

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DB - '46
I want some seafood, Mama -
Rostock's Fish Factory

Berlin-Charlottenburg
Carmerstrasse 19
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 21, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

One day early in December, I made an "official" application for a short trip into the German Democratic Republic. A longer tour planned for a group of Western correspondents had been postponed at the eleventh hour by the East Berlin Foreign Office because of the Berlin crisis. (The Soviet Note on Berlin arrived the day we were to have left.) The only remaining alternative was to make an individual attempt.

On the face of it, such applications might seem to be simple matters. However, they involve many tedious hours.

First, you must establish contact with the Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der DDR. This means long spells in the anterooms of the olive drab building waiting until one of the young foreign officers deigns to see you. Contact, in this case, is another word for ice breaking. For it is necessary to convince the suspicious young man that you are not a wicked spy. You take your time, carrying on wandering conversations about matters irrelevant to your mission.

After several such sessions, you come to the point: How about a trip into the DDR; my boss would like it awfully. He stiffens to attention. "Where to? When?"

"Well," Your tone is vague, noncommittal. "I was thinking of the northern part of the Republic. Something we know so little about. I would like to go sometime this month, if that were possible."

"You must have specific wishes," he insists.

You maintain your distance. "I was sort of thinking of Rostock. The Fischkombinat maybe, the harbor. And perhaps a collective farm..."

"Put it down in writing," he says. "And make specific requests as much as that is possible." He takes note in a ledger.

"I will come back sometime next week with a letter."

"We will leave it that way. Auf Wiedersehen."

The letter, couched in careful language (...Regretting that the November trip had to be postponed, I should like to submit...) contains four suggestions: The fish factory; the harbor, a collective farm in Mecklenburg, and the Workers and Peasants Faculty at Greifswald.

Several days later, you return to the Luisenstrasse and ask for your man. He comes down smiling.

You follow him through a maze of corridors, up and down stairways to his office. "We have decided to accept your application," says Kollege (Colleague) Rickert. "We have scheduled the trip for Thursday...three days...a companion will accompany you, to help you, (Newsmen are seldom allowed inside the DDR without escort)...and perhaps one other correspondent...you will be permitted to drive your own car...we will pay the costs of the journey...come back Wednesday for your visa."

Then, if there is time, you do homework on the places you will visit. There are specialists to talk to - at the United States Mission; at the U.S.I.S. radio station (RIAS), and at the Ministry for All German Affairs. There are scraps of information in the clippings from East German newspapers. There are refugee reports:

"Rostock's new harbor is way ahead of schedule" (but it ought to be with a budget of 65,000,000 marks in 1958.)

"Rich collective farmers; poor collective farms." (a useful homily on the division of gains in a Socialist state.)

"Find out how palatable their fish really is." (a suggestion from one of the experts who keeps an eye on product quality.)

* * *

Kollege Kinzig, the comrade secretary of the Foreign Office visa section was not in her office at the appointed hour on Wednesday. Instead, she was lost in one of those endless cadre meetings that Communist functionaries have to go through every week.

So I spent a good part of the morning in the glass-partitioned waiting room at the back of the old Zeughaus (Armory) building, browsing in the Party publications that lay strewn on the heavy maple tables. Colleague Kinzig arrived about noon, a skinny woman with frizzled reddish-blonde hair and gunmetal eyes.

She leafed through the passport slowly. "I see you have been in the Republik before," she said, in a disapproving tone. "But you did not have the proper visas." She opened a drawer and took out a rubber stamp. "I will make your previous visas totally invalid," she added, moistening the stamp pad. Thud, thud, "Ungültig"... Thud, thud, "Ungültig"... Then she imprinted the new entry visa and filled in the spaces with a cramped hand. "Now go to the Peoples Police Inspector for a Stay Permit," she commanded, and handed back the passport.

This required a further trip past the Alexanderplatz to the huge Vollpolizei headquarters building, which serves largely as a prison. The service was swifter here. An enormous creature named Frau Gozur put the final DDR seal of approval in the pass. In theory, I was ready for Rostock.

But not quite.

