

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

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DB - 42
Stalin Foundry -
The House That Joe Built

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Carmerstrasse 19
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522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Not until the bus rattled past the candy-striped tollgate that divides Grünau in East Berlin from the Brandenburg meadows of East Germany did I believe it. We were driving to Stalinstadt, and I was still in the party.

Smelly exhaust fumes from the low octane gasoline pervaded the ancient bus. The big basalt cobblestones and poorly-sprung axles turned sitting at the back into a long ride on an outlaw horse. It was just a bit after dawn on a Monday morning in October, and my stomach was growling after its missing breakfast. Yet I was exhilarated. We were going to Stalinstadt.

Four days earlier, a polite young man made the offer. I had just registered to attend the (Marxist) World Economic Conference at East Berlin's Humboldt University. The young official asked, "Would you like to visit a center of Socialist Construction after the conference? All the participants are invited."

I was flabbergasted. My previous applications for journeys into the German Democratic Republic had all been rejected, by Communist press officials. Yet here was a member of Walter Ulbricht's Socialist Unity Party (SED) asking me if I wanted to take a trip into the forbidden reaches of the DDR. "Naturally," I said. "I would be very pleased to go."

He told me to bring my passport next morning in order to obtain the necessary visa. I did so. He returned it that noon, smiling, and said I would be informed the following day about the time of departure.

I spent most of the afternoon discussing the addresses of various Marxist economists with young Party members from the university. About 5 p.m., one of them interrupted our amiable dialogue long enough to say, "By the way, you won't be able to go along on the excursion to Stalinstadt...(up to this time I did not know the destination). There isn't enough room in the bus."

"But Herr Richter," I protested, "the trip was promised me... I have a visa...I have been counting on it." His hawk face remained impassive. However, he spoke cordially; he would try to find a place for me. I should ask later for news. There seemed to be nothing more I could do.

As I was about to leave, a West German reporter entered the room. He was Fritz Fack, economics writer for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. It was Fack's article on deviations from the Marxist party-line by a Russian economist that aroused my curiosity about the

Humboldt conference in the first place. Herr Richter rose and made a sardonic bow. "Ah, Dr. Fack," he said. "Sit down. I have been looking forward to speaking with you." A malicious grin whisked across his face. Fack sat down, nonplussed. The half dozen East German students remained expressionless.

"Dr. Fack," Richter continued, "it is good that you came by. Now I can take this opportunity to tell you that you will not be joining us on the journey to Stalinstadt." He paused to allow the West German's bewilderment increase. "The reason why you will not be going is the article you wrote in your paper about our conference. It is full of untruths and misrepresentations."

The newspaperman flushed, but managed to keep control of himself. He clenched his hands while Richter flung more abuses at him for reporting the Soviet deviations. "...and that is the sole reason why we are not taking you along," the young Communist concluded. "We cannot trust you to tell the truth." Dr. Fack attempted once to remonstrate, but he saw that it was pointless. He assured Richter that he would report the affair in full to his editors and that a reply would be printed. (This was done in the following week.) The confrontation between Fack and Richter seemed a bad omen for my own chances to join the trip.

I returned next day for the last session of the economic conference. To my surprise, Herr Richter greeted me warmly with the news that I could indeed go along to Stalinstadt. I should meet the group at the Guesthouse of the Free German Trade Union League at 6:30 a.m. Monday.

In the corridor that afternoon, I introduced myself to Dr. Fack and told him how painful it was to witness the humiliating scene of the previous day. "You see," he replied, "that is just typical of them - they turn an offer like that into a reward for good behavior that they can take away any time. You are lucky they don't see your articles."

Together, we sat and listened to the remarkable recantation of Professor Lev A. Mendelson, the economist from the Lomonosov University who made the broadest deviation three days earlier. Afterwards, Mendelson also reneged on an earlier agreement to be interviewed by me. He had just been called a "bourgeois reactionary" by a Moscow colleague from the Communist Party Central Committee, P. K. Fournov. Mendelson looked unhappy and fatigued.

I met Dr. Fack later in West Berlin to discuss the deviation article and his "incident". He wished me luck on the expedition to Stalinstadt. "I won't believe it until we are inside the DDR," I said.

* * *

The sun was not up yet when I arrived at the rendezvous point in the Invalidenstrasse. Neither were the Marxists who were to make the journey. I stood outside the Guesthouse smoking, and peered at the ruins of the old Stettiner Station across the square.

Presently, the university functionaries and the Marxist guests appeared, looking very sleepy. The bus driver started up his engine, shooting a cloud of blue smoke out the back.

