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Where Every Road Leads Out of the City. Walks in the Anonymous Heart of Berlin

(...) Breite Straße is as wide as it is long. Up until the beginning of the eighteenth century it was called Große Straße (Great Street), and was the royal avenue leading to the residence – despite it still being used to drive cattle to pasture each day. Archaeologically, the street's existence can be traced back to the end of the twelfth century, years before the first documentary reference to the town of Cölln.

Up until the end of the nineteenth century the street, as seen from the Royal Palace, slewed to the left across Cölln fish market in the direction of Mühlendamm. Today it leads in a straight line to the huge junction with Gertraudenstraße. It is hard to imagine that Breite Straße was once livelier and more bustling than Kudamm. Today there is nothing here to inspire a walk or a stroll. To the left is the Marstall in all its Wilhelminian solidity, right next to the Ribbeckhaus, Berlin's sole remaining late Renaissance building. It was built in 1624 for the Privy Counsellor von Ribbeck from two older buildings, to which a uniform façade was added. Directly adjacent is the entrance building to the City Library, built in the mid 1960s, with 117 versions of the letter A on its portal. The left-hand end of the street is rounded off by the German Trade and Industry Building, a pars pro toto exemplification of the capital city's turn-of-the-millennium bombast.

On the right-hand side everything is dead. Between here and the Scharrenstraße, there is nothing on the street, which is only interrupted by the Neumannsgasse, apart from the pediment of the State Council building, an adjoining chancellery wing and the faceless building of the former Construction Ministry. There is nothing worth pausing for, unless you are waiting for a bus to take you away from here.

"Whoever crossed over from Berlin felt as if they had been transported to a different city. Noble gentlemen with gold and silver braid on their jackets approached on beautiful horses. Women with their hair piled high and wearing colourful ribbon headdresses rode past in magnificent coaches. Virtually the only language spoken was French", wrote Claus Backs in his 1961 novel *Drei Fräulein an der Jungfernbrücke* (Three Women on Jungfern Bridge), set at the end of the seventeenth century. This was a period when the Huguenots were arriving as refugees in Berlin and society life was being rapidly influenced by new fashions. The better heeled settled on Breite Straße, married amongst themselves and thus were linked by family ties and business relations before they moved to the newly built Dorotheenstadt or Friedrichstadt where the dwellings were more modern and more prestigious. For centuries Breite Straße straddled the feudal-governmental centre of the city, as represented by the Royal Palace, and the civic, middle class centre. The richest merchants, many of them purveyors to the court, built their houses on Breite Straße, hiring the best interior designers to furnish them. This was no different in Berlin than in the broad streets (or lanes) of Magdeburg, Potsdam or Lübeck.

For many years, an apartment in Breite Straße was a must for members of the court. However, under Frederick William II, whose regency began following the death of Frederick II in 1786, Breite

Straße lost its significance as the main approach to the Royal Palace. Unter den Linden became the street of pomp and ceremony and Wilhelmstraße became the residence of the chancellor and royal courtiers – be it by preference or decree. Cölln, in the shadow of the Palace, began to lag behind. Breite Straße became middle class, which in those days was equivalent to social decline. However, the street's standard land value, in contrast to the surrounding alleys, remained one of the highest in the city. The plots on the right-hand side of the street became more and more crowded; workshops and manufactories moved into the rear buildings, while the populace dwelled in the narrow alleys along the Spree canal. Here the men worked as cobblers, fishermen or bargemen, while many of the women hired themselves out as washerwomen or maids in the middle-class houses of Breite Straße.

In addition to the Christmas market, popular with all classes, two institutions dominated life in Breite Straße for many decades – the newspaper Vossische Zeitung and the department store Hertzog. The Vossische Zeitung, which enjoyed a news monopoly in Berlin for over two centuries, took up office at no. 8 Breite Straße in 1818. At the end of the nineteenth century the newspaper also bought house no. 9 at the corner of Neumannsgasse. From here, numerous journalists, writers and critics who are still famous to this day, such as Theodor Fontane and Ludwig Rellstab, Kurt Tucholsky and Sling, swarmed out into the city, bringing back with them stories of a Berlin that is long gone – but the timeless quality of these narratives makes them still worth reading even now. In 1934 Aunty Voss, as the newspaper was commonly known, ceased publication following the break-up of the Ullstein publishing house, which had owned the newspaper since 1914. The building was taken over by the Reichsbank, and housed offices of the Bank of Japan, as well as the National Office for Precious Metals, an institution founded in 1935 that was intimately involved in the seizure of gold and silver assets from Jewish citizens after 9 November 1938.

