

Translated excerpt

Martin Groß
Das letzte Jahr
Aufzeichnungen aus einem ungültigen Land

Spector Books, Leipzig 2020
ISBN 978-3-95905-423-2

pp. 15, 36-37, 41-42, 148-149, 183-187, 281-290

Martin Groß
The Last Year
Notes from a Defunct Country

Translated by David Burnett



[JANUARY 5, 1990]

I wander around this country as if it were an abandoned train station. Under the vaulted glass ceiling, past the timetables and ticket counters, lots of dust, lots of light and silence. Over there in the back a couple of people are waiting for a bus. I'm walking carefree through a country that has given up on itself. The things I see now are no longer valid – or only just for a while. You walk around unchallenged, the money you spend, the commandments you transgress, none of that means anything anymore, it only happens ostensibly. Only you yourself are real, only you belong to the future. But I know this, too, is just an illusion.

[JANUARY 6]

I'm still walking around thinking, My God, you have to see this! What good are the letters and the photos? What good is it if you come in four or five weeks and everything seems normal to me. Now, in these first days, in the very first moment of astonishment, this is when you have to be here. So hurry up. I imagine us walking around and stopping and pointing at everything. Maybe then this country will yet again look completely different, or maybe I'll act as your tour guide and most of it will suddenly seem familiar to me. I don't notice that happening yet, I'm still traveling around and trying to jot down everything, to record every observation. And since we can't talk on the phone, I'll just keep sending you letters: short ones and long ones, hastily

dashed-off or elaborate and detailed, as if I had crossed the seven seas. Day after day this old-fashioned form of communication. I'm sending you these notes from a country that is null and void.

[JANUARY 22]

Monday demonstration tonight. All I actually see is flags, black-red-gold ten thousand times, flagpoles and scarves waving back and forth, *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*. The power of this flag astonishes me. Up until now it had always just hung limp and lifeless at funeral services or state visits, but here it flaps and flutters, and is almost unrecognizable. All you usually see is black and red, because the gold is covered up by the next flag. So basically ten thousand black-and-red flags, like an anarchist demonstration!

Then, at Dimitroffplatz – it must be late at night (but then again January is always night) – at Dimitroffplatz the closing rally. Throngs of people pushed together, quiet again and almost placable; up front near the loudspeakers a couple of as yet unknown representatives of grassroots democratic groups. Their speeches seem unrehearsed. They often ramble on, getting lost in endless sentences that have to be almost violently interrupted, which some of the speakers seem to find exhausting. Patiently you listen, occasionally clap or cheer: for this or that demand, the calls for democracy and environmental protection, but only the word “Germany” gives rise to a genuine commotion, drowning out every speaker. “Germany” is what’s on people’s minds, the word they want to shout and roar while the flags unfurl in the nighttime, which seems to be the only way they can force an unknown speaker to stay on topic and keep repeating this word. They won’t let their Germany be taken away from them again,

no reform or social demand can deprive them of it. In this sense it's a gross misunderstanding that these speakers and these demonstrators have shown up at the same rally.

Next to me a couple of young people. They, too, hold the flag up high (despite the cold) and shake their disappointed faces back and forth. To them everything in this country has been a failure. And Germany? Yes, that means that things will get better, because then the deutschmark is coming, and fast, that's the most important thing, otherwise there won't be anyone left here, the cities will empty out because everyone will be in the West. So they stand around, not knowing what to do with their revolution apart from threatening to leave. And if the events in October were even a revolution at all, then never has a revolution unleashed so much despondency, such a massive inferiority complex. There's no euphoria left after finally having showed *them*, there's nothing left here but the sudden awareness of a general and fundamental failure.

