

MARTA'S VISION

Saving the House

Marta Feuchtwanger had lived at the side of Lion Feuchtwanger for nearly half a century when he died of stomach cancer in Santa Monica on December 21, 1958. She had been his wife and his companion. She had saved his life, been a critical listener and even, at times, his collaborator. He was her life as she had been his. Following his death, she dedicated herself to preserving his legacy with the same devotion she showed her husband during his lifetime. Her greatest wish was to preserve Villa Aurora in memory of Lion Feuchtwanger. But in the wake of his death, she was plagued by other worries. Marta was afraid that she would no longer be able to afford the large home. Taxes, household expenses and maintenance caused her great concern and royalties were no longer flowing as steadily as they had. Lion Feuchtwanger's star had faded somewhat, due to the Cold War, McCarthyism and, in particular, their long exile. In 1959, it was impossible to foresee that in the 1970s a young generation of Germans would rediscover the author of "Jew Suss", "Success" and "Goya", rekindling interest in his writings, especially in Germany.

So just a year after Lion's death, Marta transferred the Villa Aurora - a name the Feuchtwangers never used, despite its presence on the wrought-iron front portal - to the University of Southern California. The university, in turn, took over maintenance costs, later employed a gardener and ultimately inherited the house when Marta Feuchtwanger died at the age of 94 on October 25, 1987. USC retained the right to sell the house, however, should this be deemed necessary for the financial upkeep of the Feuchtwanger library. There were signs that USC had this in mind even before Marta's death. In September 1987, Professor Harold von Hofe stepped in. He was a former student of Ludwig Marcuse who, along with Stanley Townsend, had done much to bring about the agreement with USC. Von Hofe alerted journalist Volker Skierka, who had recently published an extensive biography of Feuchtwanger, to the situation with the house.

Friends of Villa Aurora

Volker Skierka was a correspondent in Hamburg for Munich's *Süddeutsche* newspaper. He took action immediately and sought political support from the German Government. He approached Chancellor Willy Brandt, the chairman of the Social Democratic Party, Hans-Jochen Vogel, Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher and President Richard von Weizsäcker. The idea of establishing the Villa Aurora as an artists' residence was developed by Skierka, Dr. Michael Naumann, Fritz Raddatz and Freimut Duve in Hamburg. They all shared a concern for the future of the Feuchtwanger Villa and the group was to become the nucleus of the future "Friends of Villa Aurora".

With a committed effort, they succeeded in gaining the backing of leading politicians from various political parties, well-known writers, including Günter Grass and Jurek Becker and the German branch of PEN.

The managing editor of the Berlin daily Tagesspiegel, Lothar C. Poll, also became involved with the preservation of Villa Aurora. In the spring of 1988, a round table was held in Berlin under the auspices of Shepard Stone of the Aspen Institute. The initiators were joined by Members of Parliament from all parties as well as representatives from the foreign ministry, the president's office and the cultural department of the interior ministry. Shepard Stone also invited this author, Marianne Heuwagen to the conference. At the time I was a correspondent for the Süddeutsche in Berlin. I had lived in Los Angeles for eight years and known Marta Feuchtwanger personally. With a wide range of contacts in Los Angeles, I hoped to provide valuable resources for the initial stages of Villa Aurora project.

At the Aspen Institute's round table, there was an immediate broad consensus among the members of the German political parties - the Christian Democrats (CDU), the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Green Party - that the house should be preserved as the last remaining cultural monument to the exile period. The idea was that it should become a beacon to other countries as well as to posterity that the German post-war generation had learned its lesson from history and understood that the culture of those driven into exile by the Nazi regime was also part of their own heritage.

In May 1988, the "Friends of Villa Aurora" was founded in Berlin, with Lothar C. Poll as chairman. Members of the association were Volker Skierka, Marianne Heuwagen and Daniel Hamilton, deputy director of the Aspen Institute. Later, Hamilton became the first emissary of the Circle of Friends to Los Angeles, seeking local support for the enterprise. The German parliament agreed that same year to provide 500,000 DM annually for programs for the Villa Aurora, although a long road lay ahead before these funds could actually be released.

First, negotiations had to be initiated with the University of Southern California over the sale of the home at 520 Paseo Miramar. A sum of \$ 1.9 million for the acquisition was granted by the Berlin Lottery Foundation under the auspices of the Berlin senate under then mayor, Walter Momper. The Berlin Lottery Foundation later also provided substantial additional funds for the renovation of the house. We are deeply indebted to the members of the board of the foundation and the director of the senate office, Volker Kähne, for their support at that crucial time. Once again, a non-partisan alliance came to the rescue of the Villa Aurora and acted to preserve it as a German cultural memorial. The SPD / Green Party coalition in the Berlin senate was succeeded by a newly formed CDU / FDP senate under mayor Eberhard Diepgen, who also furthered the cause of the Villa Aurora.

Finally, the project was supported by politicians across all party lines, from the SPD former minister of justice, Jutta Limbach, to CDU politicians Klaus-Rüdiger Landowsky, Dankward Buwitt, and economics minister Elmar Pieroth. In 1989, the purchase contract was signed. However, negotiations on permission to



change the status of the house from a private residence to a cultural institution continued to delay the process.

The renovation of the house

When the sales contract between the Friends of Villa Aurora, a private non-profit organization in Berlin, and the University of Southern California was signed, nobody could possibly have imagined how elaborate the renovation of the house would actually be. The villa lacked a solid foundation and had received only the most minimal repairs in the past four decades. The hill on which it was built threatened to slide down onto the neighbors' terrace at any moment. The renovation dragged on and costs rose accordingly. At this point, the dedication of architect Frank Dimster was a stroke of luck for Villa Aurora. Despite his penchant for modern architecture, the USC architecture professor of Romanian-German heritage had experience with older houses, having restored Frank Lloyd Wright's Freeman House in Los Angeles. Nevertheless, he was faced with new challenges in Villa Aurora. It took 18 months just to obtain all the building permits in order for construction to begin, since Villa Aurora falls under the strict purview of the California Coastal Commission, which controls all buildings along the coast and must approve even the slightest structural changes.

