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"The Advantage of Socialism"
Rostock's new Harbor

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366 Madison Avenue
New York 21, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

It was freezing as we drove out along the Lower Warnow on Route 103. The tires crackled and hummed over the ice-filmed pavement. To the left there was darkness; to the right there was light from hundreds of distant flood lamps.

Starlike, these constellations hung over the enormous Rostock harbor construction project. The swing shift was working far into the frost-bound night. Two thousand workers; Siberia did not seem so far away.

Half a mile beyond was the Breitling, the great broadening of the River just before the sea barrier. Running lights on several ships twinkled across the water. They were outshone by the beacons of two dredges that were cutting the new harbor channel. Another half mile and we passed the sprawling Warnow Wharf. Lights were on here too - illuminating "Europe's largest shipyard hall" and the high aerial cable-cranes above three new ship hulls.

There are night shifts in many West German factories also. Yet this was different. A few years ago there was nothing but a sandy shoreline here. Now on a winter night 10,000-ton ships are being built. The Warnow Werft has seven thousand workers on its payroll.

At what a cost?

You scratch your head. Rostock hasn't been a great seaport since the days of the Hansa. Even then it was overshadowed by Lübeck and Hamburg. Rostock hardly built anything larger than a rowboat before the war. Now its shipyards are turning out oceangoing freighters. Why? Why?

The people of East Germany can buy quite a few automobiles and television sets today. There is just as much pork on their tables as in West Germany. The visual gap between East and West is rapidly narrowing. Mind you, I say the visual...

But when you see something like the barbed wire of the Iron Curtain slicing through the middle of German fields, German streams, German villages, yes even German houses; when you see a refugee camp, or when you see one of the fantastical and "unnecessary" industrial projects like the StalinStadt Iron Works, or the Marienehe Fish Kombinat or the Rostock harbor development; then and only then does the madness of Germany's division become visible.

We were in Warnemünde. Long rows of suburban apartment houses gave way to the low cottages of the ancient fisher village. Their tiny leaded windows cast sparks on the glistening snow. Then we swung out on the Park Strasse, past the luxurious 19th century villas left over from the town's Wilhelmine era.

Our companion, Herr Kühn, had secured rooms in one of the resort hotels, the Stolteraa. It was now a State guesthouse for visiting Communist prominence. From the window of my 14 mark room you could hear the Baltic waves beating softly on the shore.

Zealous and duty-bound, Herr Kühn was reluctant to undertake anything that wasn't on the Foreign Office schedule. Nevertheless, Colin Lawson and I persuaded him to dash into Rostock: supper and a night on the town instead of culture.

Worst of all, Lawson and I drank two beers and a vodka before going out to the car. Herr Kühn protested vainly: "What if you smash up the car? Alcohol! The law is strict. I must forbid it." (Thus Socialist conscience doth make cowards of us all.)

Then suddenly and unexplainably, young Kühn got into the spirit of the evening. "I know what I will do," he said. "I have a friend in Rostock. Maybe I can visit him." He rushed out to the lobby to make a phone call and returned beaming. "I found him."

We separated at the downtown Doberaner Platz with the arrangement to meet at midnight in Rostock's lone nightclub, the Trocadero. Herr Kühn went off to his friend. (I'm sure he was disobeying orders to stick to our heels.) Lawson and I began looking for a restaurant. After two false starts - dismal cafes with dirty glasses and spotted tablecloths - we were stopped by a police car. "Stand where you are," commanded the Volkspolizist. There was no alternative. We were in a narrow dead-end street.

Three more Volkspolizisten climbed out of the green sedan. "We have been watching you," said the first one. "You parked wrong on the Am Brink, and now you drive the wrong way up a one way street. Give me your papers."

Lawson whispered: "Just don't exhale."

"You West Germans think you can run around here without obeying our laws," said the cop. "They apply to you as well as to us..." Then he swallowed. "Ah...So. You are foreigners." He flicked through the passports and returned them. "...Where was it you wanted to go?"