We climbed in, about two dozen of us. On each chair there was a plastic bag containing fruit and sandwiches. Four functionaries took seats around me. I could see that they were going to be my shepherds for the rest of the day. As the bus headed south towards the sector border, one of them asked to see my passport. He examined the visa and frowned. "It wasn't stamped correctly," he said, looking up. "There is no permit for Stalinstadt..."

Again, I was sure this meant the end of the road for me. "Well," he said, cheerfully, "We will see what happens at the border." As it happened, this youthful official was the only person who left the bus at the sector frontier. He spoke briefly to the Volkspolizist, flashed a card at him, and rejoined us. "You are about to enter the DDR illegally," he grinned. "But we will see that you don't get into any trouble." For the first time, I looked gratefully at the party button gleaming in his lapel.

* * *

Half an hour later, the bus ascended from the cobblestone road to the relative smoothness of the Autobahn. We rolled on in the direction of Poland. The functionaries untied their breakfast bags, and the rest of us followed suit.

In the fields beside the highway, long rows of harvesters bent over the earth. They were filling the sacks they dragged with potatoes. "A lot of those are classmates of ours," said Herr Dreher, one of the functionaries. "They have a special vacation now to help out in the harvest."

The bus continued about 25 miles on the highway and then descended once again to a cobblestone Landstrasse. We passed more potato fields. There seemed to be very few farm machines in the region. The few villages we drove through looked terribly run down. Some showed signs of war damage suffered in the heavy fighting of early 1945 when the relentless Red Army rolled over the last of Hitler's S.S. divisions. There were no new buildings.

Just beyond Müllrose, the road circled a vast Soviet caserne, which was surrounded by a high wall. Oddly enough, the signs forbidding trespassing on the nearby maneuver grounds were lettered in French as well as in Russian and German.

Another ten miles (they seemed like leagues in that bus) and we attained the Oder Valley. As we emerged from a deep pine forest, we saw the chimneys of Stalinstadt.

"Are we going to Stalingrad?" asked one of the passengers. "No," replied an East German, hastily. "To Stalinstadt."

The approach is impressive. Out here in the midst of this sparse agricultural area - a mixture of heath and meadow - one comes suddenly upon a great factory complex. The five tall chimneys of the power station, the three giant coking ovens,

the smelters looking like strange cathedrals in the distance. This was the J. V. Stalin Iron Foundry Combinat, raison d'être of Stalin-stadt and sometime pride of Communist East Germany.

The place had a different atmosphere, even from the bus window. After miles of slumbering villages and timeless peasant fields, here was new construction, fresh paint, scaffoldings. We rounded a corner dividing the town from the factory area (the latter was clearly recognizable by the giant barbed wire fence that sealed it off.)

Set in a ways from the corner was a pile of boulders; behind it a large sign that said "Rostock needs rocks". This was the collecting point for stones to be used in building the mole for Rostock's new harbor. It illustrated one of the many shortages which the DDR overcomes by "popular action".

The unpaved road skirted the barbed fence. We drove past a new building where apprentices were being schooled, past the Free German Youth Clubhouse, past the plant's hospital, and then to the front of the administration building. Most of these yellow-brick structures were two stories high. There was nothing attractive about them.

It was about 11 a.m. when we descended from the bus and filed into the administration building. We were welcomed by Erich Markowitsch, Works Director of the Kombinat, and his right hand man, SED secretary Riegel.

Markowitsch, a brisk, quick-tongued man, led us into his conference room, which was decorated with a bust of Karl Marx and a painting of Lenin exhorting the workers. As soon as we were seated, he launched into a well-practiced speech on the subject, "Why Stalin-stadt?" As well he might, since the plant which the DDR "stamped out of the earth" here is still a very controversial matter.

(Begun in 1951, the "Stalin" project was unpopular from the start - not alone for its name. It was designed to increase East Germany's industrial autonomy. But its dependence on Polish coal and Russian iron ore made it incredibly uneconomical. It was one of the sites where workers revolted unsuccessfully against the Communist regime on June 17, 1953. Since then, its growth has been hampered by shortages of labor and materials, despite large State priorities.)

The 45-year-old Markowitsch declaimed the following with vigor:

"We are glad you came here to convince yourselves personally that we are building for our workers..."

"The foundry was constructed for these reasons: As a result of the unfortunate division of Germany, the DDR had an annual raw steel production of only 22,000 tons, mostly from the old Max Foundry. However, our machine tool industry had to have raw materials..."

"It is not an accident that the foundry was erected on the 'Oder-Neisse Peace Boundary', but rather a demonstration to our Polish neighbors... We are five kilometers from the frontier.

