BRANCHES OF THE FAMILY TREE

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The situation in 2023

This book was written in the 1980s. Much of it was still relevant until 2022, or rather 2014 -the year that Russia invaded Crimea and annexed it.

Back in the 1980s, the Cold War was coming to an end, and with the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union , the future appeared to be much rosier. The policies of Glasnost and Perestroika convinced people in the West that the Soviet Union (and then the Russian Federation) was no longer a threat.

Politicians from Western countries, including Ronald Reagan, George Bush Senior, Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Angela Merkel amongst others welcomed the changes.

From the perspective of the peace movement, it was the United States which was behaving more belligerently and irresponsibly with its military interference in the countries of Central and South America by toppling the elected left-wing governments and aiding right-wing dictators and militia groups. Then came the invasion of Iraq by American, British, Australian and Polish forces in 2003 and preparations for the war in the years leading up to it.

In Russian, meanwhile, a former KGB agent, Vladimir Putin, had become the new President, and for a while there was no alarm about it in the West. Putin made a pact with the Russian people that they would enjoy many personal freedoms as long as they did not object to the larger political policies of their government. Most of the people went along with this and in so doing became de-politicised. In many other countries, perhaps, people would also have gone along with this.

But Russians, unlike the populations of Western countries, had no real experience with living in a democracy. It is not too long ago that Russia was basically a feudal society, followed by a communist dictatorship in which deference was required at all levels and individuality was frowned upon. Gobachev offered the Russian population a chance to embrace democracy...but they turned it down.

Putin gradually set about curtailing people's freedoms. He removed large aspects of the autonomous republics within the Russian federation, so that all of them became subservient to Russia. At the same time he started closing down independent media outlets and prohibited all opposition to state rule. This meant that the police had sweeping new powers and it laid the foundation of state-controlled propaganda.

The peace movement was largely unaware of what Putin was doing and was too focussed on its opposition to what was happening in the Middle East.

Were we naive? Yes, but so were many Western politicians. All of us were duped and in hindsight I feel very bad about it.

We are now only too aware of how Russians can behave. The brutality and savagery of its armed forces is sickening. (I use both terms to underline their sheer barbarity.) Their disregard for the Geneva Conventions on warfare and their lack of inhibitions about bombing houses, hospitals, schools, public buildings and the infrastructure of towns and cities in Ukraine has come as a shock to us. The destruction of the Kakhovka dam, threatening the lives and livelihoods of thousands of Ukrainians - which almost certainly was done by Russia - shows that they have reached a level of depravity not seen in Europe since the Middle Ages.

People calling for a ceasefire, although it would save lives in the short-term, would serve to legitimise Russia's

annexation of Ukrainian territories in the South East of the country as well as Crimea. Furthermore, it would give Russia time to build-up their forces and armaments which could be used in a fresh onslaught against Ukraine and other countries. These are pretty obvious points, but there are plenty of world leaders and sections of the peace movement who do not seem to realise them.

Russian forces should retreat to their own country, and Putin and others who have had a part in the war should be tried for war crimes. Reparations must be paid to Ukraine by Russia in full. Furthermore, the Russian population should be told the truth about the war. Some will never believe it or condemn their leaders. Unfortunately, this is inevitable.

One word of caution, though. Certainly, Russia must be punished severely, but there should be a carrot and stick approach to future dealings with that country to avoid a similar situation arising as happened in Germany after the first World War which led to the rise of Hitler and the second World War. I would also like to see the United Nations Security Council closed down as it is ludicrous that the Russian Federation - the aggressor country - should have a seat on it, giving it a platform to spread lies and evil propaganda.

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PREFACE WRITTEN IN 2020

This book was written thirty-five years ago. It was passed around and a copy was lodged in a library nearby, but since then it has gathered dust on a shelf in my study.

Why am I now making it public you may ask? For two main reasons. Firstly, for archive purposes. It contains a comprehensive record of what if was like to be in the peace movement at this time. Although the movement was active in the 1960s, it faded out during the 1970s but re-emerged in around 1980, influenced by the protests against the Vietnam War in the USA and fuelled by the accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania in March 1979. This helped turn people's attentions to nuclear issues – nuclear power and nuclear weapons. It was boosted by the plan to deploy American Cruise and Pershing II missiles in Europe. On December 12th 1979, NATO announced it would deploy 572 of them in Western Europe – 108 Pershing and 565 Cruise missiles. Of these, 160 Cruise missiles would be placed in England, 96 in West Germany, 112 in Sicily, 48 in the Netherlands and 48 in Belgium. All Pershing II missiles would replace the current Pershing Ia missiles in West Germany. The first of the Cruise missiles arrived at Greenham Common in November 1983.

The World Disarmament Campaign was also active at this time. There was a branch in the nearby town and a sub-group in our own village which a few years later became an independent peace group. This organisation was founded in 1979 by Fenner Brockway and Philip Noel-Baker to work for the implementation of policies agreed at the 1978 Special Session on Disarmament at the United Nations. The Programme of Action contained in the Final Document, which was signed by every then member of the UN, related to all types of weapons. The WDC campaigned for worldwide disarmament, nuclear and non-nuclear and for military expenditure to go instead to sustainable development, the eradication of poverty and the protection of the environment and the strengthening of the role of the UN in disarmament negotiations.

One of the main courses of action taken by WDC members was to ask as many people in the country as possible to sign a petition calling for multilateral disarmament. Where I live, much of the time spent in the early 1980s was thus spent going door-to-door with this petition. It was rather daunting at times. I remember that many women felt they had to ask their husbands if they could sign it. How times have changed! The nation-wide petition was delivered to the U.N. Second Special Session on Disarmament in New York in June 1982.

Nuclear disarmament was a big issue in the 1980s and huge numbers of people were involved with the peace movement in one way or another. Looking at the newsletter of our group for these years I was reminded that every few days there was either a talk; a meeting; a film, such as 'The War Game'; or other events that were taking place. Many people travelled long distances to go on demonstrations. There were many marches in London and other cities and very many people, particularly women, from all over the country went to Greenham Common or Molesworth where there were peace camps surrounding the army bases where Cruise missiles were deployed. Many women stayed long periods of time in these camps. The commitment of everyone in the movement towards peace was overwhelming.

I read the other day that some people had commented that the 1980s peace movement achieved nothing. I would disagree very strongly. But I would, wouldn't I! So would everyone who was a member of a peace group back then – scientists, university lecturers, teachers, doctors, nurses, clergymen, military personnel, trades-people, artists, architects, housewives, retired people…the list goes on.

The other reason I am re-issuing this book is that some of the ideas - some of the things people used to do – might be adopted or adapted to present-day campaigning in connection with the climate crisis. Obviously, times have changed tremendously. Today, social media and I-phones can be used. Videos can now be taken on the spot and shown online almost immediately afterwards. These things were not available to us in the 1980s.

Whatever form the actions now take, cooperation, especially international cooperation is required. That means refusing to see other people as enemies but fostering a sense of kinship to struggle together for a common cause. And what good is preventing the disaster of global heating if wars still continue and the ever-present danger of nuclear war still hangs over us? In short, we should grow up and act responsibly, if that is possible. Seeing the state of the world at this time I have doubts whether it can happen. But to give up and leave our fate in the hands of bellicose politicians and the military-industrial complex is not something any normal human being should consider. The struggle goes on.

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ORIGINAL PREFACE

The first part of this book – the 'trunk', as it were – traces the background to the following two sections and includes information about how and why our peace group made contacts with others abroad. Excerpts from some of the letters we've received are also quoted. Names have been changed where appropriate. Foreign correspondence though is only one aspect of our work and cannot be looked at in isolation. Consequently, I've attempted to place the development of these overseas links in perspective. This has entailed a brief look at what's been going on internationally and nationally and how the peace movement has responded to the various challenges. The section concludes with a few chapters on the Helsinki Peace Conference, which would seem an appropriate place to 'finish' on.

The second and third parts, which may be likened to two of the main branches of the family tree, deal with my trip to the German Democratic Republic and Hungary, respectively. A short postscript has been added to tie up a few loose ends.

An Appendix follows, containing some practical advice for those seriously considering having a 'liaison'. But since it takes two to make twins, even in these days, I can't guarantee that things will work out as hoped for. That is evidently where a measure of good luck may come in handy.

Yet something more than crossed fingers is needed in talking or writing about East European countries, which is somewhat akin to walking backwards through a minefield. If you have it in mind to try and correct some of the misinformation that is about by stressing the good points and playing down the bad, you run the risk of being branded as a 'Red', and have to face all the unpleasantness which accompanies this. Indeed, some people are so concerned about avoiding this that they go to the opposite extreme by drawing attention to all the unsavoury things, while neglecting to mention the healthy aspects of life in these countries. Needless to say, this is a wonderful way of furthering the cause of the cold war. The ideal is to pitch somewhere in between. But if you're not careful, you may end up so obsessed by trying to balance good and bad points that you completely mar the reality of the situation.

To make matters infinitely more difficult, the problem of finding out what things are really like is compounded by the fact that there are four distinct viewpoints to choose from, with umpteen variations in between. There is the official Eastern version and the unofficial one. Both may contain a degree of truth; yet both may also contain either deliberate falsehoods or mistaken ideas. By the same token, there is the line taken by the Western authorities and the contrasting views expressed by radical protest groups. The same comments apply. Which version to believe on any one issue is often

very difficult to ascertain, especially because of the deep mistrust which often exists between both pairs of antagonists. The only war around it is, therefore, to be as open-minded as possible and to be ready to listen to various options.

This brings me on to my own sources of information which consisted of personal conversations, letters and printed matter. Except for one meeting (with the Hungarian Peace Council), I refrained from taking a notebook with me when I met people in case they felt inhibited by seeing it. There was also the chance that I might have lost it and it could then have got into the wrong hands. Instead, I waited until I was in the privacy of my hotel room before jotting down what I could remember in my normal, illegible handwriting.

Thus, it is quite possible that errors crept into my account and I can only apologise for these in advance. I fully realise that by no means can this be called a perfect record of events and there are undoubtedly numerous mistakes lurking around just waiting to be spotted by people more expert than I. I wish them 'happy hunting'.

Mistakes, however, should not be confused withy my own biases. For rather than attempt to produce an objective account, I have tried to make my own position very plain. There's far too much pseudo-objectivity around as it is, and I do not intend to sit on any fences when it is obvious that we should all be pulling down fences and barriers of any kind which merely serve to obscure issues, and to legitimise continued complacency in the face of the tremendous build-up of armaments.

Finally, I feel that I have to apologise to all those well-meaning but passive souls who believe that peace is something you polish up like a brass ornament and stand on your mantlepiece to gather dust until the next spot of ritual spring-cleaning. To my mind, it's not something to admire from a distance and leave well alone, but something instead, that you have to grasp in both hands and put to use in whatever way possible. Sometimes it can get your hands dirty. So be it. Sometimes it will make you weep. So, what's wrong with showing your weakness and humanity? And sometimes it can make you laugh. Laugh, then, for peace and happiness are one and the same thing. At all times though it should be respected and cherished. For we must all beware by now of what the alternative is.

And now, in true showbiz tradition, I would like to present you with the top of the bill – the many people who have contributed in one way or another to this book or to the experiences which are described within it. It goes without saying that without all of their efforts not a word of this book would have been possible. I won't mention them by name, but let them introduce themselves in the order that they appear. By way of thanks, may I remind everyone that our continued hopes for a better world rely upon people like them…and also, upon people like you.

ITCHY FEET - RECYCLED

In January 1984, I was borne again on a bicycle.

No longer able to rely upon having the use of our car whenever I wanted it, I was faced with a choice of two alternative means of transport: a temperamental and extremely lazy shank's pony; or a very greedy and quite mischievous single-decker bus, which is punished by having to go to bed early every night. Not happy with either of these existing options, l sought a compromise and shortly came into possession of a saddle and two wheels – a hybrid creature, blue in colour and long in the spoke, which was instantly nicknamed 'The Tebbit'. For me, it was just the job! (Norman Tebbit was Employment Secretary in the Conservative Government who inferred that unemployed people should get on their bikes and look for work.)

The dilemma I had been in is one familiar to many rural inhabitants. Living in a village but with regular meetings to attend in the towns nearby, I had need of something which could get me there and back fairly quickly, cheaply and conveniently. My decision satisfied all these criteria, and after a small investment in waterproof outer garments, I was ready to face whatever onslaughts the British weather might care to hurl at me…well, almost.

In enthusiastically joining the cycling fraternity, I was well prepared for the sudden onset of something called 'fitness' which resulted from my eager exertions – a condition comprising of numerous aches and pains, which, under other circumstances, would have made me take to my bed immediately.

But there was something else which accompanied this feeling of 'wholesomeness' which I had not been expecting at all: a new-found sense of freedom. Watching drivers zooming past me, following each other nose to tail, I felt tremendously relieved to be liberated from this obsessive competitive behaviour which, almost without exception, overwhelms people as soon as they sit behind a driving wheel. Freed from the cocoon-like atmosphere of a car with its adjustable temperature, comfort and entertainment, I suddenly became conscious of the feel of the fresh air on my face and savoured the sights, sounds and smells of the countryside around me.

It's almost like becoming a child again – you notice small details for the first time, you feel so much closer to nature, and your imagination is given the time and opportunity to flourish, virtually unrestrained. As you slowly pedal along, a kaleidoscope of thoughts floats through your mind, and you begin to dream of riding away to exotic, far-off places – Eastbourne, East Grinstead, East Germany…

East Germany? Why East Germany?

I'll come to that later.

Has there ever been the most lethargic of all portly village Bobbies who has never dreamed of winning the Tour de France as he pedals his customary way from post office to pub? Who knows a true postman who has never yearned to cycle from John O'Groats to Lands End without having to deliver a single letter on the way?

My own thoughts similarly turned to the prospect of escaping from the mundane. Having overcome my initial hesitancy in pulling over and stopping each time another vehicle overtook me, it wasn't long before I was calculating how far I could cover in a day before numbness set in; what amount of luggage could I carry before my bicycle and I would both collapse under the strain; which routes could I take to avoid towns on the one hand, and hills on the other, yet still manage to get somewhere. Each ride as far as the local shops thus became a major planning exercise, until finally it only boiled down to fixing a date to set off and I'd be fast-pedalling it all the way to Berlin.

But why go to East Germany, or should I say, the German Democratic Republic?

Patience! I'll explain that in a minute.

Then one day the unexpected happened. I had ridden into a town about 12 miles away and had chained 'The Tebbit' to a railing before going off to spend the evening at a jazz club. On my return, I saw that my saddle-bag had been tampered with. Gone were my over-shoes and set of tools, and even my pump had been taken from off the frame. In a furious mood, I started off for home at high speed. But scarcely had I gone a few hundred yards than I felt the back-wheel grating on the uneven surface of the untarmacked road. A puncture, late at night in the pouring rain, without a repair kit, a spanner or a pump, was quite enough to give me second thoughts about a long-distance cycle ride.

Waiting to be collected, my mind was filled with a long succession of 'but-what-ifs' as I imagined myself stranded in a strange country with no kind, obliging wife at the other end of a phone just a few miles away. By the time she had arrived, I had decided most definitely that I would not be cycling to Berlin after all. What a perfectly ridiculous idea, I thought, as I settled back in the cosy warmth of my seat and switched on the radio.

But I still don't understand. Why the German Democratic Republic – the GDR?

Well, look at it another way. And why not?

GLOBAL VILLAGE OR GLOBAL VILLAGE?

The 'global village' is one of those catchy expressions which can have different meanings depending upon where the accent is placed. Usually, with the stress on the last word, it is taken to mean a shrinking world in which the barriers of physical and cultural distance have been largely overcome by modern methods of communication and fast air travel.

But can this really be called a village? Granted, disagreements – some of them quite serious – can take place in any village, as BBC Radio 4 listeners know only too well. But they never get as far as the inhabitants of one street threatening to annihilate the residents of another, indeed, the whole population if it were to come to blows, over some long-standing argument amongst themselves. If that were the case, the village bobby would soon be along on his push-bike to sort things out.

- Evenin', Sir. Would you min' tellin' me precisely what you've got there 'mongst yer geraniums?
- Oh that, yes, it's only a small intercontinental ballistic missile, Officer.
- I see. And wha's that long thing pokin' out yer garage, might I ask?
- Do you mean our old nuclear bomber? Well, actually, it's my wife's – she's learning to drive on it.
- I s'pose you're goin' to tell me nex' that that thingamajig stickin' out o' yer pond is one of them subm'rine-launched crude missives?
- You're dead right. No offence is it, Officer? Look, most of the neighbours have got them too. We badly need them for our own self-defence.
- An' who d'you think's goin' to attack you with that lot 'ere?
- Well, there's those very strange people a couple of streets away for a start. They've got an awful lot more than we've got I might tell you. And I've told them – if that dog of theirs comes over and messes on my lawn just once more, I'll let them have it, right between the eyes!

Exit policeman in the direction of the council's fall-out shelter…

As regards to the so-called uniformity of cultures, apart from the ubiquitous polyurethane airports, the cling-film wrapped modern hotels and other enclaves of the species, Traveller Sapiens, there is still a rich diversity of cultures in the world which defy any attempts to wedge them into any one particular mould. We may feel at home amidst the superficial layers of another country. But beneath these, there invariably lies an alien land of mysterious customs, language and nuance. Only the true natives can find their way about there with ease and visitors who happen across this territory often lose their way and need to be rescued.

There are those who profess to be guides to this other-world – people who come back home with amazing tales to tell of sorcerers, barbaric customs and devilry in all its guises. For them, perhaps, the world is a global village – a mansion amidst a muddle of mud-huts. But a true village this is not, at least in the European sense, where a degree of equality is implied in this turn of phrase.

However, try placing the accent on the first word instead, and the expression 'global village' assumes an altogether different meaning. In place of the characteristic, inward-looking, typically conservative nature of most villages, the new description paints a picture of a community which reaches out to embrace other cultures, without any attempts to dominate or denigrate other people's life-styles or to misinterpret their set of values – an unmistakeable global village.

This is obviously an idealised concept, but one which could offer hope and direction for the future. For responsibility for a peaceful world – which is what the phrase suggests – is everyone's business. And efforts to make it a reality must start in every town and village, in every community, every street, and sooner or later, in every single home.

WOMEN OF THE WORLD

It is this idea, conjured up by this latter interpretation of the expression, which has for a long time guided the vision of the peace group in my own village.

I suppose it first came into prominence a few years ago when we decided to hold a cultural festival during One World Week, the last full week in October each year. The objective was to discover how many connections the village had with other countries. To our surprise, we were offered over 25 exhibitions by people who had lived abroad, or had relatives overseas or who regularly received foreign correspondence. Although most of the displays related to West European countries, there were several collections of items from much further afield.

Within these four English walls, a woman of the world could have donned a Mexican poncho over a Swiss lace dress, not forgetting of course, to slip her feet into a pair of Dutch wooden clogs, and then adorned herself with a Barbadian coconut necklace, a Venezuelan silver broach and some Kenyan bangles before applying her make-up, in the form of a Ugandan tribal face mask. Having done this, she could have sat down at a Norwegian table covered by a Ghanaian cloth on which stood, what else, but a Peruvian flower vase, and tucked into a Japanese fish meal, naturally enough on Italian pasta, eaten with Chinese chop-sticks, with a side helping of French cheese and garlic, sprinkled with Grenadian spices, and washed down with some German wine out of a Spanish jug. Making sure to put the (ornamental) Egyptian cat out, she could have hoisted up the Canadian flag and retired to bed beneath an American patchwork quilt, lulled to sleep by the sounds of an Indian raga played on a Japanese stringed koto."

I should point out that just for the record, we don't get too many women like that in our village!

Astute readers will have noticed that one important omission in the extract above is any mention of Eastern Europe. Oddly enough, we didn't even spot this ourselves until almost the last moment. If we were really serious about wanting to "celebrate the richness and adventure that belonging to 'One World' offers us", we would simply have to rustle up a Russian, or someone else who might fit the bill. However, it's none too easy trying to uncover a Cossack in our neck of the woods, despite what some people might think. And any emigres you do occasionally come up against are not always terribly happy about being asked to sing the praises of the country which they have deliberately left behind.

We had almost given up hope of finding anyone to represent Eastern Europe, when one day, an invitation arrived for us to go along to a social event in a neighbouring town and meet a party of East Germans on an official visit to this country. This was my first exposure to anyone from behind the Iron Curtains, as the newspapers have a penchant for putting it. Naturally enough then, I was quite

surprised and perhaps a trifle disappointed in view of all that we're led to believe, to find that that the very attractive paediatrician, whom I sat next to, didn't seem to possess even the slightest vestige of any horns. Perhaps the female of the species doesn't, or else she was concealing them extraordinarily well beneath her fancy hair style. In fact, had I not known otherwise, I would have found it impossible to distinguish her from the English women at the same table, judging purely by appearances – or had I been drinking too much already?

The reception passed very pleasantly and by the end of the evening I was not only disarmed enough to purchase a few pennants and a small toy bear (well, at least it wasn't a Russian one!), I had even been brazen enough to exchange addresses with one of the delegation, a man called Wolfgang, who turned out to be the secretary of the GDR-GB Friendship Society in East Berlin.

That did it! You've only so much as to pick up a red crayon in this area as to be labelled a communist, and there was I, not only ready to dispute that fact that East Germans don't necessarily breathe out great plumes of fire, but I'd even signed everyone's death warrant by giving away the name of my village to 'the other side'. No-one would be able to sleep safely in their beds again!

The few items I had picked up gave us sufficient material to make up a small exhibition on the GDR for our One World Festival, although we did realise that it was still a bit of a cheat. It gave a lightly more balanced overall picture of the world's different cultures, but it did not fulfil our original intention of illustrating the number of links which our village had with the outside world, unless that is, the inclusion of the East German exhibits could have been viewed as a foretaste of things to come.

Our multi-cultural event itself passed off as well as any of us could have expected. It didn't attract much interest from local residents, but we're learned to live with that situation. One day we might get it right, but until then we just have to keep plodding away without getting too disheartened.

What the Festival did accomplish, though, was something far more valuable to us than the tiny flicker of interest on the faces of a handful of people. It brought it home to us more than anything else we'd done hitherto just how little we knew about other countries, particularly those in Eastern Europe. If we had aspirations about attempting to promote understanding of other countries, then we first of all had to educate ourselves. In effect, this meant that we would be approaching the problem of disarmament from the opposite end from that we'd been used to. Campaigning against weapons alone will not fill people's hearts with peaceful attitudes. But if people the world over can relate to each other as fellow human beings, they may trust one another enough to be willing to start the disarmament ball rolling.

We had also discovered a pronounced blind spot in people's thinking when it comes to Eastern Europe. There is a strong temptation to close one's mind to anything which provokes fear. The constant references to the communist threat in the media have induced a climate of fear, at times

bordering on paranoia. But while people acknowledge the build-up of weapons, especially those of the Warsaw Pact forces, they think much less about the existence of the actual inhabitants of these countries. The term ‘Eastern Europe’ has therefore become associated with the idea of a threat and anything which does not conform with this emotive concept is ignored or regarded as being rather suspect.

By attempting to remove this blind spot, a painful operation for all concerned, it should be possible to go some way towards overcoming this paralytic fear and to enable people to think about international problems in a more rational and constructive way. That was roughly the theory. Putting it into practice was the next step.

D-I-Y DREAMING

Do-it-yourself books on improving East-West relations cannot be bought at your nearest bookshop. Neither do you find such titles as 'How to Thaw the Cold War', or 'Détente in a Day' (or even in a decade), or 'World Peace in Ten Easy Lessons' on the shelves of your municipal library. That is not to say that there are no there are no useful publications available offering advice to anyone contemplating saving the world. But locating these resources (and I exclude religious books, which are open to so many differing interpretations as there have been 'holy' wars) is a time-consuming, difficult process for the beginner, and requires a guidebook in itself, if ever one could be found. Even when you do come across the relevant sort of materials, that is not the end of the story, as you are then confronted by a wide range of conflicting opinions, particularly with regard to forging links with East European countries. Some say that you should focus your attention on making contact with independent peace groups; some say it should be with the official bodies; while others recommend you to do both. In contrast, there are those who point out in no uncertain terms that it's unwise even to start in the first place.

For the bridge-builders of the future, it all seems highly complex and extremely daunting. Prolonged discussion on the path to follow, however, can merely lead to a lengthy period of inaction and procrastination, at a time when the forces acting against peace are getting stronger and stronger. To make matters worse, heated debates on the subject can all too easily give rise to hardened attitudes and closed minds, which do not auger well for potential peace-making.

The approach we adopted, not necessarily one I would recommend others to copy, was one which could have been called 'adventurous' at best, or 'foolhardy' at worst. Thanks perhaps to the broad scope of our membership in terms of age, experience and religious and political affiliations, our peace group had gained a reputation of being willing to try anything. We were prepared even to make fools of ourselves in rushing into this new initiative without much idea of where we were going. But our trial and error approach, and the sideways glances we sometimes got for 'fraternising', were partly offset by the work for charity and for the community which we have always undertaken, and by the fact that all of us were acquainted with other people in the village under other hats.

Yet however much preparation and debate go on beforehand (or however little in our case), if the decision is made to go ahead, there is no alternative but to jump in at the deep end. You don't usually go to the trouble of writing a letter and then hope that it doesn't get delivered, unless you're employed as an inspector in the Special Branch. Even so, many letters have a knack of falling on stony ground for various reasons, as anyone who has ever written to the correspondence columns of newspapers will tell you, and further letters are often required. Meanwhile, you wait and wait and wait, and some

time after you've completely given up hope of receiving a reply, plop! – the letter-box opens, and the doormat never looks the same again.

Our first plop came at the New Year following our One World Festival. Unlike the more usual experience described above, this enveloped – containing a New Year's card from Wolfgang, whom I had met the previous October – had arrived completely out of the blue.

The card extended to us "good health and further success in the struggle for peace and international friendship" and a handwritten note at the bottom stated that a letter would be on its way in the near future.

This warranted an almost immediate reply in which I expressed our hopes that a party of East Germans would return soon and come to our village where we could "eat, drink and be merry together". I also asked whether it would be possible for us to twin with a village of comparable size in the GDR. On reflection, perhaps this was a little 'forward', considering it was the initial letter from us. Not only had I asked them back to see our etchings, I had gone on to propose marriage!

Some months later we had a letter back thanking us for the future invitation and pointing our that a proposal for twinning would have to be submitted by our Parish Council before it could be considered by them. What we had had in mind was the possibility of establishing links with an organisation in an East German village – an arrangement which might in time have grown to include other organisations within the two villages. We had not realised then that the social structure of town and villages in the GDR is far different from that in our own country. The plethora of local voluntary societies which we take for granted here, does not have an exact counterpart in East German life. Knowing that at the time a request to our local council for the village to twin with another in the 'Communist Bloc' would have been met with a chorus of raised eyebrows, we let the matter rest, at least for the moment.

The letter from Wolfgang also contained a copy of the Prague Declaration calling for a Non-Aggression Pact between NATO and the Warsaw pact, and a request for our comments on this. No examination question could have been more comprehensively or conscientiously answered. Besides agreeing with the strong support it gave to the United Nations, the setting-up of Nuclear-Free Zones and the importance of non-interference in the affairs of other States , we 'endorsed' the suggestion for a dialogue to be established between parliaments, parties, trade unions, women's groups and other organisations in the interests of peace and security; the expansion of business-like cooperation in various fields; and the strengthening of intellectual ties and artistic exchanges. I am sure that our comments did not make a scrap of difference to the deadlock in disarmament negotiations then taking place. But perhaps it showed that not all of us in the West wish to be seen as being so negative

towards such constructive proposals, as the impression often given by the statements of our governments.

By the spring of 1983, therefore, we felt the very foundations of the Cold War begin to tremble! Nevertheless, we did feel the need to speed up the momentum and to broaden our contacts in line with our desire to transform the community into a real global village.

Before continuing, I should explain that this was not the first occasion on which we had thought about becoming more internationally-oriented. Like other peace groups, we had collected signatures in the village for the World Disarmament Campaign's petition, which was presented at the United Nations Second Special Session on Disarmament in New York in June 1982. Besides signatures, we were also 'represented' at the enormous demonstration which took place prior to the proceedings by some of our badges and T-shirts, which were worn by the younger members of a family from a neighbouring town to ours. No-one, however, had been captivated enough by the sights of our particular insignia to want to make contact with us.

More of our badges and leaflets were taken to the USA by two of our members a few months later when they visited the country on a business trip. But although they gave some talks about the peace movement in Britain, after which one American commented that "it had changed her whole way of thinking about world affairs", there was no follow-up to this visit, even though several letters were written from our side of the Atlantic.

In passing, it could be added that we had also 'adopted' at this time a member of the Turkish Peace Association, a distinguished lawyer, who, along with other leading members of the TPA, had been arrested and charged with legislation which effectively prohibited democratic opposition to the country's defence policy. For such crimes as 'destroying national feelings', or of participating in trade union affairs or the activities of 'clandestine' organisations, he and hundreds of thousands of other people faced very long prison sentences or even execution.

According to the International Federation of Human Rights League in Paris, the detainees included *102 Members of Parliament, 79 writers and journalists, 92 attorneys and judges, 35 district governors, 1,485 majors and municipal officials, 6,191 teachers and 6,758 state employees*.

Our adoption of the Turkish prisoner was not expected to have any influence on the minds of those on the military tribunal, but was purely seen as an expression of solidarity between peace activists in different countries.

None of these activities led to any startling, new developments in establishing overseas' contacts; indeed, that was not always the intention. But it did bring it home to us how difficult it often is to get

things started. That is why the letter and card from East Berlin were regarded with such delight and why they gave us hope in pursuing this course of action.

THIRD PARTY INSURANCE?

Our renewed efforts to twin with peace groups abroad were directed through the means of various third parties, mostly national organisations, with pleas to be put in touch with smaller pocket-sized groups. Thus, we approached the Parisian office of CODENE (Comité pour le Désarmament Nucléaire en Europe) about a French connection, mainly because the acronym sounded like the right pill to swallow to combat our niggling worries about infertility. And a short time afterwards we wrote away to an ecological organisation in Madrid by the name of AEPDEN with a similar request concerning that country – at least I hoped that is what my attempts at Spanish conveyed to anyone who read the letter!

Not wishing to neglect countries in the Third World, we also sent a letter to the Council of Churches in Namibia to see if they could put us in touch with a village there. Some months later, it was pointed out to me by a Namibian I met in another country that a British village (or really a small town in our case) is totally different from a Namibian village, which might consist of nothing more than a few thatch huts and a mere handful of people plus their livestock, situated out in the middle of the bush or in the interior of the Kalahari Desert. 'Twins' is hardly the right word for the arrangement that we were suggesting.

Like the other two enquiries, the idea came to nothing, despite the practice it gave us in writing letters. However, our perception of one of these countries – Namibia - has been sharpened by receiving for some time the newsletter of the Namibian Council of Churches. I am constantly amazed at the courage shown by people living under great duress. An extract from an article entitled 'No-one's neutral where war is all', by the Rev. Nehemia Hamupembe in the October 1983 edition of this newsletter ('Information') testifies to this:

In the north, particularly the area which used to be called Ovamboland, life is marked by fear, bitter hatred and suspicion. The 17-year bush war continues unabated, causing great loss of both human life and property.

At night a dusk-dawn curfew is imposed. Then every movement causes one's heart to beat harder and faster only to regain its normal running once the approaching object has been identified. One never knows, after dark, who is approaching one's residence, and why.

Yet the churches are full, and the people are singing and praising God even where the church buildings have been destroyed. God has remained the only hope of the helpless.

Recently I shared in divine service conducted by a faithful lay reader under one of those beautiful 'green cathedrals' which God has provided for his poor and defenceless people.

After the service I spoke to two elderly women. I suggested the possibility of erecting some kind of building, particularly for the rainy season. "No," replied one. "We prefer to have it under a tree, because here we can identify from a distance what is approaching and to disperse when it becomes necessary."

One thing I have noted is the change in the content of prayer. Whereas five years ago people here used to pray that God may bring war to an end so that peace and justice may be enjoyed once again, Christians here now seem to have accepted their lot – they only pray that God my give them power and courage to be able to face another day.

What is true of Namibia is true of Southern Africa generally. Hardly a day goes by without hearing of violence of some sort.

As far as violence in Southern Africa is concerned, there can be no neutrality, no flight into the world of spirituality. Jesus did not do so.

Violence is an evil, and the church cannot be indifferent to it. To do this is to approve or to condone it.

Even keeping silent, withdrawal into the so-called religious sphere, has a meaning particularly to the victim of oppression. Therefore, to avoid misinterpretation, the church must state where it stands about the violence. Furthermore, she must take pains to find out the causes and possible remedies of violence, and lay these before the eyes of the world.

Maybe if we could only reflect on what it must be like for people living in places like Namibia when our own commitment sometimes begins to falter, we would be given strength to carry on and an invigorated sense of purpose.

To round off this spate of letter-writing to national organisations, we contacted the Dutch Interkerkelijk Vredesberaad, the IKV or Inter-church Peace Council, which, since 1966, has promoted peace-work in local parishes throughout the Netherlands and acts as a spokesman on their behalf. The slogan of the Dutch peace movement – 'Help rid the world of Nuclear Weapons. Let it begin in the Netherlands' (or for the benefit of any Dutch-speaking readers – 'Help de Kernwapens de wereld uit. Om te beginned uit nederland' did not deter us from getting in touch with them, even though some of us would like the process to begin here. In actual fact, however, the IKV also acts as a clearing house for international contacts in the East and West.

Consequently, we enlisted the help of a Dutch member of ours who wrote off to the IKV and succeeded in getting an advertisement in the April edition of their national newsletter. This brought forth two replies from interested local peace groups. One of these came from Daventer, an old town

with a population of 66,000, which works out at about twelve and a half times the size of our village, and was slightly out of our range, we thought. Nonetheless, the couple who had written the letter occasionally visit our area and called in to see our correspondent when they came over here a month later. Since then, we have heard from them now and again, which only goes to show that differences in size are not always incompatible, as Laurel and Hardy demonstrated.

The other reply came from a town called Baarn which has a population of 25,000. The peace group there encompasses all the main religious denominations and both major political parties. As this group seemed to resemble our own in these respects, we decided to keep in touch with them.

While we were about it, we also wrote to the IKV to enquire whether they knew of anyone in Eastern Europe who would be interested in exchanging letter with us. In response, we were given an address of someone connected with a church in East Berlin. This unexpected stroke of success, after the various dead-ends that we had previously encountered, caught us on the hop, and there followed a bit of a delay as we worked out how best to cope with it. In due course, the task was shared out between two people – one who would write to the person concerned in English, and another person who was willing to translate the letters we received in German. It cannot be stressed often enough that linguists are like god dust, and until the day when a universal language is adopted, no-one with any knowledge of foreign languages should hide their talents.

At a time therefore when other people were counting their Easter Eggs, we were busy counting our chickens, before some of them had even had a chance to hatch properly. A review of our situation in relation to the rest of the world at our AGM in May 1983 showed us leaning in the direction of the Netherlands and the German Democratic Republic, but feeling rather frustrated in not being able to embark yet upon anything like a world cruise. What we needed was a sharp holt in pulling up the anchor. This was provided by a letter from the British Peace Assembly, read out at the meeting, notifying us that my application to be a delegate to the 'World Assembly for Peace and Life, against Nuclear War' in Prague from June 21-26 (1983) had been accepted. The hawsers had been cast off and we were underway on the high tide.

SPIRIT OF PRAGUE

Having a name closely associated with that of a local peace group, you can't just sneak off for ten days behind the Iron Curtain without coming a cropper sooner or later. It's bound to be found out, however much you may want to keep it under your hat. Fed by a few pieces of incriminating evidence, suspicions soon mount, gossip reaches deafening proportions, and before you know it, it's common knowledge that you've gone and signed over the entire village football team to the Red Rovers; filched the whole of the orange-juice money from the Sunday School class and paid it into the Kremlin's bank account; and given away the closely-guarded secrets of British conker-playing to the various grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the members of the Politburo.

A much more spirited way to do it is to announce very loudly and totally unabashed that you're off to visit Eastern Europe to attend a peace conference and hope that you can rely upon people's support. This way, you remain very much in charge of the situation and can inform people of the true state of affairs, without having to strain your vocal chord or waste newsprint in denying all manner or rumours.

The method we chose was in line with this second approach, but went even further than public announcements of my intentions in local newspapers and in the parish magazine. One idea thought up by the group was to compile a 'Friendship Book' in which individuals and organisations within the village were invited to write a goodwill message and to supplement it, if possible, with any photographs of themselves, their children, pets, house or anything else deemed appropriate.

The response to this was quite incredible and the book soon accumulated a collection of the most moving messages of peace and friendship that could be imagined from all types of people. On the last day of my visit to Prague, I presented this book to the chairman of the Czechoslovak Peace Committee hoping that he could arrange for it to be viewed by other residents of the city. Perhaps our analysis of people's views of Eastern Europe had been wrong or could it possibly be that it needed an initiative like this to stimulate people into thinking about the inhabitants of these countries as being ordinary human beings too.

Another idea we conjured up took the form of a soft toy tortoise, two and a half feet in diameter and dressed in a white bonnet, on which the name TIM was embroidered. This refers to the famous tortoise which once lived in the village and was befriended by the famous naturalist, Gilbert White.

The toy was taken to a children's hospital in Prague, as a present from the children in my own village. Once again, it illustrated that the elephant-and-the-mouse relationship between other places and our village had come to the fore again, except that the mouse's place had been taken by another creature.

The actual proceedings of the World Assembly have by now been well documented. Just as a brief reminder, some 3,025 people from 132 countries (40 percent from the advanced capitalist countries, 40 percent from the Third World; and 20 percent from the socialist countries) spent several days together in the magnificent Palace of Culture in Prague, talking openly and honestly amongst themselves about how to bring peace to this troubled planet. At the end of the deliberations a final Appeal was made, which declared the following:

Preparation of a nuclear war is the most serious crime against humanity. But war is not inevitable. It is not yet too late to prevent a nuclear holocaust. Salvation is in the hands of the people themselves, of each man and woman, resolutely standing together for peace.

The mass movement for peace is a powerful force, a determining factor in the international situation, capable of influencing the practical policies of governments in the direction of peace.

The strength of this broad and diversified peace movement lies in its ability to act together. Whatever differences on other issues exist between us, we are strongly convinced that nothing must divide us in the face of our common purpose – to save peace and life, to prevent nuclear war.

I returned from Czechoslovakia with many happy memories, and pockets full of addresses on numerous slips of paper. Perhaps a little wiser about what life is like in socialist countries, my curiosity to find out more and more had grown to insatiable proportions. Most of all, though, I felt intoxicated, for lack of a better word, by what I can only describe as 'the spirit of Prague', which is expressed so concisely in the Appeal quoted above. Internationalism was the idea whose time had quite definitely come.

Almost the first thing I did, once the clouds begun to disperse from around my head, was to write a letter to Četeka – the Czechoslovak News Agency in London. The acting chief correspondent from the agency had written to me before I had set off to ask: "With what hopes do you go to Prague?" I had given him a long catalogue of 'hopes' which read more like demands (for example, "to help to persuade official Eastern European delegates that it is to their advantage to allow more criticism of their government's defence policies by their own peoples").

My experience in Prague had made me ashamed of my previous arrogant and strident tones and I therefore wrote back to them admitting to my feeling humbled by my visit and, for the benefit of any Czechoslovakians who may have felt that the conference had been one enormous junket, I made sure to stress how useful and constructive the proceedings had been in starting new joint initiatives.

Just over a week later, I received two Czechoslovak newspapers – Práce and Rude Pravo – which carried long quotes from my letter. A little praise works wonders – that's a lesson which I'll never forget.