[JANUARY 27]

People from the West. If you haven't seen them for a couple of days you almost begin to wonder. They stand there in front of "Centrum" department store and are easy to spot from the way they dress and the way they speak so loudly. Or who knows what it is, maybe the subtly coordinated colors? I can't exactly say. They seem to move differently than the people around here, let's say more "expressively" (and yet God knows West Germans are no Italians). The locals gesture less in any case, they don't make any abrupt movements, are more subdued and inhibited in everything, or maybe they're just tired. And immediately I think: it's all the fault of the old system. The link between oppression and body language is obvious. Then I think:

how unimaginative I am. Everything to me is an illustration of some idea. If a woman smiles cautiously, then only because all her life she has learned to control herself. I always presume that whatever I'm seeing is due to the political situation, that it's symptomatic of something and needs to be jotted down. The many declarations of death at the District Court, for instance. Twenty or thirty of these little yellow forms are hanging in the display case at the entrance. The names of those declared legally dead (sometimes they've been missing for decades) are faintly typewritten on them. I immediately assume that now, when it's worthwhile to inherit something again, people have hastily declared a few family members dead. But no, I learn, there were always that many.

The clear-cut line (fluorescent tube lighting, mirrors, floor coverings, etc.) is evident in the opera restaurant as well as the palace of culture. I'm in a country where the policy line was everything, and I walk a straight line through the lobby. The coat-check girl is an exception to this rigid order. She stands there at the counter, bored, gradually straightens up, and readies her arms as I approach, signaling that she's been expecting me. Having handed her my coat, I no longer know how much I'm supposed to pay: 20 pfennigs or 40, or one of those inexplicably inconvenient sums: 33 pfennigs. (Devalued three to one on top of it, tempting you to become a real spendthrift!) Today they're playing Edison Denisov; something avant-garde, in other words. Most of the audience seems to have been recruited from factories (bringing culture to the people is one of the tasks of the economy here). You can smell it, too, sitting attentively between aftershave as sour as lemons and perfume heavy with the scent of roses. Once the performance has ended, everyone files out promptly and orderly. But before that, amidst the crescendo of dissonant chords, the audience breathed heavily, fidgeted in their chairs, coughed; and finally, when the general sense of unease became apparent, they smiled, gently, indulgent, forgivingly: surely it wouldn't have killed them to play something a little more classical for us.

A couple of the concertgoers are sitting downstairs in the restaurant. They look like wedding guests in our old village taverns. Everything is so formal and festive, just that these people don't look right in a suit. Men with furrowed faces and broad workers' hands. This might be considered an achievement – the working class going to concerts! But only because the TV is so lousy.

[JUNE 21]

Whenever, out of the blue, I get another letter from you it seems so distant, as if we'd long since said goodbye, had slowly drifted apart. Now I know it has nothing to do with you and what you write; it's the letter form itself. What's a letter these days? They've long become devoid of any actual conversation. Nowadays people either talk to each other (even if just on the phone) or end up losing touch. But you and me, between East and West, all we have is letters.

As I said, they have this unfamiliar sense of detachment. Your letters talk about last week, but what about today? I read them each time like a story, I acknowledge them. But they lack the immediate drama of a quarrel, a decision, or even a confession.

I think I understand better now why, in writing these letters, I've always had my book in mind: the letters are purely literary anyway. Writing a book would at least be a belated way of reconciling myself with this permanent deficit. So let's keep pretending it's the eighteenth century! Older letters, too, read as if they'd been meant for the public all along. Why else would these people chitchat in public about their private affairs, and this in such a shamelessly flirtatious way? No stammering, no platitudes, not even in the most seemingly private

correspondence. Or maybe these people never behaved with each other in a way that we would call “private” – intimate, attuned to each other, working as a team, collaboratively and neurotically coping with our lives. Maybe letter-writers in the olden days didn’t need a public, because they themselves were the public in a certain sense (detachment and civility: working towards an awareness of the other). Not much is left of that. It makes you want to celebrate letter-writing as the utopia of an entirely different sort of relationship. In that regard, I should be content with the correspondence we’ve established, our “partnership through letters.”

[JULY 19]

Out in Döberitz they’ve set up a pole tent. But it’s not for a celebration; it’s a so-called “discount market.” And they really are selling at discount prices, a mark less than in town, or sometimes just ten pfennigs.