The second authority for the middle classes, especially young women, was the department store Hertzog, Berlin's specialist for trousseaux, tailor-made clothes and the doorstep delivery of finely packaged goods. In 1839 Rudolph Hertzog opened a drapers shop in Breite Straße, transforming it into a department store in the course of the following decades by progressively buying up all the plots between Breite Straße, Scharrenstraße and Brüderstraße, absorbing them into his empire to create a snail shell like structure in which it was easy get lost between the underwear and silk goods departments. Gerson & Leineweber had set the trend with the first of Berlin's department stores, opened in 1847/1848 on Werderscher Markt. The writer and journalist Alice Berend described a similar kind of dizzy social ascent in her novel Spreemann & Co about a fictional store located at nearby Dönhoffplatz – the grandfather was an itinerant tradesman, the father founded a modest shop on a busy square which his sons then expanded after 1870 to create a department store supplying everything a person of the Wilhemian era needed across three floors.

In 1848 Hertzog's store had 155 square metres of floor space, in 1912 this had risen to 15,875. In 1908/1909 Hertzog built a new building in neo-Baroque style in Brüderstraße, at the corner of Scharrenstraße, and an annexe was erected on the site of Cölln Town Hall, which had been demolished in 1899 having become a hindrance to the growing traffic. Soon a tram ran along Breite Straße, stopping in front of the department store. In the 1920s Hertzog lost his pole position to the department stores on Leipziger Platz and Alexanderplatz and also did not profit from the

dispossession of his Jewish counterparts in the 1930s.

Hertzog also owned house no. 19/20 on the corner of Scharrenstraße, the ground floor of which housed the confectioners Jaenicke, where young women would be invited to cake and whipped cream by their mothers following the purchase of their trousseaux. The photographer Fritz Tiedemann photographed the building twice following the war. In the first picture, taken in 1949, the centre of the façade is missing and one can see inside the former bourgeois bel étage, which due to its airiness was now only suitable for drying washing. In the second picture, three years later, the wall has undergone makeshift repairs. Regardless of how rundown the house became, Jaenicke remained – even when the advertising signs became increasingly modest, the display windows ever smaller due to a shortage of glass, and the coffee was made from barley, malt and chicory. In the 1960s the house was pulled down in order to allow the road to be widened. The building opposite, no. 28, fared no better, even though it stood for another five years. The Schlossklausen (Palace Inn), housed on the ground floor, enjoyed widespread popularity. There were hardly any inns left in the condemned neighbourhood, and up until the building of the large Ahornblatt restaurant in Getraudenstraße even the City Library had no canteen. After 1950 the Schlossklausen lacked the accompanying Palace, however this could be forgotten over beer and schnapps. Being an establishment in the higher price category, wine was also served, which could be enjoyed in booths named after palaces from other regions.

As the work of demolishing the Fischerkiez (Fishermen's Neighbourhood) began in 1965 – against the advice of preservationists and urban planners – it was also resolved to pull down the patrician houses on the right-hand side of Breite Straße. In order to make more room for demonstrations and parades on Schlossplatz, the street's small-town structure was progressively eradicated. Only the Ermelerhaus at no. 11 Breite Straße withstood this predatory destruction, albeit at a different location, having been relocated a few hundred metres away on Märkisches Ufer. The Raabe-Diele, which was originally at home in Sperlingsgasse, moved into the cellar. Twenty years later the practice of mixing a potpourri of architectural styles was perfected on a far larger scale in the Nikolaiviertel. In 1967, the lots on the section of street between Neumannsgasse and Scharrenstraße were completely built over by the Construction Ministry complex, which today remains empty. The BND, Germany's Federal Intelligence Service, which used the building for a period, has hidden it behind a solid security fence. Moss and lichen now cover the gravel concrete slabs, and they appear as if they have remained untrampled for at least a decade. Several seasons worth of autumn leaves have gathered in the entrance zones. In one of the windows Walter Ulbricht, the First Secretary, hails the destruction of Cölln.

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