Back in the village, I gave great publicity to everything that I had experienced, particularly in view of the damning media coverage that the Assembly had been given by Western journalists and broadcasters. Copies of the reports flowed from my typewriter like molten toffee and were immediately thrust into people's hands in the hope that something would stick in their minds. Most of the mementos I had been presented with over there were likewise donated to those people who had kindly submitted contributions towards the 'Friendship Book'. There's no better way of bringing people together than by giving gifts, even through an intermediary, as I was. In addition, I wrote out a full account of my visit illustrated by my photographs and other souvenirs I had collected which could be circulated around the village. Eighteen months later, it is still on its rounds and will continue to be passed around for quite some time yet.

Other copies of this report were photocopied and sent to various organisation, friends and relatives. This helped to augment the number of talks I was asked to give – one on the local radio station, one to a club for mainly disabled and elderly people, and the rest to other peace groups in the vicinity. From my experiences, I detected a growing interest in the topic of East-West relations and of world-wide cooperation in the cause of peace.

Yet a shift in attitudes is not enough in itself. It also requires a medium through which this feeling can assert itself in practical ways if anything is going to be achieved by it. This is a role which seems tailor-made for peace groups. Here, then, was the opportunity for us in our village peace group to do something really positive and constructive, although naturally, not everyone in the community agreed with what we were doing. But will they ever…?

AUTUMN-ATION

We started off the post-Prague era with the idea of internationalising all of our activities. On August 6th, we staged our usual vigil, holding posters carrying a message which ended: 'No more Hiroshimas; No more Nagasakis'. The identical message had been sent to organisations in the USA, USSR, Czechoslovakia, Mongolia, Vietnam, France and India. How the recipients of these messages reacted to this, I don't know – we never heard from them – but it was something different for the local newspaper to latch on to.

Straight after this, we heard about the 'Fast for Life' which had been started on Hiroshima Day by 14 people from France, the USA, Canada, West Germany, Spain and Japan, supported by temporary fasts by thousands of others around the world. The fasters had declared that they would continue until 'significant' action had been taken by governments to halt the nuclear arms race. For a while, it was looking very much as if there were going to be several inactive activists around, since no new initiatives were announced.

To help publicise the fast, we 'adopted' one of the people involved, a Canadian, knowing that provincial newspapers are only interested in news with a local angle. Even so, this particular item failed to capture their imagination.

We also informed Mr Trudeau, the Canadian Prime Minister, about the fast, especially since one of those concerned was a Canadian citizen. Back came a copy of an open letter from the Prime Minister's office which had been addressed to newspaper editors throughout Canada. It contained the following sentence:

When the choice is between steadfastness or weakness in the face of totalitarianism, history should have taught us that to refuse to risk one's life in defence of liberty is to risk losing liberty, without any guarantee of saving one's life.

The irony of this statement was no doubt lost on Mr Trudeau, who, according to various Canadians I've met, was in the habit of changing his feathers from dove's down to hawk's plumage, depending upon which audience he was addressing at the time.

Thankfully, none of the fasters died. They called off their fast because of the meagre media coverage they received. The only thing that perished was yet another attempt to get politicians to take seriously their responsibility for the future.

Hard on the heels of this came an event nearer to home. The director-general of the United nations Association in Britain came to our village to give a talk on the role of the UN. In spite of much widespread publicity, only 20 residents our of a population of about 4,500 turned up to hear him – not altogether a good omen for a potentially global village when the United Nations draws such little interest.

In terms of numbers, we did slightly better at the end of the month when One World Week dawned again. This year we had planned two events – the planting of a 'Peace' rose, and the holding of a party on the theme of world food. At the former, we attracted 21 people; at the latter, 22. At first glance it would appear that priorities in our area are food, flowers and the fate of the world in that order. But things may not be as simplistic as that, or are they?

The idea of planting a 'Peace' rose stemmed from the World Peace Assembly where a new variety of rose named 'Pax' had been especially bred for the occasion. We had dutifully applied to the Parish Council about where we could plant it and were offered a spot close to the village sign. This position was more than satisfactory because we envisaged a time when 'Peace' would flourish and grow all over the village, in name, anyway.

The date was appropriate too because it was around about the 300th anniversary of the founding of the State of Pennsylvania by William Penn. This great Quaker is very loosely connected with the village on account of his marriage to Gulielma Springett, whose parents lived here.

An 85-year old, highly-valued member of ours – a retired church minister – took the opportunity of addressing those present (as well as anyone else within earshot, including passing motorists). Standing behind the ready-made hole, facing his 'congregation', he stated how William Penn, whom he described as 'the first unilateralist', had made a treaty with the Indians by which it was agreed that no guns or fortresses would be allowed along the frontier of the territory. The ensuing peace between the settlers and the Indians lasted for 70 years, a long period in those turbulent times.

Having made this significant point, he reminded the gathered onlookers that we would honour his memory on this historic occasion by planting a symbol of peace, here in the heart of the village. While uttering the word 'Peace', he pointed his stick directly at the rose bush which had been standing perched on the mound of earth beside the hole. As if on cue, it very slowly and with great aplomb slipped into the waiting space and came to rest in the exact position required. Amazing!

I was assured later that the reverend gentleman did not make of practice of performing conjuring tricks – his magic must have been bestowed on him by far more ethereal powers. Perhaps it was the same spirit which prompted the man from the garage opposite to agree to water the rose whenever it was necessary. It was good to know that ''Peace' would be nurtured by at least a sprinkling of good Will!

The next day, I wrote off to a convenor of a peace group in Pennsylvania to tell him about the 'Peace' rose and the tenuous link between our village and William Penn. One can't afford to miss a chance like this, especially since some of the same 'magic' might still have been in the air.

The day after that, we held what we called a 'staff-of-life' party, featuring a big spread of international dishes. After our experiences earlier in the week, what could have been more appropriate than bread of heaven. Well, if not exactly from heaven, then from Scotland, France, Greece (pitta bread), Ireland (soda bread) and Eastern Europe (rye bread), together with Indian poppadoms and Dutch honey cake, on which were spread Middle Eastern hummus and Japanese miso, with various cheeses from France, Holland and Ireland. To add to the international dimensions of the event we then sat back and watched a slide show about Hungary to catch a glimpse of yet another slice of life.

Naturally enough, I was sure to follow this up with a letter to the Hungarian Peace Council to inform them about it. Our future good fortune proved without a shadow of a doubt that the spirit had not left us.

LETTERS, PRAY

The few weeks following One World Week, when we had a chance to recuperate from the rigours of organising these events, was an ideal time to try and establish contact again with some of the people I'd met at the World Peace Assembly. But alas, to no avail. This flurry of letters we wrote off soon merged with Christmas mailings, when it was thought it would be a nice gesture to send some calendars abroad. Such pictures of local scenes would have the advantage of being on show throughout the year, unlike Christmas cards which would soon be discarded. This tack seemed to pay off, and we received in return a number of letters, cards and calendars, which were all highly appreciated.

We had also by this time heard from our friends in the Netherlands and the GDR. As far back as August, we had been given an invitation by the Baarn Peace Group to visit them in October, and travel with them to the forthcoming demonstration in the Hague against the proposed deployment of cruise missiles in their country. Unfortunately, none of us were able to take them up on the offer. To make up for the lack of human support from our side of the Channel, however, we sent them some of our badges which purported to show that we were with them at least in thought.

A report of the demonstration arrived some months later, and enclosed were some of their badges for us to wear during our demonstrations. This, we have done. The report stated:

550,000 people took part in the march. The coalition government admitted that it was a very impressive demonstration. People converged on Den Haag in overfilled trains, coaches, cars on bicycles, on foot and even on various boats, all because of their unrest over the deployment of new weapons in Europe. The march was a political success because the number of people taking part was an increase over those demonstrating in Amsterdam two years ago. Den Haag was the biggest demonstration in those important weeks of protest in the autumn of 1983.

5,000 railway workers involved in industrial action at that time worked normally that day. The Dutch Railways staff appreciated the very good behaviour of the demonstrators.

725 journalists and photographers covered the event and radio and television stations kept people at home fully informed. Princess Irene was a speaker and created

an impression with her message, which was basically: "Don't be afraid. Go on with the struggle!" Many other famous people spoke, and many prayer meetings were held.

900 people from Baarn were transported in coaches to Den Haag and 400 more sent in their names on a petition, so 5 percent of the population were involved in the demonstrations."

From a member of a church in East Berlin, whose address we had been sent by the Dutch Interchurch Peace Council, there came a very informative letter which began:

Together with the pastor, we have founded a peace group which is now in its second year. In this peace group we have several sub-sections:

1. Contacts and Information

2.Defence questions

3.Exhibitions (Publicity)

4. Education

5. Environment and Living Conditions (Lifestyle).

These groups meet regularly every two weeks and discuss which themes they want to study more deeply. Apart from these, the Plenary meeting comes together every four weeks and the above-named groups report about their work. Some members of our peace group have taken part in peace seminars, peace cycle trips, peace workshops, etc. It is good to have contact – only like that is it possible to learn from each other…

Our activities are not so spectacular as in most West European countries, but in any case, the majority of peace members do not want this. We have to hold back in many things, otherwise they (the State institutions) would like us to go to the West, and only very few would like that.

In October another letter arrived from the church which dealt with more topical issues.

At this moment we are deep in preparations for the 'Peace Decade'. This means ten days of intensive thinking about peace, our environment, the problems of minorities and similar things. In our church there will be again, just as in 1982, many opportunities to think about these problems. Our programme begins on November 6th with a church service. For the subsequent days we have so far planned the following:

1. Creeping overkill – problems of the environment in the GDR

2.Theatre drama entitled 'Police'.

3. A presentation by the peace-group and the sub-groups.

4. Readings and subsequent discussions with an author.

5.A church service with many baptisms and holy communion.

6. A children's festival – painting, handicrafts, singing, puppet theatre, being happy together.

These are only a few examples of events; several other evening events will take place. One has the opportunity to visit other parishes and congregations and find out what they are doing. This 'Peace Decade' is celebrated in many churches in the GDR.

The work-group 'Contacts and Information' to which I belong is putting up an exhibition for the 'Peace Decade', but one will be able to see it until 1984.

We are not yet finished and have still a lot to do until the 6th of November. We still have to get pictures, write texts, produce mounting panels, print titles, produce information material and many other things.

On 16th November, our Day of Repentance and Prayer (a normal Sunday in the German church calendar) will bring the 'Peace Decade' to an end and we shall probably all feel quite exhausted.

As well as these very interesting letters, we also benefitted from an unexpected windfall. A relative of one of our members in New Zealand sent us a generous donation for our funds. In gratitude, we sent her three of our T-shirts which have our peace logo printed on them. That was the

longest journey which our 'dove' had been obliged to travel. Hopefully, it would not get seasick or homesick on the way!

Other letters received during the Autumn came from the USSR, Czechoslovakia and the GDR again – this time from the GDR-GB Friendship Society. Although some peoples might accuse us of having a bias towards Eastern Europe, this was not the case as far as our own letter-writing was concerned. We have always attempted to place equal importance on contacts in the East and West, but obviously we have no control over who gets round to replying to our letters.

The one from the USSR came from the Soviet Women's Committee to whom we had written after coming into possession of an open letter from them calling for solidarity in working for peace. The writer informed us that: All our schools started a new academic year with a lesson on peace, which will be repeated from year to year. Many members from our Committee attended such lessons in schools to tell children about the peace movement in the whole world.

I am aware that cynics may find reasons to sneer at this statement. But in a country like ours where the whole topic of Peace Education may soon be banned (unlike the study of wars, colonialism and other unsavoury features of the past), who are to find fault? I should also mention that the envelope showed clear evidence of having been opened and re-sealed with glue, for a V-shaped ridge was present on the paper inside. How it got there, I will never know. What I do know is that this has not been the last incidence of mail being tampered with in one way or another.

In lighter vein, I was quite thrilled to get a card and a long epistle from one of the guides which were assigned to us, British delegates in Prague. People with an interest in culinary matters of an international flavour may care to take note from the following passage.

We celebrate Christmas on December 24th in the evening. Every family has a nicely decorated Christmas tree with all those tinsels and trinkets and electric candles; the gifts are always put under the tree.

Christmas menu – a traditional Czech one – is carp soup and the main dish is fried carp (a traditional fresh-water fish of South Bohemia). The individual portions of carp are sprinkled with salt, tossed in flower (sic), coated with eggs and crumbs, and fried.

Carp is always eaten with so-called 'potato salad' (a really tasty one). You boil potatoes in their skins, carrots and celeriac. When it is ready and cools down, you make little cubes of carrots, a little bit of celeriac gherkins or pickled cucumbers, Edam or

Cheddar cheese and ham. Add up green peas, finely chopped onions, two or three hard-boiled eggs, and a little bit of mustard. Sprinkle with salt, season with pepper, add up a little bit of vinegar, and then peeled-off potatoes – again in little cubes. Finally, you make a mayonnaise in the mixer – one egg, a little bit of lemon and add up oil slowly while mixing the stuff. Well, and that's all. You add up the mayonnaise to the stuff which you've previously made and stir, right. Serves cold from the fridge. It's really tasty. Will you try it? I bet you will.

METHOD TO OUR MADNESS

The festive season was a long way away from the thoughts of Wolfgang and many others in the GDR and elsewhere during the early days of winter in 1983. But to give readers a chance for the potato salad to go down in comfort, I'll delay referring to his letters until later. Meanwhile, we can take stock of the situation we found ourselves in at this time concerning our fledgling links with the outside world.

Our initiatives were at last beginning to take off. The time had now come for us to move on from our original bit-and-miss approach and to reflect a little upon what we had learned so far, not so much in substance but in method. Our experiences are no doubt familiar to many people.

The first real worry (once you've managed to unearth some addresses) is knowing what to write. With indecisive fingers poised over a sparkling, white sheet of notepaper, you summon up all your powers of concentration and begin:

"Dear Sir/Madame…Ms" – I wonder if they'll understand what that means in Papua New Guinea? If you've managed to get hold of someone's name, so much the better. Then, without any hesitation, you can start off very boldly:

"Dear Mr Alfred George Ramsbottom," or the nearest equivalent in Tibetan, Hindi or Farsi. (Not really much point in worrying about the right order of Christian names in such cases.) However, invariably, it turns out to be a Mrs George that you've unwittingly written to.

Then comes the tricky bit. Before you know what you've done, you see you've come up with an absolutely stunning original gambit which many a child would envy, if only for the right spelling:

"I hope you are well. I am fine."

Hold on a minute, you think as you scrunch up the paper and begin again. I must try and be a bit more sophisticated than that. Soon the words start flowing again:

"I hope you are enjoying a nice spot of warm, sunny weather. Here we are all feeling positively miserable as It's been raining for days on end and none of us can go outside without getting drenched…"

Visions of the African draught slowly begin to filter through into your mind, and feeling highly ashamed of yourself, you reach for another piece of paper, even though you may only have been writing to someone in the darkest reaches of Ireland.

After a few minutes of wearying contemplation. You try another approach:

"Dear friend,

I am the research officer of the West Ibbleside Nitrogen-Depletion Bomb Action Group (WINDBAG) and I am writing to tell you about our opposition to the new highly secret process which I have illustrated on the enclosed diagram. Full particulars of the other members of the group are as follows…"

Any suspicions that someone or something may be looking over your shoulder as you write would probably be more than just imagination. Before you've even walked back from the post-box, you'd be met on the doorstep by a couple of 6'5" 'carpet salesmen'!

Eventually, you do manage to put together a few coherent sentences, seal the envelope and stick on the right stamps when you suddenly think: maybe I should have written it in Serbo-Croat after all – it shouldn't be hard to translate it with a dictionary from the library. Don't you believe it!

In actual fact, there are no hard and fast rules about what you can write. Common sense is all that's needed, but when you sit down to compose a letter, it's surprising how elusive that can be. You have to bear in mind that in letters to ordinary citizens in may countries, it could be very dangerous to them (as well as being highly impertinent) to criticise their government's policies, especially over sensitive areas such as defence or human rights. Letters to official organisations allow you to be more controversial without putting anyone at risk. But if you want to hear from them again, it's better to be constructive with it, rather than condemning things out of hand, as this can only sour the international atmosphere even more. The enclosure of photographs, cards and other pictures may also be welcomed as words are often inadequate in conveying the exact image required.

As for letters received, if one comes from an official source, it is useful to be able to distinguish between the somewhat idealised picture of different aspects of the country and how things are in reality. Often though, this is extremely difficult to gauge. Also, one should attempt to differentiate between the views of policies of the State and the opinions of ordinary people. Correspondence from unofficial sources produces the opposite dilemma in that it may be hard to distinguish between someone's personal opinion and what may be a more representative widely-held attitude. Furthermore, you have to think seriously about whether there might be any ulterior motives behind the letter. For this reason, I would feel much more at ease receiving correspondence from a 'loyal' citizen of another country than from someone who might be looking for a chance to defect.

These are the sorts of hints that we picked up, but that is not to say that it is infallible advice for others to follow. Everyone must do it their own way and according to their own circumstances.

One of the biggest problems of all revolves around what you can do with the information you get from abroad. Whenever possible, we print the entire letters in our newsletter, minus any personal details which might embarrass or implicate the person concerned. The newsletter not only goes to our own members but is also sent to our other foreign contacts, as well as to various national or regional peace organisations over here.

We are also fortunate enough to be allowed to have a regular monthly slot in our Parish Magazine which is distributed to well over half of the village residents. Nothing too blatantly 'political' can be included, but that has still left scope for previous articles on the USSR, Hungary, the GDR, Czechoslovakia, the USA, the Netherlands, Nicaragua and the Third World in general, while nearer to home, Greenham Common has been featured several times.

Copies of significant letters have additionally been sent to people who might be interested, the only limitations on this being time and money. Yet this has still not exhausted all the possibilities, and the search for new ways to make use of the information continues to go on. Hopefully, the art of gossiping over the garden fence will not die out yet.

The assessment of the successes and failures of our efforts was therefore a useful exercise which lasted for several months after which it was possible to clarify the objectives of internationalism much more clearly than before. The aims could be summarised as being these: to disseminate information; to exchange ideas and opinions; to further the build-up of goodwill; to promote the growth of understanding and trust; and to seek opportunities for cooperation with others in joint projects. Closer communication with people elsewhere, furthermore, helps to break down national boundaries and enables us to see others as human beings, in many ways just like ourselves.

Nothing could express this in more human terms than the letter below, written by a group of mothers living in a block of flats in a street in Moscow. It was not actually sent to us but was printed in a Soviet magazine entitled 'XX Century and Peace'. We came across it by pure chance and some of the group replied in similar vein to show their agreement with the sentiments expressed. The letter reads;

We are mothers and irrespective of our nationality, knowledge, outlooks and policy, irrespective of our place of residence, whether it is the USSR, America, Europe, Asia

Africa, India, Australia or Japan, all we, mothers adhere to the same view – the love of our children.

We want our children to live on a happy and peaceful earth, the sun always to shine on them, the sky to be always clear of the terrible clouds of war.

We are longing for peace and let it be peace on earth, on the whole of our planet.

MEANWHILE

World War Three was declared on November 14th 1983. That was the day when the Establishment pulled off its mighty offensive against 'the enemy within'; the day that sealed the fate of any continuing negotiations between the superpowers for some considerable time; and the day when the last pretence of democracy in this country was revealed as being a cruel and cynical joke. In short, that was the fateful day when cruise missiles arrived in Britain.

The majority of the population of this country had been opposed to the deployment of cruise missiles here for several months prior to this. But their views, backed up increasingly by scientific, medical and even military arguments, were completely ignored by those in power. To them, it was much more important to be seen to demonstrate the unity and resolve of NATO, than to continue with the illusion that politicians are the representatives of the people.

Deployment was therefore a political stance which owed virtually nothing to military logic, the launchers being visible and vulnerable and not even very reliable since a quarter of the test flights had ended up as failures. However, it did succeed in re-establishing the hegemony of the United States over its NATO partners, and in re-affirming the power of government over the wishes of the electorate.

This struggle between those who wanted a new toy to play with and those who most definitely did not, became a classic case of confrontation in the eyes of the powerful ranks of the media, who, with very few exceptions, had their bets firmly placed upon the predetermined winning side. What was rarely mentioned in the run up to this 'battle' was that the toys that were going to be delivered to the Newbury nursery were not harmless play-things - chess pieces in the minds of senile strategists in the full bloom of their second childhood. These things go 'bang!' if you don't watch out, and the size of that bang is equivalent to 15 Hiroshima bombs each. Would you let your child play silly games with such nasty toys?

Once the missiles had been sneaked in, the media lost all interest in the 'so-called peace-people' 'Boring', they yawned almost in unison, and looked up how to spell 'bingo'. Even the 'ladies' of Greenham Common, whose appearances and alleged habits had preoccupied editors and shocked genteel Sunday-paper readers, while their commitment and moral integrity had been constantly under attack, now found themselves shunned by the media.

They were not ignored, however, by the police, nor by the bailiffs who still made recurring attempts to evict them from their make-shift camps. Neither were they ignored by another group of

concerned citizens in that vicinity. To ensure that the decent British way of life was maintained, they continued their assaults on the women in the camp with the aid of fire, water, and sometimes, quite unmentionable other things.

Protests against the deployment by thousands of other people resulted in hundreds of arrests. When strong arguments are not listened to and a are even ridiculed by those in power, frustration build up and people seek other ways to get their arguments across, even if this means breaking the law. The police respond to this; the media gloats at the promise of confrontation; and respectable politicians everywhere glare down their noses at this irresponsible behaviour, while plugging more wax into their ears. The general public by this time washes its hands of all responsibility for the armaments-monster, which by default, it has helped to create, and wraps itself up in a self-righteous, law-abiding cloak of respectability.

Oh thou false God of democracy! Oh thou fickle and flighty God of public opinion! Oh thou short-sighted, fork-tongued, waxen-eared God of politicians! What have we done to deserve a pantheon like you!!!

On the very day that cruise missiles arrived in this country, I received a letter from the GDR-GB Friendship Society which finished off with the sentence: "It is not yet too late to prevent the worst!" Unfortunately, in the sense that we had in mind, it already was.

Less than a month later, another letter came from Wolfgang. This one closed with the motto of the GDR's Friendship League: "Friendship among the peoples contributes to safeguarding peace." More specifically, it stated: "You will surely agree with me in that we need dialogue now more urgently than ever before." I couldn't agree more. It's a shame that world leaders did not see it the same way, since the Geneva negotiations had been abruptly broken off, "which is much regretted by all of us," the letter commented.

The Geneva negotiations, it could be remembered, were supposedly concerned with reaching an agreement between the superpowers which would seek to prevent or at least limit the number of new missiles that would be deployed. The actual deployment of cruise missiles in Britain while the talks were still in session had several effects. It torpedoed any chance of any agreement being reached; it left the Soviet Union with little option but to break off negotiations; and it scored a propaganda victory for Western leaders, who pointed their fingers at the Soviet Union for refusing to negotiate my more. Odd, really, because one of the oft-stated aims of deployment was to force the Soviet Union to negotiate against a position of strength. It's not so much a case of being afraid of going naked into the conference chamber, as publicly using the conference chamber dressed in a heavy overcoat and a pair of boxing gloves.

The two letters from the GDR dwelt at length on the alarming international situation which had been put under a strain by the recent deployments. The new missiles, it was stated, were linked with *the US's conception of a 'nuclear first strike for the decapitation of the power structure of the Soviet Union and its allies' and the made conception of a nuclear war that can be victoriously waged in Europe, part of the 'crusade against socialism' announced by the Reagan administration*.

In response to this perceived threat, Erich Honecker, the East German leader, had stated in a speech on November 25th 1983:

The struggle for averting a nuclear world war, for stopping the arms race, will be continued now more than ever before. The obligation to do all we can for safeguarding peace is all the greater and we will fulfil it. It remains the primary aim of the GDR's foreign policy to make its contribution to preventing a nuclear holocaust and to safeguarding world peace.

Now as ever there is no reasonable alternative to the policy of peaceful coexistence of States having different social orders.

To back up these words of Erich Honecker, Wolfgang cited some of the proposals put forward by the member-countries of the Warsaw Pact which had fallen on deaf ears in the West, such as the Non-Aggression Pact, the proposal for a No First Use Treaty on nuclear weapons, and the GDR's offer to make all its territory available for a Nuclear-Weapons Free Zone in Central Europe, provided that West Germany is prepared to do the same, in accordance with the principle of equality and equal security.

The last-named proposal, however, was now affected by the deployment of new American missiles in Europe which would require the adoption of 'counter-measures' in the GDR and Czechoslovakia in order to maintain the military balance. Once again, the USA had started a new spiral in the arms race which would have to be matched by the USSR, it was pointed out.

This now familiar pattern can be traced back as far as 1945. Barely had the dust settled on Hiroshima and Nagasaki than the USA was drawing up detailed plans for a nuclear war against the USSR using some 300 nuclear bombs. The USSR stated that it had consequently felt compelled to develop nuclear weapons too. Since then, the USA has been the first to develop or to deploy nearly every new weapon system, including long-range nuclear bombers, nuclear-powered submarines, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, intercontinental missiles, neutron bombs and cruise missiles.

On this latest occasion, the Soviet Union did not take long in deploying its 'counter-measures' in the GDR and Czechoslovakia amidst a great many misgivings within these countries, even within

official circles, although the extent of these will probably never beknown to us in the West. The new Soviet weapons also did not endear the Soviet Union to the Western peace movement, which felt that the rug had been jerked away from under its feet just when it was beginning to gain ground in the public's opposition to cruise and Pershing missiles.

From a politically tactical point of view then, the deployment of the Soviet missiles was a disaster. From an economic perspective, it was just as much of a mistake because the funds wasted on these pieces of military hardware could have been put to much better use in raising people's standard of living. (The same argument applies equally well to the West.) However, the response was predictable as the notion of maintaining a military balance has always been the rationale of the Soviet defence policy.

But what sort of balance does this entail? There are already enough nuclear weapons in existence to blow the world up many, many times over. It doesn't even make sense to talk of a balance of potential 'first-strike', highly accurate, war-fighting weapons. A soviet computer study reported in the Guardian on July 287th 1984 indicated that it would only take the firepower from one modern submarine to cause a nuclear winter which could end all life in the northern hemisphere. The whole idea of a military balance, which might have been valid in times gone by should therefore be abandoned. These arguments I have frequently put to people in Eastern Europe and will continue to do so. But I also realise another thing which is this: can we really demand that the Warsaw Pact stands back and does nothing in the face of massive rearmament by NATO and the USA in particular (the professed objective of the Reagan administration)? Even if it did, or possibly went further and made sweeping cut-backs in its defences, is it more likely that NATO would reciprocate, or take advantage of the situation? And would you and I ever be told the truth of the situation anyway?

TOPICAL TRENDS

To get back to Britain, the arrival of cruise missiles did not mark the end of the struggle to remove nuclear weapons from these shores. Certainly, there was a feeling of despondency in the air amongst many peace groups, just as there had been when the UN Special Session on Disarmament had ended in confusion and failure in 1982. But spirits soon revived and new ideas and initiatives were seized upon. Whether this resulted in a conscious change in strategy is debateable. More likely, it brought under the limelight certain campaigning methods which had already been used under other circumstances – non-violent direct action, for instance, which had been successfully adopted by, amongst others, the early Christians, Gandhi, the American civil rights movement and the environmental organisation 'Greenpeace'.

This was especially the case at Greenham Common where the peace camp was now more than ever a focal point for practical actions and not just symbolic gestures. Once something comes to be accepted, the task of rallying opposition to it becomes very much more difficult, as the example of slavery and the rise of Fascism in pre-war Germany illustrate only too well. Had it not been for the women of the Greenham Common peace camp, the whole of the secrecy and deception surrounding nuclear weapons in this country would have been kept under wraps, and goodness knows what new weapons of mass destruction would now be cluttering up these islands of ours.

Peace activists were therefore determined that cruise missiles would never be able to come and go at will and 'melt into the countryside', as the Defence Secretary had put it. The aim of the actions at this base were thus to try and prevent the launchers from moving out of the gates, and failing this, to track them down wherever they went, so that they could never become fully operational.

The first of these objectives was prevented by the presence of numerous policemen, whose tactics were to round up the women like cattle while the launchers made their departure. The second aim, that of tracking down the vehicles, was carried out by alerting other peace groups through the means of telephone trees.

Barring interruptions of various kinds, it might take less than an hour before my own phone would ring, often in the wee small hours of the morning, with either a very detailed or else a completely vague sort of message, which I would then have to pass on down the line. Trying to persuade other members of the group that it was absolutely vital that they should get out of their warm beds and do whatever comes naturally at three o'clock in the morning was not an enviable task.

At a more decent time, other campaigners might hold a small local demonstration to make people aware that 'cruise was loose'. One of the points it was hoped to put over to the public was that should the night-time exercises be interpreted by the Soviet Union as a sign that an attack was imminent, the

response might be to blanket bomb the whole of Southern and Central England – the potential range of cruise deployment. Possible eventualities like this are sufficient to ensure that people in the British peace movement will also continue to oppose Soviet missiles pointed in this direction.

In addition, many women from this region frequently visited the Greenham Common peace camp with supplies and to show solidarity and many of them stayed there overnight on a regular basis. The slogan that captures this sense of involvement by women throughout the country in the fate of the camp and what it stood for – 'Greenham Women are Everywhere' – therefore hade a very real meaning.

Yet cruise was not the only target for people's attentions. Another weapon system was assuming more and more importance in England as it had done for some time in Scotland, namely, Trident. the replacement of Polaris nuclear submarines with new submarines equipped with Trident missiles increased the number of targets that could be struck by at least 7 times. Each Trident missile would also have a far greater degree of accuracy, potentially coming within 100 yards of its target, that is, a tenfold increase in precision over Polaris. The flight time of Trident (10-15 minutes to Moscow) combined with its great accuracy could thus enable it to have a role in a war-fighting strategy, rather than being used in a deterrent role. And yet, the government persisted in describing it merely as part of a modernisation programme of our nuclear forces and refused consistently to include it in any arms control negotiations.

Perhaps even more galling was the shear cost of the four Trident submarines – some £10.7 billion (i.e. £10, 700,000,000) according to two House of Commons Select Committees, based upon the pound's value of $1.10 (Guardian, January 30th 1985). Exactly how many hospitals, wards schools, libraries, homes for the handicapped and the elderly, and other social amenities would have to be sacrificed to help meet the bill was something that everyone should have been concerned about. "Defence doesn't come cheap", say the apologists. Neither, does it appear, does aggression, and the promise of four nuclear winter's worth of tax-payers' money.

No wonder then, that opposition to Trident submarines was very widespread and this view was upheld by the overwhelming majority of the British electorate in opinion polls. Even politicians of all parties were dubious about the purchase of Trident. But those who argued against it purely in terms of cost, and advocated putting cruise missiles on submarines as an alternative, were not as peace-loving as they tried to make out. The difference is akin to selling your mother at a ridiculously high price, or offering her up as a bargain offer. The thought of taking her off the market altogether simply did not occur to such people.

The whole question of Trident also helped to bring into focus all manner of wider issues. In 1976, statistics from the US Bureau of Labour had shown that for each billion dollars invested in different sectors, an estimated 75,000 jobs could be created in Defence, 100,000 in Construction, 112,000 in consumer goods, 138,000 in Health Services and 187,000 in Education. Now such figures could be seen to have relevance in a British context. In view of the high unemployment in this country, readers may care to calculate how many additional jobs could theoretically be created by diverting the cost of Trident into these other fields.

We should not forget too that trade unions in certain British defence companies had themselves at one time or another drawn up blueprints for converting defence production to the construction of socially-useful goods. However, the obstacles of company intransigence, government policies and the lack of financial investment in alternative schemes had put the dampers on such plans. Now, with Trident looming up over the horizon, many people began to pay closer attention to such matters in a much more urgent way.

Alternative defence was another area which received considerable interest following the publication of the Alternative Defence Commission's Report in 1983. Its recommendations for a non-nuclear, non-provocative genuine defensive posture by this country predictably did not have any impact upon government policy. But there was nothing unusual about that.

The wider issues also embraced the area of lifestyles. The ecological movement in part reflected by the phenomenal rise of the Greens in West Germany, had begun to question many aspects of modern life. And it challenged the commonly-accepted idea of industrial growth as a panacea for all economic ills. The philosophy could possibly be summarised by an old Quaker saying which should be learned and inwardly digested by everyone: *We do not inherit the earth from our parents, we borrow it from our children.*

This is particularly true with regard to the proliferation of nuclear power stations. The disposal of nuclear waste products and leaks of radioactive particles into the biosphere have already done inestimable damage to the environment and numerous cases of cancer and leukaemia may have resulted from this. High praise is due to those in the mass media who helped to spotlight this. Concern also centred upon the possibility of a 'melt-down' occurring somewhere one day, as almost happened in the case of the accident involving the nuclear reactor at Three Mile Island in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1979.

These types of arguments were presented at the inquiry into the proposed construction of a Pressurised Water Reactor (PWR) at Sizewell in Suffolk. It was also revealed that plutonium from British reactors had gone to America where it was alleged to have been used in the nuclear weapons' programme, despite denials by official sources. The generation of electricity from nuclear power plants might therefore be of only secondary importance – a sort of expensive public relations exercise.

The environmentalists and the peace movement thus came together on these issues and the common causes began to reinforce each other's arguments.

There was also a growing interest taken in the lot of the underprivileged in the Third World. This has previously been the domain of the development organisations and pragmatic Christians. The reluctance of some in the disarmament field to look at world development issues, and a similar reluctance of people in development circles to consider disarmament questions, gradually broke down in the face of continuing disasters in the Third World at a time of unprecedented military spending. This provoked many people into delving deeper and discovering far stronger links between disarmament and development than previously realised.

The incorporation of these wider issues into existing campaigns gave rise to three major trends. The first of these was the increasing amount of specialisation that took place between groups. The range of subject matter and activities had grown enormously, but the number of people able or willing to devote their time to them had not grown proportionally. To cope with this situation and to avoid duplicating other's efforts, groups tended to specialise on those areas to which they were most suited. Those located near peace camps tended to become very absorbed by them, whereas those further away could afford to look at other issues, such as world development. Those with many young members, principally in big towns and cities, went in for lots of action – demonstrations and such like. In contrast, those with more elderly members took to their pens with a vengeance. But since there was usually quite a cross-section of the population in any one group, it was almost inevitable that some members would always feel frustrated.

Another trend was shown in the greater cooperation which developed between groups. In my own county, for instance, cooperation has been extremely valuable in sharing experiences and materials, as well as in coordinating large-scale projects. This has been facilitated by different umbrella groups of a county or regional kind. Various arrangements have also evolved over time between groups within certain localities, and the territorial basis of groups has shown signs of disappearing where special interests overlap.

A third trend revealed that peace groups were gradually becoming accepted by other people in their communities. The necessity of adjusting to local circumstances resulted in a more flexible and individualistic approach to campaigning, a lesson which was often arrived at the hard way. Maybe a few compromises had to be made, but if by so doing the arguments could get through to more people then so much the better. For in the long run, peace is something which everyone wants, even the manufacturers of nuclear weapons.

HOME BREW

As anyone who has ever lived in one knows, a village, especially one in the south of England, is not the most ideal of places to hold an anti-nuclear demonstration. Nor is it the best spot in the world in which to stage a 'die-in' to illustrate very dramatically what the effects of a nuclear war would be like. Friends who happen to be passing by tend to be unaccountably struck by an acute case of myopia and simply do not see you…ever again. The milkman comes up to you as you are lying flat-out on the pavement and solemnly ask whether this means you won't be requiring your usual two pints any more (that is, if the priest hasn't already rushed over to give you the last rites). The jovial landlord is heard to remark that it's the longest prostrate operation he's ever heard of. And any dog that is loose in the area naturally assumes that you must be playing a new game and playfully sets about trying to chew your foot off…unless he has other things on his mind. Altogether then, it's not a terribly conducive atmosphere for meditating upon the horrors of nuclear war, let alone for attempting to convince your fellow village residents that they should instantly stop pruning their Cox Orange Pippins and come and join you in the dust.

Placards and banners, which stand out like sore thumbs, almost certainly seem to require planning permission, with at least two months advance notice before the event. And heaven help you if you go ahead without proper authorisation! You'll never live it down!

Leaflets through letter-boxes can also prove to be a wasted effort, since they are almost invariably interpreted, whatever the wording, as yet another jumble sale, except for the odd person who rings you up to ask for a quote on the replacement windows which he things you must be advertising in a devious kind of way. The sight of pounds and pounds of unread printing going up in bonfire smoke is not something to warm the heart.

Even publicity for quite respectable events can be a major test of ingenuity. If the printing or wording on a poster betrays as much as the slightest leftward slant, you will find that no shops will accept them to put in their windows. And anywhere else you attempt to put them up will be doomed to failure as they rapidly disappear once your back is turned. For the big unmentionable crime (or should that be 'sin'?) in rural England is that of being 'political'.

But all is not complete despair, otherwise we would all have given up and gone home long ago. There are ways and means of going about things, and once you stop trying to behave like evangelical missionaries amongst the pagans, and muck in with the other societies in picking up sweet-papers, or supporting the communal egg-and-spoon race, you find that there is often much more support for the cause of peace than you had ever imagined.

The picture of village life is of course highly generalised. But I'm sure that people in a similar position will understand perfectly what I'm talking about.

As for our own peace group, I think it would be reasonable to say that it has always felt itself to be very much a part of village life, not so much because we have been accepted by others specifically, but because our members are nearly all highly involved in many of the other organisations and churches as mentioned earlier. Whether we want to be or not we are first cousins to them all. This has its benefits and its limitations. We have been able to liaise with other societies without too much difficulty, and this has led to close cooperation on several occasions. However, we do have to watch what we do so that nothing alienates other people, which, in a small community, would be disastrous.

Similarly, too close an identification with any one political party could polarise the rest of the residents into those who might support us, and others who would automatically oppose us without taking us on our own merits.

This exposé does not imply that we know precisely what to do for the best at all times. We have often made bad mistakes and will undoubtedly continue to do so. Hopefully though, we will also learn from these mistakes and make the necessary changes in the future, yet that's always easier said than done. For instance, if ever there were a 'Cold Shoulder' award for the best non-attendance at events, we would be sure to win it, hand down. But it would be just our luck if people turned up in droves, should word get round about such a competition.

These considerations lay in our minds as we emerged from our hibernation once the New Year had crept up on us and we put our heads together to see if we could make 1984 as much unlike 1984 as possible. For a start, we would continue to seek to cooperate with other village societies on the one hand, and to co-ordinate our efforts with other peace groups on the other. In practice, this meant that the main emphasis would be on joining in with the CND group in the neighbouring town for any protest actions against nuclear weapons, while at home, we would pay particular attention to the positive aspects of peace work.

The sort of actions involved in the former have already been discussed. Regarding the latter, there were three basic areas to work in. Firstly, there was the opportunity to do things like holding stalls at local fetes to help raise funds for ourselves and other organisations. The second area related to our continuing involvement in the development field, such as celebrating One World Week, collecting for OXFAM, and, as it turned out later, helping to raise money for the local Ethiopian disaster appeal.

In this latest connection, it would only be right to mention that one of the shopkeepers started a fund for Ethiopia which soon became the focus for all the efforts of other village societies. The response was incredible. The village has a reputation for its initiative and its generosity, and once

again it lived up to the mark. We realised, however, that going beyond the expressions of concern and drawing attention to the issues which lie behind world poverty and hunger would prove to be a lot more difficult.

The third and final aspect of our campaigning over the year ahead related to the development of our international network which had seen a lot of headway during the previous year. We may not continue with this topic, keeping in mind what has been said about the background to our efforts.

MESSAGE PARLOUR

There's nothing like a touch of personal involvement to stimulate interest. A good deal of curiosity had been created by the letters we had received so far, with the expectation of getting a lot more in the future. To help matters along, we reloaded the barrel with some fresh powder – an explosive mixture of goodwill messages and a varied assortment of photographs, greetings cards and booklets, together with a fuse of long epistles and newsletters. Thus, a volley of peace and friendship was released in many directions and reports soon reached us of the consequences of our actions.