We were given a police escort to the Rostock Ratskeller.

It was dim beneath the 13th century brick arches of the Rathaus celler. A few old couples, probably pensioners, sat on the benches outside the restaurant, gazing apathetically at the newcomers. From their appearance, they hadn't enough money to go inside.

Although every table was occupied, the Ratskeller had a mordant air. Perhaps it was the naked light bulbs. Perhaps it was the faded colors on the Hansa heralds that decorated the arches. Perhaps it was the bored gray faces.

Gone were the rosy-cheeked tradesmen, the patriarchs, the white tablecloths, and the sparkling crystal of the past.

We sat down at a table with a young naval officer of the East German Seestreitkräfte. He was nursing a beer languidly. We ordered supper and a bottle of wine. The sailor sat up straight. We were foreigners? English? American? His voice was soft, but he was excited. Soon Lawson had him talking about himself.

He was a first lieutenant, this 22-year-old Saxon boy, and earning 1,000 marks a month. He liked the sailor life, but he did not care for the political discipline of the DDR Navy. Or for the restrictions. "We are not allowed to go to Berlin," he confided. (This ordinance is to prevent Volksarmee members from fleeing to the West or coming into contact with Western influences.) Most of all, he was bored: the tedious barracks life, the lack of things to do in his spare time.

I met Lawson and the officer later at the Trocadero. They were watching the floorshow. A youthful quartet thumped a slow foxtrot while the master of ceremonies tried to lash up enthusiasm with mother-in-law jokes. A Spanish dance team came on, clicking and spinning at a pachyderm pace. A polite smatter of applause, which the performers received with hideous smiles. Then an acrobat on rollerskates who did a score of pratfalls. It was grim, and the audience knew it.

Rostock nightlife...the same collectivized dreariness of Leipzig and Weimar...the provincial theater playbill clogged with bad Socialist dramas...the cinemas showing "constructive films". No wonder East Germans tune in the Western television and radio programs. No wonder they save up for holiday trips to Berlin so that they can slip into the West Sector theaters and nightspots.

Herr Kühn floated in on a cloud of schnaps. He seemed to have forgotten his fears about alcohol and driving; both he and Lawson dozed all the way back to Warnemünde.

* * *

A splendid morning: The low sun bounced its light off the ceiling of alto cumulus clouds. Small waves lapped on the beach, slowly building up a crust of ice. It was very much like Lake Michigan in the winter.

We drove a few blocks from the hotel past the Warnemünde Lighthouse to the Rostock Transoceanic Harbor Construction Office.

This is the field headquarters of the Communist army of engineers who have declared economic war on Western Europe. It is commanded by technicians who have sworn that Rostock Harbor will one day drive the capitalist port of Hamburg into bankruptcy. Regardless of the cosmic costs in money, material, and manpower.

To understand the nature of this war, you need a little geographical background.

The post-war division of Germany left the East Zone without a single deep harbor. Bremen, Wilhelmshaven, Hamburg, Kiel - all went to Western Germany. To the east, the port of Stettin at the mouth of the Oder came under Polish administration. The Poles have guarded Stettin jealously ever since.

This situation was peculiarly painful to the already hard-pressed economy of East Germany. It meant that most overseas exports from the young and struggling German Democratic Republic had to travel to the ocean via Hamburg. The ~~great~~ North German harbor had been the traditional trans-shipping point for Middle German and Czechoslovakian industry anyway. The broad Elbe River bore this heavy traffic to Hamburg and beyond.

But the Iron Curtain fell across the Elbe only a few miles upstream from Hamburg, cutting the port's pre-war shipping high of 38 million tons in half. Today, thanks to the expansion of industry in Lower Saxony, Hamburg handles about 25 million tons annually.

Much as East Germany and the other Communist satellite countries wanted to use Hamburg, they could ill afford the harbor costs that had to be paid in hard Western currency.

