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Obsessions of Berlin

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As against the terror of the bombs, the actual conquest of Berlin was of lesser significance to its inhabitants. Nevertheless, the artillery tore new holes into the ruins, shot away parts of the surviving buildings, killed many people running for food and water. The spray of machine guns is visible almost on every house, every floor, every apartment door. The tanks ground down the streets and sidewalks. The battle was fought section by section, street by street, house by house. It is said that sixty thousand Russians died in the struggle for Berlin. The estimate may be incorrect, but it reveals the ferocity of the struggle. There are no guesses on the German losses. They lost everything – particularly, however, their illusions about the Russians.

The Russians are Berlin's second great obsession. The rape of the city is burned deep into the minds of its inhabitants because it is associated with their greatest disappointment. Long before the fall of the city, refugees from the East told horrible stories about the Russians' behavior. So did the radio. But wishful thinking discounted these stories as exaggerations and propaganda. At any rate, it could not get worse than it was. The same hope that welcomed Hitler in exchange for the depression welcomed now the Russians in exchange for the bombings.

Berliners who had once belonged to the Communist Party, or sympathized with it, looked upon the Russian conquerors as their liberators. Their disappointment was consequently greater than that experienced by the great mass of apolitical people and passive Nazis. Even the less exposed Nazis hoped for a quick fall of the city in order to escape a fight that no longer made sense. The more realistic among them killed their families and themselves.

And there were those who had welcomed the Allied bombers in the hope that the misery in their wake would lead to revolt. But the terror-machine of the Nazis proved to be stronger than the despair of the people. The atomization of the masses was sufficiently advanced to allow the organized terroristic minority to control all situations. But with the Russians at the gates of Berlin, defeatism became more widespread. With the Russians within the city, revolt became possible. But the Russians were not interested; they did not look for help but for loot.

The loot had been promised to the Russian troops – mostly made up of Mongolians – as the price for taking the city. The women were among the spoils. Despite the disaffection within the German ranks, the fight for Berlin took longer than was expected, the Russian losses were greater than contemplated. The barbarism of the Russian troops is now excused by the ferocity of the Nazi defense that enraged the Russian soldiers. Their rage, it is explained, could not be controlled; it took some time before the Commissars were able to bring order into the chaos and deprive the individual soldier of his right to rape, steal, and kill, in favor of the systematic expropriation executed by the army in the name of the state.

The Nazi stalwarts had the choice of dying fighting or committing suicide. They found it easier to get killed. They hated the Russians and they had no love for the Germans. Whoever was not with them in this last battle was their enemy. Unwilling adolescents and feeble old men were forced into the *Volkssturm*. Those who could not handle a gun, or manipulate a hand-grenade, were kept busy building barricades. Refusal to work or to fight led to immediate execution. Everywhere the defeatists were hanging on the lantern posts. Attempts to cut them down were again punished by death.

The luck of battle shifted from day to day, sometimes from hour to hour. The unwilling soldiers of the *Volkssturm* threw their guns away as soon as the Russians entered their street, only to pick them up again when they were driven back. They would be killed either way: by the Russians if found with a weapon in their hands, by the Nazis if found without their guns. But in the final stages of the battle more and more Germans joined the Russians in the hunting down and killing of the Nazis. They tore down the barricades they had erected to slow the Russian advance. They helped take care of snipers. They recognized the Nazis who had shed their uniforms, and destroyed them. They improvised red flags, reorganized the Communist Party, occupied the apartments of Nazi party-members, plundered and killed on their own account.

However, the Russians refused to distinguish between Nazis and anti-Nazis; all Germans were fascists and capitalists. They even outlawed their own German Communist Party, only to allow its legal reorganization at a much later date – with the arrival of Wilhelm Pick and his Moscow-picked retinue – so as to have an additional weapon of control. It would not do in May 1945 to offer a Russian soldier a brotherly embrace. He needed just to see the “luxury” of a radio, watch, or couch to be convinced that he was not dealing with a *Tovarisch* but with a capitalist. At any rate, as he was out to loot, he was not interested in probing the personal history and social position of his victim.

The rape of Berlin was not the aftermath of the struggle but part of it. The fight was less a military affair than a gigantic raid of a million-fold army of bandits. Even the appearance of the Russian soldiers ceased to be military; they discarded filthy and torn parts of their uniforms for German civilian clothes. They wore two and three suits under the military blouses and pants. Hardly able to walk, they advanced from street to street, tommy-gun in one hand and a suitcase of loot in the other. The bayonet broke open closets and drawers; what was removable was taken, only to be lost again to the Commissars who organized the eastward track of the previously westward Nazi caravans of plunder.

