"The Foreign Workers and Us," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (June 3, 1961)

Abstract

The author asks that the term "guest worker," which was becoming more commonly used for foreign laborers, be taken seriously and that guest workers be treated courteously. In the workers' countries of origin, considerations were being raised about the new social outlook of the foreign workers and how this could hinder their reintegration at home. The author argues that the German recruitment system was partially insufficient, and that the German bureaucracy collided with the mentality of southern European workers.

Source

Let us take a quick look back. In November 1955, a respected German paper wrote: "Whether the Italians in question are in fact willing to work in Germany in larger numbers can by no means be clearly answered at this time." The first six months of the German-Italian worker agreement showed just how justified this skepticism was; a measly 1,800 workers for industry was all that could be mustered. And at the beginning of July 1956, *La Stampa* in Turin spoke of the complete failure of the recruitment action. And today? In May 1961,440,000 foreign workers were registered in the Federal Republic, 200,000 from Italy, 38,000 from Spain, and 35,000 from Greece. All told, around 550,000 employed foreigners are expected this year, compared to 350,000 last year. In terms of numbers, the experiment of the large south-north migration has succeeded beyond expectations. The chief credit for this belongs to the German commissions of the Federal Office for Labor Placement [*Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsvermittlung*] in Verona, Naples, Madrid, and Athens. Under the most difficult of circumstances, they performed constructive work that brought them more criticism than gratitude. A different question is whether the entire system of recruitment still reflects current circumstances. Of course, so far nothing is known about a separate conception by the economy for the recruitment and permanent employment of foreigners.

Calculations on Shaky Ground

This positive look back, however, should not instill in us an excessively optimistic feeling about the future. We have become too accustomed to the steadily rising influx of foreign workers. We count on it as a permanent factor in our economy. There are large companies whose plans for expansion are based virtually entirely on this calculation. Whether that calculation will pan out is uncertain. In part, of course, it will also depend on us, the target country. What is certain is that the foreign labor markets are tightening up. In part, they are becoming *de facto* tighter; in part, they are asserting resistance, whereby the official position of an emigration country need not always been in line with the real position. First, Italy: at one time, one spoke of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. We should accustom ourselves mentally to the notion of the "Republic of the Two Italies." That is how great the gap is between the highly industrialized north and the archaic-agricultural south: the average income in the province of Milan: 3,500 Marks per year; in the province of Naples: 2,000 Marks; in Calabria, according to official figures: 600 Marks. Northern Italy, especially the industrial triangle Milan-Turin-Genoa, has no more qualified jobless. On the contrary. A revolutionary process is taking place in Italy, unprecedented in its one-hundred-year history: the *Polentoni* are wooing the *Terroni*. The "polenta eaters," ill-reputed as arrogant, are courting the previously disparaged people from the *Mezziogiorno*, from the supposedly do-nothing south that merely swallows a lot of money – a billion Marks per year. In the process, the *polentoni* are experiencing the same surprise that we are: the *terroni* are in fact not like that! To a large extent, they are almost

frighteningly hard-working and employable people who are not fully utilized! (Just as an aside, and as an example of the difficulty of communicating: it is hopeless to try and translate “Terroni,” because two roots echo here: *terra* and *terrore*. But the word contains dangerous inflammatory material like *Boche*, for example, or “Wackes” back then in the Alsace).

The north is also rediscovering with surprise that Naples at the time of the much-disparaged Bourbons had more industry than Milan. They know how to work, these people from the *Mezzogiorno*. They just have a different rhythm and a different attitude toward life and job, and therein lay Italy’s problems. In conjunction with these belated realizations and their own need for labor, northern Italian industry is deliberately putting out its feelers in the south, and is making it easier to have not only branch enterprises there, but also important industrial centers. In Brindisi, the chemicals company Montecatini is erecting a plant costing 550 million Marks. More generous still is the plan for the smelting works near Tarentum for 1.3 billion Marks. Conversely, the north is striving to provide vocational training for the previously barely tolerated people from the south. The Fiat factories, for example, which until recently trained almost no one but the sons and family members of their own workforce, have established technical schools for the immigrants from southern Italy. With this, a filter against emigration has grown denser along the edge of the Alps, and the Milan business paper *24 ore* is already railing against the “harmful export” of Italian workers.

Spain and . . .

The situation in Spain is also contradictory: as is generally known, at the end of last year, the Spanish press, “out of the blue,” launched a veritable campaign against the recruitment of workers to Germany. In a number of papers, their fate in Germany was painted in dark colors: they are ruthlessly exploited by German adventurers, usurers, and business people; they are being paid less than the official rate. The system of payment in installments is another form of exploitation. On top of that, the usurious rents of landladies, who set up beds in every corner of the apartments at the price of a palatial hotel . . .