(The DDR has officially declared the Oder-Neisse Line to be its easternmost border.)

"A second reason is the social necessity that the working class at last take over the reins of leadership. It is our hope that the workers (here) have an influence on the agricultural area... (Translated roughly, this is the SED's expectation that enthusiastic worker-Communists will influence 'backward' peasants to join the cause.)

"But no valuable land was taken for the Foundry; only heath and pine forest...

"Another reason is the geographic location. We get iron ore from Krivoi Rog (1,000 miles away in the Donets Basin), cokes from Poland (the coal fields are about 200 miles away from Stalin-stadt), and lime from Rüdersdorf (in the DDR). We are located on the Oder-Spree Canal, which gives us access to Berlin and to the Baltic..."



Works Director Markowitsch - Behind him is chart of the Stalin Foundry.

Markowitsch seized a pointer and turned to the large blueprint behind him. He described the various buildings and their functions, the machines and their capacities - unloaders, conveyor belts, ore-crushers, sorters, the agglomerator for fine ore, the smelters...

"Of course we are not completely finished yet," he said. "You will see several barracks here and there. They are temporary. So is this building. We thought the important thing was to build first for the workers - dining halls and homes. We will get our administration building later..." Markowitsch swept the pointer across the middle of the chart. "This street which you drove in on will be in the middle of the Kombinat later."

"We will be getting a rolling mill in the next five year plan so we can make our own steel here..."

The director careened through more facts and figures concerning research laboratories, high productivity ("In honor of the ninth birthday of the Republic we turned out 3,600 tons of iron in one day!"), the plant's building society, wages, and so on. Then he asked for questions.

There was a pause. None of the other excursionists seemed to have queries. So I opened a barrage. Markowitsch was visibly displeased, but he answered every question candidly.

He admitted for instance, that 50 per cent of the foundry's coal supply came from Poland, although the original plans called for much more than that. (The Poles cut down their shipments to the DDR after the 1956 Uprising. They have increased them reluctantly since then under Soviet pressure.)

Markowitsch also conceded that winter temperatures caused serious difficulties with the ore shipments, which arrived frozen stiff from Russia. "We had to blast some of it out of the freight-cars," he said, "until we could build up thawing facilities." (DDR railroad men have said rolling stock is never the same after it has been to Stalinstadt). "This year maybe the dear Lord will be with us." He smirked. "...if He feeds Himself on dialectical materialism."

One question he obviously enjoyed answering concerned the steady increase of production norms. I had asked how the workers react to the constantly rising demands upon them.

"We have never seen that a limit on worker productivity exists," said Markowitsch. "We thought we were doing well at first when a smelter turned out 420 tons a day. Now we laugh when it doesn't exceed 500 tons."

"We obtained this result by better machines, new techniques, and automation. You must differentiate between work intensity and productivity." He proceeded with some sneers at the "capitalist" methods of increasing productivity.

"You see in me a representative of Socialist economy," he said. "Therefore, you will excuse my criticism of capitalism." (Nobody had said a word about capitalism.)

"Stalinstadt is the first 'Socialist City,'" he continued. "Understand, we don't rip up any capitalist tracks. We even drive capitalist locomotives sometimes. Glad to. But when we build new, we build Socialist."

There were no more questions. So Markowitsch introduced us to the young man who would guide us about the foundry. "Please do not take any photographs," he admonished, and took his leave. We returned to the bus.

The driver turned north again along the barbed wire fence. We passed a trio of peaked-roof, russet colored barracks set off to the left in another barbed wire compound. A dozen Volkspolizisten trod the courtyard. "Guards," said someone. There was room enough in the barracks for at least 300.

The bus bobbed over the rutted dirt road for another mile and then halted at a gate. The SED functionary and the guide got out and showed the Vopo watchmen our entry pass. We drove inside.

First stop was the unloading apparatus for railroad freight-cars. It and everything around was covered with red ore dust. We climbed up to the tracks to watch the operation. About fifteen workers stood around the two "tippers". They wore blue fatigue suits and plastic composition helmets. They had nothing to do. So they eyed us noncommittally.

Below the tracks was the Oder-Spree Canal. Several coal barges rested along the quai. Just beyond were heaps of coal, lime and sand. A long elevated conveyor system stretched above.

With a rattle and crash, an ore car rolled onto the tipper. While the clangor of shunting continued, I went over to an elderly worker to ask questions. Immediately, one of the functionaries came after me.

The laborer answered laconically; he had been at Stalinstadt two years. He earned 450 marks a month when he was "lucky", and the tipper workers had lots of accidents at night because of poor lighting. (Concerning wages, it is worth noting that Markowitsch claimed the average Stalin Works wage is 550 marks a month.)

