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## Weimar and the G.D.R.

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over the rocky mountain trails while we youngsters stumbled behind tells me that life in Poland is improving. The most recent visit to Poland by Pope John Paul II (in Poland he is Karol Wojtyla) was covered from start to finish by government controlled television. And now a full mass is carried every Sunday. The two policemen who tortured and killed Father Popieluszko were brought to trial and convicted. It is also clear that the Soviet Union under Party Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, retreating from Afganistan, is not about to invade Poland. The message from the east is clear. "Do your own thing, Poles, with an occasional genuflection to Pan Marx and Pan Lenin. But keep your riots small and don't go bankrupt." Also, General Jaruzelski seems to be the right person to be leading Poland. Poles don't dislike him and traditionally career army officers are the most respected people in Poland, after the clergy.

But there are also discouraging signs, such as the breakdown in the sense of community represented by the extra locks. The most troubling development that I have seen over the last nine years is the growing pessimism among Polish young people. At a picnic Andrzej, a student of architecture, was talking to Grand Valley's Andrew about a forthcoming trip to Australia. Polish Andy asked American Andy "Have you ever thought of defecting?" What strange words to the American ear. From what? Why? And to where would American Andy defect?

A recent study conducted by the Polish Center of Public Opinion Research shows that fully seventy percent of university students see no future for themselves in Poland. Sadly, for Poland, Andrzej's trip to Australia may be a long one.

## *Weimar And The G.D.R.*

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CARL KOBERNIK

Is it impossible to have culture shock by going from Germany to Germany? It doesn't seem probable, but that must be what I experienced. Three weeks I had spent in East Germany. Excuse me. In the German Democratic Republic. In Weimar, city of culture, the city in which many notables of German literature, thought, and music had lived and worked, among them Goethe and Schiller, regarded by many as the greatest German authors, and others of somewhat lesser renown, such as Wieland and Herder. J.S. Bach was active in the area, as was also Martin Luther. These men helped mold and shape German thought and culture. I had visited the places where they had lived

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and worked, walked the streets they had walked, become more familiar with their lives and times.

During my stay in Weimar, I frequently passed a small vegetable market on the way from the dorm to the mensa, the student cafeteria. It was a tiny little shop, a little untidy, with the designation HO, which meant that it was a state run shop, not a private enterprise. The meager display of produce featured cabbage, red and white — there's always cabbage in the G.D.R. It apparently is the vegetable which grows best there. A few other things appeared: cucumbers, tomatoes, potatoes, occasionally some cauliflower. I saw pears once, and also plums. A small basket of each, probably from someone's private garden. And summer apples, yellow apples like our Yellow Transparents which carried a name with similar connotations, Klarapfel. In back of the counter were a few shelves with an equally meager stock of foodstuffs. An older woman stood behind the counter, weighed the various items which the customers wanted, and collected the money. No self-service. She served the customers one by one.

Now I was at the train station in Frankfurt, fresh off the train from Weimar. I went down the escalator to the passageway under the street, turned the corner, and there I was, in front of a fruit market. I was so overwhelmed by the sheer abundance, variety, and color of the produce that I stopped abruptly. The abundance! There were bins full of fruit of every imaginable kind: mangoes, peaches, melons, kiwis, bananas, oranges, all displayed to entice the prospective customer into buying. After three weeks of walking two or three times daily by the pitiful little market in Weimar, I stood in awe in front of the colorful abundance. Culture shock, traveling from Germany to Germany? A shock it certainly was, cultural or otherwise.

A few days earlier I had visited a friend in Weimar. He had recently retired, which, he said, had its advantages, the most dramatic being able to travel anywhere in the world for sixty days each year. Of course, the fact that you can take only fifteen West German marks with you does curtail travel possibilities somewhat and makes you dependent on friends or relatives, but still you're free to go. That is not the case for those still in the work force. They encounter great difficulties in getting permission to travel abroad, for the G.D.R. needs all of its workers and does not want to run the risk that some might not return from the glitter of the West. But once retired, it's a different story. If you choose not to return from abroad, so much the better. The government then no longer has to pay your pension and provide health care. The retiree is a burden which the state is glad to be rid of.

