

Structural Adjustments (October 29, 1993)

Abstract

After working in Magdeburg for three years, a West German journalist takes stock of his experience there. He recounts early difficulties (which were obvious above all in the area of communication), discusses developments in the media landscape, and describes problematic aspects of East-West social interactions. He concludes with a reference to his own contribution to reunification: he married a woman from Magdeburg.

Source

When Busts of Lenin Were Tossed into the Trash

Unification has yet to come / A Wessi in Magdeburg takes Stock after Three Years / Insurance Company resides in Thälmann House

When Klaus Blume went to Magdeburg in the summer of 1990 to establish the Magdeburg regional office of the German Press Agency (dpa), the transition from the GDR to German unification was in full swing. On November 1, 1993, Blume will move to Mexico City as a foreign correspondent for dpa. After three years in East Germany, he is taking stock [of his experience there] for HORIZONT[1].

Lenin's days in the "Thälmann House" were numbered, as were those of the Republic. The writings of the Russian revolutionary were stacked in the hallways of the gloomy granite building. During the GDR's final summer, they were in as little demand as the flags of the erstwhile sister parties and mass organizations piled in heaps in the basement. In the former power center of the district of Magdeburg, the departing landlord, the SED's successor party, the PDS, was practicing capitalism by firing excess employees and renting offices to private companies. Because it proved absolutely impossible to find another space in a hurry, in July 1990, the German Press Agency (dpa) also moved into Gerhart Hauptmann Strasse 16, an address that, as the seat of the district leadership of the Magdeburg SED, remained widely feared until the *Wende*. I began my work as a correspondent in Magdeburg on the third floor of the Thälmann House at a time when it was nearly impossible to make a daytime phone call from the East to the West. The Trabi[2] was still the most common car on the streets, and the Deutschmark had just replaced the "Alu-Chips." [3] People used the new currency to go shopping in Helmstedt or Braunschweig.

By now, there's also good shopping to be had in and around Magdeburg; Hamburg is as easy to reach by phone as Leipzig or Berlin, and after the PDS moved out, a large German insurance company took up residence in the Thälmann House some time ago. I've been living as a Wessi in Magdeburg for just over three years. Magdeburg, often disparaged as the gray city of heavy machinery construction, has become more colorful in this period. Red roof tiles provide bright spots, as do renovated façades, which stand out on blocks that were once monotonously grey-brown. Dozens of construction cranes swivel back and forth for the economic upswing of the East, which has thus far bypassed the city's most important industrial sector, machine building.

Thousands of West Germans are working in Magdeburg; many have remained strangers, others have made themselves a home as Wossis: half Wessi, half Ossi.

As one of the first resettlers from West to East, I moved my primary residence to Magdeburg in July 1990, still during GDR times. Back then, it still seemed a small miracle when technicians connected my one-

man office to the dpa network – and thus to the rest of the world – via a PC and a dedicated line. Today, when the East German dpa offices exchange their news via satellite, one quickly forgets the days when trouble with the line often shut down the office for days at a time. Instead of sending reports from Magdeburg to the screen in Berlin by the touch of a button, I had to dictate them to East Berlin over crackling phone lines, provided I could get through at all.

When I was not in the office battling the vagaries of technology, I was on the road. During the hot summer of 1990, as the parties in the East Berlin *Volkskammer* quarreled over electoral procedure and the date of unification, I was cruising over bumpy country roads to the chemical smokestacks of Buna, Leuna, and Bitterfeld, to the copper dumps of the Mansfelder Land, or to the conferences of the emerging parties in the *Land*. Sometimes the effort to build up dpa reporting in the future [state of] Saxony-Anhalt got stuck in traffic. I seldom saw my apartment, which I had been very lucky to find; free time was rare.

And so it was easy for me to make a new home in the city on the Elbe. Instead of fighting all alone on the news front, I now head a seven-person office. Because the Thälmann House, formerly the headquarters of the SED and now of the Alliance [for Germany], would not offer us more than one room, we moved as early as the end of 1990/beginning of 1991 into Hegelstrasse, today one of the best addresses in Magdeburg, where we started the dpa regional service [*Landesdienst*].

Since then, the media market, for which we write, has changed fundamentally. The dpa solo fighter turned into a seven-person office, but this ran opposite to the trend in the dwindling media landscape. In the second half of 1990, conditions at newsstands in Magdeburg were almost paradisiacal for buyers: there were six local dailies to choose from. Now, all that remains is the former SED organ *Volksstimme* and the local edition of the *Bild-Zeitung*, the content of which has shrunk to a minimum. Newly established publications, both West and East German, went under in droves, not only in Magdeburg, but also in the province.

