

The Unwillingness of Foreigners to Understand

It was necessary to rise at 6am sharp, three muttering wraiths detaching themselves from three mattresses in a crowded and darkened room. It was necessary to avoid each other as much as possible in the strictly choreographed round of toilet, kitchen, bathroom, to say nothing that might distract or annoy, to leave plates soaking in the bath. It was necessary to be out the door at 6:15, down five flights of stairs, past the night-club below, where a dawn chorus of *Una Paloma Blanca* could be heard behind the swing-doors. It was necessary to be at the S-Bahn station, at 6:21 precisely, to catch the train that took them to their bus-stop, where the No.210 bus arrived, necessarily, at 6:32 precisely. All of this demanded concentrated effort, no eye-contact, automatic reflexes to avoid collision, total obedience to an imperative which ensured that all connections were made. Only when the bus was boarded and a separate seat for each found on the upper deck, was it permitted to let down defences, to mumble at each other, to reflect on the relentless regularity of the Berlin transport system. At 6:58 precisely, the building-site was entered.

The rest of the work-force was assembled, twenty in all, each man with his own leather briefcase containing, according to preference, sausage, bread, biscuits. Beer, of course, was held in common, fetched daily by the runner each morning, five crates being necessary each day for the reconstruction of this part of Berlin; the only non-participant in this sociable breaking of bread and sharing of cups was the crane-driver, whose duties took him a hundred feet into the air, one hand hauling him up the stairway to a sort of heaven, the other clutching both his leather briefcase and a small crate of beer. He was not seen again for eight hours, even for a toilet-break, the long boom of his crane swinging mysteriously over the site, to the accompaniment of short blasts of his siren, should there be any danger involved to those below, or a woman pass by in the street.

At 7:00 precisely, the foreman poked his head into the hut where we assembled. The day could now begin. The runner having been dispatched to the nearby cash & carry for necessary provisions, the carpenters, bricklayers, electricians, blacksmiths, labourers, drivers went about their business. No 'guest-workers' were tolerated on this site, a notable exception having been made for the three students from Scotland. Having neither the darker skin-colour of, nor the alien religion practised by, men from Yugoslavia, Turkey, and other inconceivable places beyond Austria, we three foreigners struck lucky. The foreman who hauled us without ceremony or signature from the employment bureau told us he was doing us a great favour, which more than made up for any misunderstandings resulting from the recent war. He slipped a fifty Mark note to the employment-bureau official, who five minutes previously had been shaking his head disapprovingly at the request of the foreigners to provide them with some work, and had just, with some enjoyment, summoned a security-guard to have them ejected from his office. The contract being thus sealed between employer and middle-man, the former conducted his three new employees to his battered BMW, persisted, despite no lack of comprehension, in speaking to them in pidgin-German in a patronising manner, and drove them to the edge of the city where re-construction work was progressing inexorably; and, in return for a wage at well over one third of the official rate, introduced them to their duties.

Which duties were, by and large, to keep the site swept clean, to fetch and carry, to dig holes where holes needed to be dug, to provide amusement to their colleagues during all meal-breaks, and to be the butt of the wrath of foreman, foreman's assistant, runner, and crane-driver. Every building-site requires its hierarchy of the despised, and,

since no guest-workers were present, this cheap alternative was most welcome. When the breakfast-break occurred, at 10am precisely, it was our duty to collect the first batch of empty beer-bottles and return them to the crate. Building Berlin was thirsty work indeed. And then to sweep clean the hut.

Another, but unstated, responsibility of the three foreigners was to make themselves invisible on those rare occasions when the manager from head-office arrived to conduct a cursory site-inspection. On such occasions, we were kitted out with hard-hats, so as to blend in with our colleagues, issued with buckets of water, and sent to clean the rear-windows of the storage-huts. By the time the big black Mercedes arrived, the site would be spick and span. Herr Raaben, known as “der Chef”, would haul himself from the leather upholstery of his saloon-car, solemnly cover his sweating bald head with a handkerchief, prior to placing on it a hard-hat - blue to distinguish him from anyone of lesser value; he would cast his critical eye over the proceedings, point angrily at something or other, if only to ensure that his foreman did not get ideas above his station, then, shaking his head in stern disapproval, return to his car and drive back to the city. At which time, and at which time only, we would be permitted to re-emerge from behind the huts, relinquish our hard-hats, and resume our job of the moment.