For now, we shall leave aside the truthfulness of these accusations. There is no denying that no small number of dubious characters are trying to get involved in the black and gray “labor market for foreigners.” The German ambassador in Madrid back then expressed his “serious concerns” about these directed exaggerations in the papers, and Professor Erhard’s visit in Spain brightened the atmosphere by paying the necessary costs. What has remained, however, is the impression of an ambivalent attitude in important Spanish circles: they are happy to rid themselves of the jobless, but at the same time they fear the political attitude and change in the Spanish returnees. That is understandable. To be on the safe side, they are not left entirely unobserved in Germany.

. . . Greece

Greece, finally, never made a secret of the fact that it wanted to see the emigration of its workers as a temporary condition, and that it gives preference to the industrialization of its own country. The Greeks see the industrial training of the emigrants as a necessary intermediary stage. The foreign labor reserve is thus difficult to gauge. For Italy, alone, official and semi-official estimates fluctuate between 500,000 and 1.5 million. In any case, we must share them with northern Italy, France, and Switzerland, where wages and social benefits are rather more favorable than here, and where there are fewer assimilation problems with respect to mentality – leaving aside northern Italy.

The German Philistine’s Magic Horn

It is known that a particularly sensitive ear for the subtle tones of the foreign mindset was never our strong suit. It is high time to pay attention that our *middle management* – beginning with the foreman and overseer, all the way to the level of the plant manager – does not smash more porcelain out of

clumsiness than ambassadors, chiefs of personnel, and social workers can repair again. Even a reasonably full pay envelope does not make up for being addressed as – without in fact rude intentions – "Hey you, macaroni!" The Mediterranean peoples have much more in common than one might think. That includes *sensibilitá*, which is again impossible to translate. "Sensitivity" might come closest, but with the undertone of a great vulnerability, which is by no means always expressed. But let no one be deceived! What upsets the foreigners the most here are not even the living conditions. Even though they are not as a semiofficial news service disingenuously assures us: "Reproaches for poor housing are likely to be generally unjustified." What gets on the foreigner's nerve at every turn is the widespread, philistine, school-masterly self-righteousness of our social middle classes. At least that is the perception of those probably best familiar with the matter, namely the Italian social workers. The housing conditions improved last year. They will improve further with the 100 million made available by the Federal Office. The dietary habits will arrive at a reciprocal accommodation. All that is important. What is crucial, however, is whether we adjust to the foreign workers, whether we find the right attitude. In his speech on his firm's anniversary in March of this year, Alfred Krupp demanded the following: "We should all be striving to make their stay in an environment that is foreign to them as pleasant as possible." How far down has this spark traveled? First, however, we ourselves must be clear about some basic things: Are our current foreign workers a new incarnation of the former migrant workers? Or are they essentially something new? Are they hands that one hires and lets go again, or are they a component of our economy that is no longer dispensable? To what extent are they, as returnees back at home, the pacemakers of industrialization and the attendant market? Finally, to what extent is the equalization of workers a component of the still shadowy European Economic Community? In essence, everything depends on the question of how we should adjust ourselves to the foreign workers, down to the practical detail; for example, down to the way housing is built. The answer today is not yet easy, since it is racing ahead of the present reality. The difficulty begins already with an unresolved preliminary question.

That question is not trivial, let alone superfluous. Terminology anticipates decisions and points to developments. The mere fact that we have no compelling, fixed term for this group of people attests to our insecurity. It is an old experience: where the relevant term is lacking, the substance itself has not been clarified, either. Back in the day, one spoke of "migrant workers." May God keep us from having our migrant workers wander even more! In the Third Reich, they were called alien laborers [*Fremdarbeiter*]. That was clear: they were supposed to work for us, and they were supposed to remain aliens. Is that our goal? Surely not.

Even today, Switzerland speaks frankly of "foreign workers." It can do that. In that country the word is not politically overshadowed. Even more: in Switzerland, the term "foreign worker" has a deeper, cautionary meaning. With five million inhabitants, the number of foreign workers this year will be well above 400,000. Around a quarter of the working population is thus from abroad. In France it is 8 percent, in our country for now 1.8 percent. Switzerland confronts a real dilemma: on the one hand, an expansion of production requires the acceptance of new foreign workers; on the other hand, a concern about foreign infiltration is emerging.

Although the number of "foreign workers" will reach a record in this country this year, that record cannot last in a growing economy. Until 1975, the German labor potential will not grow any more in absolute numbers. In fact, it will decline in relation to gainfully employed youths and old people. With this we face a different kind of dilemma: either increase the number of workers employed here, whereby we are already running into the resistance of the home countries, or set up industrial plants abroad. The third option would be to associate with foreign companies, which is emphatically desired by Greece and Spain, though it is, of course, not always accompanied by the requisite willingness to make concessions. However, regardless of where the development is heading, our own interest demands that the foreign workers do not remain "foreign" among us, but that they assimilate to the host country up to a certain degree, and return to their countries of origin as people who were readily assimilated. This points

simultaneously to a limit: “foreigner ghettoes,” even if well maintained, would block the goal of assimilation.

