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The Freiberg Germany Temple: A Latter-day Miracle

David F. Boone and Richard O. Cowan

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a long and colorful history in Germany. Missionary work began as early as 1840, when James Howard, a British convert, attempted to preach the gospel in the Hamburg area. Unfortunately, restrictive laws against proselyting and the general disinterest of the people prevented him from having much success. While on his way to the Holy Land in 1841, Elder Orson Hyde, a member of the original Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in this dispensation, spent some weeks in Frankfurt, Germany. While there, he visited with leaders of

other denominations and studied German.^[1] After his historic dedication of Palestine, Hyde returned to Germany and stayed in Regensburg “for a season or two,” where he studied German literature and wrote a pamphlet on Church

doctrines that was translated into German.^[2]

In 1843 the first branch of the Church was created in Darmstadt, a city south of Frankfurt. The missionary efforts enjoyed continued success with the completion of additional tracts in the German language. In 1851 Elder John Taylor traveled to Hamburg and supervised the translation of the Book of Mormon into German. Many of the earliest missionaries found proselyting very difficult and in many cases impossible. They were imprisoned, banished from the country, and mistreated. Most early converts immigrated to America, choosing not to remain in this hostile environment.

The Saints in eastern provinces of Germany, where Freiberg is located, have a particularly rich heritage. Karl G. Maeser was a schoolteacher from Meissen who, during the early 1850s, became director of the Budich Institute, a prestigious prep school for girls in Dresden. He found and read an anti-Mormon tract but was concerned about its logic, inaccuracies, and poor language. Finding the address of the Church’s Scandinavian mission headquarters in Copenhagen, he wrote for more information. Because no one in that office spoke German, Maeser’s letter was forwarded to President Daniel Tyler of the Swiss-German Mission in Geneva. President Tyler, fearing that the request was an attempt to entrap the missionaries, returned the letter to Maeser unanswered, commenting that if Maeser were sincere, he would write again. Maeser did write back, resulting in Elder William Budge’s move to Dresden, where he lived in Maeser’s home and posed as a student in order to avoid arrest. Franklin D. Richards, president of the European

Mission, specifically arranged to be present in October 1855 when Maeser was baptized.^[3] Soon his wife and others also joined the Church and became the nucleus of a new branch in Dresden, with Maeser as the presiding Elder. Within a year these converts emigrated due to increased opposition from their countrymen and a desire to obey God’s commandment to gather to Zion. Karl G. Maeser went on to give distinguished service in the field of Latter-day Saint education, particularly in his role as principal of Brigham Young Academy and superintendent over all Church schools. Years later President Heber J. Grant noted, “If nothing more had been or ever would be accomplished in Germany than the conversion of Karl G. Maeser, the Church would have been well repaid for all the efforts and means expended in

that land.”^[4]

The first recorded Church meeting in Freiberg was in 1894. Two years later, on 10 January 1896, Elder Joseph A. Ott, a newly arrived missionary from Utah, died due to an accident and exposure. His grave in St. Paul’s Cemetery at Dresden became a memorial of the commitment to duty by one of the Lord’s emissaries and a hallowed place visited frequently by local Saints and others. Decades later, Tobias Burkhardt, the twelve-year-old son of the mission president, trimmed the grass, pulled the weeds, planted flowers, and polished the marker because he thought he would never be able to serve a mission himself and “just wanted to do something for a missionary who gave his life while in the service

of the Lord.”^[5]

Following the turn of the century, the Church grew significantly in Germany, but most of the new members emigrated as soon as they had the means. Between 1914 and 1918 missionary work came to a virtual standstill due to the departure of the full-time missionaries during World War I. Despite these conditions, the Church continued to grow

with some five hundred members attending a district conference in Dresden in May 1931.^[6] Soon, however, a new war threatened Europe, and in late August 1939 missionaries from North America were evacuated once again.

German Latter-day Saints suffered severely during World War II but struggled heroically to preserve their faith and the Church. The Allied forces' bombing raids on Dresden in February 1945 were especially devastating to homes, churches, and morale. It is estimated that nationwide over six hundred German Latter-day Saints were killed in the war

and that 80 percent of the remaining members were left homeless.^[7] In 1946 Elder Ezra Taft Benson not only supervised the distribution of material relief in Germany but also rekindled the members' faith and reestablished

missionary efforts.^[8] Non-German missionaries, however, were not permitted into the newly created Soviet Zone, which eventually became known as the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Local members, including youth and married men, accepted full-time mission calls to serve in this area.

Walter Stover of Salt Lake City was appointed the first postwar mission president of the East German Mission, headquartered in Berlin. The mission had about eight thousand members. In 1947, when Latter-day Saints around the world marked the one hundredth anniversary of the Church's arrival in the Salt Lake Valley, over five thousand members gathered in Dresden to join the celebration. In 1952 missionary J. Henry Burkhardt became a counselor to President Stover's successor. He continued in that position for seventeen years. As travel and communication between East and West Germany became increasingly restricted, Burkhardt became the de facto head of the church in the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR). In 1969 he became president of the newly formed Dresden Mission.

