

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DB - 45
A Film Image (Part II)

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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Herr Kucharczyk and his fellow Buchenwald guides (all Communists) knew how to wave the - red - flag. "The capitalists call our elections undemocratic," he said. "And then they put up butchers like Reinefarth as candidates." (Reinefarth was the SS General whose troops put down the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. DDR propagandists claim he is a war criminal. Last fall Reinefarth was elected to the State Parliament of Schleswig Holstein.)

Kucharczyk also confided to us that Ilse Koch (the savage wife of Buchenwald's commandant) "is now living in the United States with her husband, an American Army captain." (In reality, she is serving a life term in a West German penitentiary.)

The propaganda message was clearer in the pamphlet sold at the gate of Buchenwald. It goes:

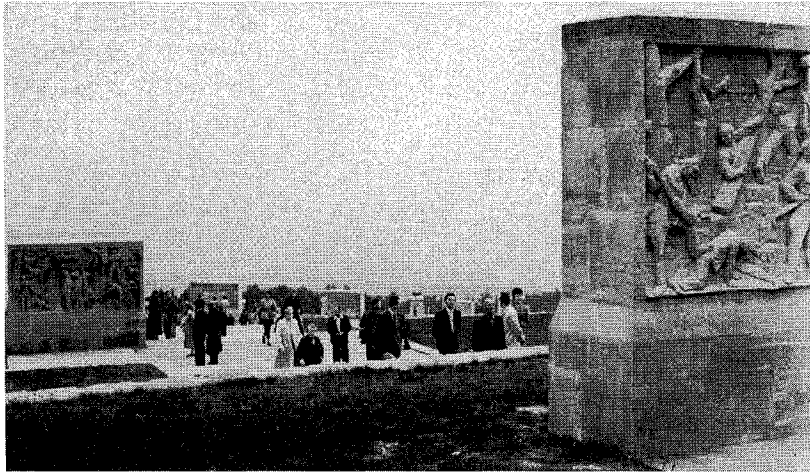
"Imperialism is rotting capitalism. Rotting capitalism, that is the medieval whipping post of Buchenwald - but it's also the dropping of microbes "cultures" by American planes over Korea and North China. Do you come from one of the Nato countries? Climb the Ettersberg. Convince yourselves of the heroic deeds of your West German brothers-in-arms of tomorrow...Rotting capitalism - that is Fascism..."

The bus took us back down the "Blood Road" to the massive memorial on the south side of the Ettersberg. Multitudes swarmed through the stone portal. We too.

A wide stairway curves down the hillside. Beside it, seven stone slabs, each bearing a bas relief. These stone sculptures tell the story of Buchenwald: Building the camp; arrival of prisoners; slave labor in the quarry; spoliation of the inmates; solidarity; illegal underground, and liberation. The reliefs were created by three well known German sculptors. On the opposite side of the steles are verses by the DDR's late poet laureate, Johannes R. Becher. They begin:

"A death camp was constructed.
A barbed wire barrier infinitely long.
Rows of barracks gray, like sorrow grizzled.

Searchlights blaze through the darkness.
A gallows looms, symbol of violence.
O age of ignominy! Think always of that age!
Think of the deathcamp Buchenwald..."



At the bottom of the stairs is the "Street of Nations". It binds together three great ring graves erected above the pits where the Nazis burned prisoners on pyres. The names of eighteen nations whose sons died in Buchenwald are inscribed on freestones - Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark...

Then another large staircase, leading up to a tall bell tower. Before this "freedom tower" is Fritz Cremer's huge sculpture representing Buchenwald inmates - eleven figures showing doubt, hope, and resolution.

From here the Communist regime dedicated its ten million mark (\$3,000,000) memorial in September. Ninety thousand persons gathered for the ceremony - among them regiments of Free German Youth, the paramilitary Society for Sport and Technology, and the Factory Militia. Loudspeakers bellowed. Brass bands trumpeted patriotic songs like "Without capitalists it goes better..." And DDR Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl cried, "We will make this ceremony a demonstration against the preparation of an imperialistic atomic war, of which West Germany is the principal danger..."

It was sundown when we departed from Buchenwald, along with thousands of other pilgrims. The guide said twenty thousand persons visited the memorial that day; nearly half a million in the preceding four weeks.

