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Germany's East and West: Still Hostile States of Mind

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By ROGER COHEN

FRANKFURT AN DER ODER, Germany -- Four years ago, Gabriela Mendling came here to Germany's "Far East." She trawled streets with names like Salvador Allende and Karl Marx in search of a home.

A physiotherapist, she searched vainly for a job. She observed, she listened, in growing amazement. Finally she decided to write -- and the storm broke.

Suddenly she was the most hated "Wessi," or westerner, in town. Her car was sprayed with paint. Her husband's Mercedes was scratched. Her son was taunted at school. Threatening phone calls poured in. "A simple-minded racist," says Henry-Martin Klemm, a local writer. For Peter Edelmann, the Deputy Mayor, "She is a liar."

The source of Ms. Mendling's notoriety is a book called "Neuland" ("New Land"), published this summer. Its subtitle is "Very Simple Stories"; it is scarcely profound.

But its daily chronicle of the difficulties of a west German woman adapting to the formerly Communist east does bring the problems of German unity down to basics.

Such basics include lasagna -- poked at suspiciously by "Ossis," or easterners, clearly new to the dish that Ms. Mendling has prepared. And Christmas carols: there are none at the Christmas gala in the city hall. And attitudes: Ms. Mendling finds she is treated with contempt as a "Wessi" seeking a job while so many "Ossis" are unemployed.

When the Berlin wall came down a decade ago, east German demonstrators quickly adjusted their chant from "We are the people" to "We are one people."

The cry had a ring to it, but as Ms. Mendling has found, it was an illusion. While the economies of east and west have moved closer, a psychological gulf has remained -- even widened.

More than 40 percent of west Germans have never traveled to the former east, recent surveys indicate.

At the same time, "Ostalgie" -- nostalgia for the old East Germany -- has spread among the former citizens of what was probably the most spied-on state in history, with its 6 million state security files for 17 million inhabitants.

The nostalgia is rarely so acute as to involve a desire for the return of Germany's little police state, but equally it is seldom entirely absent.

Memory, of course, is selective, and what is remembered now is this: there were jobs for everyone, even if they did not amount to much, time for friendships and a sense of solidarity, of community, of a life beyond "me."

Even the Communist bicycles (when available) were more solid, some say. And the free day care centers were wonderful.

As for the state security service, known as the Stasi, with its 125 miles of stacked-up files and its informers in just about every family, it has gone, as completely as the "Anti-Fascist Protective Rampart," or wall. So it is natural enough to dwell on the aggressivity of the "elbow society" in the West, rather than the oppression of East German society.

"I have always felt I was the focus of every disappointment with the West, right down to the better wheelbarrows they say they had before," said Ms. Mendling, a clear-eyed woman seemingly far too mild to have emerged as the ogre on the Oder. "From the start I was a foreigner, and intolerance of foreigners in the east is unbelievable."

That intolerance, expressed in the rise of far-right fringe movements, appears rooted in a deep frustration. Unlike Poles or Hungarians, East Germans were

not able to reshape a post-Communist state themselves. Rather, their country was taken over by West Germany -- "a second Anschluss," as Günter Grass, the winner of this year's Nobel Prize for Literature, put it, recalling the annexation of Austria by Nazi troops in 1938.

That formulation is an extreme one. No army marched into East Berlin, and there is nothing inherently sinister about a united Germany. But the takeover -- of industry, of education, of the welfare system -- was sweeping, leaving many east Germans today with the sense that whatever was good about their society was tossed out with the bad.

"The notion of a 'third way,' of a better socialist society, got lost in all of Helmut Kohl's euphoria about blooming landscapes in the east," said Elmar Brähler, a professor at Leipzig University. "Well, the blooms came late if at all, and many east Germans simply found themselves feeling inferior in an unfamiliar system."

Ms. Mendling decided to pack her bags and move from the Ruhr town of Wuppertal in the west after her husband, a gynecologist, was offered a top job at the hospital in this eastern town in 1995. Her great-grandmother hailed from Prussia; the eastern part of Germany held a strong appeal for her.

But as the experiences of her fictional alter ego, Frau Hitzig, illustrate, the reception on the Polish border, in a town with few other "Wessis," is scarcely heartwarming. The director of one physiotherapy center obliges her to take a course "so you will adapt to our collective," but even then she does not get a job.