They’ve flattened the field where the tent is standing and laid out palettes and sheets of particle board. It’s all very huge! An area the size of a soccer field, three tents next to each other, and at the front end a row of twenty cash registers. They sell the merchandise straight from the box. No shelves, no tables, just stacks of boxes on the ground, a fifteen-meter-long row of different cheese boxes, next to that a row of jam and honey boxes just as long, and so forth. Everything is covered with dust, or to be more precise: the boxes are covered with a film of red earth. Like dust it floats up between the sheets of particle board which people trample on by the thousands.

There are birds all over the place too. Loads of sparrows. Nervously they fly around the giant tent. If a box falls down and a bag of potato chips bursts open, they’re there in the blink

of an eye – unlike the people, who instantly scatter, not wanting to have anything to do with the mishap. But occasionally they do seem to revert to their nature, flapping around frantically and not really knowing how to get away. But the people couldn't care less, apparently a bunch of frantic sparrows is precisely what they expected in this imported supermarket.

The perfect photo motif: faces. Clueless, skeptical, focused, excited, disappointed. Always just heads and shoulders protruding over the edge of the wall of boxes. People point here and there, showing each other where the chocolate or the wine is. They've long since put away their shopping lists, because what good is the word "sausage" when confronted with a row of boxes containing two hundred types of shrink-wrapped liverwurst, salami, blood sausage and bologna?

I take one picture after the other, of people squeezing past each other or trying with outstretched finger to direct their husband, daughter or father. All these disoriented faces looking for the signs ("vegetables," "meat"), looking for the price, the alcohol content, the expiration date. Of course the question was bound to come: What are you actually taking pictures of? It came this time from a young man protected by a necktie. Exhilarated at all the photos I'd snapped, I managed without the least bit of effort to condescendingly flash my (long-since expired) credentials at him. A surprisingly pleasant conversation ensued. The young man was a sales manager. He came from Düsseldorf and explained to me how terrific everything was here. So much better than in the West. It's almost a kind of experiment (he said). No one has ever done anything like this before, it's a totally new experience, setting up a supermarket in a field – in just a week! And with crowds like this. First you have to learn to pile up the quick sells right at the receiving area so you don't have to constantly carry them all the way across the sales floor. Beer, for example, you can't imagine how fast it sells, but strangely enough the laundry detergent, too! The aisles had to be widened, since we drive our delivery

trucks straight into the tent and often sell the stuff straight off the back of the truck. The challenges are completely new.

Or the problem with the flooring. You can see for yourself how awful the dust is. Luckily it hasn't rained yet. There'd be nothing but mud. We have to put in a concrete floor – but little by little, since we have to keep selling! Twenty to thirty semi-truckloads a day. The refuse alone – all the packaging material, boxes of moldy cheese, cracked pickle jars, and so on and so forth – that alone is two truckloads a day. And we don't even have an access road. They just drive right across the field. But suddenly we've become the biggest chain store in Germany. That's a real challenge. We're constantly reordering and restocking. These people are buying up two semi-truckloads an hour. Just imagine the opportunities! In Düsseldorf it was all very basic tasks, but now, if it works, in a couple of years I'll work my way to the top! The fact that it's almost all Western goods we're selling, that creates social problems, sure. Unemployment, no, not necessarily. Look, we've hired almost two hundred people here, that's not bad! And they work really well too, no problems, no complaints, not even that many mistakes at the cash register.

The young man whose face was pitted with acne scars stood there at the edge of this gigantic emporium. Despite the July heat he wore a jacket, matched by an expressive, even proud face. Because God knows it isn't easy to set up a supermarket like this from scratch. In all of Europe, for example, there are no more pole tents left, not even in Portugal, and there's nothing anyone can do about it, they're all here somewhere in the GDR! If you want a tent (he said), you have to look in the U.S., or even further afield.

