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Proletarian Prep Schools

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Mr. Richard Nolte,  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York City, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

It is over a year now since I visited Greifswald in Communist East Germany. Yet, the memory of that trip is quite fresh, and with your indulgence, I should like to tell about it.

The main purpose was to acquaint ourselves with the Workers and Peasants Faculty established by the Ulbricht regime at the 500-year-old Greifswald University. These peculiar institutions were begun ten years ago as a kind of proletarian prep school; they are designed to promote higher education for working class people and their children.

More than a score of Arbeiter und Bauern Fakultäten (ABF) are scattered around the German Democratic Republic. In every case they are attached to universities or colleges. We discovered, however, that this connection is only nominal in most cases, despite the wishes of the dominant Socialist Unity Party.

Instead, the ABF cram schools are separate entities whose sole purpose is to prepare persons with a grade school education for university study. Eventually, they will be dissolved, because the 10-class school system introduced by the 1959 education reform will make them unnecessary.

But for the present, the ABFs are vital elements in the East German scheme. Indeed, most of the young cadres of the Communist Party have been educated by them. Today, there are still over 6,000 young people getting ABF training.

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The night drive from Trinwillershagen to Greifswald was an easy one, swift, despite the icy roads. We sped through Stralsund, the handsome Hansa town opposite the island of Rugen; in a few minutes we entered onto the plains of Vorpommern, the edge of Pommerania. This is the area from which the Prussian Army drew some of its finest foot soldiers. Even in the Twentieth Century, German officers praise their obedient unquestioning character with the traditional motto: "The only thing wrong with the Pommeranians is that there aren't more of them."

We parked in front of the Hotel Stadt Greifswald near the marketplace. It was a turn-of-the-century structure, by no means plush. Probably a one-time hostel for travelling salesmen. The porter told us we could not bathe, although the warm water taps were steaming.

On learning that I was American he seized my hand and pumped it enthusiastically. "I was a prisoner of war in Kansas for three years," he said. With a glance at Herr Kuhn, our shadow from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he added: "I was freer there than I have ever been since." Herr Kuhn made a sour face and turned away.

After supper we walked over to the University Club House. A number of cars were parked outside and we heard dance music from behind the curtained windows. Herr Kuhn, always the proper cicerone, tried to dissuade us from entering. "It's a private affair," he complained. But the doorman in the cellar ballroom was only too pleased to sell us tickets to the Dental Students Ball.

A gay party was in progress. Corks popped from Crimean champagne bottles and white-coated waiters darted from table to table with trays of Hungarian and Rumanian wine. The band was good and the dancefloor packed. Everyone seemed to be dressed very smartly - the men in dark suits or Volksarmee uniforms; the girls in their best gowns. Herr Kuhn was conspicuous as the lone wearer of the Communist Party button. He felt conspicuous, too.

While the band played a potpourri of Western tunes I asked Herr Kuhn why he always wore two buttons: one on his coat lapel and the other on his jacket. Was this obligatory? "It's desirable," he replied. Did he like wearing them?

"It's not so easy as you might think," he said. "In a crowded streetcar or train, for instance, if you have a seat and you wear the Party button, you're supposed to give your place to a woman. That's Socialist morale.

"What's the matter with that?" I said. "Any gentleman does that automatically."

"Yes, but since the war, manners have fallen off in Germany." He stroked his chin pensively. "Take my case...I have to take the train to Karl Marx Stadt (Chemnitz) every Saturday to visit my wife. Six hours is a long time to stand after a week in the office..."

"Do you mean to tell me that every time you ride to Karl Marx Stadt you take off your Party button so that you can keep your seat?"

"Ja," said our guide, faintly.

The Greifswald dental students had arranged a variety program to go with their dance. Now four young guitarists came on the improvised stage. For the next half-hour they performed a hilarious satire on rock 'n roll in close harmony. The beauty of it was that the East German regime has officially banned rock 'n roll music along with other decadent Western rhythms. But the Greifswalders got around this with their clever parody. Herr Kuhn saw through the ruse. "We don't approve of this sort of thing," he said, wrinkling his nose.

Nevertheless, several bottles later Herr Kuhn got into the spirit of the evening. He waltzed and foxtrotted with the best of them, drawing the line only at jitterbug. Meanwhile, my colleague Colin Lawson was busy wooing a blackeyed dental student. "I think I've got her," he boasted, as she started on her sixth glass of champagne. Then all at once she excused herself and vanished forever. Colin's distaste for East Germany began at this moment, he admitted later.

