

At the Border Crossing in Helmstedt (November 18, 1950)

Abstract

With the founding of the two German states in 1949, the inner-German border also became more visible and increasingly strictly controlled. The border crossing near Helmstedt on the highway between Hanover and Berlin became a place that transit travelers wanted to leave behind as quickly as possible. In November 1950, a radio reporter described the situation there, which was characterized by smuggling, refugee movements and the threat of firearms being used. This short excerpt provides insight into the atmosphere at the border.

Source

/Reporter: We're standing at the exit gate to West Berlin and just today there was another queue three kilometers long.

/West German border official: For us it is of course very desirable that the traffic is processed smoothly, unfortunately that is not always possible of course, because in the Eastern zone the clearances are sometimes very delayed, so that here on our side every now and then larger queues form, in fact queues at a distance of two to five or six kilometers.

/Reporter: This is a checkpoint that is not only busy during the day, but it's already long after dark and everything is brightly lit here all night long and the crossing is in full operation. How many vehicles come through during the day?

/West German border official: Well, we have an average of 1000 vehicles a day, it varies from 950 to 1200, so you could say 1000 vehicles. 500 vehicles in each direction and half of them are trucks. Let's wait a moment until that one has passed. Yes, half trucks and half cars.

/Reporter: I've heard that you have to confiscate a lot of goods. Why is that?

/Border official: Yes, the illegal traffic of goods is flourishing, of course, mainly because of the big currency gap between the Eastern zone and the Federal Republic. Today we just had an interesting case involving glassware from the Eastern zone. The case was that a West Berlin lamp dealer arrived with a truckload of light fixtures, i.e. complete lamps. In fact, he had loaded a thin layer of lamps at the top and pure East German glass at the bottom. And of course, about three times as much, because the glass dealers know very well that this glass, which is loosely packed in straw, is very difficult to check. In addition, if I may add, the two officials were offered bribes of 100 marks each. The challenges are of course very serious, and we only have carefully selected personnel here.

/Reporter: That was an attempt by an East Berlin company to use West Berlin papers to get their goods into [the West]?

/Border official: Yes.

/Reporter: But where does the coffee come from, for example, that they sometimes confiscate here by the hundredweight?

/Border official: Yes, not quintals, you could say tons. Yes, that's a special chapter, the coffee, some of it

first passes through here on trucks with customs documents, that is, duty unpaid, and is then cleared in Berlin in the Eastern sector. As you know, there is no coffee tax in the Eastern sector. And then they try to smuggle it in again.

/Reporter: So you meet the same beans twice, once as transit goods and then it comes in again...

/Border official: Then it comes in again as contraband. Or another way, which is also said to happen is that it is loaded via Amsterdam to Rostock, then to Berlin, so it is put into free circulation through the back door in Berlin and then an attempt is made to smuggle it in here.

/Reporter: So it's all about avoiding excise duty?

/Border official: Yes, the incentive is pretty big. At the ton... ten marks per kilo, so one ton is 10,000 marks. A ton isn't much, after all, it can easily be hidden under scrap metal and under goods that are difficult to hide, such as bales of rags or bales of paper. I could write whole novels about all the things that have happened here, the smuggling routes and hiding places that interested parties have come across.

/Reporter: A shot was fired earlier, where did it come from? From over there?

/Border official: That often happens with the Eastern police here, they are pretty trigger happy. There often are harmless border crossers here who didn't stop and just got shot.

/2nd border guard: I am convinced that many bodies will be found in the surrounding woods later on. Because in the terrible years 45, 46, 47 we had a relatively large number of dead people who lost their lives as a result of shots from the Eastern side and not all of them have been found yet.

/Reporter: We met a bunch of border crossers just before, but they were all people who had gone from the West to the East and had now been deported back again. But there also are a lot of people from the Eastern zone coming through here all the time.

/3rd border official: The border crossers from East to West who come across the border illegally don't cross the border here directly but come across the border to the right and left of the highway, and usually in the dark, so that they're not exposed to the danger of being picked up by the People's Police. We estimate that 100, 200 people cross here every day, that's the minimum, on weekdays. At weekends it's probably 300, 400, in good weather it can be 500 in summer.

/Reporter: That indicates that they are often visitors.

/Border guard: Or people who want to shop here, who have time on Saturdays and come over here on Saturday afternoons.

/Reporter: So the percentage of genuine refugees is only small.

/Border official: It's actually small, although there are many people crossing here with baby carriages, with small children, sometimes through the swamp, arriving here soaking wet. I met some of them here the other day. The people are always very exhausted and are taken in here by the mission. The reason why they all meet here is that they are almost all destitute and are trying to get free transportation from here.

/Reporter: What is the crime situation here? This is one of the most troubled spots in Germany, you could say, and understandably, with so many people moving here and back and forth, there are also arrivals with questionable backgrounds.

/Border guard: I can say in this context that the district here has as many arrests, people taken into

custody that is, every month as the surrounding five districts put together. If I can come back to your last question, I would like to say that the people who have been arrested, who have been mentioned before, are those who are wanted by the police. It's very understandable that a lot of criminals and shady riff-raff cross the border here in the Helmstedt police section in particular, enter the British zone here, become delinquent, become criminally active and then cross back to the Eastern zone.

[...]

Source: SWR2 Archivradio

<https://www.ardaudiothek.de/episode/archivradio-geschichte-im-original/grenzuebergang-helmstedt-kurz-nach-ddr-gruendung/swr2/80230574/>

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