

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DB - 36
Two Friends

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Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Gerd seems to personify all those qualities we associate with the poetic Germans - the ethereal air, the dreaming gaze which reaches into some mystical beyond, delicately molded temples, long artistic hands, slender, clear-voiced. You see him and you think of Young Werther, of Faust when he first meets Gretchen, of Heinrich von Ofterdingen searching for the romantic blue flower.

Wolfgang, on the other hand, is down to earth - modishly and impeccably dressed, glib and gifted, ambitious, domineering, a flashing smile. A striver, the Germans would say. A bright young man, we might say. It would be difficult to find a corresponding figure in classical German literature.

Gerd lets life come to him. He absorbs it, floats in it, then drifts off to rest up from the encounter, to meditate.

Wolfgang seeks out life. He challenges it, wrestles with it, subdues it, then hurries on to look for more.

These two belong to an age-group which the Germans call the "skeptical generation" - one that is neither "silent" nor "beat" like some corresponding Americans, nor "angry" like some Englishmen. Both are 28 years old. Both come from burgher families. Both experienced the German collapse in 1945 and the hard post-war years in a similar form. They went to school together, worked together, and attended the university together.

Yet the effects of this shared experience were quite different.

Wolfgang was motivated to seek out the marketplace, the hustle and competition of Germany's largest city, Berlin. Gerd withdrew to the secure and quiet academic atmosphere of Cologne University. Wolfgang remained the practicing realist, Gerd the non-practicing idealist. Neither is a downright skeptic. That is to say, they accept the world around them as it is; they have doubts about its permanence, but they have adapted themselves to it. Furthermore, they are not at all skeptical about their own abilities to keep their heads above water.

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Wolfgang made some of this clear recently. We were sitting in his brand-new apartment in Berlin's fashionable Westend. It is a two-story affair on the sixth floor of the Le Corbusier House. Conversation had drifted to the events in Algeria and de Gaulle's accession to power. Suddenly, Wolfgang detonated. He bounded to his feet, paced around the modern furniture, and shot off a rapid-fire monologue:

"I despise the French. My father fought them back in the Twenties when they occupied the Rhineland. Blew up bridges. And I experienced them in 1946 in Austria and the Palatinate. We hated them like the plague. They plundered us. Cut all our forests down, took away everything they could carry. They were worse than the Russians. And for all that, they starved their own troops.

"I wouldn't want to give up the (French) countryside, the food, the literature., the language. But don't tell me they can make politics. They are rotten. You can't imagine what it was like under them..."

"My comrades from the 'Napola' (National Socialist Political Education Institute, a special school where selected youngsters were trained to become part of the Nazi elite) were captured by the French and put in prison camps. A couple of them were deliberately starved to death - aged 14. That's the French."

Wolfgang began to unwind. He recalled other things about the Napola. "We had six uniforms," he said, "and all kinds of ribbons and medals. We got extra rations. Absolutely the best teachers. We thought we were hot stuff."

Then he talked about the post-war days when he smuggled, stole, and slaved to help keep himself and his family alive. "I had to support my whole family when I was 14," he said. His civil servant father was still in a P.O.W. camp then.

"A couple of things I learned from that period," he continued. "I mistrust mankind. I don't dislike other people, but I'll never rely on them. When tough times come they are base. I try to help them,..."

"If a catastrophe comes again, I'll take off to Switzerland or Sweden. It won't make any difference to me if I have to play cab-driver there or something. But never again in Germany. I'll become a blackmarketeer or a smuggler. I won't have any desire to be 'legit'.

"Three things I learned from those years - to study law and find out what was right; to have enough money always, and to watch out for jealous people. I never want to be poor again. I would sooner shoot myself. If the time comes, I'll put a bullet in my head..."

Wolfgang figured this out a decade ago. He has stuck by these formulas ever since. Of course he is not as crass as he paints himself.

One reason for this, perhaps, is a tall silent girl named Karla. She is the good-looking daughter of a wealthy Leipzig businessman. Wolfgang met her while they were both studying law at Berlin's Free University about six years ago. They found they had much in common - a strong drive towards success, a willingness to work hard, an urge to be "modern", and much mutual affection. After a four-year courtship, they got married.

Meanwhile, both put in a lot of labor towards attaining their immediate goals. While continuing their studies, they held down several jobs apiece - Karla as a legal secretary and court aide, Wolfgang as an assistant at the university, bank employee, and lawyer's assistant.

Already, they have achieved many of their aims. Until this spring they rented a pleasant apartment near Berlin's Wannsee. It was tastefully furnished, largely with modern pieces which Karla's family helped them buy. Their polished gunmetal-colored Volkswagen enabled them to commute to work easily.

