

Twinned towns seek German-Greek harmony amid Nazi jibes

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By Harry Papachristou, Alexandra Hudson and Noah Barkin

OREOKASTRO, Greece/DETMOLD, Germany (Reuters) - Hans-Joachim Fuchtel doesn't fit the image of the cold Prussian bureaucrat intent on imposing tough German discipline on struggling Greeks.

Appointed by Chancellor Angela Merkel late last year to explore ways to boost grass-roots cooperation between Germany and Greece, Fuchtel is a jovial 60-year old from the Black Forest who manages a brass band in his spare time and serves as honorary president of a camel-riding club.

His first job as a boy near Germany's western border was collecting snails to sell as food to the French forces that occupied the area after World War Two. He says he wants to bring the same initiative to his new post, mobilising Germans to work with Greeks to overcome the animosity built up during the euro zone crisis. He has his work cut out.

Fuchtel's office in the German Labour Ministry is adorned with pictures of him in Mauritania, driving a tractor in southern Germany and with his brass band in China. On his cluttered desk is a book "The misery of being Greek", a gift he says from a previous visitor.

"Germany and Greece have a long friendship, but when you look at the headlines at the moment, particularly in the Greek media, then you see that friendship being stretched to the limit," Fuchtel said.

Merkel's insistence that Greece push through ever deeper budget cuts in exchange for EU aid has fuelled rising anger in Greece where protesters have taken to burning German flags and carrying around effigies of Merkel in a Nazi uniform.

The German press hasn't pulled its punches either. Top-selling tabloid Bild regularly portrays Greeks as lazy, corrupt and ungrateful. Berlin's push to wrest away Greek control over its own budget in negotiations over a second European bailout has only intensified resentment between the countries.

Fuchtel, who has been caricatured as an overbearing German in the Greek media, has been tasked with promoting projects that can benefit both countries. Behind the scenes, he is working to boost the number of partnerships between German and Greek towns, get German foundations involved in Greece, and encourage Germans with expertise to advise Greek municipalities on matters ranging from tourism to renewable energy to waste management.

"We need to explain things to people, try to get back to a situation where we have headlines that show sympathy for the Greek people, a sensibility to the cuts they're facing and a sense for where we can.. boost hope," he said.

PAINFUL HISTORY

Greece and Germany have a complex history that has complicated the debate. The Greeks suffered atrocities at the hands of the Nazis and their fascist allies during World War Two. In Athens alone, over 300,000 civilians died of starvation during an occupation that lasted over three years. Reprisals against Greek partisans resulted in the slaughter of tens of thousands more.

Yet in the decades after the war many Greeks, particularly those in the north, came to Germany as "guest workers" to help rebuild the shattered country and escape economic hardship and political oppression at home.

82-year old Greek President Karolos Papoulias personifies the tangled relationship. As a teenager he fought against the German Wehrmacht. Then after the war he fled to Cologne to escape persecution by the Greek military dictatorship. When visitors from Berlin meet with him in Athens, he greets them in German.

Ties between the countries run deep. More than 300,000 Greeks reside in Germany, making them one of the biggest ethnic communities in the country. Nearly one in ten Greeks has worked, studied or lived in Germany. And roughly two million Germans spend their holidays in Greece every year, more than from any other country.

Despite these links, officials from both countries are now realising that grass-roots cooperation between the countries has been virtually non-existent. Only about 30 partnerships between German and Greek towns currently exist, for example, compared to 2,000 German-French pairings.

Boosting these, and getting local German and Greek communities working closely, has become a top priority in Berlin, where officials have been shocked by the Nazi images. Merkel and Greek conservative leader Antonis Samaras even discussed the issue at an EU summit in Brussels last week.

HUGE POTENTIAL

One partnership that has existed for over half a decade is between Oreokastro, an upmarket but increasingly troubled suburb of Thessaloniki in northern Greece, and Detmold in the west German state of North Rhine Westphalia. Detmold Mayor Rainer Heller's office looks out on Cafe Europa in the town square, where a group

of local Greeks gather to chat.