One of the most heartfelt messages was sent to Nicaragua. The chairwoman of a local CND branch was amongst a women's party that had been invited over there by a Nicaraguan women's organisation. The people under the Sandinista Revolutionary government, which toppled the 45-year dictatorship of the Somoza family in 1979, are very proud of the great strides taken in the welfare programmes they have initiated. Before the revolution, half of the townspeople and eight out of ten of the peasants were illiterate. Four years later, with the assistance of some 60,000 young volunteers who went out into the countryside to teach people, around 80 percent of all adults were able to read. In the health sector, 200 new health centres had been built, 60,000 health workers trained, and half the population vaccinated against polio, measles and tetanus. Infant mortality had also been cut by a third. In agriculture, 12,000 landless families had been given land to grow food and its production had risen. Privately-owned farms, which were encouraged, produced three quarters of the country's food and most of the cotton crop.

Yet at the same time, the American-backed 'Contras' had set fire to crops, killed doctors, teachers, midwives and development workers, and made continuous attacks upon harbour installations, customs posts, airports and cooperative farms. The Nicaraguans wanted to show other people what was going on and volunteers from many countries, including the American Christian organisation 'Witnesses for Peace', had visited the country to help on the land, or to compile reports which could inform people back home about the true state of affairs.

We were very happy to be given the opportunity to send a message of solidarity with this member of the British delegation, and were delighted to hear, when she reported back to us, that our message had been left in a primary school where the children might one day do a project on our village.

Perhaps it was seeing slides of women, three to a bed in one hospital, or sensing the contagious spirit of admiration and sympathy for the Nicaraguan people clearly felt by the speaker, but the evening finished off with a handsome collection for the Container Appeal. Organised by War on Want and the Nicaraguan Solidarity Campaign, the container consisted of humanitarian aid, such as first-aid equipment, pencils, scissors, and so on, for the inhabitants of this plucky, besieged country.

Another goodwill message was taken to the Soviet Union for us by the chairman of another group who went with a party of ex-servicemen. We thought it would be only fitting to send a greeting from one of our members who had been a former soldier himself. It was nice to learn that a retired colonel in one of the local Peace Committees had been especially pleased to receive the message, coming as it did from a fellow veteran. This only goes to show that a few well-chose words written in the spirit of peace can break down barriers and touch people profoundly.

Local and international cooperation also came to the fore in the collation of children's pictures from East European countries which was put together by several people, including a former convenor of our group who now lives elsewhere. The exhibition comprised of paintings from the USSR, Hungary, the GDR, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia, together with a selection of children's poems from Halle in the GDR. The one below, for example, was written by a 17-year old girl called Suzanne.

COMPARISON

You, you are sure of yourself in everything you do,

As for me, I'm afraid of making decisions.

You know your path and your goal.

I don't even know what I want.

Your day is regulated and well thought out,

My next moment is uncertain.

You say you know what people are like,

I don't even know myself at all.

You live by and for your duty.

I live just for me.

I admire and pity you.

No-one would know from reading this what country the girl comes from, or that it even matters. A contribution of a different kind is also sure to ring familiar bells with younger people. It was written by a 9-year old called Andrea.

The husband I want must be brave and good and he must be able to do lots of things.

Perhaps he will be called Jan. I also want a white horse, a dog and a guinea pig.

The paintings, especially some of those done by children in the Soviet Union, were very eye-catching, highly intricate and really quite astounding. We put on the exhibition in one of the side rooms in the village hall and several mothers and their young offspring who were in another room drifted in to see them as they were leaving. There can surely not be a better way of bridging the distance between minds than through the eyes of a child.

All the grown-ups present were also captivated by the paintings, so we wrote to the Soviet Women's Committee, which had been responsible for sending some of them over, to say how much we admired them. A short time later we received a reply which stated:

We are pleased to hear that the drawings of our children about peace appeal to you. And we are ready to continue corresponding with your group and exchange opinions on various problems of interest because it is our belief that such communication helps to improve relations between our two countries and to create an atmosphere of trust between people.

At present we are preparing to mark International Women's Day on March 8. In this country it is a national holiday, and in the days leading up to it there will be meetings and rallies at all factories and offices, in the villages and towns of this country, to mark the holiday. In response to a call by the Women's International Democratic Federation, March 8 celebrations this year will be held for the purpose of rallying women around the world for opposition to nuclear war.

By this time, we had also had a letter from the Soviet Peace Committee to whom we had written sometime earlier about the possibility of twinning with a Soviet town or village in order to learn more about their way of life, and vice versa. Our request had been forwarded to a Regional or Republican Peace Committee. The letter added:

Over 90 thousand meetings, demonstrations and other manifestations of more than 50 million peace supporters took place all over the Soviet Union during the October of 1983 including the Week of Actions for Disarmament announced by the United Nations. The International Week of Actions against the Deployment of Pershing IIs and cruise missiles in Europe was held in December. We have received a lot of letters from

hundreds of cities on marches, meetings and demonstration under the slogans: 'No Nuclear War!' 'Peace to our Planet', 'No Nuclear Weapons in Europe!' where Soviet people express their concerns caused by a new turn in the nuclear arms build-up in Europe."

After reading this, can anyone really doubt the earnest desire of the Soviet people to live in peace?

Besides sending letters and goodwill messages, we felt the need to educate ourselves more fully about things East European. Out knowledge was somewhat increased by two talks that were given to us early in the year: one on Russian and the other on the GDR. The first of these concerned a holiday spent in the far norther city of Leningrad in the depths of the Russian winter. What made it particularly enlightening was the forthright character of our guest speaker. "She's a woman who doesn't mince her meat," a foreign friend of hers remarked sometime later. The most important advice we can pass on from her talk is to inform anyone intending to visit the Soviet Union to be sure to take several extra pairs of tights along. It's amazing how quickly and easily things get done, if you've got the right credentials!

The talk on the GDR, by contrast, was a much more scholarly and in-depth appraisal of the educational system in that country. The man who presented this talk had taught there himself several years ago and had fairly recently spent a month in that country making a study of different schools. We had rather hope that his informative talk would have attracted many teachers from this area, but it was not to be. The 'Cold Shoulder' award was still within our grasp!

In addition to these first-hand accounts of life in Eastern Europe, our enlightenment was increased by the discovery that English-language editions of magazines from these countries were readily obtainable in Britain. The Soviet magazine 'Sputnik', a digest of articles on a wide range of subjects, was soon arriving through my letter-box each month. I seem to remember that when the American forces invaded Grenada, they came across a copy of this magazine, which proved to them beyond any doubt that the island was already under the domain of the Soviet Union. May I take this opportunity, therefore, to state for the benefit of any American marines which might even now be heading in this direction that I am <u>not</u> a Communist, nor do I expect I shall ever be one. But there-again, neither are the Sandinistas…and look what's happening in Central America!

ZEST FROM THE WEST

While there's still some time, perhaps I'd better hurry up and redress some of the balance by announcing that the sun had not set on the West while these flickers of light were being shed on the East. In answer to my letter to Pennsylvania after we had planted a 'Peace' rose in October 1983, I got a letter in the New Year from a member of a peace group from that State. The letter read as follows:

Dear Paul,

I appreciated very much what you wrote about the work you and your community are doing to stop the Euro-missiles from being placed in your backyards. It made me feel much compassion for your situation - the helplessness and frustration of having the US bring over our missiles to your country. "What are we doing to these people," is what went through my mind. "What are they supposed to do when another country brings over these awful weapons," was another one of my thoughts. My sincerest and deepest apologies for what my government is doing. As adults you would think that world leaders would have more sense than their actions show. But maybe they haven't really become adults and are still in some regressed adolescent stage, still acting like children and not knowing how to get rid of anger towards one another.

I'm not sure of the population of your village, but you have contacted in me, another living in a small rural area. Our town only has about 6,000 people and the county only has 35,000 – mostly very conservative, uptight, machismo-oriented. Might makes right and we (the US) have to defend the world against the evils of the Russian devil. Not only is that the line from our President, but a belief of many,

On the other had there are the many, although few are ballsy enough to come out and say what they really believe, who know that what the US leaders are doing is insane, inhumane and plain wrong. We have a small group that has been meeting since the freeze first began. We have put on a number of gatherings, from the town's first peace march two years ago to prayer meetings in the park and have shown a number of anti-nuclear films in a local church. This past fall, two catholic priests spoke about the bishops' pastoral letter which condemned nuclear weapons and their use. The bishops,

by the way, are working on a new pastoral letter which will have something to say about capitalism. I'm sure this will be a shock to the devout of the catholic church, but hopefully many will follow their leaders and understand their logic.

We've managed to get 50 or 60 people to our happenings, but we also experience a lot of frustration and futility in really getting more people to be responsive to our government's actions.

I have been active in writing letters to the editor of our local newspaper and at one time became the scapegoat for all the nukes-for-peace fanatics, who did a bit of name-calling. It bothered me off and on, but between myself and others we continued our letter-writing to the conservative local paper.

As you know there are millions upon millions who disagree with what our government is doing and many in government are as frustrated and dismayed by the hawkish majority in Congress. Maybe, just maybe we will oust Reagan from his throne this fall and have someone with a bit more worldly understanding of human compassion.

The freeze and peace movement in our country is very strong and wide-spread throughout, affecting people from all walks of life, in fact I believe we are a majority. Prayers and a unity of human consciousness towards peace and bread for all beings on the planet will have to be our work into the next few years.

My heart goes out to you and your friends with what you must endure from our leaders. God bless you.

Bob

P.S. Something that a minister friend of mine is going with a town in Germany may be something that our community and your community can also do - somehow joining together as related communities for peace and nuclear disarmament of for a nuclear freeze. Since I live in a very conservative area, if there is any interest in your village of the Council proposing this to our City Council, it would probably get more interest than if I went ahead and proposed this.

I realise it's been months since receiving your letter and other information and gotten excited about the fact that William Penn had married a lady from your area. I thought at the time it would be a good topic to draw attention to how we are all related. Well we are, and maybe that relationship between Pennsylvania and your village can be part of the basis for becoming sister communities.

Now that I'm writing to you, unknown friend, my fingers want to keep going, but other things to be done.

God bless you and the others in the movement."

It goes without saying that we were all quite thrilled to get this letter. The impression that all Americans were draping themselves in the Stars and Stripes, and itching for a fight to preserve their clean-cut, auto-oriented, consumer-packaged, Heavenly-favoured way of life, was dispelled by the contents of this one envelope. As the time for the deployment of cruise missiles had drawn near and they had been placed not in our 'backyards' but in our front gardens, it was perhaps easy to overlook the efforts of the American peace movement in trying to prevent nuclear escalation. In fact, we were almost as much starved of information about the activities of the American Freeze Movement in the media as we were of the work done by peace organisations in Eastern Europe. Letters like the one above were therefore like a breath of fresh air and gave us moral support.

Two ideas arose from the letter which we felt could be followed up. One was his idea of getting our two communities to twin. We did not set the wheels in motion immediately as there were too many other things on the go at that particular time. We also had to think how best we could present the idea to the Council for consideration.

The other idea was that of forming a three-way link between this American group, the Soviet Women's Committee and ourselves. Accordingly, one of our members wrote off to the other two parties to suggest it. Unfortunately, no response was received from the Soviet Women's Committee. And from the other side of the ocean, we learned in due course that although Bob had handed to the letter to a woman friend, she had given it back to him unopened. Surprising, but it does serve to highlight the urgent need to break down taboos in people's minds. Groups like ours could do a lot worse than to act as potential catalysts it would seem.

A few months after receiving Bob's letter, one of those never-to-be-repeated lost opportunities occurred. I had just cycled in as far as the shops, and on returning home noticed a slip of paper sticking out of the letter-box. 'No nukes', it stated and was signed by a friend of Bob's. What a

chance we missed to have a long chin-wag about our respective countries and peace groups. One good thing has come out of it anyway. I've managed to lop many minutes off my time spent in the saddle, just in case anyone else from Pennsylvania turns up unexpectedly on the doorstep!

The next letter from Bob arrived in mid-August and had been written on August 8th – the day before the anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki. The impending American election was very much on his mind and the letter gives an interesting glance at that neglected section of the population which did not vote for Ronald Reagan. The letter read:

Dear Paul,

Thank you for the continuing letters and information. I've just read a reprint of an article from Atlantic Monthly that discussed the nuclear weapons issue. One point that stood out clearly is that we in the US really have no conception of what war is like, except for those who have fought them on foreign lands.

Russians and Europeans have suffered so much in this century and in the past, having one war after another, with so many millions killed and injured. We here, with our heads not quite in the sand, still deny the existence, or at least the possibility, of war on these lands. And, I think even if one isn't denying that possibility, many just go about their business as if it won't be so bad. I believe there's even a government acceptance of it happening, and with 130,000,000 dead and dying, the living will clean it all up and get on with rebuilding the country. The main concern that the government has is that we don't panic, but remain cool and get on with taking care of things at hand.

I'm sure that you've heard about the defense department official who publicly stated that with a shovel we can each dig a hole, put a door on top and then have someone cover it with dirt. That's all we will need for survival. Except for the last man - who's going to throw dirt on his door? We know it ain't going to be Reagan.

The free movement goes on here very powerfully, and had a large impact on the Democratic convention, with a number of freeze propositions being included in the Democratic platform. In some quarters the idea of 'make the freeze the issue' will have a lot of influence on how this election comes out.

Our freeze group has had a lull for a number of months, but with the election coming up this fall, we have begun to meet again to plan how we can affect our conservative Republican community. It's so Republican that even the Democrats vote Republican in national elections, although there are some people that feel things will be different this time around.

So our group is planning on working either within the Democratic party or will work with a 'Citizens for Mondale/Ferraro' label if the Democratic party here is not doing much. We will see.

Many are feeling and I'm sure Europeans are also, that if Reagan is not defeated the world comes closer to nuclear war. It could be so, he hasn't made any attempt to lower the level of tensions between countries. Even thinking that as possible, is enough to make us all work hard to defeat him.

Although Mondale is not a saviour type, he certainly has made many promises about the freeze, getting out of Latin America, and trying to rectify some of the wrongs of the past. Well, he is only one man, and we all know that the military-industrial complex is what's behind all this anyway. The conversion of military plants into more useful industries has been getting a lot of attention from the peace movement having conferences off and on and trying to work out ways to influence industries on how to redo their plants.

Tonight, we're having a sing-gathering of peace folks to commemorate the Japan bombings. We've done more public things in the past and this is mere word of mouth, with one press release, and will mostly have folks that are plugged in together through friendships. We will actually have a public gathering in two weeks in our central park, which is surrounded by a few churches, asking the congregations to come and join after their own services, to have a collective memorial service for the Japan bombings. We'll see how that one goes.

The Ferraro V.P. is a big deal here. A lot of support, and maybe as much resistance from the old timers, but in the minds of many she could be the catalyst for a very big

change in America, maybe in the world. When considering the balance needed from the feminine side of life, we can't but all make out good with a woman in such a high office in the US. But then, I think of Indira Gandhi and Meir who were not as non-violent as we would like to see a female leader be.

Thanks again for keeping in touch. I'll talk about you guys tonight at our gathering and maybe we can discuss how to hook up with each other during One World Week.

Peace and blessings to you and your friends.

Bob

In the light of the result of the American election, it is useful to be shown evidence which proves that there are still many non-trigger-happy folk left in that country. But oh how despondent they must feel now!

During the summer months, we also heard from New Zealand – a thank-you note for the T-shirts and news that a large crowd had marched through the city of Wellington (a Nuclear-Free Zone) to protest against the arrival there of a US nuclear-ship. We also heard again from the Netherlands, informing us that 63 percent of the Dutch population was by that time against nuclear weapons. The strength of the peace movement had unsettled the government and a decision on whether or not to go ahead with the deployment of cruise missiles was later to be postponed.

Democracy therefore looked in a more healthy state than in our country. But there were signs that at least some politicians on the right here were beginning to think about disarmament in a more realistic and constructive way. In a speech in a town nearby, the Conservative Member of Parliament for our constituency surprised everyone by stating the following:

It is probable that little can be achieved until Russia returns to the conference table. So, first and foremost, in order to ease Russia's return, it is certainly worth considering re-structuring arms control talks to embrace all European missile talks and all nuclear weapons (including our own and the French) so that new negotiations could address the whole problem and not just bits of it.

Having made reasonably accurate identifications of all of the parts of the polyglot nuclear arsenal, those at the conference table could then consider a limited interim agreement to scale down the number of launchers and limit the number of warheads on each side. Such an interim agreement could break the present log jam – and would provide the basis for a later more comprehensive treaty which is the treaty, and the agreement, we all want…

When arranging these new talks, it will be important not to forget the need to resume talks about control of conventional arms…and the control of chemical warfare and of military competition in space must also be firmly on the international agenda; these subjects are at least as important as the de-escalation of nuclear weapons.

As they say in the House: “Hear, hear”.’

HUNGARY FOR NEWS

Important developments beginning in the spring of 1984 gathered momentum during the summer months and reached a climax in the late autumn. For many reasons which will become clear later, it was to prove a mighty landmark in the history of not only our own group but of other peace groups in the county too. East-West relations amongst ordinary people like ourselves would never be the same again.

In response to the letter and calendar I had sent to Hungary, I was delighted to receive a letter back from someone in the Disarmament section of the Hungarian Peace Council. He thanked us for sending these items and promised to provide us with more information about the activities of the Hungarian peace movement in the future.

True to his word, we soon received an Open Letter from Hungary, written during the Month of Peace and Friendship (9 May – 9 June), an extract of which stated:

The Hungarian language is not one of the major languages. Nevertheless, when raising our voices for peace, dialogue between nations and joint actions, our words are understood, since they are based on the unity of our people, their loyalty to humanist ideas, their work to build socialism for the benefit of our country. Up to 1945, Hungarian history was characterized by lost wars, internal conflicts and crushed revolutions. Today we fear losing a free and peaceful present and long for an ever more untroubled future. Irrespective of sex, ideology and profession, we are convinced that the small and big nations have the same interests, namely that the goods produced should not promote the arms race and military spending, but the health, physical and mental development of our children, as well as scientific and technological development serving mankind.

This Month of Peace and Friendship is a good opportunity for our workers to act jointly in defence of progress and peace, and to state that we side with all fraternal and benevolent people and movements of our home, Europe, struggling to defend life.

Our task is to overcome all dividing factors and act jointly to avert the war danger and create an atmosphere based on confidence and guaranteeing a lasting peace for our continent.

It is only through joint actions that the dangers threatening the world can be eliminated and a world of peace ensured for future generations.

Beautiful and very stirring words, I think most people would agree.

A few months later we were sent a copy of the Hungarian Peace Council's magazine 'Peace News and Views', together with an Informative Open Letter which fully described the activities held during the Month of Peace and Friendship. These included:

- Over 5,000 programmes (mass rallies, debates in workplaces, meetings of church representative, scientific conferences and cultural events throughout the country;
- Drawing competitions in a number of schools under the titles: 'Pictures of Peace' and 'Peace Through a Child's Eyes''
- A nationwide 'Peace Song' competition, which attracted 651 entries, mostly pop songs written by young people;
- The showing of the Japanese films 'Prophecy' and 'Lost Generation', filmed almost immediately after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, to 150 secondary school children in Budapest;
- A trip down the Danube on a special 'Peace-boat' for 120 young workers and students, calling in at places en route for various events and finishing up in the town of Gyor. Here a conference was held, attended by members of youth peace clubs and spontaneous peace groups, the objective being to give everyone the chance to exchange ideas and experiences;
- A 'Peace-train' ride – the initiative of a new peace group of the Hungarian State Railways – which took 450 passengers of all ages from Budapest to Cegléd on June 7. The town was adorned with flags and glowers when they arrived for a rally, at which there was a call for the continuation of détente and 'For a Europe Free from Nuclear Weapons'.

The back page of 'Peace News and Views' was devoted to an article about the 10th National Peace Conference, the first for six years, to be held on October 27-28. A programme for the next two years would be discussed and adopted by the expected 600-800 participants. Regarding specific details, it stated: "We aim to enlist the increasing support of local initiatives and encourage the formation of smaller local peace communities." And on international aspects: "We urge a dialogue and joint actions with all those persons who are prepared to take up the cause of easing world tension and averting the danger of war and a nuclear catastrophe."

I must admit, I got very excited about this. It was perfectly clear that something very important was happening in Hungary which it was not necessary to read between the lines to guess at. In effect, what was being said was that it was hoped to bring about immediate changes which would revolutionise the peace movement in Hungary. Instead of directives from the top, local initiatives would be encouraged (note the choice of that word) from local peace groups. This was surely as significant in peace circles as the fostering of private enterprise in commercial aspects of Hungarian life.

To appreciate these proposals even more, it could be useful to know that one of the criticisms sometimes levied at Peace Committees is that they tend to be too bureaucratic and out of touch with the feelings and desires of the younger generation. This, then, was a serious attempt to rectify the situation, which shows that the Hungarian Peace Council was well aware of its possible shortcomings.

Tied in with this was the repeated statement proposing a dialogue with peace groups elsewhere, particularly in the West. This again was addressing a criticism which had mainly led to the formation of an unofficial organisation called 'Dialogue' some years ago. But, at the European Nuclear Disarmament (END) Conference in Perugia in July 1984, the representatives from 'Dialogue' and the Hungarian Peace Council had shared a common platform and issued a joint statement. This showed that changes were already in the air, and prompted Ron Huzzard, the Secretary of Quaker peace and Service, to observe: "Clearly both Eastern and Western countries can learn from the Hungarians." Indeed, what starts in Hungary one day is often emulated by other East European countries the next. Maybe Western countries would do well to follow some of their examples too. Now readers may understand why I felt so excited about all of this.

By chance, I had just heard from a friend in the neighbouring county to ours who informed me that he would soon be spending a month in that country. I immediately wrote to him asking if he would be willing to take any messages with him to the Hungarian Peace Council. And when he replied that he would be delighted to do so, I contacted many local peace groups to fill them in on the picture, suggesting that they too might care to send a message. Support for the brave new ventures was extremely important and now was an opportune moment to show solidarity and friendship.

Two members of our peace group sent messages – the eldest, a woman in her nineties, and the youngest, a teenager of 17 years of age. This mixture of young and old perhaps could be seen as symbolising a new beginning with roots firmly in the past. The intervening years between their ages also encompassed the rest of us who similarly shared in the spirit of goodwill. Whether each one of our members remembered to face east on Saturday 28th October (the last day of the Conference), I'm not sure about. Yet I know for certain that several of us did on the following day…but I'll come to that presently.

GERMANE TO THE EAST

Besides Hungary, our minds were also very much on another East European country during this time. Letters from both the church group and the Friendship Society in East Berlin provided a lot of food for thought, which resulted in some new 'recipes.

Our correspondent in the church wrote to tell us of some problems they were currently having.

We are in the course of rebuilding our Parish Rooms, to put in new electrical installations, new plumbing and redecorating. As it is at times impossible in the GDR to get all the materials one wants or at the very least, extremely difficult, we have had great problems in assembling all the necessary items. In this way a lot of time was lost just buying the things. In addition, several of the more active people have moved to the Federal Republic. Their tasks have now to be distributed among the rest, i.e. we have to do them ourselves. In other words, life is not exactly easy at the moment.

He went on to tell us that their pastor had been required to appear before the State's Attorney General and an inquiry was instituted against him. It was also suggested to him that he should leave the country. But he wished to continue with his church ministry and peace work and refused to do so. The inquiry was suspended, but not dropped.

A further letter informed us about a Peace Workshop which had taken place on July 8th. This was, I quote, quite a success despite some initial difficulties, not with the State, but with our own church. There was to have been some kind of censorship but fortunately there was resistance to this. To my regret, Ecology became the main topic and of course there is nothing against that subject, but many people think this a sign of resignation because the siting (of the missiles) could not be prevented. The topics of Missiles and the Arms Race were there, but not in the same measure as before.

He added that friends of theirs in a church in West Germany were no longer allowed to visit them.

We are very sad about this and hope that our State will soon behave in a reasonable way again. We do not want a counter-revolution but only to live together in peace.

The writer gave particular emphasis to two future events which would take place in consecutive months. In November the 'Peace Decade' would be held as on previous years, which promised to be extremely interesting. A month earlier would see the celebration of the 90th anniversary of their

church with 9 events planned to help raise money for urgent repairs to the roof and the heating system.

By a coincidence, it was also the anniversary of another place of worship that year. The local Friends Meeting House to which some of us were attached, including the person who corresponded with the church peace group in East Berlin on our behalf, was celebrating its 200th anniversary. Since Quakers have always acted as bridge-builders for peace, it might not be a bad idea to start looking forward to the next 200 years by doing something constructive in this line. And if you're going to think in terms of religious denominations, then why not include other churches in the area to add weight to any projects which might be undertaken. Such were the strands of thought-processes which occupied our minds in search of a brainwave. That, in the end, was left to the imagination of another of our members who happened to be a member of the congregation of our village church. The links abroad were being matched with links at home.

Meanwhile, we were digesting the contents of another letter from the GDR. The secretary of the GDR-GB Friendship Society had written to tell us about various exchange visits that had arisen in connection with the 1983 Agreement on Friendship between Manchester and Karl-Marx-Stadt. A student orchestra from a school of music in Manchester had visited the GDR in April. Later that summer, 20 children from that city would spend a holiday in an International Children's Holiday Camp in Karl-Marx-Stadt. In the opposite direction, a party of young people and others would be visiting Manchester in October, when a large exhibition on Karl-Marx-Stadt would be on display in the Town Hall.

The letter contained one particular sentence which stood out as if illuminated by a strip of neon lighting. Here it is: Bearing in mind the benefits to mutual understanding and to the common cause of peace and friendship that such activities have produced. We would be very glad with your help to get to know people from your region, local peace groups as well as other circles you are in touch with, who might be interested in talks and events with us.

This was wonderful news. We had been given the greenlight to press ahead with finding ways of furthering cooperation between people here and in the GDR. No-one could say that this was just rhetoric – the example of Manchester and Karl-Marx-Stadt was clear for all to see. Now it was up to us to take it a stage further in our own locality.

Gradually the different loose threads began to combine and plans materialised. One of these concerned the rehabilitation of the idea of getting our village to twin with other villages. With strong

suggestions coming from the GDR and Pennsylvania, it was now a good time to air the subject in public. So I wrote to the Parish Council, enclosing the pertinent letters and asking whether it would be interested in pursuing the matter. The idea of ourselves, this time meaning the village not just the peace group, acting as a catalyst was also implicit in maintaining a balance between East and West.

To my surprise, the Council replied that after some discussion it had been decided that a separate meeting would be held in mid-November to which representatives from all the local societies would be invited to attend. The local newspaper showed an interest in the matter too. If nothing else were to come of it, at least it would have given people something to chew over which would have been considered unthinkable not so long ago.

Even more publicity was given to the idea in a village nearby where several members of the Council and other residents (but of course, not everyone) were quite enthusiastic about the possibility of their own village twinning with one in the GDR. But first, more information was urgently required.

All of these new developments seemed to point to one thing. Even if the question of cycling to the German Democratic Republic was definitely out, that did not rule out other ways of getting there. I could discuss the matter of twinning with the Friendship Society, find out more information about life in general, and visit the church with which we had links in order to strengthen the bonds of friendship between Christians here and there. The objectives of a proposed visit had been drawn up; all that remained were the fine details to consider. The decision had been made.

No sooner had I made up my mind to swap a bicycle saddle for an airplane seat, than I had an unexpected letter from the British Peace Assembly – the organisation you may remember which had handled the arrangements for the British delegation to the World Peace Assembly in Prague in June 1983. I had kept in touch with the BPA and put them on our mailing list for our newsletter which revealed our developing network of contacts overseas.

Since I was still very much involved in local campaigning and had some knowledge of the international dimensions of peace work at grassroots level, it was thought that I might make an "interesting contribution" to a forthcoming peace conference in Finland. Being in a position to go at short notice was probably also an important factor.

I felt highly flattered, but feared that the expense involved would almost certainly rule out the chances of visiting the GDR on which I had now firmly set my sights. This was no problem, however, as I would be subsidised to go. Not having a definite date yet in mind when I would be leaving for the GDR, I was able to accept their offer and leave the preparations for my other trip for when I got back. A busy time lay ahead.

GONE FINNISH

The first thing that comes into your mind when you say the word 'Finland' is undoubtedly a sauna. I must confess that I've never ever considered having one. The nearest thing to it that I've experienced is walking into the kitchen after forgetting to switch off the kettle. But once the window's been flung wide open, especially on a cold winter's day, the very last thing I would dream of doing is diving into my neighbour's six-inch deep fish pond. I don't know who would be more astonished if I did so – my neighbour, or the goldfish!

Just to reassure myself that I would be able to 'bare' (if that's the right word) a long period of discussions without unnecessarily letting off steam or getting in a sweat I consulted a book on Finland and discovered there's a lot more to the country than saunas: the language for a start – that's one thing I would keep my distance from! There are also hardy communities of Lapps, mile upon mile of forests and lakes, an awful lot of reindeer and if the photographs in the book were anything to go by, a fair number of blond buxom, blue-eyed bathers up to their eyebrows in a very thin mist. Perhaps the thought of saunas wasn't so bad after all…

One additional piece of information I came across was of particular local interest. In a churchyard in the nearby town are buried some Finnish prisoners of war captured during an attack on an island called Åland in the Baltic Sea in the year 1854. This highly pertinent piece of information, I thought, would be just the thing to refer to at the beginning of a speech. But when the opportunity arose, could I remember the name of that island? It was hard enough remembering the few points I wanted to make, let alone that!

Come the day of my departure I travelled up to Heathrow where I joined more of the British delegates – three organisers from the British Peace Assembly, and one of the 'Alconbury Nine' – a member of the Alconbury Peace Camp who had been arrested and charged with Conspiracy for taking part in a protest action inside the American base there some months earlier. Two other delegates, both associated with the Greenham Common Peace Campo, were already in Finland, as was a delegate from Northern Ireland.

At Helsinki airport we were met without delay and taken to the hotel in Espoo. Yes, that's right, Espoo. I've tried on many occasions since to state in a perfectly dignified fashion that I went to a conference at Espoo, but never succeeded. Still, it's got a friendly and informal ring to it, which reflected the proceedings. And when it comes to it, it must be far more embarrassing for poor foreigners to have to admit that to attend some conference or other, they had to spend a whole weekend in Bath.

The vehicle which took us to our destination was an ordinary modern van in outward appearance but its interior put me far more in mind of an old fashioned de-luxe model hearse. It must have been the red curtains and padded upholstery that did it and create the impression that if the deceased were give the opportunity of sitting up and riding to their final resting place, this is undoubtedly how they would choose to do it.

As we had a tight schedule ahead of us, the view out of the van's windows was all we got to see of the Finnish countryside. When people have asked me what Finland is like, I can therefore only tell them about what I saw: a three-lane highway with hard shoulders and an adjoining cycle path; all the cars with their lights on, despite the fact that it was broad daylight; a high backdrop of deciduous and evergreen trees lining the road; the occasional glimpses of plain wooden or brick buildings; and every now and again where there was a break in the trees, the tiny lapping waves of an inlet of the sea or the banks of a motionless, glossy lake. I'm sure there were many things that I missed: fields, drainage ditches, the precise colours of the falling leaves, the odd shopping centre, and the exceptional car without its headlamps off. But my mind was on other things. Why, for instance was it actually warmer here than it had been in England when we left, and where was all the snow I'd been expecting?

After about a thirty-minute drive, we came to the conference hotel beside the sea in the Matinkylä district of Espoo. Fortunately for anyone who feels completely befuddled by the Finnish language, help is near at hand. All signs are now written in Finnish and Swedish. Thus, the Säästopankkiopisto, at which the conference was being held, is also called a Sparbansinstitutet, which immediately gives the game away as its being a Savings Bank's Institute, complete with training conference and accommodation facilities. Alert readers will have already noticed from this that the word for 'bank' in Finnish is 'pankki', so presumably what employees with colds feel the need of is a touch of 'hankki-pankki'. But don't expect to come across any Swedish young ladies in the sauna, with or without colds. For they would all be closeted in the 'bastu', or looking for the 'ammattiopiste', whatever that is!

Delegates to this conference (The Conference of Representatives of Peace, Disarmament and Anti-War Movements from Europe and North America) did not have to worry about any language difficulties, however, as there were four booths on the stage of the hall offering simultaneous translation of speeches into English, French, German and Spanish, and some people had also brought along their own translators. Nations would have no trouble in speaking peace to other nations, from a technical point of view anyway.

We arrived late to find that the opening session was already in progress. About 150 delegates from over 30 countries were assembled, and we got there just in time to hear a greetings message that had been sent by Charles Haughey, the leader of the opposition Fianna Fáil Party of Ireland.

After a coffee break, the gathering split into two more manageable-sized groups for reports and discussion. Amongst other things, we heard that the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in the USA had launched a campaign aimed at getting the nuclear powers to agree to a Comprehensive Test Ban by the 6th August 1985. Then, an Italian lawyer called for an international tribunal to examine the violations of his country's sovereignty by the existence of foreign bases on its soil. This suggestion found favour with a Greek speaker who also mentioned that the USA was considering transferring its bases from Greece to Italy.

The dialogue continued over dinner when representatives from Ireland Britain, America and Canada met in a side room. The main topic of discussion was the imminent threat of a US invasion of Nicaragua. Contingency plans had been drawn up by American peace groups and it was thought that similar actions around the world would add potency to such a protest.

There was a choice of smaller group meetings that evening. The one I attended concerned Nuclear Free Zones and was addressed by Georghi Dimitri-Gostin, the chairman of the Bulgarian Peace Committee. A meeting would be held in Sofia in November to which representatives from 19 countries had been invited. It would discuss the efforts that were being made to set up Nuclear-Free Zones in the Balkans, Scandinavia and Central Europe; the role of such zones in international affairs; and 'Women for Peace' then mentioned that Scandinavian peace groups were campaigning to get their governments to establish a Nuclear-Free Zone in that region. This was followed by a Portuguese speaker who said that moves were also afoot to persuade the governments of Spain and Portugal to set up one in the Iberian Peninsula. Already, 5 percent of city councils in Spain, encompassing 40 percent of that country's population, now lived in such zones.

As regards Central Europe, a member of the Czechoslovak Peace Committee stated that they were willing to participate in the Sofia conference, and it was revealed at a later meeting that in West Berlin, signatures were being collected calling for this objective.

These initiatives, which encourage collective acts of nuclear disarmament lie midway between multilateral and unilateral courses of action, and show that the two approaches cannot be separated from another as opponents of any form of nuclear disarmament would like us to believe.

IN SO MANY WORDS

The large group meetings resumed the next morning. Discussion centred upon the falsity of attributing equal responsibility to both superpowers. A Greenham Common woman stated that the deployment of Soviet missiles in the GDR and Czechoslovakia had been a blow for the Western peace movement. Some speakers disagreed with her, and Yuri Zhukov, the President of the Soviet Peace Committee, took this opportunity to deliver a long history of the arms race. During an interval, I asked Mr Zhukov if I could have a word with him later and when the coffee break began, we sat down together.

Yuri Shukov is a grandfatherly-like figure who you could easily imagine bouncing his grandchildren up and down on his knee, or lighting his pipe in front of the fire with his slippers on, after being out int the garden all afternoon. He might occasionally put his foot in it and say things which upset other people, but he did not strike me as being at all a malevolent man.

His translator, however, did not possess this same easy-going, benign appearance – a man in an obvious grey suit, swept-back hair and eyes that refused to blink for what felt like centuries at a time.

"Yes!" he said without the slightest hint of any emotion, and it was up to me to put my case as coherently and self-assuredly as possible under the glaring arc-lamps.

I pointed out to him how the members of our local peace groups viewed the deployment of new Soviet missiles In Eastern Europe, and how the Soviet Union could therefore expect a lot more protests directed against it as a consequence. In reply, he said that the inhabitants of the GDR and Czechoslovakia had been told that the counter-measures were only there on a temporary basis, and when Cruise and Pershing II missiles are removed, they will automatically be taken away too.

I also told him that we in the West wanted more information about the USSR and to have better contacts with people there and he took note of this. Then I asked him what the response of the USSR was to the peace initiative launched by the six world leaders (the heads of government of India, Sweden, Tanzania, Mexico, Argentina and Finland), and to avoid any confusion I showed him a copy of their statement. He replied that president Chernenko had given it his support.

Time was up: the interview came to an end; the arc-lamps were switched off, and we returned to our seats as the main meeting got underway again.

One of the most important items of news to emerge from that morning's session related again to Nicaragua. The same Scandinavian women who had organised the peace march through Eastern

Europe in 1982 were planning a new project. This was to be a peace march for human rights in Central America in 1985, starting in Mexico and passing through Nicaragua and other countries before finishing up in Panama. World-wide publicity and support would be needed for this incredibly courageous gesture.

In contrast, the report on the Stockholm Conference by an official from the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Polish Ambassador revealed that whereas individuals and non-government organisations from all over the world can cooperate over tremendously ambitious projects, such as the Central American peace march, governments seem unable and unwilling even to agree on an agenda for important negotiations. Is there any wonder that ordinary people have lost faith in the ability of governments to act on their behalf! As it is, the two reports on the state of affairs in Stockholm were overshadowed beforehand by the optimistic statement made by a woman from the US Freeze movement – a former colleague of Martin Luther King's.

"Any problem created by the human mind can be solved by the human mind," she declared. Would that all the delegates in Stockholm were as positive and enthusiastic as she was.

The afternoon session gave me a chance to earn my keep and justify my presence at the conference. |I had been growing increasingly concerned about the number of times I had heard others speaking in terms of 'intensifying' the peace struggle. Words and phrases like this might look impressive on paper and sound very rousing coming over the air-waves, but what does it really signify at the level of grass-roots campaigning. This was one area I had a bit of knowledge about and several years of experience behind me, plus a wardrobe full of empty pockets to prove it. Before going to Finland, I had contacted several other local peace groups in order to build up a more composite picture of the situation in our area. I therefore concentrated in my speech on the problems and achievements that we are familiar with, the implication being that intensifying our efforts may be a nice idea in theory, but it might only result in giving the already hard-pressed committed peace activists a coronary thrombosis that much sooner.

Afterwards, I worried that the lack of any earth-shattering news in what I had to say would not be of any interest to others. However, someone from West Berlin told me later that it was exactly the same situation there. And a Swedish couple I met that evening said that things were very similar in their country. What was still missing though was an acknowledgement of any problems faced by the peace movements in Eastern Europe. Information like this, instead of a catalogue of how many people took part in this or that demonstration, would be a big step forward. When that happens, I'm sure that all of us would be talking the same language, with or without the use of interpreters.

After dinner I decided to sit in on the religious group meeting in the catacombs of the hotel, amongst an assortment of priests and laymen and women from such diverse countries as Portugal, Austria, Italy, France, Canada, the GDR, the Soviet Union and Mali – a dozen in all.

The meeting began with the Lord's prayer, spoken in Russian by a Metropolitan in the Russian Orthodox Church – a small figure dressed in a long black cassock and a long white beard and possessing one of the most gentle countenances that I've ever seen. Strangely enough, I found this prayer, for which no translation was necessary, to be intensely moving as if it had a sort of miraculous healing quality about it. And I speak as someone who is used to the silent worship of Quaker meetings!

Following this prayer, the Metropolitan (a position equivalent to an archbishop in our country) said through his translator that in the USSR, the churches often take the lead in the anti-war movement. But how, he asked, should we express solidarity with other fighters for peace?

A Portuguese Roman Catholic priest said that it was God's will that church people are in the midst of the struggle. Being religious now doesn't mean that we should stick to old traditions. We must be ready to do new things to serve humanity, and he commented that in Portugal many religious peace workers had been sent to jail.

The man from Mail, a Moslem, agreed with him: "As a believer, I believe that God has given us the lead to save life," he said.

A lady pastor from the German Democratic Republic then gave us her story.,

"I grew up in a Fascist country," she began. "Each day I had to pass by a church and inside I saw there was a Swastika flag. I learned too that the Protestant pastors were very much involved in Fascism. It was only in 1948, three years after the defeat of the Nazis, that I learned that there were also non-Fascist priests around.

