

## Marx at Karlsbad

By Walt Contreras Sheasby

Karl Marx, in a draft used in *Capital*, Vol. 2, declares in the strongest terms about the catastrophic clearing of trees, “The development of civilization and industry in general has always shown itself so active in the destruction of forests that everything that has been done for their conservation and production is completely insignificant in comparison.”<sup>1</sup>

Marx’s concern with the “conservation” of forests was undoubtedly influenced by the first stirrings of a conservation movement, particularly in the United States. The great forests of North America drew worldwide attention in the 1870s. In 1872 the Congress created Yellowstone National Park, with a forest reserve system following in future years. In 1873 a Timber Culture Act was approved, requiring settlers to plant a quarter of their land grant with trees. The gesture was even applauded by timber interests, although it was never enforced, and the head of the new American Forestry Association, John A. Warden, circulated the term applied to all these efforts: *conservation*.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, John Muir was so concerned about the giant trees in California that he despaired in August 1875 (while on a trek in Yosemite) that men would “cut down all the trees to make ships and houses.”<sup>3</sup>

Around the same time as Muir’s historic trek, Marx began mid-August visits to the Karlsbad forest and spa. It was located in Bohemia

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<sup>1</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 2 (London: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 322.

<sup>2</sup>Max Nicholson, *The Environmental Revolution: A Guide for the New Masters of the World* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1970), p. 168.

<sup>3</sup>Frederick Turner, *Rediscovering America: John Muir in His Time and Ours* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1985), p. 232.

in Austria, now the northwest of the Czech Republic. The town of 6,000 was on the Eger River, which flowed into the Elbe in the East.<sup>4</sup>

In 1869 Marx had rejected the idea of a trip to Karlsbad as “boring and expensive.”<sup>5</sup> But it was here in Karlsbad that Marx in 1875 confirmed for himself what he had learned in his studies on forest systems and natural metabolic cycles. It would not be accurate to call this an epiphany, but his sudden empirical education was undeniably an intense aesthetic experience as well, one that confirmed his deep admiration of nature. This was a feeling he shared with earlier guests at Karlsbad, including Leibniz, Bach, Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven, and Chopin.<sup>6</sup>

He visited the *Kursort* (now the Czech town of Karlovy Vary) in 1874 and 1876 with his daughter Eleanor, and in 1875 traveled alone, staying always at the Haus Germania on Schlossberg lane (now Zámecký vrch 41), which opened into a wider more fashionable street misnamed the Schlossplatz. Their guest-house was a step down from the fancy hotels, but it had a terrace-garden behind it, beyond which in the distance was the deep forest at the foot of Berg Hirschensprung. In this garden Marx and Eleanor sometimes sat together, reading books and writing letters.<sup>7</sup> From his hotel room he could look out at the back across the slope at the white Hubertusberg. On sunny afternoons he could see the women employees in two-horse cabs on their way to the riverside promenade along the Tepl, which meandered south from the mountain forest into the Eger, now called the Ohr river, passing through the workers’ part of town.<sup>8</sup>

On his first arrival, Marx wrote to Engels, “The surroundings here are very beautiful, and one cannot have enough of the walks here over the wooded granite mountains.” He added a curious comment: “But there are no birds here,” and he surmised that they were repelled by the vapors of the ten mineral springs.

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<sup>4</sup>Saul K. Padover, *Karl Marx: An Intimate Biography* (New York: New American Library, 1978), p. 314.

<sup>5</sup>David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 426.

<sup>6</sup>Yvonne Kapp, *Eleanor Marx: Family Life (1855-1883)* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), p. 164.

<sup>7</sup>Chusshichi Tsuzuki, *The Life of Eleanor Marx, 1855-1898* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 36.

<sup>8</sup>From the account of Egon Erwin Kisch, *Karl Marx in Karlsbad* (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1968); cited by Fritz J. Raddatz, *Karl Marx: A Political Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), p. 265.

On his first visit, Marx apparently stayed close to the prescribed “walking tour through the surrounding hills.”<sup>9</sup> He may not have come across the extensive logging operations in the Eger mountains in 1874 or taken much note of the rafts of logs sailing down the river.

Settlements had developed around mines in the Erzgebirge mountains by 1240, with the lush timber an afterthought. Marx’s letters did not comment on smoke from the mining of soft brown coal (lignite) in the pine-clad foothills of the Erzgebirge (the Ore Mountains, now the Krusné Hory). “Coal itself enters into the means of production of coal,” he pointed out in his notebooks of 1861-63.<sup>10</sup> For example, “in coal production some of the coal is used to work the steam-engine which pumps out water or raises coal.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, “Coal transports coal, etc.”<sup>12</sup> The amount of coal consumed in mining depends on how laborious it is to extract the coal and transport it to its destination. Much of the coal mined (perhaps a fifth) was burned in order to extract the coal. This industrial metabolism may seem economically efficient (despite costs to the environment), but it is unsustainable, “because no reproduction process whatever takes place in it.”<sup>13</sup>

For a Londoner like Marx, however, the slightly smoky skies of Erzgebirge were apparently not especially notable compared to what he once called “the pestilential breath of civilization.”<sup>14</sup> In the Winter after his return home, he complained in a January 21, 1877 letter that, “the weather here is unspeakable — close, damp, with a fog in so deep a tinge of yellow that one has, as I do, to keep the gaslight on throughout the morning.”<sup>15</sup> Conan Doyle’s trademark sketch of a *pea-souper* was equally dreary: “...a dense yellow fog settled down upon London.... pushing back our chairs we saw the greasy, heavy brown swirl still drifting past us and condensing in oily drops upon the windowpane.”<sup>16</sup> These sulfurous London *particulars*, as Charles

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<sup>9</sup>*Collected Works*, Vol. 45 (New York: International Publishers, 1988), pp. 38, 46.