More important, as striving Socialists, it stung them to be dependent on the West German port. For Socialism means autarchy - political and economic autarchy.

Over the years the East German shipping situation became more and more intolerable for the DDR Government. Much more than the drain of precious Western currency, it was the dependency on the West that hurt.

Poor East Germany: unrecognized and unloved by the family of nations, looked on as Russia's lowliest lackey, not even able to run an independent economy. We will show them. Especially that rich snooty brother of ours, West Germany.

Probably these were among the thoughts of Walter Ulbricht and his cohorts in the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party around October, 1957. It was then, at the Committee's thirty-third plenary session, that the decision to build Rostock harbor was made.

Some decision! The harbor installations alone will cost an estimated 700 million marks.

However, to make the port "pay for itself" it must gain inland access to the Elbe waterway system. That means an overland canal from Rostock across Güstrow to Wittenberg. Engineers have called such a project "impossible" for over fifty years - the bumpy topography of the Mecklenburg lake country is the worst imaginable for a canal. (One ten mile stretch would require no less than twelve locks according to technical experts.) Moreover, they reckon there is hardly enough water to feed such a canal for 250-ton barges, let alone today's 1,000-tonners.

Impossible?

"Socialism triumphs" - over topography and costs. The canal, not even begun yet, will cost another half billion marks at least. When it is finished, barges from the German Democratic Republic, from the Czechoslovakian Republic, and from the Hungarian People's Republic will be able to taste salt water in the Socialist port of Rostock.

In so doing they will avoid that decadent capitalist harbor in Hamburg - with a detour of 250 miles. Extravagant yes, but still Socialist.

Other goods will travel to Rostock over the Güstrow-Neustrelitz railroad section that was torn up by the avenging Soviets in 1945 for reparations. This was part of the main north-south rail line to Rostock. It has yet to be rebuilt.

Once in Rostock, this by now improvident freight will be loaded onto ships which must pay tolls to traverse Schleswig-Holstein on the (West German) Kiel Canal. (This Baltic-to-North Sea canal is normally bypassed by Central European traffic which uses the shorter Hamburg route.) Already today more than 800,000 tons of East German goods go through the Kiel Canal rather than over Hamburg.

All this for a transoceanic port at Rostock. One million tons transhipped today. "Six million tons in 1962," says the plan. Twenty million tons in the glorious Socialist future.

There must have been architects in old Egypt who protested that pyramids were impossible. But the prodigal Pharaohs built them. No, Rostock and its accoutrements are not impossible.

They are merely a squandering.

Thus to look for the *raison d'être* of the harbor project in the realm of economics is fruitless. The reasons for Rostock are political: The Communists have declared that the Baltic shall be a "Sea of Peace", a Red Sea. Rostock will contribute its part to this Soviet "*Mare Balticum*" thesis, to autarchy. And hang the costs.

* * *

The first of these big Socialist spenders we met in Warnemünde was Hans Hilt, traffic director for the Rostock Harbor and a railroader by profession.

Standing before a vast blueprint of the port, he gave us a clipped description of the project: the new 32-foot-deep channel now being dredged; the new "East Mole" constructed to protect the channel, the pilings for the docks...

He was proudest of the mole. "It was scheduled to take two years," he said. "But we finished it in nine months... You don't get something like this in capitalism."

The mole was built with the help of student brigades and "voluntary" construction battalions. "The citizens of Rostock volunteered 250,000 'construction hours' last summer," said Hilt. (From a population of 150,000.)



"We used a new technique of dumping rocks. To start with we didn't have enough. So the Party put out a call - Rocks for Rostock - and 60,000 tons were collected throughout the Republic. We hardly had room for them."

Hilt's hand caressed the blueprint affectionately, tracing the length of the 11,000 yard harbor basin, the quais, the freight halls, the housing developments for future dockworkers.

"We are forced by the division of Germany to build this harbor," he said. "That is the tragedy..."

