

Voices from the Province (August 4, 1990)

Abstract

In the following travel report, a West German journalist describes some of the first steps taken in the introduction of the market economy in the GDR. He also discusses the role that West German visitors and businesspeople played in that process. Additionally, he describes GDR citizens' new freedom to travel and the reemergence of a spirit of regional consciousness – signs of how profoundly the GDR had changed within only a few months.

Source

“Thuringia reminds me of Tuscany”

A summertime trip through the GDR / What's changed; what people are saying / There's a lot of talk about money

“Where exactly is ‘near Weimar in the country?’” The traveler to Thuringia and Saxony didn't want to stay in one of the former Stasi[1] – and now rip-off – hotels. So he asked his Erfurt colleague about these approximate directions to the place where he'd be spending the first of his planned overnights in Thuringia. Some people in the GDR still speak and write in this vague way because they don't know what's what. The old dictatorship and military authoritarianism in the state and the economy have been defeated but not eliminated.

“Near Weimar in the country” turned out to be the former forester's lodge of the duke; today it belongs to the LPG[2] of Ettersburg. Two or three of the neighboring families that own the cooperative spend their summer vacations there. The majority of the rooms are rented out – cheaply, by Western standards. Ettersberg was once the hunting preserve of the sovereign lords of Weimar. But Ettersberg also harbors Buchenwald, with its twofold guilt. First, concentration camp inmates died there because of the Nazi dictatorship. After the liberation, the red “liberators” continued to run the camp for a while. Once again, the word in Thuringia was: “Be careful, or you'll end up in Buchenwald.” Buchenwald's proximity to Weimar and to the villages in its vicinity refutes the myth of both the brown and the red years: “We didn't know anything.”

On this hot summer day, this is on the minds of only the fewest guests at the “Goldenes Hufeisen” [“Golden Horseshoe”] in Ramsla, a private guesthouse near Ettersburg that survived the eras of expropriation and, therefore, is now the first of its kind to flourish. West Germans and Weimarians meet there. At the next table someone from Weimar is talking big, greeting all the guests as though he were the boss. Afterwards, the innkeeper cuts the big-mouth down to size: “He has a textile business and was supposed to get four bathrobes for a church retreat.” He promised, but they're still waiting for the robes today. That guesthouse is the antitype of the earlier HO restaurants,[3] where strict but lazy head waiters practiced a particular dictatorship of the proletariat by seating people wherever they pleased. The only large table in the barnyard was already occupied, but the wish of [some of] the guests, who had driven up in cars with West German plates, was enough for tables and chairs to be immediately moved from other rooms and set up outside. Afterwards, a friend in Leipzig remarks: “Until very recently that would have been unthinkable here.” A young woman “from the West” who has just traveled through Thuringia's golden meadows says: “Thuringia reminds me of Tuscany.”

Handwritten signs are posted in front of the Autobahn rest stops between Eisenach and Weimar:

“Thuringian sausage here.” A young girl has brought a grill from home. The market economy starts small. A fat man from Eschwege in Hesse stands in the market of the northern Thuringian town of Mühlhausen, railing against the supposedly lazy “GDRers”: “Why the hell didn’t you put water in the pot again?” By the sweat of his brow, he’s selling (Thuringian) broiled sausages for 2 Marks. Across the street at the HO Hotel – and this, too, would have been unthinkable only yesterday – a young girl is offering the same sausages for 1.6 Marks. But competition is not – yet – stimulating business. Most people are buying from the West German guy – for now. Although Thuringians and Saxons, like almost everyone else in the GDR, feel insecure about price increases and job losses, they are still immune to this PDS campaign. They know who’s responsible for this wreck. Some are behaving in a way that would make Ludwig Erhard smile. At the market in Mühlhausen – just a few months ago there weren’t nearly as many markets in the GDR – a woman stands in front of bountiful baskets of bread and rolls that had just been delivered from a baker in Hesse. She asks how much for these rolls and how much for those. These are 20 Pfennigs, those 40. She chooses the 20-Pfennig rolls. After July 1,^[4] some vendors started off with inflated prices. Although prices still haven’t dropped to the old state-subsidized GDR level, they have come down to the West German level and down even further to a level appropriate for the lower incomes in Thuringia and Saxony. Genuine Nordhäuser “Goldkorn”^[5] can now be had for the odd price of 14.68 Deutschmarks instead of the 24 GDR Marks that it used to cost.