The current designation, “foreign workers” [*ausländische Arbeitskräfte*] is the spawn of the bureaucracy! It is totally unusable in daily life: “Giuseppe, the foreign worker. . .” And here we are touching upon *the* crucial point, once again by way of terminology: the great migratory movement is squeezing itself laboriously through the net of the bureaucracies or right past them. According to the European Economic Community treaty, freedom of movement for all workers of member states must be created by the end of the transition period, at the latest. Here is what Helmut Minta, the head of the foreign division of the Central Office for Labor Recruitment has said about this: “This declaration of freedom of movement by the EEC will … encompass more than 50 million workers. It is hoped that this regulation will not exhaust itself in the filling out of formalities and bureaucratic paper movement, but that a procedure will be found that allows the European economy and the European workers, with help from an individual, functioning job placement service, to find applicants or jobs where and how they are desired.” Similarly, the president of the State Employment Office of Southern Bavaria, Dr. Siebrecht: “A successful balancing of the European labor market […] presupposes a superbly functioning, un-bureaucratic work placement and recruitment, whereby state measures and private initiative should mesh.”

And that, precisely, is the great question: Can there even be such a thing as a government-directed and yet individual, un-bureaucratic recruitment and placement? Is that not a contradiction in terms? In practice, at any rate, we are far from this ideal. The director general of the Catholic Emigrant Institute in Madrid, F. Feriss, recently declared outright at a conference in Freiburg: “In Spain, the oranges destined for export are selected more carefully than the workers sent to Germany.” On the other hand, no one has ever heard of a private initiative by the economy that was planned with farsightedness. For the time being, we stand before the symbiosis of two bureaucracies: the Mediterranean one, traditionally poorly functioning, in places also corrupt because disgracefully paid, and the German one, traditionally over-functionalized.

“No Work, *Just Visiting …..”*

Suffice it to say that the placement system is bursting at the seams: in 1960, 93,000 Italians came to the Federal Republic with legitimation stamps from the German foreign offices, and an additional 43,000 came via the “illegal route.” Of the 16,000 Spaniards employed in the Federal Republic, at least 6,000 are “illegals” who immigrated disguised as tourists. In total, around 66,000 unprocessed requests are with the German commissions. At the same time, however, scenes that are as turbulent as they are disgraceful take place daily at the main border crossings. They also affect our relationship with the transit countries of Austria, Switzerland, and Belgium, and quite delicately so. Let us pick a random eyewitness account. The brackets are our insertion:

“I no work in Germany (!), only visit friend!,” hundreds of wildly gesticulating Italians kept shouting in the ears of the border officers. But the border officials had the suitcases opened and looked inside. Inside they found mostly work clothes (!), and the peculiar visitors also had no money on them (!), only a one-way ticket. The cases were clear: the Italians wanted to get into the Federal Republic to work (!). But they had no visas that entitled them to work. (But we have 500,000 unfilled jobs, 150,000 of which are in construction alone). And so they had to (!) be turned back again. […] For the most part the Italians who entered the Federal Republic illegally were “guilty of something,” say the border police. “For anyone who wants to work in the Federal Republic can certainly register properly with one of the two branches of the Federal Office for Labor Recruitment […].”

Let me make only two observations about this policeman’s logic, as logical as it is unrealistic: Italy extends for nearly 2,000 kilometers. Second, the deeper one gets into the south, the more the local authorities – not only the Italian ones – are operating as a version of the incomprehensible Fate. The

issuing of the necessary papers can go quickly, or it can take months. We know on good authority that it has at times taken up to a year. To no small degree it depends on how one is connected "at the top." Of course, the illegal migrant might have committed some crime, but not necessarily so. At any rate, it is worth reading the above-mentioned report carefully and twice in all its stupidity. For the time being, this is what the march toward freedom of movement for workers and toward the European Economic Community looks like. Regulation of immigration is indispensable of course. If it doesn't stay in balance with the housing options, slums of the worst sort emerge and an illegal trade in humans that God may protect us from. The core question is this: how does one link together the official placement system, which is legally grounded and probably also indispensable, with the proclaimed individual recruitment and freedom of movement?

