

## **SHEBOYGAN AND ESSLINGEN CELEBRATE 50 YEARS AS SISTER CITIES**

On Friday, May 19, 2017 the City of Sheboygan and Esslingen celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as Sister Cities at a banquet in Esslingen, Germany. A delegation of 34 persons traveled to Germany with Fire Chief Mike Romas and I to participate in this event. Included in this delegation are members of the Mayors International Committee, People to People and residents of the Sheboygan area.

A recent publication to commemorate the anniversary was organized by Geri Schwoerer of the Mayor's International Committee with the assistance of the Sheboygan County Historical Research Center noted the beginnings of this partnership. The sister city relationship between Sheboygan and Esslingen began as a result of friendship which was developed many years ago between Colonel Saunders who was stationed at the army base near Esslingen during World War II, and Dr. Hans Rues, a prisoner of war at that base. When Colonel Saunders mentioned to Dr. Rues that they needed more housing for the American soldiers, Dr. Rues said "My men are so homesick for their families. If they could go home for two weeks, I know that we could easily find housing for your men."

Colonel Saunders granted this unusual request, and a lifetime friendship developed between the prisoner and captor. Years later Colonel Saunders was present at a Sheboygan People to People meeting where Sylvia Weber mentioned that Sheboygan should have a sister city, but did not know which one to choose. Esslingen was recommended by Colonel Saunders.

Sylvia Weber and Dr. Rues exchanged a series of letters to set up the sister city arrangement. The People to People chapter voted on January 12, 1967 to present their selection of a sister city to Sheboygan's City Council. It was not until April of that year that the citizens of Esslingen knew anything about Sheboygan's decision to become their sister city.

An article that appeared in Esslingen Zeitung in April 1967 revealed that the people of Esslingen were taken by surprise by the announcement of a possible sister city. It further described Sheboygan and how the previously unknown Sheboygan wants to be – why, we don't know yet – Esslingen's sister city.

The announcement in the paper, made by Mr. Ohlsen at the annual meeting of the District Youth Council was met with surprise. Ohlsen went on to say, "To be sure, Esslingen will first react with wonder at suddenly having an American sister city, but in the end, it will joyfully take the offered hand."

On January 16, 1967 the City of Sheboygan Common Council recognized and endorsed the Sister City partnership with Esslingen. This was done with the hope that it would lead to a lasting friendship between the people of Esslingen am Neckar, Germany and Sheboygan, Wisconsin, USA. During this time I am the ninth Sheboygan Mayor to

preserve and participate in this partnership with our colleagues in Esslingen City government. During this time many young students have enjoyed and learned from the visits to our cities. The exchange students have made new lifelong friendships and their families have adopted the student and family of their partners.

During the past 50 years, many individuals have had the privileged responsibility of keeping this relationship strong and meaningful. I extend a special “thanks” to the City Councils, Mayor’s International Committee members, former mayors, People to People, youth chaperones, city staff and local families who participated in the student exchanges; all have helped nurture and strengthen this very special relationship with our friends in Esslingen. We are celebrating this anniversary because of all these efforts over the years.

A trip to Esslingen was organized by the Mayor’s International Committee to attend the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Banquet of the Sister City partnership between Sheboygan and Esslingen. There were 34 individuals who joined the delegation that traveled to Esslingen, Germany led by Sheboygan Mayor Mike Vandersteen. They began their journey flying from Chicago to Frankfurt and on to Stuttgart where they were greeted by Esslingen city representatives and whisked off by bus to Esslingen. At a local hotel we were treated to an elegant welcome luncheon. Remarks were presented by Lord Mayor Dr. Juergen Zieger and Mayor Mike Vandersteen. After the luncheon all boarded an Esslingen city bus for a short trip to Merkel Park.

The City of Esslingen am Neckar had procured a Sugar Maple Tree which is the state tree of Wisconsin to be planted at Merkel Park in commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Sister City partnership between Esslingen and Sheboygan. After short speeches, the ceremonial tree was planted by Lord Mayor Zieger, Mayor Vandersteen, Mayor Raab, Julie Vandersteen, Jutta Fahrion and Jon Keckonen. Mayor Vandersteen presented a commemorative plaque to Esslingen for installation near the tree to identify the significance of the tree.

On the second day In Germany, Esslingen arranged a trip to Rothenburg for their Sheboygan guests. This trip included a guided tour of the Old Town and a Night Watchman Tour of this well-preserved Medieval City. It is well known destination for tourists from around the world. It is part of the popular [Romantic Road](#) through southern Germany.

Friday morning there was a visit to the Georgii High School where we were welcomed by the Principal Mr. Joachim Scheffzek. He provided information about the school system and a profile of the Georgii-Gymnasium. A tour of the School was followed with visits to classes and discussions with teachers and students. Sheboygan exchange student Ryan Dicke, one of three Sheboygan

students studying in Esslingen, joined the tour. The other Sheboygan exchange students attending other Esslingen High Schools are Nat Werth and Grace Unger.

At noon we took the Kessler Sparkling Wine Production tour that resulted in a tasting with some light snacks for lunch. This was followed by a tour of Old Town to explore "Esslingen Secrets" with Elizabeth Keckonen Hejl.

Friday evening in the "Altes Rathaus" (Old City Hall) the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ceremony was conducted. The program began with some classical chamber music. Lord Mayor Zieger welcomed everyone and both Mayors Zieger and Vandersteen presented speeches and exchanged gifts to commemorate the 50 Years partnership between Esslingen and Sheboygan. This was followed by Elizabeth Keckonen Hejl's testimony of how participating as an exchange student to Esslingen changed her life. There was also a montage of photos and movies from 50 years of past events in Sheboygan and Esslingen. Mayor Vandersteen and the Sheboygan guests were invited to sign the Golden Book of Esslingen. The evening concluded with a wonderful German-American Buffet.

On Saturday the Sheboygan delegation was hosted by the Esslingen Fire Department. A canoe trip through the Esslingen canals, a visit to see the historic fire trucks and wagons of the Fire Department, presentation on the Fire Department and tour of the Fire Station and Dispatch Center were provided and enjoyed by all. Sheboygan Fire Chief presented a Sheboygan Fire Chief's helmet with a commemorative 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary shield to the Esslingen Fire Chief.

I thank the City of Esslingen for hosting the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of our Sister City partnership and appreciate their friendly hospitality. Both cities can look forward to the continued benefits of this relationship in the future years.

The Mayor's International Committee through their fundraisers have paid for the city expenses of the trip so that no tax dollars are needed. Save the date for "Esslingen Fest" at the 3 Sheeps Taproom on Oct. 1 and support the Mayor's International Committee.