Beginning in 1949 the government strictly prohibited Latter-day Saints from bringing printed materials across the border. Church leaders improvised by producing manuals and other literature on a typewriter with several pages of carbon paper. These copies were then distributed to class instructors. Later, the teachers were directed to leave their lesson manuals at home and bring only their scriptures. This policy motivated the teachers to be better prepared. Later still, in an unusual move, President Burkhardt counseled the members to destroy all of their books, manuals, and other literature. Joachim Albrecht of Bautzen resisted the directive at first because he couldn't understand why such a policy would be initiated and because he had taken great pains to build his collection of Church books. Finally, recognizing the authority of his leaders though not their reasoning, he burned all his books except for one. Soon thereafter he realized the wisdom of the counsel when the secret police came and asked to see his bookcase. Brother Albrecht expressed

gratitude that he could comply without fear.^[9]

When the Berlin Wall was built in 1961, visits to West Germany almost ceased. Due to emigration, Church membership in this area had shrunk to about four thousand people. Members seized any legitimate opportunity to make contact with Saints from outside the country. From time to time communist authorities permitted people from the West, including some Latter-day Saints, to attend the noted annual fair in Leipzig. Occasionally the Berlin Mission president and a few others obtained permits to visit Leipzig's fair. Members in East Germany thronged to these events, hoping to meet with one another and with visiting Church authorities from the West. Any information the members could glean from these visits was then relayed to Church leaders in East Germany. This primitive communication line helped to

keep East German Church leaders posted on the developments and news of the Church from the outside.^[10]

Temple Blessings for East German Saints

Following the September 1955 dedication of the temple in Switzerland, Saints from the German Democratic Republic were able to go there to receive their sacred blessings. In November of that year, Henry Burkhardt and his wife, Inge, traveled to Zollikofen to receive their endowments and temple sealing just one week after their civil marriage. "It was a wonderful experience that was previously unknown to us," Burkhardt reflected. "We had not even

seen a temple from the outside before."^[11]

For about two years President Burkhardt organized "group trips for married couples and families" to receive their temple ordinances in Switzerland. After 1957, because of "growing political difficulties," only an occasional Church member "acting on his or her own initiative" was able to visit the temple. Following the construction of the

Berlin wall, "even this possibility had passed."^[12] One member recalled that just the night before they were to leave for

Switzerland, the government notified them that their visa was being withdrawn. [\[13\]](#)

Meanwhile, an average of fifty full-time missionaries from within the GDR were actively sharing the gospel. Using the “Anderson Plan,” a widely used proselyting program developed by Richard L. Anderson in the Northwestern States Mission, the missionaries were able to bring hundreds of new members into the Church, raising the total to about five thousand by 1970. The majority of these members had never been able to receive their temple blessings. “Naturally, we can all imagine the sad feelings that were in the hearts” of these members, President Burkhardt emphasized. “Because of my calling at the time, I discussed the problem every time I came into contact with civic offices, trying to get permission for our members to travel to the temple in Zollikofen,” or even to England, following the dedication of the London Temple in 1958. On one occasion he presented a list of over three hundred members who were anxious to make the trip to the temple. “It practically became my hobby to pester the government officials about getting the authorization. . . . So it went for many years, even decades, without a positive

result.” [\[14\]](#) Perhaps one reason for this coolness was that government officials thought of the Church as an American organization whose members “no longer needed the government due to the care and support the Church afforded

them.” [\[15\]](#)

“Tensions were high” in 1968 when Elder Thomas S. Monson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles made his first visit to the GDR. He met with a group of faithful Saints in Górlitz, reporting: “My heart was filled with sorrow when I realized the members had no patriarch, no wards or stakes—just branches. They could not receive temple blessings—either endowment or sealing. No official visitor had come from Church headquarters in a long time. The members could not leave their country. Yet they trusted in the Lord with all their hearts.” With great feeling he promised them: “If you will remain true and faithful to the commandments of God, every blessing any member of the Church enjoys in any other country will be yours.”