Next morning, I drove to the Foreign Office at eight o'clock, equipped with an overnight bag, a full tank of gas, six rolls of film, and a hundred cigarettes.

Kollege Rickert was waiting in his best blue suit, face wreathed in smiles. He introduced me to Herr Kuhn, the curly-headed youth who was to be the "companion" on the trip. Eyes averted, we all bowed. Rickert also informed me that we would be accompanied by Mr. Colin Lawson of the London Daily Express. Finally, he asked if he might check my passport. I hand it to him.

"Oh. Too bad," he sighed. "Your car is not registered. You will have to make another visit to Kollege Kinzig..." I sighed too. "I will call her and see that it is done quickly," he volunteered. Just then, Colin Lawson arrived, a tall fellow in a Chesterfield, his rusty hair slicked down like a schoolboy's.

We piled into the car and headed for the visa department at the Armory. Colleague Kinzig was waiting. "You should have told me about the car," she admonished. "I thought you knew," I replied. With a sour look, she opened the pass and wrote the final entry.

(I have described these tiresome visa formalities in order to give an idea of the relative inaccessibility of the German Democratic Republic for most foreigners. The impasse is largely a bureaucratic one, but it is rather effective.)

* * *

It was close to nine when we started off for Rostock. A thin winter sun flickered on the housetops of North Berlin. The morning was crisp. We cruised up the cobblestone boulevards of Pankow until we reached the turnpike. The customs guard in the olive drab uniform walked over to the car. Herr Kuhn waved his Foreign Office card at him. The guard saluted, made an about-face, and raised the barrier. It made the visa rigamarole seem ridiculous.

Route 96 runs with Prussian primness through the Mark Brandenburg's modest plains. The highway is lined with ancient oaks and beeches. Those few villages we crossed invariably contained some substantial villas in the eighteenth century classical style, vestiges of the Junker past. Only an occasional squat brick-Gothic church recalled earlier ages.

The fields were as broad as those of the Midwest; probably they had been part of those Junker holdings that were confiscated by the Soviet Occupation Zone authorities in 1946. Now they are "People's Own..." Brandenburg, that spare and venerable province which gave Prussia its seat of power. Brandenburg, even today the potential seat of political might in divided Germany.

Here and there farmers were still plowing the now frozen earth, evidence of the East German press complaints about tardiness in the DDR's agricultural program. (Brandenburg still ranks as the second most backward district of East Germany) We drove through Oranienburg, Sachsenhausen (location of the Nazi concentration camp), and Gransee. There was little traffic on the highway, except for military trucks. At least a score went by in the course of forty miles - Soviet Army carriers and Volksarmee trucks.

The military traffic increased as we approached Neustrelitz. We were passing Soviet installations too; the compounds are sealed off with high board fences painted green and fringed with barbed wire.

Smack in the middle of town is a large and rather peculiar looking Soviet war memorial. It was the largest I had seen anywhere outside Berlin. On the northern outskirts there were more Soviet casernes, and just beyond a field range for troop and tank maneuvers. Squads of Red Army men were practicing cable-laying exercises.

The highway branched off towards Waren in Mecklenburg. The only indication that we were entering the former dukedom was new snow on the fields. Also, the highway (Number 109) was potholed and bumpy. (Germans have told me that Mecklenburg is famous for its bad roads and always has been.)

All at once, we came to the edge of the low plateau that overlooks the Warnow River. Several miles beyond were the towers of Rostock, the curving harbor basin, and above, the Baltic Sea. The road dashed into the valley, and in a few minutes we had reached the mighty medieval Steintor on the old city wall. It was 1 p.m.

* * *

We stopped at the State-run Hotel Nordland for lunch. Thursday's blueplate was venison stew, monosodium glutamate, and potatoes. Lawson and I were left alone to shovel in this carbohydrate delicacy while Herr Kuhn made numerous telephone calls. Presumably he was advising the various local security organs of our arrival.

Then we drove out to the fish factory - past the new Moscow-style apartment houses of the Stalin Strasse; past the Holbein Platz, where units of the Seestreitkräfte (the naval arm of the Volksarmee) were marching, past the Neptun Dockyards - to suburban Marienehe.