"Then I met a Protestant pastor who explained to me that Fascism and religion were not the same things. Yet there have been no wars in which human beings have not killed each other in the name of God. So I studied theology, and since then, I have found that the contradiction does not lie with Marxism but with religious people. There's no problem being in the church and living in a Socialist society, because it is easier to work with Marxists who are ready to save life, than with Christians who are ready to save riches. To be a Christian, then, means that you must be in the struggle for peace along with others."

When it came to my turn to speak, I merely said that a local Christian peace group had recently asked me what they personally could do to improve relations between the East and West. I had advised them to write letters.

"Good idea," said the lady pastor. "St Paul also thought it was a good idea."

The following morning the final plenary session took place. Reports from all the meetings were given, and judging by the sight of certain grey faces, blood-shot eyes and drooping limbs, some people must have spent most of the previous night writing the reports which would be to the satisfaction of all those present. The fact that there had also been a bit of a party the evening before which lasted till the early hours may have contributed somewhat too.

When the time came for the report of the religious meeting, we were all treated to an unscheduled insight into the prowess of Soviet athletes in the next Olympics. The Metropolitan was awaiting his turn close to the podium, and when called upon to speak, he was there in a few relaxed strides. His young and bespectacled woman translator, however, was sitting on the very opposite side of the room, now filled with people blocking the passageways and wandering to and fro collecting up the various typed reports. He began speaking while she had only just negotiated the first few hurdles, whilst calling out what I presumed must be a traditional Russian sporting cry: "Stoppim! Stoppim!"

Now in front of the microphone he began to speak in calm devotional tones, gazing ahead of him at the blank faces of the other delegates. As the translator came down the straight, the people in the front rows began to gesture at the Metropolitan to wait. And by the time she had reached the final bend, they were already standing up, waving their arms and clapping their hand to attract his attention.

But he knew that he'd won the race and was taking it all very graciously.

"Tell him to stop, huh!" a voice puffed with the last few yards in sight. The attention, perhaps acclaim, that he was getting just seemed to delight him further and the look of ethereal pleasure and absolute serenity on his face 'intensified'.

At last she'd made it, and snatching on the headphones in one of the booths, she uttered rather hoarsely: "Mr President, dear friends, phew! (Had she remembered it all?) Yesterday the religious meeting took place. It is sad that there were only 12 present, yet there were also only12 apostles.

"The world is now at the crossroads – towards life or death. The production and testing of nuclear weapons is nothing less than a crime against humanity and must be condemned on religious grounds. We, Christians, therefore must act as living bridges between East and West. For the struggle for peace is the sacred struggle for life on earth."

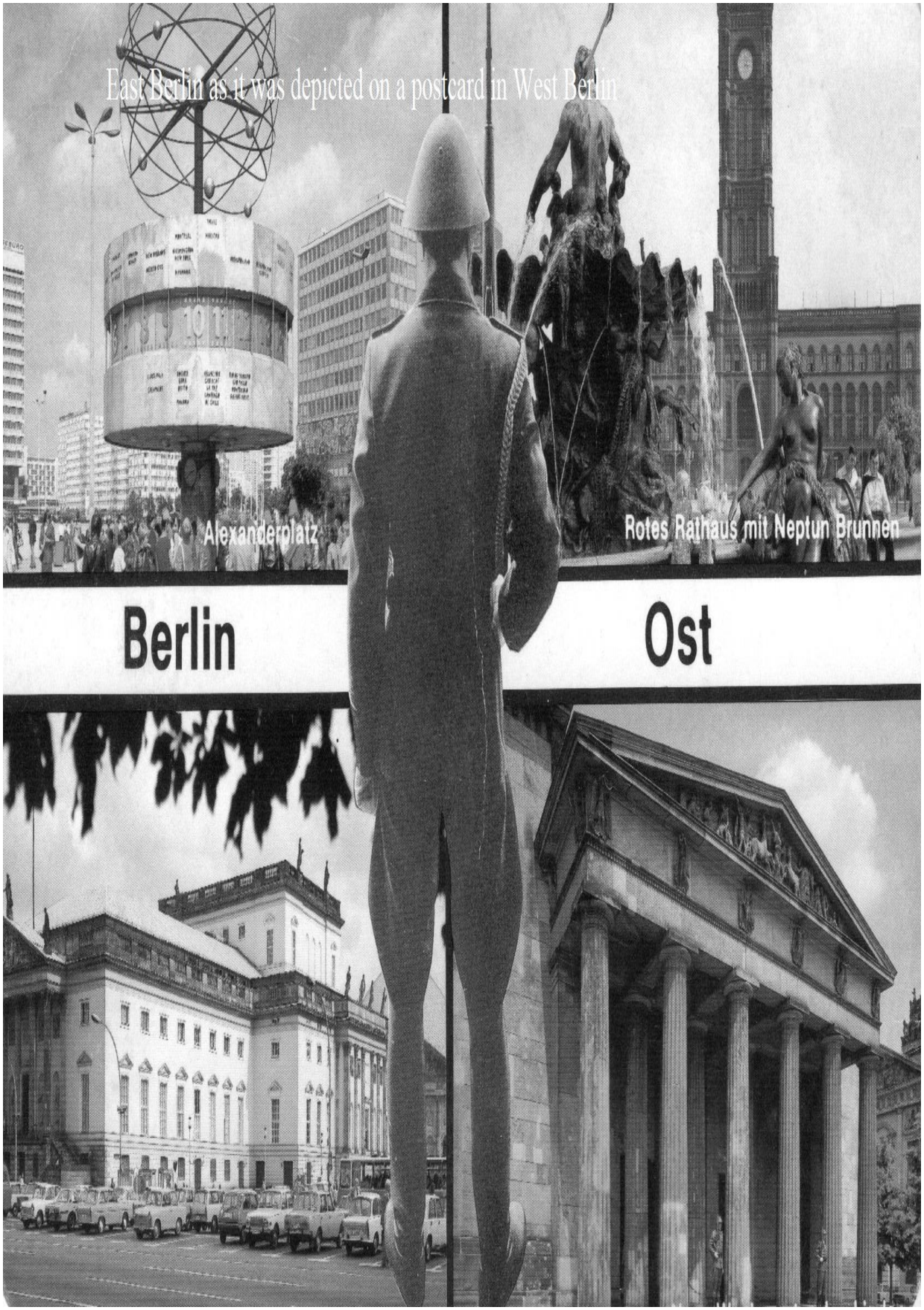
So, in the final heat, both came in together. It really makes you wonder though whether all Soviet athletes, clergy and translators are trained in the same way!

The final session drew to a close with a long and passionate speech from Ramesh Chandra, the President of the World Peace Council. We collected our things, now supplemented by posters, leaflets and badges from around the world, and boarding our 'hearse', we set off for the airport. The resolve of everyone was strengthened, the knowledge of each other's triumphs and set-backs was manifoldly increased; and the spirit of internationalism was sending forth new shoots in all directions. We all had too make certain that it would continue to flourish, and that is precisely what the intention was for our next project.

Cathedral in East Berlin

Brandenburg Gate and Wall in East Berlin

East Berlin as it was depicted on a postcard in West Berlin



PART TWO

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Back in England, I wasted no time in getting on with the necessary preparations for my departure from these shores once again. Time was surging ahead and the weather turning colder. With every degree the temperature drops, my inclination, or rather, determination to stay indoors out of the cold increases tenfold. If I didn't go to the GDR soon, I wouldn't want to even think about it until summer came round again. And that would mean missing the activities of the Peace Decade in the church in East Berlin, and losing out on the opportunity to mark its 90th anniversary by a gesture of goodwill from us. Besides, I wanted to visit the offices of the GDR-GB Friendship Society as soon as possible while there was still an off-chance that one of the villages in our area might pursue the notion of twinning with another in the GDR.

My visit to Finland had occurred at the same time as an important get-together in London to celebrate the GDR's 35th anniversary. A party of East Germans had come over to England to take part in this event as well as visiting other cities, including Manchester. After a bit of phoning round to find out their exact whereabouts after leaving London, I discovered the name of the hotel in Manchester in which they were staying. I telephoned the hotel and was put straight through to Wolfgang's room.

It was like talking to an old friend. "Come on over whenever you like," he said. I suggested the early part of November. That would be fine with him. The whole prospect of visiting the GDR which had seemed a bit remote so far, instantly became very real.

With under a month to go, there were a great many things to go ahead and do. Travel arrangements were the biggest priority. A short time before going to Finland, I had been to a meeting put on by the local branch of the British-GDR Friendship Society which was addressed by an official from the Berolina Travel Agency in London. I informed him of my intentions and he told me to come on up and see him sometime. "And remember to bring you membership card of the Society, since it gives you a 10 percent discount on prices," he added. If that's not an incentive to join, I don't know what is. I immediately became a member.

Now that I had a definite time in mind, I no longer hesitated, but took a trip up to London at the first available moment. On the train, I figured out how many days I'd like to spend in the country –

there's not much point in going on a jaunt if you don't have enough time to make the most of it. The main consideration, though, was the amount of money we could afford to spend. In truth this was nil, but given the choice between forking out on a supply of coal for the winter, or a journey to the German Democratic Republic for a few days, I plumped for the latter. I'd simply have to keep my wife and cat warm by recounting every detail of what took place, over and over again. The strategy worked. Both of them took to their beds as soon as I began (yet again), thus leaving me free to see if it might have the same effect on potential readers…

As I progressively drew nearer to the travel agency, my original estimate of a fortnight was whittled down at the rate of about one day per station, until I emerged from the Berolina office with a week's holiday provisionally booked – four days in East Berlin and three in Dresden, excluding travel time. Within an hour, a return plane ticket had been secured, hotel rooms tentatively booked, and the application form for a visa taken out of my hands.

People might be surprised to learn that if you book accommodation in the country, you are automatically granted a visa. The popular belief that it is extremely difficult for Westerners to visit these countries is completely erroneous. Unless there are exceptional circumstances, the opposite is the case. And the more people who go, the happier they will be.

With details now in hand, I hurriedly sent off letters to our acquaintances in East Berlin giving them the dates I would be there. Then the realisation of it all struck me with a dull thud. What had I committed myself to? What if all the stories we hear about countries like East Germany are true? Would I be followed everywhere I went? Would I ever get to come home again? More to the immediate point, what is the correct thing to do with your suitcase on an airport bus? How do you know when you've reached the right stop? And how on earth do you say: "Can I have an Underground ticket to cross the Iron Curtain, please."

PAST-TIMES AND TIME FOR PRESENTS

Despite these qualms, I was not altogether a stranger to Germany – West Germany, at any rate. My first job consisted of playing in a band touring American bases in Germany, one month in each – seven months in all. How well I remember those ten green bottles (of beer), and a lot more besides, none of them having the slightest chance of accidently falling; those enormous Texan-sized hamburgers and piping hot pizzas; the soul music and funky jazz; and the big chromium-plated cars, occupied by big platinum-haired wives. I remember, too, the Russian prince who entertained us in his luxurious hill-top house late one evening, and how, when the lights went out, he phoned the relevant authorities and told them to turn the lights back on as he had guests. On they came instantaneously.

But amidst all this round of revelry, hospitality and high spirits, I seem to recollect that instance when a black man was stabbed in the back during a brawl in the Enlisted Men's club; the occasions when car wheels were slashed by person's unknown; and the pallid, trance-like faces of soldiers who were there on leave from Vietnam – a totally different perspective this from that of the brash, devil-may-care antics of the newer recruits.

One morning in particular comes back to me vividly when I think of those days. As two of us, British musicians, scrunched our way along the snowy pavements of some town or other in pursuit of our mid-morning breakfast, we came across a convoy of tanks coming down the road, one after another after another – it seemed as if they were never going to stop coming. Each one of them was gleaming in the weak sunshine. Brand new, they looked, the Christmas wrapping paper only just taken off and the soldiers ever so proud of their new play things. This was one of their favourite games they were playing, and for all I knew, a similar game was probably going on in the boy's garden next door…over there.

But where were the corpses lying in pools of blood, the disfigured, the dismembered and the distraught; the gaping holes in the buildings; and the smoke, the flames and the toxic gases? Nowhere to be seen. That's precisely what made it so terrifyingly unreal. How easy it is to fall in love with objects, especially bright, shiny objects, and to forget about all the unpleasantness that goes with them. What has become of our powers of imagination? Have they been mortgaged off too, so that we can all take part in these ritual games?

Just three years before my sojourn in West Germany, John F. Kennedy had made his famous morale-boosting speech in West Berlin to emphasize the Allies' continuing support for that sector of the city – a city which two years earlier had seen the beginning of a permanent division between the two ideological halves and which would soon become an almost impenetrable wall.

"Ich bin ein Berliner," he had stated, or to be more exact, according to his phonetically-written notes -"Ish been ahn Bairleener." This startling revelation must have brought delight to any folk lacking in patriotic sentiment but possessing an irreverent sweet-tooth. For to German-speakers, the inclusion of the indefinite article served to change the meaning to: "I am a doughnut" (sugar-coated and filled with plum jam, to boot).

My own knowledge of the language was not much better than President Kennedy's. True, I had picked up a few useful phrases from American servicemen, such as "Mark's nicks," meaning anything you can't be bothered about, although I'm not clear as to how Mark or his nicks got mixed up in all of this. Such useful expressions, however, enabled me to hold quite lengthy conversations with chamber maids. But for anything more erudite, it was necessary more often than not to hazard a guess, and hope I got it right.

Luck was not always on myside though as borne out by the time when I mistakenly washed my hair in wax furniture polish instead of shampoo. Yet I consoled myself with the excuse that anyone can make a simple mistake in a supermarket, as any man would undoubtedly agree.

What did I learn from these old experiences which would be useful to me, now that I was only weeks away from flying to the GDR? For a start, I would have to take a stab at learning the language. Goodness knows what trouble I could land up in by saying what sounded like 'Marx-nichts' to a committed communist! As for washing my hair, I would most definitely take my own shampoo with me to avoid being suddenly transformed into something straight out of Madame Tussauds. I should also prepare myself for a possible military presence, but not of the American kind, that was for sure!

While I busied myself memorising the declensions of German nouns, the rest of the group put their heads together to think of something which would be suitable for an anniversary present. It was decided after some thought to leave the matter in the very capable hands of one of our members, a professional potter. What she came up with was a most beautiful work of art – a white porcelain bowl standing about six inches high and bearing an illustration of a tortoise and the name of our village on the inside. As readers will remember, the tortoise is the village emblem and a very apt symbol for a peace group like ours as we both understand the meaning of making slow but steady progress towards a goal, whether that be a piece of lettuce or a world at peace.

On the outside of the bowl, the word PEACE was inscribed, while on the opposite side, there was a portrait of a dove in flight. A candle placed inside the chalice would cause these inscriptions to be lit up in a translucent glow. Judging by the way that this ornament was admired by everyone who saw it, we felt sure it would have the same effect upon its recipients.

In addition to this bowl, we had hoped to make some tapes of people talking children singing, church bells, the blacksmith's forge – anything which would bring the village to life and portray it as a community of real people. However, it was discovered that one of the things which it is strictly prohibited to take into the GDR is a cassette tape. But seeing the short time that was left to produce one, it may not have been such a blow after all. Still, it's an idea which we may be able to use one day in connection with another country.

So, instead of a tape, we fell back upon the well-proven idea of sending a book of greetings. On this occasion, in conjunction with the bowl, it could have a religious dimension, it was thought. Individuals, church organisations and clergy were therefore asked whether they would like to send a Christian message to fellow Christians in Eastern Europe. The response was not overwhelming to be honest, but we did succeed in getting some nice messages, including one from our local bishop which gave a stamp of respectability to the mission.

We had the chance to show these two articles – the book and bowl – at an exhibition we put on during the 1984 One World Week. They were displayed later at a One World Week ecumenical service in the village and in the Meeting House in the neighbouring town – probably the first time during its two hundred years of existence that such things, bound for such a place, had been displayed in such a way.

I was also given a copy of a book that had been written to commemorate the anniversary of the Meeting House to take with me. Owing to circumstances, this book did not land up on the bookshelves of any East German Friends, but I'm sure the person to whom I did present it will value it just as highly. In a similar way, the assorted bars of chocolate which my wife provided, thinking they would have special significance to any Quakers I might come into contact with, met a rather different fate from that intended…! (The Cadburys and Frys, who manufactured chocolates were Quakers.)

Besides the above-mentioned articles, we also accumulated various miscellaneous items to give away as presents. These mainly took the form of local mementos, such as calendars, notelets, books and tea-towels, plus a number of corn dollies of different design.

Finally, I acquired another set of gifts which had no monetary value whatsoever. But what money lacked, human interest filled the void. I had told a primary teacher about my proposed trip and wondered whether the children she taught might have done any paintings I could take. There were none on hand, but the children soon set to and produced some, and splendid they were too. As well as these paintings, I was given some drawings by some youngsters who had a mental handicap and attended a social club nearby. All of these provoked a lot of interest and were much appreciated, which only goes to show that not only is art a gift, but giving is quite an art too.

RINGING THE CHANGES

The main preparations had been made, my tickets had arrived, and I'd diligently ploughed my way through a German tutor and phrase book when one day, the telephone rang.

"Hello," said a foreign voice, "my name is Hanna from the Hungarian Peace Council. May I speak to Paul Busby, please."

My wife, who is quite accustomed to all kinds of strange messages coming over the phone by day and night said that she was afraid that I wasn't in just then. Could she call back later on?

"Not really," was the reply. "We shall be finishing soon for the weekend. But we start again at eight o'clock on Monday morning. Maybe it would be possible to ring then?"

"Yes, that would be alright," my wife answered.

"Perhaps we had better just check our watches to see if we have the same time. It's nearly four o'clock here in Budapest."

"Budapest?" The penny shook. "You're calling from Budapest?" It hesitated. "Oh!" If finally dropped.

Half an hour later, before I'd even had time to take the shopping out of my saddlebag she said casually: "By the way, you had a phone call while you were out."

"Did I?" I remarked, taking off my cycle-clips and starting to cast my eyes over the front page of the newspaper.

"Someone from the Hungarian Peace Council rang from Budapest to speak to you. She's going to ring back at eight o'clock on Monday morning," she continued in a matter-of-fact tone of voice.

You could have knocked me down with a (dove's) feather.

"Guess what," I said, ringing John, the chairman of our group a little while later. I told him about it and persuaded him to come round in time for the call. And just in case I was too dopey at that time of the morning to take things in, I rigged up the tape recorder next to the phone on the Sunday evening.

At just gone a quarter to eight on the appointed day, the phone rang. I was not at all pleased. Fancy someone ringing up now when I was expecting an important overseas call at any moment.

"Hello, my name is Hanna," I heard a voice say. In my surprise, I forgot to switch the tape recorder on immediately, and after I'd regained my senses a little, I spent most of the remaining conversation struggling to do the right thing with the various knobs and buttons with one hand, while attempting to hold a large microphone to the ear-piece with the other.

"Thank you for sending us your newsletters and letters," she said. "We think you are a very positive group, and we would therefore like to invite a two-man delegation to come to Hungary to meet peace groups in the countryside."

To hear such a statement as this before eight o'clock on a Monday morning was not helping me to overcome the mechanical eccentricities of an ancient reel-to-reel tape recorder, especially as the most momentous decision I usually have to make early on a Monday morning is to choose which shirt to put on.

"I'm afraid I shall be in the GDR," I found myself saying. "But I'll see if anyone else can go."

"We have our National Peace Conference next weekend, and it would be good if you could come soon after that – about the 15th November, say. Would you think about it and let us know within a few days?"

It was only after she had rung off and the chairman had arrived in time for the phone call that I realised that the 15th November was to be my last day in the GDR. Maybe I could cancel my return flight and travel down to Hungary on that day instead. It seemed too good an opportunity to miss.

John felt that he really couldn't go, and I knew of no-one else in our group who could take off at the last moment. However, I did know of an ideal person who would be a great asset and whose knowledge and experience of peace campaigning was second to none in our area, namely, the secretary of the organisation which helps to coordinate peace activities throughout the county.

Eileen was very enthusiastic when I asked her, but felt that she had to have the backing of local groups before she could commit herself. They did not hesitate in giving her a mandate to speak on their behalf, and my own group similarly wished me well and raised no objections to my going.

My travel arrangements were altered, but at a cost, as I had to forgo the price of the return plane journey, being at such short notice. And I was notified that I would have to obtain a new return ticket in Berlin, since it could not be arranged from this end. As for the possibility of catching a train from Dresden to Budapest and back again from Budapest to Berlin, I learned from a travel agency that several trains run each day. The train tickets, however, would have to be purchased in the GDR and I would need to reserve a seat in good time.

It was therefore with great enthusiasm but also with a good deal of apprehension about any snags that might develop in connection with the missing bits in this international jigsaw that I rang back to

the Hungarian Peace Council some days later to tell them that two of us would be arriving in Budapest on November 15th. Accommodation there would be taken care of, I was told, and they would get in touch with the Hungarian Consulate in London about issuing us with visas.

The Berolina Travel Agency rang soon afterwards to tell me that my East German visa was ready. Since it was only a matter of a few days before I was due to leave, could I come to London to collect it? Thinking I could use this opportunity to get my other visas too, I travelled up there the next day, only to find that the Hungarian Consulate was shut as it was a public holiday. November 7th, I should have known, is the anniversary of the Great October (Russian) Revolution in all the Socialist countries.

The following day – the day before my flight to Berlin – I went back to London and headed straight for the Hungarian Consulate. There was only one short form to fill in and only one unexpected question to answer. (Why anyone should want to know my mother's maiden name fails me!) Yet within ten minutes of waiting, a Hungarian visa was firmly in my grasp.

Next, two Czechoslovakian transit visas and one GDR transit visa for the return train journey were needed. Despite a long walk to the Czechoslovak Consulate, and then a long time spent in copying out the application form six times over, I obtained these two visas in an even shorter time. At this rate, I could expect to get a GDR transit visa even before applying for it! And that was nearly the way it turned out, since it was now too late to get one in London. I feel I have to point out, however, that for one's peace of mind and the possibility of delays, particularly in the summer months, I would not advise others to emulate my example by leaving things till the last moment, if it can be avoided.

On the eve of my departure, I was therefore able to survey a passport full of assorted visas (minus one); a single plane ticket to Berlin, to all intents and purposes; some travellers' cheques and a few West German coins (but no East European currency which it's illegal to import); plus a mental bag full of instructions, time-tables and restrictions; and the flimsy memory of a couple of international telephone calls. Believe it or not, I slept as soundly as a log. But that wasn't hard to do – my documentation for the land of Nod was completely in order!

TAKING OFF

To rustic earthlings like myself, it is quite mind-boggling to learn that your plane will be leaving from a satellite. And how does one get to the satellite in the first place? By shuttle service, of course. Space travel must have really come on a lot, I mused, as I followed the arrows down the long corridors, leaving lesser mortals behind at the gates. Expecting to be one of the first paying passengers aboard the 'Discovery', I was a wee bit disappointed to stop into, not a supersonic piggyback spaceship, but a driver-less, mono-railed train (technically known as something incomprehensible, no doubt), which nonetheless, rapidly whisked us off to the awaiting satellite.

As any 9-year old budding astronaut will tell you, the inside of a satellite is crammed full of highly complicated, modern technology – unbreakable bottles of duty-free liquor, impenetrable packets of 200 cigarettes, and unaffordable varieties of perfume. And everywhere, the low-pitched, incessant hum of different instruments – "Fly me to the moon and let me dwell among the stars…" Presumably it's the latest, highly sophisticated way of measuring such factors as the fear-of-flying pulse rate, the mmm! -I-wonder -if-she's-on-my-flight ratio of raised eyebrows among the male species, and the curses! I-forgot-to-pack-my-darned-toothbrush, safari hat, glass eye, or replacement hip moment of realisation.

Fortunately, I'd remembered to pack all my necessities in my suitcase, while my flight-bag, which resembled a cross between a mini-Tate Gallery and a souvenir shop, provided a counterweight on my other side. The porcelain bowl fitted nicely into a round plastic ice-cream carton, padded inside with styrofoam 'snowflakes', the top tied on with innumerable loops of string which would have required a Houdini to have unravelled, in spite of the easy-to-follow instructions drummed into me by my wife.

My worst fear was that I would trip up carrying it down the steps from the airplane, and weeks of handiwork and good wishes would lie in smithereens on the tarmac below. When this didn't happen, I felt tremendously relieved and a look of 'you've done it' must have written itself all over my face.

As I was passing the Customs officials at West Berlin's Tegel airport, one of them must have noticed my over-confident expression and called me back to inspect what it was I had in my hand. Try as I might, I could not undo the multitude of knots, but I did manage to raise part of the lid to expose part of the rim of the bowl underneath. The Customs' man looked puzzled. How could I explain in a few German monosyllables what it was? I thought for a moment, regretting that I hadn't looked up the word for 'candle' beforehand. Then an idea struck me.

"Für Blumen," I declared, and was allowed to pass by without any further to-do. Maybe it wasn't strictly speaking a flower vase, but no-one's going to argue about a small point like that.

Out in the main concourse, I knew there were plenty of things to be done, and wishing to procrastinate before immersing myself in what might lie ahead, I followed my instincts as far as the little Herrn's room. Ten pfennigs a go; twenty pfennigs if you want to wash your hands afterwards. Tough luck if you're desperate, dirty and destitute. While pondering indignantly over whether these charges were in the interests of public as well as private hygiene, my attention was drawn by the sight of a very obviously placed saucer, behind which a woman was stationed.

"What's that?" she wanted to know.

"It's just my 'Blumen' vase," I said, dropping a coin into the dish and rushing off before finding out whether there was an excess charge for taking a pot of my own into such a place.

Upstairs again, my first task was to book a return flight home again. I'd been practising how to say this all the way over. However, the clerk behind the counter spoke perfect English and explained anyway that it couldn't be done there and then. I would have to see the travel agent, who wouldn't be in now until Monday. As I would be in another country then, albeit only a few mile's away, I would have to leave the matter until my return in ten days' time and trust to luck that I'd be able to get a ticket on the spot – not a thought I cherished!

One way to get to East Berlin from Tegel airport is to take a bus to Kurt Schumacherstrasse and from there, catch an underground train (the U-Bahn) to Friederichstrasse station in the Eastern sector. This is the way that I set about it and surprisingly enough, encountered no problems whatsoever.

Strange how the distance between the Capitalist and Communist Blocs is no more than an underground train ticket costing only a few pence. Viewed from the seat of a moving coach, somewhere beneath the ground between Reinickendorferstrasse and Stadion der Weltjugend, the billions of pounds of military hardware on both sides of you seem totally nonsensical. But that, I realise many people would point out to me, is naivety in the extreme. We live in the real world, even if we have to blow it to pieces to prove it.

It makes you wonder what would happen if the train became derailed at this very spot. From which direction would help come to rescue the passengers? Could we suppose that East and West would cooperate? Or would both sides view it as an act of sabotage?

I'm happy to say that on that particular day nothing went wrong with the train, although I did begin to suspect otherwise. We had stopped at all the stations in the Western sector. But when we came to the first few stations in the Eastern part of the city, the train slowed down but did not stop, leaving just a blurred impression of white tiled walls, somewhat similar to the interior décor of an old-fashioned

public convenience. This contrasted vividly with not only the bright, lively stations we had left behind, but also with the smart modern fittings in the train itself.

After a few non-stops, we came to Friederichstrasse, and to my relief, the train actually stopped and out we got. By 'we', I mean several people of different ages, but none of them carrying suitcases. Most of them immediately gathered around a small booth on the platform which was doing a roaring trade in something or other, leaving me to negotiate my way up the stairs and to discover what lay beyond.

The answer to that was two doors: one for East German citizens, and the other for foreigners, each manned by an Immigration Officer behind a glass partition. My passport presented no problems, and walking through the door, I realised that I was now officially entering the German Democratic Republic.

Hanging around on the other side of the door were three young Customs officials in military uniform, just as the Immigration Officer had been. They didn't seem terribly interested in me and didn't bother at all about examining my two bags. As I expected though they wanted to have a peek inside the ice-cream carton at my 'flower vase', and they asked what the books were that I had on me which I had noted down on the Custom's declaration.

"Travel – Reisen," I said. That satisfied them. My last piece of officialdom over for the time being, I walked out of the station and within a few yards caught sight of my hotel a short distance up the road.

THE WALL STREETS JOURNAL

The Hotel Metropole is a modern, rectangular, 11-storey hotel, or 12-storeys if you count the Panorama Sauna and adjoining terrace, not that I would feel inclined to in the chilly days of November. Besides the 340 rooms, a wide range of services is provided, such as hair dressing, car maintenance, a massage parlour, and the chance of a tour around the Berlin lakes on the hotel's own yacht. There's not much that it doesn't cater for, so it would be quite possible to spend the entire time in East Berlin without ever leaving the hotel premises…if you could afford it. But it should also be borne in mind that to get an equivalent standard of service in a British hotel would cost a tremendous amount more.

The hotel pass which is presented to you on registration is therefore like a short-term passport for this state within a state, and without it, you might experience some difficulty in obtaining your key, as is stated on the pass. Perhaps it is just as well to know then that the hotel can also make the arrangements for booking accommodation in other hotels.

The furnishings in my room were very comfortable and luxurious – long blue curtains along the length of one wall; a blue settee and armchair; a light-wood set of cupboards and writing desk; a single bed with a duvet; and an assortment of different lamps. There was also an immense radio and a large television set, as well as a small refrigerator packed full of expensive drinks, which would be charged to your account if consumed.

The bathroom consisted of a bath with build-in shower unit, toilet and marble washbasin and shelf. A pair of blue flip-flops was also available which, when I tried them on once, made me feel as if I was standing on a bed of nails. Clearly, they were designed for the use of Indian guests. On the shelf were sundry toiletries, including a bottle of eau de cologne and several sachets of hair shampoo…I think. Even so, I did not feel like taking any chances!

To my surprise, on the writing desk was a letter from our church correspondent. I was invited to meet a group of them on the coming Sunday evening. Straight away, then, I felt I was among friends and this made me glad that I had decided to come.

Having revived enough to venture out again into the cold air, I picked up my hotel pass and took off up the road. In a few hundred yards, I came across a wide avenue, and not knowing which direction the city centre lay in, I turned to the right, attracted by something in floodlights not far away. All the same, it was odd how there weren't many people about…if you discount the policemen. Yes, now I thought about it, there were a fair number of policemen strolling about in pairs.

As I continued along, the object in floodlights became clearer – a winged figure in a chariot drawn by four large horses, standing on a plinth, supported by six double columns of pillars. On both sides of this edifice, two smaller classical buildings stood, no wider than a single room across and embellished by a framework of smaller pillars.

This was my first glimpse of the famous Brandenburg Gate, topped by 'Quadriga' or 'Winged Victory'. Built in 1791, it was here that Napoleon entered the city barely 15 years later. Today, the flag of the German Democratic Republic towers over the statue as an unavoidable reminder that this symbolic landmark stands along the westernmost edge of the city's limits. Stretching just a few yards beyond it, the white concrete outline of the Berlin Wall divides East from West.

That obviously accounted for the presence of the policemen patrolling the area and for the lack of any traffic. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to lurk around this highly sensitive spot late in the evening, even if I was more interested in the architectural niceties of the monument than on the practicalities of defecting, less than an hour after I'd entered the country. Try explaining that to an East German policeman, though, and I could find myself in difficulties. None of them, however, seemed to pay any attention to me, so I slowly wandered back to the hotel, remembering that signs of hurrying might arouse suspicion.

Back in the comfort of my room, I felt quite peckish. The temptation to delve into the 'fridge was too much for me, especially since I'd only had a light snack since lunch. I was not even put off by the prices, noting that the packet of peanuts and coke I emerged with cost about the same as a good slap-up meal in a restaurant downtown. All I wanted to do was to put my feet up, sprawl over the settee and see what was on the different channels on the television. And I don't think that other customers would have taken kindly to that if I'd behaved in this manner in public.

WHAT THE BUTLER HEARD

The following morning, I arose early and made my way down to the hotel's plush restaurant where I helped myself to a breakfast of rolls, cut slices of different meats, various individual cheeses, marmalade and several cups of coffee. The surroundings created a most relaxing atmosphere in which to begin the day. One side of the room was entirely taken up by a colourful mural (but thankfully depicting nothing too stimulating for fragile minds at such a time of the day), while the remaining walls were little more than plate-glass windows covered over by lace curtains, except for a small section in the middle.

Through this square aperture, the outside world was there to see, but we were decidedly not a part of it. What I did see were the sleek lines of the tall modern International Trade Centre to the right, and some rather dowdy older buildings to the left, terminating in a blank wall, where a sudden incongruous bright spot proved to be a large blue and red hoarding advertising Russian cars. Directly in front, was the dingy-looking railway bridge leading into the Friederichstrasse station, from the direction of which came the occasional flurries of people, well wrapped-up against the chilly weather.

Our world though was one of warmth, elegance and ease as we sipped our coffees and leisurely scattered bread crumbs over our tables, comfortably ensconced in large green armchairs amidst a profusion of potted plants and woodland-shaded fittings.

No wonder I didn't hear it at first, the continuous warbling of a bird, as it fitted in so naturally to these surroundings. Startled, I looked around and gazed at the man at the side table facing me to see if he was doing bird impersonations. He in turn was staring at me, probably thinking I was responsible, but with a mouth stuffed full of crunchy rolls and a big wedge of Edam cheese, I was soon eliminated from his suspicions. Believe you me, it was quite disconcerting waiting for a well-fed bird to fly over at any minute. But then at exactly the same time our eyes came to alight on a small loudspeaker in the ceiling. The mystery had been solved and we were left wondering what additional cost there might be for a serving of bird-song for breakfast.

Well-fortified by all the food, I left the restaurant to hungrier bird-watchers than I. Outside in the corridor was a table full of books for sale, mainly of the coffee-table variety on topics such as the East German countryside, its church architecture and its artists, as well as one on Martin Luther and a choice of novels. In keeping with this general mood, an orchestral version of Beethoven's 'Für Elise' was permeating the thickly-carpeted area from a record-player standing on a nearby table. Almost opposite in a glass case along the wall was displayed a selection of porcelain chinaware from Meissen, where most of the so-called Dresden china is manufactured. All the same, I saw nothing to compare with the bowl that was sitting in my room, still packed away in an ice-cream carton.

At the reception desk, I changed some money into East German marks, although most, if not all, purchases and services in the hotel had to be paid for in hard Western currency. My passport, which I had been obliged to hand in when I had arrived, now contained a visa for Dresden in addition to the one for Berlin. I was not at all inconvenienced by this unexpected extension of red tape, but I did wonder begrudgingly why this was necessary, unless it was to keep track of the whereabouts of foreigners. However, the lack of such a visa would not have prevented me from spending the whole day in Dresden, provided I didn't stay there overnight. So what happens in Dresden by night? I would soon find out.

Returning to my room and still feeling somewhat indignant about this, I wondered whether, after all, my movements were being monitored. I took a peek out of the window. In a doorway opposite was a policeman. As I moved the lace curtain aside, he glanced up at me. Just as I thought. Pulling the heavy curtains shut again, I switched on the table lamp; and searched through my notebook for a telephone number and began to dial. But after a few digits I suddenly panicked. How was I to know that my room wasn't bugged. There were no cameras in the ceiling, and no microphones in the flower pot, I could make out. What about the radio – could it perhaps function as a transmitter as well as a receiver? I was quite chuffed at this stroke of genius on my behalf. Better pull out the plug before continuing to dial. I reached down and pulled. Darkness reigned. Help! After a lot of fumbling about, I managed to put the plug in again and finished the number.

The person I had phoned may have been surprised to hear from me just then, but nonetheless, she immediately invited me out to see her and her family later that day. I willingly accepted and only hoped that my phone call had not been intercepted. I wouldn't want to get anyone into trouble by going about things the wrong way.

While I'm about it, I'll just check to see if this really is a radio, I muttered to myself, and pushed in the first button. Bird song! If I was not mistaken it was the same bird that had serenaded me at breakfast. Or could it be its mate? I tried another button – a French programme; the third – Italian. That left the final button. I pushed. A pop record faded out and a voice said: "Coming right up, the AFN news bulletin, direct from the US by satellite."

There were news items on the (real) space shuttle, the unveiling of a memorial to Vietnam veterans in Washington, the Ethiopian famine, and the expression of doubts by congressmen that MIG planes had been delivered to Nicaragua as first had been assumed. Then, an advert for an American credit card, the weather forecast for Berlin, and back to more record requests.

Well, of all things I expected to hear, it was not this, here in a hotel in the capital of the German Democratic Republic. It immediately changes the whole image of espionage. Instead of a solitary,

trilby-hatted figure in an overcoat, secretly listening in to coded messages over a specially rigged-up piece of apparatus, what must really happen is that the whole family, plus granny, the au pair and the neighbouring cats all sit round the radio-set in the parlour listening in to the American Forces Network as a matter of course.

Whatever else I might have been puzzled about, it was now becoming clear to me that hotels of this sort are almost purely enclaves of the West within the socialist world. If I wanted to see the genuine thing, I would have to look for it elsewhere.

ELSEWHERE

The best place to start having a look round the city centre from here was back at the Brandenburg Gate, just around the corner from the hotel. A set of railings prevents you from going right up to it and I was not over-keen on even wanting to stroll through the area of no-man's land to get a closer look at the monument. At least, I was not the only one about at this time of day. Two large groups of people were also standing at the railings looking over and chattering noisily. Either they were tourists, or were taking part in a mass demonstration around the Wall, as we in the British peace movement are often enjoined to do. How deceptively insignificant the Wall looks from this vantage point, dwarfed by the monument and almost hidden by trees. Indeed, it's not even shown on East German maps of the city, but everyone knows it's there, for sure.

From the Brandenburg Gate, the spacious and very grand avenue known as Unter den Linden (Under the Linden Trees) leads straight into the city centre. It is lined by an impressive array of magnificent buildings, each possessing a distinct personality of its own, but all displaying the classical features so beloved by eighteenth and early nineteenth century aristocrats. Pillars, frescoes, arches abound and the sense of grandeur which is evoked by the sight of these buildings, particularly by night when they are floodlit, is something for the citizens of this city to take due pride in. The Humboldt University, the German State Opera House, the Museum of German History, the German State Library, and many others vie with each other for your attention, as was the original intention, which says much for the skills of the workmen who have restored and rebuilt these buildings from the rubble-strewn pavements inherited from the second world war.

From the Brandenburg Gate, the first large building on the right is the Soviet Embassy, perhaps one of the least interesting old buildings along the avenue, but occupying a prime site in relation to its proximity to the Wall and the West.

Opposite the Embassy is one of the few modern buildings on this street, where an exhibition on the Mary Rose was on show. Large photographs of the wreck and artifacts that had been discovered occupied three big window displays.

Another reminder of Britain came further up the road on a noticeboard which was announcing a performance of Hamlet in one or other of the theatres. Prince Charles was not mentioned anywhere. But perhaps the reference to another Prince – the Prince of Denmark – indicated that I must have been getting warmer.

Later in the day, I stumbled across yet one more example of the penetration of British culture into the Socialist world. This surely topped everything. There, within sight of that veritable seat of

learning, the Humboldt University, was the message ‘LIVERPOOL 1980’ scrawled in cement on the pavement. Was this a case of being third time lucky?

An even bigger surprise than any of these things came to me as I was passing by one of the squares off the main road. Parked in front of the Old Library was, wait for it, a coach with the words ‘United States Army’ written on its side. I could scarcely believe my eyes. Some distance further up the road I came across a lot more of them. If I’d thought that hearing AFN broadcasts in the hotel was something, seeing US Army buses here was…well, was I really still in East Berlin?

“By the way,” I said to Wolfgang, when I saw him a couple of days later. “I suppose you know that the American Army has invaded? What are all the bus-loads of U.S. servicemen doing here?”

“Defending freedom!” he replied (quoting what a soldier had actually told him once.) “They come on over to have a good, cheap meal, to go to a concert, or to buy inexpensive things from the shops. And there are plenty of good restaurants, concert-halls and shops around.”

“So, what do you think of it here?” he’d enquired of the soldier.

“It’s OK – I like it,” said the soldier, “but there must be a catch in it somewhere.”

