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BWB-18
From Kommune I to Pop Culture

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
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New York, N. Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

West Germany's solid citizenry and even the establishment of the left could hardly contain their sanctimonious glee two months ago when West Berlin's notorious Horror Commune, or Kommune I, finally split up and its two most illustrious members moved to Munich. Once the avantgarde in attempting to "revolutionize daily life" by communal living, Kommune I had scandalized society by their life style as well as by their antics ridiculing the Establishment. It was the newly-formed Kommune I which planned a pudding attack on Vice-President Hubert H. Humphrey during his visit to Berlin in April 1967, issued satirical leaflets proposing the burning of department stores "to bring the feeling of Vietnam to Berlin," and mocked German justice in a succession of well-publicized trials. Even the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund found K-1 too irreverent--politics is serious business, after all--and kicked the commune members out of the radical-left student organization in May 1967.

Despite its pariah status, the commune continued to attract new members, mostly a succession of girls who came and went as rapidly as the revolving door routine in a Laurel and Hardy film. They came because of the political activity and romantic aura involved with the commune; they left because of the grueling psychological pressures of constant self-analysis sessions and free partner exchange.

But internal "psychoterror" and pamphleteering proved a difficult existence for all the communards. Some left to form other communes. When other members led the swing toward violence and militarism in the student movement, ideological differences were added to the personal. Two of the original communards were sentenced to jail for disturbing the peace and interrupting religious services with political demonstrations, and they fled the country.

Which left Rainer Langhans, 29, the articulate Bürgerschreck (citizen's terror) with the long and kinky Medusa-like hair, his photomodel girlfriend Uschi Obermaier, 23, and three other communards living in the top floor of the three-story one-time factory building at Stephanstrasse 60 in the Moabit section of Berlin. Langhans had rented "the factory" a year or so earlier because, as he complained in 1967, the communards "remain alone. Because of that we have the greatest difficulties, internally and primarily politically. There is no commune environment, no prepared subculture in the form of our communal living." It was Langhans' plan to open a center "with music, where you can do everything there. And people like us will live there."

By the time Kommune I had found "the factory," however, other communal living arrangements were springing up all over Berlin (see BWB-11) and K-1 was no longer in the vanguard of the leftist movement, either sociologically or politically. For several months the commune kept alive from its writings and occasional fees for interviews, but they were living on past glory and becoming ever more isolated from the leftist movement. After photomodel Uschi moved in, in late 1968, Langhans took over as her manager and capitalized on offering her services to photographers, at $250 per day, as "Germany's most beautiful communard."

With Uschi offering financial support, Langhans had plans for reviving the political influence of the commune. He'd heard of the Berlin Senate's plans to give $50,000 for establishing a youth center in the Märkisches Viertel, the city's largest welfare housing complex. Langhans talked to a group of "rockers," working-class rowdies whom the city hoped to bring off the streets by offering them a place of their own, and he realized "that they were planning something worthwhile, that they knew what they want to do, and that it was the same thing that we were trying to do in the commune, except with another background of experience and situations." The youth in Märkisches Viertel planned to build not the ordinary kind of recreation center, but what Langhans calls "a living center, with work rooms and cafes and a place for them to do their own thing--which in the Märkisches Viertel with those miserable two-room apartments is terribly important."

Langhans suggested that the rocker group visit "the factory" to see how Kommune I lived and worked in their 150 square meter room where the communards slept on mattresses on the floor, ate, worked sporadically and held discussions into the wee hours. "Some of them didn't understand at all," he recalls. "They'd swallowed all the press propaganda about us. But one of them was enthusiastic and the next time he brought a dozen more with him."

But just when Langhans felt the commune had established contact with the working class youth, the leader of the rocker group felt his position threatened and decided to quash any K-1 interference. "Rudi was the rocker king because he was the best fighter--his strength was on the streets," said Langhans. "He felt he would have to readjust, and there were problems that he couldn't solve. He told me that he is afraid he will be shot or poisoned in two or three years if he doesn't watch out, because he's sure the violence he has generated will strike back at him."

Since Rudi saw no chance for himself, he was all the more jealous of his authority in the rocker band. Langhans had invited some of the rockers to move into a lower floor of the factory if they could persuade another visiting commune to move out. But Rudi and the visiting commune decided to destroy Kommune I.

