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DB - 50
My Three Communists

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

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Over the past eighteen months I came to know three young East German Communists. Awkward as it may have been for them to keep seeing me, they remained nevertheless hospitable and loyal friends. I have the feeling that my relationships with them were unique. None of them ever tried to 'convert' me. Nor did they try to 'plant' phoney stories or information with me, as is sometimes the case in such East-West friendships.

Our discussions and conversations ranged over a wide variety of topics - from genetics to collective farms, from automation to marketing, from Communist personalities to Marxist dialectics, from 'Socilaist Realism' to economic cycles.

These talks always occurred in an atmosphere of mutual respect and there was never an undercurrent of rancor. Meanwhile, I got to know their wives and children, the way they lived, and the things they hoped to accomplish.

From time to time, one would observe with a faint hint of irony that I was a 'progressive' thinker. But I am certain they never forgot for a moment that I was an incurable bourgeois journalist.

Just what it was that motivated them to take up with me I do not know. My guess is curiosity; not so much about me, but about America and Americans in general. The isolation of East Germans from normal concourse with Westerners is perhaps one of the most annoying features of the German division. They all feel it, including those whose minds and souls face eastward.

In some cases, one being that of Party Secretary Ulbricht, the isolation constitutes a continually throbbing injury to national pride. With about as much international recognition as Albania, East Germans willingly perform backflips to gain even fictional notice from the West.

I don't think this was the case with my three Communists, but they were unabashed in boasting about their acquaintances from the capitalist West.

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The first I shall call Heinz. He is a deepchested fellow with a strong brow and a thick shock of brown hair. On the brink of thirty, he has a brooding face.

Heinz is what the Germans term an Edelkommunist, a Royal Communist - both his parents were members of the Party before 1933. His father, a cell leader of the Communist underground, was caught by the Nazis and sentenced to several years in a concentration camp. Heinz grew up in his mother's care. When the Soviet Army invaded their East Prussian homeland the two of them were evacuated to Denmark. They spent the first post-war years in an internment camp.

While in high school he became active in the Free German Youth (FDJ). In a short time he was made chairman of the organization for the whole district of Brandenburg.

"I had three choices open to me when I got to the university," he told me once. "I could have stayed in the FDJ and become a functionary. I could have gone to the Volksarmee as an officer candidate. I'd be a captain now with more than a thousand marks a month income. Or I could have gone into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They offered me a diplomatic post in the Balkans."

Heinz rubbed his deeply furrowed forehead. We had just finished a delicious meal at the French restaurant overlooking Tegel Lake. The pleasant redolence of wine and cheese was still in the postprandial air. It caused Heinz to muse on his career for the first time in my presence.

"Instead," he continued, the words coming slowly, "I decided to stay at the university and do academic work."

How much do you earn now, Heinz? I asked.

"It works out to about 800 marks a month - 600 after taxes and Party dues."

But you could have had twice that in the army or the foreign service. Why stay in the university?

"I didn't want to become a functionary. I didn't want to be in the apparatus. At the university I have freedom; freedom to dispose of my time and to do some of the things I want to do; freedom to think."

Heinz's freedom is a relative thing, of course. He must hew to the line like every other Party member, sit in endless sessions, read endless documents. As a loyal Communist he does much of this

without compunction. Again, because of that very loyalty he goes through frequent ordeals as he deals with the unaccountable twists and changes in Party dogma or with the machinations of unconscionable colleagues.

After those revelations in the restaurant, I thought, Heinz is going to defect. I'm not so sure now. As long as the regime permits him to remain the decent person that he is, Heinz will stay and work for Communism.

He lives in a modest three-room flat on the fourth floor of an old apartment house in one of Berlin's working class boroughs. It is plainly furnished, but Heinz's pert Berliner wife keeps the place impeccably clean. Their two children play much of the time in the cobblestone street below. There is very little traffic.

In the summertime they take the elevated train out to Muggelsee for swimming and sunshine. In the winter they go to movies. Heinz has many friends and there are visitors almost every night -- the West German who just came to East Germany in hopes of a better job, the Middle Eastern student who needs help on his doctoral dissertation, the North Korean who wants to clear up a difficult dialectical problem.

Heinz has time for them all; patiently explaining, discussing, advising. It is by no means idle time, for he is weighed down with heavy teaching duties. He also contributes frequently to various East German publications and to the radio. From time to time he is sent to West Germany on proselytizing missions or to gather information. I heard Heinz speak at a recent conference in East Berlin. He has the marks of a brilliant orator - concise, forceful delivery, a rich penetrating voice, and a rare gift of exposition. These qualities are so rare in Party circles that Heinz's address seemed even more effective by sheer contrast.

