A GDR Citizen's Experience of Buying a New Wartburg (April 14, 1989)

Abstract

Buying a car in East Germany typically meant waiting for a decade or longer. For example, the author of the following complaint to the television show "Prisma" waited fifteen-plus years for his Wartburg to arrive. In the end, he was outraged by his new car's many defects and by the arrogant behavior of the company representative. The letter expresses his frustration over problems that were typical of GDR consumer culture.

Source

Letter by Anton S. to the "Prisma" Programming Office of GDR Television

Esteemed Prisma collective!

On February 8, 1989, my family was fortunate enough, after waiting 15 and a half years […] to buy a Wartburg 1.3. Expectantly, we went […] to the car dealership. After a four-hour wait, we were shown a car, a Wartburg 1.3. With the words "This is your car; have a look. In the meantime, I'll get the papers ready!" the process of "purchasing a car" was over and done with. I, for my part, didn't notice any problems with the car in the showroom. […] So we were now in possession of our car. The dealership […] has a sales office for car accessories. Shouldn't they be able to sell protective seat covers […] and hubcaps for new cars? […] Do we have to drive all the way to Berlin for that? If we have to drive from our village to Berlin for every little thing, then our eighteen days of annual vacation simply won't suffice. […]

On the drive home […] air from the side vent was blowing directly in my face. That meant it was adjusted improperly. I tried to find the correct setting by turning the vent blades. Both blades fell into the panel. I was able to fix these small problems on my own at home. [After only a few days of driving] the battery […] was almost completely drained. After a thorough inspection, I noticed that the contact switch in the trunk was bent out of shape and disconnected. Consequently, the light in the trunk had been burning since […] the day we bought the car. The result was a totally discharged battery. It was caused by the fact that the bracket on the trunk hood that triggers the switch extended too far inside. By re-bending the bracket, I fixed the problem. In the process, I noticed that the latch for the trunk […] only worked on the left side. The right side wouldn't lock into place. [. . .Two days later] when I was driving home it began to rain hard, so the windshield wipers were supposed to swing into action. But [neither] windshield wiper moved. After turning off the engine, I could hear that the wiper motor was turning, but the blades weren't moving. This was because the nut had come loose from the wiper shaft and the connecting levers were dangling about. I fixed this problem, too. […]

After a longer drive […] I noticed that the transmission was making strange noises. This prompted me to visit […] my authorized repair shop to have the car thoroughly inspected. [The garage] immediately sent a report regarding an issue covered by warranty to the Eisenach Auto Factory. April 12, 1989, was the day the representative from the Eisenach factory arrived. […] Unfortunately, our vehicle wasn't the only one exhibiting serious defects; there were five or six others. […] After the factory representative, colleague K., carefully inspected my car, referenced my notes, and took a test drive to determine the nature of the defects, we had an unpleasant discussion. There were no objections about the transmission problem. A new one would be installed, and the doors (they stick) [would be] realigned. But nothing else, colleague

K. said, was covered by the warranty. The drivetrains are also defective. I was told that this stems from their very construction, which I did in fact understand. However, it's still a construction flaw!

[…] But what is the point of all this care, if after only 6 to 8 weeks rust starts emerging from all of the Wartburg 1.3's seams? After remarking that my family and I deserved a good product for the good money we earned through our labor, I was told that this wasn't his problem and that, after all, I didn't have to buy this car. He also said he was willing to pay me 30,200 marks for the Wartburg 1.3, and then the car would be his! […] Do I have to stand for such impertinence? […] Can we afford this, especially now in the lead up to the local elections on May 7, 1989?

Sincerely yours,
Anton S.

Source: Brief Anton S. an die Redaktion 'Prisma' des Fernsehens der DDR, April 14, 1989, Stiftung Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv, Historisches Archiv, Zeitzeugensammlung, no call number; excerpted in Matthias Judt, ed., *DDR-Geschichte in Dokumenten.* Berlin, 1998, pp. 142–43.

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