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The Nervous Ones

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Richard Strauss Str. 4
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New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

After returning from Leipzig, people asked how things looked in the Soviet Zone. My reply, almost automatic, and very probably an echo of someone else's comment, was, "It looks seedy."

In retrospect, the remark was apt, but somehow, it needs clarification.

Take the aspect of most city streets in the German Democratic Republic. They have a drab, uncared for look. Stucco is peeling off the facades and beams are exposed to the elements. Potholes remain unfilled. Weeds run rampant in the vacant lots and on some of the abandoned farms. The countless Communist posters make it plain a thousand times over that it is sometimes cheaper to paste up politics than to repair houses. It is a depressing scene, depressing when you compare it to Hamburg or Düsseldorf.

But is that a fair scale to measure by?

The East German scene is still more affluent than its counterparts in Southern Italy, or India, or Africa. Besides, there is a huge construction campaign going on - one that will in time brighten the forlorn face of the Zone. (From the looks of the architectural models now being displayed in East Berlin Museums, the new buildings will have an imaginative flair that was impossible in the Stalin Era.)

Already, Communist shirtfronts are billowing with pride in the glorious East German future as forecast at last July's Fifth Party Congress. Even if their present poor quality putty crumbles and their paint flakes, it appears probable that many of their hopes will be fulfilled in the coming years.

However, to walk into the Soviet Zone at the moment is usually to walk into the Nineteen Thirties - the old-fashioned clothes, the shops, the homes.

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It was a simmering Sunday afternoon and the people flocked to the cafés. There was a big garden restaurant on the Peterstrasse where a string orchestra played schmaltzy music. I asked the young man if a chair was free at his table. He nodded. His hands twitched nervously. They had cuts on them. His eyes were masked by dark glasses. His spare mouth worked incessantly. He wore a tight, box-backed jacket over his black silk shirt.

Ten minutes passed.

An older couple joined us. The young man greeted them curtly. The older man was unshaven and there were cuts on his face. If it wasn't for them and his shabby suit, he would have looked handsome. The thin-lipped woman was unkempt and she had on a dowdy lace blouse.

Soon the couple began asking questions. "Where are you from?" "Is Chicago the city where all those gangsters and criminals live?" "Is it true that when you are old you still have to work?" "How many people own cars?" "You have a paradise, why are there so many unemployed?" (The older man was sure there were four million unemployed in America, not two million.)

We exchanged cigarettes. The woman said she and her husband had come to Leipzig to visit their (silent) son and see the Fair. Father and son, she added, were butchers by trade. "We had our own butcher shop before the war. Now we are helpers in State-owned markets." Where did the parents live? She named a small

village in Brandenburg. "We have a television set," said the father proudly. What was the price? "Ours cost 2,200 marks (\$600)," he said. How much did he earn as a butcher? "Oh, between 400 and 450 marks a month." (This is about the average wage in the Zone.)

"Then how can you afford to buy a television set?" I asked. "Isn't it awfully expensive?"

"Well," said the father, "we sold a cow and a pig and that brought in a lot. There are 30 sets or so in our town. We get all the Western programs regularly."

The mother talked about her family: "Our other son is an interpreter. He studied at Leipzig. Now he is on vacation at the Black Sea."

Like walking into the 1930's - The slogan on opera house reconstruction vows to overtake West German per capita consumption by 1961...

(More and more East Germans take their holidays in Russia now, but it is still a costly proposition which party big shots and other favored elements can alone enjoy and afford.)



The father spoke about America once more. He had been there as a P.O.W. He recalled the food, the clothes, and the automobiles. It was a recitation his family must have heard many times. The mother asked about prices in the United States. "Ach," she sighed. It must be paradise there...Paradise." The taciturn son smiled sourly and wrung his lacerated hands. "And free," he said.

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A newspaperman recommended the Astoria Hotel's "Den" as a good restaurant. I hailed a taxi and told the driver "Platz der Republik". It was a very old car and a very young driver. "Your automobile?" I asked. "You said it," he replied. "You don't think I'd drive one of those State-owned ones do you. I'm going to stay private."

I asked him whether he listened to the Western radio broadcasts. "All of them," he said. "Especially RIAS (the West Berlin station supported by the United States Information Service) and BBC. It comes in beautifully on FM."

