

The Hanging Man:

A Report on Homelessness in Germany

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during the summer of 1993 David Brodsky and I spent five weeks in Germany. It was our first visit since before the Wall came down. We travelled all over the country, talking to people in an attempt to gauge their mood in the aftermath of unification. One of the most noticeable changes was the vast number of homeless people everywhere.

What had caused this explosion in homelessness? What has the government done to alleviate it? And what have the homeless and their supporters tried to do on their own? Before I address these questions, some political facts about "post-Wall" Germany may be of use.

The well-documented euphoria that erupted when the Wall came down soon dissolved for many people into anxiety and bitterness. People in the west with whom we spoke used terms like *Anschluss* (roughly, "entry") and "occupation" to describe what had happened to them. Westerners saw that despite the promises of Kohl and the CDU, they would be paying a lot for the changes, while in the former East Germany it's clear that many have lost more than they gained, including housing guaranteed in the constitution. Unemployment, at 7.4% nationwide, reaches over 50% in some parts of the five new eastern states ("January Unemployment Figures..." Kretschmer), where many people found that their jobs and their companies had simply been abolished by the new government.

Other factors at work include the rise of openly neo-Fascist organizations, and an alarming increase in anti-foreign and racist incidents ranging from harassment to murder. There has been a huge influx of refugees, from Third World countries and from war zones such as Yugoslavia, who came to Germany because of its liberal asylum laws, which are now under attack from the conservative government. There is also a large emigration of ethnic Germans from Poland and the former Soviet Union who by German law have a right to citizenship. In this situation the powerful soon began setting the disadvantaged groups against one another. Right-wing recruiters play upon the anger and fear of those at the bottom, and some, including homeless people, have expressed resentment towards those seeking political asylum, because the latter are automatically given housing while their cases are pending.

The strong popular reaction among the Germans against racism, violence and tacit government encouragement through inaction has been badly underreported in the American press.

Everywhere we went we saw graffiti supporting foreigners, urging solidarity with refugees and with striking East German miners. Many said simply "*Nazis raus*" ("Nazis out"). Even official organizations displayed posters with messages like "Cologne without foreigners is like the Philharmonic without music." Thus racism and xenophobia are being addressed clearly and strongly by the people. Public reaction to homelessness is not always so clear, nor so gratifying.

Politicians, particularly on the right, have chosen to make it appear as if the main cause of homelessness were a flood of foreigners into the housing market. But the factors I mentioned have at most exacerbated the situation and given the media a useful symbol to play with. As the majority of left commentators on homelessness in Germany make clear, the real root of the problem is a familiar combination of government policies, ranging from ineffectual to pernicious, and a real-estate market allowed to rage out of control.

Alex Vitale, in a recent issue of *Z Magazine*, makes a statement that could be applied virtually unchanged to the German situation: "Government at all levels, the media, and private foundations continue to conceptualize poverty as a personal problem with a personal solution while ignoring the structural economic factors that have created widespread homelessness."

But many of the homeless themselves, resisting the forces that would set them against one another, insist that the causes do not lie within the individual or the victims, but within the system.

In fact, the new wave of homelessness in Germany is a direct result of the great affluence of the 1980s and early '90s. As more people can afford, and demand, larger and fancier places to live in, those on the lower end are eventually squeezed out of their homes entirely. Germans on average live in the smallest number of square metres per person since the end of World War II. A comment by a spokesman from the German Realtors' Association shows the prevailing attitude: "There is no housing shortage, only an increased demand for luxury and a group which can't be served by the market." That is, there's no shortage, just people who can't pay the rent.

The single greatest complaint is that affordable dwellings have all but disappeared from the lower end of the market, as old buildings—sometimes whole neighbourhoods—are bought, gentrified, and sold to new buyers at inflated prices. Some neighbourhoods have joined forces to try to resist the enforced modernization of their homes and their subsequent eviction, but it's hard to fight the speculators, supported as they are by German law and the prevailing values in Bonn. German tax law favours such speculation. Much of the government housing subsidies go not to renters, but to landlords. And high depreciation allowances, among other things, encourage unscrupulous developers.

The situation of those fearing eviction is particularly hard in the new eastern states. Under G.D.R. law, no one could be evicted. Now renters face not only drastic rises in rents, but the added threat of western investors buying up property cheaply, or of former owners coming back and laying claim to houses that they or their relatives owned before the founding of the G.D.R. in 1949, or even earlier. There is no clear legal opinion on the rights in such cases, and current renters and owners rightly fear that they will simply become the "victims of history"—that is, of capitalist opportunism. There are currently enough of these cases pending to keep the German courts busy for decades.

