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Working Party on Flora, Fauna and Landscapes

Siebengebirge Nature Reserve (Federal Republic of Germany)
Site proposed by the Federal Republic of Germany for the
award of the European Diploma 1971

EUROPEAN DIPLOMA FOR THE SIEBENGEIRGE?

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Even without being of a particularly romantic disposition, one cannot resist the charm of the lovely wooded hills of volcanic origin of the Siebengebirge. Not only are they the last bastions of the Rhine, whose valley spreads out north of Bonn into a vast plain, they also shelter the most northerly vineyards of Germany, and "Oberdollendorf" wine can claim to be made from the German grapes that grow nearest to the North Pole - a fact which in no way affects its quality! The Siebengebirge produces some excellent wines but they are limited in quantity and unfortunately foreigners do not often have an opportunity to taste them. On the opposite bank of the river, hidden in the woods that cover the "Caecilienhöhe" stands a small monument surrounded by bacchantes and fauns and bearing the inscription "Pro Divo Probo". It was put up in honour of the Roman general and emperor who first introduced the vine into the region.

Anyone who takes the trouble to go up the "Oelberg" (460 metres high), the highest point of the Siebengebirge, will obtain a view of the whole region of the "Seven Hills"; Lohrberg and Löwenburg, Drachenfels, Petersberg, Wolkenburg, Nonnenstromberg and further north, the Rosenau, Stenzelberg, Weilberg and Ennert. One can in fact count thirty-four hills covered with woods and flanked by rocks, intersected by little valleys, generally from east to west; they are popularly known as the "Dutch Alps".

Beyond the Siebengebirge is the Rhine which, seen from the Oelberg, no longer looks like a filthy cesspool. We see only stretches of it, the hills hiding it partly from view, giving the impression of a landscape containing three lakes.

The most recent of these volcanic formations is the Rodderberg on the left bank of the Rhine; half way up it we see the Rolandsbogen of which the poets have so often sung. Opposite the Petersberg, and also on the left bank, we see the silhouette of the Godesburg, a centuries old ruin recently converted into a hotel which has already gained an excellent reputation. The Venusberg and, in the distance, the Kottenforst frame it in greenery. On a clear day, especially when the warm currents of the "föhn" wind are sweeping through the region, we can see the Eifel hills standing out on the horizon and can admire the highest peak, the Hohe Acht, projecting 300 metres above the Oelberg. Lastly, to the south, the Westerwald merges into the neighbouring land of the Rhineland-Palatinate. Anyone looking at the landscape in this area will wonder why many of the hills which have the same characteristics as the nearby Siebengebirge, are bare whereas the tops of the Siebengebirge itself have withstood the avidity of speculators, a fact which serves to bring out the peculiar and characteristic features of the Siebengebirge, which can lay claim to being the oldest protected site in Germany.

If more than a hundred years ago the inhabitants of the region had not risen up against the proliferation of quarries and united in founding in 1869 the "Verschönerungsverein für das Siebengebirge" (VVS) (Association for beautifying the Siebengebirge) gaining wide popular support, the hills consisting mainly of trachyte, basalt, etc. would by now have been razed to the ground and their natural beauty lost for ever. At the time, an imperial decree was necessary to put a stop to quarrying in the Siebengebirge.

The fact that the links between man and nature were proof against economic interests gives the Siebengebirge great significance even beyond the frontiers of Germany. Together with the neighbouring Kottenforst on the left bank of the Rhine (which unfortunately is being increasingly carved up for the building of roads) the Siebengebirge is, in the region of Bonn, the only island of natural greenery, relatively sparsely populated and remote from heavy traffic, visited year in year out by some three million people. In winter and summer alike, on weekdays and on Sundays, people of all ages wander along the Siebengebirge's two hundred kilometres of well-kept paths, avidly breathing in the pure air, enjoying the view, gaining new physical and mental strength and finishing off their excursion in some cosy little rustic inn. Indeed, what can be pleasanter than to still one's thirst after a good walk? When the weather is fine the seventeen car parks near the main entrances display their "full-up" signs and from the car registration plates it can be seen that the Siebengebirge's friends come from far and wide. The region is not renowned solely for its pure air and calm, its flora and fauna but also, and above all, for its geological structure.