And how did his company manage to organize everything in a matter of weeks, the contracts and agreements and what have you? Oh, said the young man, to be honest there's still a lot to be done, the legal situation is still pretty unclear. We got the approval of the farm cooperative and the go-ahead from city hall. But the specific applications and permits, who can

make head or tail of those, which do you need and where can you get them? All of that is still unclear. And then the complaints of local residents, on account of the traffic nuisance, for example; it's not nice to have all these cars just parking anywhere on the grass, but no one here really feels responsible. No one at city hall even cares.

And if the district attorney were to come today and say they had to shut down the supermarket, what would this sales manager do (without a lawyer, without a contract, and with no phone line to his own company managers)? "Ah, who's gonna come. You have to take the occasional risk, and it's not like the competition is sleeping." No, he has no qualms assuming responsibility. It'll all work out somehow, everything will be fine.

[DECEMBER 5]

What a night that was! Stuck in the snow on the autobahn, along with thousands of others. Because when the first snow begins to fall between the many construction sites, during rush-hour traffic on top of it, when winter sets in and the first car starts to slip and slide, ever so slightly, or turn sideways, and when the whole line of traffic begins to skid and ends up wedged together, then it's all over. You sit there for hours. Along with the oncoming traffic, incidentally, which isn't moving either. You sit in your car, look at each other and wait in different directions. Then the snow just gets worse, and darkness descends, it's nighttime, and nothing will change before morning. Everyone is silent, the engines quiet. Pretty soon you can't see a thing, since the windows are snowed-in and fogged-up for good. You're squeezed into this steel hull, the ridiculous steering wheel virtually on your lap, and soon, on this ice-cold night, you feel utterly alone.

At some point I get out, to move around a little. In gloves and a hood I trudge through the snow and wipe it off my eyelashes. The cars, one behind the other, stretch into infinity, a couple of accidents in between, minor ones. All of this needs to be laboriously pried apart and put back into running order, but there's no counting on the police or tow trucks anytime soon. No one argues or swears, everyone just stays in their cars even if they're wrecked. Luckily no one was hurt. And outside, when I walk past, all I see is snow, nothing but mounds of snow that used to be cars.

Occasionally, for whatever reason, traffic creeps forward. A flash of hope. Engines start up all around. People wipe their windshields clean, push the broken-down vehicles aside (in a sudden, collective fit of good mood), and, cautiously, the journey continues. But before it even gets going it comes to a standstill again. The radio talks about a chaos of snow: the clearance that even with the greatest effort will last until the morning hours. And now the good mood quickly evaporates, it wasn't a sensation after all, nothing new, no adventure. Nothing but the endless cold; you put on a second sweater and another pair of socks, since your feet were the first thing to freeze, not daring to even think that a third pair of socks is useless, because the night and the cold have only just begun; and tomorrow morning, when the night is over for every ordinary plumber and saleswoman, you'll be sitting in this car still without having budged, it's all so hard to believe.

You get out of the car again when the storm dies down and it grows more silent, because the snow is coming down slowly and softly, settling on the nocturnal ground. You'll climb out of the mounds of snow and stretch your legs, start a conversation. You'll give each other advice and suggestions: maybe you should try to drive into the cordoned-off construction area, slowly nudge your way forward, just watch out there's no ditch under all that snow, you wouldn't want to fall into that. It might be worth a try, because a few hundred meters further someone has discovered a dirt road through the field, a makeshift exit, which could lead to some sort of

highway and into a village or even a town. It's worth a try, seeing as it's starting to snow again, and soon the wind will kick up too.

It's almost eleven by the time some of us reach the first village and look for somewhere to spend the night. Well, we can put up a couple of people in the bar, that's not the problem, but the others? There are hundreds of people behind us. I decide to keep on driving, to grope my way forward at a crawl. It's just another eighty kilometers, I can manage that in two or three hours. The backed-up traffic has dispersed and all around is darkness. Which means you can't see the road either, just blurry patches of snow, not even white, actually pretty dark, as if I were under water, in a slow, murky, slightly choppy current; you can't see a thing apart from the thick snowflakes that appear in the beam of the headlights and fly right at me for the rest of the night. If I don't pay attention and take my eyes off the snowflakes I'm going to go crazy, that's for sure. I should be able to see through the snowstorm the way you can see through a lattice (or a dirty window pane) and notice only the landscape behind it. But there is no landscape now. There isn't even a road, and for all you know you could be driving across a field, you'd have to get out and march ahead, feeling for the road markings with your boots. I'm going to stay in the next town I find, that's settled.