<sup>10</sup>*Collected Works*, Vol. 31 (New York: International Publishers, 1989), p. 146.

<sup>11</sup>*Collected Works*, Vol. 30 (New York: International Publishers, 1988), p. 447.

<sup>12</sup>*Collected Works*, Vol. 31, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

<sup>13</sup>*Grundrisse* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 726.

<sup>14</sup>*Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 307.

<sup>15</sup>*Collected Works*, Vol. 45, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>16</sup>Cited in William Wise, *Killer Smog* (New York: Audubon-Ballantine Books, 1968), p. 38.

Dickens called them, could be traced back to the burning of *sea coal* (lignite mined on the coast) as early as 1285.<sup>17</sup> By 1306 discontent was so vigorous that Edward I banned its use by artisans, with little effect. The year before his first trip to Karlsbad, Marx and his daughter, prompted by their physician, sojourned at Harrogate in Yorkshire, leaving London on November 20 and returning December 17, 1873. While they were gone, a heavy *pea-souper* descended on December 9 and did not lift until the 12th. During that time, according to William Wise, “The smoke-polluted fog had killed hundreds.”<sup>18</sup>

In the nineteenth century, Karlsbad was still an enchanted forest retreat, first among the triangle of Bohemian mineral spa resorts that included Marienbad and Franzenbad. As a companion on a hike with Marx remembered, “He was delighted at the various beautiful walks in the wooded mountains, especially the romantic Egertal.” The legend of the wrathful forest nymph, Eger, who turned her unfaithful lover’s wedding party to stone, was personified in the curiously shaped giant pillar rocks there, called Hans Heiling Felsen (Svatoské skály), which Marx puzzled over as had Goethe. “At the same time he would listen to the quick-flowing seething river whose gurgling in the magic valley was supposed to represent an immortal being ever weeping over the fickleness of man.” Like other earth spirit tales, there was a hint of ecological reversal, in that those unfaithful to the river suffer the consequences. Marx and his friends also visited the Grove of Oaks of Körner in Dallwitz, where the wounded poet Theodore Körner (1791-1813) composed *The Oaks*.<sup>19</sup>

His regime during each “four weeks’ cure,” involved spending “at least 12 hours out of doors” every day. He wrote that, “my principal diversion consists in discovering new walks, beauty spots and vistas in the mountain forests.” On this, his second trip to Karlsbad, when he traveled alone, he apparently broke off from the customary hiking tour, “and here I am the more subject to surprises for having so little sense of direction.”<sup>20</sup> After two weeks there he reported on his journey that “I found it extremely interesting.”<sup>21</sup> In 1879 he said of his visits to

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<sup>17</sup>Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science*, March 10, 1967, pp. 1203-37.

<sup>18</sup>William Wise, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>19</sup>Franziska Kugelmann, “Small Traits of Marx’s Great Character,” in *Marx And Engels Through The Eyes of Their Contemporaries* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), p. 191.

<sup>20</sup>*Collected Works*, Vol. 45, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 86.

Karlsbad, “I never enjoyed a comparative state of ease.”<sup>22</sup> Marx would have easily agreed with John Muir: “There is no repose like that of the green deep woods.”<sup>23</sup>

For 25 years Marx had hiked the little hills around London, especially Hampstead Heath, alone and with friends and family, and Paul Lafargue recalled, “he could ramble or climb hills for hours.”<sup>24</sup> In Karlsbad he was under daily police surveillance, and the District Captain reported on September 1, 1875 that Marx “frequently goes on long walks alone.”<sup>25</sup>

By his third visit to Karlsbad, however, Marx was surprised to find the area in the midst of a hot dry spell and water shortage that lasted for most of July and August, and which struck everyone there as “excessive.” But, as Marx wrote, “even on really hot days, we found wooded glens, long familiar to me, where it was bearable.”<sup>26</sup> During the dog days of August in London in 1868, Marx had written Engels that in order to manage the heat, “I would like best to hang in a tree in the air.”<sup>27</sup> Even during a hot spell, Karlsbad was the perfect respite. In later years, Eleanor recalled, “Always in good humor, he was ever ready to enjoy everything, whether a beautiful landscape or a glass of beer.”<sup>28</sup>

But in his treks in Karlsbad this time he was struck by the riparian logging that had transformed the local mountain river:

...the Tepl looks as though it’s been almost completely drained. Deforestation has reduced it to a sorry state; at times of heavy rain (as in 1872) it floods everything, in hot years it disappears altogether.<sup>29</sup>

It is evident that Marx was inferring a connection between deforestation and the change in rainfall and run-off, based on his readings in natural science, particularly a work on *Climate and Vegetation* (1847) by Karl

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<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>23</sup>John Muir, *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938), p. 235.