Taking advantage of his new status, my friend went to Berlin (West) while visiting his son in Berlin (capital, G.D.R.). It was his first visit to Berlin (West) in thirty years,

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and his experience after thirty years must have been the same as mine, but magnified a hundred times over. He could hardly believe his eyes. There was so much of everything, all out on display just begging to be bought. What a difference compared to the limited selection, marginal quality, and indifferent stuff in the East German stores! It must have been a real shock. His wife, however, was spared. She isn't old enough to retire yet.

Recovering from my surprise at the fruit stand, I began walking along the street. A second surprise: about every third business was a restaurant. Not only that, but they were open! And here it was, about 8:00 p.m., and the streets were crowded with people. What were they doing out here? It was another hurdle to overcome. In Weimar, restaurants are scarce, and to find one that is open in the evening is a major accomplishment. People in the streets? During the day, the streets are crowded with people, both local residents and tourists, but by 7:00 p.m. most have vanished. Strange ways for a European city.

I don't really know why I was so surprised. I had been in the G.D.R. twice before, and had even spent three weeks two years previously in Weimar. The differences this time were no greater than before, but for some reason I was much more acutely aware of them. Perhaps on the earlier visits I had been so involved with the system and how it functions that I simply had not paid much attention to the obvious.

Lest my remarks be misinterpreted, however, I must state unequivocally that there is no shortage of goods in the G.D.R. Lack of variety is not the same as lack of food. After all, there's always lots of cabbage. Indeed, there is no shortage of any of the essentials in the G.D.R., and many which can hardly be termed essentials are also readily available. The nonessentials are expensive, though, and purposely so. The profits from these items are used to subsidize the essentials: basic foods, public transportation, housing. This creates a relatively stable cost of living, but in the G.D.R., as everywhere else on earth, what once was a luxury becomes a necessity as living standards rise. Thus there is a demand for those products which constitute the "good life" even though they may be expensive.

What changes have taken place in two years? On the surface, very few. The buildings still look neglected, the brown coal (lignite) smoke as well as the black diesel smoke and the blue smoke from the two-cycle Trabants and Wartburgs still pollute the air, and the traffic noise in the narrow streets is still deafening. The East Germans still seem as family oriented as before, and the children are still accorded an important place in society. The people still maintain their gardens on the outskirts of town, and the tourists still come from other East bloc countries to the most prosperous member

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of that bloc to absorb some of its culture and perhaps buy some of its products.

Beneath the surface, however, one senses the stirrings of a fresh breeze from the east. *Glasnost* and *perestroika* are inching their way westward, in spite of the regressive tendencies of the government. The result is a greater openness among the population and a greater readiness to acknowledge and criticize the problems which are peculiar to that system. The greater openness ranges from forthright statements such as "One doesn't speak of the dead (socialism)" and "You have to have a great deal of (socialist) idealism to put up with the difficulties in getting vegetables, fruit, meat, auto parts, etc." to guarded comments at the end of a conversation, such as "You know, no one else really needs to know what we talked about."

The increased openness extends to the classroom as well. Two years ago there was little mention of the problems in the G.D.R. Now, although there is little reference to the role of the Party, there is open discussion of the problems confronting society and how the system contributes to them. These problems include housing, the physical appearance of cities, the problems of working mothers, alcoholism, pollution, and the inability of the system to create the new socialist citizen. In other words, there is recognition that socialism has so far failed to create the perfect society and acknowledgment that it will still be a long time in coming.

Although on the surface life seems to be tolerable, the large number of applications for emigration permits suggests that a great deal of discontent is still present and that people are willing to risk their secure place in their society for the hope of a better life elsewhere. Now as before applying for an emigration permit means trouble. There may be problems on the job or even dismissal from work; chances for advancement are usually curtailed. There may be harassment from the police.

In a photographer's display window, I noticed an enlarged photocopy of a news release from an international meeting in Switzerland. The East German spokesman at the meeting stated that freedom from economic deprivation (unemployment was meant) was just as important as political freedom. The term "political freedom" was heavily underlined, obviously to emphasize that political freedom, at least for some, was as important as freedom from economic deprivation. I thought it curious to see such a political statement so boldly on display. It turned out that the photographer had applied for an emigration permit which had not been granted up to that time. He was a private businessman, so not much could happen to him on the job, but in the meantime the police had come to his home several times, not for anything specific or serious, but simply to harass him.

