

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DB - 44
A Pilgrimage;
Weimar and Buchenwald

Berlin-Charlottenburg
Carmerstrasse 19
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

We were a mixed group that drove away while the dawning sunlight glanced flaming orange off the windowpanes of East Berlin.

There were the South Americans, Carlos Lozano from Colombia and Carlos Torre Flores from Peru, both dozing off their early morning drowsiness in the narrow bus seats. There was Manoutcher Behzadi, the Persian student with the merry black eyes. There was the Belgian who chewed on his pipe, Pierre Joye. And the big-shouldered Russian looming over his slender Czech interpreter. And Elli Mohrmann, the buxom woman who chatted about French novels and English plays. Frau Doktor Mohrmann, to be precise. Her sallow-faced husband, the Herr Professor Doktor, was still collapsed in one of the seats at the rear.

Add to these a couple of party functionaries, two girl photographers, and you had the seventeen of us.

We were driving to Weimar on a mild autumn day. Haze shimmered over the clay-colored fields of Saxony, a souvenir left behind by the bountiful summer. Flemish clouds rested still on the horizon as if to say "paint us."

But the bus was temporarily sealed against these scenic pleasures. At least Monsieur Joye, the Belgian, appeared to be immune to them. He was saying: "...I wouldn't live there for the world." The reference was to Stalinstadt, which he visited the day before. It made a strong negative impression on him.

"You notice," he continued, "they are trying to vary the style a bit now - some of those new buildings. But all those 'Spruchbänder' (propaganda posters). That's ridiculous. Nobody reads them. And the monotony of the place..." He stopped a moment to fire up his pipe.

"They are so dull, the Germans. I like variety. Color. Whom do they think they are convincing with that constant dinning of slogans? And the architecture. It's not even a good imitation of Moscow. Why can't you have Socialism and beauty together?"

This was the editor of the Belgian Communist organ, "Le Drapeau Rouge" talking. Monsieur Joye, a dapper fifty-year-old with close cropped white hair has been a party member for a quarter of a century. He became one after picking up a book by Stalin when his freighter docked in Brazil. He remained one when the Nazis invaded Belgium in 1940, and afterwards, when they deported him to Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen for two years.

Monsieur Joye knew the reality of Socialist Realism at close hand from visits to Russia and Balkan countries. But this was the first time he had seen the East German version. He did not seem to care for it much.

Most of all he pitied the DDR Communists for their rigid orthodoxy in matters physical as well as metaphysical. Some of this came out in his address to the Marxist World Economic Conference at East Berlin's Humboldt University.

He reflected on it now: "I told them in my short speech that they would have to adapt themselves to the modern world, that they could not stay stuck in orthodoxy. You know, Marx himself said, 'I am not a Marxist...' These theories cannot stagnate... Marx is not a God. He could not foresee everything."

Pierre Joye said all this in a pleasant conversational tone, as if he were taking a leisurely stroll in a park. His Delft-blue eyes twinkled amusement at the objects of his remarks as well as the subject who made them; that Gallic perspective you meet so seldom east of the Rhine.

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It was more or less luck that landed me beside Monsieur Joye in the southbound bus.

During the drive back from Stalinstadt (DB - 43), a good-natured party official proposed that I join the group of Marxist economists journeying to Weimar the following day.

"I cannot guarantee that there is room for you," he said. "But if you come over (to East Berlin) at 6:30 tomorrow, perhaps we can take you along. The group is going to visit Buchenwald and Weimar..."

...Buchenwald, one of the earlier concentration camps erected by Himmler's SS. Buchenwald, where thousands died by the bullet, the noose, the knout, the whip, the needle, freezing, and starvation. Buchenwald, the favored chamber of horrors for political enemies of the Nazis. Buchenwald, after the war a concentration camp for thousands who opposed the East German Communists - until 1952. And now Buchenwald, an enormous monument consecrated by the DDR Government to the memory of those wartime inmates who fought the Fascists.

...Weimar, the Thuringian town that gave Germany its fame as the "Land of Poets and Thinkers" - the creative bourne of Lukas Cranach and Goethe, of Bach and Liszt, of Herder and Schiller.

It was an invitation to visit Hell and Heaven on the same day.

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By this time, Manoutcher Behzadi, the Persian, had joined the conversation. He made a point of telling Monsieur Joye that he agreed with his views on Marxism. "I would like to have a copy of your talk," he added.

