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BULGARIA

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| <u>MORALE AND GENERAL MOOD</u> | /2000/ |
| Political Situation | /2004/ |
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A GERMAN BUSINESSMAN ON HIS EXPERIENCES AND
IMPRESSIONS AT THE PLOVDIV FAIR

SOURCE FRANKFURT: A German businessman who attended the 1955 and 1956 PLOVDIV Fairs as a sales representative of a large German refrigerator plant.

DATE OF OBSERVATION: September 1956.

EVALUATION COMMENT: This report describes in part but correctly the organization and quality of Bulgarian exhibits at the PLOVDIV Fair. Source's observations on the internal situation and the political line followed by the BCP are correct.

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About Export Business.

As a result of their PLOVDIV experiences in 1955, it was only after mature consideration of all pros and cons that the management of this refrigerator plant decided to participate in the 1956 Fair, and then not in expectation of important business deals to be concluded, but for reasons of prestige. Bulgaria was a traditional pre-war market outlet for the sale of this plant's goods and, with future economic developments in mind, the PLOVDIV Fair is considered an opportunity to keep the plant's name, its production program, and its capacity in Bulgarian consumers' minds.

The post-war PLOVDIV Fairs turned out to be of absolutely no business success for this plant, since the little profit yielded by a greatly limited export of goods did not make up for the enormous expenditures involved in the participation of the Fairs. The high expenditures were caused by the arbitrarily

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fixed official exchange rate of 1,5 leva for 1 DM. Bureaucratic formalities in the issuance of import licenses and complicated payment provisions with prices established on a ruble basis to be paid via the Soviet State Bank in MOSCOW cause further difficulties in the export business to Bulgaria. Other plants must have had the same experience in 1955, because the number of West German firms privately exhibiting their goods in PLOVDIV in 1956 had greatly decreased. Only those Western plants which produce special types of machinery urgently needed by new Bulgarian industries may have concluded profitable deals. Other deals with a fair chance of success were those concluded by export-import firms on a compensation basis within the provisions of the German-Bulgarian trade agreement: German machinery against Bulgarian agricultural products, tobacco and leatherware.

For refrigerators, which are considered a luxury in Bulgaria, import licenses are almost impossible to obtain by interested Bulgarian parties, especially since Bulgarian industry is now making its own refrigerators this year. These Bulgarian models, as inspected by source at the Fair, cannot compete with Western products because of their poor quality and primitive look, although the models exhibited were specially prepared showpieces with much extra trimming. The preparation of special exhibition goods must be common in Bulgaria, since Bulgarian trade functionaries always seemed to be greatly astonished when being told that Western products exhibited were normal mass production articles and did not differ at all from those sold to all customers. Source was able to talk to two owners of Bulgarian refrigerators and learned that their models had broken down after a few days and needed expensive repair jobs.

Another motive for the participation of this firm in the PLOVDIV Fair was the maintenance of contacts with its pre-war Bulgarian sales agents. These businessmen, one time well-off, are now considered former capitalists and have to do hard manual labor at wages which do not cover the most primitive necessities of life. The plant management, therefore, takes advantage of the Fairs and sends its representatives to these faithful people in order to assist them with some kind of support. Source talked to these men and learned that a high unemployment rate in Bulgaria makes it difficult for some of them to find a job at all.

Security Measures, as Recognized by Foreign Visitors

Border police and customs officials at the border were extremely courteous and correct; in most cases they even refrained from checking the baggage of foreign visitors to the Fair. This did not mean that security measures were neglected;

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on the contrary, source was under the impression that all foreign visitors were constantly shadowed by secret police agents in PLOVDIV. Being in PLOVDIV for the second time within a year, source noticed the same plainclothes men as in 1955, acting as officials at the Fair or, most frequently, as official interpreters. Such "interpreters" were posted at various foreign stands in such a manner that each of them could take care of /and watch/ several stands, although the services of an interpreter were neither requested by the foreign stand owners in question, nor were such services necessary, because all Bulgarian business men /functionaries of the State trade organization/ spoke fluent German. Protests of foreigners against having these "watchdogs" constantly posted in their stands remained fruitless. They did not even get rid of them at night, because right after business hours the same characters showed up wherever foreign visitors used to spend their free time, in the lobbies of the few hotels, in cafeterias, or in public restaurants. Their behavior did not leave anything in doubt about their real profession, and they displayed such blunt manners and employed such primitive tactics in carrying out their mission that source and some of his business friends took the habit of exposing these "guardians of the people's security" to ridicule by ironic remarks. These disguised policemen did not even show embarrassment when being addressed as "Commissary" or as "Porter" /in the hotel,/ or when foreigners ostentatiously approached them in the hotel lobby checking in our out ^{with} exaggerated courteousness. Their utmost endeavor in trying to overhear occasional conversations of foreigners with Bulgarian civilians became near to burlesque and gave occasion to great fun and many jokes. All such attempts, naturally, failed completely, as all Bulgarians to whom source talked must have had such thorough experience in being constantly alert against police spies that they recognized suspicious characters at first glance and took all necessary precautions in time.

