

Belgium

Four hundred years of lace making ends

By Paul Kemezis
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BRUGES, Belgium — Each afternoon the main hall of the School of the Apostoline Sisters in this peaceful Flemish city comes alive with a click-clack sound that is as important to Bruges as the chiming of its many church bells.

A dozen young girls and women work busily, moving linen threads attached to dozens of wooden bobbins back and forth across a pattern of pins stuck in cushions, making the world-famous Bruges lace.

The slow, demanding technique has changed little since lace was invented in Flanders more than 400 years ago to decorate the collars and cuffs of the gentry. The original "cottage" system of the industry in which women do individual piece-work at home or in small groups is also unchanged.

But much is different also. Seventy-five years ago there were still thousands of women in Bruges and other Flemish towns who earned a living producing lace. Now there are only a few hundred women practicing the traditional craft to pass time and earn pocket money.

The small number of lace traders still active in Belgium, mainly as a side business, fear that in 20 years production will virtually disappear, making it impossible to fill the healthy tourist demand for lace in Brussels and Bruges.

"If we lose one of our workers now, we can't find a new one," said Rnilde Luc, whose family (on her mother's side) has been trading in lace

for four generations. Every two weeks Miss Luc and her mother bring self-designed patterns and material to a few dozen women in the tiny village of Denderhoutem, 30 miles west of Brussels, and pick up finished placemats, tablecloths and collars for sale in Brussels' 40 or so lace shops.

"Brussels" or "Renaissance" style lace is made from machine-produced strips of material that are handsewn into intricate patterns by the individual lace makers. "Bruges" style lace, which is rarer and more expensive, is made completely by hand with the pin and bobbin method.