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The Motives of Ethnic German Remigrants [*Spätaussiedler*] (June 15, 1989)

In the late 1980s, massive numbers of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe seized the opportunity offered by the policies of glasnost and perestroika and returned to the land of their forefathers, where they hoped to build better lives. Here, a West German journalist talks with some of those remigrants.

“Thanks to Gorbachev we were allowed out”

The wave of ethnic Germans settling in the Federal Republic of Germany continues; it is presently larger than ever before. In the first five months of this year alone, 121,619 ethnic Germans came to West Germany [from Eastern Europe]. Since January 1, 1989, North Rhine-Westphalia's state center for ethnic German remigrants, other immigrants, and foreign refugees, located in Unna-Massen near Dortmund, has admitted roughly 32,000 Polish remigrants (the total for 1988 was 47,310) and almost 10,000 ethnic Germans from the Soviet Union (16,229 in 1988). The spike in GDR resettlers is even more pronounced. In the first five months of this year, as many came as in all of 1988.

In view of this influx, center director Fritz Wiegand and his staff are faced with a mountain of problems and work. In addition, thousands of written proceedings from the past year still have to be processed. “A lot of documents are missing,” says Wiegand. “A lot of things started piling up as early as 1988 on account of the onslaught.”

He emphatically remarked that freedom of movement still applies to ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe. “Anyone can move to his or her desired place of residence. In practice, however, we have had good experiences in the matter of advising and persuading remigrants. Most are reasonable enough not to insist on completely overcrowded dream destinations such as Espelkamp or Detmold as their future place of residence, just because they have friends or relatives there or because there are Mennonite or Baptist churches.”

The ethnic Germans from Poland continue to be mostly from the younger generations, and they only rarely speak German. Elderly people and large families with children account for most of those coming from the USSR. An older couple from a small town in the Ukraine petitioned to leave the country five times and had to wait ten years to do so. “We have only Gorbachev's policies to thank for our departure,” said the husband and wife, almost simultaneously. “But

Gorbachev is having a hard time of it. Bureaucrats and party functionaries are opposed to perestroika and glasnost, but the common people support Gorbachev in his reform efforts.”

The couple will be moving to Bochum. “We didn’t list any desired destination,” said the wife. “But we were advised to go to Bochum, since housing and work are supposedly available there.” The couple oscillates between sadness and happiness. After filing their petition, the husband lost his job as a bus driver and driving instructor; then they not only had to leave Ukraine but also say goodbye to their two adult sons. “We hope they’ll join us soon.”

Why did they want to leave in the first place? “Germans should live on German soil,” the wife responded with shining eyes. How do they envision their future? “We want to live and work in peace,” answered her husband. “And show our thanks to the FRG.”

The wave of ethnic German remigrants from Romania is small at the moment. Only a good 600 people left Ceausescu’s empire in the first five months of this year. Things went quickly for the Ziegler family from Transylvania once they filed their application. “We were allowed to leave only four months and twenty days later,” explained the father, Johann Ziegler (47). “We’ll be moving in with my sister in Wuppertal. My mother also filed shortly before we left . . . ”

He and his wife Gerda (47) were accompanied by their daughter Gerda (18) and son Albert (22). “No, in Kleinkopisch [Copsa Mica] and its environs there is no evidence of systematization, the euphemistic name that the communists in Bucharest have for the destruction of villages,” said Ziegler in response to a corresponding question. He also said no when asked if he lost his job as a carpenter after filing his application to leave.

The whole family speaks perfect German. “Learned it at home and in the elementary school in Kleinkopisch,” explained Gerda. She attended an academic high school ten kilometers away in Medias. There was no longer a Protestant pastor in town, but there were still two German-language newspapers. “And we’re allowed to listen to German radio stations,” she added. “But listening to Radio Free Europe is strictly prohibited.”

Ziegler shook his head when asked about food shortages, gasoline shortages, and cold apartments. “We had our own house,” he explained, “so we could keep chickens and two pigs. The pigs were slaughtered on Christmas, and that was enough meat for the whole year. Sugar, flour, oil, meat, and bread were rationed. Up to 30 liters of gasoline was available per month, but we didn’t have a car. . . . And our home was warm. We heated it with natural gas.”

The Zieglers are not worried about finding work and a place to live. “I’m looking for work,” said mother Gerda. “And I’ll take whatever is available, no matter what.” Father Johann is also confident that he will find work in construction. And daughter Gerda has firm plans: “First, I’ll finish secondary school and take the college entrance qualification exam.”

Source: Walter H. Rueb, "Thanks to Gorbachev we were allowed out" ["Dank Gorbatschow durften wir raus"], *Die Welt*, June 15, 1989.

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