In great demand, of course, were things that could be carried on the body, such as watches and jewelry of all descriptions. As the victory must be celebrated, schnapps and vodka were also in great demand. Every bottle of vinegar was opened and tasted before the Russians accepted their possessors' protestation that they contained no alcohol. And with the schnapps the fighting and thievery gained in

elan. Those who could not deliver quickly enough were shot down; women, not willing to give in at once, were thrown out of the windows with their throats slit. Fires were set to the houses that yielded too little, their occupants fleeing the basements into the deadly cross-fires of the streets.

During the battle, the interval between life and death is the occasion for love. Stopped for days at a particular spot, there was time for enjoyment before the sniper's bullet found its mark. Women and girls dragged from their basements were lined up on the sidewalks. They tried to make themselves appear old and ugly by smearing their faces with soot and by dirtying the shabby rags they wore in the cellars. But a soldier's hand would wipe away the filth and discover good looks behind the mask of fear. Children would follow their mothers and sisters, only to see them ordered to bend over and lift their skirts to make ready for love in daylight and collectivity, to be loved by drunken soldiers still able, however, to keep an eye on the rooftops so as not to be killed in the act of copulation. Long afterwards, the smaller of the children would play the newly-learned "game of raping."

The end of the battle is the start of the clean-up period. Groups of Russians began looking for strayed German soldiers; systematically, house by house, block by block. Nights, they returned to be rewarded for their day's troubles. The dead women, sprawling on the streets with their throats cut from ear to ear, served as a terrible reminder not to refuse the victors. The soldiers took what they found, regardless of age. Years without furloughs, years of war and nothing but war, had given them a great and indiscriminate appetite. Lucky the woman who aroused the fancy of an officer who would take charge of her and thus protect her from the mob. For others there was just the command "stay down comrade comes." It was like in an army brothel; only the experience was missing, and the husband looked on, and the children were not spared. And there was always the fear of death. If the lights suddenly went out, the Russian might start shooting. If the lights suddenly went on, he might also shoot, always suspicious of being trapped, of being tricked, of being surprised by a god-damned German swine.

Of course there are also other stories; stories of the kind Russian soldier who stopped in his fight just to help an old lady cross the street. Stories of the crying Russian soldier killing an old couple to end their useless and hopeless misery. Of the baby-lover, forcing a can of milk down the throat of a terrified child. Of those that took from one German to give to another. Of the Commissar killing the rapist on the spot, and the officer belaboring the plunderer with his saber. No doubt, these stories are as true as the cruel ones. But the unpredictability of the Russians' behavior merely increased the fear. Life and death depended on their caprices; it gave the terror a particularly bitter flavor. And when all is said, there remains the fact that within two months Berlin was thoroughly plundered. What was not securely hidden had been taken, most of the women had been mishandled, and the majority of the population had been reduced to paupers.

II

Apparently it was true that the soldiers had lost their discipline. Long after the battle searching parties continued to look in the basements and ruins. They looked no longer for Nazis but for Russians. And they have been looking for deserters ever since; most of the *Razzias* that take place in Berlin have as their first objective the hunt for former Russian soldiers. Troops were shifted, the Mongolians retreated to the hinterland; new soldiers arrived. Too late for the great show they were now forced to buy their women

with bread and their bicycles with worthless vouchers and German Marks they had picked up in banks and post-offices.

But the troops were still living with the Germans. What kind of people were these Russians? Had they been so totally demoralized by years of campaigning, that they forgot all the so-called civilized ways of behavior? Or did they come from Russian regions so backward that any comparison with Western standards was at once unfair and impossible? With surprise and contempt the Berliners watched the attempts of Russian soldiers to drill a hole in the wall in the hope that it would spout water just as the faucet did over the kitchen sink. They were amazed by the readiness of the Russian soldier to exchange an expensive wrist-watch for any old alarm clock just because it was so much bigger. They were disgusted to see their living-room changed into a butcher-shop as the Russians dragged animals up the stairs to be killed on the carpet. They did not understand their persistence of using the bathtub for a toilet and the toilet for washing their faces. They could not help laughing over the disappointment of the Russian who washed his potatoes in the toilet-bowl only to see them disappear as he pulled the lever. They saw with regret the wrecked automobiles and bicycles littering the streets, demonstrating the Russians' great love and little aptitude for things mechanical. They learned to know the Russian's great fear of his superiors: to make a misbehaving soldier run, it was only necessary to shout "Commissar" at the top of one's lungs. They witnessed Russian soldiers marched off to prison, heavy ropes around their bodies, the point of the bayonet between their shoulder blades, like in an old war-picture of a hundred years back. They experienced day by day the wide gulf that still separates the East from the West, as yet unbridgeable by any ideology, crossable only by armed forces, and haphazardly kept together by the permanence of terror.

