

The Freiherr vom Stein Turm in Hagen: A Historical Panorama-Tower

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In 1841 a book entitled *Das romantische und malerische Westphalen* (Romantic and Picturesque Westphalia)ⁱ appeared with a main part dedicated to the valley of the river Ruhr, describing its natural and cultural highlights. This book had a tremendous success with the audience, and went through two more editions, 1872 and 1890, both re-describing the landscape as much as it had changed by the increasing use of the land due to the industrialization. Subsequently, the three editions of the book do not only allow to trace what has happened in the Ruhr-valley throughout a good half of the nineteenth century but also give an idea of how the notion of landscape, understood not merely as a painterly genreⁱⁱ but as a notion describing the lay of the land, has developed.

Nowadays, more than 100 years after the third edition of the book, the landscape presents itself as a decayed post-industrial site, in parts though giving a sense of the original beauty of the land as much as the plants and other industrial assets have lost their function and are broken away. However, there is no continuity in monitoring its re-development comparable to the re-descriptions in the different editions of book mentioned above. Yet there is one, for nearly 150 years unaltered element, the Freiherr vom Stein-Tower, located at the top of the Kaisberg close to the city of Hagen, which serves as a constant against which the use of the land at least in this part of the valley can be experienced.

The tower was erected in 1869 both as a monument for the famous Prussian reformer Freiherr vom Stein who worked for a couple of years in the nearby located small city of Wetter, and as a look-out placed on the stand alone, conic Kaisberg-mountain, by this accenting a natural landmark in the valley as much as establishing a platform for a full 360 degree panorama view of the landscape. Contemporary sources report that people have been quite aware of the special character of the site, and that for about four years before the tower was built a huge scaffold decorated with a black-white and a black-red-golden flag marked its place which was to become a Westphalian Walhalla, a hall of honor and fame representing namely the paramount importance of von Stein as well as some other German patriots.ⁱⁱⁱ On the other hand, contemporaries noticed already clearly the possibility to 'view around at all sides', whereas other towers and look-outs erected in the area would offer only a view in one direction.^{iv}

Around 1900, the site was extended by a restaurant 'Zur Deutschen Eiche' which flourished and, especially in the years after World War II, became a place where younger

people from the nearby cities and settlements would meet. In 1965, due to plans to develop the whole area into an entertainment and recreational park, this and another restaurant on the foot of mountain were demolished; but those plans stayed mere planning, and when the decrepit tower was closed for visitors, it subsequently not only sank into oblivion but became nearly invisible as far as the surrounding forest grew up to almost its height of about 30 metres.

It is this historical and actual invisibility which made me feel like a discoverer when I, commissioned to do some research in the Ruhr-valley, in 1998 hit on the tower for the first time at which it appeared to me as an **enchanted** relic from a fairy-tale. In fact, however, I 're-discovered' it for the very same reason it had be erected for: while looking-out for a site from which one could oversee the landscape I spotted and climbed the Kaisberg on which it stands today as a more or less forgotten, bedraggled ruin of the nineteenth century, controlled by swarms of pigeons, its entrance welded.

When months later, I finally had managed to enter and climb the tower, I found what I had hoped for in an unexpected clear and close view: That there is hardly any other region in the valley of the Ruhr, or in North-Rhine-Westphalia like the area around the Kaisberg which within the immediate vicinity offers a picture of the whole historical evolution of our country and especially of the developments resulting from the encounters of nature and (industrial) culture during the last two centuries. Standing on the Freiherr vom Stein-Tower on the Kaisberg and looking at the surrounding landscape like at a panorama – which suggests itself due to the topographic formation of the area – one can recognize all possible historical as well as present-day forms of using a landscape which are typical of our country:

- all forms of forestry and agriculture as well as of the mining of raw materials (coal, sandstone)
- all possible forms of the use of water (waterways, reservoir of drinking water, generation of energy, leisure-time activities, sports) including the respective structures
- all kinds of traffic systems and structures (footpaths, country roads, highways, Federal Railroad, shipping lines) including the respective, sometimes outstanding structures (railroad viaduct)
- all historical and present-day forms of settlement (castles, castles surrounded by water, solitary farms, villages, urban settlements, towns) and special structures such as observation towers
- industrial plants and production facilities of all sorts
- branches of trading organizations, service industries of all kinds

- various forms of the generation of energy (hydroelectric power plants, thermal power stations, pumped storage works) with sometimes outstanding structures as well as pylons supporting the electric lines
- businesses for the utilization or recycling of waste (sewage plant of the city of Hagen, settling basins for rivers, recycling yards), dumps (part of the area itself)
- all possible forms of the use of a landscape for leisure-time and sports.

Yet the particular quality of the area lies in the fact that the immediate vicinity of the Kaisberg has remained almost untouched by the mentioned developments and distinguishes itself by a certain beauty which results from its topography (its 'island position' as a mountain circled by the river Ruhr and by the traffic systems), from its varied relief and from the interplay of open landscape and forests.

Hence, seen as structure, the Kaisberg, the Freiherr vom Stein-Tower, and the surrounding landscape comply with the basic structure of large panorama-paintings and their shell: The tower has the function of the platform, the Kaisberg functions like the false terrain, and the landscape can be experienced in function of the painting. This experience is, at first hand, the result from the fact that the distances especially between the tower and the surrounding landscape is relatively small – less than 2 kilometers bee-line – and that the landscape itself is, in most parts, mountainous thus shaping a counterpart.

Researching the Ruhr-valley in the vicinity of the city of Hagen has been part of a larger program dedicated to question the possible future of the area. The extent of the intended steps towards a redevelopment of the area as well as its present-day and future meaning within the urban and landscape structure of the Ruhrtal (Ruhr-valley) – one of the oldest industrial areas in the world – is seen as an occasion as well a chance for a fundamental reconsideration of our handed down relationship to nature and landscape. They offer a unique chance to establish and document a new approach in dealing with these resources by means of a concrete example and within a comprehensible period of time. The Freiherr vom Stein-Tower could serve as a significant platform from which such a new view on the landscape and its history could be established and performed - not only as a factual observation but also in a broader sense, in reflecting the observation itself.

This is why I propose to repair and refurbish the tower including its dome-like first floor which could hold an exhibition on the history of the Kaisberg and the monument, and make it to the hub of an open-air-museum which would be as extended as far as one can see from the tower itself.

Notes

ⁱ Ferdinand Freiligrath, Levin Schücking, *Das malerische und romantische Westphalen*. Barmen, Leipzig 1841.

ⁱⁱ Compare Nikolaus Pevsner, 'The Genesis of the Picturesque' In: *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design*. London, 1968.

ⁱⁱⁱ C. Brocksieper, *Das Leben und Wirken des früheren Ministers Freiherrn vom Stein, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung seines Thun und Schaffens in der Grafschaft Mark und Westfalen nebst dem Rheinland. Zugleich eine unparteiliche volkstümliche Gedächtnißschrift über die politisch-socialen Zustände vor fünfzig Jahren zur Beherzigung für unsere Gegenwart*. Lüdenscheid 1865.

^{iv} Drawing a circle of about five kilometers in diameter around the mountain - a distance one can easily overlook - one can today still count six other towers and look-outs which have been built before World War I.