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 Stubborn City:  
 First Impressions

Plockstrasse 8  
 Giessen, Germany  
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
 Institute of Current World Affairs  
 522 Fifth Avenue  
 New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The first impression Germany makes on the wintertime visitor involves a slight assault on the senses: The nose crinkles at the odors of soft coal smoke, strong mustard, and bad breath. The eyes dilate to see through heavy mist and fog - a change from mid-ocean brightness. The ears tingle to a whole new orchestra of bells, whistles, horns - and voices.

There are the uniforms - green, blue, gray, and black - so dearly beloved and cared for. Seven distinctive outfits were being modeled at the customs shed in Bremerhaven; a different uniform (and cap) for the baggage handler, customs inspector, immigration authority, postal clerk, policeman, railroadman, and the candystore clerk.

There is the neatness everywhere: narrow fields tilled right up to the fences, precise ranks of trees marching over the Westerwald hills, sidewalks, backyards, irrigation ditches - all tidily arranged. The handwriting is meticulous. From the window of the express train it looks as though every stone on the trackbed was put in place. One passenger, a girl from Colorado, said: "It makes you almost want to knock down a fence here and there."

There is the efficiency and punctilio: A dining car waiter passes through the coaches handing out blue tickets for meals at different hours. If you show up late, the waiter gives you a yellow ticket and a short lecture and you wait 45 minutes. Everything on the coach has a number - each coach, section, compartment, seat, and washroom. The Bremerhaven-Stuttgart express made 10 stops during the seven-hour, 260-mile trip to Giessen - every one of them on time, so the conductor said.

The room in Giessen's Prinz Carl Hotel is as clean as a kitten. It contains, however, a few ironies of efficiency: The room has two wash-bowls - each big enough for a week's laundry - but no soap in the dish. The closet is huge, but it contains only two coathangers. The light fixtures are new and fancy, but they have only 15-watt bulbs. Nevertheless an air of solid security prevails: you need two keys to get into the room and the windows have shutters on the outside plus two sets of curtains inside.

One asks: Why?

Why all the neatness, the efficiency, the punctuality, the privacy? Herr Beuchert, the stubby, gray-vested hotel manager, puts it this way:

\* This is the first of a series of newsletters by David Binder to be sent from Giessen.

"We Germans are sensitive - we like to have things quiet and orderly, to stay out of each other's hair." My new landlady, Frau Seibt, says it another. She concluded a 55-minute lecture on the rules of the house and the renting arrangement by saying: "I'm telling you this now so that we will understand each other. Then I won't get in your way, and you won't get in mine."

One thinks of the cliché: "Germany is a pressure-cooker." One looks at the winter sky which is less than 100 yards away - mist, fog, and rain pressing in on the city. The air is close and stale. One thinks of the other frontiers: to the East, Russians and Poles; to the West, the French; to the South, the Austrians and Swiss; to the North, Danes and English. Now, as always before, the country is crowded - and surrounded. The German has felt hemmed in for a long time. Every once in awhile he has done something to relieve the feeling - something violent. Meanwhile, inside Germany, he has been obliged to accommodate himself to the close quarters, the pressure, the feeling of one-on-top-of-the-other. Hence the rules and regulations: "Everything has its place - keep it there." or "Don't step on my toes and I won't step on yours." Hence the curtains and shutters, hence the politenesses - the *bittesehrs* and *dankeschoens*, hence the signs warning you not to do this or that.

Main Street in Giessen is about 1,100 yards long. It runs roughly parallel to the Lahn River, which flows along the western edge of the city towards the Rhine. The street cuts a curving path across the heart of the Innenstadt (inner city) - the old part of town. This section was 82 per cent destroyed in an awesome air raid on December 6, 1944. The city as a whole suffered 67 per cent damage. That wasn't as bad as the damage suffered by cities like Cologne or Wuerzburg, but it was bad enough for this city of 50,000 (now 60,000). Among the victims of the raid on Giessen were the old Rathaus and the Stadtkirche (City Church). Signs of rubble and ruin are hard to find on the main street today - 1½ years later. But here and there one sees a gap among the uniform 4 to 5-storey buildings. A one-storey building usually marks the spot where a larger building once stood. The bombs wrecked a city. It would be going too far to say that ~~they~~ destroyed a beautiful city. Even the Giessen Verkehrsverein (chamber of commerce) brochure describes the city as "worth seeing," rather than beautiful.