A catch there might be, but it’s not one which affects the day-tripper or the tourist. It’s a good arrangement for them. They can get bargains, and a cheap evening out on the town; East Germans get some hard currency; and both get the feeling that they want it to continue. The real catch lies in the underlying reason for the forces being stationed in West Berlin and West Germany in the first place. If peaceful relations existed between East and West, they wouldn’t be here, and they’d miss a wonderful opportunity of finding out why peace should be preserved.

Once you have reached the River Spree and cross over to the other side of the Marx-Engels Platz, you stand midway between the new and the old. Behind you, the gracious buildings along Unter den Linden stand patiently and nobly awaiting the return of a new classical age, while in front of you, the twentieth century has unmistakeably arrived and left its mark upon the skyline of the city. The contrast between the two seems even more noticeable and abrupt because of the lack of any transitional areas to soften the impact, if you overlook the cathedral which forms the boundary of part of the square.

It is probably no coincidence that the word for ‘cathedral’ in German is ‘dom’. This particular one, built in the early twentieth century, has absolutely enormous dome, and several little baby domes too. It also has an abundance of pillars and gilded crosses and inscriptions, not to mention a fair

number of green tarnished figures, no doubt highly envious of the beautiful white marble angels which appear to have escaped on to the nearest bridge over the Spree while the work of extensive restoration is completed.

Opposite this extremely flamboyant and rather pretentious 'dom' is a huge marble and glass edifice known as Palast der Republik – a no-nonsense symbol of the new. From here, your eye follows the lines of the modern buildings lying to the left of Karl Liebknechtstrasse (as the road now becomes), incorporating elegant restaurants, shops and arcades.

On the other side of the street amidst a wide area of open space, decorated with rose gardens, fountains and bushes, rises the tapering 1,197-foot high television tower, with a bulbous growth half way up containing a revolving restaurant, and diners with hopefully a good stomach for heights. Beyond this, a red and white striped aerial alerts low-flying aircraft.

Being a very foggy day when I saw it for the first time, the restaurant and aerial were not visible and the column resembled yet another restored pillar, supporting the weight of the overlying clouds. Surely this was taking the attempts to recreate the classical-look a bit far!

Just in front of the tower is a building which looks so out of place in this setting that it hardly seems real – the 13th century St Marienkirche, the oldest church in Berlin, and a haven for Christians in the city centre. I made my way along the road to the church and, finding the doors open, went inside. In the porch were several interesting posters. One of them was advertising a peace museum and another gave details of the showing of the Japanese films 'Prophecy' and 'Lost Generation'. Other posters concerned the 'Peace Decade' and a service in a few days' time appealing for 'Bread for the World'.

I walked down the aisle to a table where someone was selling religious books. Did they have any copies of any of the posters in the porch? No, but we have three leaflets about this year's 'Peace Decade'. The leaflets, showing the rainbow motif of the forthcoming ten days of activities, contained Old Testament texts about Noah and the flooding of the earth, with present-day commentaries. I also asked about the 'Bread for the World' service – was this anything to do with the famine in Ethiopia? It's not just for that, but for other disasters as well, I was told. And the assistant did a simply marvellous impression of a volcano erupting. Perhaps the members of this church raise some of their money by performing mimes for inquisitive foreigners!

While I was at the table, I also noticed that opposite to it was a desk where children were provided with some paper and pencils to amuse themselves with. A few drawings were lying about showing that this amenity was well appreciated. But for older visitors like myself, books were deemed more suitable, and as I was leaving, someone came up and tried to interest me in buying some books. I'm

afraid he did not have any luck as I didn't feel fluent enough in the language to have waded through any of them. But I'd have willingly drawn a picture if he'd have let me.

Ambling on up the road, I came to some modern shops in the area known as Alexandra Platz, or Alex, to intimate friends. One shop was displaying a range of expensive hi-fi equipment, which I expect would be snapped up in no time by visiting American servicemen. Beside the items were large photographs of the people who had manufactured them, taken in their places of work. That, I thought, was a nice touch which gave some well-deserved recognition to the workers concerned.

Another of the buildings in Alexandra Platz was a vast modern department store, the State-run 'Centrum', which sold virtually anything and everything – food, kitchen-ware, clothes, toys, luxury goods and so on, all on a self-service basis. It was thronging with people, I noticed, as I stood in a shaft of warm air by the entrance, not wishing to move on until I had thawed out.

But move on I did, for my stomach was leading me on to pastures anew, or to be more precise, to a hamburger stand not far off. No coke glasses left lying about here. As soon as customers had finished, they returned their empty glasses to the booth. Cleanliness and neatness – the essence of civic pride – were certainly much in evidence. I watched an old lady sitting at one bench lean down to pick up a wayward piece of paper she saw on the ground and place it in a litter basket. No wonder that with 'custodians' like this about, the streets were impeccably tidy.

Crossing over the road to continue my explorations, I now encountered things in the reverse sequence: first a number of wooden cabins serving food and drink on picnic tables and benches; then, another shopping arcade. This one was quite different to the department store and consisted of individual small shops along rows, all under the one roof. The second floor contained still more shops, while the storeys above were given over to offices.

This market and the Centrum stores opposite seemed to be the main shopping centres. There were very few others selling common-all-garden goods in this vicinity, which was a bit strange, considering the large number of flats in the surrounding area. Still, it must ensure that these particular retail outlets do a roaring trade, which certainly benefits the snack bars too.

CULTURE SHOCKS

Having taken care of my physical appetite, I now felt that my cultural appetite needed to be appeased. Setting off down the road again, I turned right by the cathedral and ended up once more in the Marx-Engels Platz. At the far end of it is a fine old building whose classical façade reminded me somewhat of a rather large mouth organ. A notice to the left of the flight of steps leading up to the entrance announced that here, in the Old Museum, an exhibition of art was being held to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the founding of the German Democratic Republic. I paid my 30p entrance fee and stepped inside the tall wooden doors.

The first thing you are faced with whenever you enter a public building in the GDR is the cloak-room. I think it must have more than a perfunctory purpose but function also as a sort of entrance lobby where you can be made to feel officially welcome by the very act of having your coat taken from you. Thus, it serves to replace the role of a host or hostess who would normally shake your hand and invite you inside.

The high round room I first entered showed straight away that the nude or near-nude Gods and Goddesses posing round the walls must also have paid a visit to the cloakroom! Leading off from this circular hall were several doors. One led into a small side-room where unframed pictures were being sold. I tried another door and entered the art gallery itself, where a well-presented, spacious exhibition of paintings and sculptures were awaiting me in warm, pleasant surroundings.

The temperature may have been particularly significant, since a fair proportion of the paintings and many of the sculptures depicted naked figures, mainly women but a few men too. I was really beginning to feel quite unsettled by now. Should I have taken off more than just my coat? Was this really a…'museum'? I knew that people came to see exhibits, but I didn't think I would personally have to make an exhibition of myself! Just as well that I hesitated about entering into the spirit of things since I was soon joined by several other people, all fully dressed, I hasten to add.

Actually, I was surprised to see how many people did come in to look round the art gallery – young, middle-aged and elderly – which suggested to me that culture is taken seriously in the GDR, and it is by no means reserved as a frivolity for the well-to-do, as certain aspects have tended to become in Britain.

A clue was given to me in this respect, again by Wolfgang, who told me that some people are especially employed to try and interest factory workers and other labourers in the realm of the arts, particularly in opera and ballet. I have also been informed that authors spend a lot of their time in discussing social problems with people in other professions so they do not become out of touch with them. A further factor is the low price of admission for concerts. The cheapest seats at the State

Opera House, for instance (and this I saw with my own eyes) cost only 60p. Understandably, this must act as a strong incentive to potential concert-goers, including possibly American servicemen and their wives.

A painting which attracted my attention for a long time weas an enormous tableau on an anti-war theme. The horror and utter madness of war in a city which has experienced it so devastatingly was starkly depicted. After all it must have been a full ten minutes of examining every detail in this picture, I went to move on, and as I did so, I happened to look out of the window opposite. Outside, as if to reinforce the message spelt out so vividly by the picture, was a touch of the real thing – a once majestic building still lying in ruins, the New Museum. How eerily the constructive and destructive spirit of man feed off each other!

In another room, I found pictures and posters dating from the last war and documenting the birth of the German Democratic Republic, both of which amplified this abhorrence of war. Then, in sombre mood, I made my departure.

Scarcely had I reached the avenue again when I noticed that is was time for the changing of the guard at the New Guard House, a building whose double row of columns brings to mind a Roman temple, rather than what its present name suggests. The guards in their grey uniforms, white belts, helmets and boots were slowly goose-stepping their way from here to the building next door, leaving new guards behind, taking up their positions in front of the pillars.

Although much beloved by British newspaper editors, who simply cannot resist portraying the country without recourse to photographs of these guards, the number involved is actually very few – two being the number on duty at any one time. Yet apart from the different uniform, the ritual is essentially the same as that which takes place in and around Whitehall every day. Even the goose-step, which people in our country associate with the Nazis, is a much older tradition, stemming from early Prussian times. It is kept alive, like many other references to the Prussian past, in an attempt to show the continuity of culture down to the present day, and to provide an historic backcloth against which the population can rediscover their own identity. Other nods in the direction of Prussia can be found in the retention of the emblem of the Royal Eagle, which crops up here and there, and the equestrian statue of Frederick the Great, which once more stands in Unter den Linden after a spell in Potsdam while he was out of fashion.

The snag in this desire to retain the link with the past is that it becomes confusing once you are selective about which parts of the cultural heritage you wish to accentuate, and which parts you prefer to leave well alone. Far from solving an identity crisis, it is therefore likely that you may be helping

to create one, instead of letting society evolve its own distinct characteristics which set it apart from other societies.

The negative attributes of Prussian-ness, for instance, are generally considered to be stubbornness, blind obedience to authority, and a very rigid class structure, with the military exercising great power and privilege. Are these qualities also inherent in the kindling of Prussian culture? If they are not – and for a country which claims to have a Constitution based on Peace, it would seem strange if they were – do other people at home and abroad realise this? I think not.

Here, at the New Guard House, is a case in point which illustrates this confusion. Outside, the guards were keeping alive Prussian military traditions. Yet inside this building, an eternal flame in the centre of the floor was casting its light upon a number of large wreaths laid against the walls. For this was the 'Memorial to the Victims of Fascism and Militarism ', visited by all foreign Heads of Stated and the scene of many rallies by East German organisations.

I have no doubt whatsoever that anyone in the GDR wants to see Fascism re-emerge in the country, least of all the government which includes many politicians who spent the war in exile or in concentration camps. But the question remains this: can you prevent the rise of Fascism and Militarism by a corresponding increase in military might, as the ceremony at this building seems to represent, and as the country's defences seem to suggest? Indeed, at what point does militarism show its head and reveal itself for what it is?

I sought the answers in a cup of coffee in what must be one of the smallest cafes known to European coffee-drinking man. And disappointed when no blinding flash of intuition struck me, not even from the top of the television tower nearly directly overhead, I made my way under the linden trees back to the hotel in time to leave again almost immediately.

DIFFERENT TUNES FROM MACAROONS

Friedrichstrasse station, to which I now returned, serves both the underground line (the U-Bahn) and the suburban line (the S-Bahn), and tickets are interchangeable, costing only 20 pfennigs (5p) for any distance, a charge which has not altered since 1945. The above-ground S-Bahn trains also appear as if they haven't changed much since 1945, but what does that matter when they are spotlessly clean, punctual and frequent.

The trip out into the suburbs did not take long, but it did reveal some of the less attractive residential and industrial areas around the core of the city. In areas like this, the economic muscle behind the more glamorous image presented by the city centre heaves and hoes without respite.

Beyond this, the air clears, the loud noises fade away and the only bright lights that stare at you shine from people's windows.

I was met at the station by two people I'd never met before, but who introduced themselves as the husband and teenage daughter of my acquaintance whom I had rung earlier that day. We squeezed into a small family car, a Trabant (typical of the vast majority of cars I saw on the streets) and a few turns here and there soon brought us to a street of modest detached houses, so unostentatious that I cannot remember anything about their outside appearance.

I was warmly greeted by the man's wife at one of these houses and immediately made to feel at home. I had only met her once before in another setting, and had never met the rest of the family. But the warmth and friendliness shown towards me made it feel as if we were long-lost friends. Both man and wife have prestigious jobs and are regarded as being important people. These factors could have given them ample justification for being wary of inviting Westerners into their home, as I was to find out later. But there was no mistaking their sincerity or kindness.

The sitting-room into which I was ushered was pleasantly furnished without being cluttered. Along one wall was a long bench supporting several large cushions. To the left of this was the front window, partly obscured by tall green plants and various souvenirs from abroad. On the wall next to this, facing the bench, were book-shelves stretching from floor to ceiling, except for a small space where a new television set held sway. A big round table and matching chairs stood in the far corner, leaving just enough space along the adjacent wall for a bird cage containing two budgerigars, and a few feet away, a wooden open-topped hutch, inhabited by an 8-year old guinea pig, and at one time by a companion of his, a pet rabbit.

As it turned out, I was not the only non-member of the family there. Another woman who teaches domestic science in a hospital had also arrived with her daughter. It was explained to me that student

nurses are obliged to learn about the practicalities of domestic science and to carry out such duties during the first year of their studies. The poor lady seemed destined not to be able to escape from such chores herself, as her own family was absolutely mad about animals and possessed a handful of just about every conceivable pet they could think of.

Both the woman and her daughter stayed for an afternoon snack of macaroons and milk-less tea around the table. There was much joking and hilarity and they even apologised for carrying on so -it's just the way they are. I felt the woman looking at me a little intently. Hadn't she seen me on a British television programme? I was sorry I had to disillusion her, but not knowing the programme she was thinking of, it may be as well it wasn't me. With her family so gung-ho on animals, it may have been something I'd rather not know about!

My friend then informed me that a short time ago they had been to a ceremony held in the ruins of a former synagogue, which had been used as a concentration camp. It has been preserved as a shrine for remembrance and the East German churches had arranged this particular memorial event which had been attended by Jews from all over Central Europe. The memory of what had happened to the Jews will not be allowed to be forgotten.

While we were sitting round the table, we were joined by another of her daughters – a girl with mental handicap. She showed me one of the items which she is currently having to assemble at her training centre – part of the mechanism on a switch for a children's electric train-set. Each few days, the task is changed so that the mental capacities of all the attenders are constantly being stimulated.

I told them about the social club for people with mental-handicap which I help to run, and very much regretted that I didn't have the pictures on me which the various members had drawn. I'm sure that this girl would have understood them perfectly, far better than I could. In fact, I expect she would have been able to communicate with them with no difficulty at all, for linguistic and racial differences are much less of a barrier to people with mental-handicap than they are to the rest of us. Would that in this way, we were all thus afflicted.

I gave the girl a box of chocolates which I'd brought with me. (If the truth be known, she didn't know how lucky she was to get it!) And I gave the family some of the other mementos. They appreciated them very much, especially the corn dolly which is supposed to bring good luck to people.

They also seemed very touched by the book of good-will messages from local Christians, which I thought they might like to see before it went to its designated new home. If anyone wants to know what would be the best present to take to anyone in an East European country, I would not hesitate in recommending a completed autograph book. There was no doubt about it that the contribution which impressed them most was the one from the shopkeeper in my village who has raised so much money

for the victims of the drought in Ethiopia. This sort of initiative, which never gets reported on the national or international news, was quite an eye-opener to them. All the more reason, therefore, to have more direct contacts.

Of course, showing them this book brought up the main reason for visiting their country, so I told them all about it.

"But wouldn't you also like to go to a service in the church?" they asked.

They consulted a church newspaper which listed the times of the services in East Berlin – column upon column of them, I was amazed to see – and it was found that there was one at 10.30 the following morning. Before I knew what was happening, I was speaking to one of the pastors of the church on the telephone. He offered to pick me up in his car and take me to this service. I accepted gladly.

Meanwhile, another friend of theirs had also been contacted and it was announced that he would be coming round to the house as soon as he could make it. I was really flabbergasted at the way that people were putting themselves out for me. Thanks to one short telephone call that morning, I had a busy programme arranged for me from that afternoon onwards until the next evening. At this rate, I would need either an extension to my visit, or, if I stayed any longer, a personal secretary.

Within minutes, the man had arrived, and after exchanging convivialities, he took me round to his flat in an older tenement building a few streets away in order to meet his family.

Although the house we had just left had not been anything special and by British standards would be considered quite ordinary, the flat we now entered had a much less affluent appearance – the furniture was older and stouter and obviously had been well cared-for.

In the corner of the room around which the armchairs were positioned was an old-fashioned German oven – a sort of stove, set on end and covered over with tiles. From out of a door near the top, a teapot was periodically taken to keep our cups topped up and to wash down more macaroons. I wondered whether this was a normal tea-time snack or whether it was something which is customarily offered to foreign guests – something akin to crumpets or cucumber sandwiches in our own hospitable ways.

The cat, snuggled down on a cushion on a high chair beside the oven, didn't feel inclined to enlighten me on this subject, or on any other, come to that. And in unmistakable cat-a-language informed me at one point when I tried to stroke him that felines should not be fussed when fancy doesn't strike them. My own cat would have quickly shown solidarity with him on that issue.

In this warm and homely atmosphere under the cosy glow emanating from the lampstand, we sat and chatted about more serious matters than the comfort of cats. I should add that besides the man himself, there was his wife – a kindly-looking woman, dressed simply in a long woollen skirt; and his daughter, also with an attractive, open face and dressed like most East German youngsters in jeans and a sweater. She was visiting her parents that evening had has a flat nearer the city centre.

The family seemed rather tense and upset, although still making me feel welcome. The reason for their disposition, I learned, was that the girl had earlier that day visited a friend of hers who had been imprisoned for distributing leaflets in the street against the Soviet missiles deployed in their country.

The authorities are totally against anything in the remotest way spontaneous – everything has to be officially organised. Indeed, it is even illegal for foreigners to visit people in their homes. On learning this, I suddenly felt most self-conscious and realised that I could be putting them at risk simply by being there. Not knowing how I should react, I lowered my voice until it was scarcely audible.

We are living in a dictatorship, he went on, but people are still better off than the blacks in South Africa, the inhabitants of Central American countries, or the Russian people. At least here, no-one goes hungry and everyone has a roof over their heads.

Furthermore, a degree of freedom exists within certain strictly-defined areas, such as the churches, which explains why some people gravitate to the Church for reasons other than just wanting to worship. If you step outside these areas and attempt to do something which is not officially sanctioned, you know that you are taking a risk, and could face being punished very severely.

Of the different religious denominations, the Evangelical and Catholic churches are the largest, accounting for some 7.7 million and 1.2 million members respectively out of a total population of 16.7 million. At the other extreme, the Society of Friends (Quakers) in the GDR has a membership of just 50, but because of its reputation in international work for peace and reconciliation, Quakers are allowed more concessions than any other denomination. In addition to these, are several other churches including the Evangelical Methodist Church, the Community of Seventh Day Adventists and the New Apostolic Church, as well as some 600 Jewish believers. The Christian Science Church, Jehova's Witnesses and Salvation Army, however, are banned, possibly because of the manner in which they go about their business.

What we could do in the West is to help get rid of prejudice against people in Eastern Europe, he continued. In this respect, one prime culprit was identified by everyone I met – our notorious mass media which provides a totally distorted impression of life in these countries. Regarding the issue of human rights, for instance, matters are only made much worse for everyone when a great fuss and to-do is made about it in the Western media. Publicity-seeking politicians are also very much to blame.

It is much better if such matters are handled by discrete means, such as a quiet word amongst colleagues in international circles, especially when prestigious figures like Noble prize winners are involved.

But to tackle the authorities head-on is just futile since they are totally inflexible. From the experiences of the daughter's friend and others like her, it is clear that many young people do not share this view about not challenging the powers-that-be, even if the consequences might mean imprisonment or being compelled to leave the country.

Both young and not-so-young agree, however, on the sluggish nature of bureaucracy. Strictly speaking, people with first degree relatives in West Germany are allowed to visit them on special occasions, birthdays, weddings and such like. But, unless you are regarded as being important, there is invariably a long delay in obtaining the necessary documentation. The man I was currently with had to wait a full year before his passport had been issued. For someone I met the next day, the situation was perhaps worse. He only received his passport a month after his mother's funeral had taken place.

Unnecessary and aggravating delays like these are not likely to endear the burgeoning bureaucracy to the inhabitants of this land. It could also be said though that the rituals that British people have to go through in order to get an American visa can similarly be exasperating and long-winded. And the inclusion of the McCarthyite question on the application form – "Have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?" has more than once tempted me to tell a fib and state 'yes' to see what difference it would make. In the GDR, I expect that people are also sometimes tempted to say 'yes', but to obtain the opposite effect.

The daughter travelled part of the way back with me on the train to the city centre and on the journey told me about her work. By coincidence, my wife also works in a similar capacity. Naturally, this suggested the idea of swapping information about each other's jobs.

"But would it be alright to do that?" I asked cautiously.

"No problem at all," she replied.

Opportunities like this which can help to erase prejudices and promote an exchange of views between like-minded bodies should surely be grasped with both hands. If everyone did this, it would simply not be possible for anyone to bear arms – a very practical solution to world disarmament.

TAKING IT IN FOR A SERVICE

The next morning, a car drew up to the hotel forecourt and a man beckoned me inside. I raised my eyes to the heavens for some divine guidance, and receiving none, decided that I might as well get in anyway.

"I am the pastor and I come to take you to the church," he stated. That was the sort of guidance that I was looking for.

He apologised profusely as we started off that he knew only 2,000 English words; even so, that was still ten times more than my knowledge of German, so our conversation was conducted in the language that I knew best.

"Why are you staying in such an expensive hotel?" he enquired. I told him that all the arrangements had been handled by the travel agency in London, and not knowing East Berlin at all, I'd been obliged to accept what I was given.

"For the same price," he said, "you could stay in that hotel (indicating one we were passing at that moment) and also have the woman in your room at night." Linguists will hopefully be able to explain this to any shocked theologians or disgusted feminists.

After a while, we arrived at a street in another residential suburb where I saw the church for the first time. When it is anticipated that fewer than 100 people will attend, services are held in the largest of the parish rooms in the tenement building opposite.

I was straight away divested of my coat and taken into the vestry to meet another of the pastors, a woman in her thirties, dressed in a plain black cassock. In this room, I deposited the bowl and the book and then was escorted back to the hall to wait for the service to commence.

Rows of wooden chairs were arranged in a semi-circle facing a small table which acted as an altar. To its right was a high book rest which served as a lectern, while to the left was a very large portable pipe-organ. About sixty people of all ages were already seated and were dressed very informally, I couldn't help noticing. This made me feel rather conspicuous since I had read somewhere that people tend to dress up on such occasions in Germany and consequently, I had donned my suit to look respectable.

But the initial moments of bashfulness dispersed when the woman pastor announced the opening hymn and I was suddenly faced with trying to decipher Gothic Script in the hymn book. If I'd

thought that pronouncing German was hard enough, singing unutterable words to unfamiliar tunes was infinitely more difficult.

Frieden gabst du schon, Frieden muss noch werden,
wie du ihn versprichst uns zum Wohl auf Erden.
Hilf, dass wir ihn tun, wo wir ihn erspähen,
die mit Tränen säen, werden in ihm ruh'n.

The service itself though was very little different from a normal Church of England service and from the occasional words I understood, I could actually identify some marked similarities. Indeed, I felt extremely proud of myself for recognising the creed, although pride is not exactly the sentiment called for in a confession of faith.

When it came to the undoubtedly excellent sermon, I contented myself with counting the number of times that Frieden (peace) and Hoffnung (hope) were uttered. You wait till I get back home and tell everyone that the sermon was all about peace and hope, kept running through my mind. My estimate of the count, however, vanished into thin air when I suddenly heard the priest quite clearly and unmistakeably state my name. What?!!

"She said you've been sent by God," said the male pastor who was sitting beside me. I looked up, aghast, and observed other members of the congregation peering round to see if they could see an archangel in their midst.

"Stand up," whispered the voice beside me.

With shaking legs and flushed face, I rose to my feet and hurriedly sat down again as if trying to conceal my wings within the contours of my suit, and reflecting on whether I should have made some earthly sign of greeting, like holding out my arms in a quick impersonation of the Pope.

But apparently, I wasn't the only angel about. An artist and a school teacher also had their names called and had to stand up. And the teacher even went outside for a moment and came back immersed in a bouquet of flowers. Maybe I should have nipped out than too and brought the bowl in. But alas, it would have taken me the rest of the service to have undone the string, and it could have created some misunderstanding had I presented the officiating priest with an ice cream carton at that particular moment.

The sermon over, the service continued with some more hymns and prayers and then I joined everyone standing in front of the seats as the communion wafers and wine were passed around. At the end of the service, we all linked hands for the 'peace'. On this occasion, it had a very special significance indeed.

The service thus came to a close, but no-one attempted to leave their seats. Instead, everyone sat rooted to the spot as the organist burst into a lengthy recital of what sounded like some opus or other by Bach, while a pate-turner-overer hovered at his side, rocking expectantly on the balls of his feet in a strange accompanying dance to the music.

As soon as the finishing cadences had died away and people started to mill towards the door, I rushed out and grabbed the book of greetings, which I thrust under the nose of the male pastor, who had now joined a few of the others around the coffee-table at the back of the room,

The counting of the collection came to an abrupt halt while the messages were read out in German. As had been the case on the day before, those having the greatest impact were the ones displaying simple human touches ("I am married with seventeen children and want them to grow up in a peaceful world with your children" – sort of thing.)

"But where are the addresses?" someone asked. "We want to write back to these people and thank them."

Expecting now to be taken back to the hotel, I was surprised when, instead, I was introduced to the mother and brother of the person we correspond with and told that I would be going back with them for lunch.

It was not what you would call a long journey – a few doors further down the road, that's all. Climbing the stairs in the hallway of another tenement building, we passed a door which sported a Nuclear-Free-Zone sticker and another one showing the symbol of a sunflower, which would be immediately recognised by any Ecologists in the West. Having left identical stickers on the windows of my own house, I definitely did not expect to see them on the door of a flat in East Berlin.

"That's where another priest in our church lives," the pastor commented. "He believes in political peace…" It so happened that that was also the address to which I'd been invited to come later that afternoon.

Some flights further up, we met some more members of the family with whom I was going to have a midday meal – three handsome little blond fellows, one aged four and the other two (twins)

aged six, who turned out to be the brother's children, and a woman in her early 50s, who was introduced as his mother. Now wait a minute – how can two brothers have two mothers?

"Both of us changed our surnames to the surname of our wives – it was a very unusual thing to do," it was explained to me.

Before the pastor left us to go to his own flat, I was finally able to give him the bowl, which came very close to being knocked off the sideboard a few times by the exuberant youngsters. My heart was in my mouth as I told him the story behind it. He said that it would be displayed at the service that evening and the messages in the book would be read out to the congregation. Thus, the first day of the 'Peace Decade' in East Germany, and Remembrance Day in Britain, were united by this gesture and all our efforts to achieve it had been successful.

The rest of us then sat down for a meal of meat-balls, potatoes and cauliflower, followed by chocolate pudding.

"Nicht schlurfst du," said one of the grannies to one of the children. But 'schlurf' he did and so did the other children, and like little children everywhere they all ended up with chocolate rings around their mouths.

"In seven years, I can go West," remarked one of the women, referring to the fact that pensioners are able to travel to the West without all the hassles that other people have to face. I asked her if she intended to go on such a trip. But no, it would be too expensive.

Something else that had gone West was one of the pipes above the ceiling in the bedroom. The day before, a plumber had stuck a nail in it and the bedroom had flooded. I was shown the mess that it had caused on the ceiling, and came to the conclusion that I was awfully glad that I had not suddenly arrived on their doorstep on that morning instead.

INSIGHTS

We took our leave of the grandmothers and the twins and walked to another building nearby. While his father was making coffee in the kitchen, the youngest child was installed in the loo, and finishing his business before papa had time to help him 'adjust his dress', he wandered in to the main room where I was standing. He made it quite plain that he expected me to button up his dungarees for him. You know, it puts a completely different complexion on the readiness to use nuclear weapons when you are trying to fasten up a toddler's trousers for him. When we have all learned to have a child's trust in other people, no matter where they come from, we may begin to understand what peace really means. Now perhaps that is what the sermon was all about.

Having rendered my services to the nation's youth, I turned back to see what sort of records appealed to the family's tastes – mainly American (and East German) pop music, folk and jazz, from the looks of it. A smart modern record player, similar to those I'd seen in the shop windows, stood on a shelf, and a guitar leaned against the wall a few feet away. Doubtless, any young people from other countries would feel instantly at home here.

The child was put to bed, and then we sat down at the high wooden table to have our coffee in big, sensible cups. Opposite me, a German oven rose up like some giant-sized mustard tin beside the wall, its function now superseded by a modern radiator. Alongside it, a tall dark wood cabinet – almost certainly a collector's piece in our country – contained the best china and pewter pots, while a little distance away, an even higher doorway led into a small passage, from which other doors led off to the kitchen, bathroom and bedrooms.

The height of everything is emphasized by the lofty ceilings and one gets the impression that modern furnishings on a smaller-scale would look totally out of place. It's a pity that the builders of these tenement blocks at the turn of the century didn't stop for a moment to consider the likely costs of heating bills. Yet they did at least build things to last and although the paintwork in the entrance halls was showing signs of age, the buildings themselves have stood up to the vagaries of time remarkably well. But I'm sure you've had enough of this tall story…

My companion told me that he was not happy in his present job working in a factory and would like to get another one connected with the church. However, this might be hard to come by and would mean much lower pay. His wife only works part-time, so he would have to think very carefully before changing his job. Besides, belonging to a church peace group can prevent other employers from taking you on.

In theory, socialism does not permit unemployment. Indeed, according to the Labour Code of the Constitution, it is categorically stated that: "For every citizen capable of working, the right to work is inseparably connected with the honourable duty to do socially-useful work."

Up until the present time, unemployment has not existed; on the contrary, there has been a labour shortage in many fields. However, many women are being told that they should care more for their children at home, and in practice, this can result in a disguised form of under-employment.

Like all young men, he had done a stint in National Service, and is therefore eligible to be called up again at any time. He had refused, as had several others, and could face imprisonment for having done so, depending upon how the verdict of the current enquiry goes. But he is not optimistic. At least, there is a unit of the army engaged in construction work in which soldiers do not bear arms, as we had been informed about in letters. Although this is not well-publicised by the authorities, knowledge about it is familiar to many people.

The growing militarisation of society, for this is how it is perceived by many, is characterised by other aspects too. At school, children are given military education and are provided with war toys to play with. For that reason, his own children are sent to a church-run school rather than a State one. He also complained that there is a lot of violence on the television. I could understand this comment about Western programmes, but I was surprised to learn that it was just as bad in programmes from Eastern Europe. Incidentally, it came as a surprise to learn that televisions here pick up three West German channels, as opposed to only two East German ones. One can imagine that transmissions from the West would be likely to exert a lot of influence on people's attitudes and aspirations.

"What is your impression of the West?" I asked with this in mind.

"People can say and do whatever they like over there," came the reply.

I tried to explain to him that even if this might have been the case once, these freedoms are being rapidly eroded now. Anyway, what good is it to publicly show your opposition to certain government policies or its actions, when all demonstrations and protests are blatantly ignored. It merely enables governments to talk in a grandiose fashion about the existence of our so-called democratic way of life, while at the same time doing exactly as they like.

It was at this point that we were joined by his brother, who had just returned from a meeting in another town and hadn't expected to see me yet a while. He asked after the members of our peace group who correspond with him and I gave him their best wishes and the addresses of others who would like to write to people in the GDR. He was very pleased to get more contacts and requested that when they write, they also send a photograph of themselves.

I did not have any photographs on me, but I did have plenty of other things – books, sweets and various souvenirs – which I now gave to them, and to their wives and children who had come into the room while we were speaking. It seemed a good idea also to give them the book on the history of the local Friends Meeting House. I had been carrying it around with me in case I should bump into any Quakers that day. But the possibility of that happening was now remote.

Since the newcomer had not been present at the service earlier in the day, I informed him about the book of greetings, signed by a number of clergymen from local churches, but obviously not from the Meeting House because they don't have any priests. He understood this himself as he'd been told about it in letters. But this was new to his brother.

"You don't have any pastors? How are the services conducted?" he asked, quite askance.

"Well, you all sit round in a square or a circle facing each other, and the meeting thus proceeds in silence," I said.

"But isn't anything said at all?" he persisted.

"Oh yes," I replied. "Sometimes someone will stand up and say something, and then sit down afterwards, and it will all go quiet again."

"I've never heard anything as strange as that in all my life," he exclaimed. "Never!"

It would seem that my choice of recipient for the book may not gain the Society of Friends any new members, but it will certainly provide someone with a lot more surprises.

While this conversation was going on, the children had vanished from the room. They returned now with some pictures that they had been painting and presented me with them. Although they may never find their way into a gallery, the paintings are worth far more than the rarest of Rembrandts. For in terms of sentimental value, they are nothing less than masterpieces.

CHURCH MILITANT OR NON-MILITANT

Bidding farewell to the children and their mothers, I was then taken to the church itself, about 100 yards up the road to see how the preparations for the 'Peace Decade' were coming along.

Attached to the church tower facing on to the main street, was an enormous banner bearing the 'Swords into Ploughshares' symbol of the East German churches' peace groups. This was either an obvious provocation to the authorities, or perhaps, those responsible were merely seeing if they could get away with it.

It was in early 1982 that trouble began to brew between young church people who sewed peace badges which incorporated this symbol on to their clothes, and the State authorities who disapproved because of the clear pacifist implications of the message. They were also concerned that other people would be influenced by seeing them and the effect would snowball. When the police were instructed to order anyone wearing a badge to take it off, even though it was not strictly speaking illegal, a crisis looked as if it could be in the offing. It should also be remembered that the wearing of these badges could be regarded as an unofficial 'spontaneous' act which was in open defiance to the authorities. In the event, a much more serious conflict was avoided by an uneasy compromise, whereby the churches decided not to manufacture any more badges, but were allowed to keep this insignia and motto for 'internal use only'.

This is the reason why I was so amazed to see this banner on the church tower. And I was not too surprised to learn later that it had to come down, since the authorities considered it was not suitable for public exhibition.

Inside the church on one side at the back was a photo-montage exhibition on such topics as the plight of the third world, environmental problems, militarism and the arms race. The statements that were being made were unambiguous, forceful, and by and large, pacifist in nature. One picture, for instance, showed two fingers pointing at one another with the slogan 'It's your fault'. Another portrayed the path of the militaristic mould from cradle to the grave.

My biggest surprise though was at seeing what lay opposite this exhibition. There, with the caption 'No Future' written in English (that was curious, come to think of it), was a huge model of a Missile, and on it were printed the words: Cruise, Pershing II and SS-20. No objection was raised to this, from what I've heard.

I thought I'd seen everything now, but not so. In a room off to one side of the altar was a mock-up air-raid shelter made out of a tent. Apart from this difference, it could just as easily have been a fall-out shelter built on the lines recommended in our own government's booklet 'Protect and Survive'. It even contained an old valve wireless, some buckets of sand and an old gas-mask hanging from a peg.

The authorities apparently did not object to the shelter itself, but they did not like the way that youngsters were walking round inside it wearing Nazi helmets and the present-day uniform of the People's Army.

I heard subsequently that the church leaders were approached about the offending pictures and the get-up of the youngsters in the shelter and a discussion took place to explain matters. Nothing more was ever said about it.

As you can imagine, I was absolutely astonished to see such things in a church. As we crossed the road again, I pondered on what John Selwyn Gummer would have had to say about an exhibition of this kind in a church. Would he have approved, because of it being in an East European country; or disapproved, because of the church involving itself in such worldly matters? (John Selwyn Gummer was the Conservative Party Chairman and member of the General Synod of the Church of England. His views on the repressed churches in Eastern Europe were often broadcast on the radio.)

I had not solved this dilemma when we arrived at the door of the flat that I had seen earlier that day, adorned with peace and environmental stickers. Inside, we were welcomed by the occupant and not long afterwards were joined by three young people who all spoke a smattering of English.

They asked me about the peace movement in Britain, and questioned me why it wasn't involved in the Northern Ireland situation. I said that it was too near our own doorstep, and to do so would risk splitting the peace movement. The main focus of attention which had united people from wide-ranging backgrounds was opposition to nuclear weapons.

"Then it's not really a peace movement as such, but a disarmament movement," was the comment. In the GDR, I was told, they are concerned just as much with ecological matters and Third World problems. That very evening in fact there was to be a hunger-supper in the church in aid of famine relief in Mozambique.

I informed them that some of the broader peace groups in Britain were also concerned with wider issues like these, and even in CND – by far the largest organisation – there is now a change towards a much broader perspective. Then, referring to the exhibition that I'd just seen, I couldn't help asking them how they managed to get away with such a thing. I didn't think any churches in my country would permit anything remotely like this. So how did they do it here?

It was pointed out to me that so long as it's on church property and confined from public view, it's tolerated, albeit reluctantly, provided that it does not breach the law of the land. Protesting in the street, however, as I've already learned, is strictly forbidden, unless it's an officially-organised activity, such as a demonstration put on by the GDR Peace Council.

This shows the importance and the influence of the church and reflects such things as the Church-State Agreement of March 6th 1978. Carried to excesses and possibly one or two aspects of the exhibition might have been construed as such by the authorities, the good relationship between the Church and the State could eventually come under a severe strain. The Church leadership has therefore found itself in the position of having to keep on good terms with the State on one hand, while trying to satisfy the growing demands for a more forthright stance on peace issues amongst many of its grassroots members, particularly of the younger generation.

But the State has to tread carefully too, especially in view of the large proportion of Christians amongst the population. It should also be borne in mind that the Evangelical Church also runs a number of social institutions, including some 48 hospitals, 89 homes for the handicapped, 117 convalescent and holiday homes, 330 homes for the elderly and 326 children's day centres. Likewise, the Catholic church runs 7 nursing schools, 34 hospitals, 107 homes for the elderly, 39 sanatoria, 44 children's homes and 310 nursing stations. The State simply cannot afford to alienate the Church, any more than the Church can risk a strain in its relation with the State.

Far from being dissidents, therefore, the Church peace groups are very much a part of the socialist system, even if they do demand to express themselves in a more spontaneous way than is at present allowed. There is also very little difference in essence between that they stand for and the official rhetoric on peace and disarmament, and it is noteworthy that several church leaders are members of the GDR Peace Council. Pressure at grassroots level within the churches may thus eventually filter through to the Peace Council and from there ultimately to the State.

What then accounts for the opposing trend towards the increasing militarisation of society? Some of the reasons would be brought to my attention tomorrow. Until then, I was left to contemplate on Mr Gummer once more in the privacy of my hotel room while polishing off another bar of chocolate.

To be political (munch), or not to be political (munch, munch)? Has that ever been the question for the Church?

THE OTHER SIDES OF THE COIN

On arriving back at the hotel that evening, I had been handed an envelope by one of the young ladies behind the reception desk. It contained a note from Wolfgang welcoming me to the city. He had been to the hotel on the Saturday and Sunday evenings and found me out on both occasions. But he had persevered and arranged to meet me at 8:45 the next morning. At that time I was bound to be in, and I was.

The main reason for this early call was that Gerhard Lindner, the Vice-President of the GDR Peace Council whom I had met very briefly when the party of East Germans had come over to England two years earlier, had expressed an interest in meeting me again. And this, according to the note, was his only chance to say "hell" to me.

At the appointed time, I took myself to the reception area and adopted one of those 'here-I-am-but-where-are-you?' looks. I was quite taken by surprise when a fairly young, tall man with a slight brown beard came up to me and shook me by the hand. In my mind I had been expecting a short, clean-shaven, balding and bespectacled man – in point of fact, someone who answered to the name of Gerhard Lindner.