Langhans describes the scene: "About 8 a.m. on a Sunday morning they kicked in the door and there was a ritualistic scene of violence. There were five or six of us in the commune, some seven to nine of a visiting beat band staying with us, and only three rockers. But they had knives and everything. Our friends in the beat band tried to defend us, but they saw it was impossible. Five of us were injured--I had a strained rib and my mouth was bloody and I had bruises in several places. None of us were hurt so badly that we had to go to the hospital, but we went to a doctor

Rainer Langhans

and

Uschi Obermaier

and had him check us over anyway."

About a half-hour later the communards packed their clothes and other belongings and left "the factory" forever. Uschi and Langhans flew to Munich, her hometown, and other communards sought refuge with friends in Berlin.

By the time I talked to Langhans and Uschi in Munich, where they are living with friends until they can find a "factory"-like building to set up another commune, the former psychology student had grown philosophical about the violent end to his three years of communal living. "The climate of destruction and violence in Berlin now is partly due to the exceptional status of Berlin, its more intense inherent contradictions and economic difficulties. Berlin has a higher unemployment rate than the cities in the Federal Republic, and also the most violent street-gangs. There is this climate of radicalization. On top of that the leftists there are beginning to try and really provoke a civil war situation. All of this is intensifed by the fact that the least intelligent politicians are in Berlin. That's why I left."

Langhans professes to prefer non-violent methods for political change, and his work in the commune seems to bear him out. He was the commune's chief writer during the early days of satirical flyers and happenings, "when our agitation was only verbal." And although Berlin police found a home-made bomb in "the factory" last spring while communard Dieter Kunzelmann still lived there, making Langhans an accessory to the fact of potential bombing, Langhans' ideological differences with Kunzelmann later became irreconcilable and Kunzelmann was forced to leave the commune. Already sentenced to jail for disturbing the peace, Kunzelmann reportedly is in the Middle East now with the El Fatah. Berlin police suspect he may be indirectly responsible for the rash of bombing incidents in the city since the spring of 1968. There have been five fires caused by molotov cocktails, one bomb explosion and three bombs discovered before they exploded, one of them (at the Jewish Community House) powerful enough to have demolished the building. Most of the bombing attempts were directed at police or prosecutors or judges who have taken part in trials involving leftist demonstrators.

Although he is understandably reticent to talk specifically about his former communards, Langhans explained to me in Munich that he believes there are "two kinds of learning processes. One has to do with coercion and the drive for achievement, with guilt-feelings and consequent purification. The other one works via a principle of satisfaction, of the happiness-drive. The first one is an almost Christian model, and it is Kunzelmann's bag. It is a destructive model, so Kunzelmann agrees with the present Berlin actions of bomb-laying."

Langhans' bag is the Lustprinzip or the happiness principle. But he says he did not realize the breadth of positive opportunities for developing this politically until he and Uschi made a trip to London (where she was making a film) last fall. "The negative learning process determines up to 99 percent of the situation in Berlin. When you're in Berlin, you can't think out positive learning processes, even when you want to and try to, because the whole situation is set against it."

But why, I asked, is the position of the left so negative in Berlin? Why has the essentially humanist-socialist ideal of which Rudi Dutschke talked been supplanted by a destructive dogma? "Earlier it looked as if Berlin could change positively," reflected Langhans, "but the SDS is different in Berlin. The SDS members are poorer than the ones in Frankfurt who constantly publish books, or the Munich ones who get parts in films. Poverty creates class-hatred. There is an incredible left-unemployment problem in Berlin, and these people want a violent solution to their dilemma. There are more shooters and fixers (users of heroin) in Berlin than anywhere else, mostly among the working class kids. I know a lot of these people, and the bomb-layers are a part of them."

In London, however, in a thriving pop culture environment that he hopes to help transplant to West Germany, Langhans said he had seen "a lot of positive learning processes. The youth there have a historical situation that is similar, yet they've done something different. I saw their meetings, I saw their shops, the gear clothes, the relationship that people have to fashion and to themselves. I wasn't at the (Rolling Stones') open-air concert, but I saw that everybody talked about it and that it was important for them. I saw that through the attempt to create and change things for themselves, they are open to the possibilities of positive experiences."

