

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DB - 43
Stalinstadt:
City of (the fallen) God

Berlin-Charlottenburg
Carmerstrasse 19
December 27th, 1958

Mr. Walter S. Rogers:
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Our bus rolled out of the Stalin Kombinat and into Stalinstadt at 2 p.m. We drove along a new street, past construction sites where cinderblock apartment houses were going up, past the fake Grecian columns of the city theatre, past the vast vacancy of the town square.

We got out on Karl Marx Strasse. The guide pointed to the paving stones and said: "These were made from slag at the foundry. Nothing is wasted." He said nothing about the durability of the blocks. But then he didn't need to; there are only a couple of motor vehicles in Stalinstadt and thus hardly any wear on the streets.

Our group crossed the street and entered the "Activist" Restaurant (the quotes are theirs). It had some grandiose touches; marble floors in the foyer, gleaming chandeliers, tall windows. However, food stains on the table cloths returned us from the illusion of plush.

Along the panelled walls of the "Activist" were proletarian scenes, oil paintings illustrating the construction of the Stalin Works in the ill-defined style known as Socialist Realism. Only the color combination, pink-blue-brown, was cheerful.

They served a substantial meal - soup, porkchops, peas, carrots, and all the potatoes you could eat.

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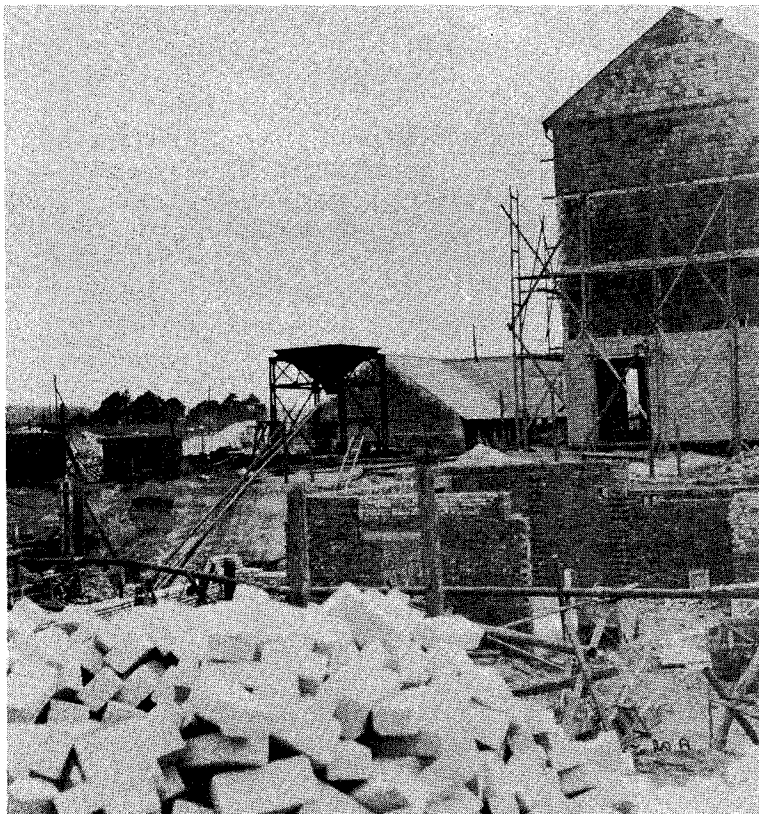
After lunch, we were offered what tourist bureaus call a "free afternoon", to shop or sightsee as we chose. The guide said he would take me around town and I accepted.

The street scene of Stalinstadt is a strange one. Long unbroken rows of buttermilk-hued apartment houses stretch before you with only the minutest variations of form. Trees that were planted here seven years ago are still spindly, and they do nothing to relieve the bare fronts. Since the lawns are narrow and the sidewalks too, it is as if you are in the canyons of a stone and concrete metropolis. Yet a few hundred yards away is the heath.

On this afternoon, Chinese red banners hung from many windows, for it was the ninth anniversary of the German Democratic Republic. The order had gone out to show the flag, and all good Socialists obeyed. Here and there, families had put up signs in their windows announcing: "Socialism Triumphs!" and "Glory to the Republic of Workers."

These were the only dashes of color against the dull plaster of the housefronts.