Ulla Heise, one of those people who used to make sure that everyone in Leipzig brought someone else along to the next demonstration, says: “I haven’t bought any bread since July 2nd. As long as it’s three times more expensive than in the West, I’ll live off Knäckebrötchen. By now it’s as cheap here as it is for you.” For all the anger over price gouging and all the disillusionments of daily life in the period after the euphoria, she and her friends have never forgotten what they’ve achieved. Leipzigers applaud when a West German on stage at the “Pfeffermühle” cabaret thanks them for that he fact that he had just crossed from Hesse to Thuringia at Herleshausen “free of controls,” just as though he had driven from Hesse to Bavaria. Yesterday’s revolutionaries don’t want to let go. Ulla Heise and her friends are publishing “Nachgeschaut,” a kind of documentation of Stasi omnipresence, with Forum Publishing House in Leipzig. They know where the Stasi once sat, from the coffee house to the university. Since smoke pours from some of Leipzig’s supply shafts during these dog days of summer, the word on the street is: the Stasi’s still sitting there.

In Leipzig, too, West Germans are omnipresent. A flashy black car is parked in front of the Hotel Astoria. With the bumper sticker “IBV,” it is advertising “career success” and luring people to the hotel on a Sunday between 2 and 5 in the afternoon. The blurbs don’t provide details. “Success facilitates a higher standard of living through better income – and this is precisely what we want to offer you. At first, you can start by making your own schedule and working for us part time. With six hours of work a week, it is entirely possible for you to earn an additional income of 300 Deutschmarks.” The person who wrote this admits that it made some critical people skeptical, for good reason. “But these are exactly the people we envision as our future coworkers: committed, critical, self-confident.” Supposedly, this wasn’t about the “quick buck.” It didn’t say what it was about. We ask back in the West.

“I” stands for *Immobilien* [real estate], “B” for *Bausparen* [building and loan associations], “V” for *Versicherung* [insurance]. They’re looking for sales agents, then, and are supposedly happy with the response. The message on the shiny red background has a similar gold-digging ring to it: “I’m doing fine.” It says that a successful life has “certain characteristics: contentment, fulfilled wishes, and money too!” Someone else is advertising another undefined “supplemental job for gainfully employed individuals between 20 and 35,” with which one can achieve “something extraordinary.” An inquiry reveals that “FMGH” is the advertiser, a “Society for the Promotion of Medium-Term Investment.” My friend in Leipzig asks whether this is what the free market economy is all about, “with swindlers, touts, and con men.”

Some Leipzigers grumble that now they’re also supposed to pay “West German prices” in restaurants

that used to be affordable to them. They're already avoiding the erstwhile Stasi and rip-off hotels. They were only patronized by those who disposed of Western money in the two-class society of Honecker's GDR. Is there now a danger of a new two-class society? "It'll settle down," say invited guests of the West German coffee roasting company Eduscho while visiting an exhibition of drawings on the cultural and everyday history of coffee in the "Pfeffermühle" house near Thomas Church. Cabaret artists are playing for this coffee klatsch: "The same money? They mean the same currency. We're a long way from having the same money." Johann Sebastian Bach, himself a great entertainer and coffeehouse musician, not just a solemn cantor, would have been delighted with the young group that was doing a rock and jazz version of the master's "Coffee Cantata."

Many West German economists are uncertain. In Halle, we're told, a Western bank gave out ten loans to start up businesses, eight of which had already gone bankrupt. The head of the *Treuhandstelle*, who is liquidating GDR "national property," says: "At the moment, no company is paying for shipments and practically no one is paying bills." The longest lines are in front of financial institutions, which are almost as rare as gas stations. They want clear general conditions, secure loans, actionable law. In many cases, they still don't know who really owns what and where they want to or should invest.