The Siebengebirge is also very interesting from the historical point of view. As may be seen from the names of villages and streams many tribes succeeded each other here: the Illyrians, the Celts and the Germans; then came the Riparian Franks. The Siebengebirge was the south-east limit of their territory. The highest summit, the "Auelberg" (probably derived from "euwa-Auo" and then corrupted to "Oel") gave its name to the province of Auelgau which was where the tribunal was set up. In the 11th century the provinces were superseded by counties (comitate). That was the period of the foundation of the monasteries of Stromberg (1134) and Heisterbach (1192) - which the legend of the monk of Heisterbach (Wolfgang Müller's poem) has made known far and wide - and of the construction of the castles of Löwenburg, Drachenfels and Wolkenburg. In 1815 the Siebengebirge was annexed by the newly constituted province of Rhineland Prussia and since 1945 it has been the southernmost bastion of the Land of North Rhine - Westphalia.

Geologically the Siebengebirge goes back to the Devonian period. The slate and other deposits which stood in vertical formations as a result of folds were gradually worn away, being subject to periodical flooding by the sea, and were radically transformed in the middle tertiary period by earth movements, leading to the subsidence known as the Bight of Cologne. Molten lava spreading through the trachyte tuff formed trachyte, andesite and basalt blocks from 300 to 400 metres deep in a radius of 6 to 7 kilometres. Subsequently the Rhine hollowed out its bed more and more deeply, forming terraces and forcing its tributaries from the Siebengebirge to deepen their valleys at the same time gradually carrying away the hills eroded by the weather.

The Romans made use of Siebengebirge trachyte in building their fortresses and they also set up brick works. Later, these building stones of volcanic origin, much sought after, were used in the construction of the cathedrals of Cologne, Limburg and Xanten. The slopes of the Siebengebirge also provided copper, malachite and sulphides of lead and zinc. The caves and galleries dug in the mines, among them the "Ofenkaulen" (hollows made through removal of blocks of tuff used in the building of ovens), harbour numerous species of bats in winter, some of which come from as far away as the northern plains of Germany to hibernate there. The caves also shelter several varieties of arthropoda (invertebrates).

Through the variety and quality of its geological structure the Siebengebirge makes an important contribution to science. But laymen have not been forgotten and when the reserve was being laid out the Weilberg and Stenzelberg quarries were converted into information centres with a number of explanatory panels by means of which the public can follow the evolution of the earth's crust over 30 million years.

After admiring the natural monuments, we simply must go and see the Stöckenhof arboriculture experimental centre, which has been very carefully laid out and where every natural variety of tree and all the acclimatised exotic species which have been successfully introduced into our regions may be seen growing. Following the motorway, we come to Laagshof, a park of about 100 hectares recently purchased by the State, where animals live in complete freedom; anyone may go there and from observation posts watch how the animals, including deer and boar, behave in their natural habitat; it is a far more vivid experience than seeing animals in a cage.

The Siebengebirge does not abound in game, roe-deer being the most common. In the south wild animals are also found. The fallow deer which were introduced in 1945 have partially deserted the area since. However, there are still some boar. There are also smaller animals; foxes and badgers, hares, rabbits, pheasants, partridges and snipe, a few grouse and even some racoons that escaped from a private property. Hunting is strictly controlled and serves above all to ensure well-balanced re-stocking. The Siebengebirge is of considerable value to the universities of Bonn and Cologne, providing, as it does, opportunities to observe small game and protected animals.

As is the case throughout our latitudes, a considerable part of the flora was destroyed during the Ice Age. But the flora of the region is nonetheless of considerable interest, as the work of Käthe Kummel and of August Hahne shows. As far as the sociology of plants is concerned, we find there a specific region of European oak and beech, with mountain-ash and hornbeams in the south-west and in the south, on the slopes facing the Rhine, meadows and elms which like warmth. The region may be said to stand midway between the flora of Central Europe and that of the Atlantic. As a result of the very strict regulations on timber felling in the Siebengebirge reserve, natural mixed forests have been preserved more or less everywhere, although for economic reasons conifers have been introduced which have settled down well, such as larch, pine, firs, spruce, etc. The most important aim of forestry supervision in the Siebengebirge is, however, to preserve the natural beauty sites and arrange the most attractive parts of the forest as leisure centres. Ownership of the 3,900 hectares of forest is as follows: 1,500 hectares belong to the State, 810 to the VVS (Association for beautifying the Siebengebirge), 730 to the municipality of Bad Honnef, 300 to various associations; and 550 are divided up among 1,100 private landowners. The land of North Rhine Westphalia and the VVS have in recent years bought back several hundred hectares of small pieces of private land, some of them minute. Parts of the forest more than 30 years old were severely damaged by shell fire during the war and are being gradually removed - which has almost invariably given rise to beautiful viewpoints out over the landscape, and replaced by healthy varieties better adapted to local soil conditions. This is especially the case with good quality soil. These necessary measures require a network of forest lanes, well set out and well maintained, which can also be opened up to hikers as, generally speaking, transport of the timber takes only a few weeks in winter.

