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Dream and Reality

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Richard Strauss Str. 4  
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New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Last week I drove 100 miles southwest to the City of Leipzig in the Soviet Zone of Germany. I spent five days there during the annual fall fair.

The Leipziger Messe, as it is called, is one of the most significant trade events in the entire Communist Block. There, much of the intricate dealings between the Soviet satellite states are hammered out. There, the economic planning of those states is tinkered with and adjusted. There, the new nations of Asia and Africa are royally courted by Communist hosts. There, Western buyers and sellers meet and negotiate with their Eastern counterparts.

The Leipzig Fair also provides one of the few opportunities for Western observers to enter and stay in the German Democratic Republic. For the Communist regime in the Zone is otherwise shy about publicity than Greta Garbo, despite a violent desire for world-wide recognition and respectability. The East Germans know that most publicity they get in the Western press is bound to be bad publicity.

Nevertheless, the Zone authorities go the risk of showing their laundry twice a year at Leipzig. Presumably, they reckon that in the case of the fair, mere mention of it in our press outweighs the unfavorable commentaries which attend most Western visits to the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR).

At the same time, they make an enormous effort to dress up Leipzig for the outsiders. Scores of taxis are imported from nearby Torgau and Halle. Heaps of citrus fruits and bananas appear on the grocery stands. Storewindows are filled with otherwise scarce luxury items. The streets are swept as they never are during the rest of the Socialist year.

Thus the picture of the DDR that one obtains through Leipzig-colored glasses is just as distorted as that which one gets by looking at the Soviet Sector of Berlin. They compose a store-front dream, not the warehouse reality that is the rule from Rostock to Zwickau. It is even a rather shabby dream, when compared to West German prosperity. But it is not altogether an inscrutable one.

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Obtaining a visa to attend the Leipzig Fair is very easy. You cross West Berlin, pass under the newly rebuilt Brandenburg Gate, and stop on Unter den Linden opposite the Soviet Embassy in East Berlin. There, the Fair Branch Office sells a visitor's visa for ten West Marks.

The visa document is a booklet with pages for personal information, description of valuables being taken into the DDR, and a currency certificate. Its purpose is to maintain precise control of the bearer's movements and expenditures. The latter are especially important to the East German authorities, because DDR currency can be legally purchased at a rate of four West marks to one East mark outside the Zone. It is, however, illegal to import DDR marks from the West and the penalties are severe to those who get caught doing so.

Air visitors are required to purchase East marks at an artificial one-to-one rate after they enter the Zone.

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Crossing from West Berlin into the Soviet Zone was also a simple matter. The Volkspolizisten (People's Police) had a special booth set up at the Drewitz control point on the Berlin-Leipzig Autobahn. Lines of cars and trucks were parked waiting for the hour long processing which precedes the normal transit drive from West Berlin through the Zone to West Germany. But we air visitors were politely shunted through in a few minutes.

This was in contrast to lengthy searches which some Westerners had to undergo at other control points such as Marienborn and Wartha. There, the "Vopos" turned baggage inside out, uprooted car seats, and combed wallets. Some such searches took up to four hours.

It was also a contrast to the searches I had been subjected to on several recent trips, when border police ransacked the car, handbags, and papers, and interrogated me about my political "attitudes". These frontier "Vopos" are almost all youngsters, and their investigations seem to have a random character. One time they are all smiles and dispatch. The next, they are tight-lipped and painstakingly diligent. Only a few act like fanatical Communists.

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The drive to Leipzig is an undramatic one - across the flatlands of Brandenburg's Middle Mark, a heavily wooded area interspersed with spare-looking rye and potato fields, soft grainy yellows and deep greens in the September haze. Then come the Scotch fir forests of the Fläming heights, followed by the fertile plains of the Elbe River valley; Saxony.

The Autobahn bridge across the Elbe is still a one-lane affair. Naked piers of the other section mark the demolition of World War II. So it is with the other Elbe bridge on the Berlin-Marienborn Autobahn. Similarly blown bridges in West Germany have long since been replaced. But huge girders stand now in front of the East German bridges, waiting to be fitted into place.

Beside the highway and on the overpasses, dozens of East Germans stand watching the traffic go by. Most of them wave enthusiastically at the cars with West German plates, but never to those with licenses of the DDR. It is a curious welcome.

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The Press Center at Leipzig is a 5-story building, conveniently located downtown next to the New Rathaus. It houses a large restaurant, typing rooms, a conference room, and offices for the press officials of the various government ministries. The personnel operates speedily and efficiently when it comes to ordinary matters.

