

“30,000 People are Walking in Igelit Sandals” (1948)

Abstract

The development and use of substitutes for raw and basic materials in short supply had already played an important role during World War II. This continued in the postwar economy of scarcity. In the Soviet occupation zone, where leather for shoes was lacking, sandals were made from Igelit, a soft PVC material developed in the 1930s by I.G. Farben. The use of Igelit was restricted at the beginning of the 1950s because it contained components that were hazardous to human health.

Source

Next to clothing, shoes have been one of the most pressing needs over the last few years. The aid measures of the “People’s Solidarity” [*Volkssolidarität*] of Saxony-Anhalt were recently supplemented by the production of Igelit sandals. On May 1, 1948, production was begun in the permanent display rooms with three workers, and it increased so rapidly that 125 workers are employed today in manufacturing alone; an additional 75 work in the adjoining Igelit shoe repair and vulcanization workshop. In just under five months, around 30,000 pairs of sandals were produced, largely for women and children. In Halle alone, 10,000 pairs of these shoes are being worn, while the others were distributed throughout the state of Saxony-Anhalt. In the vulcanization workshop, 50 bicycle tires are vulcanized every day.

Since the shoes are issued without any obligatory exchange of discarded Igelit, the strong demand has led to the long line that is constantly seen in front of the distribution location. The rooms have already become too small, and the entire repair and manufacturing operation had to be moved to another building. That it was not possible to manufacture even more shoes was not a question of raw materials, but rather of space and tools. Here, too, we see once again the need for German unification, since the soldering irons that are required to “solder” the shoes have been made in the West up to now. However, some fairly good electric soldering irons have also been developed here.

The plant employs only women and war invalids, all of whom were trained as “plastic welders” in training courses of the Welding and Experimental Institute in Trotha. The repairs are done quickly, since neither nails nor yarn are used.

Currently, the enterprise is in the process of developing closed, between-seasons shoes for the winter. The problem of “Igelit and winter cold” has not been resolved yet. It remains an awkward situation. So far it has not been possible to eliminate the disadvantages with Igelit. At the moment, no absolutely cold-resistant shoe can be produced. It is advisable not to go into the cold with Igelit. And what does the workshop do in the winter? It is very busy, since the spring production is already under way, and repairs, too need to be made all the time.

Volkssolidarität has created a workplace that is providing aid to many workers, even if only temporarily.

Source: “30 000 laufen auf Igelit-Sandaletten,” in *Volkssolidarität*, no. 6, October 1948, p. 6; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, *Das gespaltene Land. Leben in Deutschland 1945-1990. Texte und Dokumente zur Sozialgeschichte*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1993, pp. 85-86.

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