

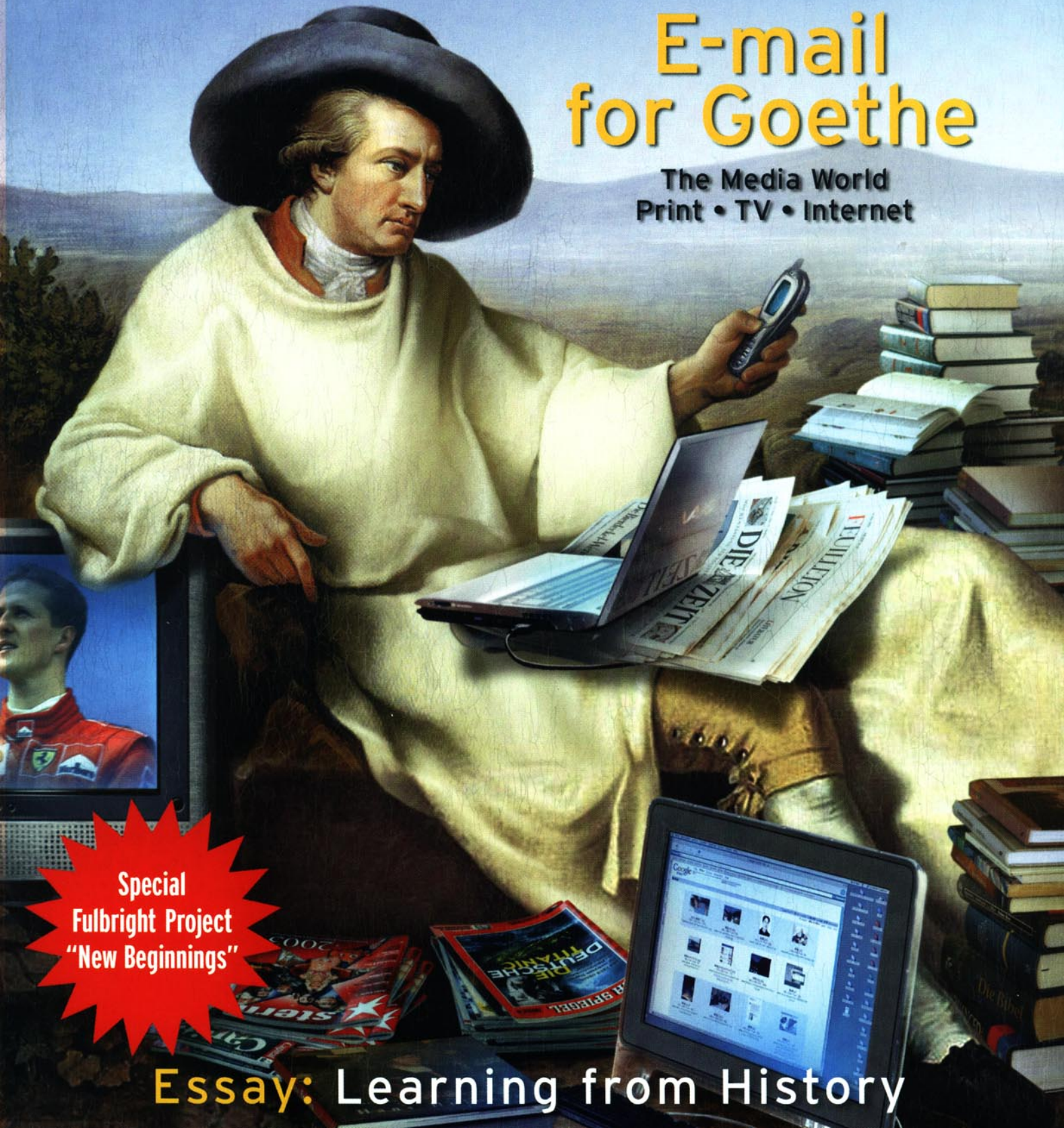
Forum on politics, culture, business and science

