

Teddy Bear Town in Germany — a Hansel and Gretel Setting for Toymaker

Giengen-on-the-Brenz, the little German town where the Teddy Bear originated over 60 years ago, is basically a village of toymakers with a history dating back about 700 years. Its cobblestone streets and gingerbread houses, many of them centuries old, provide a "Hansel and Gretel" setting. There is also the quiet Brenz River and the fields and forests surrounding the town. It is here that Margarete Steiff GmbH., the world's largest stuffed toy manufacturer, is headquartered.

Toymaking is much the same as it was when Margarete Steiff first opened her shop in 1880. Most of the work is done painstakingly by hand. For the greater part, each tiny piece of mohair cloth or felt is cut by a worker using a pair of scissors. Noses are hand-embroidered, seams are hand-stitched, stuffing and coloring are done by hand — and so it goes throughout the entire manufacturing process. The Old World custom of homework, too, is practiced. Women are seen arriving at the factory with huge baskets to pick up raw materials which they later return as finished products.

Giengen has grown with, and because of, Steiff's success. At this time it has a population of 14,000, of which more than 2000 work as toymakers for Steiff. The warm feeling the Giengeners have for the Steiffs is evidenced in many ways. The main street is "Margarete Steiff Strasse," and portraits of Margarete and members of the family who took over after she died are displayed in the meeting room of the town hall.

Much of this feeling is no doubt due to the memories the villagers have of Margarete. Born in 1847, she was a victim of polio at the age of two and a half which paralyzed both legs and her right arm, confining her to a wheelchair for the rest of her life.

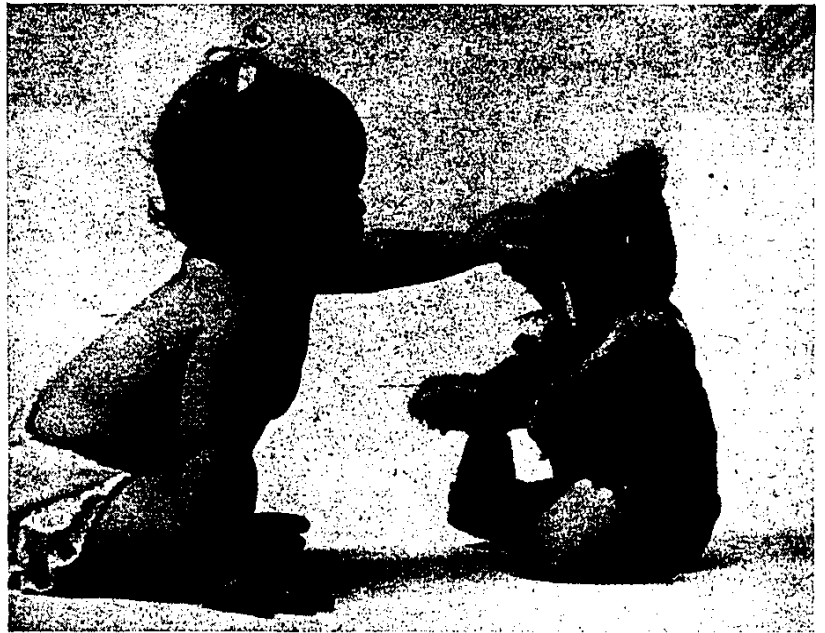
Many of Margarete's younger years were spent learning to become a dressmaker. She owned Giengen's first sewing machine, which she had to work backwards because of her paralysis. In 1877, when she was still in her teens, she opened a shop specializing in women's and children's clothing. The material she used came from the Haehnle felt factory, which was owned by her mother's family. She did well and in the first year hired several other women to help with the output. About then Margarete wrote in her notes, "At this point the model of an elephant fell into my hands; felt was well-suited to copying it." The finest shearings were used for the stuffing. This little elephant first served as a pincushion. And so the world's first stuffed toy was born.

At first these were given as gifts to children who came to visit. But, as demand for them grew, Margarete's brother Fritz realized a

business potential and carted a sackful off to the country fair. In a short time all were sold, and Margarete's hobby was put on a paying basis. From this point on (1880) to the year 1897 is the relatively typical story of the growth of a small family business into a thriving industry.

In 1897, after completing his art studies in England and Germany, Margarete's nephew Richard joined the firm. While studying in Germany, he spent many hours sketching the playful brown bear cubs at Stuttgart's famous zoo. Working from these sketches, Richard designed a little toy bear, with movable joints, made of mohair plush (the first stuffed toy having moving joints). The first models were introduced in 1902 and found their way to America a year later, 1903.

The name "Teddy Bear" came out of a hunting incident involving the President. In 1902, the year Steiff made its first bear, Theodore Roosevelt traveled into the backwoods of Mississippi on a bear hunt. After several days in which no bears were sighted, the expedition's guide chased a little bear



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cut out of the brush and cleared the way for the President to get off his shot. Mr. Roosevelt refused and shooed little bruin back to his mother.

Steiff's bear sales for the first few years were disappointing, but in 1906 an event took place in Washington, D. C., which put Steiff's factory on an overtime basis and boomed the prosperity of Giengen. This was the time of

the Theodore Roosevelt administration and guests were invited to attend an affair to be held at the White House. As they came in they saw Steiff bears posed on the festive tables — dressed and equipped as hunters and fishermen — a theme chosen by the caterer because of the President's reputation as an avid outdoorsman. When the illustrious Teddy admitted that even as a bear expert he couldn't

name the breed, a guest spoke up and said, "Why, they're Teddy Bears, of course!"

The publicity attending this dubbing brought about a crush of orders for the suddenly fashionable Teddy Bear, and over one million were sold that year. The factory is still owned by the Steiff family and is headed by fortyish Hans-Otto Steiff, great grand-nephew of Margarete.

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