We walked the brief distance to the offices of the Peace Council and were shown into Herr Lindner's office by his secretary, who informed us that regrettably he had been called out to another meeting but should be back in about a quarter of an hour. She wasted no time in bringing us a potful of coffee, and in his absence, we made ourselves at home in his office. Meanwhile, it gave us a chance for a good chat and to exchange pictures.

Wolfgang began by handing me a number of large coloured photographs showing the National Youth Festival of the Free German Youth which had taken place from June 8-10 that year. In the accompanying notes it was stated that *over 750,000 girls and boys, representing the 2.3 million members of this socialist youth organisation, had taken part in 2,000 cultural events, as well as staging a demonstration through East Berlin, carrying posters demanding: 'Europe must not become Euroshima'.*

One particular photograph showed some 50,000 sporting types in the 2.25kilometre marathon through the city. The text ran: *"1,000 pigeons as the symbol of peace rose up to the sky at the beginning of the peace race which was a manifestation also against the NATO super-armament."*

I wouldn't wonder at it if one of the birds hadn't succumbed to more worldly temptations and flown straight into the dining room of my hotel to take up lodging!

In return, I gave Wolfgang the pictures which had been drawn by children from a local school. He was delighted with them and would see that they were displayed to good effect.

He then spoke about the visit to Britain that he and others had recently made to mark the GDR's 35th anniversary. Their newspapers had given the events a lot of coverage, and I was shown a page from one paper which was completely taken up with the visit. Yet the press in England had virtually ignored the whole thing, and in those newspapers which did mention it, the articles were full of offensive and distorted facts.

Nevertheless, the trip had been a huge success and many interesting meetings had occurred, including some with Conservative organisations and local dignitaries. Since then, several large cities had requested to have twinning arrangements with cities in the GDR, following in the footsteps of Manchester and Coventry.

In this respect, I mentioned the possibility that one or two villages in my area might decide to do likewise. This news brought a big smile to his face, although he could do no more at the present than to forward the information on to the relevant committee. Once an official request has been made, it is the function of this body to try and match up similar sorts of places. They insist upon this formality because of past experiences when they've been asked to find a twin by someone who has not been given any official blessing to do this. Then, after a lot of hard work has been done, it has been discovered that the Council concerned is not interested in such an arrangement. Understandably, this has made them feel that their goodwill has been thwarted.

Goodwill in undeniably a very precious commodity. But the GDR is not always the target of such a benign spirit. The three West German television stations that can be picked up in the GDR continuously find fault with whatsoever the GDR does or says. And there is no let-up either in the constant barrage of propaganda beamed at Eastern Europe by certain Western radio stations with the express purpose of causing dissatisfaction and unrest. Even the American magazine 'Newsweek' commented recently that *"under the Reagan administration, the Voice of America and its two US-run sister stations, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, no longer report the news objectively and have become little more than forums for extremist East European emigres or strident views from the White House."*

"You must know that before the Wall was built, many acts of sabotage occurred in East Berlin to try and undermine the country's struggling economy," I was told.

Yes, indeed. It is not common knowledge but a special section, camouflaged as a 'research advisory body' had been set up in the West German Government to organise this and had received huge secret funds for this purpose. However, Western historians are very reticent about recalling such

matters, or of revealing the extent of Western involvement in the 1953 Uprising in East Berlin, which in many respects was paralleled by the events in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1967. Yet for the East German authorities, the memory of the smuggling-in of large quantities of weapons by CIA-backed vested interests, including former Nazis, plus the infiltration into these countries of agents and mercenaries posing as tourists at the time must surely give them justification for continued vigilance.

"We are also very concerned about the increasing number of neo-Nazi organisations in the Federal Republic," remarked Dietmar. "If they could, they would attempt to set up cells in the GDR. Perhaps now you can understand why there's a ban on many printed books, tapes and spontaneous demonstrations."

Bans of this nature, however, are also interpreted by some citizens as an infringement of freedoms, tempting them to defect or to apply for emigration to the West. When international tension rises, as it has done recently in Central Europe with the deployment of new missiles on both sides, an even greater clampdown occurs and more people seek to leave the country. The blaze of publicity given in the Western media to the latest batch of defections and the occupation of the Prague Embassy by some East Germans, who believe the grass is greener in the Federal Republic, has no doubt influences other people a great deal. Certainly, everyone I met was well aware of these incidents. But what these actions have actually resulted in is the introduction of some restrictions on travel to other socialist countries in order to stem the flow. The situation has therefore got worse for everyone, and presumably this could lead to a measure of dissatisfaction which could manifest itself in others wanting to defect. Once completed, the vicious circle is hard to break.

Another inducement to leave is the perceived higher standard of living in the West. I myself had seen advertisements on the television channels from Western Germany for the kind of luxury goods which cannot readily be obtained in the GDR, although most ordinary consumer goods are not particularly scarce. "We just don't have the variety that's available in the West," Wolfgang said, "but no-one has to go without essentials." Other people I'd spoken to made the same point.

This factor was of considerable significance in the early days of the German Democratic Republic. Prior to the construction of the Wall, an estimated 3 million East German citizens had fled, over half of them across the Berlin frontier. In part, they had been lured by the promise of better wages and the artificially-maintained high living standards in West Berlin, intended as a showplace for Western capitalism. These emigres had represented a drain of anything between 30 and 200 thousand million marks invested in their education and training. A well-known American travel-book has commented that although the construction of the Wall might have tarnished the image of the GDR in international circles, it did have a pronounced effect upon the political and economic position of the country. But not, it should be stressed, without the input of a lot of hard work.

"Then there is the alarming talk of Reunification by some West German politicians who still do not recognise the GDR as a sovereign state but regard it as a part of the Federal Republic," Wolfgang continued.

The Soviet Union is anxious to maintain the GDR as a buffer State between itself and West Germany. For historic reasons it is much opposed to German Reunification. It is also possible that other East European countries might seek to leave the Soviet camp should this occur and the net result would be very destabilising if no reciprocal moves took place in Western Europe at the same time to nullify any military or strategic advantages what would thus be gained by the West.

However, given the choice between maintaining the status quo or Reunification, and I would hazard a guess that many East German citizens would still opt for the former, or if possible, for some midway point rather than go the whole hog. For thirty- five years of separate development has created two very distinct societies and a completely new generation has grown up without any first-hand knowledge of how things used to be.

There are obviously a great many other factors in this equation which help to explain why the GDR should feel itself continuously on the defensive – a posture which translates itself into a preoccupation with military preparedness and the curtailment of certain individual liberties.

The East German government is not by any means blameless and probably has its fair share of malpractices and corrupt politicians. It has also mad bad mistakes in the past and has been very heavy-handed on various occasions. But the proposals it has put forward at the United Nations for disarmament measures should at least be given credit and taken seriously, as the former UN Secretary-General, Dr Kurt Waldheim, acknowledged in December 1976 when he said:

The German Democratic Republic has played a positive and constructive role ever since it entered the United Nations. This is especially true of efforts towards disarmament and also of other aspects of our activities. I should like to place on record my gratitude for the positive and active role of your country.

Words of praise like these cannot easily be dismissed.

I hope what I've written doesn't lead to the impression that everyone here is terribly downtrodden. Provided they can come to terms with the country's strict laws, its political persuasion, and its overbearing bureaucracy, people can lead quite normal, and yes, happy lives. This was the message which Wolfgang was trying to emphasize, I felt. But if they want to change things from within, they are inclined to come up against a blank wall, or sometimes if they get carried away, four very thick blank walls, as other people had made it very clear to me.

The conclusion I can't help but reach is that if we want to help reduce tensions in the country and ease the restrictions on people's lives, we should surely be seeking to remove all forms of provocation. And of course, this should be reciprocated.

PROBLEM-SHARING

Our chat had lasted a long time. The coffee pot was empty and yet there was still no sign of Gerhard Lindner.

"Something urgent must have come up," his secretary said apologetically as we made our departure.

Indeed it had. We met on the stairs and found out that the matter in question was the threat of an imminent invasion of Nicaragua by American forces. The country's newspapers were full of speculation about what might happen, not to mention a considerable amount of other comment. The Peace Council had been holding urgent talks to discuss how to react. There was no disputing the fact that they were very worried indeed, if the expression on Gerhard Lindner's face was anything to go by, and they could foresee the possibility of both superpowers becoming closely entangled which could only end up one way.

I informed him that in Britain there is also strong opposition to America's involvement in the region, not just within the peace movement but also amongst other members of the public. In our own area, the visit to that country by a local person had sparked off a lot of interest in the fate of Nicaragua. Even now, I expected peace groups at home would be responding to this news in similar fashion. He smiled. It was good to know that there was a feeling of solidarity between us over this issue. Had the events quickly escalated into a world war though, in the conventional stages anyway, I shuddered to think of how precarious my own position would be over the next few days.

Wolfgang interrupted my gloomy thoughts as we continued on our way. Mention of the peace movement prompted him to remark all of a sudden:

"There are some smaller peace groups in this country too. But," he added, "they're only opposed to Russian missiles, whereas they should be against all of them."

I should really have told him about the exhibition I had seen the previous day (but felt it wise not to), which vividly illustrated they were indeed opposed to all missiles and, in the case of some people, to weapons of any description. But I couldn't help thinking of what someone in the church group had said which was the exact converse to this remark. "The Peace Council is only opposed to NATO weapons" – that was it. It would seem that there's a crying need for better internal communications, if nothing else.

Not far away from the offices of the GDR Peace Council is a large dour-looking building which houses the East German branch of the United Nations Association, the Solidarity Committee (which

raises funds for Third World countries) and last but not least, the International Friendship League. The GDR-GB Friendship Society is one among many different sections of this huge organisation, and from the signs on the doors, I noted various other countries which have friendship links with the GDR – Italy, France, the Netherlands, Iceland, Venezuela, Nepal, Ecuador, India, Mexico, and so on and so forth.

As Dietmar's own office was being decorated, we popped for a moment into one he is temporarily using which was no bigger than a pantry. Here I was presented with some East German magazines.

"You know we British are a pretty cynical bunch and like to think that every other country is in such poor shape as our own," I hinted as I leafed through the glossy pages portraying a completely rosy picture of the GDR.

"Well, of course we have problems here as well," he said. "For instance, a new company producing industrial rubbers has just been set up which will result in many workers and their families having to move to the area from other towns. Obviously, this will produce all kinds of human problems." Then turning the tables on me, he added: "But I know what you mean. We're also very saddened about the way that Britain's fortunes have declined. At one time, the pound was worth 11 East German marks; now it's down to only 3.6 marks."

Readers with an interest in money matters may care to know that the cost of the meal in the canteen we then visited came to only 70 pfennigs. At just under 20p for a large flounder and chips, followed by a portion of apple pie, I could well understand why no-one looked underfed in the building.

Since Wolfgang had a meeting that afternoon, I returned to the hotel, and after a bit of a rest to try and digest everything, I once more took to my feet to explore some of the streets I'd not yet ventured into while the sun was still shining.

COUNTING HOUSES

In an attempt to lose myself and to discover the unexpected, I set off in a southerly direction and soon came across and official building providing information on the Soviet Union. In the window there was a large mounted photograph of the Nordic Women's Peace March which travelled through several East European countries in 1982. Tempting though it was to go inside and find out more about it from the Russians' point of view, I decided otherwise on considering the language difficulties I would be sure to encounter.

Not long afterwards, I passed a large temple-like building, crowned by a multi-pillared dome, completely encased in scaffolding. Further down the road lay an almost identical building. These, I learned later, were the French and German Cathedrals, much devastated in the war but now being renovated. Midway between the two, another fine classical building – the Schauspielhaus – has also been restored and will reopen shortly as a concert hall. In these surroundings it's hard not to believe that Nero would have had the last laugh.

With the sound of cat-gut and chuckles still fresh in my mind, I eventually came to a junction and turned left down the broad main road called Leipzigerstrasse. Enormous modern blocks of flats stand like soldiers on parade along the street, testifying to the efforts of the planners to provide more up-to-date accommodation for a fair proportion of the city's million-odd population.

For the country as a whole, it is planned that three million flats are to be built or modernised between 1976 and 1990. From 1971 to1982, about 1.2 million new flats were built and nearly half that number of older properties were modernised. This enabled around a third of the population to move into better-equipped accommodation.

According to a handbook, it is stated that in the 1980s, *"priority is increasingly being given to the repair and renovation of older residential areas". This seems to indicate a definite slackening off of the trend in building new units, which is verified by the figures (400,000 from 1971-75; 559,000 from 1976-80; and 600,000 from 1981-85.*

Although this might reflect all sorts of reasons for the change in emphasis, it would appear for one thing that the haste in putting up new buildings in the post-war period, albeit a very impressive and admirable achievement, nevertheless led to some poor workmanship and the costs are now having to be counted. Even along this street, I could not help but notice that there were sure signs of premature ageing – rotten wooden boards, for example. But I saw no evidence of any vandalism from the outside. Judging by the Germans' fastidious nature, I didn't really expect to see any either. Possibly, it could also have a lot to do with the importance given to other more constructive sports and hobbies.

The ground floors of these buildings contained various restaurants and shops. The very biggest shop of all, a solitary building situated at the interestingly named Spittelmarkt Junction, was devoted to children's interests and was already displaying all kinds of Christmas goodies in the windows. Beside the shop on a patch of open ground was a children's play area. Several steep-roofed log cabins on stilts, reached or breached by means of ladders and slides, stood round in a cluster, joined together by a number of high-sided wooden bridges – a rustic Wendy-village, no less.

Fiercely resisting the impulse to join the kids clambering up and down and round and about, and daunted by a 'No Entry' sign on the road nearby, which probably referred as much to adults as to car drivers, I continued on my way, guided by the sight of the television tower in the near distance. Having reached that goal and once more finding my bearings, I rewarded myself with a snack from a stall and returned by a more familiar route to the hotel.

The chill of the evening air was setting in, and it was certainly no weather to amble aimlessly around anymore. Getting from A to B in as short a distance and time as possible was the object now.

Some hours later, with my bones warmed up again, and with thirst forcing me to cast all manner of loving glances in the direction of the fridge in my room, I made a quick dash out to find a cheap café. To my chagrin, this necessitated walking all the way back to the centre. In spite of the bitterly cold wind and the lack of any traffic worth talking about, no-one jay-walked or dared to cross the road before the little green man sign appeared at the pedestrian crossings. On some occasions, I began to wonder whether it was ever going to come on, and I had horrible visions of being found frozen to death next morning beside a faulty traffic light. At times like this, I knew that there were indeed great differences between the GDR and the UK which far transcend any superficial distinctions between the capitalist and communist ideologies. I had discovered the real truth at last.

LAST SIGHTS

One of the big worries that had been playing on my mind was put to rest the next morning when I called at the hotel reception desk to hand in my key. Here it was Tuesday already, the day I had planned to travel down to Dresden, but I still had no train ticket or seat reservation. A notice I had seen at the Alexandra Platz station the previous evening had said, as far as I could make out, that seats have to be reserved a month in advance. However, back at the hotel I was told that there was nothing to worry about and the particulars of my intended train journey to Dresden were taken down. While the receptionist was about it, she said she could also arrange for my ticket to Budapest from there as well as the return journey to Berlin.

On showing my face the following morning, the tickets were ready and waiting for me, and a seat reservation for the first leg of the journey was booked. Ticket in the singular, would be a better way to describe it, for instead of having a clutch of them, it was possible to get a return ticket which allowed me to break my journey in Dresden, or to put it in the words printed on my ticket: "Der Reisende kann die Fahrt innerhalb…unterbrechen."

I had chosen to travel the cheapest way and this meant going by second class. How odd that in a socialist country dedicated to the levelling of class differences, there should be a privileged form of transport! Was first class reserved for politicians, foreigners, or maybe, peace activists? No, it all depends on how much you want to spend, and for my 2,000kilometer return journey (approximately 1,250 miles), the fare amounted to £33 basic, plus £1 for each seat reservation and a commission of £1 to the hotel for making the booking. You can't grumble at that!

Feeling much relieved, I left my bags in the luggage room and took off on an escorted last look at East Berlin, once again in the company of Wolfgang. Back to Alexandra Platz we went, and finding that the bar in the basement of the Rotes Rathaus (the Red Town Hall) was not yet open, we had to go elsewhere for a drink. The mind truly boggles at the thought of having a beer in the cellar of a Rathaus!

After this, we paid a visit to the monumental Palace of the Republic which I had passed by several times but never yet been inside. Completed only in 1976 and build on the site of the Hohenzellern Stadtschloss, the Prussian Royal Palace which was destroyed in the last war, this huge white marble and tinted glass edifice houses the country's Parliament and also contains a conference hall capable of seating 5,000 people. In addition, the Palace is very much a place of entertainment and includes many facilities which we would not expect to find in the Palace of Westminster.

Handing in our coats, we headed straight away for the bowling alley, not to play a game, but to have a meal in the restaurant there. From our table near the central bar, we could either watch the games in progress or look out of the window at the River Spree flowing alongside.

The meal I chose – Rump steak with buttered cabbage, mushrooms and pommes frites – was one of the most expensive on the menu, yet cost only about £1.75. There were other hot main courses which cost only half of this, which, considering the unique nature of the restaurant is very reasonable. The food looked very tasty indeed, but unfortunately, I discovered too late that there is a special East German technique in shaking a salt cellar without it coming apart in one's hands, completely emptying its contents over one's plate. Never mind, all the more excuses to have a drink afterwards to clean the palate.

To get back to money matters – how do these prices look to an ordinary citizen? The average monthly wage for a man, according to Dietmar, is about 1,100 marks, and for a woman, usually less than this, so that a family 's income would be somewhere between 1,800 and 2,000 marks, or £50-55 a month. National statistics show that just over 70 percent of this goes on food, luxuries and consumer goods; nearly 17 percent on taxes, contributions and savings; and just under 9½ percent on education and miscellaneous services, including fares, rents, electricity, gas, water, heating and repairs. The remainder (a little over 3½ percent) is spent on entertainment, recreation and holidays.

"It's almost as cheap to eat out as it is to eat at home," I was informed. Certainly, all the restaurants I'd seen were always full, and the one we were sitting in now was no exception.

Many people also enjoy going out for an evening's entertainment, and they may choose to come here for that purpose. In this very building, there are three large halls on different floors which cater for all kinds of music, featuring live bands, orchestras and discotheques. And all of this, it should be remembered, takes place in the parliament building.

I couldn't help thinking that some of these innovations would not come amiss in our own Houses of Parliament. A spot of ten pin bowling would liven up the Lords no end and a punk rock band in the Commons would surely be preferable to the usual sounds which emanate from that Chamber. But I'm not so sure whether everyone would agree with me. Perhaps it should be the other way around.

There was no more time for such speculation. It was time to collect my cases and head for the Lichtenberg main line station. On the way, we talked about various exchange visits between our two countries and both of us expressed the hope that people from my area would be interested in making a visit to the GDR on such a trip. The, bidding me adieu and fore-warning me about Hungarian strong beverages, Wolfgang pointed me in the right direction for the train and trotted off to see his dentist. I thanked him for his kindness and hurried along to the platform. Let me see now – platform 17, seat number 92, and coach number 55. That sounds as if it must be a very long platform indeed!

IN FINE TRAIN

It's always a bit unsettling when a train is late. The desire for an explanation as to what's wrong quickly builds up into an obsession. While I was standing on the platform beside what I took to be a signal box, someone came up to the door, gave a knowing knock and, open sesame, he was admitted inside. Other would-be passengers did not take long in learning this particular rhythm and soon, one by one they began to approach the door and give a rat-a-tat-tat (for official secrecy reasons I can't disclose the real signal) and the door would open for them likewise. As it got later and later, their voices and the mystery voice within became very agitated, and the callers, rather than being let in indiscriminately, were mostly turned away.

About half and hour after the train should have been due, there was a station announcement which was met with a chorus of loud groans and people started to disappear hurriedly. Virtually left alone on the platform and not knowing what had been said, I decided to consult the timetable in the passageway. Supposing this train had been cancelled, I would have to get to another station to catch the next express train for Dresden – a daunting thought.

It wasn't even any consolation to see the layout of the train, actually containing no more than eight coaches, posted up on a diagram on the wall next to the timetable – all very easy to understand and useful information, if only the missing ingredient, the D-Zug itself, had been present.

Just as I reached the main concourse an amber light started flashing on the departure board beside the train I wanted. Sure enough, it had now arrived, fifty minutes late, but there, none the less. My belief in the punctuality of trains on the continent had been shattered and British Rail had grown considerably in my estimation. Yet the delay had made another aspect of East German life seem more 'human' and the reactions of other people had been perfectly comprehensible even if the announcement had not been.

The train itself was on an altogether bigger scale to British ones, requiring you to climb up a set of steps to get into the coach; nevertheless, it was quite similar to the 'open plan' variety that we have over here. The high-backed, straight seats, covered in a red vinyl kind of material, were not as comfortable as the upholstery on British trains, but everywhere was clean and tidy.

No sooner had we set off, than people around me left their seats and reappeared shortly afterwards clutching a bottle in one hand and a hot dog in the other. Reasonably satisfied that I could handle a snack without disgracing myself, I marched myself off to the buffet car. A sausage nearly a foot long was taken out of a saucepan and put into a bun for me, and back in my seat I had no difficulty at all in devouring it. As I did so, people came by carrying handfuls of empty bottles back to the buffet car. No wonder the trains stay so spotless!

In a few hours we arrived at Hauptbahnhof station in Dresden. Leaving the main entrance, I consulted the nearest map, and not seeing the name of my hotel printed on it, I picked up my bags and set off down the wide pedestrian precinct leading from the station. If you are patient, you may be lucky enough to get a taxi, but the fares are expensive and it is one luxury I preferred to do without.

After struggling along with my cases for some time, a youngster sidled up to me and asked where I was from. “England,” I replied. “You want to change money?” he asked furtively.

Now one thing you are told never to do in a socialist country is to change money on the black market, least of all in a public place. Remembering this, I told him that I was quite happy with the money I had, thank you, but if he wanted to do me a favour, perhaps he could tell me where the Hotel Lilienstein was. Right here, he said grumpily and scooted off.

I checked in and took the lift to the ninth floor of this modern hotel, where I found a pleasant room, but unlike my first hotel, minus a television. However, the extensive view from the window easily made up for this deficiency.

As soon as my arms had shrunk back to their normal length, I locked my door and returned to the lift. A matronly-looking woman in a fur hat dashed in behind me. She uttered an unfamiliar word and pointed downwards, so I nodded. In the lounge area next to the reception desk she joined a gathering of other folk who were hanging round, ready to go out for an evening stroll by the looks of it. It was quite unmistakeable that this was a group of Russians – ordinary Russian working-men and women, that is – the men in pullovers and jackets chatting noisily and looking just as content to stay where they were beside the tray of drinks, and the women wearing their Sunday-best coats and hats with sparkling eyes and excited expressions on their faces.

Outside I strolled up and down the precinct, now in more of a fit condition to take things in better. This area has been completely rebuilt since the war, and an excellent job has been made of it too, Nicely designed shops, plush hotels and many fine restaurants gaze at each other across the broad walkway, separated by floodlit fountains which bring a splash of life and vitality, as well as a good deal of cold water, to the surroundings. Bright lights cast a glow into the sky and several car parks full of modern cars create an undisguised look of affluence. It’s hard not to believe you’re not in some mid-sized American city here; there’s even an ice cream parlour on hand, patronised much of the time by young couples in jeans. Older people, dressed more formally and without exception, extremely smartly, walked to and fro en route to an evening meal, a film, a concert or what-have-you.

While I was standing gazing round in amazement at these sights, the Russian holiday-makers came along, and in high spirits formed an impromptu circle and began singing, stamping their feet in rhythm. The two policemen patrolling the area paid no heed to them and ambled on.

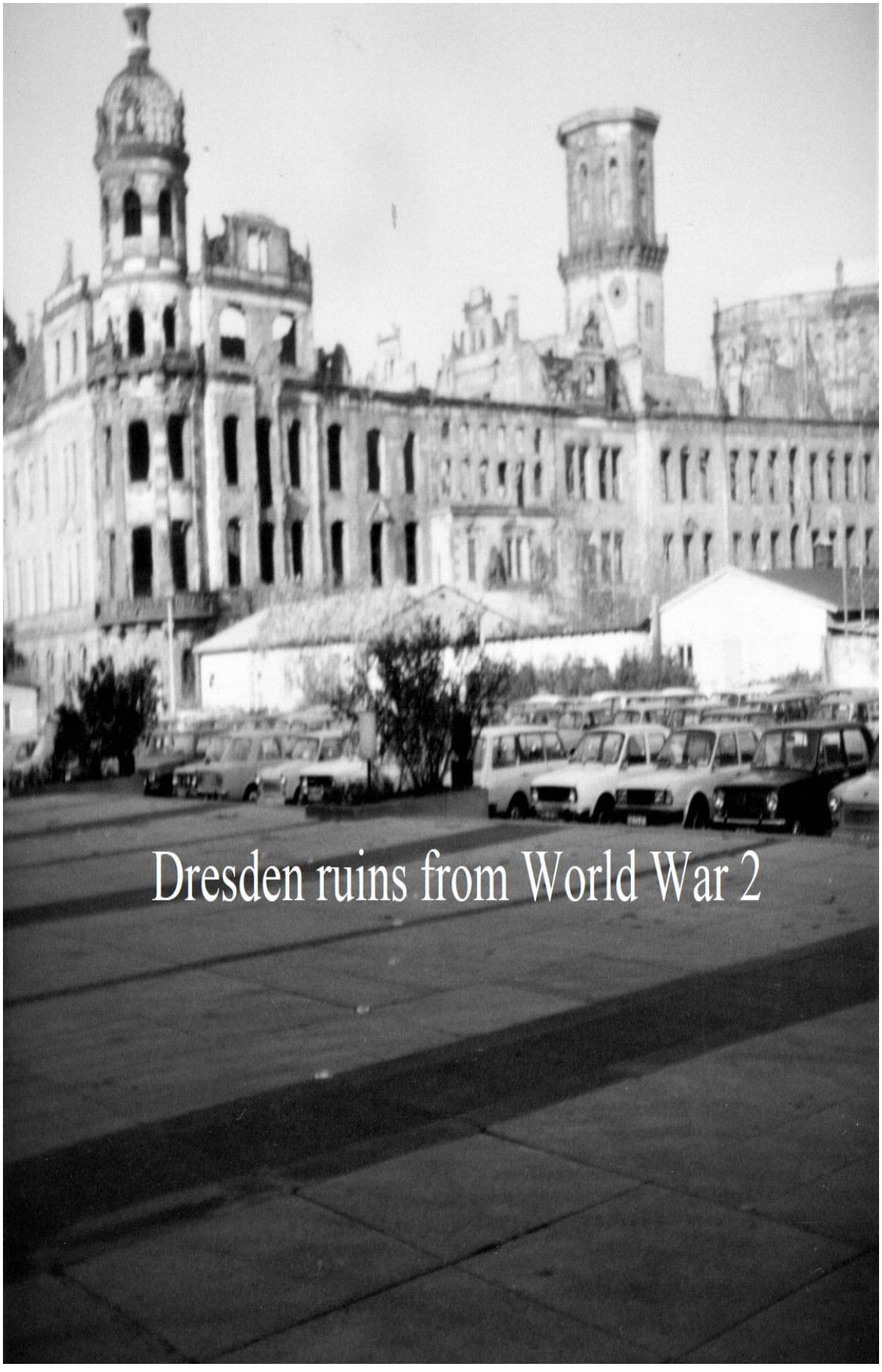
Returning to the hotel, I asked a receptionist what there was in the way of night-life. I think she misunderstood what I had in mind for the look on her face registered absolute disgust at my enquiry. But in an effort to placate me, she advised me to go along to the restaurant up the road. It was now closed, so I took off in the opposite direction, and crossing over a tramway came to a terrace of older building looking on to a square. The covered pavement beside the ground-floor shops looked an interesting route to explore, and sure enough, halfway along I came across a night club. On a board outside were photographs of the artistes which showed that inside, a Bulgarian scantily-dressed lady contortionist would be performing with a barbershop quartet, clad in knee-length leather breeches. I put my nose inside the entrance but the girl at the cloaks-counter informed me that the show had already begun. Over the road though was a 'weinstubbe' that was still open.

The throb of pop music pulsating from a door told me that I had found the right place. Up the grand staircase I trotted, drawn by the music, and was stopped at the top by a woman attendant. For some undisclosed reason, I couldn't go inside; either I was too late again, or not dressed right, or it was too full already – it certainly looked it. There, crammed on the dancefloor in front of the band were scores and scores of fox-trotting youngsters. No decadent Western smooching going on here! Not really my cup of tea anyway, I thought. I tried another door downstairs and found myself in the toilet. On account of what I found there, fox-trotting must turn people on more than I had reckoned!

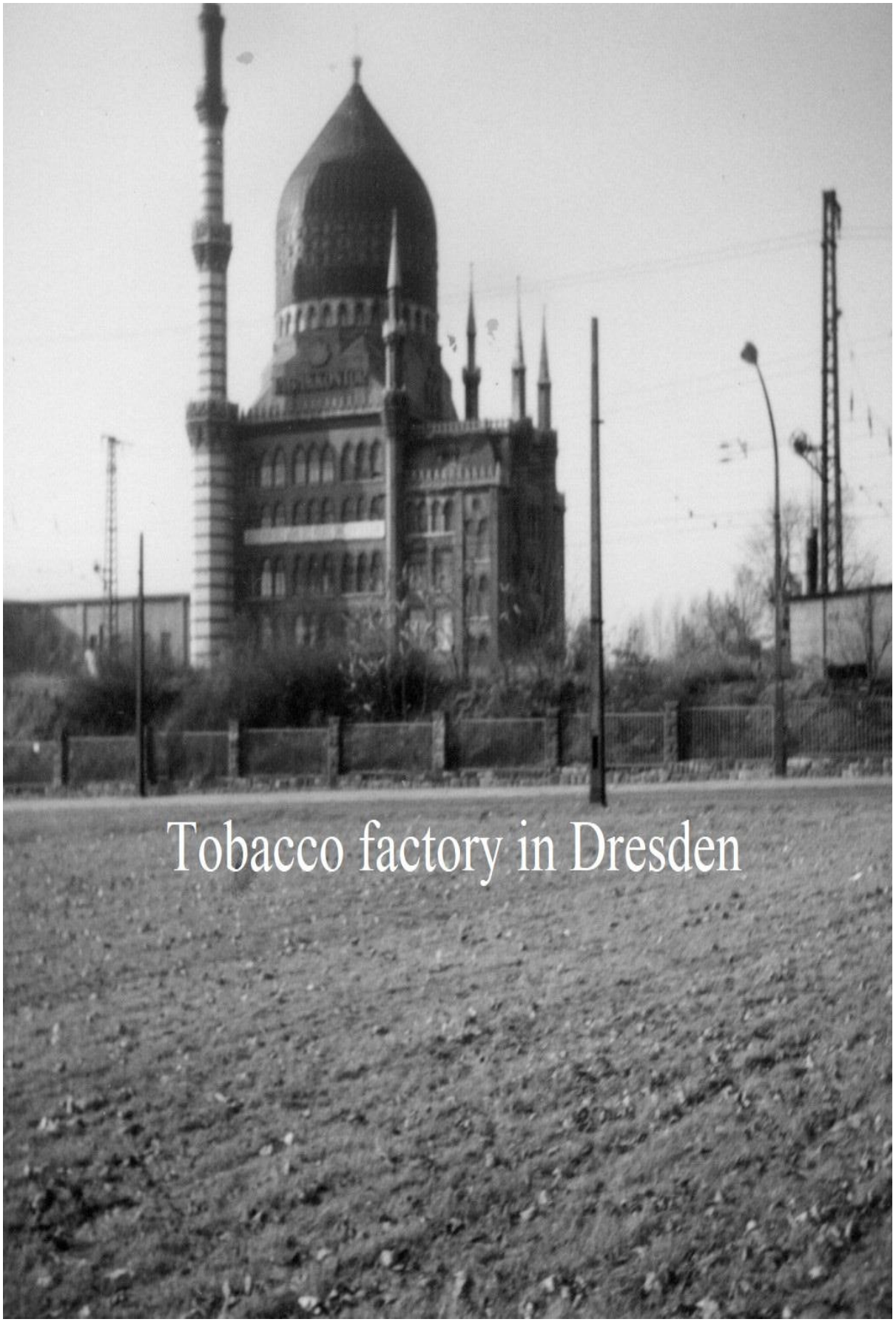
Down another passage and I came to a wine cellar – nothing phoney about these arches, the candle-lit tables, or the wine itself, or indeed the cosy, intimate atmosphere evoked by the combination of these things.

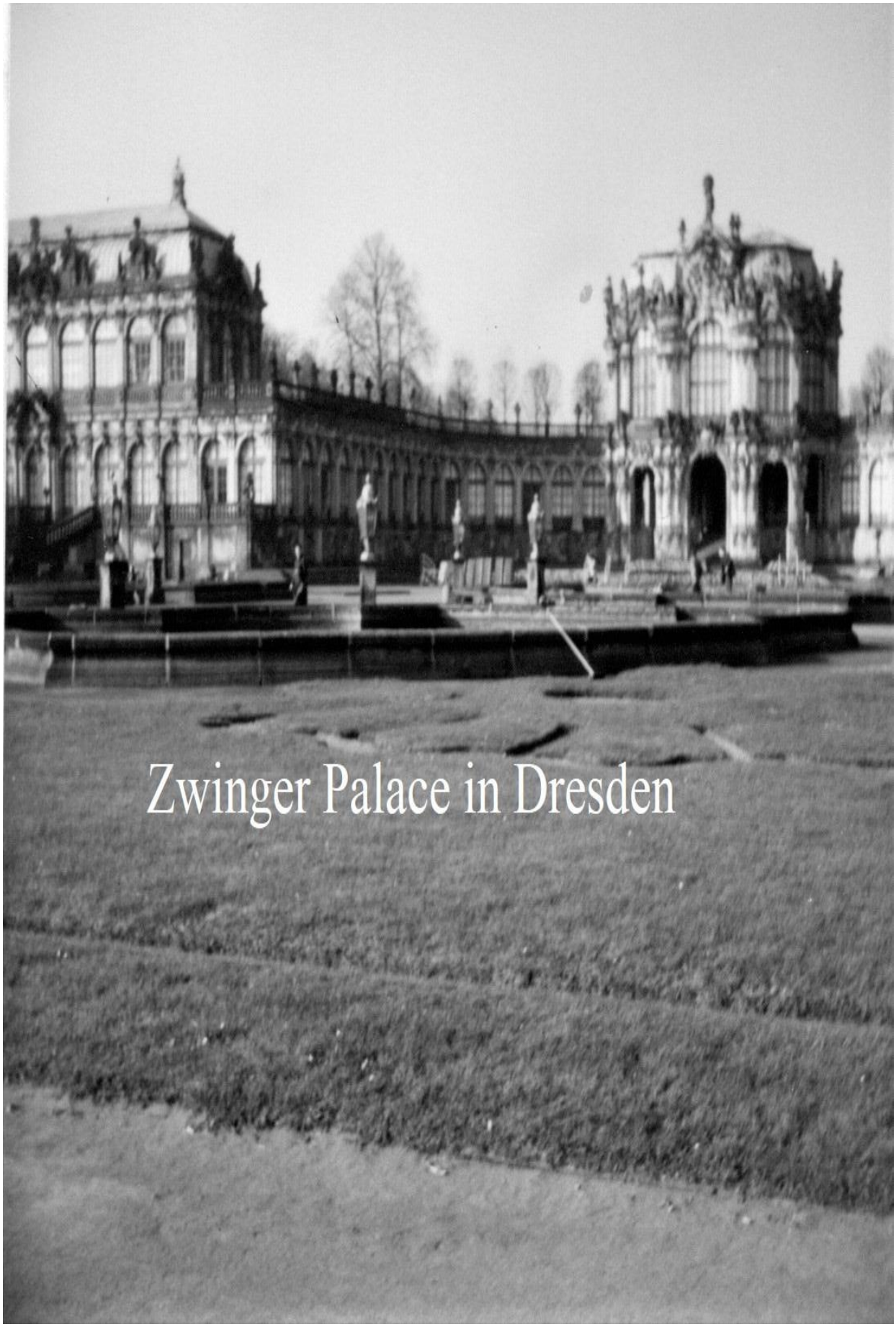
Since it was extremely busy, I was obliged to sit at a table with a young couple who were almost hidden from view behind a stockade of bottles and glasses. Noticing my poor command of the language when I ordered a drink, they asked me where I was from. My answer resulted in a lot of interested comments (none of which I understood). But words are not the only means of communication. For as soon as my half-pint-sized wine glass was empty, it was immediately filled up again to the brim. I had no difficulty in understanding that at all!

This really epitomised the generosity which I came across time and time again. Indeed, the warmth and kindness of people I met and the absence of any hostility towards me, a Westerner and especially in Dresden, made a deep impression on me. I hope that when people from East European countries visit our country, as it increasingly being done, they will be treated in the same spirit. But that goes without saying, doesn't it!


Dresden ruins from World War 2


Ruins in Dresden


Tobacco factory in Dresden


Zwinger Palace in Dresden

AT WHAT PRICE?

I started off the next morning by doing some window-shopping in the arcade, although I realised that some of the prices here would probably be higher than elsewhere. Amongst a beautifully-designed Christmas display in the windows of a department store, were a number of fluffy animals, the cheapest being about £8.50, while the most expensive one, a big lion, cost £25. In a bookshop, most children's hardback books were in the £1.50 - £2 range; some adult books, however were priced up to £7. Also on sale were small jigsaws at £2 each, a mosaic kit at £3.50 and a chess set with a cloth board at about £5.

For the warm-minded woman, there were wool hats in another shop for between £4 and £5, while for stay-at-homes, there were women's slippers at £5 a pair, and men's at slightly less than this.

An item which is far easier to compare in prices is a standard long-playing record, which costs £4.75 in the shops there. For my money, if only for the cover, I would have chosen the one showing a picture of a ton-up boy on a motor-bike. At the top were the words: "Wojciech Gasowski sings Love Me Tender, Rip It Up, Blue Swede Shoes and Tutti Frutti" amongst other songs.

The general conclusion I reached was that some things cost more, some less, and some more or less the same, which only proves how futile the whole exercise must have been. Nevertheless, comparing prices is hard to resist and it's something which everyone always wants to know about.

Having given way to this compulsion, I moved on and in a little while came to the Church of the Holy Cross, which stands on the other side of the square to the night club. Badly damaged in the Anglo-American bombing raid on the city on 13th February 1945, it was rebuilt and consecrated again ten years later. Inside the church, which seats over 3,000 people, the brickwork has been left bare. Devoid of any superficialities, the sheer simplicity of the interior serves to focus the mind on the real reason for one's being in a church. An exhibition, purely artistic rather than political in nature, was mounted at the back in celebration of the 'Peace Decade'. I signed the Visitors' Book with what I hoped was a suitable message and left.

Beyond the square and before you get to the banks of the river Elbe are some more forthright reminders of the bombing. The gutted and grotesque skeletons of buildings such as the Royal Palace come as a sudden shock and haunt you for long afterwards. The gaping window frames appear like the darkened, withered sockets of gouged-out eyes which unremittingly stare at you, pleading for your every attention. Walls starting nowhere and ending nowhere, outlined against the smug, uncaring walls of hale and hearty buildings all around, beg you to be put out of their misery. And dismembered noble sentinels, blackened by soot and grime, maintain their lonely vigil against another such raid.

How can decent, civilised people, Christians even, do this to one another in a war, I wondered, thinking of the death and destruction inflicted upon Dresden, Coventry, and elsewhere. How is it possible for a person to cuddle his own baby and incinerate someone else's; to nurse a sick person back to health while proliferating injuries and diseases on others; to feel deeply moved by great poetry, prose, art and music and in a single sweep to erase such objects from the face of the earth; and, to top it all, to feel proud and gallant, not to mention Christian and civilised for having done so?

The true significance of the twinning between Dresden and Coventry as the embodiment of Christian reconciliation then forcibly struck me. But reconciliation will not be possible after a nuclear war. All the more reason then for us to do everything in our power to see that such atrocities are never allowed to happen again.