That night he knelt in prayer, pleading that the Lord would honor this astounding promise made in His

name. [\[16\]](#)

Walter Krause, one of Burkhardt’s counselors, was ordained a patriarch on 3 April 1973. As he began to give blessings he promised individuals the “full privileges and blessings of the gospel,” including being sealed in the temple. At that time citizens were not permitted to travel abroad until after they had retired from work at age sixty-five. As Brother Krause pondered the difficulty of these promises, he concluded: “I can’t promise something that people are going to have to wait forty years to collect on. I’ll never again give that blessing.” Nevertheless, he made the same

promise in the next blessing he gave, “he just could not deny the Spirit.” [\[17\]](#)

In August 1973 Bishop H. Burke Peterson, first counselor of the Presiding Bishopric, participated in the Munich area general conference. During a visit to the GDR, President Burkhardt took him to see various “gathering places” of the Saints. At the newly rebuilt chapel in Groitzsch bei Leipzig, Bishop Peterson unexpectedly remarked, “Why shouldn’t it be possible to dedicate a room of this building in order to give the members their endowments?” President Burkhardt recalled, “This utterance gave me a completely new perspective and awakened the hope that we could, through this means, reach our goal and help our faithful members to receive their temple blessings.” Still, he realized, as had been the case with the Endowment House in Salt Lake City during the nineteenth century, “each person would be

able to receive only his own endowments and not be able to do work for the dead.” [\[18\]](#)

On Sunday morning, 27 April 1975, Elder Monson stood with local Church leaders on a high outcropping of rock overlooking the Elbe River in between Dresden and Meissen. He offered a prayer petitioning divine blessings for the land and its people. He emphasized “the tender feelings of many hearts filled with an overwhelming desire to obtain temple blessings” and prayed, “Heavenly Father, wilt Thou open up the way that the faithful may be accorded the privilege of going to Thy holy temple, there to receive their holy endowments and to be sealed as families for time and

all eternity.” [\[19\]](#)

Elder Monson’s prayer motivated President Burkhardt to redouble his efforts in contacting government officials, emphasizing to them the importance of temple blessings for the Latter-day Saints. Each year President Burkhardt unsuccessfully tried a different approach, such as asking for permission for only older people, or those who were retired

be allowed to make the trip to the temple.^[20] At the same time other faithful Church members, also motivated by Elder Monson’s promises, continued applying for visas. “As soon as they would receive the routine denial of their visa application, they would immediately begin processing a new one, only to be turned down again.”^[21]

In 1978 the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Berlin summoned President Burkhardt to a meeting. The officials “first made it very clear to him that he must put a stop to the annoying practice by the members of resubmitting visa applications to visit the temple in Switzerland. ‘Go back and tell your people to stop pestering the officials with visa applications. You can tell them to forget it. They will never be permitted to leave the country to attend your temple. You have made it abundantly clear why it is important for your people to attend a temple, but what we do not understand is

why your church does not build a temple right here.”^[22] President Burkhardt could not believe his ears: “This opening was completely unexpected for me.” He thought of all the reasons why a temple could not be built in the GDR—the lack of enough members to justify a temple and the need to maintain its sacredness. The official told Burkhardt the

government would have no problem with the Church restricting access to the building after its dedication.^[23]

Actually, the government’s suggestion to build a temple was consistent with a change in policy announced the previous year. According to a “treaty with the churches,” cooperation would replace hostility. Specifically, the government would authorize construction of new buildings; this would court favor from the churches and would bring

in badly needed “hard cash,” mostly from the West.^[24]

“I thought in my heart,” President Burkhardt recalled, “that the First Presidency was not likely to agree to the

construction of a temple in a communist land.”^[25] Nevertheless, he eagerly reported these developments to Elder Monson, who in turn discussed them with the First Presidency on 22 November 1978. Two months later he further discussed with the Presidency the fact that because the Saints in East Germany could not obtain visas to go to the temple, it might “be necessary to provide some facilities there for such ordinance work.” During the next couple of weeks, “tentative plans” were prepared “for a small facility to be erected in the German Democratic Republic for the purpose of temple work.” On 10 February 1979, Elder Monson took these plans in Berlin to Elder Theodore M. Burton, the General Authority supervisor there, and to regional representative Dan Jorgensen. Elder Monson recorded in his journal, “We then placed the temple drawings as inconspicuously as we could within Brother Jorgensen’s briefcase and drove across the border into East Germany.” The group met with Henry Burkhardt, who “had tears come to his eyes

when he saw the beautiful drawings.”^[26]

Government officials “liked the building plans” that Henry Burkhardt had submitted to them.^[27] As he prepared to attend the April 1979 conference (having been permitted to make these trips since 1972), they asked him to consult further with General Authorities about plans for the new building. He met with the First Presidency who assigned him “the job of finding a construction site and getting the authorization to build a chapel that could simultaneously be used

as an endowment house.”^[28]

Selecting a Site

The large congregation in Karl-Marx-Stadt (formerly and once again known as Chemnitz) desperately needed a new chapel. Therefore, President Burkhardt first requested permission to build there. Following months of

negotiations,^[29] national government authorities in Berlin instructed Burkhardt early in 1980 to work directly with regional officials. Eventually, the request to build a chapel and endowment facility in Karl-Marx-Stadt was turned

down.^[30] Similar requests to build in Dresden and Leipzig were also rejected. The government suggested that the

church consider Freiberg instead.^[31] Reportedly, Freiberg city officials “objected at first” but were “overruled by the

^[32]

highest levels of the government.”

