

THE LAST DAYS

-first impressions of the last days of East Germany-
(*Mecklenburg/Rügen, August 1990 [between the introduction of the
Dmark and reunification]*)

Entering East Germany had always been depressing. Often there were long waits. The border guards looked you closely in the eyes to make sure you matched your passport picture. Once the West German newspaper I carried was deposited in a trash bin. It was the only time I remember seeing one of the border guards smile. The mood was somber, color it grey. In 1983 I started to travel from Heidelberg, West Germany to Moscow by train. I mistakenly sat in an East German compartment with uncomfortable green seats and nothing to break up the monotony. When the conductor came by, he suggested that I sit in a compartment for West Europeans. Unfortunately I had to get off the train in West Berlin as I had forgotten to get a transit visa for Poland. I ended up flying from East Berlin to Moscow. The flight was cheap but the impressions most deeply engraved were of the airport and surrounding area that matched the East German compartment on the train. Barbed wire and soldiers, signs warning you not to stray or take pictures, the eternal grayness. It was a novel experience, then, after the fall of the Berlin wall to be able to proceed into and through East Germany unhindered. A friend from Heidelberg and I took our cycles on a train to Schwerin in Mecklenburg and spent a week cycling around the lakes and coast.

In one small town, a woman ordered eight 'Amerikaner' in a new Eduscho cafe, half apologetically, explaining to the lady behind the counter that it had been a long, long time since she had had one. The sale's lady laughed and responded, "well, then you should indulge."

In the traditional shops people were unfriendly. Once I had the choice of three kinds of terrible looking cheese, three unwrapped blocks, obviously a long way from being fresh. I waited while the saleslady helped another customer before I left to return a few minutes later. There was vet another customer at the counter, but the cheese lady caught my eye so I asked what kind of cheese the right-most and least revolting of the three blocks might be. After getting the information I then asked for a slice but had thrown at me cold and stern: "*Ich bin nicht so weit!*" ('it's not your turn yet'). The symbolic failure of a system: a woman selling three kinds of unappetizing cheese with an arrogance stemming from the knowledge that in the past you could literally take it or leave it.

In the rural areas of Mecklenburg and Rügen there is a more relaxed atmosphere and we were warmly received. At the campground across the lake from Krakow am See, the headmaster of an O-level school not far from there, who spoke English with an authentic British accent that he picked up in a POW camp, invited us to breakfast at his campsite and extended an invitation to us to visit him at the castle he lived in should we ever visit his town. I learned that on his own initiative he had arranged cycling outings in the summer with his pupils,

where they cycled as far as 140 Km in a day, which shamed a little for our maximum daily journeys of 50 km. In Rügen, west of Stubenkammer while cycling alongside a lake on a dirt road in the direction of Bergen, we stopped to ask a farmer directions. He leaned over the fence and talked to us for a quarter of an hour, so long in fact that we missed the train we were heading for, but the experience standing in the field adjacent to the lake listening to this highly educated farmer had to be prolonged. He stated that he had done quite well under the old system, being able to raise sows on the side and get 1,000 DDR marks each; last year he had made 10,000 marks that way. Now they couldn't even sell their grain and had to market it at dumping prices in Hamburg. Such private gain, he noted, was actively supported by the state. For him, Honecker could have stayed in power another three years and he would have been set up (though he admitted "we were imprisoned here"). Now he didn't know what was coming. But standing in his garden next to a very attractive house, he did not seem to be in a bad situation. I asked him if he would buy the property and his quick response was startlingly insightful: "and work day and night, what for?" As long as the property is collectivized he can work his eight hour shift (except for harvesting) with vacation time and make his own money on the side.

His comments on Honecker contrasted with the first political opinion we heard in East Germany, our first night at a campground outside of Schwerin when a 6-year old boy blurted out upon hearing I was an American, "Bush, how I hate him!!" When asked about Gorbachov the verdict was not much better; as to their own political leader: "But Honecker is the worst!!!"

The old and the new can be seen in the reaction of the people everywhere, but with the shopkeepers and 'Beamter' most particularly. Some are remarkably relaxed, open and friendly, while others bark orders like drill sergeants and threaten with fines, or exhibit hostile indifference. There were still lines at times -- for instance in Bergen while I could find no fruit of vegetables in the grocery stores I went into, one street vendor offering grapes had at least 15 people patiently waiting their turn for as long as our dinner lasted in a restaurant opposite.

At the information desk in the Warin train station, in a bureau that resembled more a supervisor's office, I waited for the woman in charge who had gone off with a woman she was helping to get a coffee and a breakfast role. When they returned I felt like an intruder but was told I could take a seat. After a few minutes the woman looked up from her breakfast and small talk, and in between actually providing information about trains to her friend asked me, as an afterthought, what I wanted. She gave me the information I needed, reluctantly, and provided further information about alternate routes only when prodded. On the line between

Stralsund and Bergen we met one conductor twice who had laugh-wrinkles reflecting a clearly jovial personality. He told us nonchalantly to put our bikes on the train, here or there, it would be all right. On an earlier train a grand matron made us and four other people, in conformance with the written regulations it is true, take off all our luggage from the bikes so that we just barely made the train. However, our very first experience leaving Lubeck was with a young conductor who very politely informed us that we had mistakenly put our bicycles in a passenger compartment instead of the luggage carrier, which this particular train had, but that it did not matter to him as long as he could pass through. He told my friend that it was hard to get exact schedules in this transition period and that if he had time after checking the tickets he himself would write out the schedule we needed to get from the first leg of our trip around the lakes of Mecklenburg to Rügen. And indeed at the end of our journey he produced a painstakingly hand-written schedule for trains from Malchin to Stralsund with connecting trains in Neubrandenburg.

At a small lake in Bützow a 55-year-old man told me excitedly that it was his life's dream to go to the West coast of America. His daughter spoke perfect English, having studied English and German at the university in Rostock. He had lived on the lake all his life and like other people we met from the area conveyed an attachment to the land. When asked if the lake was clean he pointed out the high amount of algae and reeds growing on the edge of the water and said that they indicated that the water was polluted and that too much nitrogen from the local agriculture was in it: "not clean but schön." Would he take over the campground and make a running enterprise out of it? Well it belonged to the community and maybe they would upgrade it; he was too old to take on anything new himself (!)

The dying throes of East Germany one month before its incorporation into former West Germany is one of diversity breaking into a monolithic society of limited choice guarded by people barking orders with their regulations and threats of fines in their pockets. What stands out in this part of East Germany to West Germans I have talked to is the undisturbed quality of the natural setting. Our cycling tour was hampered by cobblestoned city streets but enhanced by the beautiful tree-lined country avenues winding their way through forest, field and meadow, not carefully parceled out as in the West, but sprawling uninhibited.

Sometimes, too often, this natural beauty was destroyed by the gray, brown concreted and corrugated steel housing structures, whose depressing aura is only struck home by the contrasting flower boxes with their multicolored geraniums. The system in East Germany did not succeed in complementing the beauty of the region; on the contrary its monolithic grayness stood out

against it like the buildings to the geraniums. Some of the old houses, in Binz and Stralsund, for example, retain the flair of a former nobility, but the nobility of a past age, neglected and in disrepair. Marx's principle that in socialism the personality of the individual will first freely be able to unfold and develop has been covered in grey like those houses, but is being heralded by the jovial faces of the polite conductors, the benign, relaxed air of headmasters, farmers and lake attendants. Collective vacations spent in 'objects' the very semantics of which according to my companion conjures up something lacking any subjective or human quality (in fact an involuntary shudder went through her whenever she encountered the word) are giving way to a new age of individual choice and (?) hope.