Crossing the bridge over the river, I came to the shopping mall in the new town area. A very wide, tree-lined avenue runs down the centre between an assortment of well-stocked modern shops, awaiting customers. But on this particular cold but sunny day, there weren't many about. The coffee shop on the corner was far from deserted though, and in view of the choice of mouth-watering gateaus on offer, I can well understand why. Even mid-morning on a Wednesday, customers were dressed up to the nines, which made me feel rather like a gate-crasher at a Conservative ladies' coffee-morning as I filled up on calories and caffeine to beat the cold.

Near the bridge was a tourist information office. On my return I went inside to study the railway timetable on the wall. It would be nice to visit a smaller town while I was in the country to see another aspect of life and this was my last opportunity to do so.

I was happy to see that there were frequent services and a wide choice of unknown names to select from. But which one to choose? The only way to do it was to shut your mind and stick a mental pin into one of the names – a difficult process, but one which yielded the name 'Tharandt'. According to a route-map, it was to the South-West of Dresden, yet that was all the information I had to go on. It was to be a blind date for both of us.

My watch showed that there was still time left before it was necessary to catch a train. So, crossing the bridge again, I turned right along the road beside the river in search of the famous Zwinger Palace. I walked and walked and walked and eventually came across an odd-looking building, which, in my ignorance, I thought must be it. But I was wrong – it was in fact a tobacco factory. A strange folly indeed: it appeared like a cross between a mosque and something out of Disneyland, its main features being a large dome, four small rounded towers and a red and white striped chimney.

The real Zwinger Palace, which I happened across by accident not long afterwards, was far more graceful and majestic as one would expect from a highly ornate and magnificently-restore Baroque pavilion. But of the two, my higher score for points of intrigue had to go to the former.

SUSPECTED SUSPECT

At the station, there was a chart on the wall listing different place names with matching numbers. To the side of it were some machines containing visual display units and the numbers one to nine on tactile buttons below the screens. By touching the number of the place you wanted, various bits of information about the required train service would show up. The school children milling around me were clearly well-adept at using these machines. They would rub their fingers over a number, see what came up, rub it again twice, check the display, move their finger back and fro the other way, look again and then start on a combination of numbers. It was quite fascinating to watch. I think that by the end of this time they must have known the serial number of all the components, the colour of the socks the train driver was wearing, and the first names of everyone on board. The final instruction was the most important and that gave the cost of the ticket required, which was also issued by the machine. That was also the only bit of information that I wanted to know, but it took a lot of attempts for me to get the right answer.

Having dutifully punched my ticket in the franking machine on the platform, I waited for my train to arrive. Did I say train? It could almost as easily have been a double-decker bus on rails, if you can imagine a number of them connected together and driven by just one person.

The journey lasted twenty minutes and took us out into a forested area along the bottom of a steep V-shaped valley. From the station at Tharandt to the town itself there is a short walk of a couple of hundred yards. Here, a quiet side road branches off to the left from the main road, following the river and the railway line through the woods to the next small town.

I strolled down this lane for a little distance until the houses petered out and the track ahead narrowed. It would have been lovely to have carried on, but a country walk was not after all the reason why I was here. Retracing my footsteps, therefore, I re-joined the cobbled main road up through the town.

The small squat shops, especially those selling food items, were quite well supplied, I observed. The hairdresser was busy, and the filling-station, consisting of nothing more than a solitary pump and situated on an island in the centre of the road, was doing an exceptionally good trade, in spite of the small amount of actual traffic on the roads. The houses on different side-streets further on, mainly older stock with slate roofs and dormer windows, had a very sturdy appearance, even though some of them could have done with a fresh coat of paint or some new plaster here and there. Yet the presence of a number of new buildings and the smartening-up of several of the shop fronts indicated that although this may not have been the most prosperous of towns, it was definitely thriving. And there was absolutely no mistaking the character which it possessed.

I continued up the main road until I came to what I thought from a distance was a school. Coming level with it, however, I was startled to see an armed guard inside a booth at the entrance. A school? Perhaps not. Some sort of military base or stores? Maybe. If so, goodness knows what suspicions I might have aroused by swinging my camera around with gay abandon, snapping pictures left, right and asunder. The thought had been going through my mind that If I acted like a tourist, other people would be more likely to come forward and perhaps point things out to me. But so far that hadn't happened, I must admit, for no-one even seemed to notice me.

On seeing the guard and speculating on what might lie inside whatever it was that he was guarding, my first instinct was to hide my camera. Adopting as nonchalant a look as possible, I continued walking on a discrete distance before daring to turn round.

Passing the building again on my way back through the town, I endeavoured now to appear as much like a local resident as I could, so as not to draw attention to myself or to my Brownie camera. I even took a slight detour and climbed up to the church which stood on a steep rise above the main road, as if intending to say my devotions. The door was locked. Of course, I should have known it would have been all along, but I was just checking. Down to the street again. And a short pause in front of the official noticeboard like any good citizen. That immediately aroused a few looks – evidently, that's the last thing that anyone chooses to do here. And so, back to the entrance hall of the station, which, to my consternation, was crowded with people sheltering from the biting cold wind. I hung about trying to look cold too. At least, that was easy, and I had no difficulty in passing for one of them. But suddenly, they all rushed out of the exit to get on a bus, leaving me alone with the woman at the ticket kiosk.

Confident that I had now made it without being pursued by an armed guard, suspicious of a strangely-behaved foreigner concealing a camera in a carrier-bag, I breathed a sigh of relief and said to the ticket clerk: "Dresden, bitte" in the best German accent I could muster. So saying, I handed her some money. It turned out to be…a West German 20mark note. Oh!! Didn't she go on and on about it! I hadn't a clue what she said, mind you; I just nodded and trusted in her superior knowledge. Anyway, I did get a ticket, and a pocketful of East German change (which I really wanted to get rid of) and caught the next train back to Dresden without any further mishaps.

Let this be a warning to other people who might be tempted to pick out names at random from railway timetables. You never know what you may find there. But equally so, I wonder how many unsuspecting foreign tourists in England think the Greenham Common sounds like a simply ideal spot for a rambling or camping holiday?

PART THREE

CROSSED CHECKS AND CZECHS CROSSING

Thursday the 15th dawned, and after a very filling breakfast, I staggered back up the road to the station with my cases and found the right platform for the 'Hungaria' Express to Budapest. I was pleased to see that this time, there were corridors and warm compartments to stretch out in, three a side in the first class and four in the second. But this difference in elbow room per passenger didn't worry me since only two other people shared the compartment with me for the first stretch of the journey – a middle-aged man in a suit and his wife, or so I assumed.

Apart from uttering the word "Budapest?" to each other, we said nothing the entire way. Neither did they speak to other passengers who joined us later, which is quite understandable since we were travelling through several language zones – German, Czech, Slovakian and Hungarian. The English habit of keeping oneself to oneself and never speaking to strangers on a long train-ride may thus be far more widespread than we realise. Indeed, the man and his wife hardly spoke a word even to each other and spent the time gazing out of the window or snoozing, with the occasional delve into their picnic hamper.

The warm and restful atmosphere gave us a good chance to view the fleeting scenery in comfort. Once we had gone through the industrial suburbs of Dresden, we passed a few small orchards interspersed with greenhouses and other nondescript buildings on the fringe of the city before we reached the countryside. To our right, the River Elbe accompanied us through a wide floodplain and it was not long before the hills began to rise on both sides of us until they emerged from the lower tree-lined slopes as dark and deeply-wrinkled cliffs, presenting a constantly changing façade, like a succession of weather-beaten faces of old countrymen. Strung out along the river bank was an uninterrupted line of red-roofed houses, coalescing in places to form fat little villages and well-fed towns. For this is 'Saxon Switzerland' – one of the most popular tourist areas in the country. Bad Schandau, the picturesque border town where the train stopped, really seems to breathe this air of well-being and has become a major resort for very understandable reasons.

Yet while the waters flow freely across the border without having to prove their molecular structure, mere mortals are faced with a continuous stream of East German and Czechoslovak Immigration and Customs officials, dressed immaculately in forbidding military uniform. The best policy, undoubtedly, is to show everything – passport, train ticket, bags, bank statements, old school reports, British Legion Flower Show Certificates and the odd crumpled-up remnants of cinema tickets which always seem to get lodged in the corners of your coat pockets. Never argue with them about

which country has the best football team and never try making a joke about the weather. Most important of all, as we're always being told, never ever try smuggling anything through.

To remember my stay in Dresden and the GDR in general, I had taken the wrapper off a toilet roll and stuffed it amongst my luggage instead of throwing it in the bin. After a while, one is reduced to such desperate measures in the peace movement in order to prove to people here that people there are really no different. Readers who may still not be convinced might be interested to learn that the 'Topa Kon' variety of toilet paper retails at just over 8p a roll. More interesting even than that snippet of information is the list of numbers printed on the wrapper. I hope it's not meant to be confidential but I can reveal that the number on mine was 155 85 40 005 003 054. I puzzled over this for some time until it struck me – of course, it's a competition. That must be the nearest equivalent they have to the combinations of numbers we get on various coupons and in many of our newspapers nowadays. Come to think of it, didn't I hear someone call out something as I wandered down the hotel corridor one morning. That's what it must have been – "Bingo!" Yes, you're never alone with a toilet roll wrapper…or are you?

Judging by the reaction of the others when the Customs official fished it out of my suitcase and held it up to the light, perhaps I might have been wrong. His stony expression indicated that I would be lucky to escape with 10 years' hard labour, while the respectable German couple nearly choked over their devilled eggs and quickly looked back at the passing scenery.

Shortly afterwards, the train stopped at Decin; the officials got off and four burly Czech workers got in, the one beside me reeking of what euphemistically-minded advertisers refer to as B.O. They put a case over their knees, pulled out a pack of cards and proceeded to play a game very similar to pontoon, or should that have been 'pong-toon' under the circumstances?

Meanwhile the train was threading its way through an industrial mining area, everywhere very dusty and the buildings put up in a most hickeldy-pickaldy fashion. Some of the older houses in particular were extremely grimy. But there were also plenty of attractive, newly-constructed and very likely, privately-owned houses amongst them, which reminded me of what one of the guides at the World Peace Assembly in Prague had said the previous year: "Many people don't want to have anything to do with politics and prefer to concentrate instead on raising their own standard of living." Even so, in the small towns we went through, red banners proclaiming political slogans were a frequent sight, much more so than in the GDR.

Leaving behind the mines and factories, we again found ourselves in the countryside – an area of woods, big open fields, low hills and every now and again, a vineyard or a field of hop vines.

Arriving in Prague, the workmen got out and in came a woman and four men, smartly but informally dressed and clearly not labourers by profession. Eight people in a hot compartment with the pungent smell of body odour still lingering in the air was too much for the woman who soon adjourned to the corridor outside. And for the entire journey to Brno, lasting nearly four hours, she never once took her eyes off a long, typed document, whereas the others dozed most of the time away.

At Brno, the places of the departing passengers were taken by some more workers and when they all left at Bratislava, we were then joined by a middle-aged homely-looking woman who had the look of someone who intimately knew that stretch of the railway line. I put a lot of trust in her after we'd crossed the border into Hungary, since I was worried about possibly missing the signs in the dark and ending up in Bulgaria or Romania. I should have known that the train was only going as far as Budapest, but still! Unlike the previous experience, formalities crossing the border were over in a flash. While an official checked my papers, another man (a sniffer) trotted up the corridor on all fours, shining his torch in odd nooks and crannies looking for any hidden caches of drugs.

The train was already running late when we got to Hungary, and although the driver 'put his foot down', we had a lot of time to make up. We also made a few unscheduled stops, all of which I took to be Budapest. But the calm manner of the woman sitting opposite me put my mind at rest. She had taken the best part of twenty minutes to take off her headscarf, gloves, shawl and two layers of cardigans when she'd come in, so when I saw her begin the reverse process, I knew we must be getting close.

By the time the train finally pulled in to Nyugati station, we were an hour late. Would someone still be there to meet me, I wondered. The answer came in the shape of a young woman in her twenties, wearing a short skirt.

"Are you Meester Paul Boosby?" she asked, coming up to me from out of the shadows. I informed her that I most certainly was.

"My name ees Maria; I am to be your translator," she said, "and these ees Hanna from the Hungarian Peace Council, and your driver, Imre."

We all shook hands.

"We have some bad news for you," she continued. "Your colleague, she ees not here. Her plane cannot take off because of the bad weather een London."

"Yes," said the other woman, also young, but wearing more practical clothing in view of the temperature. "We've been at the airport all afternoon, but she's not been able to come. We'll try again tomorrow."

What with the plane being delayed and my train being so late, they must have had a most tiring day, and here it was 11 o'clock at night and very cold. I only hoped that I was worth all the waiting-round for, but I didn't feel I could contribute much, the way l was then feeling after a 13 ½ - hour train journey. I was awfully glad, therefore, that we headed immediately for a hotel across the Danube in the Buda area of the city, where I put my head on my pillow and was out like a light.

If anyone were to ask me what my first impressions of Budapest were, I would have to be completely honest and say – I don't actually remember…but I can thoroughly recommend the beds!

CONFERENCE BUILDING MEASURES

I awoke to find myself in a nice bright room, by no means as luxurious as the hotel room in East Berlin, but equally as comfortable to my mind, and with a balcony behind the French windows, although it was far too cold to take advantage of this additional amenity. We were told later that this was a pretty normal sort of hotel and is patronised by quite ordinary people.

I took a seat in the restaurant and waited to be served. The waitresses all were dressed in uniform, but their choice of footgear was entirely their own. One had flat shoes on; another, high-heels; and yet another wore fashionable short boots. In conversing together and with their superiors they also seemed to be putting their foot down and standing up for themselves in a way corresponding to their individual selection of footwear. This, I'm sure would never have happened in the German Democratic Republic.

Their knowledge of English was limited to two words: salami and hamandeggs. My Hungarian was non-existent, so ordering breakfast didn't take too long. That morning, I chose the salami which came with thick chunks of heavy brown bread and a large potful of coffee. The next day, incidentally, I opted for the ham and eggs, which consisted of two very runny half-fried eggs sitting on thin slices of ham in a hot Pyrex dish. The thing to do evidently, was to turn things over in the dish, and in this way, the eggs continued to cook until palatable (thanks be).

My driver and translator collected me afterwards and we drove back over the Margaret bridge to one of the buildings beside the river embankment for my first meeting with three representatives of the Hungarian Peace Council: Hanna, whom I had met the previous evening; another woman, who was the International Secretary; and a more elderly man, who had served in the Peace Council since its inception in 1948. I found these people to be extremely pleasant, remarkably open and very deeply committed to the cause of peace. I emphasize this because there is a tendency in Britain to think of the East European Peace Committees as being staffed by faceless impersonal bureaucrats. Nothing could be further from the truth, particularly in the case of Hungary. We could do with people of this calibre in the British peace movement.

Their degree of commitment is in large part a reflection of what Hungarians have suffered in the past. In the Second World War, every twelfth citizen perished, almost half of the national wealth was destroyed, and the direct material damage caused to the country was equivalent to the cost of building 14,000 bridges across the Danube. Experiences like this have imbued them with a sense of history and an awareness of their vulnerable strategic position in the heartland of Europe which has seen countless invasions and occupations throughout the centuries. The realisation and acceptance that

they are only a small country in a world dominated by the superpowers spurs them on to play an ever more vigorous part in trying to bring East and West together.

They explained that they had few contacts in Britain and therefore greatly welcomed the newsletters and other letters which I had been sending them for some time. Consequently, they took the initiative to invite me over there so that we could develop this contact and explore new ways of cooperating and extending the dialogue.

The International Secretary, who did most of the talking, said they were pleased that 1,200 people of all ages had attended their recent conference which proved quite decisively that in spite of the worsening international situation and the predicted demise of the world-wide peace movement according to its opponents, particularly in the Western media, it was still a force to be reckoned with. Many new ideas had been proposed and it was now time to see that they were put into practice.

It was generally stated at the conference that the reason for the heightened tension in the world was the deployment of cruise and Pershing II missiles in Western Europe which had upset the military balance. (Many military experts in the West would go along with them on this.) This had to be restored, but the balance of forces should also be reduced on the basis of equal security, and it was hoped that negotiations between the USA and USSR would soon resume.

Although the Peace Council is free to act autonomously, it was pointed out to me that it fully supports Hungary's foreign policy which calls for, amongst other things, a Nuclear Freeze, a No First Use agreement, and the establishment of Nuclear-Free Zones. For the record, the vast majority of the American population (some polls put it as high as 80 percent) would like to see a Nuclear Freeze; the Church of England voted in favour of a No First Use resolution at a meeting of the General Synod in 1983 (and has not yet got over the shock); and many governments in the East and West are seriously considering the feasibility of establishing Nuclear-Free Zones, as mentioned several times before.

On the eve of the Hungarian National Peace Conference, a mass demonstration of 100,000 had taken place in front of their parliament building with banners calling for a Nuclear Free Europe. For some reason this item of news was not picked up by our media, possibly because there was no confrontation involved between the demonstrators and the government. Even on the rare occasion when such demonstrations are mentioned, they tend to be dismissed as being manipulated and the demonstrators are portrayed as being naïve. But then, what about Greece, New Zealand and Finland, for example, where the peace movements also support many aspects of their governments' defence policies? To be sincere, you don't necessarily have to oppose your government, and if you own government supported disarmament proposals like those mentioned above, I would be one of the first to show my support without being pressurised into doing so. On this issue, it may be pertinent to quote a sentence from a pamphlet produced by the Hungarian Peace Council which refers to people like ourselves.

"We may only wish from the bottom of our hearts that they will soon attain the position where they act not against their governments, but in cooperation with them, together for détente and peace," it states.

The structure of the Hungarian Peace Council was then explained to me. It is a united and broadly-based organisation, with a presidium of 35 people including a president and three vice presidents, and a secretariat of only 13 full-time workers. The Council has some 351 members who were elected before the Conference at local level in all or the country's nineteen counties before being endorsed at the Conference. Nevertheless, it was pointed out, if the public is not satisfied with the performance of these elected members, they may be replaced.

The Peace Council itself does not have any local bodies in the countryside. However, there are such things as Peace and Friendship Committees which come under the auspices of an organisation called the Patriotic People's Front that coordinates peace activities at such levels. Although the Peace Council and the Patriotic People's Front are independent of one another, there is a lot of interplay between them.

The full National Peace Council usually meets twice a year, and the Presidium, four or five times a year. In addition, there are a number of expert commissions within the Council which organise conferences, produce publications and bring people together in common fields of interest. Thus, there are commissions concerned with disarmament, development, science, information (i.e. the mass media) and young people. The last-named – the Youth and Student Commission – was formed only recently as a result of (to quote from the same pamphlet) *"the many varied and colourful ad-hoc initiatives by which the younger generation has demanded a place – sometimes in an untraditional and irregular way – in the peace movement."*

Evidence of these ad-hoc initiatives is the existence of various spontaneous peace clubs which have started up lately. Thirty-five of them took part in the Conference itself. I was also informed that at the European Nuclear Disarmament (END) Conference at Perugia in Italy in 1984, the Peace Council and the representatives of the independent group called 'Dialogue' shared the same platform and issued a joint statement.

The concept of peace in Hungary therefore embraces much more than disarmament, but also includes many other elements. The information I'd been given, moreover, stressed that involvement is regarded as being most important and the emphasis is very strongly upon genuine cooperation rather than confrontation, not just in the field of peace-work but in life in general.

The emphasis upon cooperation also extends to the international aspects of the Peace Council. I was quite taken by surprise when it was suggested that possibly my village, or even county, might care to form links with the county of Csongrád in the south east of the country. But this depends upon

how local people in that county regard the matter as it could not be foisted upon them. This was indeed a breakthrough; even the suggestion in itself was highly significant, let alone if any concrete actions arise out of it. It was far more than ever I'd expected, and an unquestionable assertion that they were quite serious about wanting better East-West communication.

For my part, I told them about the organisation, the achievement and the problems of local peace groups in my country. I tried to explain how local and national peace groups interact, and of course, I welcomed their suggestion about twinning.

I was then handed two parcels containing a picture book on Hungary, which I will one day present to a local library, and a Hungarian ceramic jug and beakers in a traditional design, which will be reserved for all appropriate functions put on by our peace group.

In exchange, all I could offer them were some calendars, a cheap tourist book and a corn dolly, since I had made the acquaintance of far more people on my travels than had been expected and most of the present had been given away. Nevertheless, the corn dolly interested them as much as anything else, because similar objects are still made in some country areas of Hungary. A connection already existed between our two countries. That was a good omen.

STANCE TO REASON

On this happy note, our meeting came to an end and I was straight away whisked off to meet two senior representatives of the Church in accordance with the very busy schedule that had been arranged for me. It had been underlined several times how important the role of the Church is deemed to be in that country. Now I was to find out first-hand more about this particular aspect.

When we arrived at a building somewhere deep in the suburbs, I was greeted by two senior members of the clergy – Canon Imre Bíró, the Secretary-General of the Catholic Peace Committee, and Dr Zoltán Aronyos, the Secretary-General of the Inter-church Peace Committee of the National Peace Council.

We sat at a huge oak table on which stood bottles of mineral water (as is the custom here), a selection of cheese savouries and a decanter of wine. But first, a brandy appetiser – another custom.

Canon Bíró told me that in the 1950s, there had been serious problems between the Church and the State, but since then, the development of the Christian-Marxist dialogue had resulted in many of these problems being overcome; not all, but a good many. A far more significant change, they considered, was the new spirit of cooperation between the different denominations which was exemplified by the formation in December 1983 of the Inter-Church Peace Committee and by the holding of the First National Gathering of Churches and Religious Communities in Budapest on March 29th, 1983 – an historic event.

I was glad to be able to tell him that I had heard a little about the Hungarian churches from the magazine of the United Reform Church whose Moderators had visited the country the year before and were delighted with what they found. Furthermore, I had read in the Namibian Council of Churches' Newsletter that a Hungarian – the Rev. Dr Zoltán Káldy – had recently been appointed the President of the World Lutheran Federation which unites some 54 million people. This must be a great honour for Hungarians.

The Canon apologised then that he had to rush off to attend a funeral of a colleague, leaving Dr Aronyos questioning me about the reason for the British churches suddenly taking a more active stand over the peace issue. I replied that as far as I knew it was the result of various things: the changing general climate of opinion; the emergence of new church leaders who are prepared to be more outspoken (although many still sit on the fanciful fence); and probably most important of all, the pressure within the churches themselves from Christians who feel very strongly about the morality of the whole question. He also wanted to know more about peace groups in Britain – did they have a Christian basis? There are a few specifically Christian groups, such as Christian CND, I told him, but most of them include Christians and non-Christians.

Our conversation came to an end amidst more wine and savouries. Before leaving, I was given some copies of a booklet entitled 'Responsibility for the Fatherland and Humanity' which contains a collection of some of the speeches made at the ecumenical church gathering referred to earlier. The Appeal adopted at this conference is printed in this booklet. Since it is addressed to Christians all over the world it would not be amiss to quote a passage from it here. Thus, it states:

Let us join forces with other peace-loving people, let us raise our voice even more energetically against the increase of the arms race and the attempts to gain a superiority of force, as well as for the total ban on nuclear weapons and for general disarmament.

- *let us demand the patient continuation of peaceful negotiations to settle all disputes;*
- *let us struggle for a more just economic and social order of the world, for the common security of all nations and races, without which no real peace is possible in the world;*
- *let us stand in a way that influences public opinion against all attempts at reviving the cold war, and let us take part more energetically in creating understanding and confidence between nations;*
- *let us call on our governments to work for the above ends and let us support them for the realization of these aims.*

I would also like to quote an excerpt from one particular speech, which sums up for me what I believe the Church's stance on peace should be in no-nonsense terms, with no bowing and scraping to the Establishment or the usual hackneyed apologies for the just war or the policy of deterrence. The person who delivered the speech was none other than Dr Zoltán Káldy.

In the world at large, which God has given man as a home, there are great tensions and grave problems. Instead of a home-like atmosphere, the world is ruled by fear and concern. Pure life itself is in danger. For the first time in history, man – who in the past had only limited means of destruction – now has the capacity to eradicate a culture that has flourished and civilization that has been created during the millennia.

Humanity is facing the ultimate alternative of life or death. The production of nuclear weapons and the menace inherent in them, the ability to annihilate the human race, shows before God, the utmost arrogance of man, because God alone can dispose of life and death. There continues the escalation of the arms race, the development of new weapons, the stockpiling of nuclear missiles, the exploitation or the raw material resources of the world – instead of utilizing the resources for development purposes, and striving for the elimination of social and economic injustice.

In the arms race, the countries refer to their own national security in order to justify accelerated armaments. Bishop Kibira of Tanzania (then) President of the Lutheran World Federation, lamented

that "While the Western 'Christian' world justifies the arms race by its own security, it tends to forget to ask how the nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America, that is of the Third World, can survive famine and secure life at all."

The sad fact is that the world is treated as if it were of our own, and not of God. As a result, we destroy our environment, our home on the earth. Millions die not only by military conflict, but also because they are deprived of the most vital conditions of existence.

We have so far failed to effectively combat the arms race, which increases fear and mistrust, and the stupidity of certain circles advocating that military might enhances security, when in actual fact it only increases uncertainty and obstructs reconciliation. We philosophise over the justified nature of nuclear deterrence, claiming that the nuclear weapons are needed to deter anyone from a nuclear war. That, however, is self-deception.

Developments of this type are clearly contradictory to God's will. According to our Christian stand, it is unacceptable to rely upon the threat of nuclear weapons and consider their possible use so as to avoid a war, as a matter of fact, the possession of nuclear weapons by itself is irreconcilable with our faith in God and our concept of creation.

The very existence of these weapons contradicts God's love and will. Obedience to God's will requires all of us to do our utmost to fully eliminate nuclear weapons. Instead of the above-mentioned national security, we have to work for the security of the whole of humanity. No nation's security can be guaranteed through endangering the security of others, or striving for military superiority. Only universal security guarantees security for individual nations. Therefore, the churches should also work for the elaboration of an international security system, and the road to this leads through a halt to the arms race and disarmament.

It also has to be borne in mind that the much-desired peace is inconceivable without justice. The Gospels unanimously hold that peace and justice are inseparable. Therefore, work for peace also involves efforts to ensure justice as a basis of peace. An economic system has to be established at an international level which provides for a more just distribution of the world's resources and bread.

If we ponder the issue, we religious people, Christians, have to confess with repentance that we have shown negligence. We have sometimes failed to question was as a solution and to raise loud our voice that problems should be solved through negotiations and peaceful means. We have often been ambiguous and irresolute, when we should have acted.

The churches have to arrive at unambiguously rejecting war, armaments and nuclear weapons, what is more – it is my conviction – these questions have to reach the status of a confession of faith, in other words, war, nuclear weapons and the arms race have to be denied as if to bear witness.

Simultaneously, the churches should increasingly seek cooperation with those who – although they do not share their beliefs – are united with us in that they profoundly desire peace and strive for it.

If you excuse the violent terminology, this is ‘one in the eye’ for all those who tell us that religion is dead in ‘communist’ countries.

WALKY-TALKIES

From the world of high Christian principles to the world of very down-to-earth and occasionally un-Christian sentiments only took a few minutes in the car as we ran into some heavy traffic in the city centre. Whereas traffic jams in East Berlin can just as easily clog up the streets, at least they are predictable in that there does seem to be a definite sense of direction of each lane of traffic. In Budapest, however, every car seems to be going in a different direction, especially in the narrow side streets. To make matters more chaotic still, pedestrians also are inclined not to pay the slightest bit of attention to any crossing lights or to the traffic around them. And yet, instead of confusion and anarchy, there is an underlying sense of order about it, similar to the internal structure of an atom, which reflects vitality and the forward thrust of progress.

We eventually progressed from a parking place to a fashionable cavern-like restaurant that was overflowing with various shapes of knives, forks and spoons, complimented by the various shapes and sizes of equally well-polished customers. An appetizer (of the alcoholic kind to 'settle the stomach'), followed by wine and an apricot brandy accompanied the deliciously filling meal in the company of my driver, translator and two of the three members of the Peace Council whom I had met earlier that day. They had by now had a chance to consider some of the points raised at our discussion and it was therefore possible to go into more detail about certain aspects.

What do we do about publicity? Well, usually one of us in the group designs a poster. In Hungary, we get schools to run a poster competition, and then we choose the best entry.

In view of the way the mass media tends to trivialise issues in the West, how do you set about disseminating information about peace? Through writing letters to local newspapers and by organising film-shows, talks and meetings. Over here, our mass media deals fully with the issues, and speeches are reported in full. (Yet people are nearly always too busy to read them.)

And what is the real threat to the West from a country like Hungary? That one was easy – Brandy!

After the meal, we said goodbye for the time being, and I was taken by Maria, the translator, through the busy streets to another building, an old hotel by the looks of it, converted into offices and overlooking the Danube. Confronted with the choice of going up the rather splendid marble circular staircase, or trying our luck in the extremely antiquated life around which the stairs wound, we opted for the latter, and I'm glad to say, arrived safe and sound at the right floor. All the same, feeling the effects of a heavy meal inside me wishing to go down rather than up, I'm not so sure we made the correct decision!

We were met at the door to one of the offices by a middle-aged man in a grey suit and red tie who introduced himself as the Propaganda Officer of the Patriotic People's Front.

Oh dear, these words do have a terrible ring to them which can so easily colour our attitudes, grey and red being the predominant shades. But it must be remembered that in a socialist country, the ruling Communist or Socialist Party is the most respectable and conservative of bodies, seeing to it that the values of the status quo are diligently upheld. At the other extreme, the disruptive or subversive elements in society are those people who would like to see a revolution, or more accurately, a counter-revolution, to bring the country back into the Capitalist fold. In other words, it is the mirror image of our own society in these respects, and terminology which we tend to shy away from must be viewed in this light. Thus, translated into Middle-Class English, the man would probably be called an information or publications officer in the education department.

As for the Patriotic People's Front or PPF, I can do no better than explain it in the words of the man himself, as we settled down in comfortable armchairs over a welcome glass of brandy.

The Front, he stated, is a broad coalition of interests which includes representatives of the church, trade unions, members of different political parties, workers and professional people. It has branches throughout the country and its main function is to see that programmes for the country's social development are undertaken. Another of its roles is to promote peace through the Peace and Friendship Committees, as mentioned earlier. Hence, peace and social development are seen to go hand in hand. Or, to put it another way, the links between the provision of amenities – water, gas, road building, and so on, and the preservation of peace in order to carry out such developments are mutually reinforced. Perhaps if these connections were emphasised more in Britain, the general public would not be so complacent about the cuts in all aspects of social development (schools, health services, libraries, etc) while the defence budget gobbles up huge amounts of money for such obscene white elephants as Trident submarines.

The Patriotic People's Front also has a Solidarity Committee, which raises awareness of Third World issues and sends material aid to these countries, but not weapons, I was told. One outstanding achievement was the construction of a 'children's city' in Kampuchea by Hungarian experts, financed by donations from ordinary people. Inaugurated on 7th January 1984, it included living accommodation, a nursery school, kitchen, canteen, clinic and training workshops for the 1.000 children involved.

We also discussed the matter of elections. A person has a choice of three candidates in each locality. If none of them receives over half of the vote, another election can take place a short time afterwards until an eventual winner is declared, or an agreement is reached between the candidates on who it to stand. The person I was speaking to, a Communist himself, is represented in Parliament by

a Rabbi, and he is quite happy to accept this. Even the Presidency is shared out between several people, he added.

When it is considered that before the second world war, the country was ruled by a right-wing dictatorship and that acute difficulties arose over questions of legality and constitutional order during the cold war period of the 50s and 60s, the degree of democracy that now exists is remarkable. But, as the man continued, there have been other problems of late. Candidates who held government positions nevertheless still had to represent their normal share of constituents who felt neglected by the additional burden of responsibilities placed upon their Member of Parliament. Consequently, changes have been introduced so that the responsibility to represent so many voters has been partially alleviated for politicians in high office.

Reforms like this have been discussed prior to legislation by hundreds of thousands of ordinary people in public meetings throughout the country and this has resulted in numerous proposals to modify draft legislation.

On another matter, I asked him about how problems of the environment are coped with in Hungary, and I told him about the growing opposition to nuclear power in Britain. What happens in Hungary, he informed me, is that if there is a case of pollution, a committee is formed and pressure is brought to bear upon the offending polluter to do something about it. I wish that was all we had to do to stop radioactive discharges in this country. But it's not easy for us, and probably for Hungarian environmentalists either.

We had run out of time since the man had a lot of other important business to attend to, and Maria and I had to get back to the hotel. The rush hour was just beginning and being a Friday evening, the shops were packed full with customers stocking up for the weekend. We went into a supermarket, which could easily have been in the main street of any town in Britain, if you take into account certain different varieties of goods, although some brand names were only too familiar – Coca Cola, for instance. Shareholders may be interested to learn that these same two effervescent words were illuminated in huge neon-lights on the wall of another building nearby.

Basic foodstuffs in all shops, whether in big cities or in small villages have been kept reasonably cheap and are uniformly-priced. But the cost of other goods has risen considerably over the last few years. Between 1983 and 1984, the consumer price index was expected to rise by 7-8 percent, while average earnings would rise by nearly 5 percent. Total income, however, which includes financial and social welfare provisions, would bring this up to 8 percent, nullifying the effects of inflation, possibly for some people more than others.

There is indeed a big gap between the wages of the highest and lowest paid, although this gap has been reduced over the past decades when compared with the situation forty years ago under the

Capitalist system. Some people, for instance, can afford to buy Mercedes cars which would take other people twenty years of so to save up and buy.

Some occupations are very poorly paid. Women, in particular, perform many of the menial clerical jobs and occupy less than a third of the total number of managerial positions. As in most countries, they are still paid less than men, even with the same qualifications, job position and experience.

The surprising thing about these facts is not that such problems exist – no society is not beset with difficulties of one sort or another – but that they are openly acknowledged by the Hungarians themselves. Many of the criticisms above, for instance, are to be found in the English language edition of the magazine 'Hungarian Digest' (4-5, 1984) from which the statistics are also taken. This degree of openness and healthy regard for criticism and self-criticism earn my greatest respect.

The centre of Budapest is a mixture of State and private shops, which stand side by side and at first glance to a Westerner appear virtually identical. However, State shops tend to be bigger, like the supermarket we went into, while the private shops, although smaller, tend to have more modern fashions and, from all accounts, better quality goods. This trend towards a much more mixed economy is actively being encouraged by the government. An article on law-making in the magazine cited above states that: *"Hungary's leadership ascribes great importance to the promotion of supplementary activity, the second economy and private initiative, thereby to improve the population's supply of goods and services."* No wonder that the first East European country that Mrs Thatcher chose to visit was Hungary.

But shops are not the only aspect of this policy. There are also private businesses, farms, markets, and now, peace groups too. On a more mundane note, there are also private taxis. Maria, who had a passionate disliking for rain, tried her utmost to get a State taxi for us so that she could claim back the fare. However, the only ones which passed us were private ones. So, after a bit of a walk, which pleased me fine as I could see all the shops, cinemas and night clubs at close quarters, we finally took a tram which merely left us with the last steep hill to climb to get back to the hotel.

The first person I bumped into on entering the hotel entrance lobby was Eileen, who had just arrived from London and had been collected by Hanna from the airport. This called for a celebration, or at any rate, a meal, and so the four of us – Hanna, Maria, Eileen and myself – filed into the restaurant which was now extremely busy. A gypsy band in full costume was going through its traditional repertoire on the bandstand and the cold, dark damp of the evening was already a million miles away.

Our hard-working Hungarian hosts (hostesses) took their leave of us. And to round off the evening, Eileen and I took a gentle stroll down the hill to the main road, looking in the shop windows as we walked along. Here, there was a sweet shop, here a shop selling sexy lingerie, and here, a body-building shop with what could be considered rather risqué pictures on display. You wouldn't see anything like that outside of an art gallery in the GDR! And over here, a small restaurant – privately owned I expect – where a gypsy fiddler was busy serenading customers at their tables.

Almost opposite was a bar-cum-café in which we had a coffee. Just so we couldn't be accused of showing preferences, we had a second cup in another bar around the corner, packed full of young folk enjoying an evening out.

As I lay in bed in the early hours of the morning, unable to sleep because of the bouts of singing, the bursts of laughter and the general merriment going on downstairs, I wondered why we weren't presented with this image, rather than the usual portrait of queues, jack-boots and missiles, whenever reference is made to the 'Communist Bloc'. It makes you wonder which image is indeed the real threat to the Western establishment and to the people with their finger in the war-pie.

THE PLAIN TRUTH

We were up bright and early next day as we had a 125-mile ride in front of us to the city of Szeged in the Southern county of Csongrád. The tall blocks of flats in the suburbs of Budapest gave way to small-scale industrial works and then the isolated farm cottage as we started to cross the Hungarian Plain. Granted it was not the most ideal of conditions – a driving wet day on a busy road – but there was still plenty to see and think about.

It's quite weird how the old and the new coexist in Hungary. On a road heavily used by big lorries, zippy little cars and streamlined buses, you sometimes see a horse and cart sauntering along like something out of a different century. In one sleepy old village (sleepy because Saturday is a day off and the blinds of many houses were closed), I remember seeing the sudden incongruous word DISCO painted in gaudy letters on the windows of a building. And in the small plots of land surrounding private farmsteads, which lie tucked away in between the huge open fields of the cooperative farms, you sometimes notice a tethered cow, some hens or a gaggle of geese.

Yet these are not contradictions- remnants of a past way of life which is fast being eroded away. Rather, both old and new, small and large, orderly and seemingly disorganised are integrated parts of the present, but a present which is undergoing all manner of dynamic changes.

It is true that the private household plots, for instance, produce a major proportion of the total food crop and surpluses from these plots are often sold in private markets. But cooperative members are not confined to the large farms but may themselves be allocated tiny plots in which to grow vegetables. These may then be purchased by a processing factory run by the cooperative. The cooperative may also hire out cows, pigs or sheep to individuals to rear or to breed, with the costs and profits shared out in specified ways. In time too, a person may even purchase the livestock for himself, but still rely upon the various services provided by the cooperative. It is an arrangement which is not always as successful as it sounds in theory, but it does illustrate the dual nature of cooperative farms and private farmsteads in the country's economy.

Just over half way to our destination, we stopped in a large town called Kecskemét – the birthplace of the composer Zoltán Kodály. Here, we had a coffee in a modern café overlooking the town square, or rather, the two adjoining squares. There was no doubt at all that the town was enjoying considerable prosperity, with much recent development, high-rise flats, light industries, colleges, busy shops and heavy traffic in evidence. But the development of the town as an important market centre is no recent phenomenon, for there were several old churches clustered around the square – a sure indication of past importance.

The churches throughout the country are most eye-catching and contribute a slightly oriental flavour to the surroundings on account of their green onion or paprika-shaped steeples, poised on top of the typically European square, panelled towers. The Asian influence is also suggested by the houses, which lie at right angles to the road. Almost concealed from view behind high walls and closed gates lie networks of shaded and arched courtyards. It's not too surprising then to learn that the Turks occupied most of the Southern and Western parts of the country for a hundred and fifty years, ending only at the end of the seventeenth century.

Another usual sight in the countryside is the abundance of religious shrines, mostly large crosses adorned with fresh flowers, which testifies to the continued influence of the Roman Catholic church in these areas.

What I did not see though were any of the red banners I'd seen in the other two countries.

"I was absolutely horrified to see them when I visited the GDR," said the translator (a different one from the day before). "You rarely see any of them in this country now; maybe sometimes in a factory, but that's about all. It's much different from the way it was in the 1950s."

It's quite understandable, therefore, that with such big differences between the two countries, East Germans feel that a visit to Hungary is like going to the West, although their perception of the West, and that of the Hungarians may be entirely different. But on this aspect as well, it is significant that Hungarians are able to go abroad much more easily and they don't need a visa to go to Austria.