At first President Burkhardt and his counselors objected because Freiberg already had “an old building” for a meeting place. But as they discussed the matter further, they thought, “Why not Freiberg?” It was centrally located between the major population centers of Karl-Marx-Stadt, Dresden, and Leipzig with convenient railroad and highway access. Mission leaders fasted and prayed earnestly over this matter. President Burkhardt affirmed, “I give you my personal testimony, although until then I was always against the location of Freiberg, that the Lord gave us the answer that Freiberg was a wonderful place for an endowment house. We received the assurance that there was no reason to

reject this offered location.”^[33] Interestingly, *frei berg* means “free mountain.”

When the First Presidency approved the Freiberg location, the brethren in Germany were directed to secure “an appropriate construction site.” In March 1982 Freiberg city officials offered two possible locations. One, near the city’s center, offered a view only of surrounding rooftops and could never be expanded because of a nearby busy highway. The other site, on an “elevated slope” in the outskirts, was a large two-acre field that afforded a “view of the city of Freiberg” and would enable the temple to be seen prominently from throughout the area. When President Burkhardt recalled that when he and his administrative secretary, Frank Apel, first visited this spot, “we both had an unusually pleasant feeling. We were very certain that this was the right place, although the public transportation left much to be desired.” Following further fasting and prayer concerning this site, “the answer was distinct.” President Burkhardt then informed the area Presidency in Frankfurt about the decision. When Church officials came to see the sight, Burkhardt would always show them the downtown location first before taking them to the hillside site. “All of the visitors had the

same reaction—they had the same opinion as we did,” he later recalled.^[34] Interestingly, this site was only a few blocks from the university where Henry D. Moyle, a former counselor in the First Presidency, had studied earlier in his life.

There was a problem concerning title to the property. At that time private individuals and organizations were not allowed to acquire property through an outright purchase. The government would only agree to make the land available

through a long-term lease to the Church.^[35] However, Freiberg city officials were pleased the Church was planning to build its temple in their community, which would soon be celebrating its nine hundredth anniversary. With their help, the Church was able to actually purchase the land in 1982 from two families. Even though they had owned the tract for decades, they had not been allowed to do anything with it. The Church was required to pay only seventeen ostpfennige (East German pennies) per square meter (about sixty-nine marks per acre). Because the Church felt that this price was too low, it voluntarily paid the owners an additional Fifty ostpfennige per square meter—still just a token amount—all

from local Church funds.^[36]

In all these negotiations the government dealt directly with Henry Burkhardt, the acknowledged head of the Church in the GDR. Even when representatives from Church headquarters were present, Burkhardt was still the one

who signed all contracts.^[37]

Designing the Temple

As President Burkhardt negotiated the purchase of a site, government officials required him to furnish written reports of what he was planning. Apparently they were acquainted to some degree with Latter-day Saint building practices. Rather than approve the attachment of endowment facilities as a wing on the back of a ward chapel, they

recommended that the temple be made a separate building. “It should be a building your members can be proud of.”^[38]

When President Burkhardt came to general conference in April 1981, he met with President Spencer W Kimball and with Emil Fetzer, the Church’s architect who had been assigned to design the temple. This project was close to Fetzer’s heart because his ancestry had come from Germany and he had served his mission in that area. This would be

Fetzer’s “final temple project.”^[39] He was directed to proceed “discreetly, so there would be no embarrassment if [the temple] fell through.” Therefore, he worked on the plans alone on Saturdays and in the evenings.^[40]

When President Gordon B. Hinckley First reviewed the sketches for the Freiberg Germany Temple, he felt they

should be revised “to give it greater dignity.” Although these changes would cost more, he was convinced that “ten years from now Church leaders wouldn’t miss the money but would be perpetually critical of the structure if it wasn’t designed properly from the outset.”^[41]

Architect Fetzer developed his temple plans in conjunction with “a group of architects, engineers, and government officials from Dresden and Berlin.” He explained that the temples floor plan needed to remain unchanged because of “its unique function” but agreed that they might have input regarding the building’s exterior. Although Fetzer’s working relationship with this group was amicable, they could not agree on the design for the temple’s entrance and tower. Even after four visits he rejected their suggestions because they looked too Lutheran, and they couldn’t accept his designs because they seemed too Russian. Finally they accepted Fetzer’s design of “a simple modern tower composed of two high arches interlocked with two smaller arches on the sides,” which “looked German to them.”^[42]

The resulting design harmonized with the medieval architecture of the town. The temple’s exterior featured stained glass windows and a gray-blue slate roof. The eight-thousand-square-foot structure would be the smallest temple so far,^[43] about half the size of a typical ward meetinghouse. It would include one forty-seat ordinance room, a celestial room, two sealing rooms, a baptismal font without the traditional oxen, dressing rooms, and related facilities.