We rattled up to the Astoria. Big Russian cars were parked all around it as though there were a movie premiere. Liveried doormen shooed away the curious crowds. There were signs in the windows: "Closed. Reserved only for Fair Guests." This was one of the many first-class hotels kept for the prominent. "You can eat around the corner," said the cabby, "in the celler with the proletarians."

The "Den" was full. I finally got a place and ordered a Rostbraten. The others at the table were drinking; three men and a heavily made-up girl in a knit dress. They were all employed by People's Own dress factories, one of them said. Their eyes were slightly glazed and they were joking among themselves.

"We're his servants," said one of the men, and pointed to a skinny young fellow who wore the Communist Party button. "I thought there were no more servants under 'Socialism'," I replied. "Good, Good!" said the older man.

The girl gazed at us balefully. She appeared to be suspicious of foreigners. The young man began to speak excitedly. "Some Westerners think our styles are dictated to us. That's not true. We are completely free to choose our fashions. Mostly we follow Paris and Rome. We always will." Then he blustered a bit about the superiority of 'Socialism',

"Mind you," he concluded, "I'm not trying to convince you. Don't get that idea." The older man ordered a round of cognac and we toasted the nervous girl. Then the young man invited me to visit his exhibit.

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At 8 p.m. I went to the Congress Hall at the Leipzig Zoo to hear a festival concert by the famous Gewandhaus Orchestra. Fritz Konwitschny, the renowned conductor, had selected a program which included Brahms' First Symphony and the work of a modern Finnish composer. It was stuffy and hot in the auditorium; so much so that a girl in the next row keeled over and fainted.

The performance was excellent. Konwitschny conducts with superb control and fluidity.

He has been well rewarded for his ability and for his political loyalty to the DDR regime. The Government recently awarded him the "National Prize" for artistic accomplishment. Konwitschny also receives an enormous salary. In Leipzig you can hear whispers about the conductor's big spends.

Konwitschny's financial harvest is fairly typical for performing artists in the DDR. That is why orchestras like the Gewandhaus, and the opera companies and theater groups of East Berlin enjoy great reputations. The Government recognizes that high art pays good political premiums, and they support it accordingly.

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In the morning, my hosts talked more about their life in Leipzig. The husband hauled out two carefully preserved Western dance records and put them on the phonograph turntable. "It's not that this music is forbidden, he said, 'it's just 'not desired'."

He recited some of the bitter jokes about Walter Ulbricht, the Leipzig-born first secretary of the Socialist Unity Party (Communist) who is the real boss of the satellite state. "Have you had an Ulbricht Schnitzel yet?" the jape begins. "No? Well, you can't get them yet. Why? Because they haven't killed the pig yet."

He turned to politics: "Look at Adenauer with his 82 years. What a man. He still travels around the world. He goes to the Russians (to Moscow in 1955) and pounds on the table and says, 'Give me what I want.' And they do. Our Pieck (Wilhelm Pieck, 82, the figurehead president of the DDR) can't even take the ride from Berlin to Leipzig, he's so senile."

I asked his wife about the practice of religion in Leipzig. She said that before the war the population was split fifty-fifty between Protestants and Catholics. But with the post-war influx of expellees from the Sudetenland and Silesia, the city now has a great Catholic majority.

"When I go to church," she said, "I get sneered at by the neighbors. They stop you on the streets and say, 'Those lazy priests, they ought to go to work.' and 'Why do you waste your time in church?'"

"But the church is always full. There are services from 6 a.m. to noon on Sunday - alternating for Protestants and Catholics. You should have been here on Corpus Christi this year. It was a real demonstration."

Indicative of the Zone regime's attitude towards religion is the fact that Leipzig's war-damaged Catholic church is being torn down rather than rebuilt. Official pressure against churchgoers and priests increases daily.

My hosts also told about the "Voluntary Construction Hours" they have had to put in during recent years. They were obliged to "volunteer" their time to help build roads, houses, and parks. The "volunteers" are organized in brigades of shovellers, brick-chippers, rakers, and so on.

The only compensation for such work is that one may get an apartment in a "Socialist" building - in other words, a good one. The State demand for this type of extra labor is constant and it embraces every element of the population. It is one of the things that gives the DDR a sort of wartime atmosphere.



"We had to put in 500 'construction hours' to get into this apartment and we will have to do more later," said the man. (This is above and beyond the regular 45-hour work week.)