I obtained all the necessary identification papers, door passes, lodging, tickets to three theater performances, and a meal in less than an hour. The press restaurant served the usual German fare - schnitzels and pork cuts. But there was the added fillip of Russian caviar and vodka. Prices were slightly higher than in West Germany.

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It was evening. The Petersstrasse was brightly illuminated; Saturday night crowds surged up and down the main street, peering in the glowing show windows. Banners with Communist slogans and placards proclaiming the Fair added a festive (if political) touch. There was an air of anticipation about.

A throng had gathered around the Capitol Theater. Spotlights played on the building and the black-red-gold national flag fluttered in the autumn breeze. Volkspolizisten held the crowds off from the theater entrance. In the lobby, knots of men stood about, smoking, and chatting in undertones. Most of them wore the red, white, and blue clenched-hands symbol of the Socialist Unity Party (Communist) in their lapels. It was 8 p.m.

All at once, several long black limousines pulled up in front of the theater. They were Russian "Zims". Out of one stepped Heinrich Rau, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the DDR and Minister for Foreign Trade and Inner-German Trade.

Fresh from Jena, where he had given the 400-year-old university a Communist curry-combing, Rau was in Leipzig to supervise the Fair. At the Capitol Theater, he made the main address in the opening ceremonies.

He is a tough bird, this 59-year-old veteran Communist; a hawknose, a switch of white hair springs from his pate, deepset eyes. Rau is the Mikoyan of the Soviet Zone, a man of practice. Two years in a Gestapo prison, commander of the 11th International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, three years in Concentration Camp Mauthausen, he has been everywhere a good German Communist should have been. Rau has survived all the party purges.

Standing beneath a huge reproduction of the DDR symbol (hammer and compass), Rau delivered his aggressive speech in the tone of a gas works executive reading the annual report at a trustees meeting. Fighting words like "atomic armament", "imperialistic", and "militaristic" came out strangely mild and pear-shaped.

Rau began with benisons for the DDR's latest proposal concerning a settlement of the German Problem - a commission composed of the Four Powers on the one side and representatives of the two German "states" on the other to arrange a peace treaty. The catch in this, of course, would be the de facto recognition of the Soviet Zone regime. Still on the subject of foreign affairs, Minister Rau touched on the Middle East and the Far East, praising the "peace-lovers" and damning the "aggressive imperialists."

Then he got down to business on trade. He condemned the American embargo against trade with the Soviet Zone. Every time he said "embargo" spotlights flicked on and newsreel cameras hummed. Western restrictions on East-West trade, he said, would serve only to strengthen interdependent trade relations among the Communists. On this same line, he also cussed out the Bonn Government for limiting trade between East and West Germany. Rau quoted Walter Lippmann in defense of his anti-embargo argument. (Lippmann has become a favorite amicus curiae in the Communist world.)

The DDR, said Rau, was ready to carry out reciprocal trade agreements with "all countries." A few minutes later, however, he remarked that East Germany could now provide itself with all the butter, eggs, and meat it needed. In the future, none of these goods would be imported from capitalist countries (hence wiping out trade with countries like Denmark and Holland).

Finally, Rau devoutly proclaimed that the DDR would "prove the superiority of the 'socialist' order of society to the capitalist economy of West Germany by surpassing the per-capita consumption of food and consumer goods in West Germany by 1961."

The Fall Fair was held in the name of this bold promise, which Rau called "completely realistic." He cited some statistics to back it up. The Genossen (comrades) in the Capitol Theater cheered.

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Leipzig's hotels were already full, so the press desk assigned me to the private apartment of a family. It was only a stone's throw from the Press Center to the apartment house. But large sections of the streets were being resurfaced and the blocked off stretches made it necessary to drive six blocks to the entrance. It was a great sandstone structure in the Moscow style, part of a series of 6-story "Socialist" apartment houses.

I rang the doorbell next to a name-card. Several minutes passed. Then a head appeared in a window high above. "I'm coming right down," it said. A dim hall light went on.

The man who came down the stairs was short and wiry. His elbows stuck out like those of a fireman on a coal-burner. He seemed to be bandy-legged until I noticed that he was limping. He unlocked the door. I handed him the room assignment card. He ushered me inside, past a framed photograph of Ernst Thälmann, the German Communist martyr, and past the bright red bulletin board that was dotted with anti-Adenauer cartoons. We walked up the ten flights of stairs to his apartment.