Order was re-established in Berlin. Russian soldiers had been buried where they had fallen, on the sidewalks, in the center of the streets. Their graves had been lovingly cared for. Little white fences had been placed around them. Flowers, and often the picture of the deceased, were planted on the heap of earth covering them. Their remains were now dug out to restore the streets to their original function, and were placed into mass-graves at more appropriate places. Barriers were placed on every important street corner. Smart Russian women in uniform, white gloves, their bosom pushed up to the neck, regulated traffic by lifting or lowering toll-bars for vehicles and individuals alike. Like other regulations modeled on the Russian village, these traffic disturbances disappeared with the entry of the Allied troops.

With order restored, pillage was now directed from headquarters. The factories lost their machinery, the warehouses all they contained. Even the tracks of the city railway were removed, but had to be brought back at a later date. The street-cars were moved to Russia. The Germans repaired previously discarded ones; but they, too, were taken. Only the oldest, most dilapidated ones were left to Berlin.

With the entering of the Allied troops about half of Berlin was freed of the Russians. The expropriations were legalized, the removals were now being called reparations. The Russian troops moved into barracks and bunkers formerly housing German troops. Their uniforms seemed cleaner and they began to let their hair grow. But the more well-mannered they became, the less could be seen of them. Their isolation is not complete, of course; they can still be observed guarding the factories and offices that work for them. They have their parades and patrols and also their time off. They still plant their machine-guns on railway stations to check the papers of all who pass. But there is no longer that one-sided "fraternization" of the first months of the occupation.

III

Russia has lost in Germany, most certainly in Berlin, notwithstanding all the apparent “good will” the people show toward the Socialist Unity Party, Russia’s German instrument. It is not propaganda, nor a stubborn refusal to be disillusioned, which explains some of the Berliners’ “enthusiasm” for Russia’s German policy. Behind the “enthusiasm” hides fear, which is kept alive by an invisible terror that may at any day come into the open.

On May Day 1948 there were nearly three-quarters of a million people in the *Lustgarten* demonstration called by the Russian-sponsored Socialist Unity Party. Apparently more than the number of those who attended the Socialist demonstration at the Reichstag building. Only two Russians in mufti, and one in uniform, shared the tribune with Pieck and his staff. Few Russians were seen along the route. The slogans were all related to imagined German needs, and against the Marshall Plan. Hour by hour the demonstrators passed the reviewing stand. Their shoutings, however, had no spontaneity, but were directed by groups of clagues near the loudspeaker-system. The Communist-controlled Berlin police formed part of the demonstration and received the loudest applause. Over and over again the loudspeakers burst forth with “Long live the German people’s police.” The Moscow-trained former Nazi officer, Markgraf, at that time Berlin’s sole police president, smiled down to the masses, coquettishly waving a red carnation or clicking his heels in an earnest salute. Berlin’s love for the police and the love of the police for the Berliners seemed boundless and all-embracing.

The shabby clothes, torn shoes, and hungry faces of the demonstrators made them appear like an army of desperate beggars, out to invade the reservoirs of the rich. But they yelled for the police, for the often-felt rubber truncheons, for the deadly order of the party-state. Did the bottle of schnapps they received this morning go to their heads? Of course not, for it was sold at once to the black market. The schnapps was not a present but cost more than a weekly wage; by selling it they realized a profit big enough to buy four loaves of bread. Maybe the sight of the large brown sausages sold at various booths near the marching-route made them love the world and all it contained? But taking the sausage meant to part with precious ration-coupons and to face a meatless month. No, the enthusiasm for the police, for the Communist Party, for Russia, was not the result of bribery; it was given absolutely free, it came from the heart, a heart obsessed by fear.