The main street is actually a combination of three streets. It starts at Selterstor (Selters Gate) - the southwestern entrance through the old city walls. As Seltersweg it runs 400 yards to the Kreuzplatz (Cross Square) where it becomes the Mausburg (Mousecastle). The Mausburg crosses Kirchenplatz (Church Square) and Lindenplatz (Linden Square) where it becomes the Walltorstrasse (Wall Gate Street). It ends where the north-eastern gate used to be. The street is narrow - about 12 feet wide - except for a few places where it broadens to 25 feet.

Traffic on the main drag is terrific. Cars, motorcycles, bicycles, small trucks, motorbikes, and the miniature automobiles made by Willi Messerschmitt and the Heinkel firm - all whiz down the one-way street from 6 a.m. to well after dusk. Pedestrian traffic is heavier. At 8 a.m., at noon, at 4 p.m., and again at 6 p.m., you can hardly make your way on the sidewalks for the crowds. During rush hour at least 7,000 people throng main street - more than a tenth of the total population.

There are at least 167 reasons for all this traffic - 167 shops and stores. Among these are: 5 cafés, 7 shoestores, 8 druggists, 22 clothing stores (mostly women's wear), an oculist, and an umbrella store. Most of the buildings on main street are new - or rebuilt. The architecture is a mixture of the so-called Kaiser Wilhelm style, Gothic, Baroque, imitation Baroque, Fachwerk (half-timber), and just plain German. The drabness of Giessen is accentuated right now by the omnipresent fog, which rises off the Lahn and off its four tributary streams, which run through the city. The color of Giessen is predominantly gray. The gray is touched here and there by dull yellow, somber brown, dingy red, and a sickly olive shade.

Giessen became a city in the high Middle Ages. At the end of the 12th century, the Hessian grand dukes who owned this territory decided they needed a stronghold on the Lahn. They built a water-castle where Giessen now stands - between two fortified points, Gleiberg Castle to the North, and the Schiffenberg Monastery to the south. The name Giessen ("at the brooks") was first used in a document dated 1203 (referring to a certain Countess Salome of Gyezen). The town grew around the castle and became a city about 1248. There were earlier settlements at Giessen - including one by the Germanic tribe called Chatten, whom Tacitus describes. But no settlement was permanent until the castle was built. By the 14th century Giessen got a wall complete with towers, gates, and a moat. In the 17th century, an enlightened noble, Landgrave Ludwig V, founded Giessen's university. In its first seven centuries Giessen suffered the same growing pains as most European cities - sieges, a decimating plague, occupation by foreign armies, floods, epidemics, and fires. It expanded slowly: Population 3,000 in 1600; 5,000 in 1805; 20,000 in 1900.

During the 19th century the University grew into its own and brought to Giessen a measure of world renown. Justus von Liebig, one of the founders of modern chemistry, did most of his pioneering scientific studies here. Later, Wilhelm K. Roentgen, the physicist who discovered X-rays, taught at the University.

Meanwhile, the city had developed as an important rail junction connecting Upper Hesse with Cologne and Coblenz to the west, Fulda to the east, Frankfurt to the south, and Kassel to the north. And, as one of the prize possessions of the Hessian dukes, it was natural that Giessen become capital of Upper Hesse province.

Giessen may be a provincial town, but there is plenty to serve the entertainment-seeker. On a typical night last week the Giessener could pick from six films: 2 German, 2 French, 1 Mexican, and 1 American. Or he could go to one of three public lectures - including the Anthropology Society's presentation: "Are Birth And Death The Beginning And End Of Human Existence?" Or he could go to the Stadttheater (city theatre) where the Giessen repertory company was performing Strauss' "Wiener Blut." Afterwards he could drop in at any of 24 cafés, taverns, dancehalls, cabarets, and restaurants.

I went to the operetta. The hall was packed - at least 800 people in the small theatre. The box office girl hung up the Ausverkauft (sold out) sign a minute after I bought my 1-mark (25 cents) ticket for the gallery. The production was excellent - simple but imaginative. The audience gave it a big hand. At intermission time the crowd paraded solemnly up and down the lobby - couples and families arm in arm. Their faces were all pink - as though they had been scrubbed with cold water and a hard brush. They probably had been.