This "Western" frustration matches that of the Saxons and Thuringians: "Our government is paying way too much attention to the capital of Berlin, the anthem, the flag, the voting law." Legal uncertainty is also causing distress for private individuals. In Markkleeberg, a Leipzig musician and his wife, a potter – "we work *Ton in Ton*"^[6] – are living in her father's house. The father, however, had been dispossessed as a "capitalist," and the previous SED rulers, as they did in so many other places, quickly sold the house to someone else after the *Wende*.^[7] Now they have to fight for their property with the help of a lawyer. Fortunately, they were not dispossessed by the Soviets; strangely enough, the injustice of those occupation-era expropriations is supposed to become law after unification.^[8] The wife's daughter is studying in the West and is thrilled with the international atmosphere of the student dorm in Rodenkirchen near Cologne. They themselves are hosting a female student from Bonn. These days, the unification of the Germans is taking place not only in the mountains of paper amassed by negotiators from both states. It has nothing to do with megalomania or a "Fourth Reich."

Anyone who traveled through Thuringia and Saxony shortly before the *Wende*, returned a bit later during the winter campaign for the first free *Volkskammer* elections, and returned once again after introduction of the Deutschmark will immediately notice changes: the most important one is the visible triumph of freedom. At Herleshausen they're taking down the floodlights that were used by the border guards who turned the GDR into one big prison camp, and who now want to become civil servants in the West, if possible. No one is controlling the border any longer.

The once omnipresent SED propaganda is now a matter for those who track contemporary history. But gone, too, is the black-red-gold exuberance of "Germany, united Fatherland," of the winter and spring [1989-90], when the national flag was flown without the GDR emblem on many houses between Eisenach and Leipzig. The workaday and morning-after feelings have set in. Now the emotions, anxieties, and sense of self of Germans in the GDR are tied to a sense of belonging to a particular region. "They" in East Berlin should have established *Länder* a long time ago, one keeps hearing. Before this comes to pass and the *Volkskammer* decree on the reestablishment of the *Länder* takes effect with the *Landtag* elections in October, many people have resorted to self-help. In Mühlberg, a village in the foothills of the Thuringian forest, residents have made good on their somewhat peculiar reputation among their neighbors. The "Mühlberg Halblangen," who are proud of living in one of Thuringia's oldest villages, rushed ahead of everyone else and banished the memory of a step so commonly taken by German dictators – the breaking up of the German *Länder* – from their village sign. "The district of Erfurt" has been neatly painted over and replaced with "Land Thuringia." The same can be seen in other villages.

On the road from Halle to Mühlhausen, the Thuringians, who in 1952 became part of the district of Halle

against their will, and thus part of Saxony-Anhalt, proclaim on their town signs: “We are Thuringians.” One doesn’t know what the Russian officers who are leading a column of tankers across the road think of this. Are they thinking about the dissolution of the Soviet Union into its peoples and tribes? A man from Halle gets out of his car at every forced stop and clenches his fists. This, too, would have been unthinkable “back then.”

At the waysides along endless fields of golden meadows one feels little of the ecological catastrophe of the GDR. There’s more than just Buna and Bitterfeld, Aue and Greifswald. In Erfurt, loving “reconstruction” and dilapidation are still cheek by jowl, but the signs of rebuilding are multiplying. Two old houses display the coat of arms of Rhineland-Palatinate, which is doing the restoration here, reminding one of the old saying: “Erfurt and Mainz are one.” The Erfurt countryside is abloom with yellow parsley fern, white common yarrow and cranesbill in blue and pink, and an abundance of chicory and knapweed. On the way to Bad Frankenhausen, we stop in the village of Ringsleben and are happy that time is standing still. On one house there are again – or still – two proud storks.

NOTES

[1] Stasi was the commonly used abbreviation for the Ministry of State Security – eds.

[2] Acronym for *Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft*, a term for large, collectivized farms in the former GDR – eds.

[3] State-owned HOs (*Handelsorganisationen* or trade organizations) were established in 1948. They included grocery shops, restaurants, department stores, hotels, and industrial goods stores – eds.

[4] July 1, 1990, was the date on which the currency union took effect, bringing the Deutschmark to the territory of the former GDR – eds.

[5] A well-known local spirit made of grain – eds.

[6] A wordplay on the German term *Ton*, which means both sound/tone and clay – eds.

[7] The German term *Wende* refers to the events that led to the downfall of the Communist regime in 1989/90 – eds.

[8] See chapter 3, document 10 – eds.

Source: Helmut Herles, “Thüringen erinnert mich an die Toskana”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 4, 1990.

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