

The Hopes of East German Refugees (August 8, 1989)

Abstract

On May 2, 1989, Hungary began dismantling its fortified border with Austria, stripping away barbed wire fences and removing detection devices. During the summer of 1989, it became increasingly easy to cross from East to West over the Austro-Hungarian border. At first, the flight remained risky, but as more and more East Germans were allowed to pass – without valid exit visas – others were encouraged and followed their lead. The result was a mass exodus that shook the very foundations of the GDR. In the following article, a Frankfurt reporter describes the arrival of a train from Vienna carrying East German refugees who had escaped through Hungary.

Source

Special Train from Pankow^[1] with Transfers in Vienna and Frankfurt: Refugees from the GDR, their Route across the Border, and their Arrival in the Federal Republic

On early Tuesday morning, a large billboard with fat white letters welcomes the 100 GDR refugees who had started their trip from Vienna's West Station nine hours earlier. "Taste the West," the advertisement encourages. Whether their new lives in the West will really involve "super taste" at a "super price" is something the fresh arrivals have not yet thought about. It is 6:20 a.m.

Express train D222 has barely arrived, fifteen minutes late, on track 3 in the Frankfurt train station, and already the exhausted passengers are being illuminated by television cameras and flashed by photographers.

At first, some of them turn around and flee back into the two "special cars." "Why are you photographing me and my children? Tomorrow people on the other side [i.e., in the GDR] will know about this," complained a 28-year-old father of three who had crossed the Hungarian border with his children. Most of these refugees have kept silent for weeks, not even telling friends and family of their planned escape. People assume they are still on vacation in Bulgaria or Hungary. "I didn't tell a soul, no relatives, no friends." He says that he wants to tell his friends in the GDR himself.

None of the resettlers [*Übersiedler*] had gone to the West German embassy in Budapest. "It was basically possible to drive your Trabi from the GDR to the open border in Hungary and continue right into Austria. Some did just that. The cars are parked all around down there," explains a 25-year-old man from Bautzen. He's happy to have "left everything behind." He does not know that in the first half of the year, 56,000 refugees have already entered the Federal Republic; he also cannot know that although the moderator of the *Tagesthemen* evening news did not say, "the boat is full," he did say, "it's getting crowded." He was referring to the German embassy in Budapest, but he could have just as easily meant the Central Reception Center of the state of Hesse in Giessen, where the 100 refugees were brought on Tuesday: the camp is bursting at the seams.

Away from the large crowd of reporters, a 37-year-old mother is standing with her daughter, son, and a friend of the family. Each of them is carrying a small bag; the 17-year-old daughter also has a yellow plastic bag from a Viennese store. "That's all we could take with us," says the daughter, who criticized the lack of freedom of expression in the GDR. The mother explains, "We are active Christians and not held in very high regard over there." The father is still in the GDR. "He has no idea where we are," says the daughter.

Officially, the four of them set off for vacation in Hungary on July 23. “Then we looked at the chain-link fence at the border and crossed over the next day. No one was in the nearby Hungarian watchtower and nothing happened.” That’s how it went for most of them. No one is boasting or bragging. They give their accounts hesitantly and in a matter-of-fact tone.

Klaus and Bernd from the district of Halle had already planned an escape in 1986. “But it was too dangerous for us at the time.” When they heard that the Hungarians had dismantled the border fence, their decision was made. “We crossed the border around midday and didn’t even see any border guards.” Others were stopped by Hungarian border patrols, but no one received the now notorious stamp that would have exposed them as would-be escapees back in the GDR; and the second attempt then succeeded. A few married couples have their children with them. One couple waded through the water and reeds of Lake Neusiedl for five hours; they reached Austrian soil at 5:30 in the morning.

The two busses leave the main train station in Frankfurt shortly before seven o’clock, bound for Giessen. In the gray haze of an uncomfortably clammy morning, the busses curve around the skyscrapers in Frankfurt’s financial district. “The Dresdner Bank! Look! They’re everywhere, not just in Dresden,” a 25-year-old from Potsdam tells his buddy, also from Potsdam, while pointing to the bank tower.

The people come from all parts of the GDR, from Cottbus, Potsdam, Zeitz, the district of Halle and Karl Marx City. Most of them left the GDR in the last week of July.

“I’ll go anywhere; I want a job, a workplace. The only place I don’t want to go is a small village, where the people are surely too nosy. But Bavaria supposedly needs workers,” someone remembers hearing. The skilled baker worked for years as a railroad conductor in his home district. “Now I want to work in a bread factory.”

Sitting behind him is a 21-year-old who would like to work as a sound technician or electrician in radio broadcasting. “But with my training? We’re years behind the times. I can forget it,” he says and falls asleep from exhaustion.

“Well, we call him ‘Gorbi,’ just like you do. In Karl Marx City we have great reception, and it’s easy to get [television] programs from the West. But the GDR is stagnating; nothing is moving there. You always have to fit in, always say what they want to hear. They’re hopeless. All the countries around us are opening up; only the GDR is staying the course.” In neighboring East Bloc countries, young people from the GDR are considered “the biggest jackasses,” says the young man. You even feel uncomfortable on vacation, says a young skilled craftsman from Brandenburg, shaking his head. Dressed in a leather jacket, jeans, and tennis shoes, he is hopeful in light of his successful escape, “I am independent and flexible. Nothing will happen to me in the FRG.”

The young man next to him, also from Brandenburg, agrees, even though he doesn’t hide his insecurity. “I’m a little afraid of what the future will bring. But I’ll manage,” he says, encouraging himself. His self-assured neighbor adds, “of course some people won’t make it, but it will only be the ones who can’t think on their own. That’s the way it is.”

[...]

“If anyone believes that you leave behind your life just like that, and if anyone presumes that we came to the West only for material reasons, then he’s wrong. All I can say to that is: a month in the GDR would be enough for that person, too,” asserts a young, long-haired blond man in gym shorts. As soon as he arrives in Giessen, he’ll head for a telephone booth.

“Of course” they have all realized that enough West Germans resent their coming and speak of a “flood of refugees.” “Of course” they know that there are two million unemployed in their new homeland. They

also know that the golden glow of the West can be deceiving. “But when I told my best friend I definitely had to go on vacation and I had a transit visa for Hungary, he just said, ‘Make sure you don’t come back with a stamp in your passport.’ But now that’s past.”

Initially, the refugees will face with an “absolute state of emergency” in Giessen. This is how Gerald Weiss of the Hessian Ministry of Social Affairs assesses the situation. With 2,000 “occupants,” the reception camp is completely overcrowded. Some of the new arrivals will have to move into gymnasiums or trailers. “We haven’t registered such an influx of refugees since the Wall went up. We can’t work miracles. We need room for another 1,000, at the very least.” The new arrivals don’t care. “We’re not staying here very long.”

NOTES

[1] [Ⓜ] The title of the article refers to a song by German rock star Udo Lindenberg called “Sonderzug nach Pankow.” – ed.

Source: Rüdiger Scheidges, “Sonderzug aus Pankow mit Umsteigen in Wien und Frankfurt; Sonderzug aus Pankow mit Umsteigen in Wien und Frankfurt: Flüchtlinge aus der DDR, Ihr Weg über die Grenze und die Ankunft in der Bundesrepublik,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, August 8, 1989.

Translation: Allison Brown

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