Yet the peculiarity of these streets lay in their emptiness. Except for a rare bicyclist, or a mother with a baby carriage, they were as barren and silent as those of a ghost town. It was like a giant movie set where all the extras had suddenly vanished



Some of Stalinstadt's 700 new apartments are going up here.

The guide said: "It is the middle of the shift now, otherwise you might see more people on the streets."

It is a commonplace to comment on the desert vistas in East German cities, especially those of East Berlin - as compared with West Berlin. But this time I was really impressed by the voids of Stalinstadt. A few hours later, when the festivities honoring the DDR's birthday began, the square in front of the Rathaus filled up with people, making the contrast that much keener. Of course the guide's explanation was correct: most of the Stalinstädters were at work or resting up until their shift began. Yet it remained an odd sight.

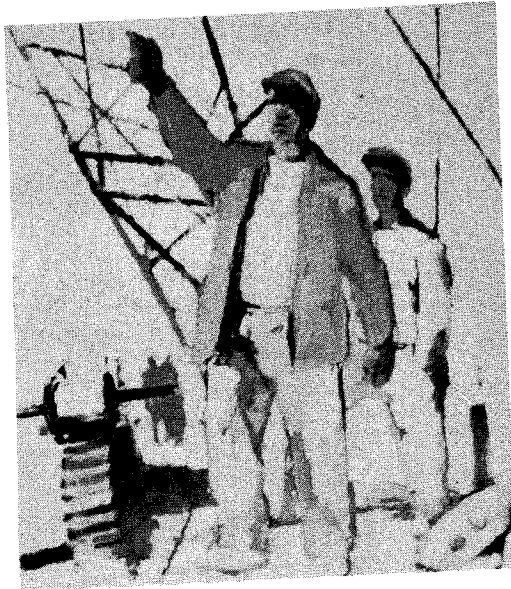
A city of 20,000,

growing towards a planned 45,000, with uninhabited streets. We strolled out of the "old" section (denoted by the flat-topped Moscow style buildings) to the new part of town. "We wouldn't build that way again," said the guide, pointing back to the old apartments.

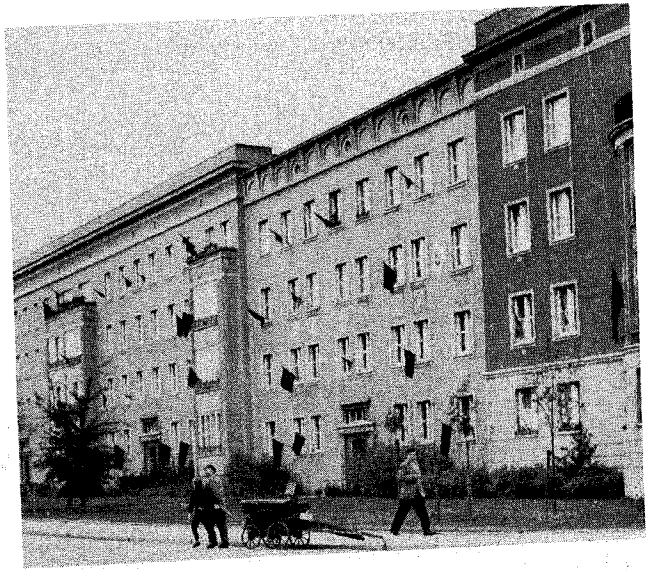
Here, the apartment houses had those sloping, red-tiled roofs so familiar in Germany. The streets - all of them named for Socialist heroes past and present - were a little wider too. We passed the shopping center; the stores were tucked in under three stories of apartments. Without exception they belonged to the State-run "Trade Organization."



The Town Square - In the rear, the city hospital



Socialist Realism
in the "Activist"



Stalinstadt Housefronts -
The handcart is a common sight.



One of the many deserted streets



The new Self-Service Store

The fanciest was a new fruit and vegetable market - a one-storied building with glass sides, set at a jaunty angle. A neon sign on the roof proclaimed "Self-Service" - a recent innovation in the DDR.

The guide took me down another silent street. All at once a deep amplified voice crashed into the stillness. "Workers of Stalin-stadt!" it shouted. "Come out to celebrate the ninth anniversary of our glorious republic! Eighteen o'clock (6 o'clock) at the Square of Friendship! Workers of Stalinstadt...!"