Various doors are still open to Heinz. He has been offered a Party liaison job that would take him to one of the Western countries for several years. The last time I met him he talked of "going out onto the production line for a year or so." Heinz is restless and often despondent. With all his gifts he still is not sure what to do with them or where he might retain that measure of freedom - to think.

During that restaurant conversation Heinz asked me why I didn't believe in Communism. I told him it was because I think Communism is utopian. He grinned slightly and sourly. "I still don't think it's utopian," he said, "and if I did, I would quit."

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Peter is a skinny fellow with high temples and thick glasses, rather handsome in a skeletal way. He lives on the outskirts of Berlin in a spacious, handsomely furnished apartment. There are ebony figures from Africa on top of the bookcase, and carvings from China on the tea table. These come from trips made by Peter and his wife.

There is a large combination radio-phonograph housed in white ash wood in the living room, and a new television set in the bedroom. These come from Peter's recent earnings as a film script writer. So does the motorcycle parked outside.

Peter has risen far and fast for a one-time electrician. You might sneer and say "dictatorship of the proletariat." But I think that would be mean and unfair in his case. He has earned his way. The son of working class parents, he grew up in a large North German city. He was drafted towards the end of the war and served the last months on the Eastern front. The next three years he spent in Poland as a prisoner of war. It was here that he learned about Communism and became a convert.

They were lean years for Peter. "I remember the first American novel I read. It was *Gone With The Wind*. I read it standing up in the latrine, because that was the only place with a light bulb. I thought it was the greatest novel I ever laid hands on."

Back in Germany he labored briefly on a farm. Then he was delegated by the Party to work on an agricultural control commission in the first great collectivisation campaign of the 1950's. Finally he was admitted to a Workers and Peasants Faculty.

Several years' study at East Berlin rounded out his education. Meanwhile, he had met Edith, a bosomy little girl with gleaming button eyes. She was an expellee from a German community in Poland and a rabid Party member. They married and they now have a four-year-old boy who lives with her parents most of the time.

I never learned the reason for this, since Peter and Edith have more than enough room in their apartment for the child. Perhaps it is because Edith has a demanding job in the East German export ministry. She travels a good deal.

In a sense, Peter is the most cosmopolitan of my three friends. He has been to Moscow and Peking, Prague and Warsaw. He is also the most at ease in the company of Western books and Western languages. Yet this is somewhat deceiving. For all his excitement about the latest Frank O'Connor stories, or Graham Greene novel, or nouvelle vague film, Peter is not an intellectual.

His writing, although it manifests a certain facility and wit, is neither profound nor problematic. This makes him nearly ideal for the Party-line promoters of 'Socialist Realism' who abhor depth and conflicts. Peter is aware of the patent ennui and superficiality inherent in 'Socialist Realism'. He is aware, too, of the primitive idealization of proletarian heroes by the school. But his stories and scripts, written probably unconsciously in this vein, are selling.

So, for the time being, he doesn't know what to do about it.

As for the Party, it does not impinge on the life of Peter's mind. Rather, I think it annoys him or pleases him more or less externally, like a rash or a bath.

Not long ago he told me about an irritating situation in the shooting of his first film. All at once, after the cast was already chosen, the director declared that six of the roles would have to be assigned to amateur actors from provincial theater groups. Peter was aghast. His whole film would be ruined by poor acting.

The reason for this sudden shift was the Central Committee directive that amateur theater, particularly "Worker Theater" be given more attention in East Germany. The method recommended by the Ulbricht regime was to combine amateur with professional theater wherever possible. That went for films, too.

A similar directive concerns literature. Under the slogan "Grab the Pen, Buddy" workers are being encouraged to write, write, write -- short stories, plays, poems, and "factory diaries."

Both the theater and literature policies of the Communists affect professionals like Peter deeply. It means that they must compete against the crudest sorts of grade school creativity. Already, the East German press and theaters are full of worker "works" that would make a Neanderthal cringe.

But it hasn't occurred to Peter to point an accusing finger at the regime which makes such policies. Not out of dishonesty, for Peter is very honest with himself and others. He is annoyed with the effect, but he simply hasn't bothered to trace it to the cause. And that is why I maintain he is not an intellectual.

* * *

Egon is the mercurial one of the trio, and probably the most fascinating. Not yet thirty, he has the face of a baby gargoyle; a wide mouth and curly hair. There is something demonic about Egon, and I don't know quite where it comes from.

