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## In the Rhine Valley, Clamoring for Relief From Ramped-Up Rail

By MELISSA EDDY SEPT. 21, 2014

LINZ AM RHEIN, Germany — The bluffs along Germany's Rhine Valley have attracted tourists since the Romantics sung of their rustic beauty in the mid-19th century. Around the same time, the first railways were built, bringing visitors who admired the crumbling castles atop the vine-clad banks, as well as the region's white wine.

Train tracks still run through the towns up and down the flat banks of the mighty Rhine River, but their load has changed. Instead of passengers, nearly two-thirds of all trains today carry chemical tanks, bins filled with coal, or flatbeds laden with rolls of steel.

There are also a lot more of them these days, stirring up resentment in riverside towns like this one of half-timbered houses, whose view of the water, just beyond the 14th century Rheintor tower, is cut by elevated train tracks.

From beside the fountain in the cobbled square of Linz am Rhein on a recent afternoon, a low grumble could be heard in the distance. Within seconds it had grown to a roar as a freight train clattered along the tracks.

"They don't bring us anything but noise and dust," said Ewald A. Hoppen, leader of the local protest group in Linz am Rhein, part of a wider regional movement that calls itself Against Train Noise.

The Rhine Valley has become a vital stretch along Europe's most important north-south rail route amid a European Union-wide effort to move more freight away from the Continent's congested roads. The Rhine-Alpine Corridor, put into service in 2007, links two of Europe's most important industrial regions, the North Sea ports of Antwerp, Rotterdam and Amsterdam with the port in Genoa, Italy.

These days, 180 to 300 trains pass through the storybook river towns by day, and an additional 200 or so throughout the night, and residents complain

of lost sleep. A 10 percent increase in rail traffic is expected starting next year, when Switzerland is scheduled to open the 35-mile-long Gottard Base Tunnel, which runs through the Alps with the aim of moving heavy freight trains swiftly and with minimal pollution.

Deutsche Bahn, Germany's main railway operator, has set a 2020 goal of reducing freight train noise levels by half of what they were in 2000 through updated, quieter braking mechanisms and the installation of sound walls along the tracks. Already it has invested about \$90 million in infrastructure to dampen sound in the Rhine Valley.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's government earmarked about \$1.35 billion in its 2014 budget to improve the country's railways, which includes exploring alternative routes to the Rhine Valley and helping to pay for the switch to quieter brakes.

But many in Linz and neighboring towns fear these measures will not do enough to limit noise to tolerable levels.

On Saturday, more than 600 people from up and down the valley gathered outside the main train station in Bonn to demand their right to peace and quiet. Norbert Röttgen, a senior member of Ms. Merkel's party and native of the region, pledged to mobilize lawmakers in Berlin.

Karen Schmitz, whose home is less than a block off the railway tracks in nearby Leubsdorf, was recently awakened in the middle of the night by the bone-rattling screech of metal on metal as a freight train ground to a halt. Several minutes later it rattled into action again. No sooner had it cleared the tracks, she said, than the clatter of the next one made its approach known.

"We can't think of sleep, although we have to wake up again for work at 6 a.m.," she wrote in a letter to Against Train Noise. "How can it be that everyone in the country is beholden to keep the peace at night, but not the trains?"

In fact, dozens of laws in Germany regulate noise. Owners of loud dogs can be held liable for late-night barking, and many municipalities prohibit car alarms' blaring during sleeping hours. Other localities order drivers to reduce their speed on city streets after 10 p.m., and most airports are barred from allowing commercial flights to take off and land for several hours between midnight and dawn.

But from the days when they were a public monopoly, trains have enjoyed special status. A decades-old law granting trains the right to make more noise than other vehicles was scrapped only last year. And in environment-sensitive

Germany, rail traffic is embraced, as it emits fewer greenhouse gases than other modes of transport.

Opponents argue that there is a limit to how much priority should be given to environmental benefits over the welfare of residents and the local economy.

The Rhine Valley is, after all, an attraction for tourists from around the world, who hope to catch a strain of the mythical siren's song from the Lorelei Cliff that soars above the swirling green-gray waters at the narrowest point of the river. Instead they are confronted with the rattle and hum of Europe's industrial backbone, moving from one end of the Continent to the other. In Linz alone, several hotels near the railway have closed, and yet another is up for sale.

Stephan Trier and his wife, Heike, run the Linzer Brauhaus restaurant and an attached guesthouse overlooking the Rhine. They have been forced to drop the price of rooms that face the tracks and began informing potential guests that they were essentially booking at their own risk of a sleepless night.

"We can't do anything about it, so the least we can do is warn them," Ms. Trier said.

Despite their best efforts, the train noise remained an issue, reflected in their ratings at online booking sites, which can be crucial for attracting visitors.

"Great location," wrote one guest from June on Booking.com, adding, "If you leave the window open, it sounds as if a train is rolling over your comforter."

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