

## Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

### An 18-year wait to buy a car

*East German refugees tell why they escaped from the Communist system, where basic necessities are unavailable.*

**B**y the end of September, more than 30,000 refugees from Communist East Germany had arrived in West Germany. From the end of May through the first days of September, when the Hungarian government lifted border controls for the transit to Austria, some 5,000 such refugees, and after the opening of the borders, more than 25,000 took the escape route to the West.

The refugees are fleeing from a worsening political situation and a collapse of large sections of the economy in the German Democratic Republic (G.D.R.). Although East Germany is one of the 12 largest industrial economies in the world, the situation there is very reminiscent of what one would find in a Third World country.

*EIR* talked to refugees who had just arrived in West Germany and are lodged in one of the various temporary encampments set up all over the country. It becomes clear that the economic and political reasons for their emigration go together; the system of political repression and economic undersupply is one and the same.

A young woman of 23 years, who had worked in a grocery store in the city of Goerlitz, said she grew tired of "standing in a store where there was almost nothing to sell." There were "apples, but no bananas, maybe some cherries . . . mostly cabbage, carrots, and cucumbers for sale," she said.

Even cucumbers grew scarce this year, because a disease wiped out much of the harvest. In the East German five-year-plan economy, there is no contingency for extra food im-

ports, so if the harvest is bad, nothing will be done to improve the situation.

There are food imports, but these are used as "cash crops" for re-export to third countries, to bring in hard foreign currencies. A refugee of about 30 years of age, who formerly worked as a sailor for the East German merchant marine, reported the following: "We picked up a lot of bananas, mainly from Ecuador, but also from other countries. These were shipped to Berlin, part of the cargo also to Prague or Budapest. But in our own stores, you would never find bananas, and if at all, a kilogram would cost around 5 [G.D.R.] marks."

In West Germany, a kilogram of bananas from Ecuador would cost 1.99 deutschemarks. The price difference is even larger, if one compares the 900-1,000 G.D.R. marks net income an East German worker earns per month, to the DM 1,500 net income of a worker in West Germany.

The ex-sailor said that most of the imported goods are not used to supply the G.D.R. population, but end up in West German food stores. "The fruit cans you see in your stores—I am sure they are from us," he said.

It is the same with furniture. Many West German homes are filled with chairs, tables, beds, and shelves from IKEA—manufactured in the G.D.R., the raw material coming from Finland. In East Germany, people have to wait several years to acquire a new desk or chair of modern design.

A former cab driver from the East German city of Magdeburg reported that one has to wait up to 18 years, to get one of the three main low-cost au-

tomobiles produced in the G.D.R. He had ordered his new car in late 1973, and finally received it in 1989!

This is only part of the problem; the roads are in such bad condition, that professional drivers may ruin the shock absorbers of their cars within half a year. Getting new shocks is no easy operation. To take the car to a repair shop is a risk, because it may take weeks or months to get it back. But at least the licensed auto shop can get a supply of shock absorbers—eventually.

But as a private person, one has to go to the black market for spare parts. As the cab driver reported, he got an essential part for his brake system from one of the Polish "tourists" entering East Germany with a store of spare parts—but he had to pay seven times the usual price for it.

The Pole may very well have gotten the part from a licensed import store in Poland. An underground market for spare parts of all sorts exists in Eastern Europe. It is also used by many industrial companies in the G.D.R., which otherwise would not be able to produce, because the supplies are not available in the official five-year-plan system.

Except for the military-related sectors of the economy which supply the Soviet military machine, the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) shows no intention of improving the situation.

Even the private belongings which the refugees left behind serve the SED's "economy." Since a refugee is a "criminal" under the G.D.R. penal code, his belongings fall to the state and are re-sold. The chair a refugee was sitting on a few weeks ago, may thus end up with a family that hasn't been able to buy one. With 30,000 refugees already having left for the West now, this makes roughly 30,000 chairs, right?