

“That Was When I Knew: I Had to Become a Refugee” (March 19, 1953)

Abstract

The vast majority of GDR refugees in the 1950s fled via the easily crossable border between the Soviet sector and the Western sectors in Berlin. After a temporary stay in provisional camps, they were typically flown to the Federal Republic. This March 1953 article from the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* explains the motives of the farmers who were fleeing the GDR in especially large numbers at the time. The article also explains, however, that there were limits to West Germans' solidarity and their willingness to help – that is, there were voices opposed to the unrestricted admission of GDR refugees.

Source

“That Was When I Knew: I Had to Become a Refugee”

In Berlin, one always has a bad conscience after making a quick trip from the West to the old Reich capital where one used to live! A word of advice to all those who feel the same way: Make sure not to praise Berlin! True, Kurfürstendamm is even more resplendent with light than before, and what Leipziger Straße [Street], which ended up in the Eastern sector, has lost has been replaced by Schloßstraße in Steglitz. But beware! If, upon your return [to the city], you start praising Berlin and Berliners out of sheer joy that your longing for home is finally being satisfied, you will see a smile appear on the face of a friend or former comrade from Berlin, a mixture of pride, irony, superiority, and melancholy. “When is your flight back?,” the Berliner responds, and then you fall silent.

Well, and then the plane takes off, and of the 50 passengers 46 are refugees: for days, weeks they stood around in Berlin; now they have to stand around in the West outside barracks and offices, in front of desks and registration-card files. But at least in Berlin they experienced something that was also quite strongly present in the West before 1948, before the currency reform, but then disappeared, little by little: solidarity, helpfulness, altruism . . . call it what you will; the words sound hackneyed, because they have rolled all too often off the tongues of hypocrites, but also of organizers and propagandists; but he who wants to can still understand what these words mean . . .

I noticed: in Berlin, the restaurants – even the expensive ones – are cheaper than in West Germany. The explanation: there is a general lack of money. I noticed: when a radio broadcasting corporation presented events – splendidly successful, incidentally – for the benefit of refugees, the Berliners, proportionally speaking, donated the most, despite the shortage of money; I noticed that. And then: the small vendors with their fruit and Coca-Cola stands who had set themselves up in front of the official residence of the Senator for Social Affairs on Kuno Fischer Straße, they let many a dubious coin, many an East mark – this, too, I noticed – pass for a West mark.

Even the “peddlers” with their “trays” are so generous toward the refugees that arrive here. They know: many come without a penny. Oh, how nice it would be if Walter von Cube, the editor-in-chief of the Bayerischer Rundfunk [Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation], possessed the “suicidal humanity” to stand for a little while on Kuno Fischer Straße. Not to worry! You won't get dirty there. The idyllic Lietzensee [Lietzen Lake] is there and looks cheerful, clean, and friendly under the first sun of spring, and most of the refugees who line up to register are wearing their best suits, their Sunday best: this imparts a well-groomed feel to the refugee misery.

Nor do the people complain when the wait gets to be too long. They don't open their mouths. They are silent, either because they are not used to opening their mouths, or because – even here, still – they are afraid of traitors. But if Walter von Cube stood here on Kuno Fischer Straße, the sight of refugees would surely move his heart. Surely then he would be willing to examine what is true and what is false in his theory – disseminated by the Bayerischer Rundfunk – that the East is deliberately sending refugees to West Germany to disrupt our economic recovery, and that we in the West should defend ourselves against this by closing the borders.

In the hallway of a building on Kuno Fischer Straße one is able to help a few old people decipher some signs. “Refugees, do not take the city trains.” – As is generally known, the city trains in all of Berlin belong to the East Berliners. You already see this from the fact that these days, especially, the flags are flying at half-mast in honor of the death of the Czech dictator [Klement] Gottwald – even at the Western train stations.

At these stations, it can happen that officials with the East Berlin authorities “collect” refugees – as the crude expression has it – in the middle of West Berlin. – “Beware of informants!” Well, this sign doesn't keep the old people from openly recounting why they fled. “Our village is nearly empty. Hardly anyone is still living there.” – “My sons left three weeks ago. I don't get a pension. I want to go to the West because the old people there get a pension.” They were allowed to leave without impediment. Was Cube right after all when he said on the Munich radio that the Soviets are deliberately sending people to the West?