When the decision was made to make the temple a separate structure, the government gave permission to construct a meetinghouse as well. Therefore, plans from Salt Lake no longer reflected the concept of an attached “endowment house” but rather referred to a “temple” with adjoining buildings. Henry Burkhardt consulted with his

government contacts concerning just how many other buildings might be authorized.^[44] Ultimately the complex would include the temple, a stake center, and a dormitory building for temple patrons. A home for the temple president would be located around the corner on an adjacent street.

As late as June 1981, plans to build the Freiberg temple had not even been disclosed to most of the General Authorities. The First Presidency felt that these plans should be kept confidential until they were “more certain of [the]

location and the approval of the plans of construction.”^[45] By October of the following year, these concerns had been resolved to the point that plans to build the Freiberg Temple were publically announced for the first time. The First Presidency expressed appreciation for the “cooperation of the National Ministries in Berlin, the State Building Academy in Dresden, and the city officials of Freiberg” with whom President Burkhardt had worked closely for several years.^[46]

Help during Construction

During the next few months, working plans were drawn by German architects and engineers from Dresden under the direction of Dr. Dieter Hantzsch, who worked closely with Emil Fetzer. Groundbreaking for the new structure took place on Saturday, 23 April 1983, a beautiful day. Elder Thomas S. Monson had jokingly assigned Elder Robert D. Hales of the Seventy to be in charge of the weather. “Elder Hales, the Lord has opened the way for a temple to be erected here in this land far away from freedom, and you have the opportunity now, per my assignment, to be in charge of the weather. I would like you to ensure that we have sunshine to shine upon all who are in attendance for this great occasion!”^[47]

As Elder Monson took a shovel and prepared to turn the first bit of soil, a member of the Church Building Department cautioned: “Be careful how you lean on the shovel. When Brother Packer broke ground for a new temple in another country, the shovel broke under the weight of his foot.” Elder Monson replied with confidence, “German-made shovels don’t break.”^[48]

Government officials were seated in the front rows of chairs, which had been set up in the field. Because President Burkhardt knew that all the government representatives were atheists, he watched with apprehension as Elder Monson invited them to participate in a prayer dedicating the land: “We all fold our hands, bow our heads, and close our eyes.”^[49] One of the Church officials present opened his eyes during the prayer and noted that all government officials,

^[50]

except one, had their heads bowed and eyes closed. Following the service the government officials expressed to President Burkhardt their appreciation “for the spiritual time that they were allowed to participate in” and pledged their continuing cooperation. [\[51\]](#)

Among the faithful Latter-day Saints attending the groundbreaking ceremony was the first patriarch of the Freiberg Stake, who for many years had prayed that he and his wife might receive their temple endowments. They felt confident that they would receive this blessing because they had followed Church counsel to remain in their homeland rather than immigrate to America. They had never dared to hope that they would ever attend a groundbreaking ceremony for a temple right in their own city. [\[52\]](#)

The government’s Limex Corporation was assigned to be the contractor for the Church buildings in Freiberg. [\[53\]](#) This assignment was followed by what Henry Burkhardt later described as a series of miracles. Government officials shepherded all permits through the approval process, expediting construction of the beautiful new temple—a fitting symbol for Freiberg’s upcoming anniversary. This cooperation was in marked contrast to the red tape delays that were postponing the Frankfurt temple construction; although the Frankfurt temple had been announced a year and a half earlier, it would not be completed until two years after the temple in Freiberg.

Although the Church paid the bills, men working on the Freiberg temple were officially employed by the state.

Surprisingly, government officials pulled men from a badly needed housing project to work on the temple. [\[54\]](#) Ordinarily the workmen would have had a party to celebrate their new contracts. After becoming thoroughly drunk, they would begin work the next morning. The contractor, however, had learned of Latter-day Saint standards, and he stated that the men would drink whatever the Church would provide. The workmen then listened to a few talks on the nature of the temple they would be building as they enjoyed all the apple juice they could drink. One of the workers remarked that

this introduction was “the greatest ceremony of that type” he had ever attended. [\[55\]](#) The heating plans posed a challenge because low-grade coal in the area was used to heat most buildings. To use this system would require a heating plant with an unsightly smokestack that would dwarf the temple’s spire. In 1980, however, the Soviets announced a plan to earn badly needed funds by selling natural gas. This project was completed despite opposition from U.S. President Ronald Reagan. The pipeline passed along the north edge of Freiberg, adjacent to where the temple was being built. Henry Burkhardt applied for permission to tap into this superior source for heating. Only after repeated requests was

permission granted—even though applications for various other public buildings were turned down. [\[56\]](#)

Finding quality lighting for the temple posed another challenge. Architect Fetzer wanted a crystal chandelier for the celestial room, but the local architect Dr. Hantzsche informed him that such furnishings were not normally available in the GDR because the government strictly controlled imported items. Yet at the annual products fair in Leipzig, Hantzsche, Fetzer, and Burkhardt “found a chandelier made of superb Czech crystal, exactly the type and size they were looking for.” Hantzsche was amazed, never having seen such quality in the GDR. The vendor concurred, indicating that she only had this one and two like it that were smaller—the latter being perfect for the two sealing rooms. All three were

purchased immediately. [\[57\]](#)