Behzadi explained that he was working on his doctorate in economics at the Humboldt University. A native of Teheran, he is a member of the Tudeh (Communist) Party. Behzadi fell to talking about Iranian politics. "Our big chance has passed," he said. "The Shah is a criminal, but the monarchy will probably hold on to power. We are only 30,000 now." He and Joye concurred that the best Marxists could hope to obtain in countries like theirs was beneficial influence on national welfare policies and industrial development.

The Iranian made no direct comment on Socialism as practiced in the DDR. However, he jested frequently at the earnestness of the Germans and their institutions. "They have no humor," he declared.

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"A mixed group..." Party functionaries in foreground. Second from right is Dr. Mohrmann

The bus sped along the Autobahn, across the Elbe, past the factory chimneys of Dessau, of Halle, of Merseburg - the heavily industrialized Saxon flatlands that are a counterpart to West Germany's Ruhr. Then we were climbing out of the valley of the Saale and up the spurs of the Thuringian Forest range. The highway curved sharply to the west, and soon we slid into the Saale Valley again. We had entered the former Grand Duchy of Weimar - no longer known as part of Thuringia in the DDR, but designated simply as "District Erfurt."

Crossing the Saale we saw the city of Jena with its ancient university and renowned optical works, framed prettily by round hills. Another gentle climb and the bus plunged into the golden dales of the Ilm, castles and cloisters crowning the heights on either side. Overhead, the sun broke through the clouds. Frau Mohrmann sighed. "I still think it is going to rain," she said. "Every time I go to Weimar, it rains. A natural law." Goethe, too, complained about the wetness of Weimar.

However, the valley remained suffused in sunlight. As we turned off the highway, the church steeples of Weimar came into view, and beyond, the Ettersberg with the great stone Buchenwald monument gleaming white. In the field of rye next to the road a Russian soldier lay sunning himself.

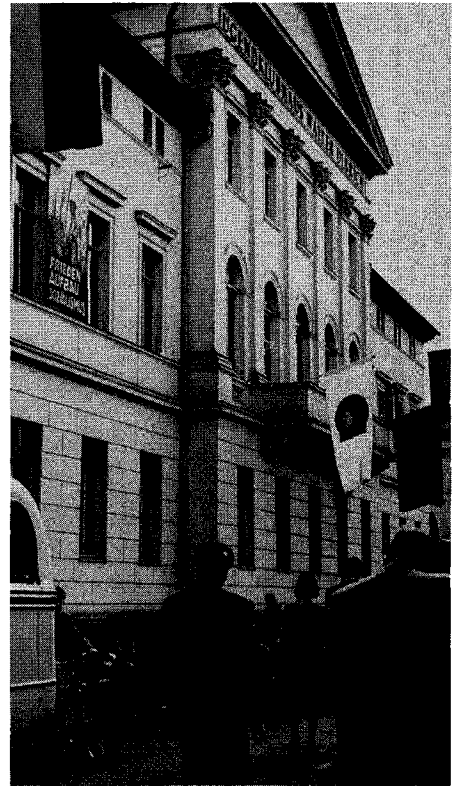
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The bus halted for a few minutes in the middle of town. Our party climbed out at the Goetheplatz. A brass band was playing proletarian songs to a small crowd. Carlos Flores observed: "A village concert in Germany - that's always kids, old men, and two cops."

Behind us was the Youth Clubhouse "Walter Ulbricht", and in front, the Hotel "Russischer Hof". Yet these Socialist touches hardly seemed to impinge on the classical air of the square.



"...and two cops."



Ulbricht Clubhouse



--"...old men."

Then we drove up the Leninstrasse to the Hotel International for lunch. They served succulent veal steaks and a fresh salad. Each of us was treated to a full liter of Czech beer. It was the tastiest meal I had eaten in the DDR. Afterwards, we were shown our rooms. Mine was comfortably large and well-furnished. Ten minutes later, we went downstairs to the bus. It was 2:30, time to go to Buchenwald.

The bus heads north up the Ernst Thälmann Strasse, and climbs the long slope of the Ettersberg. Halfway up we pass a Red Army caserne. Then left onto "Blood Road" - two and a half miles of concrete leading up the ridge to the top of the mountain - 900 feet above Weimar - to Buchenwald. A lot of traffic; buses, cars, motorcycles, bicycles, hikers.

We turned off into a parking lot. More cars, and at least a dozen buses. Crowds of people - school classes, squads of Volk-armee recruits, factory delegations, young couples, whole families.