Uschi and Langhans have wholeheartedly accepted the eclectic mixture of old clothes, beads, velvets, polo shirts and levis that set apart youthful fashion in London. When a German reporter asked her how many dresses or suits she owned, as if she fitted that old image of a girl with closets full of clothes and never a thing to wear, Uschi replied, "I have only four dresses, and I bought them all at the Kensington or Chelsea Antique Markets in London--you can't find that kind of workmanship on clothes made here and now." Generally Uschi and Langhans dress casually. Langhans favors a silver Indian jewelry neckband with a polo shirt and levis, Uschi a pullover and levis.

But the establishment of the left (Konkret Magazine, for example) accuses Langhans of capitulating to the consumer society and degrading the image of Kommune I to that of a "pop pair." Langhans shrugs off the charges. A rejection of the consumer society "used to be my life," he admits, and it was one basis for the foundation of Kommune I. "But I don't think I have changed radically," he countered. "I think I am even more consequent now. The basic idea of the commune is to make it work inside, to achieve the harmony of living together. In the old commune that didn't work--we used to think revolutionizing of daily life meant revolutionizing the others. The Kommune I project was an effort to integrate political and private life, but more or less accidental sympathies are not strong enough ties. This time we want to establish a productive situation. Whoever wants to join our commune here in Munich should have some kind of project or interesting plan."

Directing his energies toward a productive working commune, with less forced introspection and examination, Langhans wants to use pop culture as a vehicle for making German young people aware of their own power, both commercially and politically. "Young people are the most important people. Nobody seems to see that here, and it should be realized. Young people already control a large segment of consumer spending--$5 million annually in Germany through what they buy themselves, and even more by advising their parents what to choose from the consumer market. In three or four

Left: Fritz Teufel and Rainer Langhans, founders of Kommune I.

Below: Uschi and Langhans eating dinner in their friends' apartment in Munich, the remainder of Kommune I.

years half the Americans will be under thirty, and the situation is similar in Germany."

Langhans contends that the new pop culture should not be seen merely from the point of view of manipulation and integration into society, as many leftists interpret it. "There is more to it. Take the Rolling Stones. They are not primarily important as good musicians, but as a group of people who represent a utopian way of life that young people want to copy. Mick Jagger seems to have freedom, no fixed working time, a lot of money, and every possibility to spend his time creatively. The left doesn't see that there is a mass movement toward this pop culture. It may be still unconscious, but it is the sphere that establishes revolutionary models, not the worker in the factory."

But won't further emphasis on youth broaden the generation gap? Langhans doesn't think so--"Young in my terminology happens to mean 'under thirty' right now, because a person over thirty doesn't smoke pot, believes in making a living, doesn't know much about beat music, has short hair, lives privately, and all that. The only people who do these things now are young. But in ten years or so the lines will no longer be so clearly defined. Then 'young' will describe an attitude open to technological developments, to all the potentials of the modern world."

That's why those who talk of revolution today should use a concept different from the Marxian analysis, says Langhans. "It is no longer a physical confrontation between the haves and have-nots--a class war, with weapons and on the streets--because our society is not bent on the satisfaction of basic physical needs as much as on the satisfaction of spiritual needs. The basic physical needs were important for Marx' analysis, because they were a reality in his contemporary society, but in our technological society the problems have been solved. The confrontation takes place on different levels now. The changes, inequalities and difficulties which still exist in our society exist because of its incredibly imperfect organization and structure."

"But society is not only bad," continues Langhans, "it contains utopian elements, machines and work-saving devices which Marx could only guess at in his time. Machines then were an extension of eyes or arms, but they hadn't taken on the quality of instruments that could do more than man."

The mellowing revolutionary believes man's prevalent drive for the satisfaction of spiritual needs is concentrated in the sphere of consumer products and the new emphasis on sensual qualities, on leisure time, on advertisement with its sexual overtones and wrappings.