I selected for a nightcap a tavern on Seltersweg called Trinkaus (Drink Up!) a pun on the word Trinkhaus (drinking house). As I entered, the jukebox was playing a popular American record, "When Ah Lost Mah Babe," oleagiously sung by Pat Boone. At the tables G. I.'s lolled over drinks and girls. By chance I had picked the one bar in Giessen patronized by American troops based in this area. Over in one corner a couple of men in the uniform of the Bundeswehr - the new (German) Federal Army - sat nursing their beers. A sleazily dressed woman stuck a finger in front of her G. I. boyfriend's face and said: "I tell you, if you trink what I trank you be flat on the floor . . . Give me whisky. The best whisky is Old Graindad (sic)." As she got up to leave a few minutes later she said: "See you later alligator." I ordered a glass of wine. A taxi dancer came to my table and introduced herself. "I am Mitzi," she said. Mitzi wears bangs, heavy eye makeup, slacks, a tight sweater, and too much poundage around her middle. She said she was 22 years old and came from Trier in the Mosel Valley. I asked her what she thought of Giessen. "Es ist n' sture Stadt" (It's a stubborn or narrowminded city), she said. About then the three German soldiers stood up, donned greatcoats and caps, and moved towards the door. As they neared the table where the American soldiers sat they snapped to attention and saluted the G. I.'s. The Americans simply stared at them until they walked out. "Jeezus," said an American afterwards, "they think we're supposed to be buddies or somethin'." A little later, the Trinkaus got livelier. There was hollering and thumping in back of the tavern. A German girl in matador pants shot up from her table, reeled slightly and pointed at her G. I. companion: "You! S... for nothin'!" The American leveled a steady gaze at her and replied magnanimously: "Baby, you ain't s... for the birds." The headwaiter turned up the jukebox good and loud. It was playing the Badenweiler March - a military piece which has been known to bring a nostalgic nationalistic tear to the German eye. You couldn't have heard it three years ago in the Federal Republic. In the Trinkaus it served to drown out the further exchanges of the G. I. and Baby. The cymbals peeled, the drums were rolling, the fife was keening - when I drank up, and marched out, into the stubborn city.

America is represented by more than hit tunes and soldiers in Giessen. You can buy pizza pie and spaghetti and meatballs in one restaurant, American magazines and books in several stores, and Coca Cola everywhere. The barber on the Marktstrasse said some German youngsters have been asking for "rock 'n roll" haircuts. He said he feared the arrival of the Hollywood film, "Rock, Rock, Rock," at a nearby theatre this week was going to cause a stampede for the rock 'n roll haircuts.

Giessen, like most American cities, is television conscious. The aeriels sprout from nearly every roof. Television fare in Germany is limited to a couple of state-owned stations. Programs are broadcast only in the afternoon and evening. The technical quality is excellent. Some of the programs last week included: a film of the American Navy expedition in the Antarctic, a hockey game between Germany and Poland, a 20-minute news roundup, a sparkling production of the Jean Giraudoux play, "The Trojan War Will Not Take Place," and a talk on the psychology of wild west films.

The latter, entitled "Nothing Against Wild West Films" was done in the form of a conversation between an anxious young mother and a calm psychologist. The housewife started things off: "Aren't these wild west films awful? ...so violent! I'm worried about letting my Hans go to them. They may excite him too much." The psychologist replied soothingly that these American films were not "too intense" for Junior.

"On the contrary," he said, "the child will always identify himself with the hero." The hero, he added, is always good, and never commits mayhem without the deepest provocation. The psychologist walked over to a blackboard and picked up a piece of chalk. "Suppose we mark down the hero as 'X'" (draws on the blackboard), the psychologist continued in his liquid voice. "'X' is everything good, brave, and reserved. Over here we mark down 'Y', the villain, or the badmen - the knife artists," the psychologist frowns. "In the middle," (he draws a circle) "are the ordinary people - helpless without a leader." Then with lines, dots, squiggles, and other diagrams, he explained the action of the typical western. The young mother was still doubtful. He showed her cuts from several "good" westerns. Finally, after 45 minutes, he convinced the housewife that westerns are not bad for fans.

Sports are popular in Giessen. Saturday night the Giessen Box Club had it out with a team called the Offenbach Kickers. A poster advertisement claimed the Kickers were at their strongest. The match took place in the Volkshalle (People's Hall) on the north side of town. There was a good turnout - some 1,500 people. Unfortunately, most of the Giessen sluggers were shorter-armed, younger, and less muscular than their Kicker rivals. It was a bad day for Mudville. Nine Giesseners hit the canvas in their three-round bouts. Five fighters on the home team won their bouts - two by technical knockouts. One Giessen light heavyweight threw in the towel after 45 seconds of the first round. The Offenbacher had knocked him around the ring like a tennisball. The announcer explained to the crowd: "Der Offenbacher ist zu stark." (The Offenbacher is too strong). The crowd in the gallery was disappointed. They yelled for blood. The announcer came on again: "May I ask the onlookers to be sporting, please."