Several months ago they got the ultra-modern apartment in the new building "through connections." They live now in balconied splendor.

Their walls are decorated with a "real Liebermann" (a German Expressionist painter) "a real Daumier", and a baroque mirror. On their phonograph you can hear the water-cooled clarinet of Jimmy Guiffre, the sophisticated songs of Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald, and the contemporary fugues of Dave Brubeck. Lounging in a comfortable Kroll chair ("they furnished the German pavilion at Brussels...") you can sip a well-iced scotch and soda (Johnnie Walker) and admire the cut of Wolfgang's clothes ("My tailor is the best in Berlin but I fight with him all the time because I wear the British and Italian styles. Not the Berlin style...")

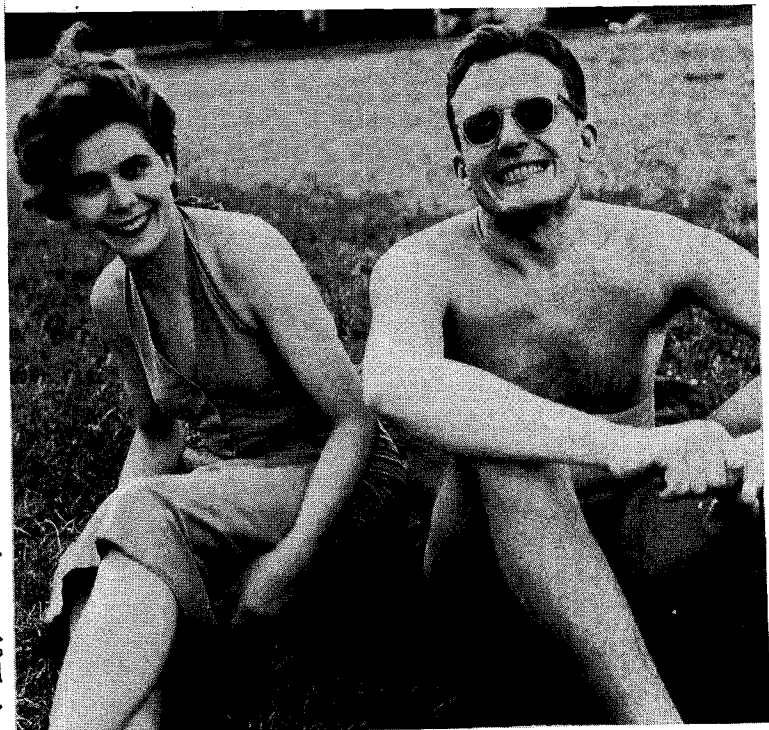
When Wolfgang and Karla go out, they "eat Chinese" at Lingnan's, or Italian at Peppino's, or French at the Maison de France. They have cocktails at American-style bars.

At first glance, you might almost pick him as an American - the gray flannel suit and the striped tie, his conversation sprinkled with Americanisms like smart, teamwork, contacts, (this comes partly from Berlin, which has been under high-powered American influence ever since the Air Lift days. It also comes from the popular news magazine, der Spiegel - patterned on Time - which employs much American slang. Wolfgang reads it regularly) It also comes from the fact that being "American" is synonymous with being "modern" in Germany. And Wolfgang is a very modern young man.

At first glance then, seeing the big smile, the open-house hospitality, and the other American touches, you might think Wolfgang was being merely imitative. That is deceptive. Wolfgang is also exercising his good taste. And where he doesn't have taste, he is learning quickly.

Wolfgang and Karla like good things.

They also like to have important friends. Their Berlin circle includes successful young lawyers, artists, and businessmen. When they married, Wolfgang chose his law professor and an elderly business associate of Karla's father for witnesses.



Wolfgang is half way to the top and in a hurry to get the rest of the way. He and Karla have it pretty well planned.

Last fall they went to work on his doctoral thesis - "I don't really need a PhD to practice," said Wolfgang, "but it helps you get a better clientele." Together, the two of them finished the dissertation in about eight weeks. It deals with the new tax law in relation to corporations, an area in which Wolfgang expects to specialize.

Meanwhile, Wolfgang had picked out Cologne University as the place where he could get his doctorate the fastest. He got in touch with Gerd and had him do some of the spadework with the law faculty. During the spring he assured me that it was a "sure thing" - he would be "Doktor Wolfgang..." in August.

Somewhere along the line his calculations were mistaken. Wolfgang's attempt to gain the degree without a period of residence at Cologne apparently fouled things up. He is now counting on December. His resiliency when this part of his timetable was not fulfilled seemed surprising. "It can wait a little," he admitted.