Completion of the Temple

Because temples are constructed according to higher quality standards, workmen used superior materials and were exposed to advanced techniques that they had heard of but had never implemented. These included double wall construction and triple glazing to keep out the cold. Naturally, they took pride in their work. “This is one of the nicest temples we have as far as workmanship and finish are concerned,” Fetzer affirmed. The oak interior features “some of

the finest woodwork I’ve ever seen.” [\[58\]](#) Because the men had done such a good job, the government planned to give them a reward; traditionally this would have been vodka and other liquor. Church leaders did not wish to offend the men who had completed their work so well, but they felt that such a celebration would be highly inappropriate in the temple, even though it would not yet be dedicated. Fortunately, Church leaders did not need to worry. “I can’t believe my men,” the foreman surprisingly confided. “They do want the party here because this is where they have been working; but they

decided that because you people don't believe in alcohol, they're going to do this one with fruit juice and soft drinks." Furthermore, noted the foreman, his men had exhibited a different attitude on this job—they seemed to enjoy their work more, they did not swear, and they treated each other with more kindness. ^[59]

As construction on the temple progressed, the residents of Freiberg showed an increasing interest in the project. People were naturally curious about the new building, but they must have especially wondered about how and why a church was receiving so much support from the communist regime. ^[60] As curiosity turned into respect, individuals began to refer to the beautiful new building as "our temple." ^[61]

Nearly ninety thousand visitors toured the temple during its twelve-day open house—roughly twice the population of Freiberg. This was double the number who visited the Stockholm Sweden Temple during the same time and nearly twenty times the Latter-day Saint membership in the GDR.

Interest increased as the open-house period continued. People who had grown to detest standing in line for almost everything they needed, willingly waited up to four hours to visit the new temple, often in the rain, in a line a kilometer long. ^[62] One visitor exclaimed, "You know, around here you're forced to stand in so many lines, and we're

sick of it. But this is the line I chose to stand in, and I'm not budging until I see in there!" ^[63] Sometimes fathers waited in line while their wives took care of the children in a more comfortable place; then the mothers would switch places with their husbands in order to save the family's place in line. Open house hours were normally from 8 A.M. to 8 P.M., but sometimes at closing time there were still crowds waiting to get in. "We simply can't send them away," President Burkhardt concluded. "Tonight we are going to stay open until every person that wants to see this temple has seen it."

On that occasion the tours continued until 2 A.M. ^[64]

The police, normally feared in a totalitarian state, were surprisingly friendly and helpful as they directed traffic and supervised parking. ^[65] On the other hand, government agents monitored and even photographed all who came to tour the temple. Some officials at the Technical University in Dresden warned their students that they would be

"severely disciplined" if they visited the temple. ^[66] Visitors attending organ recitals in the downtown "Dome," or cathedral, were cautioned to stay away from the Mormon open house up on the hill. Interestingly, these repressive measures did not have the desired effect. One visitor to the temple open house admitted, "We didn't even know you were here until they warned us not to come up here. Aren't we glad we saw this? We enjoyed this more than the tour in the dome." ^[67] Local missionaries received many referrals, as many as five to six thousand visitors each day asking for

more information about the Church. President Burkhardt reported that four hundred people even asked for baptism. ^[68]

Elder Thomas S. Monson recalled that in his 1975 dedicatory prayer he had petitioned God to "instill within the citizenry a curiosity concerning the Church and a desire to learn more of our teachings." He regarded the success of the open house as "a direct fulfillment and response" to that prayer. ^[69]

Still, communist officials in Berlin wondered why thousands of citizens in the atheist GDR waited in long lines to see the temple. These leaders asked Gunther Behncke, a local government functionary, to report on what was going on there. In response he emphasized the following: first, the Latter-day Saints "work diligently, are honest, and are loyal to the state"; second, they regard the family as important and believe marriage should endure throughout eternity; and third, their faith prohibits partaking of alcohol, nicotine, or other addictive substances. Behncke reflected that these standards were totally inconsistent with the usual norms in his country. "The work ethic had deteriorated; people were getting divorced with increasing frequency, the divorce rate in the GDR being the highest in the world; and ever more people were resorting to alcohol."