As a "Wessi" in a town with an 18.6 percent unemployment rate, she soon concludes that she should not expect work. After all, as she is repeatedly told, an electronics plant that once provided state-of-the-art components to Communist Bulgaria has been closed with the loss of almost 8,000 jobs.

The book hammers away at people with funny accents -- they all say "ick" instead of "ich" (pronounced ISCH) for "I" and pronounce "g" as if it were "j" -- and at the funny things they seem to do, like half-fixing a toilet before leaving a bucket to serve until the repair is completed three weeks later.

Still, Frau Hitzig tries to get involved in the community. Preparing a party, she goes to buy wine, but finds only sweet Bulgarian or Hungarian plonk and is met with incredulity when she requests a dry French wine. "You're the first customer to ask for it," says a shopkeeper who apparently hopes she will also be the last.

A pre-Christmas party for spouses of doctors at her husband's hospital turns into a fiasco. Until the last moment, invitations for a meal at a pizzeria are not answered. Then nobody seems to know what to order, until Frau Hitzig asks for a vegetarian pizza and all the guests, sheep-like, follow suit as if vegetarian pizza were the new official doctrine.

When conversation does strike up at last, it turns unpleasant as one woman, a doctor herself, says she could never bring herself to harass privately insured patients to pay their bills, as "they do in the west without batting an eye."

Frau Hitzig cannot restrain herself: "Do you really think everyone in the west is an unscrupulous exploiter?"

Ms. Mendling says everything related in the book is true. Indeed, it began as a series of letters relating her experiences to a friend in Wuppertal. "When I realized Ossis and Wessis were growing further apart, I had to illustrate that," she said.

The book, published with a modest first printing of 1,500 copies, caused little stir until two local writers -- Hans-Joachim Nauschutz and Klemt -- came across it and were outraged. Nauschutz called for a boycott of the book, and Klemt published a poem in a local paper parodying Ms. Mendling's view of the primitive "Ossi."

The poem begins:

I am a strange hard Eastman. I smoke on the toilet, I eat with a hammer and sickle and drive a convertible made from a Russian tank and an old MIG. I am a strange hard Eastman, I have a dirty look. It continues:

I am a strange hard Eastman. I wear a bear skin and play the balalaika until the first morning light. Then I go hunting for Wessis, and if you come close to me -- I am a strange hard Eastman -- you'll die in the Taiga.

After the poem appeared, the anti-Mendling campaign began in earnest. Her 12-year-old son was regularly mocked at school as a "Wessi-idiot." Neighbors refused to look at her.

A pamphlet was circulated at her husband's hospital advertising "a basic course on the use of knives and forks for beginners offered by the wonderful Gabriela Mendling (specially imported from the West)."

Klemt said the problem with the book was that it was stupid and racist.

"To treat another culture as intrinsically inferior to yours is a form of racism," he argued. "She speaks high German, and everyone else speaks slang. She eats right, and everyone else eats wrong. She dresses well, and everyone else looks like an idiot."

What Ms. Mendling failed to grasp or illustrate, he said, were the roots of the attitudes in a place like Frankfurt an der Oder. Of course, jobs were lost. But what was lost was more than jobs, because in East Germany employment also brought free theater tickets, a vacation spot, social events -- indeed the entire framework of the Communist good life.

So people feel lost, faced suddenly with responsibilities they were not educated to assume, exposed to newcomers jetting in to buy up things or run them before jetting out again for the weekend, unable to orient themselves in a society based on risk and achievement rather than security and conformity.

"And people with narrow horizons who cannot solve their problems look for their Jew, or their Turk -- or their Wessi," Klemt said. "That is stupidity, and Ms. Mendling has been a victim of it in these attacks on family. I am against these attacks, of course, but I also loathe her dumb superiority."

The furor over the book, featured recently on German television, has boosted sales, and it is now in its fifth printing. Ms. Mendling, who used the pseudonym of Luise Endlich for "Neuland," says the spraying of her car and taunting of her son only confirmed that "this is a place with many primitive attitudes."

The author intends to stay to see if this town on the Oder will change and whether the new buildings now sprouting are accompanied "by the more critical changes in people's heads."

But perhaps part of Germany's problem is that the changes westerners expect are not necessarily those that easterners want.

"I am not against unity," Klemt said, "but the cost was high. I still have the dream of a new solution, a different way, with social justice. Today I have freedom and a nice apartment, but I work too much, sleep too little and feel that a slower life is more in tune with our basic human instincts."



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