An actual town, a small one, looms before me. The snow falls more slowly and softly, almost gently, between the first houses. Maybe it just seems that way because of the couple of walls and windows visible behind the snow. A streetlamp, too. But what town is it? I didn't see a sign. I drive down a gently inclined road – slowly, because at the bottom it narrowly passes under a railroad embankment and the snow is crunching under the wheels. A fully occupied police car is parked halfway down the road (on the autobahn there wasn't a policeman for miles!) Still, they may be able to help. But the policeman behind the wheel gives me a suspicious look: no, there's nowhere at all to stay, pointless to even think about it. Even in

normal times the hotels are all booked up – you know, on account of the businessmen from the West. But there's always the institute, that might be a possibility, there are usually a couple of beds free there. The institute for leatherworking, they'll surely take in somebody, even at this hour. But it's hard to find, the best thing would be for me to follow them. So they lead the way, the three policemen in their patrol car recently painted green and white, down the hill, across unlit, traffic-free intersections, taking it slowly. The road begins to wind when it goes uphill again. The houses are silent, their shadows deep.

And the institute? A vast compound. I make out a couple of buildings, a factory in the background and a smokestack. Two policemen get out and advise me just to enter the building. Even if no one is awake anymore, I'm bound to find a vacant room. But I can't possibly enter the house of strangers and lie down in the first available bed. Maybe one of the policemen could accompany me, that would be a little more official. But they wave off the suggestion, that's asking a little too much in this cold. I should understand. They get back in their vehicle, wave again, and again I'm alone.

I approach the building, leaving my bags behind (I don't want to look too pushy). The snow is probably about twenty centimeters deep now, it scatters in the air when I walk. The building is locked. I knock and ring the bell but nothing happens. Just the wind pressing against the window panes and swirling the snow outside the door. Shielding my face with my hand, I look around the complex. In reality the factory seems to be a heating plant. I see a mound of coal at any rate, with rods and gondola cars in front of it, along with two men. There's about fifty yards between us. But is it really people I see, looking so unmoved in my direction? They don't wave or signal to me, nothing.

I'll go over and find out who it is, standing over there so late at night in front of the brick building, I'll see if they really are heating-plant workers. Approaching them, I notice they have black faces (there are traces of coal all over the snow too). The men move slowly, thoughtful

rather than tired. It's hard to talk with them. I can't ask them, for example, if this is the leatherworking institute and if there's a custodian here. They'll only answer the first question. Yeah, this is the leatherworking institute; and then they talk about the students living here, it's hard to tell lately how many there are, and even the ones who do live here often spend half the night in town. This is how they talk, completely oblivious to my question about the custodian.

We're still standing outside in the driving snow. The two men don't seem to feel the cold. I explain that the police told me I could spend the night here but that the door is locked. Yes, one of the boilermen says, strangers often spend the night here, a lot has changed in that regard. He sets his shovel down and steps into the entrance of the heating plant. Meanwhile he gradually broaches the subject that I could spend the night here too, they should be able to arrange that, because, like he said, there are loads of strangers here now. I'm grateful to be out of the snow and wait for more instructions. But the man standing across from me, between rusty metal rods and a couple of hoses, is silent. He looks at me like he's answered as best he could and is now waiting for my next question. So I decide to focus on a single question: how can I wake up the custodian? Who knows, the boilerman answers, the custodian is probably sleeping soundly, the scoundrel, he always gets drunk and falls asleep in front of the television. – But maybe there's a phone there, I ask. Yes, there's a phone, but who knows the number? The man looks around for a moment, as if the number were written somewhere on the wall, then it suddenly occurs to him that there must be a directory in the drawer upstairs.