State Secretary Klaus Gysi reasoned that because Church members' standards were "completely atypical of normal citizens in the GDR," the Church had no chance of becoming a mainstream denomination there. Yet if they have such good qualities, promoting

“marriage that lasts a lifetime,” he concluded, why shouldn’t they be allowed to build a temple? ^[70]

The temple commemorative cornerstone was placed during a special ceremony on 28 June 1985. Many government officials were in attendance. President Gordon B. Hinckley, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, remarked, “Although all gathered here do not believe the same as we, we want you to know that we pray for all of you, and each of you has a special place in our hearts, as do all mankind.” ^[71]

The temple was dedicated in seven sessions over the next two days. Participants described this as a time of pentecostal outpouring of God’s love. Honored to be the first speaker in the opening session, Elder Monson remarked that this was “the greatest day in my life, a day I have prayed for fourteen years.” He recorded in his journal: “The dedication services were filled with rejoicing. The singing was a prayer unto God, the messages were from the heart, and the prayers reflected the feelings and committed testimonies of faithful souls.” ^[72]

President Hinckley concurred: “We shed many tears; we wept with them; we prayed with them; we sorrowed with them; we rejoiced with them. It touched me to the depths of my soul when I saw the faith, the love of the Lord, the loyalty to the gospel in the hearts of Saints in the German Democratic Republic.” As he recalled his visit to the Freiberg area Fifty years before while coming home from his mission, President Hinckley reflected that he “never dreamed such a structure would one day stand here, and that completion of this temple was evidence of the Lord’s hand in softening the hearts of government officials who permitted it to be built.” ^[73]

In the same vein, President Monson reflected: “Frequently people will ask, ‘How has it been possible for the Church to obtain permission to build a temple behind the Iron Curtain?’ My feeling is simply that the faith and devotion of our Latter-day Saints in that area brought forth the help of Almighty God and provided for them the eternal blessings which they so richly deserve.” ^[74]

Henry J. Burkhardt, who had been intimately involved with the temple project since its inception, was named its first president. Newly called ordinance workers in Freiberg received training from Swiss Temple personnel as well as from German-speaking American Saints.

Impact of the Temple

At first, the Freiberg Germany Temple served only Saints living in the GDR. Church authorities discouraged Latter-day Saints in the West from going. Government officials surprisingly took the position that the new temple was only for people in their own nation, not even for those in other “socialist” countries. ^[75] Even though it served just a small group of Saints, the temple was very busy. It was the only temple at the time “where one makes an appointment to participate in an endowment session,” noted President Thomas S. Monson, now a counselor in the First Presidency. “It is the only temple I know of where stake presidents say, ‘What can we do? Our home teaching is somewhat down because everyone is in the temple!’ When I heard that comment, I thought, ‘Not bad—not bad at all!’” ^[76]

The temple’s influence was not limited to Church members. After being married in the old cathedral in town, couples often went to the beautiful gardens of the temple on the hill for their wedding pictures. ^[77] A by-product of the temple construction was the government’s insistence that the Church work through an authorized East German attorney; he was able to quickly cut through red tape to help the Church in such matters as providing needed publications to its members. ^[78]

The temple may have had a broader and much more profound impact. Speaking at the cornerstone ceremony of the Jordan River Temple in Utah, President Ezra Taft Benson declared that even the surrounding area is blessed with the dedication of a temple. ^[79] During the later 1980s the climate began to change in the German Democratic Republic. In the spring of 1989 the first Latter-day Saint missionaries in decades were permitted to enter the GDR from other countries. President Monson regarded this as a fulfillment of Isaiah’s statement, “The people that walked in darkness

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have seen a great light” (Isaiah 9:2). At the same time the communist government allowed young Latter-day Saint men and women to serve missions in whatever country the Church might assign them.^[81] In the first group of these missionaries was Tobias Burkhardt, the young man who did not expect he would be permitted to serve a mission.^[82]

Then the Berlin Wall was torn down in November 1989, just four years after the Freiberg Temple was dedicated. Scholars have correctly identified many causes of these momentous changes, but the beneficial spiritual influence of the Freiberg temple cannot be overlooked.

With the falling of these barriers, the Freiberg temple has become busier than ever; therefore, in 2001 renovations began that would approximately double the size of the temple. New facilities would include a baptismal font on the back of twelve oxen, a brides room, an office for the temple president, and improved accommodations for individuals with disabilities. The most visible exterior modification was placing a statue of the angel Moroni on the temple’s tower.^[83]

As he reflected on the circumstances which led to the temples construction, President Burkhardt testified that he recognized “Heavenly Fathers hand” at work. With His help “the impossible becomes reality.”^[84]

^[1] Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, Richard O. Cowan, eds., *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 421–25; Gilbert W. Scharffs, *Mormonism in Germany: A History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Germany between 1840 and 1970* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1970), 1.

^[2] Scharffs, *Mormonism in Germany*, 2—3.

^[3] Alma P. Burton, *Karl G Maeser: Mormon Educator* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1953), 5—7; Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 1:83–86.

^[4] *Millennial Star* 66, no. 5 (1904): 98.

^[5] Thomas S. Monson, *Faith Rewarded: A Personal Account of Prophetic Promises to the East German Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1996), 51; see also Lois Decker Brown, “Brief Mission, Constant Harvest,” *Ensign*, August 1995, 46–50.

