

Germany's 'Democratic Revolution' party holds first free congress

by Rosemarie Schauerhammer

The numbing jostling from pothole to pothole on the highway, desperate attempts to make a single telephone call, tests of patience at the few gasoline pumps and restaurants, everywhere the same downcast, uniform gray color of the facades of the buildings—these were my first impressions as a West German citizen on her way to the party conference of one of East Germany's leading opposition parties, the Demokratische Aufbruch (Democratic Revolution). But then, suddenly, what a contrast! The frazzled traveler is standing inside the town hall of the little village of Fischbach near Gotha, immaculate and well-appointed enough to be the envy of many communities in the Federal Republic of Germany. And the party organization functioned equally well: a press conference room, modern loudspeaker equipment, ballot boxes, multicolored ballots—all the way down to the tables bearing placards with many as yet unfamiliar names.

It had all the looks of the work of professional politicians, but, thank God, those looks were deceiving. The organization runs smoothly, but in the discussions there was not a trace of routine or well-worn procedural mechanisms.

People listen attentively to the greetings from the guests from the Federal Republic (West Germany), and eagerly seek to bring new things into the discussion. The West German Social Democratic Party (SPD) has sent a low-level person to say hello, while the West German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) comes with a hefty delegation: Dr. Wagner, Minister-President of the state of Rheinland-Palatinate, and Herr Milde, the interior minister of the state of Hesse. Both of them speak with practiced ease, and receive well-wishing applause. But what a shame, since neither even acknowledge the existence of the many fundamental questions which are preoccupying the citizens of the German Democratic Republic (G.D.R.); and when Herr Milde attempted to give a definition of the Christian image of man, he was simplistic to the point of embarrassment.

And then came a small incident which gave a foretaste of how the best-laid plans of these practiced and oh-so-superficial election managers from the West will go awry when they endeavor to back the upcoming election in the G.D.R. Among the gifts which the CDU has brought for the Demok-

ratische Aufbruch are well-styled bumper-stickers bearing the letters "DA" and, of course, the colors red and green (for "social" and "ecological"). The stickers are happily passed around; but then the room becomes filled with grumbling noises. One delegate, a bearded fellow who in the West would be easily taken for sympathizer of the Greens, could be heard murmuring in disappointment: "Why red and green? They've got to be black, red, and gold!"—Germany's national colors. This becomes the unanimous consensus in the room, and is later expressed in an overwhelming majority vote by the state organization to adopt the sticker's design as their logo, but to change the colors to black, red, and gold.

The people there do not deal delicately with each other, but speak out openly, and the discussions immediately get down to essentials. A policy address by Edelbert Richter is interrupted in mid-course with calls of "Keep it shorter!" at the point when he launches into a historical summary. People want to get down to what is essential, and that means the future! Opinions clash strongly at that point. The SPD has acted decisively: It has formed a common opposition front against the SED power apparatus. But what's the right answer? Should we continue to represent all interests as broadly as possible; or, should we show a distinct profile and develop ties with the parties in the governing coalition in Bonn, the West German capital? People really don't want the latter; they want to shape themselves into something new.

The popular desire for unification with the Federal Republic is overwhelming. All agree with the demand, "Let's get rid of the SED!" But as for programmatic content, for the elections they want to confine themselves to "non-intellectual" statements, and to stick by the simple question: "Are you SPD, or are you a party of the center?"

To align, or not to align

Throughout all the separate votes at the congress, the conflict continues between the advocates of a party with an image of being open from all sides—even following the splitting out of the SPD—and those who advocate a clear recognition of the governing Christian Democratic-Free Democratic (Liberal) coalition in Bonn. One further reason for the particular acrimony of this debate, was that everyone knew that

their decision in this region would be decisive for the direction of the entire Demokratische Aufbruch, since Thuringia is the party's stronghold. So there was a lot of hard debating—but no jawboning.

People fight things out without dissimulation, and a high value was put on personal integrity. It is decided that no former SED functionary can become a member of Demokratische Aufbruch, and that even former rank-and-file SED members must have been out of the party for at least three

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years before the revolution in order to qualify for membership in the DA in Thuringia. Anyone who wants to run for the party's state executive committee will have to undergo merciless questioning concerning his moral integrity; anyone who leaves the slightest doubt about that, won't have a chance. Indeed, many of the delegates there can boast of a family tradition of struggle against the SED dictatorship.

The fixed pole

And finally, the most surprising and impressive experience for this writer at the party congress, was the appearance of one person who, amid all the back and forth, represented a fixed pole and emanated a quiet optimism: party chairman Wolfgang Schnur. From previous televised interviews, I had gotten the impression of a somewhat inflexible, inaccessible lawyer who often has to struggle to get his words out. But what I saw "live," was an easy-going man who could rise above immediate circumstances, with a refreshing sense of humor and great vision. Let me give examples of each of the latter two points.

First example: The chopping and stabbing of both currents is in full swing, the protagonists have obviously lost any overview, and someone calls out, "Well, we *do* have our party chairman in the room." An idea which will save the day? But what will happen now? Will the decision once more come "from above," just as it had over the past 40 years? Party chairman Wolfgang Schnur steps up to the microphone and tells his friends that they're all such "magnificent young democrats," but that there is one particular young democrat

who particularly pleases him, and who he has been observing the entire time. He then asks if the mother of that young democrat would please hold him up so that everyone could see how peaceful and happy he is. An obviously embarrassed but proud mother then holds her six-month-old little boy into the air. Thunderous applause fills the hall. In a moment, all the anger and partisan dispute is swept away, and the discussion continues—young, truly democratic, and not "from above."

The second example: In his address, Schnur presents a hopeful economic perspective, with a clear avowal of market economy and freedom of commerce. This, he says, has to guarantee social security, especially for people on pensions, and will require co-determination and actually free trade unions who are not controlled by a party monopoly. So far, so good. Then, in a statesmanlike manner, he puts Germany's responsibility for promoting international peace into this economic context, saying: "And when we hear about the problems of our Polish neighbors—that there's poverty there. Shouldn't we start an initiative from our side, and say: 'Dear Polish friends, we will help you?'" For a moment, there is a breathless pause in the entire room. Surprise is written in the faces of many: We, who are up to our necks in our own economic problems, we should offer them help? Schnur continues, confirming that idea: "We will soon be economically stronger and more capable. Let us go to Poland, then, so that they can see that we are serious about a policy of peace, which means understanding and immediate aid. The same for Romania, the same for Hungary, and the Soviet Union. Let us . . ."

Frantic applause breaks out suddenly; the speaker is unable to continue his speech; and indeed, he doesn't need to say more, since all have experienced what they could not have believed possible: They have raised themselves above their day-to-day struggle and have had a glimpse of a vision on the horizon which will serve as their reward for their courageous battles of the past few months.

People's faces became increasingly happy as the congress drew to a close. The new state chairman Horst Schulz definitively recognized the Bonn governing coalition as the party's main discussion partner. However, Schulz was not simply elected as a representative of the "conservative" wing, but as someone who, as state chairman, will lead his party with full vigor into the elections.

And I, too, was happy, as I drove home to West Germany. But despite this, rage began to well up as I reflected on the political situation in our country. How much better would the "young democrats" develop and carry out their ideas in East and West, if it weren't for the partisan stupidity of the SPD, which is looking greedily toward the political capital they can make in the next West German parliamentary elections, and which wants to run the steamroller of the West German political scene over this freshly plowed field of political culture!