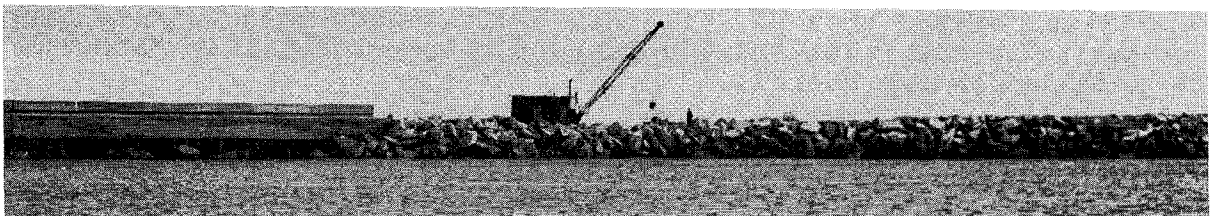
"Look at what the West Germans are doing on the Elbe. Building a new canal that nobody needs, and we have to pay for it in higher tolls. Costs us millions."

I asked Hilt what the other Socialist countries thought of Rostock - the Poles for instance with their large harbors at Danzig and Stettin. (It is said that the Poles are displeased about Rostock.)

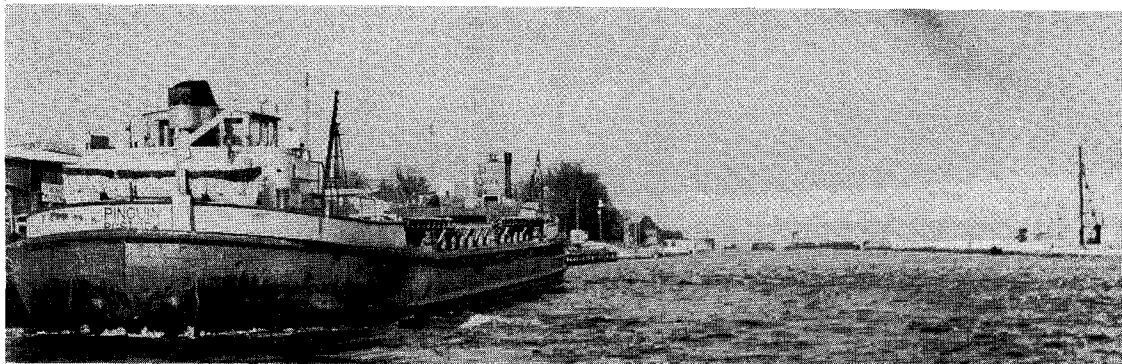
"We don't build any competitive harbors in the Socialist Camp," Hilt replied. "But we must see to it that our foreign trade expands."

Then we were hustled outside with two of Hilt's colleagues. They took us down to the wooden piers of the old Warnemünde harbor slip; Herr Karlek, the young economist, and Herr Wolf, the harbor strawboss. A police patrol boat was waiting to take us on a tour of the new harbor.

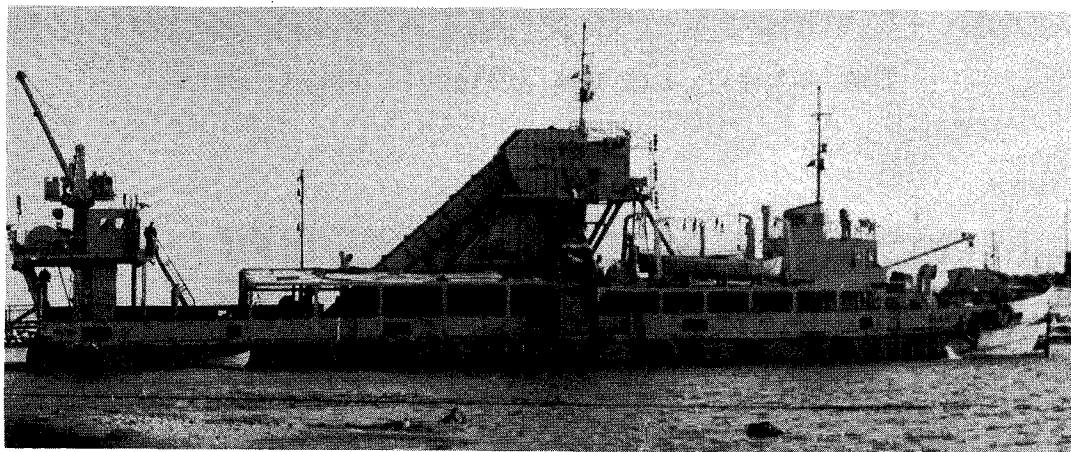
Encased in his leather overcoat, 43-year-old Heinrich Wolf stood in the stern with me as we cruised past the smooth concrete of the old Warnow jetty. Gulls circled overhead. A lone freighter stood on the norther horizon, its superstructure gleaming orange in the winter sunlight.