(One wonders... What draws them here? Morbid curiosity? Probably some. Mere sightseeing? Perhaps a little. However, I believe many thousands of Germans go to Buchenwald because of the humble decision to confront the crimes of Nazism. Maybe a few of them regard it as a kind of penance.

One wonders... Does the Communist propaganda take effect? A West German reporter commented on the dedication ceremony: "...An inscription says, 'Buchenwald warns'. It warns above all else not to falsify the legacy of the murdered." But I had the feeling Buchenwald makes such an overwhelming impression, fills one with such inexpressible sorrow, that no room is left for contemporary propaganda.

Another West German reporter asked: "Why is there not something like it in the Federal Republic?" He was thinking perhaps of Dachau and Bergen-Belsen, where only modest memorials have been constructed.)

Ten minutes later we were in Weimar. Worlds away from Buchenwald. In our time, minds are accustomed to the newsreel that switches instantly from the cyclonic disaster scene to the beauty parade. Yet none of us had appetite for the meal that was served after four hours on the Ettersberg.

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That night a group of us sauntered downtown. On the recommendation of the hotel porter we sought out the liveliest Lokal in Weimar - the "Elephant" on the Market Place. Pierre Joye escorted a strong-chinned German woman, while Manoucher Behzadi and the South Americans accompanied the two girl photographers.

The "Elephant" had a high ceiling, marble columns, crystal chandeliers, glass-topped tables, easy chairs, and a jejune quartet. The atmosphere was that of a common room in a rundown college. I learned later that it had been constructed by the Nazis for Hitler. Lavish rooms, and a 3-story underground garage for the limousines of the big shots. The SS celebrated wild orgies here under the command of Buchenwald's infernal priestess, Ilse Koch.

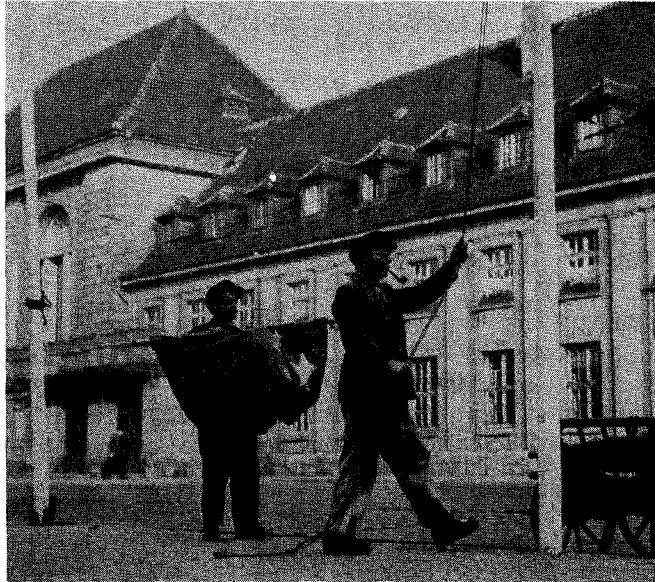
We drank Hungarian wine, exchanged anecdotes, and took turns dancing. The band belabored its Party-dictated quota of slow foxtrots, waltzes, and tangos. When the rare fast numbers came the couples danced a restrained jitterbug. Instead of swinging out - which is forbidden - they held hands and jiggled. Carlos Lozano observed, "Everything this band plays comes out a march, Boom. Boom. Boom."

A professional musician back in Colombia, Lozano got fed up about midnight. "The Germans," he growled. "That music is terrible. It really makes me angry. Everything, march, march, march. And the food; potatoes, potatoes, potatoes. Get them drunk and they all turn out to be militarists...everybody fears the Germans."

Then he and Carlos Flores began humming cha cha cha tunes, Lozano drumming the beat on the tabletop. By the time we hit the street they were singing, "Un poquito des 'd'amor!" at the top of their voices. The "Olé's" bounced off the ancient Weimar walls. A Volkspolizist hurried towards us. Lozano mamboed around him. Seeing we were foreigners, he let us pass. The evening ended with a mock bullfight in the Stalinstrasse.

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Breakfast was at seven. The tour leader said we should be underway in half an hour, so there was still time to look outside for a few minutes. It was a soft misty morning. The square in front of the Weimar Station was thronged with commuters. Workmen were hauling down the various Communist flags left over from the DDR ninth anniversary celebration.