One morning, after just such a visit from Herr Raaben, this time with an escort of two further Mercedes saloons, containing an assortment of men in expensive suits, each armed with a stout brief-case, there had been a scene. The foreman took the unusual step of summoning one his most trusted side-kicks, Herr Hasselmann, and, in full view of all, berating him in a loud voice for some oversight. Herr Raaben seemed satisfied at this public sacrifice, the other men in suits nodded grimly at each other, shook hands all round, then all drove away in a cloud of dust. No sooner had they gone than the humbled Hasselmann sought out the three foreigners.

“Hey! Du!” he yelled. “Komm mal her! Aber schnell!” He grabbed my arm, being the first to arrive, and the one, co-incidentally, who spoke more than a few words of the language of Goethe. He thrust a spade into my hands. “Jetzt! Mach’s schnell! Lupinen ausgraben!” Lupinen - lupins? What was the man raving about? Was there a gap in my technical vocabulary? Detecting the look of incomprehension on my face, Hasselmann fired off some rational epithets about the proverbial stupidity of all foreigners and their stubborn unwillingness to understand, then with the greatest contempt resorted to pantomime: “Lupinen” - he indicated with almost poetic ballet flowers growing, bees alighting, noses sniffing. “Ausgraben!” - with determined motions, such as had re-built Berlin from its unearthly state of destruction some thirty years previously, he mimed the act of digging. “Aber mit Sorge, nicht wahr?” - with care. Finally, he led us to a huge bank of up-turned earth, some ten feet high and fifty yards long, which ran the length of the back wall of the site. “Hier. Los!” With which clear instruction he left us to our task, one which lasted three further days, at the conclusion of which we could lie in bed at night and see before our closed eyes only a spade entering earth, and the desirable, hoped-for, rare, sight of a lupin-bulb uncovered. In three days, we had excavated no fewer than two hundred and seventy-three such bulbs, erroneously covered up with earth during initial excavations. Were lupins a protected species in Berlin? Did Herr Raaben’s wife have a romantic attachment to them? Had the American Occupation Forces issued some decree on the preservation of Western flora? No one told us. It was possible that no one knew. It fell to a gardener, specially employed for a day, to re-plant the bulbs at the front of the site; the disdain that showed in his eyes for the three foreigners indicated that he had already been told that we had almost destroyed the plants: barbarians, ignorant fools, money-grubbing idolaters, with values so far distant from his own that we might well have come from different planets.

At noon precisely, it was Mittagessen, dinner-break. The crane-driver, paid extra to do so, sounded his klaxon briefly three times. "Essen, Tommy!" shouted all the workmen to the three of us, as they trotted back to their hut, ready to crack open the fourth or sixth beer of the day. "Essen!", accompanied by an extravagant mime of transferring food to mouth, followed by considerable laughter. Each day, every day: the greeting was some kind of catharsis for them, permitting them to recognise us as workers requiring refreshment, but certainly not as colleagues. The fact that all of us drank only milk, not beer, with our food was noted with considerable interest; the cultural divide was never so wide as at those moments. One colleague, of a more scientific bent than the others, brought in "Boy-bier" one day, three bottles of a malted drink with which to tempt our palates: the gesture was not a great success and was never repeated.