Detmold is advising officials in Oreokastro on how to collect rubbish more efficiently, take advantage of renewable energy sources and secure better access to EU funds. About a dozen high-school students from the Greek town are due to visit Detmold's municipality-run utilities later this year to receive vocational training. Heller is under no illusions that small steps like these can rescue Greece from its downward spiral. But he does believe forging closer local links is a good way to counter the mud-slinging. "Greece is bankrupt. We can't save Greece here in Detmold. But we can get people talking with each other and thinking about ways to get more money into local communities there," Heller said.

"Take solar energy. There is huge potential there and as soon as the euro is secured, you can bet that our Chinese friends will be flooding the market with cheap photovoltaic systems. What I've told our Greek friends is that we can help them set these systems up and ensure the money that flows from them stays in their hands." Another model partnership exists between Sohos, a town of about 3,000 in the mountains about an hour's drive west of Thessaloniki, and the Berlin district of Steglitz.

Famous for its carnival, where locals don animal hides and run around the streets ringing bells and drinking tsipouro, a local ouzo variety, Sohos relied historically on agriculture and dairy production for its wealth. But it has suffered since the crisis struck and the European Union began winding down farming subsidies, says local resident Varvara Polyhroni.

In 1999, Polyhroni set up a local culture association that deepened ties with Steglitz. One of the first Steglitz residents to visit Sohos 20 years ago was Christian Goiny, a local politician and member of Merkel's Christian Democrats <CDU.L>, who continues to travel to Greece regularly. Last October he asked his Greek counterparts if they were interested in attending "Gruene Woche", or Green Week, the world's biggest agricultural fair that lures some 400,000 visitors to Berlin each January.

"No Greek company had shown up at Green Week for ten years. Apart from local restaurant owners selling gyros, there was nothing," Goiny said during a recent visit to northern Greece. "Nobody here seemed to care much, in Athens we fell on deaf ears."

But Ioannis Anastasiadis, the 39-year old mayor of the Langadas municipality which includes Sohos, jumped on the offer. He was desperate. Budget cuts reduced the block grant Langadas used to receive from the central government by a third and one in three locals is now unemployed. With Goiny's help, a small stand was booked for four Sohos producers. It was four times smaller than the one used by tiny Malta, but was a big success.

"It really opened doors for us," said Eleni Proika, 50, who employs about 25 people in her cheese factory in Sohos.

For Anastasiadis, Green Week was just a beginning. This week, Langadas will also have a presence at the ITB, a big tourism show in Berlin.

"We are using the international tourism conference in Berlin to bring German and Greek tourism experts together," said Fuchtel. "The holiday season in Greece could be lengthened, there could be more hiking holidays, which are very popular with Germans. This is an area where we can advise Greece."

POLITICAL HUBRIS

Still Detmold Mayor Heller worries the Berlin-led campaign may be more about public relations than substance. He says he has seen only slow progress since he joined Fuchtel in Thessaloniki in November of last year for a conference to inject new momentum into the initiative.

A month before that conference, German Economy Minister Philipp Roesler travelled to Athens on a highly publicised trip with 60 German business leaders in tow to explore investment opportunities and search for ways German know-how could help lift the Greek economy.

Many of the executives came from Germany's solar branch but returned with grave doubts about infrastructure and financing. The ministry acknowledged last month that it was disappointed with the Greek response to its offer to help set up a development bank.

Bonn-based Sigrid Skarpelis-Sperk, president of the Union of German-Greek Associations and a former politician from the centre-left Social Democrats <SPD.L>, sees enormous potential in the relationship.

"Germans are good at organising and Greeks are good at improvising. Together they could be excellent," she said. But she is pessimistic because of the austerity Germany and its European partners are asking Greeks to swallow.

She likened the situation to the period after World War One when a defeated Germany was forced to accept the onerous terms of the Versailles Treaty, a step which is widely seen to have contributed to the rise of the Nazis. "I see stupidity and arrogance in the German conservative position on Greece and a failure to remember our own history," said Skarpelis-Sperk.

(Reporting by Harry Papachristou in Sohos/Thessaloniki, Alexandra Hudson in Berlin, Noah Barkin in Detmold; Writing by Noah Barkin; editing by Janet McBride)

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