We walk through the plant, past pipes, rusty steel skeletons and stairs, and finally past the furnaces. Immediately it's warm and dry, even though the door is open and the wind is blowing in snow. There are ten furnaces here, the heating-plant worker explains, but only eight are in operation right now. They don't seem particularly big to me, not the giant furnaces I imagined. The man lets me look inside one, but the fire is almost out. Hmm (he says), it shouldn't be like

that. He steps over to the next one, opens the flap and calls out: This one, have a look over here! I look and have to cover my eyes from the blaze of light and heat.

And this is for the coal, he says, opening a hatch. He points here and there, and I ask myself what this man really looks like behind his sooty face. Everything will soon be changing, he says, they're going to switch to oil and then they won't need any boilermen anymore. Anyone over fifty will be sent into early retirement, you can count on that, and I'll have my 75 percent. Apparently he forgot why we entered the heating plant in the first place, and now that he's shown me everything he's a little surprised to find me standing there next to him. He seems to be rummaging around in his brain, trying to figure out where I came from and what he should do with me. I tell him we were looking for the telephone directory. – Oh, yes, the telephone directory.

We climb a steel staircase. There's a small room under the roof, the lounge so to speak: a crude table with chairs and a wooden bench, a brown-checked oilcloth, a newspaper, a portable radio. The furnishings include an electric stove, its burners encrusted with a brown film; an open can of split-pea soup is steaming away on one of them, presumably the night watchman's lunch. A young, gray, shabby-looking cat is slinking around the boilerman, rubbing against his legs. The man bends down to give it a piece of sausage but the cat refuses to eat it. Yeah, she's a spoiled one, but maybe she'll eat the split-pea soup. The blackened boilerman takes a spoon from the can, bends down again to give it some, but the cat won't touch this either. It wants to play instead, snatching with its claws at the thread hanging from his sleeve, and this time I'm the one who almost forgets we were looking for the telephone directory.

The truth of the matter is, I don't want to stay at the institute after all. I'd rather stay here and rest my head on the table for a couple of hours. Until it's light out. Or I'll stay awake and watch these men. Yes, when I really think about it I'd rather keep my eyes open; it's one of the last

opportunities I'll get to see this boilerman, the cat, the split-pea soup. In the age of grand narratives, an encounter like this might have been called "authentic." Followed perhaps by the question: What is man? – Ah (one would have answered), ah, he's nothing but a shadow, a scattered day, and everything he undertakes is like chasing after the wind. Meanwhile we're out of metaphors to describe how puny we are. They've dried up, been exhausted; and that's the only reason we feel so big and grownup now, and yet all we've done is puff ourselves up in every available language. We stretch and do verbal gymnastics, hoping the words will reveal us in all our greatness, our grandeur.

Later a man trudges over from the institute. A late returnee. The smaller of the boilermen was the first to notice and call him over. He says to me, "Hurry up, he's got a key and will let you in." Yes, the man with a northern German accent sleeps here, and he's got a key. But all he can offer is his own room. It's a quad, and of course I can have one of the beds there. Entering I see two wardrobes, left and right, two beds behind each one, the foot of one at the head of the other, then the wall with the windows. In the middle of the room two little desks, each with two chairs. This is how students live. And the walls? I don't even need to look, I know the answer instinctively: gray wallpaper.

"Here's some space for you," says the man, pushing together a couple of shirts (neatly hanging on hangers) on the left half of the wardrobe. But I'm not planning to move in! Then we go to the kitchen, there's a bottle of wine left there. No glasses, though, just tea cups, and no corkscrew either, but we don't need to look for one since the man knows what he's doing. He takes a knife and, using the handle end, pushes the cork into the bottle. That's the way we do it here, he says, while I try to guess who "we" might mean.

