

The Maria Hilf Church of Markt Eisenstein, Bohemia

(Markt Eisenstein in now known as Zelezná Ruda, Czech Republic)

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The most prominent landmark of the town of Zelezná Ruda is the eighteenth-century Baroque parish church of Marie Hilf, with its distinctive onion dome. The first chapel in this area of the Bohmerwald was erected in 1692 by the Duke Wolf Heinrich Nothhaft von Wernberg, owner of the local glassworks, for his Roman Catholic subjects. David Grünwald, a monk from a nearby monastery, was appointed by the Bishop of Regensburg to be the first parish priest. The simple wooden chapel was dedicated in 1694 on the Feast of Mary's Assumption into Heaven and drew large numbers of people from the nearby villages in Bavaria and Bohemia. The faithful worshipped in this chapel for forty years. In 1729, the duke ordered a more substantial building to be constructed in its place. The Church of Maria Hilf" (Our Lady of Help) was completed in 1732.

The Church in the forest was meant to be a crown for Mary. The Eisenstein "Gnadenbuch" (Book of Grace), composed by monks between 1730 and 1750, noted that the Church in Eisenstein was built as a Marian Shrine. It was also known as Mary's Star, the name stemming from the fact that this unique structure was designed in the shape of a six-cornered star. In each of the five altar niches was placed a copy of an image of Mary. The church was capped with a giant cupola or "onion dome." A small bell tower, with its own onion dome, was added in 1777. Eight tombs of the Hafenbraedl family, owners of the Glassworks until 1852, were placed along the inside walls and are marked with religious inscriptions. The interior of the Eisenstein Church is large enough to hold 200 worshippers.

Much of the current interior decoration of the church dates from the middle of the nineteenth century. The centerpiece of the main altar features an image of Maria Hilf,

painted in 1871. It is a copy of a painting of



The Maria Hilf Church in the early twentieth century, a copy of a framed photo found in the Bohemian Forest Museum, located in the citadel Veste Oberhaus in Passau, Germany.

the Virgin Mary made by Lucas Cranach the Elder between 1517 and 1525 for the Capuchin monastery in Innsbruck. This image of Mary became very popular in the Austrian Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Copies are found throughout the empire. In 1871, an eight-register organ was installed. Hanging from the center of the church is a striking crystal chandelier, made in a local glassworks shop.



The interior of the Maria Hilf Church in 1998 (Photo by SAM)

The parish of Markt Eisenstein also included the nearby villages of Deffernik, Dorf Eisenstein, Elisenthal, Panzer and Gerlhuette. Until 1808, the Eisenstein Parish belonged to the Bavarian Diocese of Regensburg. Then it was incorporated into the Bohemian Diocese of Budweis. The Eisensteiners were devout Roman Catholics and followed the strict teachings and traditions of the Church. The Church of Maria Hilf was at the center of the villagers' lives. The faithful attended Mass on Sundays and on the many Holy Days scattered throughout the year. These Feast Days offered village inhabitants a welcome respite from the rigors of their lives eking out a living in the villages of the Bohmerwald.

Walking to the Maria Hilf Church in Mid-Winter –

It was still dark as we went to the church in the mornings but all of the lanterns moving slowly along were so beautiful that they changed the snow-covered lane to a place of enchantment. The church windows, too, lit up the snow around them with the candlelight that glowed within. Often it was so cold that the men would arrive with icicles in their mustaches and the kerchiefs of the women were framed with icicles, but no one complained of suffering even if the church was unheated. Our deep-seated faith was all that we needed to be comfortable in the church. (Josef Pscheidl in Christmas Time around Eisenstein)

The first baptism noted in the Church records is that of Margaretha Dellinger the daughter of Michael Dellinger and Katharina. The child was baptized on October 3, 1694. Ten children were baptized in 1695: Johann Michael Pock, Joseph Helm, Mathias Carl, Christoph Aschnprener, Margaretha Käsberger, Johann Carl, Barbara Wolf, Magdalena Gschwenter, Katharina Hilgart, and Anna Maria Riederer. The first marriage was that of Andreas Drexl from Haidl and Anna Gnad from Eisenhammer, celebrated on February 3, 1695. The many baptisms, marriages and deaths of the villagers are found in the parish records which are now located in the archives of Plzen, Czech Republic.

The cemetery which originally surrounded the church was abandoned in 1851. The cemetery at the



The cemetery on the outskirts of Markt Eisenstein (now Zelezná Ruda), 1999 (Photo by SAM) community.

Heuttenberg above the marketplace had also disappeared by the late twentieth century. A third cemetery was established on the outskirts of the village, on the road to Deffernik. It still existed at the turn of the twenty-first century, although it had ceased to be well maintained.

In 1946, Markt Eisenstein fell behind the Iron Curtain of the Soviet era. Peter Kaas, the parish priest at the time and a German, was sent into exile, along with the other German Bohemians, or Sudetan Germans as they came to be called. The beautiful “Maria Hilf” Church with its striking onion cupola, became the property of the Czech State. Things changed again with the fall of the communist regime in 1989. The old church was restored between 1995 and 1998. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the 300-year-old Catholic Church in Markt Eisenstein had once again become a functioning parish for the Catholic members of the

Sources:

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The Maria Hilf Church in October of 1998 (Photo by SAM)