<sup>24</sup>Paul Lafargue, “Reminiscences of Marx,” in *Marx And Engels Through The Eyes of Their Contemporaries*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>25</sup>Robert Payne, *Marx: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 466.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>27</sup>*Collected Works*, Vol. 43 (New York: International Publishers, 1988), p. 79.

<sup>28</sup>Padover, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

<sup>29</sup>*Collected Works*, Vol. 45, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

Fraas.<sup>30</sup> Logging had exposed the topsoil to erosion, and flooding was silting the river and leaving the bare slopes to bake during the hot dry spells. Even in this idyllic retreat from civilization, natural environment was being killed off by industrial exploitation, and Marx probably should not have been surprised that no warblers sang.

Rosa Luxemburg, writing from prison in 1917, found an explanation in her reading about plants and animals, “why the warblers are disappearing from the German forests. Increasingly systematic forestry, gardening and agriculture are, step by step, destroying all natural nesting and breeding places.”<sup>31</sup> In the words of Rachel Carson, “Birds, ants, forest spiders, and soil bacteria are as much a part of a forest as the trees....In the modern era of intensive forestry the old hollow trees are gone and with them homes for woodpeckers and other tree-nesting birds.”<sup>32</sup> When logging drives away the birds, the entire “web of life” that constitutes the forest is weakened, and it becomes very susceptible to disease.

In 1877 the expense of another trip to Karlsbad led Marx to change his Autumn destination to the Neuenahr spa south of Bonn and the Valley of the Ahr, but he discovered that, “just where Neuenahr is, the hills are rather far away from the actual spa, at least for those whom Karlsbad has spoiled.” The compensation was that “the air’s always admirable.”<sup>33</sup> The quality of the air was a recurrent item in his correspondence, in part reflecting his readings in the physiology of respiration cycles in flora and fauna by naturalist biologists like William Benjamin Carpenter and physicians like Percival Barton Lord, “that air which has once been breathed cannot serve again for the same process until it has been purified in the great workshop of nature.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Karl Fraas, *Klima und Pflanzenwelt in der Zeit: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte beider* (Berlin: Landshut, 1847).

<sup>31</sup>Rosa Luxemburg, *Letters* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1993), pp. 202-03.

<sup>32</sup>Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), p. 293.

<sup>33</sup>*Collected Works*, Vol. 45, *op. cit.*, pp. 268, 267.

<sup>34</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1978), pp. 612. In 1864 Marx read a number of books in physiology, including William Benjamin Carpenter (1813-1885), *Principles of General and Comparative Physiology* (London: Churchill, 1839) and Percival Barton Lord (1808-1840), *Popular Physiology*, 3rd ed., revised (London: Savill and Edwards, 1855).

Marx had not walked in a “true forest” since his youth, and he was rather thrilled when he was advised that from there, “I should go somewhere higher up, in the Black Forest, and take my fill of mountain and woodland air.”<sup>35</sup> This was something that Marx as a young boy had done with his father, as he had later (in 1841) hoped to re-enact, “to roam again at *your* side through our wonderfully picturesque mountains and forests.”<sup>36</sup>

Engels supplied a detailed military map of the mountains in Baden-Pfalz from the uprising of 1849, but Marx’s travel plans were contingent on “wind and weather permitting.” Apparently the elements did not cooperate. In any case, it seems the journey to the mountain range south of Trier was dropped.<sup>37</sup> Had Marx gone to the Black Forest, he undoubtedly would have commented further on the effects of both the logging and reforestation efforts there.

Thereafter, political repression intervened, and Marx said, “consequent upon the state of things in Germany and Austria, I was precluded from paying my annual visit to Karlsbad,” and there were no more forest treks.<sup>38</sup>

As to Bohemia today, in the foothills just north of contemporary Karlovy vary, the 60 km brown-coal basin (from Kadan to Ústi nad Labem) has been dubbed the “black triangle” because of more than a century of digging and scraping lignite. Dozens of villages have been bull-dozed out of existence. The remaining population chokes on lethal, yellowish clouds pouring from coal power stations a few miles away from Karlovy vary. As a candid guidebook acknowledges, the magic valley of Bohemia that Marx visited “has become a byword for the ecological disaster facing the country in the postcommunist era. Its forests have all but disappeared, weakened by acid rain and finished off by parasites.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>*Collected Works*, Vol. 45, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-8.

<sup>36</sup>*Collected Works*, Vol. 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 28.

<sup>37</sup>Hal Draper, *The Marx-Engels Chronicle* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), p. 203.

<sup>38</sup>*Collected Works*, Vol. 45, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

<sup>39</sup>Rob Humphreys, *The Rough Guide to the Czech and Slovak Republics*, 5th Edition (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 214.