Next day the sun made an appearance in time to light up the soccer game between Giessen and the town of Lorsche. Giessen won this contest - three to nothing. Over 2,000 people stood on the earthen terraces of the University Sports Field to watch the game. There were no seats. The temperature was about 34 degrees, but nobody seemed to mind. At half-time the men made a rush for the refreshment stand where they bought quantities of Schnapps. The game was a crowd-pleaser - plenty of near misses, fouls, penalties, charleyhorses, and hard-driven goals. The youngsters on the terraces shouted: "Tempo! Tempo!" (Faster! Faster!) whenever it looked like a goal was in the offing. That night there was still another sports event - The Festival of Sports at the Stadttheater. Giessen's sports heroes, past and present, were on hand for greetings by the mayor and other City officials. Some 700 well-wishers were in the hall to give them a cheer. Nobody from the boxing team showed up.

A Sunday afternoon walk around Giessen makes one more aware of the amount of damage done by the World War II bombing. Here is the shell of a burnt-out house. There is a heap of rubble on what used to be the ground floor. You can still see the kitchen tiles. However, the walk also makes you aware of the incredible degree of recovery since 1945. Many of the new buildings have been constructed out of bricks and concrete blocks taken from ruins. The mortar has been chipped off the old bricks laboriously to make them usable. Some streets - like the fashionable Lonystasse, and the Liebigstrasse - seem to have escaped bomb damage. On these one can see the gracious homes with their turrets, towers, iron grills, and little walled-in gardens - unscathed. Elsewhere it is a case of new among old.

Sunday afternoon is café-time - like other afternoons only more so. After the soccer game I stopped in the Café Hettler at the Selterstor. It was full. The Hettler has several qualities which are popular in Giessen. It is quiet. It has reasonable prices. And best of all - it affords a discreet but complete view of everything going on at Giessen's busiest intersection. The Hettler also boasts a modernistic ceiling fan which is mildly intriguing to watch. When I entered, several coffee-drinkers were gazing at it, fascinated. Most of the customers at the Hettler were drinking wine and eating cake - talking once in awhile. At the next table a man in his late thirties paid his bill, got up, and spoke to me: "Excuse me, sir, will you help me on with my coat? . . . thank you." It was a trenchcoat and it took a minute or so to button and buckle. The man had only one arm. I must have looked surprised, for he pointed to where the arm would have been and said: "Russland," (Russia) . . . Auf wiedersehen." In the Hettler, I also had a closer look at some faces. The women: little pinched-in lips and big feet (size nine at least). The men: big ears and little feet.

It's difficult not to feel a little self-conscious in Giessen. People stare at you . . . they stare at each other. I stared back once, and a man said to me: "What are you staring at?" Perhaps it is that the Germans are themselves peculiarly self-conscious.

The other thing one notices quickly in Giessen is the plethora of signs. There is a sign for everything: "Put bicycles here only!"; "Littering paper forbidden by the City!"; "Turn handle to left" (over a door handle). My favorite was at the soccer field: "Vorsicht bissiger Hund!" (Beware the biting dog).

Giessen has two daily newspapers - both morning papers. The Giessener Anzeiger (Giessener Advertiser) and the Giessener Freie Presse (Giessener Free Press) have a circulation of about 16,000 each. Up to now I haven't been able to find much difference between the two. Their local articles contain almost the same wording. The makeup is similar. The features are about the same. Last Thursday you could read these local items in both papers:

- 1--Giessen gas stations are going to cut out night service,
- 2--The City Traffic Commission has recommended a new parking lot for the Walltorstrasse gate.
- 3--The class of 1917 from the Count Ludwig Gymnasium gathered at their alma mater yesterday to talk over old times, go over their old final exams, and sit in their former classroom seats.
- 4--"Guilty or not guilty?" --County Court Director Scheld gave a lecture last night on "how careful one must be these days not to come in conflict with the law."
- 5--The Giessen Women's Club has sent 1,000 parcels to the Soviet Zone of Germany in the past two years.
- 6--A 44-year-old man (no name) was sentenced to two months in jail by the district judge on charges that he tortured his horse and goat. A witness found the horse so hungry that it was eating wood. The goat was standing kneedeep in manure and crying.
- 7--A group of doctors advised a group of industrial managers on how to avoid "Manager's Disease" (heart attacks). The doctors recommended eight hours sleep a night, a glass of wine before retiring, no homework, a weekend hobby, and plenty of exercise.

Both papers work hard at cultivating the local audience. Each has a column called: "Wir gratulieren" (We congratulate), which greets old Giesseners on their birthdays. A short biography of the lucky one is printed - along with a half column picture.

The Freie Presse and the Anzeiger carry considerable amounts of national and international news. They also run wire-service features. On weekends, the Freie Presse goes after young readers with a 4-page section for children. It's called "Mach mit" (Join In), and it features drawings, stories, and poems by Giessen children. On the back page of the section is a cartoon strip - "Peter und der Wolf."

