

West German Short Film about the Emergency Reception Camp for GDR Refugees in West Berlin (1953)

Abstract

Entitled *Berlin—Insel der Hoffnung* [*Berlin—Island of Hope*], this short film shows GDR refugees arriving at an emergency refugee camp at the convention and exhibition center at Kuno-Fischer-Strasse 8 in the Charlottenburg neighborhood of West Berlin. The film shows the members of a rural family (father, mother, daughter, and son) going through the necessary bureaucratic steps to gain emergency admission to the Federal Republic. Upon handing over their identity cards, the family members relinquish their status in the GDR. They then enter into a liminal phase involving the verification of their democratic credentials by the police. “Every fate,” the narrator explains, “becomes a piece of paper.” The West German stamp (on their papers) and their West German currency symbolize their new affiliation. Now begins the difficult journey toward economic and social integration.

Source

Transcription

Berlin, Island of Hope (1953)

0:00:20 – 0:00:21

Credits

A documentary report produced on behalf of the Senate of Berlin. Written by Herbert Kundler

Director: Dr. Hanno Jahn

Camera: Hans Jaehner

Music: Richard Stauch

Producer: Landesbildstelle Berlin

0:00:22 – 0:02:35

Voiceover:

This little dot on the map of world politics is one of its hot spots: Berlin. A city divided into two halves, East and West. Surrounded by the Soviet zone. Dictatorship reigns everywhere: in Magdeburg, in Frankfurt an der Oder, in Rostock, in Dresden, in Greifswald, in Leipzig, Schwerin and Görlitz. 18 million Germans are waiting for liberation. They look to the West. Red Army soldiers, People's Police, watchtowers, barbed wire stand in the way. The only place to flee is West Berlin, the little dot on the map, an island of 2.2 million people. The hours of escape are hours of fear. Secretly, inconspicuously, almost without luggage, the fugitives seep into the city. Most of them choose the route via East Berlin, coming from there to the West on foot, or by S-Bahn, tram or underground. And then, when the train stops in the Western sectors, there is a great sigh of relief: safe!

Farmer Jansen from Mecklenburg, too, has imagined it many an evening with his wife, what it would be like to be

able to say, "Safe at last!" It is a relief from fear and impotent anger, but it is only a start, for now they walk on foreign roads and now, many years after the war, begins camp life, idle waiting, and the struggle for existence of people who have lost their homes, their possessions, and even their closest relatives in many cases.

Mr. Jansen asks a passerby:

Is it still a long way to the refugee center?

Passerby:

No, it's over there where those people are lining up.

Voiceover:

Here they stand now, the new arrivals of the day. In some months 30,000, 40,000, as many as almost 50,000 people have fled to West Berlin. People from all segments of the population. Jansen, the farmer from Mecklenburg, stands next to a railroad worker, a student stands next to a skilled craftsman, in line with a laborer and a worker. It is an anonymous crowd. The identity of each individual, what they are, why they came, is checked multiple times.

[...]

0:02:35 – 0:02:49

Voiceover:

First of all, anyone who has left home with a few marks of East German money in his or her pocket naturally wants to know whether he or she will find a bed or a straw sack in the evening. Farmer Jansen gets an admission slip for one of the 90 Berlin refugee camps.

[...]

0:02:50 – 0:04:58

Mr. Jansen:

Alright, we know where we'll sleep. Now we fill out the questionnaires and then we go to see the police.

Voiceover:

It's the usual questionnaire, with fields for last name, first name, date of birth, and so on. But when you fill in Field D, occupation or other activity since May '45, you remember what you tried to achieve in the years after the war,

what you worked for despite all the difficulties, in the hope of liberation coming soon.

The long tables where the officials work look almost like an assembly line: identity cards are handed over; receipts are written out. This is how it goes day after day.

Mr. Jansen:

We got rid of our East German ID cards, now we have to wait until they call us to get the receipt. It's good that you get numbers, so they don't have to call out our names over the loudspeaker in front of everyone. They're probably checking their police records right now to see if they've got anything on us. It's actually quite reassuring that they do that with everyone, so at least you know that no crooks are coming into the camps.

Announcer: 36-812, 36-813, 36-796, 36-8...

Mr. Jansen:

That's the number we just got.

Voiceover:

The Jansen family has been assigned to a refugee camp in Neukölln [a neighborhood in West Berlin]. A few square meters in a large hall, where you are never alone, never just with your family, must now replace your own four walls for weeks, sometimes for months.

[...]

0:04:59 – 0:05:26

Hardly anyone realizes what it means to make sure that every refugee has enough to eat. If you count all those who are in the West Berlin camps, they equal the population of a large town. There are tens of thousands of them, and millions have to be raised to pay for their food. The rations are 1.40 marks per head per day. The food supply in the Soviet zone was poor; many refugees were starving.

[...]

0:05:27 – 0:05:55

Voiceover:

Prior to the hearing before the [various] Federal Emergency Reception Committees, each person's reasons for fleeing to the West are closely scrutinized. Emergency admission will only be granted if the flight occurred because of an urgent danger to life and limb or for other compelling reasons. And to investigate this in tens of thousands of cases is an enormous job, but no one can say that an uncontrolled stream of refugees is being admitted from Berlin to the West. Every fate becomes a piece of paper.

[...]

0:05:56 – 0:06:17

Sign: The head of the Berlin Emergency Reception Procedure [Agency] and representative of the Federal Government.

Music.

0:06:00 In the waiting room

Mr. Jansen:

How'd it go?

Refugee, a textile engineer:

Nah, denied, no valid reasons.

Administrative officer:

Number nine, please.

Another waiting refugee asks:

Where were you in the zone?

Refugee:

In Forst in the Lausitz. I'm a textile engineer by profession.

Interview, young man:

I learned to be a locksmith and when I finished my apprenticeship, the company fired me.

0:06:20 – 0:06:28

Mrs. Jansen:

We had not delivered our full share of meat and potatoes, they said, and we must either join the cooperative at once or my husband would be sent to the penitentiary.

[...]

0:06:28 – 0:06:40

Mr. Jansen:

Where my people have lived and farmed for 300 years, I won't work for a collective. Not me, not my wife, and not my children. I told them that in no uncertain terms.

[...]

0:06:40 – 0:06:52

Speaker of the Reception Committee:

Mr. Applicant and Mrs. Applicant, the Reception Committee has deliberated and decided to grant you emergency admission on account of leaving the Soviet Occupation Zone for compelling reasons.

[...]

0:06:52 – 0:08:24

Voiceover:

The recognized refugees, those taken in on an emergency basis, are distributed among the states of the Federal Republic and West Berlin according to a quota. When the refugees descend the stairs to the airfield, a long-cherished expectation becomes reality.

When the planes land in the West, the Federal Republic faces the difficult task of the economic and social integration of the refugees, who join the more than 10 million expellees and those Soviet zone refugees who have already been admitted. In the confined space of half of Germany, they are all seeking not only political freedom

but also freedom from want and a future for themselves and their children. Their fate demands international help, but the first help they expect is from the people who speak their language, in the towns and villages where their journey ends.

[...]

Translation of German transcription: Insa Kummer

Source: Excerpts from: *Berlin -- Insel der Hoffnung* ["Berlin – Island of Hope"]. A documentary report produced on behalf of the Berlin Senate, 1953. Script: Herbert Kundler; Director: Dr. Hanno Jahn; Camera: Hans Jaehner; Music: Richard Stauch. Producer: Landesbildstelle Berlin. Source: Landesarchiv Berlin, F Rep 400 Nr. 144. Thanks to Christoph Dörffel for his assistance.

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