The Forbidden City

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THE GREATEST ATTRACTION of the Communists’ spectacular “World Youth Festival” held in Eastern Berlin in August, seemed to be Western Berlin. That was the impression given by hundreds of thousands of young participants who slipped through the loose Vopo (Soviet-Zone police) net to visit the forbidden sectors of the “island city.”

They could be seen by the scores staring hungrily into foodshops; marveling at shoes, clothing, radios and luxury displays in store windows; grouped around sleek, modern automobiles; wandering aimlessly through the neon-glitter of Kurfuerstendamm, Berlin’s ragged equivalent of New York’s Fifth Avenue. They crowded a score of motion-picture houses which charged them a nominal fee of one East mark (about five cents); jammed the US Information Center for continuous showings of US documentary films; swelled the daily attendance at several Marshall Plan exhibits almost to capacity.

RIAS, the American-operated radio station, ran continuous programs from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily, presenting recorded music and cabaret shows, lectures and discussions for the thousands of East youth who jammed the studios. A German Red Cross feeding station served an average of 30,000 meals a day to East German youngsters. West Berlin’s youth centers sometimes accommodated up to 100,000 in one day.

West Berliners did not stand on their heads to compete with the Communists’ mammoth demonstration, but it was obvious that they were pleased to have these gawking visitors and to show off their hustling city of freedom.

ALTHOUGH MOST OF the Easterners changed their blue uniforms of the Communist German Youth (FDJ) for civilian clothes before sneaking into the West Sectors, they were easily identifiable. Drab, shabby clothes, hard, cracked shoes and an unkempt appearance set them apart from even most of Berlin’s poor. The twanging voices of Saxony and Thuringia and the harsh dialect of Silesia also marked them from Berliners.

If the sincerity of these young fugitives from the Communist festival could be granted, most of them had come to Berlin with the intention of visiting the Western Sectors of the city. Obviously many of the youth questioned by western observers were anxious to give the “right answers” out of gratitude for free meals and movies. However, the unanimity and spontaneity of the remarks of scores of youth indicated a basic truth to their claim that they “had heard about the wonders of the West” through RIAS* or from relatives who lived across the Iron-Curtain boundary, and that they were anxious to see this other world for themselves.

Most insisted that “nearly everybody” in the Soviet Zone “listened to RIAS and the Northwest German Radio” even though it was dangerous.

“We came to the Youth Festival because it provided us a cheap way to visit West Berlin,” said a 23-year-old engineering student from Thuringia, while his six friends nodded assent. He pointed out that they were given round-trip transportation for 16 East marks (about 80 cents) apiece and provided with free billets in the East Berlin festival camps.

“We spend all day in the West Sectors and only return to East Berlin to sleep at night,” he said. “So far we have been to none of the events of the World Youth Festival.”

* See “RIAS, the Truth Crusader” in the Information Bulletin, December 1950.

What has the West to show? Curious Eastern youth wait before Titania Palast to see special movies arranged for tens of thousands who escaped to West Berlin from the Communist rally. (PRD HICOG photos by Jacoby)
flicting reports about the food, some claiming that they did not get enough others stating that it was adequate but not very good. The food apparently consisted mainly of bread, cheese and sausage, issued to them once or twice a day.

This group, too, said that they spent all of the past seven days in West Berlin, only returning to sleep at night because FDJ officials checked them in and out of their billets. Very few of them had attended any of the major sports events, political rallies or theatrical presentations of the festival. "We can't get tickets," said one. "Out of my group of 50 boys, only three got tickets to the major events. This is about average in all groups."

As to the number who were tasting the forbidden fruit of Western freedom, the visitors made extravagant claims, ranging all the way from 25 to 75 percent of the total number of festival participants. "All of my group, including our leader, comes to the West Sector every day," said several.

On Sunday, Aug. 12, day of the festival's gigantic parades, very few of this group had got to the West Sectors. "We were awakened at 3:30 in the morning to march in the parade and didn't finish until nearly 2 p.m.," said a teen-aged apprenticed worker from Saxony. "Most of the time we just stood and waited, without anything to eat or drink. At five o'clock in the afternoon we had to march again, and didn't finish until 1 a.m. Monday."