In 1990, many Western publishers in Magdeburg and elsewhere evidently underestimated doggedness of the Osis, who loyally clung to their old tried-and-true newspapers. Instead of switching en masse to new publications like the sophisticated *Magdeburger Allgemeine* (Madsack), Magdeburgers stood by their *Volksstimme*, which by now had changed markedly under Western management. Those Western publishers who took over the SED press, which had been boosted to six-figure circulation numbers during GDR times through government paper allocations, bet on the right horse. Only in northern Saxony-Anhalt can the *Altmark-Zeitung* (part of the Ippen Group) still pose a serious challenge to the *Volksstimme*. It succeeded, shortly after the *Wende*, in establishing a presence in all five rural districts [*Landkreise*] of the Altmark and in speaking deliberately to the regional consciousness. The yellow press, especially the *Mitteldeutscher Express*, could gain traction only in the more densely settled southern part of Saxony-Anhalt, where the former SED organ *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung* in Halle was otherwise running the show.

Whereas the number of dpa customers in the realm of print media thus declined, it increased in the area of electronic media. The public broadcasting era began in Saxony-Anhalt with the launch of the three-state “Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk” (MDR)^[4] on January 1, 1992; the private stations followed in the summer of 1992. Since then, “Radio SAW” and “Radio Brocken” have been competing with MDR 1/Radio Saxony-Anhalt and MDR Live for the ears of listeners. But despite the new on-air variety, many residents of Saxony-Anhalt in the regions close to the border still remain loyal to the Lower Saxon^[5] stations that they know from the pre-unification era (NDR 2, FFM).

The restaurant industry has also experienced an upswing. The first two Italian restaurants in Magdeburg, the cause of much astonishment in 1990, have been joined over the years by Chinese and Greek restaurants. The large number of well-paid and poorly housed civil servants on loan from West Germany

enabled the “upswing East” in the state capital’s gastronomic scene. Industry in Magdeburg is still waiting for the same thing to happen to it. Of the 30,000 workers employed at the time of the monetary union, only about 5,000 are still working in Magdeburg’s traditional machinery building and industrial equipment manufacturing sector today. After the Deutschmark had replaced the transferable ruble^[6] and the Soviet Union had dissolved, Magdeburg machine manufacturers were barely able to sell a ship diesel motor or a rolling mill in their traditional markets in the East. So far, the service sector and the administration have been the sole source of almost all new jobs. Thanks to the large number of agencies and ministries, unemployment in Magdeburg, most recently at 14.8 percent, is still below the state average of 17.7 percent. The deplorable state of the economy makes it more difficult for East and West to coalesce in Magdeburg.

As long as West Germans in the federal *Treuhandanstalt* are making decisions about the welfare of thousands of workers, the image of the “bad Wessi” won’t disappear all that quickly. Because they, too, were unable to prevent a growing number of people from having to go on the dole, Western politicians stopped being seen as miracle workers long ago. If it was a plus for a politician to be from the West in 1990/91, then in 1993/94 it would appear to be a minus that has to be compensated for by other qualities. In many areas there was no unification: one can still see West German officials sitting at separate tables in pubs in the evening, because they prefer to be among themselves. Some government departments, like the State Chancellery,^[7] are almost purely Western domains. Conversely, where East Germans are in the majority, as in the Ministry of the Environment, “Wessis” have no opportunities to get ahead. At least there are more and more West Germans in Magdeburg who are moving their residence to Saxony-Anhalt and aren’t commuting to Lower Saxony every weekend. Personally, I have carried out unification with the East: I will not be leaving Magdeburg alone as I head to Mexico City. My new wife, a true blue *Magdeburgerin*, is coming with me.

Klaus Blume, the bureau chief of dpa-Magdeburg, will be the correspondent in Mexico City beginning November 1 [1993].

NOTES

- ^[1] *Horizont* is a news magazine that specializes in marketing, advertising, and media – eds.
- ^[2] Affectionate abbreviation for the most widely manufactured car in the GDR, the *Trabant* – eds.
- ^[3] GDR citizens often referred to their coins as “Alu-Chips” [aluminum chips] because most (but not all) were made of aluminum, but also because they were low in value when compared to their West German counterparts – eds.
- ^[4] The MDR, or Central German Radio, broadcasting station covers the federal states of Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia – eds.
- ^[5] Lower Saxony is a federal state in the former West Germany – eds.
- ^[6] The transferable ruble (1964-1991) was used as the accounting unit in foreign trade interactions between members of the Council for Economic Assistance (or COMECON) – eds.
- ^[7] Office of the Minister President of a particular federal state; in this case, Saxony-Anhalt – eds.

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