The manipulated demonstrations of the “people’s will” are organized through a malignant net of organizations. It is not up to the individual to decide whether or not to go. With others he is assembled at the place of work or at his living-quarters. His trade-union functionary, factory-representative, party-comrade, or house-warden, will know if he missed the call, if he stayed away deliberately; and he may be reprimanded or reported. Reported to whom? That’s just it. Under the Nazis it was clear, but now one doesn’t really know. However, if the Russians should become the absolute rulers, it may be expected that a bad record or a deficiency of enthusiasm will reach the files of a new Gestapo. It is better to play safe, to act and talk as is expected, or not to talk, just nod, and follow the functionary.

Communist Party trustees, backed by the Red Army, control factories still working, supervise all available jobs whatever their nature, control the cooperatives and the municipal offices. Although rations are small they must be bought. To live, one must work, even if most work is of the make-believe kind. Some jobs qualify for ration-card Two, others for ration-card Three, the most important jobs, as evaluated

by the Russian occupiers, for ration-card One. To get a ration-card a work-card is needed. To keep the work-card, one must not oppose the policy and ideology of the Socialist Unity Party.

In opposition to the planned installation of a Western German government the Party called for a German referendum on the question of national unity. That no one is against unity is clear, though there may be some who do not care to show concern. That this is not a German question at all is also clear. What will happen in Germany and Berlin depends on the conflicts or agreements, between the great competing powers. Nevertheless, the propaganda offices are busy on both sides and the referendum is part of the Russian program. And then it starts:— The house-warden knocks on the door: “Have you added your name to the list for the referendum?” He comes back next day with the same question, and the day thereafter. The question is asked at street corners, at the grocer’s, in the factories and offices, everywhere, by a great number of unpaid functionaries in search of ration-card One, until everybody feels sure that he is watched, that his indifference will not remain unnoticed. The list of names demanding the referendum may be kept, checked, and gone over again, as soon as the Allied powers have left, on the day of reckoning when the unreliaables are purged. Anyhow, it is not difficult to sign a name, and thus they sign — just in case.

Of course nobody is fooled by these expressions of the people’s will. The Party is not gauging its ideological success but the amount of fear it has been able to inspire. By means of the referendum, demonstrations, elections, declarations of all sorts, it measures the degree of its power over the people. It knows that ideological control is of small importance in an age which has devaluated all ideologies, where ideologies are merely labels for the controlling powers of one or another set of politicians who base their rule not on ideas but on an effective organization of terror.

Life in the Russian sector begins to resemble life under Nazi rule, including the arrests and disappearances of oppositionists in nightly raids. Although as yet without uniform and with restricted authority, a red “SS” is in formation. Discipline and the leader principle are stressed, the party hierarchy and its system of privileges has returned. With the division of the people into ration-card categories an inexpensive army of functionaries and storm-troopers has been created. Being in possession of a number One ration-card means to keep on living; outside this category there is only slow starvation. The struggle for existence is a fight for the proper ration-card, for the privilege of being used as policeman, propagandist, informer, or executioner by the masters of the party-machine.

Russian expansion is based not on consent but on force. It is a military and police affair exclusively, notwithstanding all the doctrinaire concern with ideological issues, for these, too, perform police functions, leading, as they do, to the early discovery of deviations and nascent opposition. It is not the change in the economic structure the Russians may introduce in Germany that causes concern, but the political-social structure of their party-state. For the Berliners the “Iron Curtain” hides no secrets. They have traveled across it, their relatives are living there, visiting them from time to time, either legally or illegally. Uncensored letters reach Berlin. They know that the conditions in city and country do not differ from the miserable conditions in the Western Zones, that Berlin merely reflects the whole of the territory that was once Germany. Furthermore, some of them have been with the Nazi armies in Russia, some returned as prisoners of war, looking like the inmates of Belsen and Buchenwald in their last stages of development. Local experiences are not their only criteria. But because of these experiences all that is Russian takes on a particularly sinister character.

The immediate situation, however, calls for duplicity. As long as there is a chance to pledge allegiance to the West, the chance is taken in the illusory hope that this may influence the decision of the Western powers to stay in Berlin. Simultaneously, the Russians are supported wherever necessary, in order not to arouse their wrath, in case the city should be theirs completely. As there are no escapes for the masses, their attitudes change with their masters. Democratic Berlin will be even more “democratic” as soon as the basis for its current democracy – four power competition – is removed. Meanwhile, people can do no more than bewail their reluctance to follow suit at the first great exodus to the Western zones, at the earliest rumors of a possible Berlin crisis. Now they are trapped, to be sold out if so convenient, or to be used in a kind of test-case for the larger issues at stake. Those who do not live by politics will prefer to do as they are told, no matter who does the telling. The Western-oriented politicians will, at best, become refugees. In their majority they will probably crowd still more the already crowded Russian concentration camps. In any case, German preferences do not count; the present flood of brave slogans about the Berliners’ valiant refusal to bow to the new dictatorship is only silly, facing, as Berlin does, an army judged able, in case of war, of overrunning the whole of Germany within a few days.