The flag of People's China comes down

A boy with a bright blue scarf came up to watch me take pictures. "I am a Young Pioneer," he announced. "I lead a whole group.. They are ten-year-olds mostly. But I am eleven."

"What's your name?"

"Hans Peter Schwarz," he said.

"What do you do in the Young Pioneers?"

He looked a little downcast. "We have to go out and harvest now," he said. "We work from eight until sundown for fourteen days."

"What do you want to do when you grow up?"

"I am going to join the Volksarmee and go to sea. My dad is a frontier policeman. ...Where are you from?"

"USA."

"Where is that?"

"Across the ocean."

"Will you take my picture?"





The boy waved goodbye as we drove off down the Leninstrasse. All along the way street cleaners and shop owners were out sweeping up leaves. It reminded me that Weimar was the cleanest city I had yet seen in the German Democratic Republic.

At the last minute, the tour leader decided to give us a glimpse of Goethe's house. The whole group applauded. So we pulled up at the Frauenplan. It took some negotiating to get us inside before the official 9 o'clock opening hour. The open sesame came when the leader pointed to our Russian and whispered, "Important guest from the Soviet Union."

Thus we received the grand if hurried tour of the poet's home, whose war damage has been completely and lovingly repaired.

The 250-year-old building, which Goethe redesigned according to his theories of color and form, is a unique combination of comfort and comeliness. To see it is to believe it, that the man was a universal genius, regardless of how little or much one has read of him. The rich collections of paintings, of sculptures, of Majolica ceramics, of furniture, but also of geological specimens, scientific instruments - all bear witness to Goethe's insatiable curiosity about the world and to his love of beauty. For this onetime student of German literature it was a thrilling experience.

Encouraged by our enthusiasm, the tour leader agreed to a subsequent run through the Schiller House, just around the corner.

Friedrich Schiller lived here only the last three years of his life. However, the house contains a handsome collection of the dramatist's works, original manuscripts, portraits, and household effects. Like the Goethe House, it is a national shrine, and worthily so.

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We left Weimar behind in the warm caress of the autumn sun. It seemed as though Buchenwald was almost banished from mind. Nor was it possible to think of Goethe's city in its contemporary setting of Communist domination - FDJ meetings, "construction hours", and factory militia maneuvers. Nor any politics for that matter.



Yet an hour later I was talking Marxism with Carlos Flores and Carlos Lozano.

The Colombian guitarist was saying, "I don't believe a Communist revolution is possible in my country. We will not succeed as a party, but perhaps we will as an influence on the other parties. The main thing is to convince the bourgeoisie to be nationalist and get them out from under the Americans. We Communists can contribute to industrial development. But that is about all." Lozano already has a doctor of laws from the University of Rome. He is studying for a degree in economics at East Berlin. "I would like to study at Harvard before I go home," he said.

Carlos Flores, a member of the Ketchuatribe in Peru, said the communal traditions of his fellow Indians might provide a basis for future Communism. "But that won't come for a long time," he added. "Our language hasn't been written down yet. That is being worked on in Moscow." The main thing for Peru, like Colombia, he said, is to break away from United States domination.

Lozano, a lively, high strung fellow, said he was "in complete agreement" with Joye on Marxism. Flores, a shy and quiet person, said he did not agree with the Belgian at all.

It was interesting to discover that none of these foreign students - Behzadi, Lozano, Flores - had any noticeable affection for Germans or for Germany. Despite the fact that they were all receiving generous scholarships from the DDR Government.

They were willing to learn from Germany, but not to like it. Makes you wonder just how solid international proletarian solidarity really is.

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Four more hours on the Autobahn and we were back in Berlin, fatigued but satisfied with the brief pilgrimage.

Now, many weeks later, it may be appropriate to say something about the juxtaposition of Weimar and Buchenwald. It is of course a geographical accident.

But it was no accident that the SS guards of the concentration camp paid special reverence to the "Goethe Oak" which stood inside the barbed wire. This tree, under which Goethe was reputed to have rested, was piously protected after all the other trees of Buchenwald were felled. Those SS men who murdered so indifferently felt soulful bonds with the poet of humanity. One thinks involuntarily of the Jew-killers who were flower-lovers - like Himmler.

Yet the proximity of beauty to bestiality is omnipresent in Germany, east and west, yesterday and today. Once in awhile a look at something like Weimar and Buchenwald makes you wonder about tomorrow.

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