A high-school boy from Silesia said that early Sunday morning some Vapos had brought them a huge portrait of Stalin to carry. "At first I refused, but the Vapos said I would be arrested if I didn't help carry it."

"We all had to march in the parade, but I don't think more than 15 percent really believed in it," chimed in another teen-ager. "We cheered and clapped, but only because there were Communists watching us."

The observations of this group were generally echoed by Eastern youngsters questioned in other parts of the city.

For these young captives of the Iron Curtain, West Berlin seemed to hold the combined attraction of a forbidden territory and a fascinating fair. Practically all of them expressed their admiration for the seemingly healthy economy as compared to the drab existence in Eastern Germany. They were astounded at the quantity and quality and the low prices of the goods they saw, as compared to the astronomically high prices of similar items in the East Zone "HOs" (Handelsorganisation or state-operated sales stores), the only place where rationed goods can be bought in the Communist areas.

"The Communists told us that all the fine foods and goods that we saw in West Berlin were only for a few wealthy people, and that most of the people couldn't afford them," said one student. "But we have seen differently. Even your workers are better dressed and get more to eat than the people in our zone."

All the youth commented on the hospitality of West Berliners. Initially some complained that the people
treated them coldly — as if all Eastern youth were Communists. But these complaints were seldom heard after the first few days — especially after Berlin's Mayor Ernst Reuter called on all Berliners to "greet these people from the East warmly" and "show them true human kindness."

"The people here are friendly — even the policemen," said one youth. Some reported that West Berliners had given them money, while a few had been invited to homes. Four young boys, who decided to test the Western concept of democracy, mustered their courage and knocked at Mayor Reuter's door one afternoon. They were invited in for coffee and cake.

Another group of FDJers picked at random from the Funkturm (radio tower) "chow lines," had lunch with US High Commissioner and Mrs. John J. McCloy during one of their visits to Berlin. The High Commissioner as well as many other Allied and German leaders spoke to groups of Eastern German youth at RIAS and at special rallies held for them in the Western Sectors.

The political differences between East and West also were not lost on the youngsters. Mayor Reuter tells of a group of youngsters who gathered around his car one evening while he was shopping in a bookstore. When the chauffeur told them that it was the mayor's car they were amazed.

"How is it possible that the mayor of Berlin drives through the streets without a police escort?" they said. "In our city, the mayor would never dare drive without police guards."

Most of the youth questioned talked of the freedom of West Berlin. "You can say and read what you want... you don't have to worry about who you are talking to..."

Hundreds of thousands of Communist youth in their blue uniforms read this emblem of the free world. (Photo by ECA)

Schoeneberg youth home in West Berlin daily led 1,800 FDJers who "came to see." Their faces have been covered to avoid possible retaliation by the Communist authorities.

there are no secret police here...you can read every opinion in the newspapers..." were typical comments.

At the US Information Center and in the West Berlin youth centers, libraries and reading rooms were crowded with youth reading western newspapers and books. Stacks of anti-Communist literature disappeared rapidly at the Information Center. The director ordered his librarian to warn the Eastern youngsters not to be seen with this material in the Eastern Sector.

But even in free Berlin, the long arm of Communist control reached out for the wanderers. Infiltrating FDJ agents attempted to identify comrades who roamed the West Sectors. Officials at one youth center reported they had caught six young men attempting to photograph their fellows for identification purposes. While the Communists attempted to tighten their net around the East Sector border by increasing police controls, the youngsters continued to stream across, riding inconspicuously in the subway or walking through the ruins.

The full effects of this peaceful invasion of West Berlin will probably never be known. Whether the festival turned out to be a greater success for the West than for the Communists, as some observers claim, is a difficult judgment to make, in view of the gigantic mass of young people that the Communists were able to marshal for their regimented two-week program. But there were rumors of wholesale replacements in the hierarchy of the FDJ, because of the uncontrollable defection of the youth to West Berlin.

Obviously, the youth festival proved that the Communists' grip on East German youth is not yet complete by any means; that they easily escaped their Red masters for a few days' "hooky," and that they came to the West with open minds, willing to listen and to learn. The great majority of those who visited the West will return to their homes with grave doubts if not outright rejection of glit Communist talk of "peace," "democracy" and "Stalin's great friendship for Germany." (Continued on page 6)