To leftists who see socialism and revolution in narrower terms, Langhans sounds like a sell-out. But he insists that his analysis is not anti-Marxist. "It is only a continuation of Marxism through an analysis of our present society. It may sound controversial, but it may be truer Marxism than that of some leftists who have no relationship with modern technology short of making bombs. Dialectical Marxism talks of handling conditions as they really are and to develop a practice from them. It's archaic to go back into history for models."

The revolution that Langhans wants to support at the moment is a

technological one, and his ideas echo much of Marshall McLuhan's "Medium is the Message," although he says he has only read a few of his essays. He wants to use video recorders to "open up totally new vistas of communications" for young people, and for the left. He is talking to the Samy Brothers (who own restaurants, discoteques and boutiques in Munich) about turning Germany's largest discoteque, Blowup, into a video arts laboratory for one day each week. He foresees a net of production and communication studios, outfitted with video recorders "to compete with television and its antiquated studio structure." A video-recorder, for example, "could be installed in places of leftist activity, like communes, universities, teach-ins, and inform everybody about what has been going on by showing the films later in a movie theater." Langhans said he and Uschi are currently working on a concept for a 45-minute television film; they have already completed a 5-minute short for television (using video recorders) which will be shown on 3 February. "I didn't make a script, but used a collection of ideas with texts written along with it. One segment shows Uschi bejeweling herself with lights, another segment is a fictional interview in which I look into a mirror and interview myself."

Although Langhans believes television and other mass media could devote themselves more profitably to "a utopian satisfaction of needs," he notes that the communications industry is still structured in an authoritarian way. "They can only imagine the consumer as somebody to be manipulated, whereas they could try to find out about people's real needs, which would not even reduce their sales, and achieve a new kind of revolution."

The left has failed to get its message across because it's using old-fashioned means of communication, he says. "The left should learn how to handle the new contemporary language, which is a language of pictures, as it is now used by television and magazines. This would ensure better communication between the left and the outside, better than flyers and teach-ins. After all, we--the left--want what everybody wants, but this has been overshadowed by our archaic image of revolution, which made our efforts look so ridiculous, so hard to understand, so difficult, and suddenly also destructive. We have agitated with the wrong antiquated analytical models which don't have much to do with what is going on in our present society. Therefore the sociological, esoteric jargon, the leftists' inability to handle the mass media, their inability to see what is going on even within their own movement--like the sex liberation and female emancipation."

Leftist actions have been modeled on physical confrontation, Langhans says, which creates "the constant vicious circle of provoking the police, who then strike back in a fascist manner. Of course, our society has fascist elements, but it also has utopian elements. And if you want to change society, you have to ask yourself: where do I start? do I make the police beat me up? or do I start where society already has utopian potential."

Sexual liberation and the drug scene are two utopian elements that Langhans sees within society. "The big fuss being made about drugs here and in the States is the last convulsion of a bourgeois desire to try it, without really daring to. Therefore they invent horror stories around the drugs. I've explained to my father that drugs are a must for everybody who wants to succeed in modern management, because alcohol stupefies, it

doesn't make you creative. If the state doesn't go softer on drugs, people will simply take what they want, the law suits will be milder, the taboos will disappear very quickly."

When I repeated to Langhans what other German leftist students have offered as an argument against drugs--that it leads to de-politicalization--he responded unperturbed: "It's true that hash makes you apolitical, and that's one of the reasons why hash is good. Because if politics is something alien to you it is good for you to get rid of it. If it is not alien to you, you will become still more political."

Langhans' own political involvement developed through a search for identity and contact. The grandson of a famous Jena physician, and son of a businessman whom Langhans describes as "rather right wing, but disappointed," young Langhans went to a different school each year, finally ending up in "an elite boarding school where I was the only poor kid." When his rich classmates invited him to visit their homes, he was impressed "by the social ease of their communication with each other, the lack of any kind of apparent pressure." In his own home, Langhans always had difficulty establishing contact with his parents--"my mother," he said, in a curiously matter-of-fact way, "never had an orgasm, so she was pretty neurotic and so was I. I first had psychiatric treatment when I was four years old."

After finishing his Abitur, Langhans was drafted into the Army and won the rank of sub-lieutenant, then was thrown out because of "disobedience--I still don't know exactly why, it was an accident."