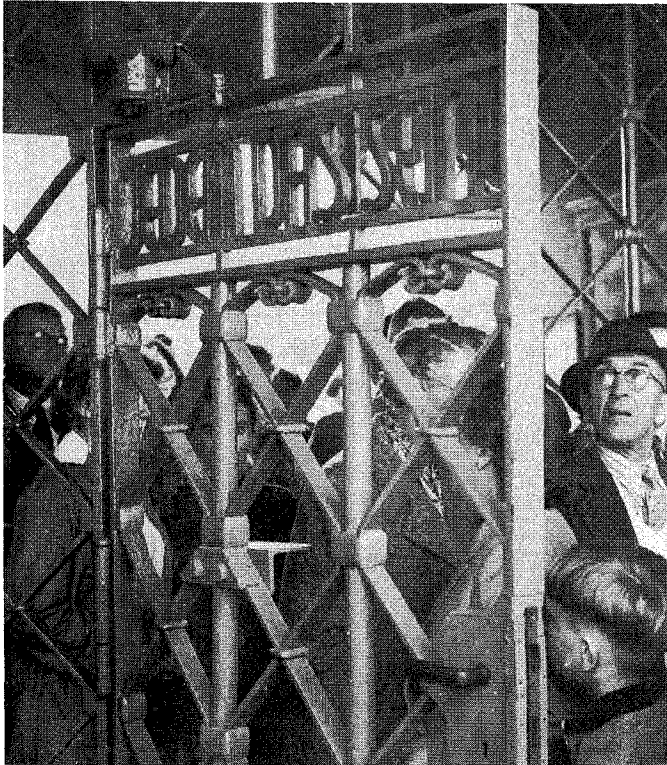
The gatehouse...to the left the dreaded "Arrestbunker"

Our group followed the herd. We passed between tall empty barracks. "That's where the SS lived," someone murmured. Then we came upon the main road to the camp, called "Caracho Way" from wartime days. This was the path new prisoners had to run, driven by SS guards who shouted "Caracho!" (from the Russian *xopóMиH*, meaning "good") More than two hundred thousand of them. Those who faltered were beaten and sometimes shot.

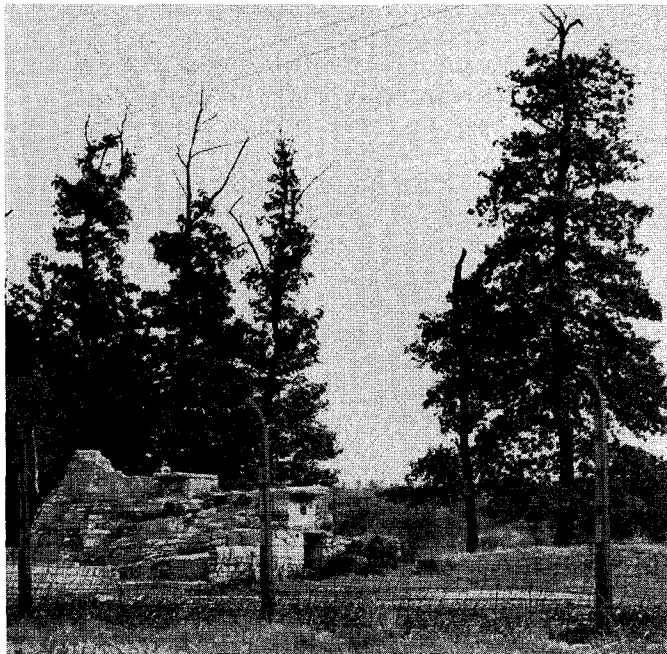
To the left and right, rusted strands of barbed wire, concrete blocks poking up out of the earth at odd angles - the remains of former camp buildings.

And then the gatehouse. Those of us who had been so talkative earlier fell silent. We passed beneath the wooden superstructure. Through the ponderous steel gate. Metal letters spell out the cynical motto, "To Each His Own". The SS often fettered prisoners to this gate until they expired.

On the other side we were met by a wiry man with a sandy complexion, Herr Kucharczyk, one of five Buchenwald inmates who now act as guides. Before us was a vast slope where no grass grew. This northern declivity of the Ettersberg is where the prisoners' barracks once lay. It is empty now except for brick dust and tiny shards of concrete.



"To Each His Own" -
(Death)



The fence and the kennel

Great throngs moved slowly across the glacié, most of them mute, heads bowed. Eighty thousand prisoners had been jammed together here at one time. Fifty-one thousand perished. The population of Weimar. Statistics.

Herr Kucharczyk led us to the barbed wire fence and pointed out the ruins of a concrete dog kennel. The dogs, he explained, were sometimes loosed on prisoners, for "sport". They were trained as killers.