Heavy militia forces must have been concentrated in PLOVDIV during the weeks of the Fair, because patrols with tommy guns were to be observed at almost every atreet corner. A big military parade on a national holiday in the middle of September was given by the authorities as the excuse of the presence of tanks in the city. Source observed tanks driving in the streets several times and heard their rumble almost every night.

Poor Accommodation and Services for Foreign Visitors

Even in consideration of the fact that foreign visitors enjoyed great privilege in regard to quarters, food services, and treatment by the authorities, a three-week stay in PLOVDIV is absolutely no pleasure for a Westerner. It is certainly a nuisance if the water in the hotel is cut off at the very moment when you are going to take shower in order to

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wash the lather off yourbody, as it once happened to source. And an interruption of the water supply lasting up to three consecutive days at temperatures of between 40 and 45 centigrades may still be borne with patience by people who have been used to such conditions for years, but it will certainly not help make Western visitors feel very happy. The service in public restaurants also leaves much to be desired. After having given their orders, Fair visitors had to wait for at least one hour, sometimes also for two hours until some surly waiter served them old steaks and lukewarm beer. Having had such experiences in so-called first class establishments especially fixed up for the Fair and almost exclusively frequented by foreign visitors because of the extremely high prices, source was no longer curious to see more popular places in town where he would have been able to meet average Bulgarians.

The "Hotel Stalingrad," at which source stayed was normally used as a students home. In September of each year the students had to move out, and the building was renovated and equipped with hotel furniture to house foreign visitors to the Fair. Nevertheless, it gave an impression of being greatly neglected, with dirty floors and tablecloths, worn out upholstery, missing light bulbs and the like. Telegrams of customers handed to the porter for dispatching reached the post office only with incredible delay, source personally experienced one case when his telegram was held back in the hotel for thirty hours.

Source's Impressions of Everyday Life

Source could not notice any improvements of the general living standard since 1955. People were still as shabbily dressed, and they still observed Western consumer goods, exhibited with the same naive astonishment. According to what source heard from his firm's former Bulgarian sales agents, people in Bulgaria live in great poverty because of the immense discrepancy between earnings and prices. An average worker does not make more than 600 leva per month and has to pay 250 leva for a pair of shoes and at least 1,200 leva for a ready-made suit for poor quality. A cup of coffee costs eight leva, and dinner at a restaurant for foreigners amounts to 30 leva, without being of de-luxe style.

Only farmers seem to be a little better off. Among the crowds of people shepherded to the Fair every day, farmers, easily to be recognized as such, gave the best impression in regard to neat clothing and general appearance. From his Bulgarian friends source heard that most farm people live more or less on a basis of self-sufficiency, not only with respect to food production, but also as far as their clothing is concerned, as

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they wear homespun linen and homespun wool and do all the tailoring and dressmaking themselves. Communist functionaries of the Bulgarian trade organization told source that most farmers have so far successfully resisted /sic/ collectivization.

Most amazing to source was the fact that no debunking of the STALIN cult apparently had taken place in Bulgaria as of September 1956, since the walls of all offices, hotel lobbies, and public institutions were still plastered with STALIN pictures as in 1955. These observations were in line with information obtained through his Bulgarian friends, who told source that there was no easing of the general situation to be observed in Bulgaria, but that oppression of personal freedom was continuing the same as before. This was easily recognizable even to an occasional visitor not familiar with the conditions in Communist countries. People still felt continuously watched by secret police and were greatly afraid to talk freely about political subjects because they were living in constant fear of denunciation. This atmosphere of fright and the immense distress of people contribute in source's opinion most to make Westerners feel unhappy in Bulgaria, even more than the lack of comfort and the primitive accommodation and services.

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