Guest Workers – a New Term for the Foreigners

The term "guest worker" also still sounds alien, nor is it free of an inherent contradiction: it is generally not expected that a guest work for the host, earn money from him, and spend some of it there, as well. Moreover, the "guest" in the truest sense is not intent on earning as much money as possible in the shortest possible time, which makes him the bogeyman of the "traditional domestics." Old-style hospitality stood under the high protection of *Jupiter Hospitalis* and was based on a cashless patronage relationship. Since then, of course, the money economy has progressed. Only time will tell whether the term "guest worker" will take root. It cannot be forced. In any case, it would be more pleasant and easier to use than "foreign laborers" [*ausländische Arbeitskräfte*], not to mention the historically burdened and misleading label "alien worker" [*Fremdarbeiter*]. Where that term can lead is demonstrated by an excerpt from the contract a company in Hesse presented to its Italian workers: "The alien worker must conduct himself in such a manner that no one is bothered by him; he must also refrain from insults. In case of careless work, the employer can proceed to the immediate dismissal of the alien worker." Friends, not this all-too-familiar tone! Could one offer the "guest worker" a document like that? Perhaps not quite so easily. In any case, it is not a matter of indifference under which label, which means, from which perspective, we encounter the foreign worker.

The Good Will of the Returnees

Before the First World War, around 750,000 migrants on average came across the borders of the Empire every year. In other words, many more than today. There they worked under semi-colonial – that is to say, disgraceful – conditions. It is also worth recalling that as early as 1907 there were thirty care centers of the Caritas; the same number exists today. In spite of that, the infamous *"Schnitterkasernen"* [harvester barracks] were a fixed, ineradicable institution. For the Italian brickyard workers in the south of the Empire, a place to sleep in the well-heated brick barns was virtually considered first-class accommodations. Here one can see how things have changed. Neither we nor the sending countries are indifferent to the mood and state in which the guest worker takes his leave from us, for a reason, already, that people like to skip over: the political and social order of all Mediterranean states is more fragile and vulnerable than people wish to realize. The educated Greek, who has taken delight in political discourse since ancient times, makes no bones about his concern: how will the returnees get along again once they have lost the link to their village, to the extended family, and to the traditional poverty? Will they not feed the festering underground in Athens, Piraeus, Saloniki? Spain vacillates between similar concerns, and Italy could unexpectedly become Europe's political problem child as early as this year. The *Corriere della Sera* only recently proclaimed this as a "warning call." One thing was clear to all: whoever returns from the "Golden West" to his homeland disappointed turns his gaze – to the East. One should not underestimate this political ferment in countries with a vulnerable social structure.

There is a Lack of Recruitment Offices

The German commissions abroad have been much criticized. For some they work much too slowly,

whereby it is overlooked that the real obstacle lies in the thicket of foreign labor administrations. For others they work too quickly, too hastily and summarily. For all that, not one of the critics has also provided the recipe of how to “process” the homeless human freight of a transport train. Anyone who has ever dealt with personnel organization on a large scale will not fail to appreciate these commissions. If the complaints still do not end, if the flood of job-seekers continues to push across the borders from all sides without registration, the reason lies with the system itself, which requires both refinement and greater density, as well as supplementation from private initiative.

An increase in the number of recruitment offices would be desirable. Second, one might think about setting up reception camps at the main border crossing points, also in the interest of our already strained friendly relations with the transit countries. In Salzburg, for example, there has already been enough trouble. Of course, such reception camps would have to be impeccable organizationally and hygienically, provided with an adequate staff of interpreters and equipped with an efficient phone and teleprinter. It would also be more useful for private business to maintain trained case workers than to send, on a case-by-case basis, hurried agents with at times completely absurd ideas and wishes, for they do not exactly make life easier for the German commissions.

Not Too Much Bossing Around

With this, we are touching not only on an organizational, but a fundamental problem, one that concerns the mentality of the Mediterranean countries, which is so little known in our country: the southerner is in principle bureaucracy-averse, to put it mildly. He has a deep distrust of the state apparatus at home. He considers it almost imperative to circumvent it. Thus the man from Calabria and Apulia does not necessarily have a criminal record when he lands as an illegal alien at our borders. Under the onslaught of complaints from the border area, the Bavarian interior minister recently promised “help in faultless hardship cases.” That is welcome. But that is not what this is about. Rather, we are dealing with the magical attraction of our strange “miracle country” on population strata, some of whom are themselves still living in magical wishful thinking and for whom bureaucratic regimentation is initially something incomprehensible.

All Mediterranean countries have a long tradition of emigration spanning generations. In 1920, 211,000 persons emigrated from Italy, 150,000 from Spain. They certainly did not get to America, Canada, Brazil, or Argentina entirely without papers, official stamps, and health certificates. Of course, Mr. Capone and his ilk were also among them. But the likes of them have always known how to get any stamp. During this murky prehistory, the vast majority of the honest and hard-working evidently made it to their destination without being bossed around by the state, as incomprehensible as it may strike us. Even where they are lacking in reading and writing skills, the people from the south are bright, resourceful, and clever. However: unlike us, there is one thing they hate with a passion – being bossed around all the time.

Source: L. Kroeber-Keneth, “Die ausländischen Arbeitskräfte und wir”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 3, 1961, p. 5.

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