IV

The political issues that seemingly agitate the Berliners only indicate their own impotence. Their interest in politics is waning. They would, no doubt, support any power, and any cause, in exchange for bread and security. They would even try to forget their early experiences with the Russians. But no bread and no security is forthcoming. It is the obvious poverty of the Russians, their strange primitiveness, their crude terroristic methods, their inability to give, and their need to take where hardly anything is left to take, that makes the Germans prefer the West. Even if nothing is to be expected from either side, still there is a greater familiarity with the Western world. There is also the strong suspicion that the Bolshevik colossus rests upon feet of clay and that, notwithstanding possible initial successes, it would not last in a prolonged war. It is not so much hunger for revenge, as the desire to escape the camp of the defeated, which motivates the German sympathies – such as they are – for the West.

However, no real turn to the West is possible. Victors behave as such; even where no great gains can be realized the victorious gestures will be maintained. These gestures alone confront the Berliners, removed as they are from the bargain-counter of international diplomacy, where special claims historically and otherwise, are framed in terms of coal and iron. France’s anxiety over a possible German revival is not shared by her occupation troops, who recognize its baselessness merely by looking around. No fear-determined brutality accompanies their rule. Only the French officer behaves as arrogantly in Berlin as did the Nazi officer in Paris. And in the French desire to demonstrate their superiority the Germans may recognize their own behavior of better days. It is not a wise girl who refuses a French soldier a dance in the Amusement Park; she may very well get her face slapped. One must be careful in the use of one’s language when facing the French interrogator, since a real or imagined lack of respect may lead to painful consequences. In general, however, the French behave toward the Germans in Berlin as they would if they met them in Paris. In their persistent enmity they are like all the other Western people who endured the Nazi occupation. Apparently, they are not as yet finished with the war and their previously suffered humiliation still looks for compensation.

Only the British soldiers attempt to make themselves inconspicuous, provided they are sober, and so long as they are on their own. But they are forced to do a lot of marching and shouting. Their officers stick to themselves in Germany as once in India. Barbed wire around their compounds, toll-gates, and many guards secure their isolation. They bring their wives and children to Berlin and live their English-way-of-life as if they were at home. The privates turn to German girls, which brings them into contact with the population. They are no longer feared but envied for their better food and happier outlook.

The presence of the French and British is largely ignored, however, as it is clear that only two great powers determine Berlin's status. America means many things to the Berliners. It means relatives and friendly organizations that send food and clothing. It means coffee and cigarettes on the black market. It means work and sales. It means a hamburger with a GI in the *Titania Palast*, and well-filled garbage cans for the scavengers. For some it provides the unfounded hope for social solidarity and for a turn away from the present trend of totalitarianism and war. For others it means effective opposition to the East and the certainty of war. For most, however, America is only the other side of the coin which, however thrown and however it will fall, spells doom for Europe in general and for Berlin in particular.

Although deeply involved in Germany and Berlin, the occupation army knows how to keep its distance from the defeated. The isolation of the Americans is perhaps even more complete than that of the British. They live their American way-of-life in heavily guarded compounds, comprising large territories in pleasant natural settings. They have their own churches, schools, and kindergartens; their own movies, concerts, lectures, restaurants and stores. No German foot is to set there, except on missions of service. As distinct from the British, no program of austerity interferes with the Americans' pleasures. All less desirable activities are performed by Germans; Polish guards watch over them, their unbombed quarters are inaccessible to all but those with proper papers. Security has been developed both into a great art and a great science. To judge by the weapons displayed and by the red tape employed, the life of each American seems to be in constant danger. Even the *Fräuleins* need a "social pass" attesting to their physical health, which was in former times required only of prostitutes. From another view however, all this isolation seems not at all queer, for it corresponds to the division of rich and poor that sets up barriers everywhere. The Americans in Berlin may be looked upon as a kind of new bourgeoisie, more sharply divided from the slum-dwellers than the bourgeoisie of old.