Even from the gate, it is plain to see that the Fischkombinat Marienehe is a vast establishment - long warehouses, rail sidings, overhead pipelines, spacious grounds. It was surrounded by a high fence. "No photographs" said the sign on the gatehouse door. Another placard demanded: "Out with the Occupiers! Berlin for the Berliners." A stiff wind was blowing out of Denmark.

The director of the Kombinat, Herr Willi Diecker, received us in his large office, whose principal decoration was a bust of Walter Ulbricht painted bronze. At 54, Diecker is a husky fellow with thin sandy hair and the face of a man who has done a lot of meditating.

He spent the first half hour telling about his factory.

Until 1950, Marienehe was a Luftwaffe airfield. "There never was a high seas fishery here in Rostock before," said Diecker. "We had to stamp everything out of the earth." The reason was that East Germany could not afford to import all its fish supply, (Germany's traditional fisheries are on the North Sea Coast) as it was obliged to do after the war. Even today, the DDR has to import sixty per cent of its fish supply, for reasons that will be explained.

The Kombinat now operates twenty trawlers and two auxiliary ships. It has repair shops, cutting rooms, a net room, a fish meal factory, ice-making equipment and a polyclinic.

Additions in the current 5-year plan are to include refrigerating plants, a new quai, and a canning factory. "Right now we can only handle fresh fish and filets," said the director.

Marienehe employs a total of 3,300 workers, one third of them on the trawlers. The fleet fishes the North Sea, the Bear Island grounds, the Norway Coasts, and lately the Grand Banks and the Labrador Coast. In the winter they work the Baltic.

Diecker said the DDR Government had invested a total of 150,000,000 marks in the Kombinat over the years (roughly 75 million dollars). "We are not yet profit-making," he confessed, "but that won't be the case for another twenty years or so. We will be a profit-making business only when we can land three times as much fish."

Up to this point, the Kombinat had sounded and looked like a pretty impressive operation. Then we asked Willi Diecker how much fish he was netting annually. "About 45,000 tons this year," he said, ruefully. "We were supposed to get 50,000 tons."

What was the matter?

The director assured us that his workers were fulfilling their norms. Political education was progressing steadily. The repair shops could turn over a ship in 48 hours. The new perlon nets were stronger and lighter than hemp. The five hundred apprentices were going at their tasks with Socialist elan.

Everything was going swimmingly, said Herr Diecker, except for one element - the fish. They weren't there in their old haunts. Demonstrating a complete lack of Socialist morale, they had vacated the North Sea in favor of the South and North Atlantic, leaving the Rostock Fischkombinat high dry and comparatively fishless.

"Most of our trawlers are not big or fast enough to make the long voyages," he explained. "We should be getting five large ones in 1960." But that is a long time off. In the meantime, East Germany is stuck with a costly and unproductive plant.

The Communists think big and plan big. As Willi Diecker explained, the Fischkombinat is a project which the DDR Government reckons in terms of decades. But that does not detract from the present day situation: The Kombinat is a monstrous example of misplanning.

In defence, Diecker points out that all of the European fisheries have been sorely affected by the recent migrations of food fish from local waters. "The herring shortage has hit all of us," he said. "This is a turning point in the worldwide fishing industry." The difference is, however, that the "capitalist" fisheries are in a better position to finance new and more effective trawler fleets than the tightly spanned Socialist economy of the DDR.

The director admitted that the fish shortage showed up not only in terms of decreased quantity, but also in decreased quality.

"The lack of fish has caused some troubles in quality production," he said. "It means our trawlers have to drag (nets) longer. That is hard on the fish. Instead of dragging half an hour to get a full catch - as you can off Labrador - we have to keep the nets out for two or three hours."

The fish that emerge from such draggings are bruised and their meat goes soft quickly. ("You can always tell the difference between our fish and foreign fish," said a Rostocker later. "Ours is gray and flabby. Theirs is white and firm. Nobody buys DDR fish when they can avoid it.")