Wolfgang and Karla have the other things planned too. After he gets his degree, he will apply for a fellowship to do a bit of graduate work in the United States. His main object is to see a bit of the country. In several years, they expect to move out of the Le Corbusier House and into a real house somewhere in the Grunewald district. "Then we will have room to have children," says Wolfgang.

As for his career in the law, Wolfgang is betting on the eventual reunification of Germany. If and when this comes, he would be sitting nicely in the new-old capital. If it did not come, he would be left on half a spot; namely the Western Sector of this divided city, kept artificially alive by special subsidies from the Bundesrepublik and America.

Transposed into an American milieu, Wolfgang would be as easy to recognize as he is in the German one. He would be the Ivy League graduate who went to New York, the well-equipped go-getter who makes good in the big time.

In Germany, Wolfgang identifies himself as one of a new generation of individualists - persons who got pushed around when they were youngsters, persons who aren't going to let themselves get pushed around again no matter what happens.

Wolfgang's present is "American". His past was "German" and his future will be too.

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While Wolfgang was laying his well-ordered plans and setting to work realizing them, Gerd perambulated. His mother had died shortly after the war. His father, a Wehrmacht colonel, was in a Russian prison camp, where he remained until 1952. Gerd was left to take care of his sister, Maria-lies. They lived in Marburg for a time, and then in Hannover.

Gerd considered entering the book publishing business. For awhile, he worked in a firm, close to the books he loved so much. Then he went to Mainz University with Wolfgang. Maybe he would study law, he said. Gerd wrote poetry and slept late in the morning.

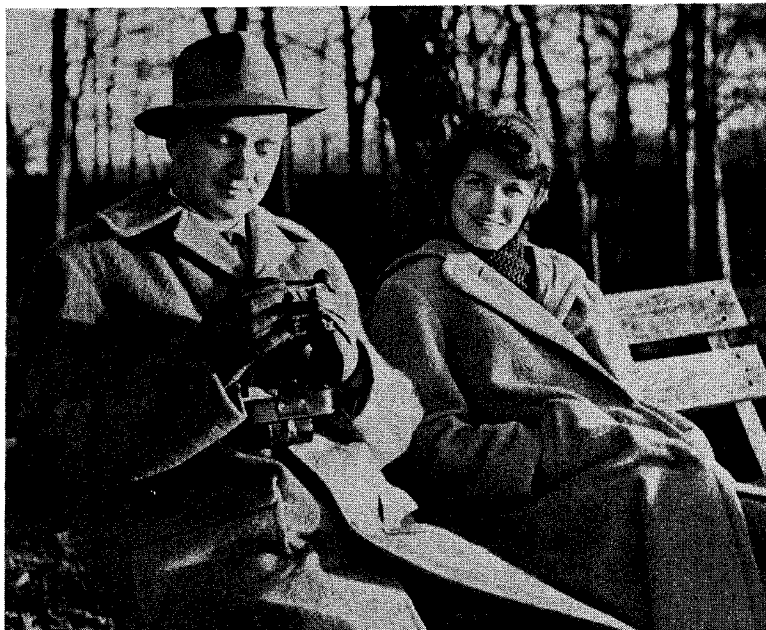
Together, the two of them moved to Hamburg for several semesters. Wolfgang supported himself with a factory job. Gerd tried several odd jobs and heard lectures on art and literature.

In 1953 he switched to Cologne University and changed his major to economics. He got a room in a rustic castle that had been made into a student home. Sometimes Gerd studied very hard. Other times he drank wine and wrote poetry. A poignant affair with a married woman set him back for some months - he left Cologne and worked in the Schwarzwald as a tourist guide until he got over it.

Gerd began to concentrate on his studies in 1955. His professor, one of Germany's leading economists, took an interest in Gerd and put him on the staff of his institute. The choice was apparently a good one. Both the institute and Gerd have been flourishing.

In the meantime, Gerd's pretty, frail sister was having troubles living with their father in Hannover. In a desperate attempt to break away, she married a young man she had known only briefly. The marriage flopped in a few weeks and she returned to her father for help. Gerd hastened to Hannover and together with his father obtained an annulment of the marriage. At the same time, he decided to take Maria-lies to Cologne in order to help her start out again. They got a small apartment near the university and Gerd arranged a secretarial job for her.

