

The East in the West

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An East German woman as Chancellor? The West Germans would vote for her. She is not exactly being met with a wave of enthusiasm in the new, eastern states. She embodies change – and people there have had enough of change.

The process of German unification is littered with promises that were not fulfilled. The phrase “flourishing landscapes” has become the epitome of West German promises and East German disappointment. If, with Angela Merkel, suddenly what was never promised came true, it would not be well received in the East. The East is seeking continuity, not new transitions.

That is the undertone speaking out of all the interviews that Lisa Strömbeck conducted with twenty East Germans before Angela Merkel ever appeared on the horizon as a candidate for Chancellor. The artist chose eight interviews to braid a chain of life stories of two actors, an undertaker, an engineer, a photo lab employee, a journalist, a radio director, and a Russian teacher under the title *“It wasn’t all bad.” From Socialism to Capitalism – Eight stories of former East German citizens.*

The interviewees are all more than 50 years old.

It is a long way to the East’s political equality in the West, so the montage of interviews is a document of futility describing the difficult German-German relationship with a melancholy undertone.

Lisa Strömbeck’s interviewees and their statements give a feeling why, fifteen years after the fall of communism, the old, post-communist Party of Democratic Socialism is able to push forward into unknown dimensions as a “new” leftist party and, according to current surveys, to swell to the size of a major party. Right now we are hearing again: “It wasn’t all bad,” because the interviewees may not be among the clear losers, but feel they belong to a milieu that has not been blessed with extraordinary successes.

Viewed by the light of day, the reconstruction of the East has been one big disaster, especially for the West, whose economic engine is groaning under the burden of unification. The fundamental data pulverize the attractive appearance. East Germany stands in worse contrast to the West than the Mezzogiorno to Northern Italy; the value-added quota is stagnating at 63 percent; unemployment at 20 percent; in the majority of cities, the State and the labor office are the biggest employers; 77 percent of all 25-year-olds are willing to resettle in the West – so a publicly funded home for the aged is on the horizon.

Again and again since 1990, on all levels, the East Germans have demanded equality.

They have only partially gained a hearing.

When some of them have proven themselves equal – and there are examples of this, especially among artists and intellectuals – it seems to meet skepticism. The East secretly and extensively cultivates its inferiority. Those who bid farewell to that, bid farewell to the Eastern collectivity. Is that it? Of course it is justified to remind the West of the failings of recent decades: the economic plight, the general paralysis of reforms, the lack of respect for many an Eastern biography. Protest has been popular in the new eastern states since people experienced the other side of unification.

Until the transformation began to hurt, many did not realize, not only that reality necessarily failed to

meet the expectations, but also that the new means a constant farewell. The yearned-for West came like a tide over the country, washing away everything they knew. Many experienced this overwhelming newness as a confiscation. In the existential shadow of this process, the communist Socialist Unity Party managed to transform itself into a protest party with an imaginary homeland-protection function. The Western dominance of the new era guaranteed the party's success. The disappointed had little difficulty portraying unification as subjugation, precisely because this so tightly interwove the obviously true with the hypocritical.

Indignant (Western) reactions have only spurred on this often self-satisfied mentality of victimization. The movement against the "Hartz" consolidation of welfare and unemployment administration and benefits, which evaporated in the summer of 2004, has reappeared in the old-new leftist party's ascent in the public opinion polls. But is it any wonder? Someone who has endured in just a few years the revolution of all living conditions must experience the Hartz Laws as the epitome of socially hard-hearted policy and can't help retrogressively making the former East Germany seem better than it was.

For a change for the better, the citizens of East Germany had to literally let go of everything their lives had been up till then. So Lisa Strömbeck sees them as the avant-garde in terms of willingness to change. She manages to define "Eastness" in an unaccustomed way. The experience of transformation that is beginning to stiffen some Easterners' resolve for reform could become the biographical starting point for a new self-confidence. These people don't want to be seen as mere endurers of the great changes, but as active protagonists in the reform process. Not a simple matter. After fifteen years of change, most East Germans want to finally see light at the end of the tunnel: security, jobs, calculable prospects in life.

Lisa Strömbeck's interconnections between destinies promise nothing, but they build confidence, even if the interviewees sometimes struggle for diametrically opposed perspectives on reality.

Where the one would like to convert the East Germans' overwhelming experience into forward-looking energy, the other sees in it only the source of the protest.

The disillusionment in the East is nearly universal. Nothing has been so destroyed in recent years as the trust in a second great change. The artist has understood this.

It remains to hope that a spark of hope can jump from her understanding to her public.

Deeply moved by the fates of those she could speak with, Lisa Strömbeck plans two more interview projects: one with people who, often with an unbroken German Communist Party tradition, resolved to resettle in East Germany after the Berlin Wall was built; the other with German communists who, seemingly untouched by all external changes, unshakably defend their convictions.

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