From the tippers we followed a conveyor belt to the ore-crushing unit. A large red sign engaged our attention. It said: "Protect The People's Property Against Arsonists and Saboteurs!"

Inside, the breakers made a great din. It was a dimly lit shed, but we got a good view of the machinery and the sieves. Again, I asked a laborer some questions. Again, the functionary was at my heels. So I confined myself to mundane matters. "I'm just a common laborer," he said. "My wages run from 430 to 460 marks."

We walked on to the next building, which housed the control panel for the automatic conveyor system. Marx and Engels gazed impassively from picture-frames above the winking lights. While the operator explained the panel, a call came through a loudspeaker, "Comrade...a belt broke in the ore vaults..."

The group moved on to the baking unit where fine ore is broiled into briquets. We climbed to the second floor to look at the ovens. The guide said: "This is the dirtiest and the hottest place in the whole works; the workers here get longer vacations."

An oven tender, a 400-mark-a-month worker, had something more to say about conditions in this building. He unhitched his filter mask and muttered, "There's too much dust here; it gets in your lungs. We need air-cleaners..."

Where was I from, he wanted to know. "USA? Man you are really a stranger here." He grinned. "The last big delegation we had were Russians. Last May." (Earlier, Director Markowitsch explained that Russian technicians were instrumental in the designing and construction of the Stalin Works.)

We followed the muddy road past the dining hall. The guide said: "Workers can get a hot meal here for 80 pfennigs to one mark." Then we walked through a large shed where molten iron is poured into forms to make ingots. On the far side, a troop of twelve men were shoveling slag off the railroad tracks. They wore faded blue jackets with wide yellow stripes down the backs. A green-uniformed Vopo stood over them with a tommygun.

Two of the functionaries ran up and placed themselves in front of me. One spoke hurriedly. "You see, Herr Binder, they are penal laborers. By working here, they earn money and get time off their sentences! For every two day's work they get three days closer to freedom. And they help build Socialism!" What kind of prisoners are they, I asked. "Political prisoners," was the reply. (There are an estimated 10,000 political prisoners in the DDR. Most of them perform forced labor.)

The last stop was one of the smelters. We watched while workers built sand channels for the molten metal. Then they pulled on the heavy asbestos "Marsman" suits and prepared for the ritual of tapping the oven. All were in their early twenties. Some of them even wore the Free German Youth shirts.

The foreman arrived, a man about 35 years old. His workers were already ramming the long torch into the wall of slag. Showers of sparks spurted out. I asked the foreman how long he had been at the works. "Seven years," he said, "right from the start when we had to live in barracks." He was now an instructor as well as foreman, and he earned 500 to 550 marks - still lower than Herr Markowitsch's average.

At last the torch broke through the crust, and the white hot iron trickled into the trough...

The bus was waiting for us below. As we boarded it, a new column of yellow-striped prisoners marched by in lock-step. Four armed Vopos and a police dog followed the three ranks. There were 45 men in this forced-labor gang. They looked grim.

* * *

It is difficult to make any value-judgements on the basis of a three hour tour of the Stalin Foundry. It was the first time I had ever visited an iron works, so I had no basis for comparison.

From research in West Berlin, I knew that the plant was still lagging in its production schedule, despite the Markowitsch boast that the foundry now turns out 1,060,000 tons a year. I knew that the accident rate was high because of inadequate protective measures and exaggerated production tempo. I knew that although the laborers have no overtime, they still have to work three shifts - around the clock. They must change shifts every two or three days.

But neither this information, nor the brief visit allow any precise conclusions about Socialist factories.

As for general impressions, even the limited glimpse warrants some observations on this "Socialist Center of Gravity." In the first place, nobody seemed to be working very hard, nor did any of these proletarians seem to be preoccupied by their tasks. There was a general atmosphere of lethargy about the Stalin Works.

Second, the whole plant was unbelievably smutty - not alone from the omnipresent ore dust, but from lack of care. Unused machines lay rusting in the open. All around there were unsightly heaps of scrap, spare parts, boards, cable, and tools. Considering that this was supposed to be an exemplary piece of "Socialist" construction", it made a poor showing.

Finally, there was a depressing military aspect about the place - the barbed wire enclosure, the Vopo barracks, the penal laborers. It seemed as if an army were running the factory.

At this point, it is worth recalling what one of the Marxist visitors to the Stalin Foundry said after the tour:

"This whole thing is madness, you know. It's completely uneconomical - costs them a fortune to run. But the poor devils have to have iron and they haven't got enough hard currency to buy it from West Germany."

David Binder

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