^[6] *Church News*, 29 December 1990, 4.

^[7] *Deseret News 2001—2002 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 2000), 330.

^[8] For an eyewitness description of Elder Benson’s mission, see Frederick W. Babbel, *On Wings of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975).

^[9] Garold N. Davis and Norma S. Davis, *Behind the Iron Curtain: Recollections of Latter-day Saints in East Germany, 1945—1989* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1996), 159–60.

^[10] Bruce A. Van Orden, *Building Zion: The Latter-day Saints in Europe* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 199.

^[11] Henry Burkhardt, talk given to missionaries in the baptismal room of the Freiberg Ward Chapel on the temple grounds, 18 March 1997, typescript of English translation in authors’ possession, 3.

^[12] Ibid.

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James H. Backman, “TheTwo German Temples—Legal Background,” paper presented at the Mormon History Association conference in England, July 1987, copy in authors’ possession, 1—2.

- [14] Burkhardt, 3–4.
- [15] Paul VanDenBerghe, “A Foundation of Strength in Germany,” *Ensign*, August 2000, 48.
- [16] Thomas S. Monson, in Conference Report, April 1989, 66–67.
- [17] Phillip J. Bryson, “Background on the Temple in the German Democratic Republic: An Eyewitness Account,” remarks given at Brigham Young University, 3 and 9 July 1985, transcript in authors’ possession, 6.
- [18] Burkhardt, 4.
- [19] Thomas S. Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 36.
- [20] Burkhardt, 5; Peter Czerny, remarks in Richard Cowan’s BYU religion class, 3 December 1987, typescript of recording in authors’ possession, 3.
- [21] Backman, “Two German Temples,” 2.
- [22] Backman, “Two German Temples,” 3.
- [23] Burkhardt, 5; Czerny, 3.
- [24] Backman, “Two German Temples,” 2.
- [25] Burkhardt, 5.
- [26] Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 53–54.
- [27] *Ibid.*, 58–59.
- [28] Burkhardt, 6.
- [29] Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 61, 63.
- [30] Burkhardt, 6.
- [31] Paul L. Anderson, “New Temples in the Old Country: Adapting Mormon Architecture for a European Setting,” presentation at Mormon History Association conference in Aalborg, Denmark, 1 July 2000, typescript in authors’ possession, 7.
- [32] Backman, “Two German Temples,” 4.
- [33] Burkhardt, 6–7.
- [34] *Ibid.*, 7–8.
- [35] Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 69, 73.
- [36] Burkhardt, 7–8; see Czerny, 4.
- [37] Backman, 3.

- [38] Czerny, 4.
- [39] Backman, “Two German Temples,” 4.
- [40] Anderson, “New Temples,” 6.
- [41] Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 417.
- [42] Anderson, 7–8.
- [43] Richard O. Cowan, *Temples to Dot the Earth* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997).
- [44] Burkhardt, 8.
- [45] Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 69–70.
- [46] *Church News*, 9 October 1982, 2.
- [47] Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 88–89.
- [48] *Ibid.*, 89.
- [49] Burkhardt, 8.
- [50] Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 90–91.
- [51] Burkhardt, 9.
- [52] Backman, “Two German Temples,” 1—2.
- [53] *Church News*, 9 June 1985, 3.
- [54] Czerny, 2.
- [55] Bryson, “Background,” 8.
- [56] Czerny, 4—5.
- [57] Anderson, “New Temples,” 9.
- [58] *Church News*, 9 June 1985, 3.
- [59] Czerny, 5.
- [60] Bryson, “Background,” 10.
- [61] *Church News*, 9 June 1985, 3.
- [62] Bryson, “Background,” 7.
- [63] Czerny, 5.

- [64] Bryson, “Background,” 7–8.
- [65] Czerny, 5—6.
- [66] Bryson, “Background,” 10, 18.
- [67] Czerny, 6.
- [68] Bryson, “Background,” 9.
- [69] Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 103.
- [70] Gunther Karl Otro Behncke interview by Matthew K. Heiss, 20 October 1991, in James Moyle Oral History Program, Church Archives, translated by authors.
- [71] *Church News*, 14 July 1985, 12.
- [72] Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 104–5; *Church News*, 14 July 1985, 12.
- [73] Quoted in Dew, *Go Forward with Faith*, 419–20.
- [74] Monson, *Faith Rewarded*, 105.
- [75] Bryson, “Background,” 11, 21.
- [76] Thomas S. Monson, Conference Report, April 1989, 68.
- [77] Czerny, 6.
- [78] Backman, “Two German Temples,” 12–13.
- [79] *Church News*, 22 August 1981, 8.
- [80] *Church News*, 3 July 1993, 6.
- [81] Monson, Conference Report, April 1989, 68–69.
- [82] Brown, 50.
- [83] *Church News*, 12 January 2002, 6.
- [84] Burkhardt, 9.