Here was a typical example of the schizophrenic tendencies of the government. On

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the one hand, it had encouraged applications for emigration permits by announcing that a greater number would be granted than in the past. But when so many people applied, the government apparently had second thoughts because of the sheer number and attempted to discourage emigration. Such vacillation must be obvious to the people.

There is greater concern for the environment now than two years ago. It reminds me of the environmental movement in the U.S. some fifteen years ago. Everyone has become aware of environmental problems, their seriousness, and their international implications. The major thrust to correct the problems seems to be to produce more with less, thus reducing the demand for raw materials and energy. That makes good economic sense and ecological sense, but much more must be done to alleviate the situation.

Much air pollution is caused by the widespread use of lignite, a low grade of coal. Contributing to the pollution from lignite are the antiquated individual heating systems in the older apartments. However, lignite is the only widely available fuel in the G.D.R. Because of the problems in paying for imported goods, in this case oil or gas, lignite will continue to be widely used. The Trabant and the Wartburg, the two cars manufactured in the G.D.R., are also responsible for considerable air pollution. They have antiquated, inefficient two-cycle engines which consume more fuel than they should. They also are not equipped with any kind of pollution controls. There has been talk for years about an entirely new Trabant, but so far it has not appeared. The promised appearance is always postponed for another year or two.

Such delays are not unusual, according to East Germans, for it always takes two or three times as long to accomplish something in the G.D.R. as anywhere else in the world.

Other trends include fewer banners with political slogans draped from buildings and across streets, a less stridently anti-Western tone in the newspapers, and possibly more privately owned businesses. There appear to be more privately owned bookstores, restaurants, and other shops. There is a real need especially for restaurants and hotel rooms to accommodate the many visitors to the G.D.R. By allowing more private enterprise in these service areas, the government perhaps hopes to cover these needs. Certainly it would help the balance of trade to encourage tourism further, but how is the encouragement of private enterprise compatible with Marxist principles?

Service in the HO shops would probably also improve if there were competition from private shops. While I was in Weimar, a new, privately owned meat market opened. It was relatively large, clean, had rather large meat cases (for the G.D.R.), and a decent

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stock of meat and sausage. In addition, it was well-staffed. Needless to say, it provided very strong competition for the HO meat shops. It was doing a very good business from the day it opened.

There are many crosscurrents and undercurrents present in the G.D.R. today. On the surface, it appears to be business as usual, with the Party still very much in control. However, one senses in the G.D.R., more than in Western Europe or the U.S.A., that an era is slowly, almost imperceptibly drawing to a close and a new age, still hidden beyond the horizon, is about to inch its way into view. The undercurrents, the crosscurrents, are there. The shape of the changes which they will cause still remains to be determined, but surely changes will take place. There is a dynamism present in the world, and no matter how much opposition there is to that dynamism, it will eventually have its way.

## *Letter From France*

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LYNN MAPES

France continues to provide the American visitors with a culture, society and polity that contrasts with their own. Placed somewhat ambivalently between the ubiquitous small shopkeeper of Poujadist ancestry and the ever-more-numerous *hypermarchés*, French society sustains its pre-World War II character while it leads us to a post-modern future in areas as diverse as architecture, literature, music, fashion, and nuclear power.

Surely a country with one of the lowest birth rates in Western Europe during the pre-birth control 19th century and which now has one of the higher rates in the birth prevention era of the late 20th century is complicated. France is a centralized country with state *dirigisme* evolving from its royalist, Jacobin and Napoleonic traditions. But it also has regionalism in its diverse traditions — Flemish in the north, Breton in the west, Alsatian in the east, and Basque and Corsican in the south. It has such a varied geography that over seventy-five percent of the French spend their five-week paid vacation within French borders. And it is altogether possible that the revolutionary and conservative traditions have never quite been reconciled, as shown by the explosive 1984 conflict over state control of Catholic schools.

But it is French society, especially its unique language and those interesting cities, that provides more direct access to the French and how they live. Aix-en-Provence,