

POST CHRISTMAS SEASON / NACHWEIHNACHTZEIT

New Year's Eve: Silvesterabend (der 31. Dezember)

New Years Eve custom: Silvesterabendsitte

chimney sweep: der Schornsteinfeger, die Schornsteinfeger

"Clients who haven't paid for two years or three -- now I can say I don't need to work there anymore. That's a plus."

The change in policy brings Germany in line with an EU directive liberalising the services sector.

Germany's roughly 8,000 chimney sweeps are hired not only to climb roofs and scrub away soot with their coiled-wire brushes, but also to inspect heating systems for fire hazards and poisonous carbon monoxide leaks. They also monitor pollution levels and energy efficiency.

Under the new rules, chimney cleaning and measuring of gas emissions can be carried out by licenced free contractors.

Hopes that competition will drive down prices, however, look dubious because contractors will likely have to travel greater distances to the job and advertise their services to stand out from the crowd, boosting their expenses.

Anticipating the changes, Skrobek moved his offices to a prominent spot in the lively Kreuzberg district and decorated his shop window with images of the iconic chimney sweep.

"We didn't have to make publicity for ourselves before -- our status is still like a civil servant's," he said.

Dream job

Skrobek has been in the business since 1977, when he was just 17.

"It was always my dream job -- even as a boy in school I thought it was pretty romantic" working above the treetops with breathtaking views over the city, he said.

A friendly man with a distinct twinkle in his eye, he said he loved delighting children in his spiffing uniform and handing out chimney sweep soft toys in a time-honoured custom.

Sweeps are traditionally thought to bring good luck, in large part because before their trade was widespread in Europe, thousands died every year in house fires attributed to faulty chimneys, fireplaces or heating ovens.

The districts were established under the Third Reich and historical records show the Nazis pressured chimney sweeps to use their unique access to homes to spy on fellow Germans. The practice continued in communist East Germany but Skrobek insists chimney sweeps are now trusted members of the community.

According to the Federal Association of Master Chimney Sweeps, Germany has the fewest number of injuries due to fire or carbon monoxide poisoning in the EU. It said its members uncover 1.5 million hazardous defects per year.

They also carry out energy checks to determine heat loss from flue gas, a component of government plans to reduce CO2 emissions.

Skrobek said many sweeps took a kind of holistic approach and addressed whatever problems they might come across under the flat rate they received.