Young people are also there, eighteen and twenty year-olds, standing in rank and file as though they wanted to form a column. – “You're all together, aren't you?” – “Yes sir, yesterday, at the factory, they were sorting people out. Two hundred boys had to line up, right from the machines. And then they said that we should immediately volunteer [for the GDR army]. Uniform . . . barracks . . . Just as we were standing there together, the ten of us, we bolted.” – “How do you imagine life in the West?” – “Well, it's possible that we should become soldiers there, too – what do you think? No matter. Better there than in the East.” – “Could you have stayed?” – “In barracks, yes.” – They picture the West as golden, these boys. Anyone who joined Cube in warning against taking them in might be right, if he didn't know: now they are here, now they can't go back.

Many of those standing on Kuno Fischer Straße – and newcomers arrive continuously from the nearby city train station of Witzleben – are farmers. Quiet folk; you cannot read anything on their faces. They remain mute, they don't trust strangers. But do they at least trust each other? – A one-legged man is sitting in the sun on a piece of wall that is jutting out. A couple walks by; she, the wife, is carrying a child; he, the husband, is pushing a baby carriage with a suitcase in it. A surprised-sounding greeting. The couple and the one-legged man are from the same village. “You have to go in there,” says the one-legged man, and he points his crutch at a door and offers to watch the baby carriage. How they stick together! But then the one-legged man fumbles with his wrist. “Take my watch as security for the baby carriage,” he says, “I wouldn't want you to think I'll make off with your suitcase. . .” And the farmer folk take the security deposit, only a tiny bit embarrassed. In the Soviet zone, they have learned to mistrust one another!

This farmer demands to see some identification before he answers. Then he explains that he is from the Uckermark. He has a medium-sized farm. Ten hectares. He doesn't speak with the Uckermark accent; he is a Romanian-German from Bukovina. He came with his parents to a village in the Uckermark and married a local girl. “My parents were given a plot of land. Three hectares. The parents can still manage.” – “Why are the parents able to manage?” – “Because the small settlers aren't affected as much by the quota.” – “And you?” – “Well, at first everything was going well. In the first years I only had to deliver two centners of meat [100 kilograms]; last year, it was supposed to be 22 centners, and that was impossible. The day before yesterday I was summoned to appear before the authorities. ‘Sabotage,’ they said to me, ‘The people's assets poorly managed.’ The other farmers joined the ‘Production Cooperative’

[*Produktionsgenossenschaft*] recently, the collective farm. I quickly said: 'I want to do that, too.' They said: 'Too late.' That was when I knew that I had to become a refugee. Last night we discussed it, my wife and I. We told my mother-in-law that we were going to Jüterbog for a wedding; we took our child, the baby carriage, and packed a suitcase for three days, and now we are here." – "And the mother-in-law doesn't know?" – "No, we wanted to write to her. If she can prove with a letter that she didn't know anything – then maybe she'll be allowed to continue living in the house . . ."

There must be a system to it. But how can you grasp it? What is the answer to the mystery of why so many farmers are currently fleeing the Soviet zone? It can't be panic. A farmer who doesn't look like he scares easily is leaning against a front-yard fence on Kuno Fischer Straße. Hook nose, forceful face. He's wearing a huntsman's hat and a loden coat; there is a briefcase on the ground next to him. That is how he looked on three successive days, and every time I had a brief conversation with him.

"The system," he says, "is to ruin the medium-size farmers." – "You are a medium-size farmer?" – "I have a farm of 100 acres. When I returned from the war, a lot of things were in disrepair, but at first everything went splendidly. The farmers got rich. A centner of rape seed fetched 3,000 marks, a center of wheat 1,000. The people were going hungry, the farmers were doing well. And then, the more talk there was of advancement, the worse off the farmers were. Last year they started the witch hunt against the so-called large farmers. Today, the small farmers, those who work less than ten hectares, have to deliver three to four centners of grain per acre, the larger farms 40 centners per acre. Nobody can manage that." – "Is it true that the production cooperatives, the collective farms, have a lower quota?" – "A much lower quota, 20 percent!" – "If it is true, then, that a smaller percentage is being demanded from the collective farm, from the large farm that has been thrown together, than from the medium-size farmers – how is that possible? Why, then, this interest in creating collective farms?" – "It's the principle. And the principle is sacred."

