



The last Congo-boat, the ‘Charlesville’ a LOST battle ?

As from the beginning of this year a sustained battle has been running in Flanders and in Rostock (Germany) for the rescue and conservation of the very last Congo-vessel, the m/s “Charlesville”, presently the “Georg Büchner” in Germany.

The ship had been transferred by the city of Rostock to an association called "Förderverein Traditionsschiff e.V." that operated the ship as a hotel for several years, but unfortunately came to face financial difficulties. It decided to sell the ship to a rather shady company based on the Seychelles (Argent Ventures Ltd.), which however was a front for a Dutch group (Van der Kamp BV). The final destination would be a scrap yard in Klaipeda (Lithuania).

However, on January 8th the ‘Vlaamse vereniging voor Industriële Archeologie vzw’ (Flemish Association for Industrial Archaeology, non-profit organization, V.V.I.A.) discovered that the ship berthed in Rostock was a legally protected historic heritage monument. This was reported to both the German authorities and to Flemish Minister Geert Bourgeois - and an intervention of the latter directed towards his counterpart in the Federal State of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (provisionally) suspended the sale and breaking up of a historic monument.

Mid-March of this year, the "Förderverein Traditionsschiff e.V." declared bankruptcy, and the ship's ownership came under guardianship that exercised substantial and massive legal, financial and political pressure to sell the ship for cash.

On April 30th the Flemish Association for Industrial Archaeology V.V.I.A. sent a very comprehensive letter with a plea for preservation to the Denkmalamt of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (see copy attached), but no reply was received. Europa Nostra - the coordinating organization of Heritage associations in Europe - also insisted on preservation.

Very recently, the Flemish Minister Bourgeois wrote another letter to his counterpart at the Federal State with the request to maintain the preservation protection and to provide for the necessary time to develop alternatives. A takeover of and developing a conservation management plan for such a sizeable ship, indeed requires to allow for the necessary time. Furthermore in Germany apparently no one wanted any longer to confide the ship to organizations, interested parties and institutions.

From Rostock, the painful news reached us that, under pressure from the curator and the Mayor of Rostock, the Heritage Service (the ' Denkmalamt ') of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern has lifted the legal protection of the ship, despite the opposition of the heritage associations in the city and numerous citizens.

This decision has cleared the path to hand the ship to the (Dutch) company established in the Seychelles, and to have the vessel towed away as soon as possible.

The Flemish Association for Industrial Archaeology is now formulating a whole series of questions regarding the events that took place in Germany :

1) When the ship was sold to a scrap yard, disregarding the necessary legal procedures for such an operation, the competent Heritage services of Rostock and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern were not aware of the sale. They only later initiated actions, after the alert came from Flanders through diplomatic channels. Looking at subsequent events, one can hardly believe this to be a coincidence.

2) The Denkmalamt of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern decided now that one can no longer maintain the argumentation towards the ship being a legally protected monument. This decision goes directly against the advice of the local caretakers of Heritage and of Heritage Associations both in Germany, in Flanders and elsewhere in Europe. This decision is totally incomprehensible.

3) It is the task and the ethical duty of Heritage caretakers and of Heritage Services to defend the interests of the heritage by all means and within the scope of all capabilities. By this decision, taken without even a minimum level of resistance, the City Council of Rostock and the Heritage Service (Denkmalamt) of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern give in to financial jousting without a minimum level of resistance for the benefit of financial (and other?) interested parties and under pressure from a shadowy buyer. This is clearly to the detriment of the heritage. This is a wrong signal emitted to the world of heritage and heritage conservation. It delivers a painful precedent - not only for Germany but also for other countries. The Flemish Association for Industrial Archaeology considers the decision of the competent Heritage Service of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and of the City Council of Rostock as a slap in the face and a detrimental degradation of all principles of good cultural heritage management.

The Flemish Association for Industrial Archaeology wishes to thank everyone involved over the past months for the deployed efforts towards the rescue of the Charlesville/Georg Büchner, and to those who continuing their dedication on the issue :

- Firstly, the Flemish Government (both the Cabinet of Minister Bourgeois as well as the Agency for the Protection of Heritage Sites) for all their influence, knowledge and experience thrown into the scales and with whom, at all stages of the negotiations, a good consultation could take place based on mutual confidancy ;
- All the volunteers who raised the alerts, inside and outside our own Association, on Facebook and elsewhere, in Flanders and in Rostock; it was an fascinating and uplifting movement taking place which, we hope, will crystallize for the benefit of the sailing, shipping and other Heritage - and lead to further cooperation (and even friendships) between individuals and associations in both countries;
- The associations and organizations, a number of companies, and individuals, who have done everything here and in Rostock, sometimes with the courage of despair, to reach the rightful decision out of this fierce challenge.

The Flemish Association for Industrial Archaeology will further investigate and update all the information about the events and about the still unclear and hidden backgrounds of the story, in order to process a post factum analysis and draw conclusions. The heritage organizations and volunteers can only learn from them.

For all the information that reaches us, we guarantee as in the past - when asked - a strict confidentiality of origin and sources.

In the meantime, we call upon all heritage organizations and heritage volunteers to voice their protest against this and write to those with whom the responsibility lies for this heritage drama. Send your protest not only by email but also (and preferably) per (registered) Letter to:

- The Mayor and de City Council of the city of Rostock:

Hansestadt Rostock
Der Oberbürgermeister, Büro des Oberbürgermeisters
Roland Methling
Neuer Markt 1, D-18055 Rostock
ob@rostock.de
and in cc.: to robert.stach@rostock.de, liane.melzer@rostock.de

- The regional state authorities of the State of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern via
Minister Brodkorb
Minister für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur
Ministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur Mecklenburg-Vorpommern
Werderstrasse 124, D-19055 Schwerin
poststelle@bm.mv-regierung.de
and wit a copy to
Dr. M. Bednorz
Landesamt für Kultur und Denkmalpflege Mecklenburg-Vorpommern
Domhof 4/5
D-19055 Schwerin (Deutschland)
m.bednorz@kulturerbe-mv.de

Annexed to this message are :

- Our letter of 30th April 2013 to the Denkmalamt van Mecklenburg-Vorpommern
- A historical brief of the m/s Charlesville – Georg Büchner

Any further information can be obtained from:
Vlaamse Vereniging voor Industriële Archeologie vzw
Flemish Association for Industrial Archaeology
<http://www.vvia.be>
administratie@vvia.be

Please access our webpage for the Charlesville / Georg Büchner
<http://www.vvia.be/Standpunten/Charlesville.htm>