve continuously invested more money to improve production.

“Difficulties encountered today are the strong regulations, high labor costs, and the high cost of energy and raw materials we use and the decline of independent retail stores all over the world,” says Müller. He adds, “The expectations of our customers and the strong seasonal business with its financial problems don’t make our business easy.”

To help him, he began to study business and economics, and finished with a Bachelor’s degree, and after that he studied marketing and finished in 2013 with a Master’s degree. “I hope to have most of the skills necessary to run a company nowadays, but I know that living means a lifetime of learning,” he explains.

Even with the problems of the woodcarving business, Müller says, “I’m glad to have this profession because this is my way of self-expression.”

With dedicated and skilled toymakers continuing their trade in the small villages tucked into the pastoral Ore Mountains, customers worldwide can look forward to more beautifully designed and carved wooden toys and Christmas decorations for years to come.

Don Heimburger, whose grandfather came from Germany, says the hard work and dedication of the people in the region’s woodcraft industry is another reason to visit the Erzgebirge.



If you go...

You can fly Air Berlin from several cities in the United States to Berlin, and then take a train to Seiffen, the Christmas Village. Staying at the Hotel Erbgericht, located in the middle of the town, will put you within easy walking distance of all the inviting stores. The busiest season in Seiffen and surrounding towns is – no surprise – Christmas. For more information, go to www.ergebirge-tourismus.de or www.germany.travel.