

Sylvan Regards

THE STUFF OF LEGENDS,
GERMANY'S 1,000-YEAR-OLD OAKS
HAVE THRIVED THROUGH CEN-
TURIES OF FORAGERS, WARS,
AND POLITICAL CHANGE.

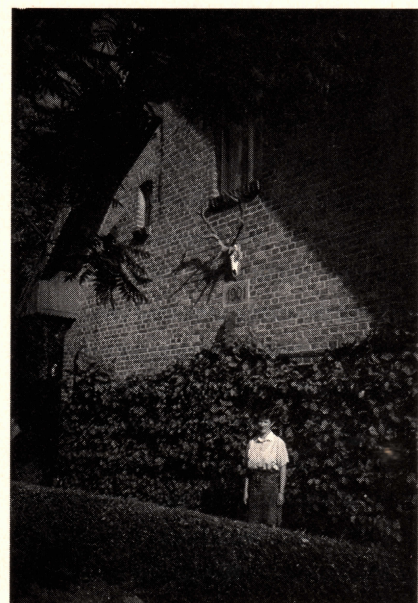
*Story and photographs
by Chris Bolgiano*

In the former East Germany resides a stand of trees older even than the 1,000-year-old state in which they stand. Perhaps the oldest trees in Europe, rivaled only by Poland's Bialowieza Forest, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania's dozen or so Ivenack Oaks, as they are known, are both an awe-inspiring state treasure and a historical record of forest management through the centuries.

On the day I visited, a small crowd had gathered by 10 a.m. to stroll the neat, wide paths through the grove. Like the other visitors, who come from across Europe, my guide—Christine Neise, the forester responsible for the 2,400-acre state forestry district that includes the Ivenack Oaks—and I paused before each tree. As we stood beneath the multi-layered spreading crowns, speaking quietly, I admired the deeply furrowed bark full of spider webs, mosses, and slug trails that glistened here and there.

The oldest tree, estimated at about 1,200 years, was the largest and appeared by the vigor of its growth, to be the healthiest. More than 100 feet tall, it had a gnarled, knotty circumference of about 24 feet. Younger trees reached heights of 70 feet and more. "We estimate the age by counting rings on branches that fall from the oaks," Christine said, "and by taking borings from neighboring trees that we know are younger."

These thousand-year-old oaks are not romantic remnants of the dark, foreboding virgin forest that Druids worshiped. Instead, they sprouted in woods through which Slavic herders, the first settlers, had run their livestock for centuries, letting them forage for whatever they could find. "Iva" is believed to be a Slavic word for meadow or pasture. By some lucky circumstance the Ivenack Oaks escaped being nibbled, or perhaps they were purposely spared to produce acorns, much



IN THE FORMER EAST GERMANY, THE STATELY IVENACK OAKS HAVE BEEN A SOURCE OF NATIONAL PRIDE FOR MORE THAN 1,000 YEARS. FORESTER CHRISTINE NEISE (RIGHT) CARED FOR THEM UNTIL HER UNTIMELY DEATH LAST SUMMER.

prized as food for pigs. Once the oaks grew beyond reach of chomping, the undergrowth around them was kept cleared first by domestic herds, then by fallow deer in a fenced enclosure of nearly 200 acres, erected by later aristocratic owners.

"The secret to the long life of the Ivenack Oaks is keeping the crowns free for unfettered access to light," Christine said. "In other places, where herds were withdrawn and deer were sparse, oaks smothered in undergrowth. Keeping them clear, and keeping visitors from trampling the soil around them are our main concerns." Railings around the oldest oaks keep the press of visitors at a healthy distance, but I cherished the opportunity to touch the youngsters—the 500-year-old trees.

Like the rest of Mecklenburg, the oaks passed from Slavs to invading Germans in the 12th century. From 1252-1550 they belonged to a Cistercian cloister, then became part of a manorial estate. During the Thirty Year's War (1618-1648), Ivenack, like much of Germany, was devastated. Farms and woods were burned, but the oaks remained. In the 18th century a Baroque castle was built on the Gothic foundations of the old monastery; the von Maltzahn family owned and lived on the land from 1761 to 1945.

When Germany was divided after World War II, the Russians gained control of the eastern section of the country and transferred large landholdings they had confiscated to the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In 1962 the GDR declared the oaks a protected area, and 11 years later began to implement a management plan to protect the landscape while opening the grove to the public. Public sentiment convinced the state to keep them as a public trust after reunification in 1990. (Since reunification, as evidence of Mecklenburg's flourishing ecosystems, West Germans have established three national parks, six nature parks mostly on

privately owned land, a biosphere reserve, and hundreds of smaller protected areas.)

According to legend, the oaks have a very definite prescribed life span. It is said that seven nuns from the Cistercian convent broke their vows and were punished by God by being turned into oaks. A different version has the nuns surprised in sleep by robbers and running half-naked into the woods, where they called on God for protection and were turned into oaks. After a thousand years, the first oak will die and liberate one nun's soul, and every hundred years thereafter another oak will die and its human soul will be freed.

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The Ivenack Oaks have been a source of regional pride for a couple hundred years; the Mecklenburg writer Fritz Reuter praised them in the mid-19th century as famous landmarks. Their history brings to life the legendary German reverence for trees and forests. Perhaps a distant echo of a Druid past, this sylvan regard was greatly amplified by lessons from the disastrous overuse of forests in Christianized medieval times. By the end of the 18th century, the forests of central Europe had been ravaged by overcutting and overgrazing, and even the duff had been raked away for barn bedding. The birth of forestry as a modern profession occurred in Germany in the late 18th

century, and foresters came to be honored members of a society that desperately needed them.

Foresters for the last private owners, the von Maltzahns, placed a high value on preserving the Ivenack Oaks, and the job of protecting them often passed from father to son. That kind of continuity, modernized in terms of gender, continued when Christine became forester. Her father was forester in the same district for nearly 40 years.

But continuity doesn't mean that values cannot change, and the oaks provide a good example of the way forestry perspectives have shifted in Germany. Three of the oaks died during Herr Neise's long tenure as forester. In those days, it was common practice to work up dead trees and use them in practical ways, and the remains of the dead Ivenack Oaks were removed. Now, Christine often leaves dead trees to play their part in forest ecosystem processes, and plans to leave as they fall any Ivenack Oaks that die.

"*Naturnahe*"—close to nature—"is how we try to manage what we do in the woods," she said.

Walking through the woods surrounding the oaks, I looked for signs of the kinds of management that would ensure that the Ivenack Oaks would have successors. And I saw oaks ranging in ages from 50 years to at least 500, as well as many beeches both ancient and young. Woodpeckers tapped and songbirds twittered in dappled canopies. No doubt about it, the Ivenack Oaks embody a real and continuing commitment not just to individual trees, mighty as they might be, but to forests as well. **AF**

Chris Bolgiano of Fulks Run, Virginia, covers forestry and wildlife issues. She writes that Christine Neise was tragically killed in a hunting accident last August.