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The Trouble with Food in the GDR

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Mr. Peter Martin  
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Hanover, New Hampshire

Dear Peter:

Hungarians had so often complained about the food in the GDR (German Democratic Republic, i.e. East Germany) that I was prepared to find the food situation worse than it really is. Of course East Berlin is presented as the show window of the GDR, but on a recent survey that I made of the food stores there, they seemed to me to be almost as well stocked as Budapest stores. And certainly, the quantities of food available in East Berlin look good compared with other countries in eastern Europe.

I set out to visit food stores in the old working-class district of Prenzlauer Berg, a mile or so north from Alexander Platz, which is, more or less, the center of town, and in Pankow, one of the nicer residential areas in the northern part of the city. I find the outer districts to be a relief from the oppressive garrison atmosphere of East Berlin's center. The center, where most westerners visit, is built on such a grandiose scale, is so heavily policed and so dominated by the Wall that it feels more like a political statement than a real city. Everyday life seems to go on in a rather more normal way in the outlying districts. People seem less on guard and there aren't nearly as many men in uniform.

Prenzlauer Berg has been substantially rebuilt since the war, and food stores are plentiful and not too crowded. Although you'd be in sad shape if you set out looking for such exotica as tomatoes or lettuce this time of the year, the situation is better than what I found last April in Romania, in the sense that one needn't stand in line for the basic necessities. Fresh fruits and vegetables, though, are pretty much limited to what can be grown and stored within the GDR -- cabbage, potatoes, carrots, onions and apples,

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and a few other unidentifiable roots. Some green peppers and cucumbers have just arrived and Cuba is sending small, sad-looking oranges.

Agricultural imports from Cuba aren't confined to citrus. Because Cuba is considered a development responsibility of the CMEA (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance), both the GDR and Hungary import considerable quantities of cane sugar, even though they produce more than enough beet sugar for their own needs. However, they resell most of the cane sugar before they even take delivery.

Meat, especially pork, is plentiful, but not as high in quality, in my opinion, as is most Hungarian meat. Partly this is because of the way it's butchered. Nearly half of West Berlin's meat supply comes from the GDR, mostly live animals. But it looks better in West Berlin meat stores than it does in the East, because of the way the meat is trimmed. The meat you see in the windows in East Berlin is not always what you get, either. Everybody seems to have to take his share of the less desirable and fattier pieces. In a shop near the Hackeschen market, I tried to buy only the lean, but a woman standing next to me, who was amused by my attempt to get a replacement for the fat pork chop carefully tucked under the lean one, told me I'd never succeed. She was obviously an old hand there.

Although quite a bit of it is fat, East Germans' per capita meat consumption is high compared with most other countries--in 1982, consumption stood at 91 kilos per capita, per year, more than any of the other socialist (CMEA) countries and only a little lower than West Germany's consumption. The gap between the Germanies narrowed during the 1970's, when the GDR encouraged meat consumption by holding consumer prices constant and allowing incomes to rise. Even today, meat prices are the same as they were in 1970--8 East-Marks per kilo for the better cuts of pork.\*

Prices of all the basic foods, bread, milk, eggs, fats and oils, as well as meat, have remained the same for many years, so the average worker has been able to increase consumption without necessarily spending a higher proportion of his income on food. But people don't want just to eat more, they want to eat better, and this is a problem for socialist countries, including the GDR. Products designed to appeal to consumer tastes are a speciality of the West, not the East, so meeting demands for tastier and higher quality foods usually means more imports. Rather than allowing a black

\* At the official exchange rate, that is, 1 East German Mark= 1 West German Mark, that's about \$1.20 per pound, since the West-Mark is now worth about one-third of a dollar. At a more realistic exchange rate, calculated using the East German Mark's relationship to the Hungarian Forint, and the Forint's relationship to the dollar, the figure is closer to 45¢ per pound.

market for these goods to emerge, the GDR has tried to deal with the problem directly, by setting up special stores that sell imported products at high East-Mark prices.

At the "Delikats", you can buy tea, coffee, candies, liquors and imported canned goods, such as peaches from China, canned fish from Denmark, and even kangaroo-tail soup, presumably from the Australians, who must feel pretty good about finding this market. It's in the Delikats that you often have to wait in line to buy food, even though everything is quite expensive; for example, a bottle of Cognac may sell for more than 100 East-Marks. This means that a worker would pay almost ten percent of his monthly income for such a luxury. Judging by the crowds who are willing to pay these higher prices though, these stores are obviously sopping up a lot of excess purchasing power.

The state has also tried to provide an outlet for people to spend any hard currency, i.e. U.S. Dollars or West German Marks, which they've acquired from relatives in the West, or by other means. In the "Intershops", which take only western currency, the state sells everything from televisions to frozen pizzas, all imported into the GDR. The crowds of shoppers in these Intershops are even bigger than in the Delikats, especially in the evenings after work hours. I've seen hard-currency shops in many other parts of eastern Europe, but these are the only ones I've seen that have expanded into selling foods like ice cream and frozen green beans.

I found myself wondering how the state reconciles its ideological commitment to building an independent socialist society with the practical decision to provide capitalist ice cream for people who can come up with the West German Marks or U.S. Dollars to pay for it. It's not as though the GDR doesn't produce and sell ice cream or frozen green beans; I saw them in nearly all of the larger food stores I visited. They're apparently not up to western quality though, or people wouldn't be snapping up the food products in the Intershops.

The primary purpose of these Intershops, however, is not to keep consumers happy, but to get Dollars and Marks into the hands of the state. The GDR, like most other East European countries, badly needs western currency. The Federal Republic and West Berlin are major sources of hard currency because of the sizable remittances from relatives, from trade, and government-to-government payments. Remittances from relatives are partially recouped in the Intershops. Further, food and agriculture are important in the trade and government payments.

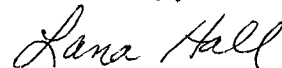
The GDR sells a number of agricultural products to the West Germans, especially to West Berlin because of its location. West Berlin relies on the GDR to supply not only meat but also significant quantities of poultry and eggs. It also must rely on the GDR to handle garbage and sewage disposal,

payments for which constitute another source of hard currency for the GDR. The waste products themselves are said, after processing, to add a valuable asset to the GDR's agriculture.

Trade with West Germany is also important--the Federal Republic is the GDR's third largest trading partner, after the U.S.S.R. and Czechoslovakia. Before the war, the region around Halle, which is now in the GDR, supplied barley to Munich's breweries. This commercial linkage continues today. The GDR also ships significant quantities of rye and wheat, estimated this year at around 109,000 metric tons, to the Federal Republic for use in making bread.

Obviously, the GDR can produce and sell raw agricultural products that meet western quality standards. But judging by the lines in the Delikats and Intershops, they haven't themselves developed the ability or motivation to process these products into foods that their own consumers really want.

Sincerely,



Lana L. Hall

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