He grew up in the Rhineland, the son of a taxi driver. The father was a Communist, but not a very good one. Egon hates him. One day last year, the father came to East Berlin to visit. It was the first time they had seen each other since the end of the war. "My father was here," he said laconically. I asked how he was. "We didn't have much to say to one another," he murmured.

Egon is a hater, albeit a brilliant one. The only persons I ever heard him refer to affectionately are Lenin, Khrushchev, and his wife.

I've seen him in action several times as an agitator. In West Berlin. He shoots to his feet, quivering, his face red and his voice sputtering. Then he is the demagogue, thrashing and slashing about, just on the edge of hysteria. Each time he lost control of himself and went a little bit too far, making a fool of himself in the cool pragmatic atmosphere.

In private, however, Egon could be a wonderful host. Then he was attentive, thoughtful, and even amusing in his raw Rhenish way. His placid buxom wife would bring out great rashers of open face sandwiches and there was plenty of beer or tea.

I think he is a good father to his little boy and girl, too. He is stern, but sometimes he teases with them and he is very patient about teaching them to talk and walk. Egon is also handy around the house. Last fall, on a do-it-yourself binge he painted his living room, put down new flooring and papered the walls - all of it very neatly.

But the Egon I knew best was the thinker and talker. I used to spend hours listening to him expound the quiddities of Leninist dialectic, Mao's theories, the Jesuitical view of genetics, Giorgii Lukacs on literature, the significance of 'Socialist Brigades', and so on. Invariably, he was patient and thorough, and always ready with a tip on some important article or book that one might have missed.

Egon is a philosopher by trade. In this capacity he edited an academic journal for a time, always conspiring to sneak in some controversial author or idea. It was this same characteristic that landed two of his predecessors in political confinement. Egon is a radical and a fighter just as they were, but in his case he happens to conform by and large with the current radicalism of the Ulbricht regime in matters theoretical and practical.

Soon after he got his doctorate, Egon found his true calling - that of polemicist. He went to work for one of the Party organs. There he soon shone as an acridly brilliant writer. Writing on a wide range of topics he always composed with a real flare for vivid imagery and cutting metaphors. In the murky cloudland of Communist jargon, Egon's piercing shafts are refreshing, no matter how intolerable or outrageous they might be to the Western eye.

Still, he isn't exactly happy in his new profession, despite his relatively high salary. He had some run-ins with the editor recently. Whether he stays with the Party organ for a long time is open to question.

The most amusing thing that happened to Egon recently was his "month in the production." According to this Chinese Marxist scheme, adopted by the East Germans last year, Party functionaries must spend a month each year working in factories or fields. Many of them despised the idea, but Egon did his time enthusiastically.

Only he found conditions in the factory where he worked truly shocking. This Socialist reality didn't correspond at all with what he had been reading and writing about.

The machines were obsolete and the laborers in his department despondent, sloppy, and disinterested. The so-called Socialist Brigade formed in his department consisted of a halfwit, a former beautician who wanted only pin money, and a man who should have been on old age pension. Egon discovered that the bold "Socialist Reconstruction Plan" which called for a complete overhaul of the factory in the next five years didn't even mention his department.

"Automation," Egon muttered when the month was over. "That's the only way to fix up that factory."

It's terribly hard to say what will become of Egon, just as it is of Heinz. I am sure he will go far, but I don't know the direction. His friends say he is spoiled since he joined the Party organ. They imply that he has lost his early idealism, that he has become a compromiser. I'm not so sure that he is any more of a compromiser than his critics.

There is a picture of Lenin, the ideologist, on the top of Egon's wall-to-wall bookcase. But the name that is most on his tongue is that of Krushchev, the great pragmatist of the century. I think Egon probably swings between these two poles.

* * *

There is lots more to tell about Heinz, Peter, and Egon; for instance, the fact that they all listen regularly to RIAS, the American sponsored radio station in West Berlin. They don't like it, but their curiosity drives them to it.

Rather than go into exhaustive detail, I will recall an incident which took place last summer. My friends Gerd Scherhorn and Wolfgang Kohler (see DB - 36) were in West Berlin and I decided to bring them together with my East German friends.

The result, probably predictable, was poor. It was also sad. These five Germans, each of whom I knew well, each intelligent, each voluble, all about the same age, simply could not talk to each other. Two West Germans and three East Germans.

They may reunify Germany someday, but they'll never unify my five friends.

David Binder

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