

# BY AN OLD OCEANOGRAPHER

## 'As it was'

With uniting of German Nations into the 'Kaiserreich' in 1871 marine affairs became a dominant factor in foreign policy. Already in 1861 the Prussian Naval Ministry had established a Hydrographic Bureau in Berlin for surveying and charting the sea. This was transferred to Hamburg in 1875 and extended to observatory 'Deutsche Seewarte' for closer contact with trading vessels in Germany's main seaport. But after the successful deep-sea, round-the-world expedition on the corvette *Gazelle* (1874-76) a national maritime centre, including museum, was proposed for Berlin.

One hundred years ago, on 5th March 1906, Kaiser Wilhelm II celebrated the opening of the 'Museum für Meereskunde' in Berlin, accompanied by Prince Albert I of Monaco, who just four years later inaugurated his famous 'Musée Océanographique'. Both had begun their plans in 1899; the results, however, could not be more different. While the building in Monaco was exposed to the Mediterranean Sea and showed the results of Prince Albert's own oceanographic research, the Museum in Berlin was located in a gloomy side street (Figure 1) and its main attraction was a German Navy exhibition.

Actually, this collection became the nucleus of the Museum. Pieces had been being assembled since Wilhelm II had acceded to the throne in 1888 with the statement that the future of Germany would lie at sea. Ten years later, the collection was presented to the public and the leading newspaper in Berlin promoted its permanent exhibition as a vehicle for fostering imperial marine affairs. The Kaiser, in childhood already dressed as a little sailor, supported the idea but wished combination of the exhibition with an academic institution for marine science. The latter was founded at the University of Berlin in 1900 under the geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen and although six years ahead of the opening of the museum it was already named 'Institut und Museum für Meereskunde'. It proved very successful in attracting public attention by popular lectures held up to four times a week before audiences of two hundred or more, and publications 'for the awareness of the national importance of the ocean and its naval affairs'.

Although the naval collection turned out to be the main attraction at the Museum, exhibitions in other departments were of high quality in terms of scientific approach. Each exhibit was arranged in such a way that visitors got a broad impression of what was being shown; for example, via dioramas, new at that time. Sections were devoted to navigation, oceanography, marine biology and fisheries.

After World War I, when German scientists and the German language were unacceptable at international scientific conferences, the Institute regained an international reputation when it undertook the first large-scale, systematic hydrographic investigation of the tropical and southern Atlantic Ocean in the *Meteor*-Expedition (1925-27). The results were published in fifty volumes, the last in 1965.

While oceanographic research activities at the Institute expanded, the Museum remained practically as at its founding. Many plans were discussed for transferral of the naval collection to a separate and more attractive building, using arguments like "The Reichsmarine is the embodiment of Germanic manly power as it manifests in the world". But this priority fell from grace after assumption of power by the Nazi regime. This was land-orientated in its lust for conquest, and hydrography and oceanography were degraded so as merely to serve naval operations.

When in 1941 the first bombardments had already reached Berlin, the evacuation of important cultural objects was considered. Near the final phase of World War II most movable cultural objects, like those at this museum, were removed from Berlin and stored in various castles, bunkers and tunnels to the north, east, and south of the capital. Some even underwent further transfers. These are astoundingly well documented considering the circumstances, an example of the reliability of German bureaucracy, even in extreme situations.

After the war the fate of exhibition items depended on their location: whether they belonged to the western or eastern area of foreign occupation. Those collected by the Soviet Army were brought to the Central Marine Military Museum in Leningrad. Years later they were returned, in the meantime restored, to the German Democratic Republic (mainly the German Army Museum in Dresden, the Museum of German History in East Berlin and the Marine Science Museum in Stralsund). Objects that found their way into West Germany, (in particular the institution library), are now integrated into the stock at various places. These include the German Traffic Museum in Berlin, the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency in Hamburg, the Institute of Marine Science in Kiel, and the Naval Academy in Flensburg/Müritzwig.

The story of the Berlin Museum suggests an impossible state of affairs right from the beginning: the combination of military and marine-science exhibitions at an unattractive place. A new initiative for a German marine-science museum began in 1951 in the old Hanse (trading) town of Stralsund in the Baltic, in a disused church. Since then it has undergone continual growth, establishing outstations in the neighbourhood, and its latest extension, an OCEANEUM, will be opened in 2008 (Figure 4). After the reunification of Germany it was awarded the status of national marine science museum.

### Further Reading

'Aufgetaucht' das Museum für Meereskunde', by the Museum für Verkehr und Technik Berlin (1996), pp171.