The Anzeiger weekend edition carries a special section for farmers and gardeners, called "Die Scholle" (The Sod). Articles in Die Scholle last weekend included: "The Manchurian Adonis Rose," "Delphinia," "Russian Rabbits," "An Infrared Box For Baby Pigs," and "Putting Dung On Our Fruit Trees."

The Anzeiger runs editorials. So far, the Freie Presse hasn't. The Anzeiger's signed political editorials start on the front page and continue on the second. They run about 1,000 words apiece. Every other day a member of the Anzeiger staff writes a short, light editorial. One day it was on the subject of briefcases, another on alarmclocks, another on backyard gardening. They aren't very funny. The Freie Presse matches these light pieces with an occasional poem in the Hessian dialect. The political orientation of the Anzeiger has been independent, with leanings toward Dr. Andenauer's Christian Democrat policies.

Last week there was a long and often bitter debate on foreign policy in Parliament at Bonn. The aim of the debate ostensibly was to make clear what the Administration and the opposition party were doing towards reunification of West and East Germany. The debate was broadcast over radio and television. It was the first time West Germans had a chance to hear and see its Government in action in this manner. The event brought an interesting comment from the Anzeiger editor, Dr. F. W. Lange. His editorial was reminiscent of the American reaction to the Army-McCarthy hearing broadcasts in 1954. Following, are some of Dr. Lange's remarks:

"The great foreign policy debate in Parliament leaves behind it a stale taste on the tongue. This all too generously offered chance to peek behind the scenes stripped Parliament of all its mystical aura. One should be mighty careful about using the microphone and the (television) camera (but) perhaps it will serve the purpose of keeping parliamentary discussion to the point."

Lange added that the debate brought forth nothing new from either party, as far as he could see. He agreed with one deputy that the discussion "made little sense." Lange concluded by saying the lesson of the Polish and Hungarian rebellions ought to be enough to teach Germany her duty: "to do all in our allotted power to strengthen the unity of the West."

The foreign policy debate was opened by Foreign Minister Heinrich von Brentano. He defended the Adenauer policies of support for NATO and cautious approach to the Soviet Block on the subject of reunification. Speaking for the opposition, Erich Ollenhauer, leader of the Social Democratic Party, outlined a vague plan for establishing a European "security system" which would presumably act as a third force between the East and West blocks. Such a system, said Ollenhauer, would make reunification easier.

It seems to me this debate was important enough to warrant further quotation from German newspaper commentators. Writing in Die Welt (The World, a national daily, independent, circulation 160,000) Klaus Harpprecht concluded an acrid editorial denouncing both parties, with these words:

"The time for sobering up has arrived. Let's be happy that it occurred before the elections. Disillusion always hurts, but we can bear it, we in the West at least. And the Germans in the (Soviet) Zone? They registered their doubts about our oaths a long time ago.... Let's leave reunification out of the game as long as it isn't within our grasp. Above all else, let's leave it out of the election game. He who really wants it doesn't have to talk about it every day. He who is impatient would do well to curb his passion. For our impatience is the Kremlin's secret weapon - and thereby a wonder-weapon - against reunification."

Hans Baumgarten, the influential editor of the Frankfurter Allgemeine (a national daily, independent, circulation 94,000), also wrote an earnest comment on the debate. He admits that many deputies spoke with the ballotbox in mind (this summer's national election), but he added: "that's their privilege." Baumgarten said the debate at least cleared the air. The question is now, he says: "What risks should we take ... for our security along the lines of a peaceful approach towards the East (block) in view of things as they now stand?" (and) "Can we hope to come to reunification more quickly this way?"

The other day I made friends with the headwaiter at the Prinz Carl Hotel. Horst Casper is 25, slender, dark blond, and gray-eyed. A native of Koenigsberg in East Prussia, (now controlled by the Russians) he slipped out of East Germany 11 years ago. He has been working in hotels since 1949. Two days ago he asked me to join him at Café Mettler for coffee. I asked him what he thought of the foreign policy debate. We switched to wine and Horst let loose a low, bitter torrent of words:

"Adenauer doesn't want reunification. There are only rich and poor in Germany today. The rich like it this way - no reunification. They're the ones that voted for Adenauer. Look here in Giessen, (he pointed to the main street across the square) "If we were united tomorrow, half the stores in this city would have to close down. A fifth of the people in Giessen would go over to the East, where they came from. I would. With everyone packed together here it makes good business in West Germany. With reunification, millions would go back to their homes. I'm for the Social Democrats. They really want reunification."

Sincerely,

David Binder