He took us to the crematorium. We saw the "measuring apparatus" devised by the SS to liquidate Soviet captives. Seven thousand of them. Guards clad as doctors pretended to measure the height of the prisoners; a hidden rifleman shot the "patient" in the nape of the neck. While march music blared through a loudspeaker. Zinc-lined tubs stood ready for carting the corpses to the ovens.

In the courtyard, a triple gallows. Those who did not strangle fast enough were clubbed to death. In one corner of the courtyard a memorial plaque: "Ernst Thälmann, who was murdered by the Fascists on August 18, 1944 at this place." Thälmann, the popular pre-war leader of the German Communist movement.

A dank cellar with dozens of meathooks mounted in the walls for hanging. Short heavy clubs on the floor. Upstairs six ovens - the original three were not enough. And when the six were not enough, the SS incinerated thousands in funeral pyres on the southern slope of the Ettersberg.



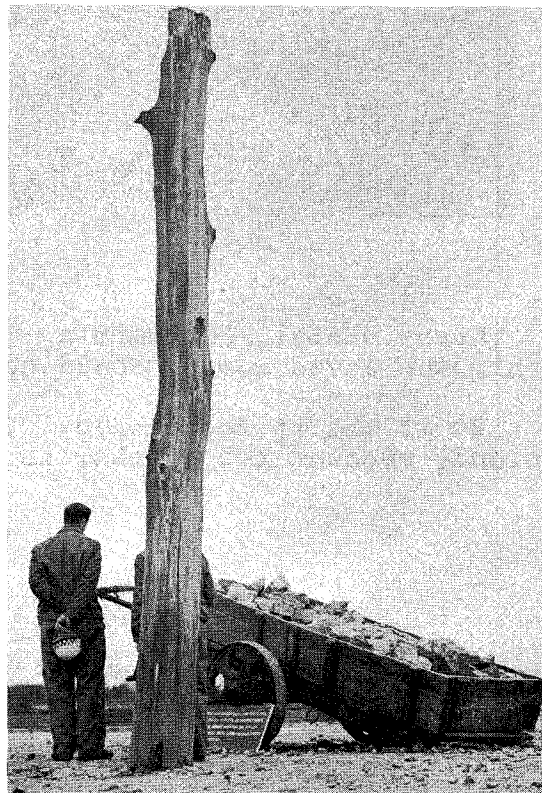
Wreaths for Thälmann-
The Crematorium

Outside again. A weatherbeaten tree trunk studded with iron spikes. This was one of the gibbet trees. Feet manacled, wrists tied behind the back, prisoners were hung up by the hands as a special punishment. Passing guards scourged them. Many died of exposure. Or starved.

Next to it a heavy wagon loaded with 11,000 pounds of stone. A dozen prisoners hauled these wagons from the Ettersberg quarry to the rail head - a thousand yards. In all seasons. Jewish inmates were commanded to sing when pulling such a load. "The singing horses," they were called.

Beyond, the former SS canteen. Now a museum of horrors: a collection of human hair taken from corpses; a heap of small shoes removed from murdered children - even the dead were exploited; shrunken heads of inmates used by the SS as souvenir paperweights; a bullet-shattered brain; the hypodermics which SS doctors employed for lethal injections of prisoners (one of them, Dr. Hans Eisele, recently fled West Germany to Egypt in order to escape a war crimes trial); and the tattooed skins which the Buchenwald commandant's wife ordered for lampshades.

Finally the "Arrest Bunker" - twenty-eight narrow cells where selected prisoners were specially tortured. They were selected by SS Scharführer Martin Sommer, a maniacal murderer who was sentenced to life imprisonment only a few months ago by a West German court. Sommer flogged his victims to death, he strangled them with his own hands, he chained them to searing hot radiators. Sometimes Sommer crammed as many as 250 prisoners in the tiny cells...no food, no water.



Gibbet tree and
Quarry wagon



Guide Kucharczyk described it all without inflection: "Here this happened..." "There they did that."

His tone recalled the opening sentence in Karl Kraus's last book, "The Third Walpurgis-night", written in 1933. The great Austrian critic confessed that the Nazi seizure of power made him speechless.

Kraus wrote: "Concerning Hitler, nothing occurs to me." Words to him who loved words, could not express his horror and outrage.

So it was at Buchenwald. Stupified by the gruesomeness, one can only recount the events, as Herr Kucharczyk.

David Binder
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(to be concluded)

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