INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Zentrum
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Mr. Peter Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
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Hanover, New Hampshire

Dear Peter:

Any map will show that Berlin lies in the eastern part of the German Democratic Republic (i.e. East Germany), almost 100 miles from the nearest point in West Germany, but I was nevertheless somewhat unprepared for the fact that one must really enter the G.D.R. when travelling by car to West Berlin. There are four so-called "transit corridors" through which travellers can reach Berlin with fewer border complications, no mandatory exchange of currency, and no visa other than a transit visa that can be purchased at the border. But you know immediately when you've left the West: even if you don't notice the lookout towers and armed patrols, the pot-holes in the corrugated road surface will tell you that you're back in eastern Europe. West Germany contributes quite substantially to maintain these roads, but the money doesn't seem to have filtered down to the road surface.

I had also wondered how these corridors are controlled, since the G.D.R. doesn't normally inspect vehicles in transit when they pass back out through the checkpoints, but they do monitor the highways. At least one police car is parked next to every roadside parking area, and very little goes on unobserved on these roads. Every few miles another sign appears to tell you how far it is to"Berlin: Hauptstadt der DDR", that is, "Capital of the G.D.R."

Because of Berlin's peculiar political status, even road signs are political. In every practical sense, the eastern sector of Berlin has been incorporated into the G.D.R. as its capital city, but under international law Berlin (both East and West) is still under the authority of the occupying powers. This means, for example, that West Berlin's representatives in Bonn don't have a final vote in West German parliamentary decisions and that West Berlin residents aren't subject to conscription in the West German armed forces. The G.D.R., by contrast, gave East Berlin's representatives full voting rights and

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extended its military conscription to that sector of the city, as part of the process of integrating East Berlin into the G.D.R. Hence the road signs on the transit routes are as much a political statement as a guide to motorists.

It's mainly the older generation of Berliners, however, for whom these East-West political issues are bothersome. They can remember the creation of the G.D.R. and the various Berlin crises, and many of them still have close relatives in the G.D.R. whom they visit. Of course those who are most aware of West-East problems are those who actually emigrated from the G.D.R., and most of them are today in their mid-40's or older. The last big wave of emigration was right before the Wall was built in 1961.

It was at that time that Jutta Müller, a friend of ours who is now a grammar-school teacher in West Berlin, arrived here from a small village in the G.D.R., shortly after she graduated from high school, and just before the Wall went up. She left for some of the same reasons that young people have always left small towns and villages, but the sense of being watched was far stronger under an oppressive political regime than it usually is in a small town. When she was told that she couldn't attend the university until she had mended her attitude by serving as a manual worker for two years, she felt that she had no choice but to leave.

Her parents remained there, because her father couldn't bring himself to leave the small plumbing and heating business he'd built up. Soon after, the state took over his business anyway, but by then it was too late to leave, and a few years later he died. Her mother and invalid sister still live in the same town. Jutta now is able to visit them several times a year, bringing with her a consignment of western-made goods that they've requested. Their shopping list is usually long, because they seem to believe that everything made in the West is of far superior quality to that made in the East. Undoubtedly, part of this attitude comes from watching the advertisements on West German television, because they usually request specific brands. (It had been puzzling us why every Saturday and Sunday West German television devotes a full half-hour to listing the program schedule for the entire following week. It appears that it's a service for viewers in the G.D.R., who can't buy newspapers with western program listings. Every weekend Jutta's mother and sister laboriously copy down the next week's television schedule.)

After she left it was almost ten years before Jutta could begin making these visits, because the border was effectively closed. For many years she was even afraid to go by car to West Germany through the G.D.R., preferring to fly. But since 1972 when an agreement was made granting amnesty to pre-Wall emigres, and easing the restrictions on visits by West Germans, she's been able to visit regularly.

These circumstances have made her very sensitive to changes in the political tension between the G.D.R. and West Berlin. Her situation can't be unusual, if other places in the G.D.R. were anything like her hometown. Out of a high school graduating class of 60 people, Jutta knows of 50 who subsequently emigrated or escaped to the West.

The younger people of West Berlin, however, are much less aware of these problems. Since very few of them have immediate family in the East, they rarely have occasion to visit there. Other than museums and cultural monuments, there's little to attract them there as tourists, either, and the currency exchange requirements make even a short visit to East Berlin an expensive proposition for them. As one researcher of our acquaintance put it, most of them don't know much more about the G.D.R. than that it's a place where you can't buy bananas. (Most people in West Berlin, of course, do watch G.D.R. as well as West German television. The news programs are no more enlightening than elsewhere in eastern Europe, but they have extensive sports coverage and good old movies. One of the best film archives in Europe before the war was in Potsdam, which now lies inside the G.D.R.)

Recently, at the invitation of a professor at the Technical University in West Berlin, we visited his class in international agriculture. The subject under discussion that day was agriculture in the G.D.R., and after the months they had spent studying the agricultural problems of distant tropical countries, the students seemed amazed to learn about the strikingly different world that lay right outside Berlin. Few of them knew about the enormous specialized livestock and crop farms, and the elaborate central planning mechanisms of the G.D.R.

Interest in, and knowledge of, the G.D.R. has dropped off in the younger generation partly because the political climate has normalized, but primarily because the flow of immigrants dropped to a trickle after the Wall went up. Last year only 30,000 to 40,000 came over legally, and that was one of the peak years. This drop in interest has also created problems for research on the G.D.R. Much of the Cold-War-motivated funding for research that was relatively plentiful earlier, has dried up with the new "Ost-Politik."

The market for this research has also dried up, because there are fewer young researchers who want to work in this area, and fewer people interested in the results.

There are two research institutes in West Berlin that continue to work on G.D.R. agriculture, but with reduced staff. One of these, the Forschungstelle für Gesamtdeutsche Wirtschaftliche und Soziale Fragen, has cut back from four full-time people to one, and no longer tries to mount specialized large-scale studies. Karl Hohmann, the one remaining researcher, continues to do some of the best work that's being done on the G.D.R. in the West, but finds that he's handicapped by the lack of research assistance.

It's also a problem for him that he can't visit the G.D.R. in an official capacity to talk with other agriculturalists and visit the countryside. The G.D.R. severely limits these official contacts, expecially for West Germans, so in his research he has to rely heavily on the agricultural data and newspapers published there. This doesn't mean, though, that he never has a chance to see the G.D.R. On the contrary, from his fifth-floor office on Stresemann Strasse, just a couple of hundred yards from the Wall, he has a splendid view of the vast gray expanse of East Berlin. The view didn't seem that inspirational, but it must help him keep his mind on his work.

Sincerely,

Bruce Hall

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Received in Hanover 4/9/85