Of course, business closes the gap; the coffee from the States must be sold, valuables which escaped the Russians must be bought, and the requirements of the elevated social position demand a great amount of German labor. But work is fantastically cheap. Prior to the currency reform the weekly pay for any category of work did not exceed the German Mark equivalent of ten American cigarettes, that is four cents, as the PX sells the carton for eighty cents.

Nevertheless, the USA feeds part of Berlin. The Americans never tire of pointing to their deliveries and to the fact that they themselves manage without German-produced foods. Like the nation as a whole, so her citizens separately feel like philanthropists, the more to be admired since it is the former enemy they benefit. The hungry beggars have no choice but to be grateful, and their excessive submissiveness supports the conqueror's illusion of generosity. But there is no Jove for the Americans. The block-busters are not forgotten. The Americans are preferred because of the crumbs that fall from their tables and because they are businesslike people. They buy where others steal, they sell where others give. And even

if the end-result – absolute impoverishment and complete exploitation – should be the same, the process to this end, in terms of personal experiences, seems not as terrible as the lawless past.

American generosity brings a bitter smile to the lips of the Berliner. He knows quite well what his rations are, and he knows the black market prices. His bitterness on this point, however, does not differ from his feelings toward his own countrymen, the farmer for instance, or toward the Displaced Persons and the Western businessmen who are engaged in black market activities. He cannot find any satisfaction in the thought that the black market must find its end as soon as Germany is emptied of all the valuables that still command a price on the world-market, for he needs the black market and is by necessity a part of it. The temporary black market depression in the wake of the currency-reform did not help the Berliners much, as the “cold war” prevented them from profiting by the farmers’ and store-keepers’ new confidence in the freshly printed money.

The smile released by the propaganda for Democracy, however has no bitterness at all. It can even turn into a hearty laugh if the question of the re-education of the Germans is raised. It is understood, to be sure, that an army is exempt from democracy, otherwise it could not be an army, and that an occupation army in particular cannot serve a lesson in democracy. It is rather the propaganda in newspaper, newsreel, and radio, that is found so amusing. Every word uttered in favor of democracy is at once contradicted by the facts of life. It is not the Nazi education of the past, having lost its dubious meaning long before the occupation, which explains the Berliners’ obvious reluctance to take the dealers in democracy seriously; it is the close resemblance of their present life to that under the Nazi dictatorship. Of course they are supposed to pay for their sins of the past before being allowed to enjoy the fullness of the democratic life. The propaganda merely contains the promise of rewards for present-day good behavior, just as the flesh-pots of the Nazis had to be earned first by countless sacrifices and terrible suffering. But for too long the Berliners have lived on promises, and no longer do they trust in words. They are not cynical and disillusioned, as the observers say; they are merely sick of phrases totally unrelated to their actual situation. They do not see a choice between democracy and dictatorship but merely hope for the lowest possible degree of the terroristic rule of which they have had so much.

It is found increasingly difficult to oppose the Nazi observation that power alone determines who is to rule and live, and who is to be ruled and destroyed. The anti-Nazi cannot help feeling that authoritarianism has survived the Nazi rule and that the difference between oppressor and liberator is rather small. Hate and disgust grows, and dissipates into despair. It cannot lead to a revival of nationalism, as the material base for the latter has been bombed away. To get out of the country, rather than to revive it, is the dream of its ambitious people. They are no longer able, however, to feel embarrassment over the long Nazi dictatorship, and they no longer brood over the atrocities committed. They have grown cold to all but their own misery; and to tell them, as is often done, that they “only got what they were asking for,” causes no anger but only tired gestures of resignation. Whatever they were and whatever they have done, just now they only desire to live and to be left alone.

V

The desire to be left alone has nothing to do with the current issues of self-government, national unity, Western federation, constitutions, or the color of flags. It simply means to be left out of all activities concerned with such matters. It is the desire to escape the manipulations of politicians, profiteers,

professional ideologists, and also the pressure of the enchanted minority defending traditional values. It is a vague longing for a new start, unaffected by the past, and an activity with no other issues than those of making bread and of eating it undisturbed. The desire is illusory but it indicates the prevailing state of mind. To be left alone implies also the wish to escape the war now in the making. The anti-war attitude is not based on theories but on direct experience in the bombed cities and on the battlefields of the world. They have learned to place life above all those considerations which are evoked in the justification of war. They are at any rate much too busy trying to keep alive, to be concerned with the larger problems of world politics. They do not really care about the changes of uniforms so long as they are able to use the night for sleep.

