Saxony's Royal City—Dresden

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During 1972, after finishing my doctoral thesis in Paris University, I made a tour of Poland and Germany. My train from Warsaw passed through Berlin, Dresden and Leipzig but I was not allowed to have a stop over in East Germany. At the West German frontier, our train was thoroughly checked by East German police to detect illegal immigrants who used to cross from East to West Germany. The train was virtually dismantled during this checking operation. During 1990, the year of German unification, I visited Weimer and Erfurt but could not visit Dresden. Fortunately, during September 1996, after attending an International Conference in Seeheim, near Frankfurt I took a round of all important East German towns by car. Jens Heinicke, my German host, was kind enough to spend one week-end to show me round Berlin and Dresden. In my opinion, Dresden is the most beautiful German city, representing old German architecture and culture.

Dresden started as a small village on the bank of river Elbe in 1206. It became the capital of Saxony state in 1464. During the reign of Augustus the Strong, Dresden developed into a royal city of Europe, matching Paris and Vienna in its splendour. It was a centre of Reformation in Europe and Martin Luther started his Protestant movement from the royal palace chapel in Dresden. During 1697, Augustus the Strong became King of Poland and converted his family and Royal court to Roman catholic faith but the whole city population was allowed to remain Protestant. In 1806, Saxony came under Napoleon's rule and its fortifications were dismantled. It suffered the heaviest damage during Second World War bombing raids when 45000 people got killed and most of its historical monuments were destroyed. After

unification, all the monuments are being restored to their original pristine glory. The Church of Our Lady, the most important Protestant monument in Europe, is being reconstruted using old stones from the site kept intact.

We arrived in Dresden around mid-day from Freiburg. After parking our car, we took a stroll from Theaterplatz to the central Augustus bridge on the Elbe. The Roman catholic church, Hofkirche built by king Augustus lies in this square with the equestrian statue of king John on one side.Dresden is famous for its theatres and opera houses. Semper opera house was built by Maurice of Saxony in 1548. Famous conductors, composers and singers of Europe, namely, Bach,Carl Maria von Weber, Bordini and Wagner, performed in this famous opera house. In February 1945, it was reduced to rubble and it took 40 years to rebuilt it. In fact all the monuments in Theaterplatz were destroyed in 1945 and rebuilt in the original Baroque style after the Second World War. Another landmark in this square is famous Zwinger which houses Science Museum, Historical Museum and Picture Gallery. It was built by Popplemann, the famous architect with the help of his sculptor friend Permoser under the direction of king Augustus who used its square as open air ball room, an arena for parties and receptions, unique of its kind in the world. Its ornamental structure in baroque, crown gate, fountains, statues and collection of paintings of European masters, armaments and porcelain are world famous.

From the Angustus Bridge, we crossed over to the east bank of river Elbe and made a tour of Newstadt (new town). This part of the city is completely rebuilt and only a few old monuments are visible. The gilded equestrian statue of Angustus the Strong, King of Saxony and Poland, is the main tourist attraction. The main street of Dresden, Hauptstrasse, also provides some glimpses of old German architecture. Walking along the river Elbe, we took some snaps and returned to Freiburg in the evening.

Jens Heinicke told me the funny but true story about Angustus the Strong whose body was laid to rest in Krakow cathedral (Poland) but his heart was buried in Dresden Hofkirche. According to a legend, it is said to start beating even today every time a pretty woman passes by.