This is not to deny that travel to the West is slowly becoming easier too for East Germans, in spite of any recent additional restrictions which will probably only be of a temporary nature. It does show, however, that for a number of reasons (political, geographical, historical and cultural), the countries of Eastern Europe are all quite different from one another and sweeping generalisations about the countries behind the Iron Curtain are often far more misleading than revealing.

After a while, we arrived at Szeged and since we were earlier than expected, it gave us the chance to drive around for a spot of sightseeing. Situated at the confluence of the Maros and Tisza rivers, this old city, which received its charter in 1246, has had a history of natural disasters, including a terrible flood in 1879 which nearly wiped it out completely. The city and county have also witnessed many uprisings against dreadful living conditions under successive repressive regimes. On the cultural front, the area has been the home of many celebrated figures, including Miklós Radnóti and Atilla József – two of the greatest twentieth century Hungarian poets.

Driving past one of the university buildings, the cathedral and, surprise, surprise, two CND symbols painted on walls beside the road, we came to a large municipal building where we were

greeted inside by three dignitaries – two women and a man. Sitting round a coffee table in one of the rooms, we had a most amiable, open and informative discussion.

The man, probably in his 50s and very distinguished-looking, was the secretary of the Patriotic People's Front for the county of Csongrád. He started the proceedings by telling us a little about the county. It has a population of 459,000 inhabitants; two thirds of whom live in the five historic towns of Szeged, Csongrád, Szentes, Makó and Hódmezovásárhely. Industries include agricultural processing, the manufacture of agricultural machinery, ceramics, rubber products, furniture and electrical appliances, amongst others. In addition, half of the country's oil comes from this region.

Great strides have been made since the second world war in creating new industries, better agricultural efficiency (thanks to mechanisation, irrigation and the growth of cooperatives) and social reforms. Before the war, for instance, 14 doctors had to cater for 10,000 patients, whereas now it has increased to 33, or approximately one doctor to every 303 patients. Similarly, twice as many teachers are now employed. In a county where there were as many as 30,000 illiterate people before the war, a quarter of all adults have now completed secondary of higher education. Moreover, 9 percent of Hungarian students (8-9,000) graduate from the universities and colleges of Szeged each year. The man had every reason to be pleased with these achievements.

The next to speak was an elderly lady, immaculately dressed and with a lovely chirpy smile. A member of the National Peace Council and the Peace and Friendship Committee, she described various aspects of peace-work locally, including the springing-up of spontaneous peace groups.

Following her, it was the turn of a young woman in her twenties, very elegantly turned-out in a white tunic suit which vividly set off her shiny black hair and sparkling black eyes. This vivacious woman was simply bursting with energy, enthusiasm and ever-so-many Hungarian syllables. Her position, as Secretary of the Patriotic People's Front for the city of Szeged, must have carried a lot of responsibility for a woman of her age.

She began by identifying three stages in international relations since the war: the cold war period; the era of détente; and the present time of heightened tension in the world. What could be done about the current situation? Public education is one thing. In Hungary, the Patriotic People's Front sees that people are informed about the foreign policies of their government with regard to peace. There are also a number of experts from the University of Szeged who give talks to organisations on such issues. But young people are not content with this and want to be far more actively involved. In fact, many of them had been present at the National Peace Conference at which thirteen representatives to the Peace Council had been elected from that county.

It was then up to us to give them some details about peace activities in our country at national, county and local level and to express how we in turn saw matters. This stimulated considerable

interest, especially from the younger of the two women who was clearly taking mental notes of every word that was being said.

After exchanging gifts (a book on the county of Csongrád for us and some peace badges, stickers and posters for them), we walked a short distance to a restaurant for some lunch. Fortunately, the rain had now stopped, but it was still chilly and overcast. For although Szeged is blessed with the highest number of hours of sunshine in Hungary, it can be extremely cold at certain times of the year. However, what was really warming was to see two small pennants – the Hungarian and British flags – standing side by side on our table. It was just as if a lasting treaty of peace and friendship had already been signed between our two counties, or should that be, our two countries?

Csongrád, we were told, is already twinned with its neighbouring counties in Romania and Yugoslavia and exchange visits take place. Yet on the matter of twinning their county with ours, there seemed to be some hesitation, particularly with regard to practical considerations, such as language difficulties. Would it also be worth their while, wondered the man? On this point, Eileen and I were of no doubt whatsoever. Most definitely, we said; there can be no better way of strengthening peace and building understanding between peoples. Nothing more specific was arranged then and there. But in principle, the man raised no objections to people in our county sending information to him, and he would try and see that it was distributed to like-minded people in the county of Csongrád. Although it might be a long-winded and cumbersome way to begin, it could be a useful start, and who knows how it could develop.

BÉKE'S DOYEN

The meal scarcely had time to go down before we were being welcomed at our next port of call by the universally-known strains of 'Blowin' in the Wind'. About fifteen secondary school students and a few of their young teachers sat facing us in a school building in the town of Csongrád. One of them, with a guitar, introduced himself as the leader of this, the Singing Peace Group – one of the spontaneous peace groups which had performed at the National Peace Conference.

He told us that there were in all about 35 members who get together to sing peace songs. They also hold meetings on current affairs, often with a speaker from the University of Szeged, at which they get up to 100 people to attend. But they felt frustrated because it was difficult to attract more. The group was formed to increase people's awareness of these issues, since many are too busy or can't be bothered to find out more information for themselves. For although the topic of peace is discussed in History lessons at school, or in a subject called 'The Way You Look At The World', this is still not enough for some of the students who feel they want to know and do more, as we had learned earlier.

These words of introduction were then followed by the song 'We Shall Overcome', sung in English, after which they entertained us with a very pretty song which they had made up themselves. It was most moving and I could see, albeit through moist eyes, the barriers between us all disintegrating into thin air. What lovely kids they were! Any parent in our country would be proud to have such nicely-mannered, intelligent and concerned teenagers as these in their family. It really stirred the protective paternal spirit within me. (And I expect it did the same for a few maternal spirits too!) Oh damn those bombs and all that mad talk about fighting nuclear wars! Why can't everyone see, just like these innocent-looking, fresh-faced kids can so clearly see, that there is no alternative to peace between countries.

Were there similar groups to theirs in our country, they asked. We told them about the involvement of young people in peace groups and the sort of activities they engage in. Then how do we link up with them? We said we would put them in touch, whereupon they handed us a slip of paper on which this message was written:

Youth of the world want the Peace!

Join forces with our, if you want the Peace too!

Send sy a picture postcard to our address!

Bring our letter to your friends living abroad!

The address of the club, the Dalolo Békeklub, was also given on the paper, proving that they were absolutely sincere in wanting to be put in touch with young people over here.

Unfortunately, there was no time left to continue our meeting since they had to get ready for a concert. But before they left, they presented each of us with a wall-hanging on which the word 'Csongrád' was embroidered. Then, we were taken over the road to another of the school building.

"There's a room over there if you'd like to, er, draw a penny," the translator whispered to me. I thanked her but to be perfectly honest I wasn't feeling overly artistic at that moment. On the wall, though, I couldn't help noticing some ready-made pictures -photographs of certain recent events. One which caught my eye showed the American baby girl who had been given a baboon's heart not long beforehand. Our driver, who spoke no English at all, indicated to me that the baby had died a few days ago, which was confirmed by the translator when she returned. It makes you wonder if things that happen in Eastern Europe are as well-known to people in the West as the reverse seem to be the case.

Over a delicious meal, finished off with a huge slice of chocolate cake and a light fluffy sponge, together with…you know what, we chatted about the peace club. Hanna said that she found it very interesting and it was the first time she had actually met them. And the man from the Patriotic People's Front made the comment that the young people would certainly not let us forget them. It was, it would thus appear, a time of enlightenment for everyone concerned.

But come what may, there is one very serious problem we have with young people in Hungary, we were told. There just aren't enough of them. Incentives are being given to couples to have bigger families because there is a chronic shortage of labour in many fields and rising numbers of elderly people to look after. Whereas my own county also contains very many elderly folk, some of whom retire to the area, we are burdened instead with the problem of unemployment. Yet unlike Britain, Hungary has no so-called independent nuclear deterrent. It was also remarked that they consider that civil defence planning against nuclear was is an utter waste of money, and they prefer to spend the money on social amenities instead. Maybe there's a lesson here for us to learn. If we were to follow some of Hungary's examples, it might even be possible to have our cake (or sponge) and eat it!

Soon afterwards, we said farewell to our acquaintances from Szeged and Csongrád and returned to our hotel back in Budapest. Some young Russians joined us in the lift and for some reason or other insisted on leading me off to their room. I was easily led. But before getting there, I was rescued by Eileen and together, we made our way instead to the dining-room for a relaxing nightcap.

As we walked in, the gypsy band was in the throes of playing 'On the street where you live' – the violinist leader giving a pretty good impersonation of Stephen Grappelli. Then, they launched into a

unique version of the Beatles' tune 'Yesterday' for the benefit of some admiring Magyar maidens, before taking up their positions round one of the tables to encourage the goulash to go down with a strong helping of fiery-flavoured gypsy music.

Left behind, the cymbalom-player put down his little hammers, lit up a cigarette, and proceeded to catch up on the day's news in his paper, which he rested on top of his instrument. I worried about him. Every other musician I've ever known would have jumped at the chance to chat up the enchanted charmers. So much for gypsy romance!

THE NORTH – SEEN

Our last day in Hungary, a Sunday, was devoted entirely to sight-seeing. We were taken first to the town of Esztergom on the northern border – a very pleasant journey through a popular hilly area beside the River Danube and its backwaters. Architect-designed houses and holiday-homes, costing up to £150,000 are strewn along the sides of the road for quite some distance from Budapest. Owned mainly by well-to-do professional people and private merchants who mainly commute into Budapest to work, the houses come in all shapes and forms. But few of them have much land around them, which would not please wealthy, English people, I'm sure. All of them, however, enjoy a view over the river, which I suppose is the main attraction.

"I hope the Danube is really blue," I said to Maria, who was back with us again.

She laughed. "Strauss must have been colour-blind," she said. And when I was able to get close up to it later in the day, I knew precisely what she meant.

Esztergom is dominated by the immense cathedral, the largest in Hungary, and by the Catholic faith, in which the cathedral plays a large part. We drove up the steep hill to the old battlements which now serve to enclose the nineteenth century cathedral, crowned by an immense dome sitting on a circle of pillars. The interior, I must admit, I found a bit disappointing. The marble walls in various shades were quite attractive, but the plain glass windows and the lack of any ornamentation or architectural niceties lack interest. In a smaller church, such plainness might have been appealing, but in this large building, it merely made it look like a house without any furniture.

As we arrived, the usher was in the process of moving notices back down the aisles which asked visitors to stop at these points, since the morning service was about to begin. It was far from full when the small choir procession came out of a vestry near the front and stood on either side of a small altar in the nave instead of going into the chancel. But the celestial singing and the rich concordant vibrations of the organ made up for any lack of numbers.

We made our exit, and then stood for a few minutes on the battlements, gazing across the river below to the town of Štúrovo on the Czechoslovakian side of the border. The remains of bridges could be seen, but none now span the frontier at this point and travellers (that is, local inhabitants only) must cross the river by ferry. Strange how this barrier between friendly countries still exists. But failure to rebuild the bridges may have more to do with practical considerations than anything else.

The car stopped next in one of the side streets of the town beside the two huge oak doors of the Primate's Palace which houses the Esztergom Christian museum. The main feature of the museum is the exhibition of altar paintings dating from the thirteenth century, but there are also some fine medieval carvings, a room full of centuries-old carpets and tapestries, and an assortment of other oddments, such as chalices, crosses and candle-stick holders, made from silver and gold.

'The most important provincial art gallery in Hungary', the guide-book stated and there was no question that it was indeed a priceless collection. Yet there was a marked absence of any visible security measures, with the exception of a handful of little old ladies who keep watch over the rooms, and provide you with huge slippers to fit over your shoes before you're allowed in. Now I know that crime is a major problem in Hungary, and only a year before our visit, some thieves had broken into the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts and stolen seven Italian masterpieces. So I was quite puzzled by this lack of security. I could only conclude that most crimes must be committed by people with bare shoes – and these are no match whatsoever for the fastidious elderly matrons and their felt over-shoes.

On the way back to Budapest, we called in at a really delightful picture-postcard of a town called Szentendre. The mellow oranges, yellows, reds and greens of the plasterwork on the Baroque buildings, rather like old-fashioned dolls' houses in appearance, succeeded in brightening up even this dull and drizzly day. It was here, while filling our stomachs, once again, in a small intimate restaurant with candles on the tables and soft classical music wafting through the succulently-tasting air that Eileen made her boo-boo. The waitress had brought an enormous platter of soup to our table for us to help ourselves from.

"The pieces of meat in the soup are pheasant," Hanna turned to me and said. "Do you know what they are?"

"Oh yes," I replied. "There are quite a lot of them close to where I live."

"What do you mean," chipped in Eileen, who had been quietly gazing around the room. "There aren't any in England."

"Yes there are," I retorted. "I often see them in the lanes or strutting about in the fields."

"You're joking," said Eileen. "We haven't had any peasants in our country for centuries."

The thought that we might have been consuming tiny morsels of peasant in our soup was not exactly the image of Hungarian life which I'd have like to have brought home with me. "Just as we thought," I can hear the cynics remark in unison. "We must protect ourselves from such barbarous people."

But pheasants are an entirely different matter. And so are flaming rum-soaked pancakes, covered in thick chocolate sauce – hardly the fare of barbarians. No wonder there were hordes of hungry, hopeful Hungarians, many of them in expensive winter coats or stylish leather jackets, who had to be turned away when the place filled up.

At least one more table was made available when we staggered to our feet and strolled up the cobbled street to visit another museum, this time, the former studio and home of a ceramic artist of national fame, Margit Kovács. I especially remember the 'portrait' of three children, desperately wanting to do something they knew they shouldn't do, but at the same time, worried that they might be found out – their postures and expressions captured perfectly in clay. In contrast with her early creations which display unquenchable joie de vivre, there is also the more sombre, meditative, and at times, despondent later work, following her conversion to Christianity in the early 60s until her death in 1977. Everyone, not just artists, would be fascinated by these exhibits and no-one should visit Hungary without coming to this wonderful museum.

No sightseeing trip could be complete without looking at some of the many interesting attractions of Budapest itself, and this is precisely what we did next. On a hill overlooking the Danube on the Buda side of the city stands the modern Fisherman's Bastion – a sort of moth-eaten dunce's cap of a building, and reputedly erected on the site of the old fortifications which the fishermen were responsible for in protecting that part of the city from invaders.

The view from this story-book, mini-fortress is stupendous. But on the day we were there, visibility was much reduced by the rain. The parliament building, however, built in the nineteenth century and modelled after the Palace of Westminster, is so striking that you can't avoid seeing it whatever the weather. There are the same arches and pinnacles as its British cousin, but instead of a clock tower (well, you wouldn't really expect to find a Big Ben in Budapest, would you) there are other additions, including a dome in the centre and square turrets on both sides.

Turning your back on this view, you are immediately confronted with the statue of St Stephen on horseback, standing on a high plinth. St Stephen (Szent István) the first king of Hungary, established the system of organised Christianity in the country in the eleventh century. As if to remind you of this fact, a few yards from his statue is the Matthias Church, otherwise known as the 'Coronation Church', which dates from the thirteenth century and has been reconstructed and renamed over the intervening years. During the period of Turkish rule, it underwent another transformation in becoming the principle mosque in the area. Now, however, it is named after Matthias the Just, who reigned from 1458-90, and was the last national monarch of native stock.

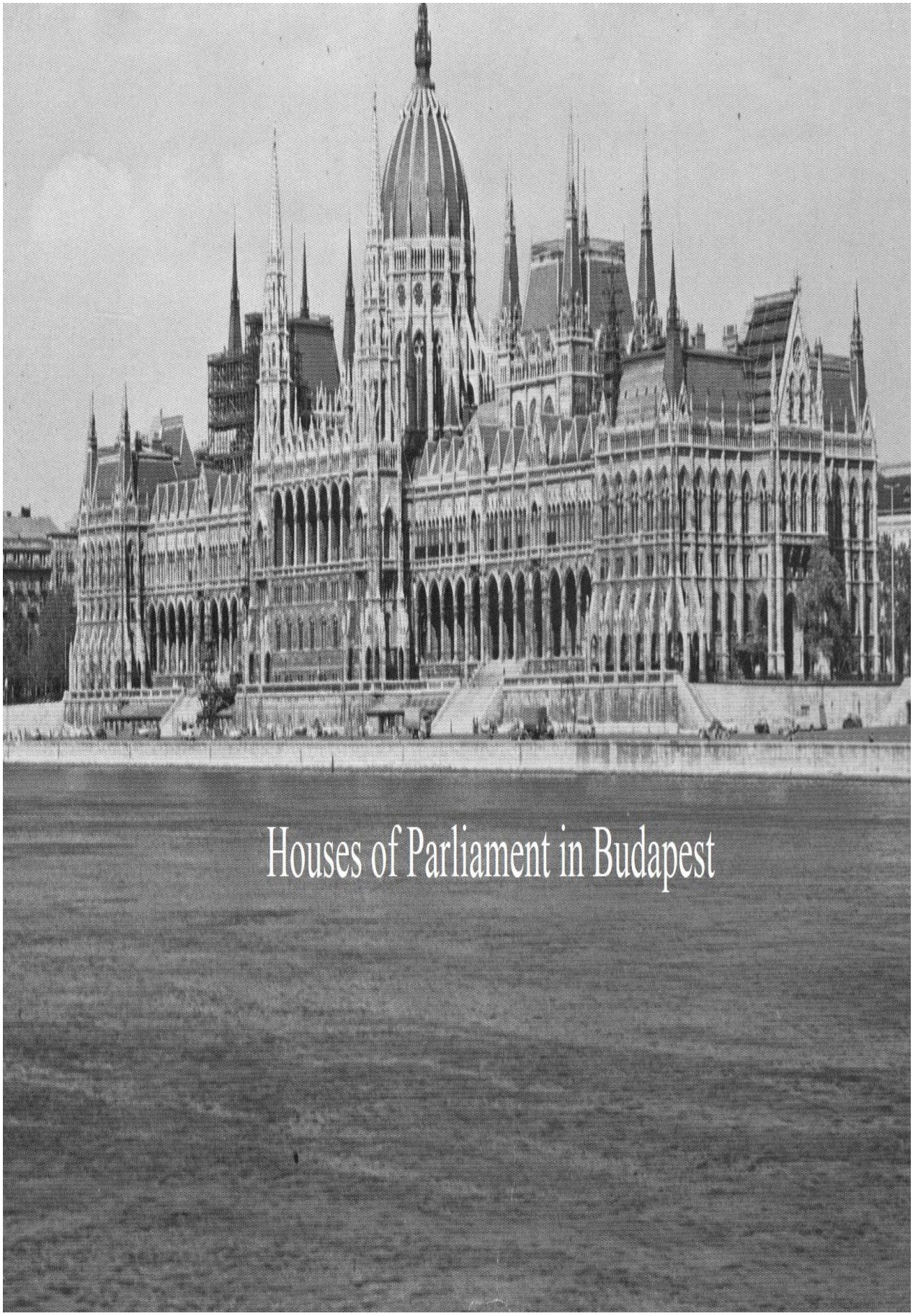
Apart from the elaborate spire, which includes many stylistic features usually seen inside rather than outside a church, the most intriguing aspect about the exterior is the roof. Decorated with a mosaic of brown, white and green diamond-shaped patterns, it looks as if it could well have been a prototype for rather fussy wallpaper or Victorian kitchen tiles. Nevertheless, it's quite attractive and adds an unexpected touch of brightness to the rest of the building.

So, with the exterior of the church being so eye-catching, what was the interior like? Fascinating, but also rather over-powering on the eyes. The walls are covered everywhere in colourful swirls and spirals, which, after a while, provoke you into searching in vain for an area of bare unadorned wall as a bit of a respite. We were told that patterned walls like these help to remind people that they are originally descended from Asia, a fact which they take great pride in. Certainly, there are plenty of sightseers in the church that day, but I don't know how many of them were actually thinking about their Asian forbears. One of them – a beggar – clearly had other things on his mind. But then, the thousands of homeless people in such Western cities as London, Paris and New York would similarly be little impressed by the tombs of wealthy kings and queens in Westminster Abbey.

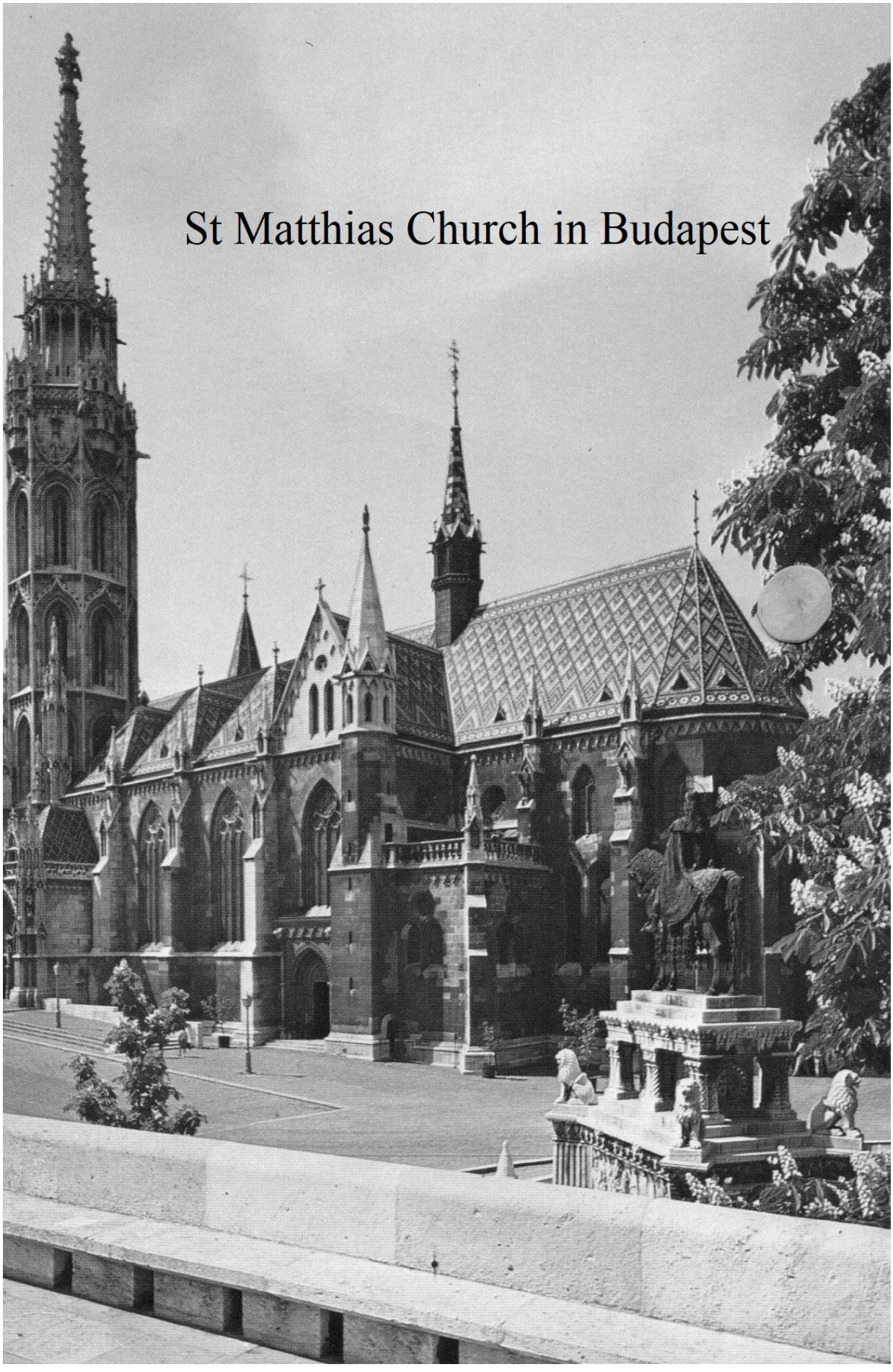
As it happens, there are the remains nearby, not exactly of an abbey, but of another church build by Dominican friars in the thirteenth century. Today, they have received a new lease of life on being incorporated into the ultra-modern Hilton Hotel in Budapest. On leaving the plush modern foyer, you enter a corridor in which parts of the old church, mainly frescoes and stone-work have been retained in a tasteful and fascinating mixture of the old and the new.

To round off our guided tour, we drove from here to Heroes Square where a Millennial Monument commemorates the thousandth anniversary of the country's conquest in 896 AD. According to folklore, Árpád , the first Prince of Hungary took the land from Svatopluk, the King of Moravia who had formerly ruled this region. Árpád had been chosen as their leader by the seven migrating Magyar tribes from the Ural Mountains. To unite themselves into one people, the seven chiefs of the seven tribes had sealed their union with a blood pact.

Over a thousand years later, much more blood had been spilled during the 1944-45 siege of the city and at the 110-foot high Liberation Memorial which marks this occasion, where we went next, tribute is given to the Russian soldiers who fell during the seven-week battle. History has a strange knack of reflecting itself.


Houses of Parliament in Budapest


Fisherman's Bastion in Budapest


St Matthias Church in Budapest

SHOW ME THE (RIGHT) WAY TO GO HOME

After returning to the hotel so that I could pick up my bags, we left Eileen to catch a plane home and we set off again to the Nyugati station for me to catch the Istropolitan Express. However, the departure board made no mention of any train at all going to Berlin. So off we sped to the Keleti station. No train was due to leave here for East Berlin either. My stomach sank. The others made some enquiries and found out that a train would be leaving from the Nyugati station, but only one of the coaches would be travelling all the way to Berlin – the remainder were only going as far as Prague. We piled into the car yet again and rushed back to this station, and sure enough, the train was already there, waiting at the platform.

I was taken to the right carriage and found the right seat in the right compartment, according to my seat reservation which we'd obtained at the station without any difficulties. Then we all said goodbye to each other and I did my best to make myself at home.

But a dark cold train is not the most homely of places, and the thought of an 18-hour train journey prompted me into taking a quick stroll down to the main concourse to purchase some rolls and a bottle of coke from one of the vendors. Suitably stocked up for the journey, I returned to the train and just hoped that everything would be alright.

For a while, everything was fine. I had a compartment all to myself, which, when we got underway, became nicely warm and cosy and I soon began to feel quite soporific. It was obviously too good to last. When we arrived at Štúrovo, the Czechoslovak border town, the guard appeared in the doorway and uttered something completely incomprehensible to me. I looked blank. He repeated it louder. I looked even blanker. "Wagon Kaput!" he shouted in desperation and rushed off.

I noticed with alarm that the people in the other compartments had left and were moving up the train to the other carriages. After some hesitation and rather fearful of leaving the only coach bound for Berlin, I got out too and traipsed my way up the platform before getting in again.

I chose a compartment in which two Czechoslovakian women were deeply immersed in books, totally oblivious to me. Within a few minutes, the guard came along. By shaking his head, pointing to my ticket and repeating the word 'Praha' (Prague) I got the distinct feeling that I should not be sitting there. So, picking up my bags again, I made my way down the corridors looking for another coach, possibly a replacement for the one I'd first vacated. Now, though there were no second-class coaches at all from one end of the train to the other. Perhaps they've put on a first-class coach in its

place, I thought, and when I came to a seat number corresponding to the one on my ticket, I paused for a moment and then went inside.

A Hungarian and two Slovakians were occupying the other corner seats and were in a very chatty mood. I made it clear that I was British, but this only seemed to increase their desire to converse with me.

"Hungarians learn Slovak; Slovakians learn Czech; Czechs learn German; Germans learn Russian; Russians learn…Russian," one of them said, thereby using up his entire English vocabulary, I would suspect.

Many English people (or one in particular) don't really understand any of these languages, I tried to make them realise. But that still didn't seem to put them off. So, we continued 'chatting' (with the aid of a good deal of mime and illustrations) about beer, cigarettes and their sandwiches, with frequent references to existentialism, nihilism and dialectic materialism, not to mention the existence or otherwise of bottle-openers.

At Brno, they got out and in came a whole host of other people, all with seat reservations, nearly all of them the same as mine, it would appear. One of them pointed at the figure 1 on the door and notified me in no uncertain terms that I would have to leave.

Up I got and struggled down the corridors again. And believe you me, it was quite a struggle as there were nearly as many passengers in the corridors (most of them with bottles of beer in their hands) as there were in the compartments.

Arriving at the very end of the train and still not finding a second-class coach, I put on a little-boy-lost look, which was not hard to do by this time, and smiled sweetly at the new lady guard. She pointed up the way I'd come and raised two fingers in the air. It was definitely not the victory sign I discovered when I ended up in exactly the same coach that I'd had to leave. Resigning myself to a long and uncomfortable journey, I plopped down my cases and wedged myself in amongst them beside the door to the toilet.

Half an hour later, at fifteen minutes past midnight to be exact, and with the prospect of another twelve and a half hour's train ride in front of me, I had all but given up hope of ever sitting down again when the lady guard arrived in the scene. To my great relief, she ushered me into the compartment next to the one I had been forced to leave, and, following the example of the man opposite, I curled up on the seat and slept until we arrived in Prague.

My companion got out here, as did the people in the next compartment. This gave me the opportunity to move next door again where at least the seat number tallied with that on my ticket,

even though I had no idea (and by this time didn't even care) whether the coach would land up in Berlin, Warsaw or Leningrad.

When we reach Decin on the Czech-East German border, I knew that all was well, and my spirits revived considerably when the Immigration Officer issued me with a transit visa for the German Democratic Republic on the spot, instead of throwing me out of the window as I'd expected might happen.

I felt so relieved that I was heading in the right direction with all my papers in order that I trotted off to the washroom to have a shave. The washroom, incidentally, is a separate room from the W.C. on these trains. If you think it's hard enough keeping your balance and sense of direction in the toilet on a lurching train, let me assure you straightaway that having a shave is infinitely more difficult and you invariably end up lathering your shirt and shaving your scalp. In spite of these difficulties, the combination of gentle physical exercise, lukewarm water applied to the face and a newly emerged stubble-free chin succeeded in freshening me up a treat and I returned to my seat a new man.

A new woman – yet another guard – opened the door shortly after leaving Dresden. She looked at my ticket and demanded why I was in a first-class compartment. I endeavoured to tell her, but my explanations obviously lacked the degree of charm which I had managed to exert over the former lady guard. She promptly fined me 10.80 marks (about £3) and gave me a good ticking-off for good measure. There are times when it is very convenient to have a poor understanding of another language.

By this time, there were only a few hours left to go anyway, and I took solace in admiring the countryside now covered in deep snow. Fortunately, this didn't slow the train down at all and we arrived at Lichtenberg station in East Berlin on time.

From here, I took the U-Bahn to Thalmannplatz and walked the rest of the way to Friederichstrasse station where I ran into a long queue of people waiting to go through Customs. A young and very conscientious officer had just taken over at the immigration desk and insisted upon taking his time, as well as everyone else's, in scrutinising the passports very thoroughly before letting anyone through. It was obviously done to make a point, but what point he was trying to make was unclear to me and possibly to him too. No-one, however, bothered to look at my luggage.

Before I knew it, I was back in West Berlin, hopelessly lost, mind you, as I'd somehow or other got my S-Bahns and U-Bahns mixed up. But seeing my distress, a kind man came up to me in the street and showed me where the nearest station was so that I could catch a train for Kurt Schumacherstrasse and a bus from there to the airport. It really can't be emphasized enough that

irrespective of all other factors, people everywhere can be kind and considerate, even if this does sound like a rather obvious point to make.

Perhaps it's unfair to jump to quick conclusions or to make rash generalisations, but I have to admit, nevertheless, that I did find it quite harrowing on the Underground in West Berlin. Whereas fellow travellers on the U-Bahn in the eastern sector had sat down quietly and orderly, even though everyone around me had stared at my new suitcase with a curious or envious look on their faces, know not which, most of the passengers on the Underground train in the Western part of the city, by contrast, appeared not to see me at all, and before long I found myself edged into a corner. Immediately, I felt the need to assert myself again which was difficult after being away from this type of competitive atmosphere for some time. Youngsters were wearing strange get-ups and chewing gum and some of them carried radios around with them, with the volume turned full on. A group of youths larked around having mock fights in the way that they often do. There was a look of stress on everyone's faces which was very noticeable. Even the advertisements in the trains came as a bit of a surprise. Were they really written in German or American? A hybrid of both, possibly. It was all quite strange and overwhelming. Goodness knows what it must be like for someone from Eastern Europe on a first-time visit to the West!

At the airport there was a long wait before the travel agent arrived. But praise be, I was able to get a ticket back to England on the next plane. In the meantime, I had plenty of time to have a look around. There were expensive knick-knacks for sale, such as bracelets with tiny lights that lit up in sequence – nothing like that on the other side of the Wall; there was a wide variety of girlie magazines – unheard of, or rather unseen, in the Eastern section of the city; and there were smutty jokes on T-shirts and posters – quite unlike anything you'd come across only a few miles away in that other country. There were also lots and lots of postcards. Amongst a rack-full of pictures of West Berlin, I found one showing different landmarks in East Berlin. Superimposed over the top was a picture of an East German soldier in boots and helmet…You just can't get away from this image of the East!

A short time later I was met at Gatwick airport by my wife – a most welcome sight indeed! She was very pleased to see me and wanted to know all about the trip. I didn't keep her waiting. She was so enthralled that she took the wrong turning and before we could make amends, we had driven nearly twenty miles down the motorway in the wrong direction. Well, after the other experiences of my return trip, it would have seemed unusual if all had gone smoothly. Nonetheless, we eventually arrived home, and my 28-hour marathon journey and 10-day visit to Eastern Europe had drawn to an end.

THE LESSONS FOR TODAY(1985)

This account cannot end without tying up a few of the loose ends, although unlike a work of fiction, there is never a time when all the threads can be neatly interwoven and trimmed off. Thank goodness for that, as life would be very static and boring if this were so. New initiatives are the stuff of life. However, it is possible to provide some more recent information which may be of interest to anyone who has followed the story so far, as the saying goes.

The meeting called by the Council in my village to consider the question of twinning was well-attended. This in itself was cheering. But the general feeling was that the school's existing link with a village school in France should be extended and publicised, rather than taking on any more commitments. A few representatives of organisations did express an interest in linking up with a Third World community and one day this might go ahead. Yet it was realised that a lot of thought and preparation would be needed to avoid the pitfalls. The possibility of twinning with a village in Pennsylvania was dismissed because of its being too far away and impractical for exchange visits. The further possibility of twinning with a village in the German Democratic Republic was met with a loud hush, so we did not pursue the matter. Maybe another time…if there is another time. Meanwhile, the chance that the other local village may still decide to take this on is still on the table, but is rather doubtful.

Eileen and I did hear though that a small party of East Germans would be coming to our area in the following spring for a round table discussion concerning changes that have taken place in Europe since the second world war. This could be a very positive meeting if it enables the participants to share each other's perceptions of the current world situation. At the time of writing it is still too early to know when the Hungarian delegation intends to visit us, but we are naturally looking forward to seeing them.

On the more informal side of things, we have increased contacts between the church in East Berlin and ourselves. Hopefully, other organisations and churches in the surrounding area may soon become involved too. Our friends in East Berlin have even suggested that the local Friends Meeting House may care to sign an agreement on friendship with their church. (Later – I brought this matter up at a Quaker business meeting, but it was turned down because apparently it is not something that Quakers do.)

Our own peace group was also surprised to receive a reply to our request, made two years ago, to twin with an organisation in the Soviet Union. A long letter from Krasnodar Regional Peace Committee in the Republic of Georgia came a month after I returned home. They state that they are willing to exchange children's pictures, materials on public and cultural life and information about our respective peace activities. This is another breakthrough which will help us to understand each other

much better and will generate trust and goodwill. It also shows the patience needed in building East-West bridges. The meaning of such patience is something which the Russians in particular understand only too well. But it is a virtue which we sometimes do not have time for, literally.

Finally, we cannot forget the West. It was good then to receive some information from Canada recently – a contact I had made at the Finnish conference. It is hoped that this coming year we may also be visited by our Dutch friends or by some new Swedish acquaintances of ours. And who knows what else might develop during the course of the next twelve months or so. We may not yet have a real global village, but the blueprints are being drawn up fast.

Footnote written later – Several groups of people from various towns in this vicinity visited Hungary following this. In return, there were a number of visits by groups of Hungarians to this country who were given accommodation in people's homes. Some of them kept in touch with each other for years afterwards. There was also a small group of youngsters who went to an international peace "camp" in the North of Hungary. This finished off with a demonstration in central Budapest under the slogan – No nuclear weapons in Europe.

What lessons can be learned from our various experiences? Firstly, I think that we must always be open-minded, ready to learn and not afraid to take risks. This may mean that we sometimes make mistakes, but provided we act out of love and respect for one another, it is doubtful whether any lasting damage will be caused.

Secondly, we must accept other countries for what they are, as separate States, rather than as components of different political or military blocs; as societies which may often be quite unlike our owns but which are not inferior to our own way of life, merely because things may be done in alternative ways.

Finally, we must acknowledge that peace is a much broader concept than just disarmament. Disarmament alone will not prevent hostilities since anything can be turned into a potential weapon and used against others if genuine peace does not prevail. We should therefore be concerned with issues of world justice and the prerequisites which would go towards creating a genuine community of nations.

In short, it is time that we banish the whole idea of there being 'enemy' countries. The real enemies are hunger, poverty, disease, greed and militarism. Let us unite with others everywhere in combating these evils for the good of the whole of humanity. It can be done, but only when we are prepared to allow it to happen. Surely it is now time to think in terms of a world peace community and to strive to enlarge it into a peaceful world community.

APPENDIX

A. IDEAS FOR DEVELOPING LINKS

* Exchange of paintings, drawings, sketches, cartoons, photographs, designs, stamps, picture books, posters, postcards, newspapers or cuttings, magazines, stickers, badges, leaflets, pamphlets, programmes for concerts or sporting events, home-movies, etc. (anything pictorial).

* Exchange of audible material – records, tapes, recorded interviews, as well as printed music and hand-written music.

* Exchange of recipes of a traditional or typical nature.

*Exchange of crafts – corn dollies, batik, embroidery, patch-work, applique, jewellery, engraving, wood-work, pottery, etc.

* Exchange of fashion – clothes (pictures or materials) etc.

* Exchange of information about hobbies, pastimes, clubs, sporting events, etc., especially where relevant items can be sent to and fro.

* Exchange of books on all manner of topics.

* Exchange of educational materials, models, projects, teaching aids, etc.

* Exchange of 'moves' in board games (e.g. Chess) or card games (e.g. bridge).

* Exchange of letters (don't forget to include a photograph of yourself).

* Exchange of all other information- local or natural history, present-day occurrences, views, achievements, problems, particularly relating to your local churches, societies, schools and other organisations and institutions.

* Adoption of 'Aunts/Uncles', 'grandparents', 'cousins', etc., where a personal relationship can be developed as if twinned persons are members of the same family.

*Joint projects – words and music for songs, pictures and text for books, collation of materials for exhibitions, matching schemes for charitable projects, joint statements, petitions, prayers, etc.

* Exchange-visits – these can be invaluable, but are not essential. Once contacts develop, party booking and charter flights could be investigated.

* Three-way exchanges or more.

B. PROBLEMS

1. Language

To get round language differences there are several solutions –

a. use as many pictures as possible (many international symbols are already used

which may be useful, e.g. road signs, washing instructions, map symbols, etc.

b. see if there are any willing translators in the area.

c. see if there is a third language that is known to both parties.

d. make a start at learning the other person's language.

2. Expenses

Twinning can be expensive, so –

a. expenses should be shared.

b. low-cost ideas can be the basis for exchanges.

c. if all else fails, fund-raising may be necessary, but it may be possible to combine it with disseminating information about the project.

3. Time/Effort

To avoid all the time and effort falling on too few shoulders:

a. try and start off on a devolved basis

b. use as many people with some time on their hands as possible (pensioners, unemployed, children, house-bound invalids, etc

c. substitute this project for something less important.