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One topic that interested me particularly was the youth. Throughout the summer, reports seeped out to the West that teen-aged Leipzigers had been fighting attempts to mobilize them for Communist tasks. There were stories of rock 'n roll "gangs", riots, hot jazz clubs, and a virulent protest movement against the Communist youth organization, Frei Deutsche Jugend (FDJ). Jazz appeared to be the focal point of the resistance. The DDR Government has frequently declared this music to be "degenerate", "corrupt", or "imperialistic gangster 'unmusic'."

I went first to the People's Police station, a large building facing the Dittrichring. The two Volkspolizisten at the door were baffled by the request to see their "press officer." One of them dialed two or three numbers on his telephone to find out if such a person existed. Finally he said: "My comrade will escort you to Major Schmoeller. But first fill out this form and leave your pass here."

We took the paternoster to the third floor. Major Schmoeller received me in a spacious office. He was a beefy man who spoke the broad Saxon dialect.

"Major," I began, "We have been reading a lot about the wild teen-agers of Leipzig in the DDR press and the arrest of some. Could you tell something about it."

"Well," he said, "it was really only a small number in the great mass (the newspapers had spoken of 'several hundred'). A bunch of kids who dressed in the Western styles; cowboy shirts, blue jeans, and medallions on their chests. Some of them got fresh to people on the streets... It's not really a problem. Purely external. They just don't fit in our 'Socialist' street scene.

"We arrested some of them to put a scare in them, and that stopped it. The 'Scarecrows of the Petersstrasse,' that's what the newspaper called them." He chuckled heavily.

"Would it be possible to look at the records or talk to the detectives who worked on the cases? Major Schmoeller blenched. "Just a minute. I will have to speak to my chief." He returned a few minutes later and spoke very rapidly: "You will have to get all your information from the Minister of Interior," he said, "in East Berlin. I cannot tell you any more. Goodbye."

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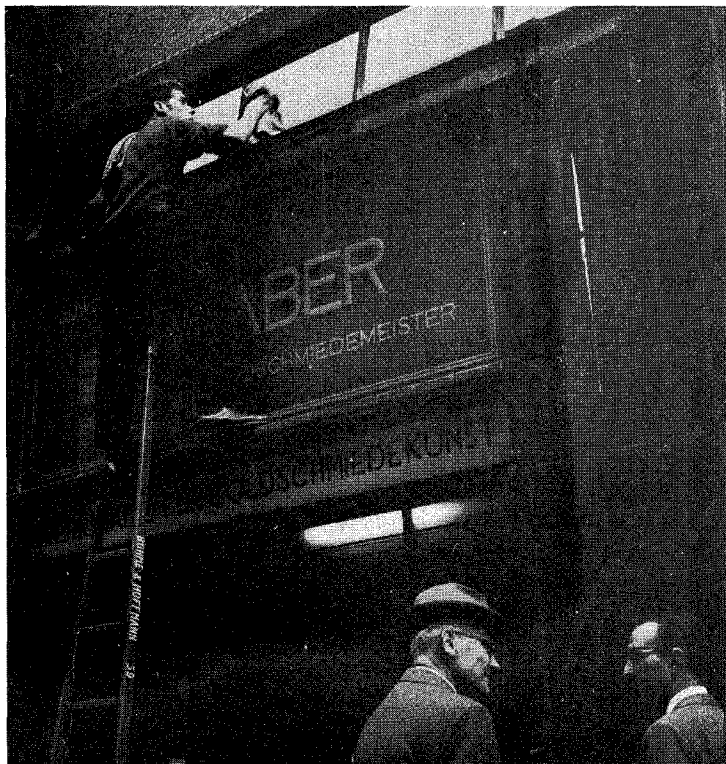
Out on the street I stopped a couple of youngsters wearing Lederhosen. "Hey boys, what do you know about the teen-agers who got in trouble with the cops?"

"Man, it was rough," said the oldest. "They expelled lots of them from our school. And the principal forbade blue jeans."

"There were three gangs," said the other, "The 'Capitols', the 'Broadways', and the 'Forty-Seconds'. Many were arrested last month. And the police closed down the jazz clubs."

Where could you hear hot music now in Leipzig?

"The only place I heard of was out on the Thälmannstrasse, but it may be closed now too," said the first. "They (the Communists) are really down on us now."