Sleep is important, undisturbed sleep of even greater importance, as the Berliners found out in the restless nights during the war. To go to bed with the careless assurance that they will rise again in the morning – this ordinary experience became the greatest desire of the bombed sleep walkers. To sleep without the constant fear of death meant more than victory or defeat. Sleep is not just the mind and body at rest, it shortens the days, it helps against the cold, it is a substitute for food, preserves energy, and is the hiding place of misery.

Food is another of the Berliners' great obsessions, and sleep overcomes it only partly and temporarily. The individual awake is the personification of hunger. His mind is occupied with food and the question how to get it. All other thoughts are secondary and rather meaningless as long as the primary need remains unsatisfied. The rationed food is no problem. It is so little, and is sold at stable prices, so that anyone who works can pay for it. The only question it arouses is whether to eat it all at once or to distribute it over the larger part of the week. The answer depends on the individual's connections on the black market and on his ability to pay its prices.

The search for food goes on relentlessly, in and outside of Berlin. For food anything expendable will be exchanged. For a few pounds of potatoes great hardships are endured; hours of standing in line for a railway ticket; the brutal rush for a front place at the gate; the struggle for a place inside the train or even for hanging on its sides; the dodging of the police, and the long marches from farm to farm. Whoever cannot leave the city is busy visiting the grocery stores and black market centers so as not to be late for the last delivery of bread or butter. They are always on the run for food, always asking for information about food, always excited about food, always thinking in terms of food, and all the while hungry to the bones.

There are many types of hunger, and the Berliners have experienced them all. There is the hunger for specific commodities that disappear in times of war. There is the desire for a balanced and pleasant diet, instead of stuffing the belly with whatever is on hand. There were the rations during the Hitler regime, which were seldom sufficient, and became hunger rations toward the end of the war. And then came the absolute hunger with the collapse of the distribution system during the siege of Berlin. To survive this period meant to eat whatever was found on the streets, in the ruins, and during frantic searches in abandoned stores. Wounded horses were ripped apart as soon as they had fallen. Most of the people turned butchers; like ant-heaps they hovered over the carcasses. They hunted for dogs and cats, picking from the asphalt what was red and bloody, even the innards of men blown to bits by artillery fire. Only to live through this ordeal, to be alive when the war was over, to enjoy once more a normal life, and to eat as much as one liked.

But the hunger remained; it was now organized and categorized. Former class divisions lost their meaning before the food-commissions, only to have their illegal comeback on the black market. The law made new classifications in terms of ration-cards with different numbers of calories, dividing the population into groups that were to live and function, Others that were to die off slowly, and still others destined to die quickly. The counting in calories may be good for the statistician and it may make easy the sociologist's comparative studies in living standards, but to the hungry it is merely the strangely expressed verdict determining their punishments down to the death-sentence. But the judges are not fair, the sentences are not clear. What does it mean, for instance, to speak of the calories of ten pounds of potatoes if half of them are inedible, or of the calory-content of one pound of sugar if half of it consists of an undefinable dust? What does the rationed meat mean, if week after week no meat at all reaches the market, or if it turns up in the form of ground intestines mixed with flour, or is substituted by a herring nobody knows how to fry for lack of fat?

Not even the highest ration covers human needs; it must be supplemented with black market food and self-raised garden products. All other categories are only names for various starvation levels. They not only create new classes but also split the families into feuding units. The permanence of hunger makes sharing impossible. All sociality disappears; everyone holds on to his own, or tries to hold on. Some eat their rations fast, others slowly; envy and hate develop merely by watching people eat. Some men ruin their health quickly so that their children may eat, others starve their wives and children to retain their own strength. Suspicion rules, extras are kept secret, food is eaten in hiding, dragged into a corner to be devoured in animal-fashion. People are nervous, ill-willed, ready to quarrel on the slightest pretext and more than often inclined to kill. Inequality within the setting of general want is the crudest form of inequality, the most corrupting, the ugliest, and the most vicious method of control.

