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Well-protected – Schirm Oertel doesn't leave anyone out in the rain – a traditional Bremen firm supplies Presidents and Royalty

Bremen (ddp). Dark clouds on the summer sky mean increased sales for Dorrit and Rainer Gramke. The couple owns one of the last remaining shops in Germany specialising in the sale and repair of umbrellas, Schirm Oertel in Bremen. Under the label "Oertel Handmade", they bring their own collection out in Bremen one rainy year after another. Their umbrella models are ordered from all over the world.

Around 20 years ago the couple bought the small shop in downtown Bremen. The reputation of the more than 100 year-old firm was known far beyond the city of Bremen, and now Internet orders from Gramke's customers come in all the way from Norway, New Zealand, and the USA. Just recently the umbrella expert sent a large shipment on its way to the University of Istanbul. And even crowned heads protect themselves from the rain with umbrellas from Oertel. For example, in March Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands held an umbrella from Bremen aloft during her state visit in Berlin while officially opening the new Dutch embassy there.

The German President is also a customer in Bremen. For the 60th anniversary celebration in Berlin of the assassination attempt on Hitler the shop prepared a special three-metre umbrella. "If it had rained on July 20th, the speakers would have definitely been kept dry", Gramke said. Johannes Rau, the former German President, was supplied with a particularly large umbrella with a radius of 1.4 metres and a handle made of exquisite Malacca cane. On the handle next to the standard metal tag engraved with "Oertel Handmade" with Bremen's key motif coat-of-arms, a second metal tag was attached. "Engraved on this was Schloss Bellevue, then the residence of President Rau", Gramke said.

The new German President, Horst Köhler, has not yet been supplied by the shop in Bremen. In the meantime, though, the German Federal Interior Ministry and the Hamburg State Chancellery have been customers for years. Bremen's Senate, on the other hand, is a rare customer in the specialised umbrella shop. Since Mayor Hans Koschnick went out of office in 1985 no more umbrellas have been ordered from Oertel.

Other customers take an extra flight all the way from England in order to have their umbrellas repaired in Bremen. This was the case of two British ladies who had inherited umbrellas made around 1900. In all of England there were no original parts to be found. The shop in Bremen had them, though. "Even in rainy England there are hardly any specialised umbrella shops left", said Gramke, whose inventory is filled with replacement parts up to 100 years old.

The Bremen shop even repaired an umbrella that used to belong to the Austrian Empress Sissi. "A man had bought it at auction, and then promptly sat on it in his car", related Gramke. The handle resembled a swan's neck, and the umbrella was more for protection against the sun than against the rain.

All umbrellas from Oertel are handmade. For this the specialised shop in Bremen has commissioned a small manufacturer in Milan. The designs are Gramke's, and for the handles he selects fine woods which can hardly be found on other umbrellas, such as Canadian maple and pearl bamboo. The umbrella canopies are made of Teflon-coated materials often used for high-quality ties. "The colours of the fabrics are always oriented on fashion", Gramke pointed out.

And even every Knirps which goes over the counter at Oertel was made according to Gramke's concepts. For this he buys the frames of older Knirps collections, stores them, and then brings them to market with modern fabrics.

(www.regenschirme.de, www.european-umbrellas.com)

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