A boy who dares to wear the 'rock-n roll' costume (left) is a rare sight in Leipzig now.

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The pinch-faced party-member who sat opposite me during lunch in the Thüringer Hof had some more to say on this subject.

"We haven't got many rock 'n roll boys in our town. But there are plenty of them in the industrial cities," he said.

Why, I wanted to know.

"They get paid too much. Enough for a family man. Then they get the idea that they should show off in public."

But why the Western stuff specifically?

"They think that everything from the West is modern and fashionable. So they imitate it. They smuggle in these adventure stories where gruesome crimes are described in exact detail. They think 'We can try something like that too.' Then you get the riots." (He swallowed and then continued in a low voice.) "In all honesty, I'll tell you I like to read those thrillers myself. And I do."

Just how do the juvenile riots start?

"They get a wad of dough in their pockets and they go into some dive and throw down three beers. Then they feel pretty big and start showing off... These youngsters should be taught to take hikes, go to summer camps. That's why we have our youth groups."

A woman at the table broke in: "We come from a factory town and I can tell you, every kid there wears, does and speaks nothing but Western stuff."

The party man, a buyer from a small town State co-operative store, added, "To be frank, one reason is that we are about ten years behind the times when it comes to fashions and music. But let me tell you, the bands won't play any more here unless the kids behave."

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The main theater of operations in the stepped-up Communist campaign to capture East Germany's reluctant youth is education. The latest move in this area was the nationwide introduction of "polytechnical education" on September 1.

Its announced aim is to combine classroom theory with field practice. The means include sending all the DDR's school children from seventh to twelfth grade onto farms and into factories once a week to work. The Government also hopes to make the youngsters into better Communists this way.

In order to find out more about this new scheme I went to the Department for People's Education in the Leipzig Rathaus. A suspicious secretary started to shoo me out of the superintendent's office. Then she changed her mind and took me into the boss's office. I told him I wanted to interview some teachers and maybe visit a "polytechnical class."

"But we just started," he said. "It's too early to look now." He seemed upset. "I have been superintendent for only a few weeks." (The implication was that his predecessor had flown the coop to West Germany. Some 3,000 teachers have fled the DDR since January, 1958). "I cannot arrange anything. Do it through your press bureau."

At the Press Center, Herr May was jumpy but accommodating. He promised to set up a conference with some teachers. As for the interview with Trade Minister Rau (DB - 38), he was not so sure.

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That same afternoon, Heinrich Rau and half a dozen of his cronies held a stagy press conference in the ornate (bourgeois) assembly room of the Rathaus. The hall was jammed with several hundred reporters, most of them from DDR papers. Facing us were the trade functionaries, looking well-fed and smug.



Press Conference - Minister Rau
second from the right...

The conference started with a long and tiresome declaration by Rau's deputy, Gerhard Weiss. He echoed the boasts about East Germany's incredible industrial successes and took a few swipes at the West German economy.

As might be expected, most of the discussion period was taken up by planted questions from the DDR reporters. These men would utter the questions in an almost pious tone. Then

one of the officials would stand up with a "I'm glad you asked me that" look and read the reply from a manuscript. It was pretty crude.

The only questions that were not answered directly were the ones the non-communists asked. For instance, an Egyptian asked if the DDR would consider stretching its credit terms on loans to the United Arab Republic. Answer: "We are greatly interested in continuing development of trade with Near East countries..."

I directed the following question at Minister Rau: "Insofar as you complained during your opening speech about the U.S. embargo against the DDR (DB - 38) could you tell us what goods the DDR wants to trade with America if and when the embargo is lifted?"

Rau stood up, smiled a patriarch's smile, and paused. He began slowly. "Well...actually, we haven't made any thoughts about that... America would have such a broad assortment of goods to offer... At present there is no basis for trade... In fact we haven't had any time to think about it. There's so much to think about..."

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After the conference I looked up the reporter from the local newspaper, the Leipziger Volkszeitung. I asked him if he could arrange to show me around his plant. He said that he would give a collegial try. In the course of the next 48 hours I called the paper five times. Five times I got the run-around. Finally, I gave up. It was understandable, but it seemed a pity that the People's reporters didn't dare receive a Western colleague. Probably the Leipzig newsmen, like most Communists, regard us Westerners as spies.

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