Our craft rounded the jetty and turned into the new channel. To the port was the East Mole, a curving concrete plate at the end of a long breakwater of boulders. A lone steamshovel heaved the last rocks into the sea.



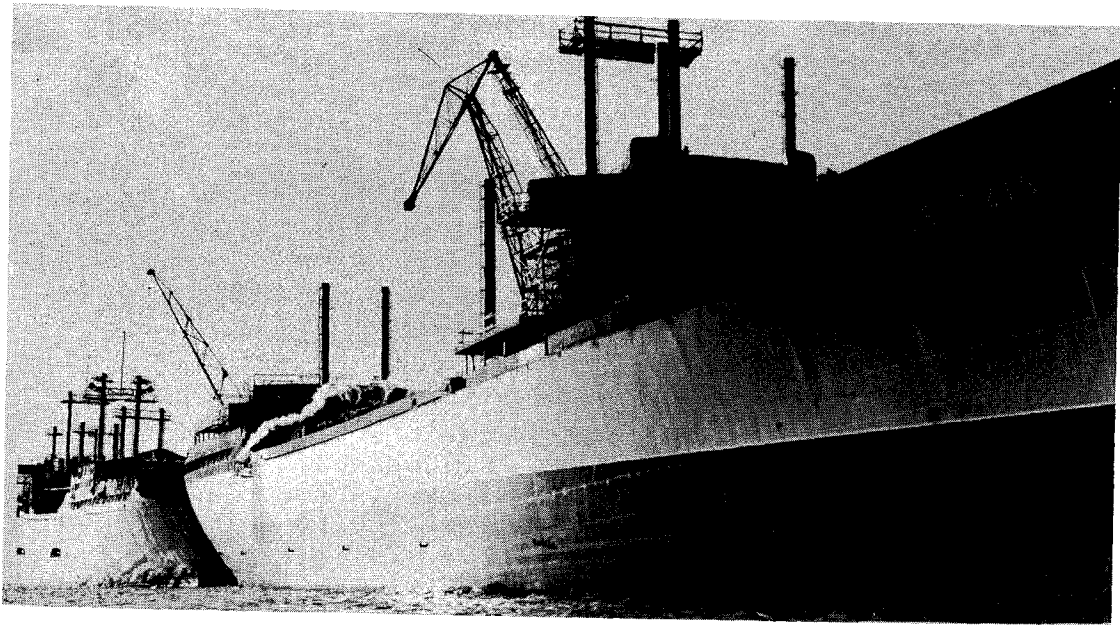
On the starboard a barge, the "Pinguin", slipped past us towards the Baltic with a load of sand from the channel. Already, the chain dredge ahead of us was loading a new barge. It bore a large red banner with the words: "Our Happiness Rests on Peace".