The renovation itself, which took from 1992 to 1994, proved to be anything but slight. First, the entire house had to be lifted in order to build a solid foundation beneath it. Then the hillside had to be stabilized by cement pillars sunk deep in the ground. Air conditioning was added, as well as an entirely new heating system. All the plumbing and electrical lines were replaced and all of these changes were accomplished without altering the appearance of the building in any way.

The costs went far over the original budget. The Berlin Lottery Foundation helped out once again and the foreign ministry later provided additional financial support. As a crowning glory to all the construction headaches, Villa Aurora was placed on the list of historical landmarks in California after the renovation was complete. This distinction resulted in a reduction of the normally rather steep property taxes in the area. In recognition of his accomplishment, Germany awarded Frank Dimster the Bundesverdienstkreuz, the country's highest order of merit, in 1996.



The turbulent history of the association

While the construction work went forward in Los Angeles, planning continued in Berlin. The association put the finishing touches on the Villa Aurora concept, organized events and solicited additional support for the project. Even before the Berlin Wall came down, Lothar C. Poll had attracted the interest of East Berlin publisher Aufbau in the project. Two editors at the publishing house had joined the Circle of Friends. However, after the collapse of communism and German reunification, it became increasingly difficult to raise money for such a distant endeavor. There were simply too many more pressing projects at home, which took priority for the former east.

Berlin's Institute for Advanced Study had been interested during the planning phase, but due to the lack of financial support those plans were abandoned. Then the Tagesspiegel, which had not only covered the legal fees for the sale in Los Angeles but many other costs as well, was sold to Holtzbrinck Publishers.

There also were more hurdles in Los Angeles. A prominent conservative émigré in Los Angeles was thoroughly opposed to the project. Well connected to the Diepgen senate, he tried to undermine the conversion of Villa Aurora into a residence for artists. Instead, he wanted to sell the villa and establish a kind of "Heimathaus," or German salon, in Los Angeles, and even found some supporters in Berlin. In the end, little came of the matter, but it caused a temporary distraction.

However, in the mid-1990s the project seemed to have run aground anyway. To create new impetus, the initiators of the project elected a new steering board with this author as chairwoman, Volker Skierka and Freimut Duve as deputy chairs, and Dr. Michael Naumann and Dr. Jürgen Meinhold, one of the new executives of the Tagesspiegel.

The Berlin Lottery Foundation agreed to provide funding for maintenance of the villa for three years. So, finally, all obstacles to opening the Villa Aurora artists' residence were gone. In Los Angeles, a provisional director was put in place as well as a local advisory board, with representatives from leading cultural institutions such as the Getty Center, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the California Institute of the Arts. The Los Angeles branch of the Goethe Institute was also invited to join the venture. The last hurdle was difficulty getting the funds released that had been allocated by the German government in 1988. Intense lobbying and hundreds of letters written to members of parliament finally persuaded the government budget and finance committee to grant funding for the programs.

In the fall of 1995, the first two artists in residence arrived at the villa, writer Irina Liebmann and visual artist Lisa Schmitz. On December 1, 1995, a small celebration officially marked the opening of the Villa Aurora. The University of Southern California hosted a symposium of writers in exile in honor of the occa-

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sion. The Getty Center agreed to support a writer in exile, an important aspect of the active program of the Villa Aurora in Los Angeles. The Getty would provide housing while the Friends of Villa Aurora paid the living expenses. The Getty Center had already cooperated indirectly with the Villa undertaking. When the villa was being refurbished, the original furniture, initially sent to USC, had been reupholstered but had not yet found its way back to its former home. During this time, playwright Heiner Müller was invited to the Getty Center in Santa Monica. Müller, dissatisfied with his lodgings at the Getty Apartments, asked if he could move to the Feuchtwanger house. Thus it came to pass that as early as January 1995, Heiner Müller was, in fact, the first guest of the Villa Aurora.

Following the official opening, the board of the Friends of Villa Aurora in Berlin found themselves running and maintaining a viable cultural establishment in Los Angeles, a responsibility which proved to be too demanding for the committed but volunteer members. An executive director was hired in September 1996 to head the Berlin office. Dr. Mechthild Borries-Knopp had recently moved from Chicago to Berlin and was not only familiar with American affairs, but also with cultural event management. Once the programs were up and running, I withdrew from the board, in the autumn of 1997. In 1999, I was then asked to chair the board of trustees. The new board of the Friends of Villa Aurora consisted of chair Freimut Duve, with Volker Skierka as deputy chair along with Dr. Mechthild Borries-Knopp. Dr. Michael Naumann, in his new capacity as minister for culture and media, also became a member of the first board of trustees and was successful in procuring state support for the programs of the Villa Aurora. Naumann and Skierka retired from the board in 2002. Dr. Joachim Bernauer, a delegate of the Goethe Institute, was established as director of the Villa Aurora in 1999. When he was posted to the Goethe Institute in Sao Paolo in 2002, he was succeeded by the current director, Claudia Gordon, with Dr. Zaia Alexander working at her side to coordinate programming.

Villa Aurora celebrated its 10-year anniversary in 2005. The current board of the Friends is chaired by Freimut Duve and his vice-chair is Volker Kähne. Dr. Mechthild Borries-Knopp serves on the board together with two "Angelinos," Lee Ramer and Dr. Steven Lavine.

Marianne Heuwagen