When he first entered the Free Berlin University, he was obsessed with studying. "I was an ascetic, hung up on ambition and achievement. I slept five hours a night, and read the rest of the time. I even got mad at the people on busses because they prevented me from reading." After two years on that kind of schedule, he suffered a circulatory collapse. He had first studied psychology, "partly to find out about my own problems...I was painfully shy and introverted, couldn't relate to people at all, not even look in their faces." He still avoids eye contact, and talks at a machine-gun pace. After his collapse he took up sociology, philosophy and Marxism in addition to psychology. But his professor turned down a dissertation he wrote for his diploma--"he said it was too much sociology, but I think perhaps it was too daring."

During his third year Langhans stumbled on an SDS work group at the university and forced himself "to come out in the committee meetings, talk on the microphone, discuss with people. Gradually I learned to handle people and lost some of my shyness." He soon was elected chairman of the FU SDS. After a disappointing love affair at age 25--"she was the first girl I had sexual relations with, that's how long it took me"--he joined Kommune I "so I wouldn't be alone. They weren't friends, really, but at least I could talk to them about my psychological problems and be sure they had the theoretical background to understand what was wrong with me." He became the commune's chief writer, and when Fritz Teufel and Dieter Kunzelmann left the group, the oldest original communard.

Langhans' relationship with brunette, velvety-eyed, pouty-mouthed Uschi began in the fall of 1968, when the two met at the Essen Song Festival. The Kommune I had put in a provocative appearance at the Frankfurt

Book Fair (where copies of Langhans and Fritz Teufel's book Klau Mich--Steal Me--were displayed), then traveled to Essen for the Song Festival, an annual gathering spot for young people. Uschi, a fixture on the Munich party scene after she placed second in the "Miss Schwabing" beauty contest, had modeled and done bit parts in films before joining the Amon Duul beat band, who were appearing at the Festival. The Amon Duul lived together, smoked pot together, and had a rather Asiatic sound. Uschi played rhythm instruments--the maracas, the tambourine and the drums. When the band wasn't on stage, they sat in their bus and smoked pot. "You were so unobtainable," Langhans kidded Uschi, "sitting there in your trance."

Langhans asked the Amon Duul band for a joint, and they turned on together. Uschi describes her sexual allegiances at that time as passionate but short-lived. "I really don't remember whom I used to sleep with in those days. I used to be really intense and then, after a month or so, I suddenly got bored." But she liked Langhans, and when the band went to Berlin for some recording sessions, she looked him up.

"I figured it would be very exciting to sleep with Langhans," she recalls, since he was one of the left's brightest personalities following his and Teufel's brilliant ridicule of the German legal system during their trials for passing out flyers which allegedly incited the populace to burn down department stores. She slept with him and moved into the commune. "He treated me totally differently from anybody I had met."

The Kommune I had eight members then, three of them girls. "There was a lot of jealousy," Langhans admitted, and the communards critized Uschi for her inability to express herself and her lack of political knowledge. "I was totally intimidated, and they nagged at me about it in those endless sessions. I just clammed up and couldn't say anything." After two months, Uschi fled back to Munich, but Langhans followed her and brought her back.

"I realized we hadn't treated her right," says Langhans. Both admit there were terrible sexual problems when Uschi joined the commune. But both say they learned from the experience. "These problems showed me that you cannot enforce these communal sexual relationships, that coercion doesn't work," said Langhans. "I regard it as a kind of youthful aberration." Uschi credits the commune with helping her to "gain consciousness. I handled things only emotionally before, now I can judge them." She is more selective about her modeling assignments now--she refuses to model for liquor advertisements, for example, since neither of them approve of drinking--and she is in favor of Langhans' plan to "break up her conventional Munich modeling career and have her demonstrate that there is something more interesting and worthwhile for her to do." Langhans believes Uschi's joining the commune "exposed the Establishment and focused attention on us." Recalling that, when Langhans was in pre-trial detention for six weeks before he and Teufel were found not guilty on the flyers charge, a fellow prisoner asked him "how do you get a woman, with the way your hair looks?" Langhans said, "Now they see that a beautiful girl finds us and our life interesting enough to join us."