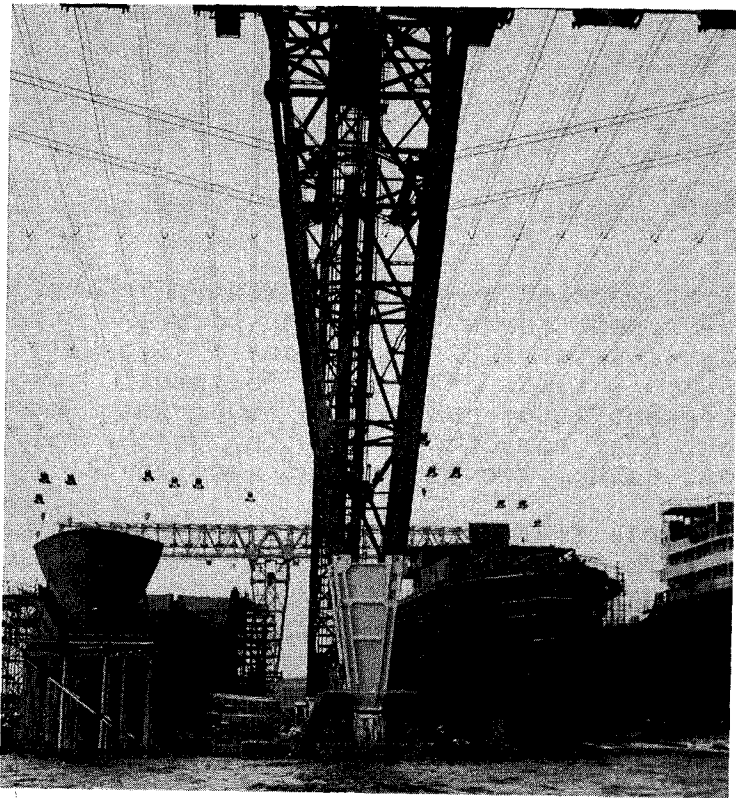
The patrol boat wheeled towards the western shore. We approached the new Warnow repair yards (a fishing boatyard expropriated from a private owner after the war). Most of the slip was taken up by a huge Russian whaler. "The Jurk Dolguruki," explained Wolf. "It's being outfitted here." We swung into the channel again, past a low, gray corvette. Pointing to the swift-looking warship, Herr Wolf said, "We built that here in the DDR."

Just beyond, three freshly-painted freighters were moored: the Leipzig, the Erfurt, and the Ycolbe, a ship for Russia. Laborers were putting the finishing touches on their superstructures. "They will be completed in a month or two," said Wolf. "All of them 10,000-tonners."

Behind the freighters loomed the great cable-crane framework of the Warnow Werft. "Sixty meters high," Wolf cried. Three more freighter hulls rested on the ways in various stages of construction. Acetylene torches winked in the dark interiors like fireflies.



The Leipzig and the Erfurt - nearly done



The Warnow Wharf

Our boat turned back towards the new channel. "We are crossing the new basin now," Wolf said. "It will be 180 meters wide instead of the 50 meters in the old basin."

"The channel will be deep enough for the 10,000-tonners. But later we will deepen it for 20,000-tonners - especially for the oil tankers."

What will be the chief advantage of the Rostock harbor over other European harbors, I wanted to know.

"We are building a fast harbor," said Wolf. "That's the main thing. From the entrance to the docks it will be only six kilometers. Hamburg has 150 kilometers (up the Elbe). Bremen has 110 kilometers (up the Weser.) Even Rotterdam is slower."

"Furthermore, we reckon there is very little sanding up here on the Baltic and almost no ebb and flood to worry about."

"We figure on being able to turn over a ship in ten hours."

Now we were approaching the terrain of the dockyards - a broad plain studded with light poles and pilings. This section was still in the digging stage.

"We have 2,000 at work here now," said Wolf. "In the coming year it will increase to 3,500. We had to move four million cubic meters of earth by December 1, according to the plan," he added. "We made it."

Unskilled workers on the construction project get 450 to 500 marks a month, Comrade Karlek interjected. The skilled laborers earn 600 to 800 marks.