Down at the bar I chatted with some of the students and professors. "All the way from America," they repeated. "What a pity you can't stay longer. We could tell you what things are really like here. You won't find out as long as you've got that Aufpasser (watchdog) with you."

This was a woman talking, slightly intoxicated. Her husband nudged her to be quiet. "To hell with them," she said, defiantly. "They've made a mess of things and he ought to know about it."

They told about Greifswald's "Street of Friendship", the name given to the old shopping thoroughfare known earlier as the Long Street. Now the local people refer to it as "the street of the long friendship." Another dig at the Communists is the name for the structure housing the university history faculty. The students call it "Institute for Very Latest History." Then Herr Kuhn showed up and conversation stopped.

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We got off to a late start next morning. Snowflakes fluttered down thickly. Outside the hotel a band was planing. It was the tenth anniversary of the Communist Young Pioneer organization. Hundreds were assembled in the old marketplace and more marchers with blue scarfs were pouring in from the side streets, snow pelting them.

The Workers and Peasants Faculty has its headquarters in a former Luftwaffe barracks on the outskirts of the city. Herr Kuhn directed us easily, for he was himself a product of the Greifswald ABF.

Rudolf Bittner, the director, was waiting for us. He took us into his office to explain the workings of his faculty. Here is the story he told:

The Arbeiter und Bauern Fakultäten grew out of the so-called pre-study institutes set up by the Soviet Military Administration in 1946. The aim was to open the doors of Germany's colleges to working class children.

Youngsters with a regular grammar school education are given three years of preparatory training at the ABF; following that they take the Abitur maturity examination just like high school students. Applicants can register themselves. But usually the practice is for factories to delegate the youngsters to the ABF.

"We require that all ABF applicants must have skilled worker certificates, so most of our pupils come from industry and the farms," Bittner said. "Right now we are especially interested in those who seek a profession in agriculture - we also try to convince our graduates to go where they are needed..." (This was still another reflection of the perennial critical shortage of skilled farm workers in East Germany.)

The average age of Bittner's 330 pupils is 19; the youngest are 17 and the eldest 30 years old. Depending on the parents' income each receives a scholarship of 180 to 190 marks a month. (about 85 dollars in purchasing power). Only 70 marks of this goes for room and board - the rest is spending money.

The 38 hours of classes per week are divided among geometry, math, physics, biology, chemistry, German, history, music, Russian, mechanical drawing, and Marxist studies. Second and third year students add French, Latin and English to the regular load.

The director said the ABFs are gradually shifting to a two-year scheme, while at the same time the East German regime is expanding its evening school, adult education, and correspondence school programs. "Before the war, less than 8 percent of Germany's students came from the working class," he declared. "In the German Democratic Republic over 60 percent of our students are from the working class."

I asked Bittner about relations of the ABF with the university. "There was some scepticism at first," he said. "Especially among the old professors. But now the universities are demanding our graduates. As for relations between the two faculties, it's hard to say...it varies from case to case. Some of the university professors actually have Standesdunkel (professional snobbery is the rough translation). Real collegial relations come slowly. With the instructors it's easier. And, of course, we get along well with those professors who are in the Party. The Party and the FDGB (Trade Union) help bring us together."

What about the qualification of his faculty members?

"Some of our colleagues are still taking correspondence courses. Originally, 50 percent came from grammar- or high

schools. They had teacher training. The rest have finished college. No, we do not have any PhD's here." (This is in contrast to the ordinary German high schools which give an equivalent education. Nearly all high school teachers have completed their doctorates.)

Participation in Communist organizations appears to be mandatory for the ABF students. Bittner said nearly all of them are in the Free German Youth and everyone must take part in the Society for Sport and Technology, a paramilitary group. He added "We are especially proud of our agitation-propaganda team. We won a prize down in Berlin." (In this case the Agitprop team was nothing more than a school orchestra.)

The director admitted that relations between his ABF students and the university undergraduates left something to be desired, but he declined to specify. Concerning ties with the non-academic world he said: "Some of the factories who delegate students to us insist that they return. In such cases they make contracts with the students. And the commitment to return becomes the basis for the factory recommendation."