It fell to one of us, by rota, to go to the nearby shops to purchase food for our evening meal and for the following day. On such an errand, I set out one lunch-time. As I neared the shops, an old lady, walking some yards ahead of me, of a sudden faltered, dropped her shopping-bag, tumbled against a low wall. I ran up to help, and held her in my arms; I could see that she was unconscious. All of my carefully-acquired German deserted me. "Hilfe!" I shouted, to no one in particular. The passers-by, seeing a dusty young man in jeans, long dishevelled hair, with a suspicious foreign accent, assumed the worst, and took great care to ignore me. It was either rape, or drugs, or terrorism: by preference, all three. They read all the time in the newspapers, did they not, of student Porno-parties, Sex-orgies, LSD, the Red Army Faction at play? The old lady's breathing was growing laboured, I tried to ease her to the pavement. "Gibt's einen Arzt hier?" I asked, was there a doctor anywhere? Again, there was only suspicion, fear. One pensioner, however, braver than most, pointed with a stony face to the building outside which I had wrestled the old lady to the ground: it was, by happy chance, a medical clinic. By an even happier chance, two policemen had already been summoned by the alert citizenry, and I was unceremoniously detached from my burden and advised sharply not to move. After the old lady was carried into the clinic, the policeman turned their attention to me: where was my id-card, what was my name, where was I from, did I have a work-permit, what was I doing on this street, why was I not working at that moment, did I have any money: reasonable questions that anyone might ask a foreigner. When they learned that I was neither from Yugoslavia nor Turkey, could even speak some German, and that I had gainful employment, their interest abated considerably; they put away their note-books and ordered me to be on my way. By the time I had made my purchases and had returned to the building-site, there was no time to eat. The foreman demanded to know why I had been out so long, and considered my tale far-fetched in the extreme. "Wir wollen kein Ärgernis, verstehst?" - no trouble here, comprendo, sonny?

A huge bill-board had been erected just within the site, encouraging the blooming youth of Berlin to get smart, find a career in the building industry. "Seid schlau, lernst beim Bau!". More accurately might have been Dante's warning, or the simple command: "Vorsicht!" - be careful, all those who enter here, your physical well-being is at every moment in danger. Above you swings, like the Sword of Fate, the long arm of the crane, carrying in unforeseen trajectories a hopper full of sand, a dangling, twirling cement-mixer, a pre-fabricated portion of concrete floor, liable at any moment to swoop towards you, or into the ether beyond the reach of mortal man. On more than one occasion, loosened steel rods rained from the sky and impaled themselves in the earth like so many blades of quivering brown grass. In the uncertain soil of Berlin, part clay, part sand, deep holes dug could, from one moment to the next, collapse. More interestingly, the man who drove the dumper-truck had clearly never passed any aptitude-test, and had apparently acquired the job through sheer loudness of voice and

enthusiasm for driving. The dumper-truck had two speeds: very fast indeed; and even faster, in reverse. The driver's preferred speed was the latter, for it gave him unmatched opportunity to strike terror into the hearts of the unwary. "Arschloch" was the name given to this favoured buffoon, but we were humourless foreigners to feel any resentment against him: it is the way we do things in this country and if you don't like it then - "Hau ab!" - bugger off back home.

On what turned out to be my final afternoon of work, I was minding the business for which I was paid, sweeping some untidy dust from a concrete foundation at the foot of a short incline. The dumper-truck driver had many important things to transport up and down this incline and had, with wise forethought, laid down a matting of steel to ease his wheels over the churned earth. On one of his rapid ascents of the slope, his rear wheels had slipped on the grid, and spun it backwards. One of the steel points sliced into my shin. I had a moment of surprise and clutched my leg, before falling down. Pulling up my trouser-leg to assess the damage, I had the rare privilege of seeing the skin peel apart almost in slow motion, a long gash from knee to ankle, some revealing innermost parts of my body I would rather not see. I may have screamed, for that is what foreigners do; the crane-driver, doubtless gazing out of his cabin in philosophical contemplation, sounded his klaxon. The foreman dashed over, told me angrily to get up. I protested, showed him the blood gushing from between my fingers. His face paled: I could see that he now regretted his compulsive action, and fifty Marks, in employing three foreigners. An ambulance was summoned, I was driven to a hospital; my compatriots were put back to work and not told where I was taken to, so it was some time before we met again. While lying awaiting treatment, two sympathetic policemen interrogated me - where was my id-card, what country did I come from, did I have a work-permit, did I have any money, why was I so careless? Not knowing the exact technical term in German for the item of metalwork which had sliced me open, I had to resort to a line-drawing on a notebook, which exasperated the officers in no small way: clearly, if I did not know the word for the flying object, it was hardly surprising that I was stupid enough to get in its way.

Two days later, my compatriots tracked me down and paid a visit. The following day, the foreman appeared at the hospital, clutching a bottle of wine and asking if it was my intention to seek out a lawyer. My wages, he assured me, would be paid until the end of next month, to show good-will. "Gute Besserung!" - get well soon; and please don't even think of making trouble. And above all, be smart, don't ever return to our building-site again.