A large loudspeaker truck rounded the corner and stopped near us, still bellowing. A few children gathered around it. But nobody looked out of the apartment house windows to see what the racket was about. Probably they could hear with the windows shut.



The loudspeaker reminded me of what an engineer who fled recently from Stalin-stadt had related in West Berlin. He said the truck was used for all sorts of occasions. For instance, when the movie theater shows propaganda films, only a few people attend. Then the loudspeaker truck is sent around the streets shouting: "Workers of Stalinstadt. Come to see the important film..."

They never leave you alone.



The "new" part of town - note television aerials...

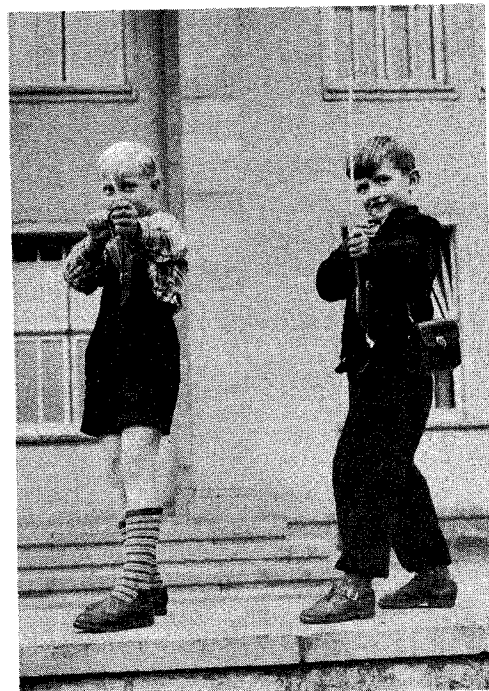


A lot of children

No denying it. This was a first-rate school building. The rooms were well lit and airy. There was a good-sized gymnasium with lots of gymnastic equipment and a basketball court. The dining room doubled as an auditorium. The manual training department had power tools and a printing press...neither of which I had seen in comparable West German schools.

We crossed a large grassy courtyard. Apartment houses formed two sides. A children's home (day nursery) faced the third, and a school the fourth. There were clots of children playing here and there on the grass - in fact there seemed to be more children in Stalinstadt than adults. Markowitsch had said the average age of the city's population is 26. "The youngest city in the republic," he called it.

The school, finished in early 1957, was well-equipped and spotless. According to the janitor it had 19 classrooms and seven additional "big rooms". "It cost four million marks," he said, with a degree of pride. There were 800 pupils attending the school now, and they were taught by 32 teachers. "We could use a few more," the janitor admitted. "Maybe you would like to join the staff."

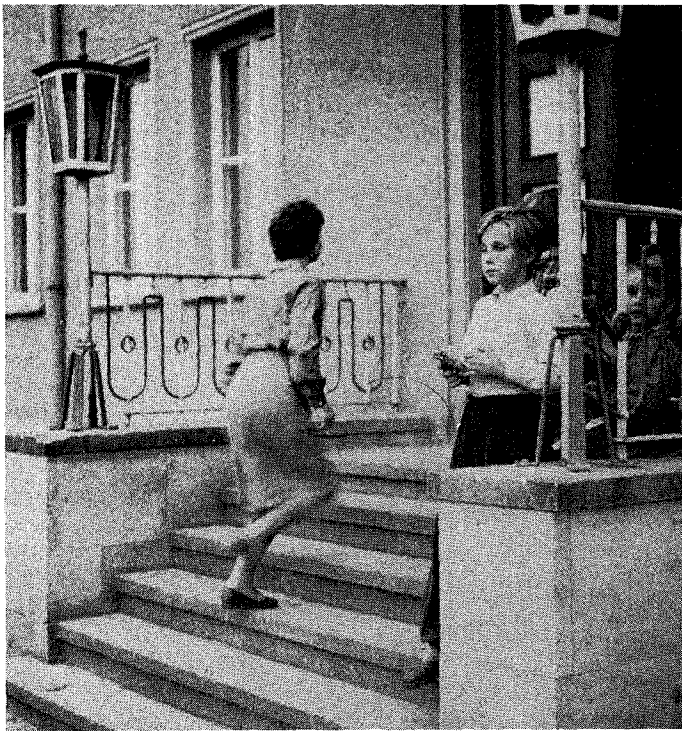


Schoolboys outside the new school

And the water fountains in the corridors were decorated with clever bas relief animals made of tiles. The only political touches were occasional proletarian scenes in the class rooms and the fierce picture of Lenin in the teachers' conference room. The bookcase in the latter room contained a surplus of Communist Party literature.