Do more 'Socialists' come out of the ABF than went in? Bittner answered laconically: "Some ask to become Party members when they finish."

He also emphasized the new role of polytechnical education in the ABF Program. "We are sending our students into the factories and onto the collective farms once a month to help them combine practice with theory. We are particularly proud that our student body contributed 15,000 hours of voluntary labor to the construction of Rostock Harbor last summer - and 2,000 marks besides. Some of our boys aren't so conscious of the class they belong to. They are disappointing. But on the whole the morale is good."

Fifteen thousand hours - that works out to about 500 hours of work per student, during one summer vacation....

The man who described all this has come a long way for his thirty years. Sandy-haired Rudolf Bittner has been here since 1951. The son of a mason, he was trained as a surveyor. Then in quick succession he joined the SED, became a schoolteacher, school principal, and finally a math and physics instructor at the Greifswald ABF. A native Sudetenlander, he is rather typical of the expellees who made a quick career via the Party.

As I had learned to expect from previous experience, the reality of this East German Errungenschaft (accomplishment) was not as 'Socialist' as the telling of it.

None of the boys we talked to in the classroom were in the Free German Youth any more, although all of them had been forced

to join at one time. They seemed bored with politics - as much so as their West German brothers.

Horst Podziech, 21, worked in the Wismar shipyards before coming to Greifswald and he expects to study ship construction when he finishes the ABF. He would have joined the youth organization, but his mother is a resolute church member, so he was turned down. Horst seemed more interested in his motor bike than anything else. His stipend pays for gasoline, he said.

It was the same with Roland Rosolski, 19. He was an apprentice mechanic on Rügen, and now he wants to study airplane construction. He had been in the FDJ also and had quit. Asked if he wanted to join the Party one day, he whispered: "No."

Gerhard Gross, another future airplane constructor, was equally uninterested in the political development of East Germany. I asked him what sports he practiced in the Society for Sport and Technology. "You can't call it sports," he said. "All we have is military training; shooting, map-reading, and so on." His classmates were pleased that I spoke to Gross. "We call him Mister Big," one of them said, explaining the jazzy pun on the name.

All of the students we talked to spoke of their complete isolation from Greifswald University. "We don't get together with them at all - at the most in a dance, but then only by accident."

Despite a general air of drabness, the ABF had excellent facilities. The classrooms are large, the classes small, the laboratories well-equipped. We toured the dormitory and found it adequate, too. There were pinups on the walls, mostly of Western film stars. The only political note was rung by a blackboard in the corridor with the legend "Self Criticism." But the board was empty.

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Not long ago, an East German friend came to dinner. He is a writer and a very conscientious Communist. During the evening he reminisced about his past. In the course of the monologue he said he had attended the ABF, before going on to university. After he left, a refugee who was present commented: "That's a typical ABF product - he can never spring over his own shadow." The judgment is harsh, perhaps, but accurate when applied to those insecure persons who were jerked out of familiar surroundings and dropped into a quickie course.

Earlier, the ABF students tended to be what the Germans call "Hundred-fifty percenters" - the Party fanatics and opportunist-careerists. Mean and ambitious, they used their elbows and their Party membership to get ahead in the topsy-turvy society of the DDR.

But this type seems to have vanished from the ABF, if Greifswald is a valid example. Moreover, the boys we met there appeared to have lost whatever identification they once had with the toiling masses. They were looking forward to college, better jobs, and a better life. They weren't looking backwards, towards their proletarian heritage, in spite of heavy pressure by the SED to do so. And they were willing to take the military aspect of their ABF years in the bargain - caserne-like dormitories and weapons training, too. The Party would like to pour them out in molds, but they won't pour.

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The journey back was dreary. Moss was growing on the Anklam cathedral. New barracks were going up at Pasewalk, where Adolf Hitler decided to become a nationalist forty years before. New snow covered the old Stettin Autobahn and the going was slow. We passed into East Berlin without incident and left Herr Kuhn at a subway station.

He was obviously relieved to say goodbye, although he couldn't be anticipating a weekend of report-writing with pleasure. This was his first assignment with capitalist newspapermen and it had been a strain.

Absent for only four days, West Berlin was still a welcome sight after 450 miles of East Germany. I don't know when I was so glad to drive through the Brandenburg Gate into the brightly-lit British Sector.

*David Binder*

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