A small woman with large chestnut eyes greeted us softly at the door. There was an anxious tone in her voice. But she and her husband were polite and accommodating in explaining the rules of the house. She brought out towels and coathangers. We made arrangements about breakfast.

The bedroom was spotless and exceedingly well furnished; two large beds with thick downy covers, bedtables with modern lamps, a dressing table, and a large wardrobe. Two big windows opened onto the street. Next to the beds was a tiny wooden crucifix.

I told them where I came from and my profession. The man said: "You come from the West?" I nodded. He looked at me uncomprehendingly. His wife was silent and plainly frightened.

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Next morning, the sun shone hot into the room. The temperature climbed to the 80's by 9 o'clock. Breakfast was already on the table in the livingroom; two rolls, a large dish of butter, jam, and a pot of malt-coffee. The housewife had fetched all these things especially for me. Her own breakfast was much simpler.

A news broadcast was coming from the large cabinet radio. The announcer described the brilliant opening of the Fair, the countless guests, the delegates from Asia and Africa. The man came in and twisted the dials until he got some dance music. "Radio Luxemburg," he said, "they always have the best."

It was a comfortable room. Again, the furniture looked solid and there was plenty of it. Two walls boasted oil paintings and there were several framed mottos in elaborate Gothic lettering. One said: "Money doesn't make happiness, but it calms you." Another: "I've had enough." The china cabinet contained porcelain figures and a glass model of Mickey Mouse. It was the kind of room you see in most West German Kleinbürger (petit bourgeois) homes. This reminded me of the theory of a refugee professor from Leipzig who believes that "kitsch", the corny art and literature of the bourgeoisie, is an unassailable bastion against Communization in East Germany.

I went into the kitchen. The wife had deep rings beneath her eyes. Seeing that she was still afraid, I repeated the information about myself. Her husband broke in. "She thought you were German, that you were checking up on us. She couldn't sleep last night." He smiled and his brown eyes sparkled.

We asked each other questions. Yes, he was a born Leipziger, trained as a skilled factory worker; now working as an unskilled laborer. He had been severely injured in the war. She was a former kindergarten teacher, had lost her job because she was Catholic, and was now a cook in a factory. They were in none of the many Communist organizations of the DDR.

They wanted news from the West.

"Tell me, is it true what they say about the refugees?" the wife asked. "Our newspapers say that thousands are leaving West Germany and returning here." I told her about the flood of refugees leaving the Zone these days - sometimes nearly 1,000 on a single day. "That's true," she said, "we know Fritz Müller, the dermatologist. He went West with his wife and children and his car and now he's a professor again. We know lots who left."

They seemed to be confused by the contrasting reports from East and West. While they heard the Western reports over the radio regularly, they also saw the Zone newspapers every day. They couldn't tell who was lying.

Their situation was curious. It was obvious from their background that they did not approve of the DDR regime. They were familiar with the Western attitude towards East Germany through radio broadcasts.

But the constant drumfire of Communist propaganda and their own inability to test its validity made them distrustful of both Western and Eastern arguments.

Moreover, they spoke of the ZONE always as the "DDR". In other words, they acknowledged the existence of the Communist government. They agreed it was a Soviet puppet. They agreed that it was detestable. But still they recognized it as their state authority.

This is going to be hard for West Germans to swallow. People in the Federal Republic never fail to refer to East Germany as the "Soviet Occupation ZONE", or as "Middle Germany" - the area between West Germany and the territories under Polish administration which they call "East Germany."

But my Leipzig hosts made it plain that these geopolitical semantics were beyond them. It was the DDR government that gave them their jobs and took them away. It was the DDR government that ordered them to help repair streets in their spare time. It was the DDR government that demanded their participation in party meetings. It was the DDR government that prevented them from visiting relatives in the Bundesrepublik. | "Here in the DDR..." was the way their sentences began.

Whether they liked this regime or not, they acknowledged it.

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At press headquarters, I spoke to a young attache from East Berlin's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Could I obtain an interview with Minister Rau? Herr May wiped his pale forehead with a handkerchief. "You must hand in a typewritten list of questions," he said, "and then we will forward it to the proper authorities." The attache was distraught.