# Deutschland

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Essay: Learning from History



■ Rebuilding home

# The Lost Village

Coal mining in Saxony swallowed up the little village of Schladitz. The residents began a new life in the neighboring community

It is nine in the morning and, like most days, Helga Delling is tending the graveyard of her youth. For Mrs. Delling, 71, that isn't abstract nostalgia as much as it is physical work, a dirt-under-the-fingernails grief therapy. The village where she spent many of her young years, was married, and raised her children, is gone. She has erected a cross on a mock grave atop the soil that once held her family home, and now returns daily to keep it tidy. "Going back there calms me down," she says. In many ways, her life is better now. The apartment where she lives with her husband in Rackwitz, a nearby town, is slightly larger than their former home. There are more shopping opportunities, and both she and her husband were able to find work. There are many positive economic signs in this former East German region. The Rackwitz aluminum factory has been modernized and is once again the area's largest employer. A Porsche factory has opened nearby, and a BMW plant is under construction. Most of the houses in Rackwitz have been renovated and there are a number of new stores. But the attraction of the former life remains strong. The nearly fifteen years since East Germany collapsed have left a legacy more complex than ideologues of either side like to admit. Here, everybody was evicted from the country of their childhood, forced into a new world even while rooted in place.

In a sense, Mrs. Delling is lucky. She has a physical memorial where she can lay flowers. Mrs. Delling's village, Schladitz, was a 600-year-old village located just north of Leipzig in Saxony. It had the misfortune of being situated atop brown coal reserves that East Germany considered essential for energy independence. Demolition began shortly before the Wall fell. I visited Schla-

ditz for the first time in May 1990, when I was touring former Eastern Europe after the fall of the iron curtain. "They pressured us so much until we left of our own free will" was the way former resident Gerd Schladitz put it at the time. I also spoke with the few residents who had refused to abandon their old houses, located just a few hundred meters from the enormous open-pit coal mines that were supposed to engulf their village.

THIS SPRING, I returned to Schladitz—or rather, the land where it had once stood. I learned that the mining of brown coal had stopped, but that Schladitz was considered too far gone to save. I found Gerd Schladitz, now 67 and pockmarked by skin cancer, living in nearby Rackwitz. He had just returned from a funeral for a former neighbor from Schladitz. "The village life is gone," he said. "Now it's maybe a polite wave across the fence."

Others have less nostalgia. Just down the street of Mr. Schladitz's new house stands the house of Kerstin Sperling. I had met her in 1990 when she had just moved to Rackwitz, into an unpainted house that still stood amid churned earth. Now it is neatly painted

and surrounded by a landscaped garden. The baby I had seen in the baby carriage is now fourteen years old. "You move on," Mrs. Sperling says.

THE MAYOR OF RACKWITZ, Manfred Freigang, 55, is trying to get the local economy to move on as well. He is pinning his hopes on the spillover effects from the two nearby car factories. Still, he says, it is a difficult time. The area's youth are moving away, and unemployment hovers near the area's average of 22%. "There simply isn't enough work for everyone," he says. But

to remind himself of how bad it could have been, Freigang keeps a map showing what the GDR had planned for the area through the year 2030. Virtually every one of the dozens of villages around Rackwitz was to have been demolished, leaving Rackwitz as an

island adrift among vast brown coal pits. Since the land of Schladitz was never physically torn up for coal mining, the government has allowed former Schladitz residents to repurchase their land. Mrs. Delling now hopes that her children will be able to rebuild the family home there, and finally put to rest the painful nostalgia for her former life. "I suspect this land will be valuable again, one day," she says. "My two granddaughters will rebuild." ■



**Rackwitz/Germany** is a village in the state of Saxony with 3000 inhabitants. It lies 15 kilometers north of Leipzig



**OTTO POHL**

most recently worked as a freelance journalist. He writes for the New York Times, and other papers. During his time in Germany he worked for the magazine Spektrum der Wissenschaft and GeoWissen

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