

Whatever happened to Ludwig Leichhardt?

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Ludwig Leichhardt leads the way through his humble first-floor Berlin flat to his office, where souvenirs and gifts proudly adorn the back wall. What can't be hung or framed is kept in a wooden cabinet opposite. "This is my 'Australian room'," the 73-year-old retired engineer declares in a wondrously guttural voice that belongs to another century. He points to a large linen wall-hanging depicting a map of Australia. "A friend of mine found it in Poland and sent it to me," he says. A clip-on kangaroo and koala from a bygone era cling precariously to one hem. There are oils of outback landscapes painted for him by an Australian woman living with a German fellow in Newcastle; a didgeridoo he bought in Sydney; an Akubra donated by a Berlin restaurant called Billabong. Leichhardt seems pleased to be able to show his room off. "It's what I do," he says wryly.

There are perks to being Ludwig Leichhardt III, the great-great-grandnephew of one of Australia's most famous explorers and scientists: friends and strangers tend to want to give you things. Ludwig III doesn't remember all of the donors. He shows me the silver coin featuring a portrait of his forebear against a map of Queensland released earlier this year by the Perth Mint. He presents the commemorative stamps released in Australia and Germany in October. He pulls from a shelf the newly published paperback *Where is Dr Leichhardt?* in which author Darrell Lewis has scribbled a personal greeting to him. There are many other examples, but Ludwig III is a giver, too. With a hint of dry humour, he says he recently spent hours fact-checking a Hamburg journalist's crime thriller loosely based on the explorer being the subject of an assassination plot.

Much more intriguing are the newly translated writings of his intrepid ancestor, published by the Queensland Museum. One of the translators, Tom Darragh, handed him a copy of *The Leichhardt Diaries: Early Travels in Australia during 1842-1844* on a recent stopover in Berlin. Darragh, a retired scientist from Melbourne, was amazed at Ludwig III's striking resemblance to his namesake. "Somebody said, 'You'll recognise him. He looks just like Ludwig Leichhardt'," Darragh laughs, recalling how he identified him in a busy Berlin train station.

Some might call it destiny; Ludwig III seems to think so. “I have the same Christian name, the same last name and the same looks. That is a commitment I am bound to,” he says. Leichhardt’s disappearance in 1848 in far inland Australia is a great mystery of colonial history that remains unsolved, 200 years after the explorer’s birth. His memory and achievements are preserved and honoured in this modest Berlin home – and in a town and region where he was raised, the Leichhardt legacy is being revived.

Leichhardt’s adventures and fate were too remote to matter to most of his 20th century descendants. In the aftermath of World War II, they had more immediate concerns. Ludwig III was about five when his family fled the city where he was born, known now as Szczecin in Poland, and resettled in East Germany. “Everything we had from Leichhardt remained under the rubble,” he says.

Leichhardt III was in his teens when he learnt about the exploits of his forebear and he became fixated, devouring information wherever he could find it. But this fervent interest cast him as an outsider in his family. Neither of his brothers – now deceased – were intrigued. Rosemaria, Ludwig III’s wife of 54 years, explains his predicament. “It sometimes got on his family’s nerves because it was always his main topic. That’s why the family wasn’t into it so much. They were often saying, ‘Oh you and your Australia, you and your Leichhardt!’” That goes for the younger generation too. “We were hoping our grandchildren might be interested, but so far, nothing.”

Ludwig III reckons Leichhardt’s skills as a botanist, zoologist and geologist can be likened to those of his contemporary, the polymath fellow Prussian Alexander von Humboldt. “For me it was always fascinating that he was a universal scientist, a general researcher like Humboldt,” he says. Humboldt made his name with discoveries in South America and is to this day a household name. Berlin’s oldest university is named after him and his brother, Wilhelm, a prominent politician.

Until recently, most of the celebration of Leichhardt has been in the land of his death, not the land of his birth. In Australia’s bicentenary year, 1988, Ludwig III flew to Sydney where he gave a speech about his ancestor at a University of NSW conference to mark the 175th anniversary of Leichhardt’s birth. He recalls the hero’s welcome he was given as if it were yesterday. “It was fantastic. The newspapers were writing: ‘Leichhardt’s back!’” He presented a relief of his uncle to the inner-west suburb of Leichhardt on behalf of the *Liga für Völkerfreundschaft* (International Friendship League), which had funded and organised the trip; East Germany also gave a bronze bust of the explorer, now in Parliament House in Canberra, for which Ludwig III was the model. A picture of the bust adorns the cover of one

of four books he's written on Leichhardt since 2005. "I am proud of my books, but others are writing more," he says, touching the snow-white beard he grew for the sitting and decided to keep.

Ludwig III's flat may be a repository for all things Leichhardt, but step outside and it's a vastly different story. In this neighbourhood, having "LEICHHARDT" emblazoned on a door rings no bells in the consciousness of Berliners. Ludwig III mounts a plausible defence. "My neighbours have no idea about Leichhardt. I don't like to present myself as a Leichhardt here in Berlin," he says. "Leichhardt belongs to Brandenburg." Brandenburg was Leichhardt's home state; back then, before the German provinces integrated into a single nation state, it was a part of the kingdom of Prussia. So I hit the road, where, 90 minutes south-east of Berlin, "Leichhardt country" beckons.

Louise Gorman is a Sydney-born journalist who writes for various publications and broadcast outlets on many and varied topics. Louise grew up surrounded by the lush cane fields and hinterland near Mackay. Since 2008 she has been based in Berlin, Germany.