The way that took Willi Diecker to Rostock was as rough as a back road, but not extraordinary for the top functionaries of East Germany.

"I was born in Westphalia," he said, "one of eight children. I went to work in a glass factory when I was twelve." Later he apprenticed himself as a surveyor in the land registry office, and gradually gathered enough credits to attend a workers' college run by the Social Democratic Party.

He started working for SPD newspapers in 1929, was imprisoned by the Nazis in 1933, and banned from journalism after his release the following year. It was during this time that he came to know and sympathize with the German Communist Party (KPD). From 1935 until 1945 he worked variously as a machinist and a merchant. The Gestapo jailed him several times; last in 1944 for high treason.



Willi Diecker (right)
With Companion, Herr Kühn

When the Soviet Military Administration forced the fusion of the KPD and the SPD in 1946, Diecker joined the newly created Communist-dominated Socialist Unity Party which has ruled East Germany ever since. Immediately, he was given a leading position in the State administration of Saxony Anhalt. Later he had a high post in the Ministry of Economics. He has been director of the Kombinat since 1953.

"I am not a seaman," said Diecker, "but I like fish. I used to eat a lot when I was a student. It was cheaper." (In fact the Marienehe Fishery had to start from scratch as far as technical personnel and skilled labor was involved. At the start, most of the trawler captains had to be hired from West Germany.)

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The director took us on an exhaustive tour of his plant. We paused a moment on the quai leading out to the river. "We are looking forward to the completion of the new channel (in 1960)," he said. "The old one is too narrow and trawlers keep bumping into each other in high winds."

Then he pointed to a loudspeaker. "We have a communications system all over the plant now," he said. "In the morning we broadcast setting up exercises. I am not taking part as yet," he added, "but I intend to." (This is part of a campaign throughout the Socialist Block to develop gymnastics in the factories and offices.)

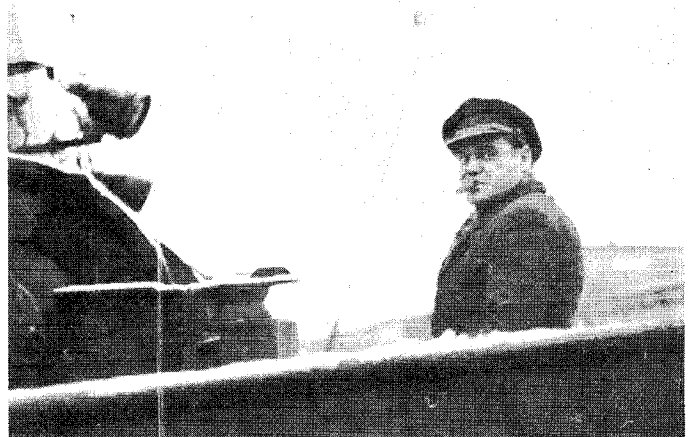


Diecker guided us through workers' canteens, through the dark and silent cutting rooms (the machines came from West Germany), and the Kombinat's chemical laboratory. There were almost no workers in sight. But those who came our way greeted the director cheerily, often as "Comrade Director". Diecker knew many of them by name. Obviously they liked him.

Asked to explain the absence of workers, Diecker said: "Normally we work three shifts. But it depends on the supply." (During the whole of this tour we did not see a single fish, dead or alive.)

We inspected some of the DDR-built trawlers. They looked sturdy enough, the "Clara Zetkin", the "Stalinstadt", and the "Eisleben". But they were rusty tubs, badly in need of paint and trim. Diecker said five of them were fitted out with radar.

The director said his captains earn 25,000 to 30,000 marks a year. "They are all youngsters," he added. "The average age is 25." The trawler seamen earn 8,500 to 9,500 marks annually. (These are high wages for Germany - East or West.)



Diecker said it was not easy to promote political education on the trawlers. "We have SED men and union leaders on most of the ships to lead political discussion groups," he said. "But usually

when they are at sea there is too much to do, and when they get ashore they want to go home."