If there were a sign that the hunger might end it would lose half of its terror. But the many years of repeated disappointments extinguished all hope. Even if the situation should change suddenly, the people would not believe in its permanence. They would merely eat themselves sick, would hoard what they could not get down, accumulate enormous quantities of food; it would take a long time before food would cease to be an obsession. Abundance, however, occurs only in their dreams; the recalling of the far-off past seems like a fairy-tale of well being. Lucky are the children born into this misery. They do not know about other than the meager rations, the substitutes, the skimmed milk if any, and the black dry bread. They do not know about candies, chocolates and fruits, and often refuse these strange things if they are offered to them. The world of hunger, cold, and want is the only world they know about. With their toes blue in the sharp wind, they run about laughingly like other children. With their bare feet in wooden soles they play their games undisturbed. Their carefree attitude misleads the well-fed visitors to consider the claims of misery to be grossly exaggerated. The doctors know differently, of course; they measure, weigh, and keep records and offer proof that these children are not like other children, for they weigh less, grow to lesser heights, and die sooner when sick.

The older children are realists in the world of hunger. Their early life belonged to Adolf Hitler; no other ideas but those of the Nazis entered their minds. No one contradicted their childish empty talk. Theirs was the future – supposedly. And then all this collapsed. What was good became bad, what was once laudable was now cursed; if no one dared to oppose their childish arrogance, now no one seemed to care for them at all. They were either a burden, or a source for additional food, which they gathered by becoming small-time operators on the black market. Some no longer had parents; others who had, no

longer cared for them. They needed help which no one could provide; so they tried to help themselves and sometimes they succeeded.

Disregarding the ever-present propaganda for the prevention of diseases, girls look for soldiers. They have been raped, why shouldn't they sell? What is all this talk about morals anyway? Of course, syphilis is not worth a pack of cigarettes. But neither is it good to be healthy and hungry. All is a gamble anyway, the good often die quicker than the bad. There is no love and no romance, it is all business on the barter level. There is little prostitution in the old sense of the word although there are still prostitutes around the *Alexanderplatz*. If enough buyers were at hand, prostitution would be general. Sex is a way of getting food as good as any other, and often the only way. The escapades of wife and daughter in search of food are disregarded; love completely disarmed, faces hunger.

The adolescents are frightfully realistic about the new relationship of hunger and love, of existence and sociality. No values other than material ones arouse their interest. They are practitioners of the empty life. The immediate personal gain in terms of things – edible, usable – is their only concern. Narrow-minded, without scruples, they turn their cold egotistical eyes upon the world of rubble in search for plunder left by the plunderers of yesterday. And since so little is left their selfishness is miserly; not even toward themselves do they know generosity. They calculate, count, ration, hoard, to secure their mere existence in spite of everything and everybody.

Hunger shows; it drives the smiles from the faces and tightens the skin on the bones. The flesh turns yellowish-brown and eyes sink into their sockets. There is an irritated tired look in the eyes, and sadness and anger around the mouth. The backs are bent and the steps are unsure as if in hesitation before the grave. When hunger comes, it appears publicly only in its early stages and in some cases not at all. Permanent hunger makes one indifferent, even to the self. The hungry hide like wounded animals in their caves. Starvation is not a street-sight; it doesn't offer itself to curious visitors. The people on the streets, and particularly on the still comfortable streets, frequented by the even more comfortable visitors, are still struggling against starvation with all the weapons at their command. If they are hungry, they rush about not to get hungrier. They still care about their appearance, dress up brush, wash and mend not to add moral humiliation to the physical dilemma. The starving rush no longer. They do not clutter the streets; they have no shoes to walk in and no reason to be seen. They stay at home, in their rooms, live in their beds, or in the wards of hospitals, apathetically awaiting either a miracle or death. Their peaceful withering away is the triumph of the rationing system. It is always a minority that succumbs first, to make room for another minority, recruited from the large mass of people lighting for their place in the majority. But in the end the various minorities represent a previous majority. This prospect, however, only intensifies the struggle for life and gives the hunger-obsession first place in the minds of the obsessed.

Note on the Text

Shortly after the end of the Second World War Paul Mattick renewed contacts and correspondence with his previous comrades from the German/Dutch or Council Communist current of the 30s.

One of these was Reinhold Klingenberg, whom Mattick had know personally from his youth and who – still living in Berlin – could tell many details from the actual scene of the German capital captured and managed by the

victorious Great Powers.

In 1948 Mattick himself managed to go to Europe and visit Berlin. There he met his old contacts and was able also to participate in some of the gatherings of the Group of International Socialists, GIS, around Alfred Weiland. From this trip he collected very detailed information about the situation in Berlin – information that was afterwards expressed and communicated in this article on the *Obsessions of Berlin*.

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