I asked the guide if polytechnical education was in full swing at Stalinstadt. "We've just begun now," he said without much enthusiasm. It appeared he did not know much about the new system.

We left the school and walked between the apartment houses to another large courtyard. It was grassy like the first one, but fenced into squares with playpens and jungle jims.



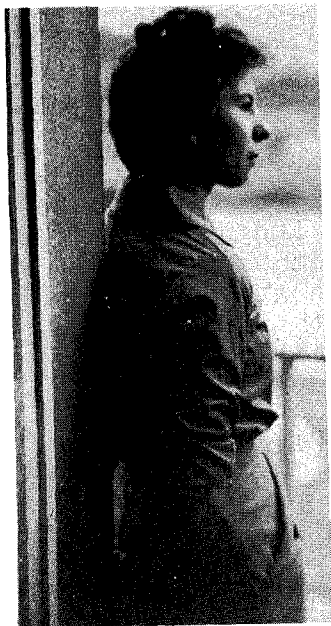
The Kindergarten

Our next visit was to the Stalinstadt Kindergarten, which is two and a half years old. The girl who ran it could not have been more than 21. She was short and would have been cute if she hadn't worn such a deadly earnest expression. (Germans have a habit of making their lips disappear when they are concerned about something.) She wore the bright blue blouse of the Freie Deutsche Jugend organization, and had a wedding ring.

She said her wards were mostly children from families in which both parents worked. The kindergarten had 180 children at the moment; divided into eight groups. Parents pay 25 pfennigs a day to leave their children here. "That covers only part of their expenses," the girl explained. "The State pays 500 marks a year for the care of each child."

Like the school, this was a neat and well kept establishment. There was even a small clinic attached to the kindergarten.

The girl showed us through the rooms, which had furniture in graduated sizes, depending on the age groups (four to six years). It was late afternoon already, and most of the children were napping. However, we could see what the children had been working on. Their latest project, obviously connected with the ninth anniversary, was flags. On every blackboard and bulletin board were the black-red-gold flags of Germany, and the red flags of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) - in chalk, in tempera, and in colored paper.



On the way out, I noticed the "Ten Socialist Commandments" framed on a wall in the lobby. They were printed in bright red. These "commandments of Socialist Lawfulness" were proclaimed at the Fifth Party Congress of the SED last summer by Party Secretary Walter Ulbricht. They begin:

- 1--Thou shouldst constantly contribute to the unity of all Socialist countries.
- 2--Thou shouldst love thy fatherland and contribute thy strength to the defence of the fatherland.
- 3--Thou shouldst aid in removing the exploitation of man by man.
- 4--Thou shouldst perform good deeds for Socialism...

Comrade
Kindergartner

As applied by the DDR Government, these commandments amount to more than a Boy Scout code. They are used in the so-called "Youth Initiation" which was introduced recently to replace Christian confirmation ceremonies. The older children in Stalinstadt's kindergarten were also obliged to learn them. Probably one can count the commandments as part of the growing liturgy of Communist religion in the DDR.

The "commandments" reminded me that I had not see any churches as yet in Stalinstadt. I asked the guide. "We have two 'emergency churches'," he said, "one Catholic and one Lutheran." That is to say they are located in barracks. He said the Catholic barrack had been torn down to make room for a new apartment house. But I learned later that it had been reconstructed on another location. "Anybody who wants to can go to church in Fürstenburg," he added (a couple of miles down the road).

The guide was a pleasant enough fellow, although not very animated. A Leipziger, he said he had been here for a year. His name was Eberhard Rühle and he was 23 years old. When he wasn't guiding tours around, he worked in the local Free German Youth organization. As a conclusion to our tour, he proposed that we visit his room in the "Bachelors' Home".

He paused in the hallway of the building and spoke to the watchman. Yes, it was all right to take foreign visitors inside. Standing next to the watchman was a Vopo, who eyed us suspiciously.