Langhans still faces a possible seven months in jail "for my most harmless actions--for disturbance of religious services when I just said we wanted to discuss, and then left the church quietly...and for a go-in at the City Hall where I blew soap bubbles." His case is now being appealed, and may fall under an amnesty under consideration by the government in

view of planned justice reforms.

Asked to compare his political practice to what he has read about movements in the United States, Langhans said "the closest thing might be to the people who did the Woodstock Festival. The earlier Kommune I activities could be compared to the Yippies, but I don't agree with Jerry Rubin now."

Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman and the other defendants in the trial of the Chicago Seven, however, might well have used Langhans' and Teufel's courtroom theatrics as a primer for their continuing Chicago show. To illustrate, here are some excerpts from Klau Mich, the book about their trials for inciting the populace to burn down department stores:

Judge: Why were these flyers printed about the burning of the warehouse in Brussels?

Teufel: We thought they would excite moralistic shock from people who never become indignant when they read in their morning paper about Vietnam or more horrible things.

Judge: Then you are demonstrating against Vietnam?

Teufel: Not only, we demonstrate also against satiation and self-satisfaction.

Judge: Who is satiated?

Teufel: You can formulate it in another way. The Germans are a democratic, peace-loving, industrious people. Of course they killed a lot of Jews, but now Arabs are killed with German weapons, so that's a sort of reparation. That's the way it is: the more blacks or yellow-skinned people who perish down there, the better it is for us.

Judge: (in shocked tones) You don't mean that seriously!

laughter in the courtroom

Teufel: Of course!

* * * * * * * * *

The guard, searching through Langhans' briefcase for molotov cocktails, finds a sign and gives it to the Prosecutor.

Prosecutor: I want to announce to the court that in the briefcase of the defendant Langhans a sign has been found that is the property of the court. It says "Public Not Admitted."

Langhans: It was laying in the hall.

Prosecutor: Did you take it off something?

"Student Trial," oil and collage on canvas by Renato Guttuso

(courtesy of Michael Hertz studio, Bremen)

Langhans: No.

Prosecutor: That would have been theft.

Langhans: (ironically) Ah so!

Judge: The sign will be taken into custody and remains here.

Langhans: But the sign is right, hang it on the door.

Judge: Please record this: I count 25 representatives of the press and 13 observers, which makes 38.

Langhans: That's very few, considering the interest.

laughter in the courtroom

Judge: Quiet please, or I will...

Langhans: ...clear the courtroom!

Judge: Jawohl, correct!

* * * * * * * *

Judge: What was the reasoning behind the flyers? What did you plan to achieve? An action has to have a reason.

Langhans: That's not so difficult, that's why it amused us to interpret it in this fashion. We never thought it would be considered as a challenge (to burn down department stores). That's absurd! May I ask how you ever got the idea that it should suggest setting a fire?

Judge: (interrupts) You have not...

Langhans: (yelling) I can't utter a complete sentence without being interrupted. Be quiet for a moment, until I'm finished!

judge says nothing more

Langhans: Now I'd like to ask how you could think that the flyers were an invitation to setting a fire. That is idiotic!

Judge: What do you mean?

Langhans: That means that we think people who would feel themselves prompted to set a fire could only be idiots--and that's what the court has done.

Prosecutor: This formulation shows an unseemly attitude. I move the defendant be punished by an extra day's detention.

* * * * * * * *

Prosecutor: (loud) What was then your purpose with the flyers? You have avoided answering that question!

Langhans: Don't scream!

Prosecutor: (more quietly) I thought you couldn't hear well under your hair.

Langhans: Now I don't understand you.

Prosecutor: Then I'll come closer.

Langhans: Yes, come ahead!

Judge: Better not!

Langhans: Why, because I stink?

Judge: Ja, Ja!

* * * * * * * * *

Langhans' position in the German left is difficult to define at the moment; he is no longer a clown and not yet the pop culture entrepeneur he hopes to become. If he is accepted as an arbiter of pop values by a populace that once considered him an outcast, it will indicate a gradual progress of the German Establishment center to the left, as demoscopic studies and the new Social Democratic government, which is left-looking if not left-leaning, already seem to validate. And for "democratic, peace-loving, industrious" but traditionally conservative Germany, that's a good thing.

Sincerely,

Barbara Bright

Barbara Bright

Received in New York on January 23, 1970.