"We have also had some difficulty paying according to productivity," he admitted, referring to the fish shortage again. (In East Germany as in other Socialist countries, premiums are paid when production exceeds the norms set by the State. However, in many factories, such as this one, conditions are such that the norm can seldom be fulfilled; making premiums illusory for the laborers, as well as annoying.)

The Kombinat's repair shop was almost empty of workers too. A couple were tinkering with a piece of deck machinery when we entered. The shop was decorated with red banners and Socialist slogans. The foreman came over. Diecker introduced him as Hans Schulz, aged 38. He had a bundle of red covered booklets under his arm. "Take one," said Schulz, "we are educating the workers to develop a proletarian consciousness with these."

The title was: "Marxist-Leninist Evening Course of the Trade Unions - Our Materialistic Concept of the World and Nature."

"Our workers are one hundred per cent better in their progressive thinking than they were four years ago," said Schulz fervently. "But still not as much as we would like." As for the effectiveness of the repair shop, Schulz said: "It used to be that the Neptun Dockyards would tell us they needed three weeks to fix a trawler. We said we would overhaul them in fourteen days ourselves. We showed them! That's Socialist competition!"

Diecker also took us to the chandler's floor and to the net room. He was especially proud of the nets. "All made of perlon," he said, "all produced in the Republik. They are surprisingly good; tough and durable, and they dry fast." He gave us samples.

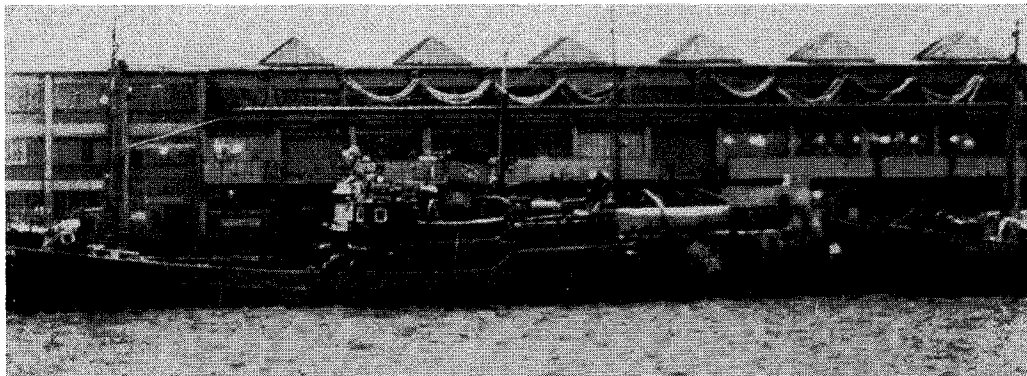
To cap the tour, the director showed us the Kombinat's polyclinic and its childrens home. The clinic was extremely well-equipped with operation rooms, surgical and X-ray instruments, isolation wards, and even sauna baths. It was empty except for a couple of bathers.

Likewise, the childrens home was large and well-appointed. However, the small staff had too much on their hands with three dozen babies and toddlers. These were the children of working mothers - married and unmarried. I gathered that some had been dumped there by parents who couldn't be bothered with caring for them.



Hans Schulz

It may have been the lack of fish and workers at Marienehe, but I did not get the impression of a victorious march towards Socialism in the Fischkombinat. Nor were there any signs of the triumph of proletarian consciousness.



As a sidelight on this subject, it is interesting to note that there was no fish on the Rostock restaurant menus that night. And there was none the next day in Greifswald, also a Baltic coast town.

Furthermore, it was revealed in a private conversation that 20,000 cans of fish from Rostock had burst during the fall because they had been poorly sealed. "Unskilled labor," was the comment. "They ruin some of the fish before it is even canned."

One couldn't help feeling sorry for Willi Diecker in this situation. We left him standing in the snowy darkness of his great factory, his face set and sad. He seemed like a nice guy, with none of the marks of the fanatic. He was plainly a conscientious director and a hard worker.

And there he was in his vast void plant, a model Communist enterprise. Yet all he could do was sit there and worry about the ones that got away.

David Binder
David Binder

(To be continued)

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