Our pilot turned us about and we sped back to Warnemünde. "When it's finished," said Wolf, waving back at the docks-to-be, "we will be able to load and unload twenty-four ships at once."

"And you can rely on it," he said, jutting his chin out. "The first 10,000-tonner will be unloaded at our new docks on May 1, 1960. That's our target."

Just for emphasis, he repeated this vow as we stood in front of the harbor office a few minutes later, ready to depart. Herr Wolf unbelted his leather coat, pulled out his wallet, and withdrew a smudged card. "Look here," he said. "My 'construction hours' that I volunteered this year." I looked at the rubber-stamped figures. They added up to three hundred hours.

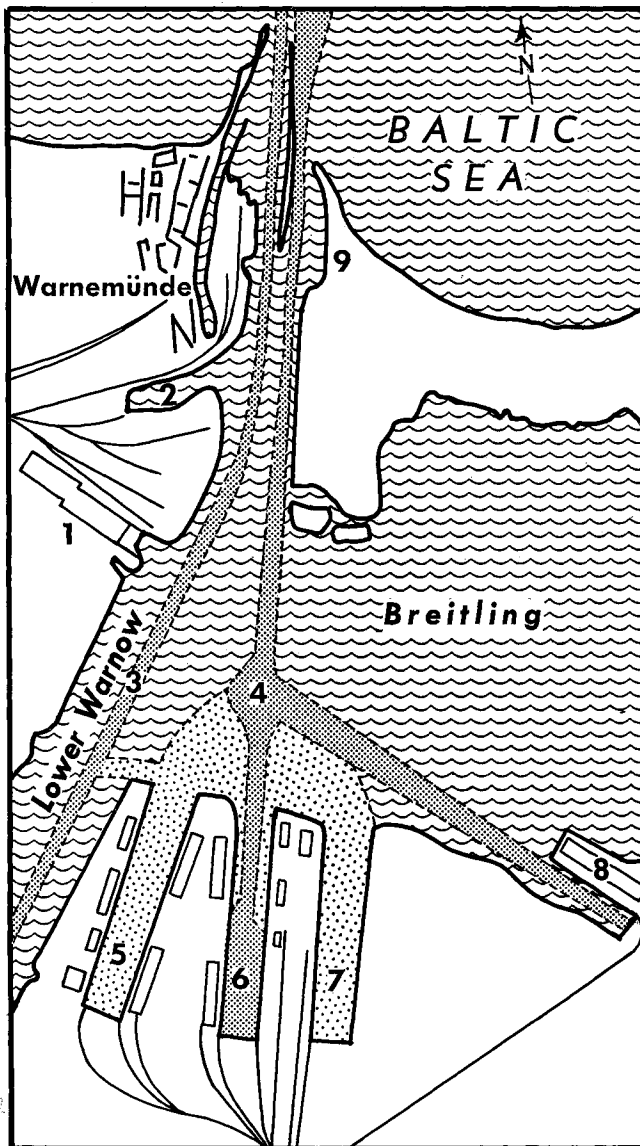
"You see," said Wolf, "that is the advantage of Socialism."

"You can concentrate everything on a couple of gigantic projects - like StalinStadt, or the 'Black Pump' (Power Station at Hoyerswerda) and Rostock." He shook my hand hard to convince me.

Recalling Herr Hilt's remark about Rostock and the division of Germany, I turned to his colleague, Herr Karlek: Tell me, would you people build this harbor if Germany were reunified?"



Wolf and Karlek



"Yes," said Karlek, in partial contradiction of Hilt.

"We would build it, reunification or no. Because a harbor is needed here."

It was too late to ask Hans Hilt whether he really thought the division of Germany was a tragedy.

He was gone.

Who was it, I thought, who said that the Germans are their own worst enemies?

David Binder

1. The Warnow Wharf
2. Repair Yards
3. Old Warnow Channel
4. New Warnow Channel
5. Basin "A"
6. Basin "B"
7. Basin "C"
8. Tanker Port
9. New East Mole