Administration of the Siebengebirge forest is a matter of public utility and is subsidised by the State; its objective is mainly to preserve species intact as long as possible, for the pleasure of visitors, and, in the long run, to replace the conifers with deciduous trees in the interests of the community and of nature conservation. This also holds good of the two other State reserves, i.e. the Drachenfels (the most frequently climbed mountain in Europe), on which stands a mediaeval ruin in danger of collapse and a hotel for thirty guests which is to be restored, and the Löwenberger Hof which has accommodation for twenty guests.

There is not much fishing except along the banks of the Rhine and the Sieg.

Lovers of peace and relaxation have 200 kilometres of paths at their disposal with nine foot-bridges; some of the lanes are used for the transport of timber, as mentioned above. Since 1968 seventeen car parks have been built, twenty-eight lawns and rest areas have been set out, six ponds cleared and even an educational walk laid out; all this has been financed out of funds provided by the State, the Land, municipalities and private enterprise. In addition 500 benches and twenty-eight shelters have been erected. An appropriation of ten million marks has been earmarked under the "1975 programme for North-Rhine Westphalia" for the upkeep of the amenities and for further planning. The "Verschönerungsverein für das Siebengebirge" which celebrated its centenary in 1969 and which all inhabitants of the Bonn region should join since they all benefit from its activities, spent 4.5 million marks from the time it was founded to the year 1921 and from that date to the present day another 5 million marks, all for the public good. Expenditure over the next five years is expected to amount to 1.2 million marks. The Association will be able to go on working for everyone's benefit out of income it will receive from the telecommunication equipment erected on the Oelberg.

Its innumerable splendid sites, the scientific interest it presents, its unique features from the geological and historical points of view, the vistas it offers and opportunities for relaxation and rest, all the many qualities of the Siebengebirge as the oldest, most popular and best known natural region in Germany under special protection, having been declared a nature reserve twelve years ago, lead me to propose it, with the assent of the appropriate authorities ("Oberste Naturschutzbehörde des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen" the Supreme Nature Protection Authority of North Rhine-Westphalia) to the Council of Europe for the award of the European Diploma, which is awarded in respect of natural monuments or regions, to authorities who have distinguished themselves by their efforts, of European significance, to protect nature and preserve landscapes.

Although the diploma has so far been awarded to only ten European candidates, two of them were German - the Lüneburger Heide natural park, dear to the poet Hermann Löns, with a surface area of 20,000 hectares, and the botanical and zoological reserve of Wollmatinger Ried (400 hectares) near the Island of Reichenau on Lake Constance. The diploma is a distinction awarded for a five-year period to a region of unique beauty, the care taken of it, the contribution it makes to science and all the many original features it may present to visitors. It was instituted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on a proposal by the European Committee for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, founded eight years ago at my own initiative and on a suggestion from Dr. Alfred Toepfer. I have served on the European Committee since its inception as permanent delegate of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The European Diploma is an honour for the prize-winner, but it implies the fulfilment of certain obligations on which annual reports have to be made. In addition it affords protection against any restraint likely to be harmful to the aims which the prize-winner has set himself. In September 1970 a committee of neutral experts appointed by the Council of Europe, came to examine on the spot the application made by the Siebengebirge. Representatives of the Land, the VVS and the State gave all the information required and prepared a complete file for the Council of Europe. In March 1971 the Working Party on Flora, Fauna and Landscapes will examine the documents and submit its conclusions to the plenary session of the European Committee in June. The latter will make its recommendation to the Committee of Ministers which will then finally select the prize-winner.

If we glance at the large amount of written material on the Siebengebirge, the most recent work being "Echo tönt von Sieben Bergen" by Josef Ruland (Harald Boldt Verlag, Boppard, 248 pages, 40 photos and reproductions, 21 DM) published on the occasion of the centenary of the VVS, and if we bear in mind the numerous booklets, handbooks and travel accounts on the subject of that region, and the poets which were inspired by it, we can justifiably hope that the European Diploma will be awarded to it this year as a tardy tribute to its centenary.

In his "Wanderungen aus und um Godesberg" Ernst Moritz Arndt wrote in 1844: "Dieses Siebengebirge, das wohl die meisten von denen, welche die Ufer des Stroms von Basel bis Köln gesehen haben, für die grossartigste und in überschwenglicher Mannigfaltigkeit leuchtendste Gegend des Rheins erklären werden." (The Siebengebirge, which most people who have visited the banks of the river from Basle to Cologne will agree is the most magnificent part of the Rhine and in its resplendent diversity the most radiant.)