"Let's sit on the beds, they're softer than the wooden chairs," he suggests, introducing himself by his first name. He's Manfred and comes from Bremen. Manfred, about forty-five, short and slight of build, a little bit cross-eyed (yet another person who looks just a tiny bit

right past me when he talks to me. This must be my fate, always meeting these people). Manfred has strikingly blond hair, beginning to thin, which he tries to compensate for by growing a full beard. He does his best to make me feel at home, not only making space in the wardrobe but opening the windows too (because it's so stuffy) and rinsing out the cups again before we use them. Why all the effort? It's almost enough to make you suspicious. Manfred deals in "natural hair products" – I imagine toupees and wigs, but as the conversation progresses I realize he's talking about blankets.

It's just like on TV. It's enough to turn it on and watch for a couple of seconds and immediately you know if they're speaking off the cuff or following a script. I don't know exactly what it is, but you definitely notice. Manfred, who'd been improvising until now, suddenly slips into a role, talking in a high-pitched voice about natural hair products. He tries to distinguish himself from the other dealers who only want to sell, preferably a lot and as expensively as possible. Manfred, on the other hand, would like to advise potential customers. He conducts information seminars on behalf of his company, because a lot of people play fast and loose in his line of business, selling cotton blankets, for example, and advertising them as natural hair products. (This, incidentally, was the moment I realized the man wasn't selling toupees. But what did blankets have to do with natural hair? I had to put two and two together: blanket – woolen blanket – wool – natural hair – naturally!) So Manfred didn't care about selling any blankets? Well, he wouldn't exactly put it like that. If, after thorough consultation, they decide to buy something, that's completely up to them. Manfred, by the way, seems to believe in what he's saying. He sits on the edge of the bed, half sinking into the mattress, gestures sparingly, and adopts a formal tone again. I noticed this right away and answered him in kind. It's hard, after all, to discuss natural hair products on a first-name basis.

He used to be a pharmaceutical representative. But his wife left him and he got the kids, which is why he had to look for more "attractive" employment. – And all the traveling? Yes,

well, it happened to be a good opportunity. Anyway, the kids are older now. They live with friends, and he goes to see them almost every weekend. He goes out of his way to emphasize that they're in good hands with these friends, and yet I can tell by the look on his face that the last thing he wants is for me to ask any questions – for example, how old the children are exactly. He keeps slipping deeper into the mattress from where he is sitting on the edge of the bed. We might just as well go back to a first-name basis now.

Tomorrow morning at eight thirty is the first preliminary talk for an information event. How many people come to such an event? Around eight to ten. The competitor draws a much smaller crowd, five at most, for its events. They send their promotional materials in the mail. But mailmen are only human. They sometimes don't even bother, and throw a whole stack of circulars straight into the trash. We hire our own delivery boys and brief them beforehand, we choose them carefully and offer incentives. – How do you find the event spaces? Very simple. The “schedulers” do it, that's what they call them; it's virtually a profession in its own right. They drive around the whole GDR looking for event locations then rent them for the entire year, and we have to rent the venues from them. It's expensive, but saves you a lot of work. There are people who actually do that for a living. They acted incredibly fast, founded their company a year ago, the wife sits at home and schedules appointments, the husband scours the country for event locations, the backrooms of bars and so forth, that's how it works, it goes without saying that you have to be on the ball.

How many blankets does Manfred sell at each event? I'm asking the wrong question, the events he organizes are not about selling. – Aha. – Manfred asks me what I “do” too. Well, I'm a writer and report, for instance, on the GDR – the “former” GDR. “Oh,” says Manfred to my response, which to him might be an imponderable, “you can write a lot about the GDR, the things I've seen!” And he starts to tell me about different places he's had to spend the night. Always in accommodations like this, 'cause the hotels are always booked solid, all that's left

is the student dormitories, training centers, union facilities. Once I slept in a room with thirty-two beds, three days in a row. All alone in a room with thirty-two beds! Some places are fine, but sometimes the bathroom or toilet is downright disgusting. Once I stayed at a place where the floor of the showers was absolutely filthy. Bugs everywhere, worms and stuff like that! The floor was all sticky, I literally showered in my socks, that's how revolting it was.