Last fall, the two moved into a large apartment on the fifth floor of a new house. They took in a young university colleague of Gerd to help with the rent. Their furnishings are still somewhat spare, but they show exquisite taste - a Scandanavian desk and chair for Gerd, a modern coffee table and lamps for Maria-lies. They painted old chairs and cupboards in gay and glowing colors. The walls are alive with choice reproductions of Picasso and Klee, and several original prints. Gerd constructed a striking



garderobe for the hallway, and Maria-lies sewed pillows for the hard chairs. The kitchen is the first I've seen in Germany that has a cozy breakfast nook. Both brother and sister excel in cooking exotic dishes.

With modest means, they have made as handsome a home as one could find in this country.

At the same time, Gerd's academic career has been progressing steadily. He is now director of a new institute, which is exploring the area between economics and sociology. Gerd has been working on his thesis meanwhile, and expects to get his doctorate in the winter. Although he found economics dry at first, the sociological twist caught and retained his interest.

Gerd is a thinker.

He will work intensely for a period and then lay off for a couple of days - to sleep, perchance to dream. Then he reads a detective story, or turns a hand to housekeeping, or goes to the movies, or pages through some theological work, or reads the newspapers, or walks in the park.

When he is in a working mood, his voice assumes the hard clear contours of North German. He wastes no words. Then there is the ever so slight resemblance to the conscientious civil servant, disciplined and self-controlled.

When he relaxes, his face and his voice assume an incredible gentleness. In such moments, one gets the impression that he is enjoying life with all his sense, as only a free spirit can.

Gerd likes to tell anecdotes. Many of them he culls from his vast store of reading. He also likes aphorisms and old epigrams. He tells them somewhat pedantically. But in addition, he has a fine sense of humor of a sort that is rare among Germans. It is a kind sense of humor.

The security of his new job and his new home have helped Gerd to concentrate better in the last years. He has the aspect of a settled man. Thus it was somewhat startling last February to hear him say that he had fallen in love. His choice was a coltish girl from the university. After the initial captivation, Gerd decided she wasn't what he imagined her to be. However, he is still seeing her. "She's a project," he said. This is his first venture with women since the wistful affair.

Like Wolfgang, Gerd is familiar with the United States. He is fond of some American jazz and he knows American literature fairly well. However, he neither dresses nor talks "American". His interest in American things (or French or English) is intellectual and aesthetic.

Gerd got pushed around just as much as Wolfgang did in the years 1945 to '48. Wolfgang has made a conscious break with this past. In Gerd's case, there is continuity between his past and his present.

Both Gerd and Wolfgang are individualists. Gerd probably more so. Wolfgang is self-reliant in terms of his existential activity. Gerd is intellectually self-reliant. Wolfgang, like so many Germans, lives by the reflection of himself that he sees in others. Gerd lives by the reflection of himself that he sees in himself.

The other day, Gerd spoke about his career for the first time in many months. "You know," he said slowly, "I think I am on the threshold. I'm going to write a really good thesis. After that, all sorts of good things will come." He paused and grinned. "I haven't been in a hurry," he added.

Wolfgang scoffs at Gerd. "He's terribly lazy even today. Just the same as ten years ago when I had to get him out of bed. I'd make tea and put the cup in his hand. Usually he would spill it or burn his tongue. That was the only thing that got him up... He just isn't reliable."

"Look at him living there in Cologne - a provincial city. He's never going to get anywhere there. He should be in Berlin, or Munich"(both of which are currently provincial)..."

"Gerd lives there with his sister. She cooks, she washes up, pays part of the rent. What more could he want. He has a wife without the trouble of being a husband. Him get married? Why should he? It's bad for Maria-lies too. She doesn't get out enough. I've told them..."

"Gerd should have has his doctorate two years ago. I am going to have mine before he does now. You notice how he's getting that academic air? He's becoming a pedant... What did he say about me last time you saw him?"

Gerd doesn't scoff at Wolfgang. But he makes observations from time to time: "Wolfgang is in an awful hurry to get that degree... he ought to know better." Or, "Wolfgang is rather nervous."

These criticisms are partly justified on both sides.

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When it comes to politics - for one example - Gerd and Wolfgang generall disagree. Wolfgang is all passion and "realism". Gerd is all objectivity and "idealism". Wolfgang says: "I don't give a damn about politics; to hell with it." He is a bit like those other Germans who say, "We are a non-political people," and then spend the rest of the evening arguing politics. Gerd thinks and votes the things "ought to be". But he is relatively dispassionate about it.

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Today, Gerd and Wolfgang have almost nothing in common except the experience they shared. But that is something that outweighs similar outlooks and similar tastes. It is also the basis of their deep friendship - one that has lasted a dozen years.

Apart, they represent opposite poles among the post-war period's young Germans. Together, they combine most of the qualities to be found in the so-called "skeptical generation."

David Binder

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