In one of the typing rooms, the Associated Press correspondent was scratching his head. His photographer had just been informed that the East Germans would not accept AP pictures for transmission to the West; only the official Fair photographs could be sent. The correspondent shrugged and told the photographer to return to Frankfurt that same day. "What's the use?" he asked. "No sense in keeping a photographer here if his pictures don't go through."

He was skeptical about an interview with Rau. "I handed in my list yesterday," he said. That night, the AP man cornered Rau at a reception and got some dark threats about blockading Berlin out of him. Rau denied the threats after the story made headlines in the West.

I typed up my questions and gave the list to Herr May. "We'll get in touch with you," he said with an unconvincing smile.

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Fair visitors and Leipzigers filled the sunny streets of the old inner city. They spent a long time before the showcases with foreign goods - Chinese kimonos, Crimean wines, Czechoslovakian glass. State-owned stores - those carrying the initials of the Handels-organization (HO) - invariably filled their windows with Communist slogans.

In the midst of some artfully draped swatches of velvet was the bright red warning, "Away With Rocket Bases and Atomic Weapons!" Next to a baby carriage display there was the assurance, "Socialism Is Victorious."



The Socialist Note - -  
Communist Slogans in Showcases

These vows were echoed en gros in the countless posters plastered on the new buildings and the bomb-scarred structures as well as on the red banners strung across the streets. In size and number, they put an American billboard company to shame.

I asked a young taxi driver what he thought of these omnipresent political chidings. He looked over his shoulder. "You get so you don't even see them anymore," he said. "You just look right past them."

The Fair's textile exhibits were gathered in one 8-story barn of a building that faces the City's inner ring. The Ringmessehaus, as it is called, does not have an inviting facade. It is just big. But what comparisons can one make? It has its counterpart in Frankfurt am Main.

Again, the Socialist note rang in most of the exhibits. Mannequins with chic Paris-copy styles were centered around a great placard that had a large mushroom cloud painted on it. "All Are Endangered; Keep The Peace," said the message underneath. It was the same in all the other displays.

I asked a young salesman from a state-owned factory just what the connection was between his bathing suits and bomb scares. He cast his eyes downward and replied, "Well...we feel there is a connection. We are building Socialism this way."

One of the fanciest displays was the nylon stocking section. The showcase that drew the most spectators here was the one with seamless stockings, a fashion craze all over Germany now. The Zone has just one factory producing them. I asked the sales manager of the People's Own Esda factory how long he had been producing the seamless variety. "Several years now," he said, preening himself. But he would not say how many machines he had or the number of pairs he produced annually. "We are building up right now," was all he would say.

A young woman had some other information about these luxury items. She said nearly all the People's Own seamless stockings were exported. "I work in a County 'HO' store," she said. "Last year our allotment was 60 pairs for the whole county. That's enough for about 12 women."

"I just happen to have some on; but I got these in West Berlin. Oh. I shouldn't say that. It's true though. Everybody who can buys them in West Berlin. They cost us more, but you can always get them." What is true of stockings is true of dozens of other items.

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A number of private firms had displays in the Ringmessehaus. They had been relegated to the upper floors. Many of their showcases bore the small legend, "State Participation." This is a recent development whereby the DDR government forces private firms to accept State capital. Western observers regard this as a preliminary step to outright collectivization.

But the manager of one private dress firm was optimistic. "We don't expect to be collectivized for at least seven years," he said. "Of course you never can tell."

His present worry was how to compete with the State-owned companies. "We don't get enough capital to expand," he said. "And even if we had enough, we wouldn't get the workers or raw materials to do so. I could do three times the business if the Government would let me."

Strangely, this same complaint was voiced earlier in the day by the manager of a People's Own factory. During the tour of the official delegations through the Fair exhibits, this manager loudly protested to DDR Finance Minister Willy Rumpf: "Just give me the credit and the workers and I can turn out three times the present volume." Minister Rumpf was visibly irritated by the demand.

These remarks underline the difficulties of the DDR's planned economy. The State planners are waging war on many fronts. First of all, they must meet the exorbitant demands of the Soviet Union, a fifth of whose imports come from the DDR. Second, they must compete on the foreign trade market, often at considerable sacrifices. Third, they must satisfy certain basic demands of the Zone population, demands that are always growing. Fourth; they must carry on collectivization of the remaining private companies (and farms) without lowering their production.

Naturally, there isn't enough capital, labor reserve, and raw material to fulfil all these demands simultaneously. Despite a noteworthy climb in DDR production figures during recent years, the planners still have to cut a lot of big corners.

*David Binder*  
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(To be continued)