"What will you do in the West?" – "Become an agricultural worker." – "Couldn't you also have done that in the Soviet zone?" – "No, I couldn't have," the farmer says and becomes agitated. "What are you thinking? What do you in the West think today? Do you really believe that a farmer would leave his farm, his land, his house, if it were not a matter of necessity, dire necessity? A farmer? I wanted to live as a worker at home, as a dispossessed worker, very much so! But that is not an option. I did not run away from expropriation, but from prison. You see, there is this terrible law: that only people who engaged in 'sabotage' can be dispossessed. But people who engaged in 'sabotage' are punished with a minimum of five years in prison. Escape or prison – that was the choice for all the farmers you see here on Kuno Fischer Straße." – "Well, did you, did all these thousands of farmers, engage in sabotage?" – The farmer gives me a stunned look, stunned by so much Western stupidity. "It is always the same litany," he says. "You in the West are appealing to us to stay and preserve German soil. And you warn us: West Germany is overcrowded. But what do you think our choices are? The Berliners know what is going on, some Americans do, too. You get a real scare when new refugees suddenly arrive in droves and ask, clamor, plead: 'Help us!' The West Berliners are different. I would like to stay in Berlin. But what am I supposed to do here? A farmer on asphalt? I am simply waiting here . . ." – "For what?" – "For my wife and daughter. I stand here at the fence from morning until night and wait." – "Will they still come?" – "I hope so . . ."

Another day. He waits, he buys an orange from a peddler, a sausage from "Sausage-Max;" that's what he lives on. And he talks about everything in turn. "After the war, the agricultural machines were still running. When they broke down – who was there to repair them? The factories are all in West Germany. The mechanics who still had spare parts were demanding excessive prices. How was one supposed to pay for them? In West Germany they were paying farmers double the pre-war prices; we in the zone are getting the same prices as before the war, but we are paying triple the wages. That's how the disaster began. The delivery quota was steadily and continuously raised. Machines broken, horses overworked. Finally, I delivered the oats that I should have used to feed the horses. There was this dilemma: if I didn't hand over the oats, I was a saboteur. If I didn't feed the horses, I would not be able to work the fields in

the spring.

A week ago I went to the authorities in the county seat. The functionary said: “Do you think we don’t know that two of your horses died during the winter? You simply let the poor animals starve! Do you know what that is? Sabotage! Do you know the punishment for that? Prison! – So far you have not taken the artificial fertilizer allocated to your plot. Nothing will grow on your fields. Sabotage against the national wealth! And now you have the gall to demand loans!” I asked and pleaded: ‘Take my farm into the production cooperative!’ They threw me out. My wife sat at home and was making packages to send ahead to East Berlin. I saw them and cried like a baby. It was all over. All the work for nothing. You see, my wife and I and our twelve year-old daughter had done everything on the farm by ourselves during the winter; we could no longer pay any wages. Three days ago I was once again summoned to the county seat. I said: ‘I have met my quota. I did what I could.’ They said: ‘Scoundrel! You let go of your farm girl and your farm servant and threw them out into the street. Capitalist pig!’ I took my hat, and before I left I said: ‘I am going to Berlin, to the Ministry of Agriculture, to complain.’

‘Suit yourself!’ the comrades said calmly. They knew: they had me. – I gave notice in my village: a trip to Berlin to lodge a complaint. I had them certify it. They pulled the people they did not trust off the train to Berlin. One man in our compartment already had a stamp in his identification card: ‘Flight risk!’ I had my certificate: trip to lodge a complaint. I went to acquaintances in East Berlin; they had the packages my wife had wrapped up; I went there every day, every day new packages: linens, dishes, clothes, and canned goods. Of course I did not lodge a complaint; I came here, to Kuno Fischer Straße. My wife should stop it: this package-making . . .” On the third day. The farmer in his loden coat is leaning against the front-yard fence. But you can see a change in him. His wife and daughter have arrived. They are being registered inside . . .

Source: Jan Molitor [Josef Müller-Marein], “Da war mir klar: ich mußte Flüchtling werden”, *Die Zeit*, March 19, 1953.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: “That Was When I Knew: I Had to Become a Refugee” (March 19, 1953), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4125>> [March 16, 2026].