Rühle explained that the Bachelor Home had 170 beds and that it was designed for young people of both sexes. "One-third women and two-thirds men," he said. We peeked in a large room furnished with old-fashioned easy chairs and coffee tables. "This is the clubroom," said the guide, "one of three. There is a television set in one."

We moved on, glancing briefly into several lavatories and small kitchens. "We cook together with the girls," said Rühle. "You hardly have to get married..." Most of the girls we saw in the corridors wore pants.

Rühle took me upstairs. The stairwell had a series of Chinese (Communist) woodcuts on the walls - all of them depicting soldiers. At the head of the stairs was the usual picture of Lenin. We entered Rühle's room. To the right was a large clothes closet and to the left a washbowl with some pantry shelves above it. Beyond was the room - low-ceilinged and crammed with furniture. There were two beds, a desk, a chair, and a small table with a radio on it. The furniture was modern in design.

"I pay 40 marks a month for this," said the guide. "A single room costs 50 marks."

"A little small isn't it?"

"Well," said Rühle, "there's always the clubroom."

"What do you do for fun when you have some spare time?"

"There's television," he said, "and sometimes a movie or dancing. In the summer you can go out in the country and swim in some of the little lakes." He paused. "You know there's really not much to do in StalinStadt."

We returned to the entrance. In the doorway was a rather startling sight, a tall boy in a white turtleneck sweater and tight black jeans. His red hair was curled and waved in the rock 'n roll manner. He lounged against the doorjamb with a cigarette dangling out of the corner of his mouth - the familiar go-to-hell look on his face.

"Do you have lots of those here?"

"We have some," he replied, sheepishly.

"And do you have rock 'n roll music too?"

"We listen to it on the radio," said Rühle, "but no one dances that way. When they do, the orchestra stops until they dance decently."

It was getting dark and we were due back at the bus. On the way, we passed a lot of motorcycles parked outside the apartment house entrances. Most of them were covered with plastic sheets.

"That's one thing they didn't plan for here - garages," said Rühle. "Now everyone is buying motorcycles and some cars too. I'm going to get a motorcycle myself soon."

It was dusk when we reached the Square of Friendship. A squad of armed men were drawn up in front of the Rathaus. They carried carbines and were dressed in the drab uniforms of the "Factory Fighting Groups" - a semi-military unit in which workers learn the basic elements of "defending Socialist accomplishments."

A moment later blue-shirted FDJ units marched up. They were followed by a drum and bugle corps.

"These are entirely voluntary activities," said Rühle.

As the crowd grew, individuals came up and laid huge wreaths on the steps of the Rathaus. Each wreath carried ribbons with legends like "Glory and Honor to the Republic!"

The motor of our bus started up with a rumble. My Marxist companions were waiting for me. As we drove away, the drums of Stalinstadt rattled a salute to the 9-year-old German Democratic Republic.

* * *

All the bumpy way back to Berlin, the Communist functionaries pummeled me with questions about Stalinstadt. Did I like it? What was I going to write about it? What didn't I like?

I tried to turn the questions around: what did they think of Stalinstadt?

Most of them gave rather evasive answers until another passenger came to the rescue. He introduced himself as Artur von Behr, a Marxist from West Germany. "I think it's marvelous," he said. "My own daughter got fed up with the oppressive life in West Germany last year. Now she lives in the DDR and she tells me she's happy for the first time in her life..."

The only contrary opinion was one I heard from a Belgian Communist a few hours later. Pierre Joye, editor of Le Drapeau Rouge, confided (in English) "I wouldn't live there for the world..."

* * *

What does one say about a place like Stalinstadt?

In some respects it is a "worker's paradise". That is, there are no slums. No one goes hungry. No one lacks for work. There is even a certain degree of equality as far as the superficial elements of life are concerned.

But these things have been achieved at a large sacrifice of ordinary freedoms - above all the freedom of choice. The life of a Stalinstädter is regimented from dawn 'til dark and dark 'til dawn. His movements are circumscribed. He is obliged to contribute much of his spare time to "voluntary construction hours", propaganda meetings, maneuvers with the factory militia, Party schooling, and so on. Add to this the lethal uniformity of the place and you have something on the farthest side of paradise.

David Binder

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