

## Deutschland unter Allem

**T**HE RUHR REGION OF West Germany—that dense, industrial area around Essen and Dusseldorf, where city abuts city with no space in between—had an unusually cold winter this year. An air inversion locked the region in a foul-smelling smog that made one's eyes sting. This may have aggravated the pervasive atmosphere of irritation everywhere.

Perhaps it is no different from other times, but the lack of tranquility seems more noticeable this year. It shows up in small ways. A woman in a store tries to put a gift into a box too small for it; I warn her that the box is too narrow, but she stays on her knees forcing it until the box tears, as if the real problem were simply my German. A German friend of mine argues with a woman in a parking lot, insisting that he has not nicked the side of her car. Afterwards, he laughs hysterically that it doesn't matter—if he had really done something, she would have called the police. Ashtrays everywhere are full of crumpled cigarette butts. Shopkeepers smoke more, museum guards smoke more, and everyone drives even faster on the autobahns, in spite of new speed limits.

People ask me if Ronald Reagan has ever in his life been in Europe. Does he know what it means to be 50 kilometers from one border, a hundred from another, to change language and culture and currency? When he speaks about economic sanctions against Poland, does he realize how truly desperate the Polish people are, how starved? Does he understand the nuances of the Polish situation, that Jaruzelski may have been told that the alternative to martial law was Russian invasion?

I am asked if he understands the special spirit of the Polish people, the intense nationalism that makes the poorest among them leave expensive flowers on the graves of national heroes. Does he realize that they may quietly have their own

plans for Poland? Does he understand that even in the eyes of people under martial law Jaruzelski is "a Pole first, a Pole second, and an agent of the Russians only third"—that the Russians had selected him, in fact, because of his rapport with the Polish people? Whom is Reagan fooling with his statements about Solidarity? Does he really want this form of Socialism ruling in Poland? Doesn't he understand and want the East-West balance in Europe to retain its status-quo? Don't Western banks want their loan money stable? Why are we acting like characters in cowboy movies, where there are only good guys and bad guys? In Hannover, so near to East Germany, trucks from Poland indicate that at least the routes of trade are still open; with trucks going back and forth, it is still possible to sneak some butter and coffee to the other side.

**I**N COLOGNE EVERYONE IS obsessed with inflation. Michelin has at last given three stars to a local restaurant; perhaps inflation is not discussed there, but in a nearby one-star restaurant, where the quail is tender and pink and the fresh goose liver pate custardy and rich, voices at every table talk about dollars and marks.

The Cathedral is impressive, but filthy with soot. The buildings around it have all been built since 1945, when the Cathedral was surrounded by a plain of rubble. Whom do the people blame? The Allies bombed in retaliation for the bombing of London and Coventry.

The Wallraf-Richartz Museum has Cranachs and Rembrandts and a large splashy collection of American Pop Art forged by chocolate manufacturer Peter Ludwig. Almost everything is under glass, because even the pollution inside the buildings can damage the art works.

In the city of Böttrop, local residents one night describe their memories of Kristallnacht, in 1938. The Jewish family from whom everyone bought furniture lost both their house and shop, and in the shop there was a lot of furniture being held because monthly payments were not completed. So the Nazis destroyed not only neighbors and friends, but also half-paid-for furniture. One woman who worked for the telephone company remembers overhearing on the wires, "They're at our neighbors'; we're next. They'll get to you soon if you don't move quickly."

People seem to talk more and eat more. They joke more and gossip more. Local corruption, the endless vying for power, keeps everyone on the defensive just to keep their jobs and get some work done. City and regional money pays for lots of Mercedes and drivers; expense accounts pay for big meals and lots of beer in restaurants, but for nothing in the houses. In the shops, there is no sign of American health food consciousness. Liverwurst spread is ultra-pasturized, sausages are loaded with preservatives, vegetables are tinned or shrink-wrapped in plastic, and the breads and pastries, which all originate in one or two places, are made with bleached white flour. It is easier to find good pumpernickel in New York.

The past is still on top of Germany, and so is Poland. America remains vast, uncluttered, and relatively unscarred. Is it too much to hope that we might risk our innocence by opening our eyes and our foreign policy to the nuances of modern European history?

—Nicholas Fox Weber