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Interview with an East German Environmental Initiative in Schwerin (1980)

Acting under the auspices of the Protestant Churches, East German youths began to address environmental problems by planting trees, creating discussion circles within official organizations, and exploring alternative lifestyles to live healthier and freer lives in spaces that were gradually opening within the SED-dictatorship.

It's about More than Planting Trees . . .

Question: You're a group of young people who've been especially engaged with environmental problems in the past and who've also taken some concrete action in this area. A while ago you organized a so-called tree-planting action. What did you do there?

Answer: The idea for a tree-planting action originated in 1979; it grew mostly out of our basic stance, but also out of our sense of Christian responsibility toward the environment. We started organizing this action together with a state-owned company in Schwerin, the VEB Grünanlagen [Parks]. It's one of the companies that we, as a church youth group, had already built up good contacts with. We had our first tree-planting action in Schwerin in November 1979. We planted about 5,000 shrubs and trees along a new streetcar line that runs into the industrial complex near Schwerin. We gave these barren slopes a green landscaping. Our goal – and this is one of the ideas out of which this tree-planting action grew – was not just to talk a lot and complain about [the lack of] environmental protection, about how bad everything is, etc., but to do something about it. We're not just complaining about the fact that so many trees get cut down, that so many are dying from toxins, that so many get damaged; rather, we're planting new ones.

[. . .]

Question: What problems [have you dealt with]?

Answer: For example, in the district of Schwerin, problems relating to sewage treatment and disposal play a special role. It's a big problem. Not all of the sewage is treated; it's released into the environment filled with pollutants. We've also dealt with the powerful chemical fertilizers used in agriculture – to what extent this will cause problems in coming years, also with respect to yields or in the discussion on monocultures, which we have here. So those were some of the main points.

[. . .]

The following Sunday we held a service, together with a pastor from our city. It was a beautiful service, with some acted scenes, a lot of music, and then the symbolic planting of a tree that we'd received as a gift from VEB Grünanlagen. The company had given it to us as a thank you, and we planted it in front of the church in Lankow, a district in Schwerin, as a symbol of life and the preservation of nature. This first tree-planting action had a very positive resonance, also in other parts of the GDR, so we decided to organize a second one, which took place in March 1980, this time with 100 participants, whereas the first one only had about fifty.

Question: Who else came?

Answer: It was mostly young people from many other cities, also from circles outside the church, that is, young people we know from the city and who we brought with us.

[. . .]

Question: Where do you think environmental protections measures are most urgently needed?

Answer: The most important thing, as a prerequisite for measures to protect the environment, is to promote an environmental consciousness among young people, an awareness that the environment should be treated properly, that we should simply avoid certain conveniences that we have or things that we do in everyday life that harm the environment – things that no one even gets upset about anymore. Another step would be further actions like this tree-planting one, which can set a simple example of environmental restoration. Also, the state has founded the Society for Nature and the Environment, as part of the Cultural Association, and through this organization it is possible to file a complaint about environmental mistakes that were made or problems that exist, and to try to prevent or correct them.

[. . .]

Question: Is there also a dialogue on this subject with other, non-Christian, young people, with the FDJ groups, the Free German Youth, for example?

Answer: Yes, that happens automatically. A lot of us are also in the FDJ. We're called on to talk about it there. But not only there, because it is also true that not even all young Christians have an environmental awareness. Even within our own ranks we have to talk openly about the issues, about what kinds of problems exist, and get people to listen. In the FDJ groups that we know, it's possible to talk about it, but it isn't possible to follow it up with concrete actions because the consciousness just isn't there yet. At our school as well, the state argues that it's more important for young people to understand the need to build up an economy with maximum production, or to place this need above protecting the environment.

[. . .]

Question: Environmental problems were among the subjects discussed at the council meeting of the Mecklenburg state church in the spring of 1980. A resolution stated that in the GDR it is necessary to speak about the possibilities and risks entailed by the peaceful use of nuclear energy. Is nuclear power a subject in your groups?

Answer: Yes, it's a subject over which there is a lot of speculation, but unfortunately very little information is available, because up to now youths have had no access to scientific accounts. Some of us know which books are available in the FRG, for example, and these can help young

people form an opinion about what and where the dangers really are. Here, however, many, many people just don't have a clear idea. So it isn't so easy to simply say we're opposed to nuclear power or we're for it. Most, or at least many, are for it because we simply need energy; that's a very simple argument. Some church representatives are extremely worried about the whole thing. And there are some young people in the GDR who reject nuclear power for now or at the present stage, when it's said that different power plants don't have sufficient safety regulations. For instance, right now construction has been stopped at the new power plant being built along the Elbe. No one knows why, and nowhere is anything official said about it by the state. And so rumors start to spread among the youth about questions relating to nuclear power. We're worried about the whole thing and people are talking about it. But the most important thing is that we don't have any information about where the dangers are and what the problem is with nuclear energy and what effect it has on us.

Question: Another question pertains to the so-called alternative lifestyle, which is directly related to environmental issues and the future. To what extent are you concerned with this?

Answer: That's another thing that we talk about, but as a whole only very few young people have really dealt with it. In our conceptions, an alternative lifestyle is marked primarily by an environmentally conscious approach to living. We have a very clear understanding of the alternative movement in the FRG, and we also know young people and young adults who are trying to live that in the GDR. But we think that in the GDR these people are living in great isolation.

[. . .]

Question: How do the state authorities react to your environmental protection work? Do they welcome it? Are they suspicious of it?

Answer: What we don't want – and that needs to be made very clear – is to become something comparable to the Greens in the Federal Republic, or to work in that direction. And still, people were initially very critical here. For us, the main thing was not to challenge the state politically, but to do something for the environment, and that's why there been no major conflicts between state institutions and us. We ourselves are a self-supporting group; we have no full-time church staff. So we had to clarify that kind of question among ourselves or with the help of the church. The church supported us in these actions, but in the end we made all the preparations ourselves, and got involved on our own, so we had to deal with the consequences ourselves.

Source: "Es geht um mehr als Bäume pflanzen. Interview mit einer Schweriner Umweltinitiative" ["It's about More than Planting Trees. Interview with an Environmental Initiative in Schwerin"], *Kirche im Sozialismus*, 1980, No. 5-6.

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