Figures on homelessness vary. In a country of 80 million people, estimates range from 1 million homeless to over 3.5 million, if in addition to people on the street you count those in temporary or substandard housing, those in women's shelters, and the over 100,000 drug and mental patients who could be released but are not, because there is nowhere to send them.

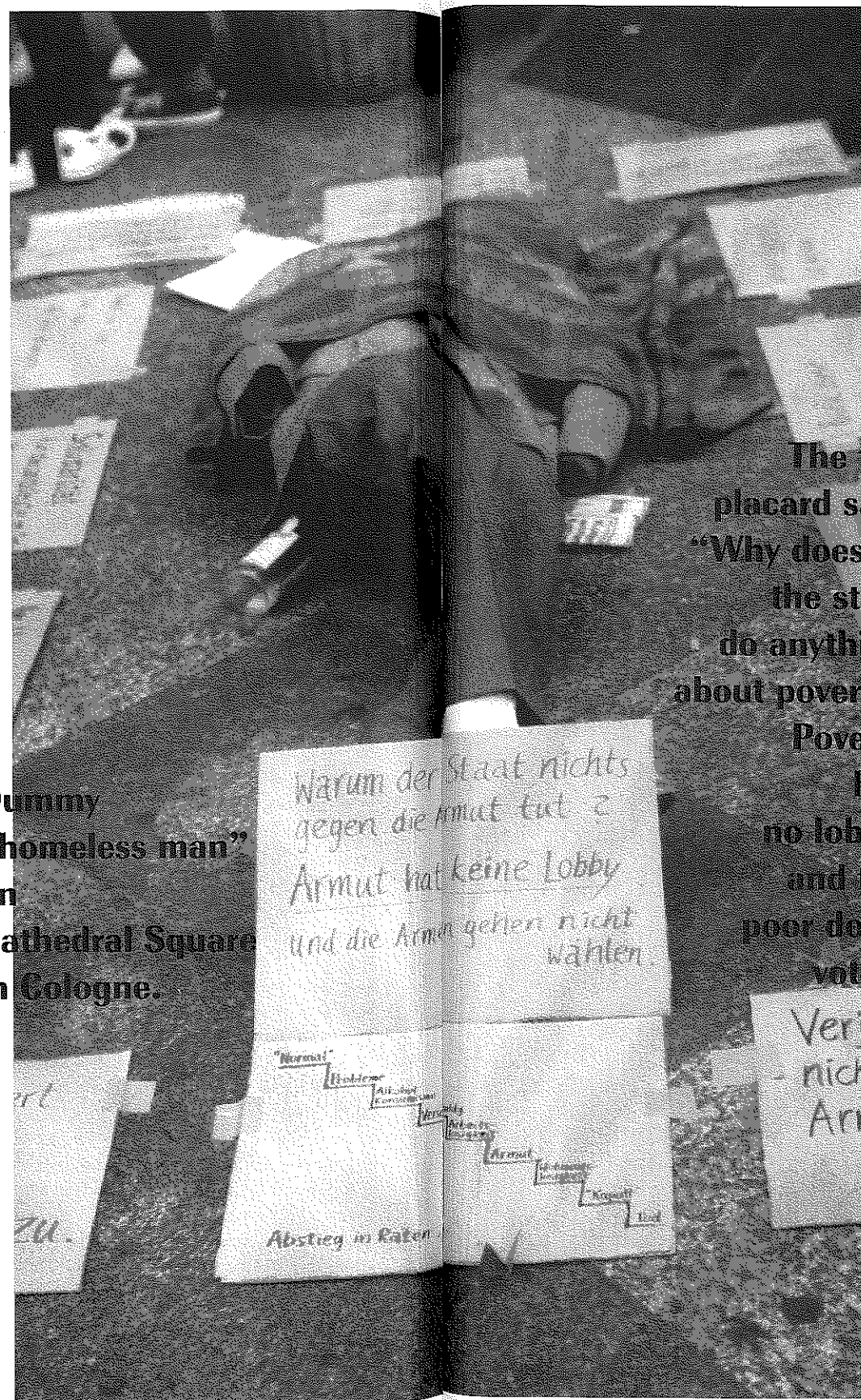
There are a variety of so-called alternatives open to the homeless. The very worst off sleep on the street, and in parks, subway stations,

underground garages and public toilets. But there has been an increasing tendency of municipalities and businesses to hire private guards such as the notorious "Black Sheriffs" of Munich, to chase people out of these areas, with dogs and clubs if necessary. In many cities people have banded together in *Wagendorfer*, squatters' villages of abandoned cars, converted vans, gypsy wagons and construction shacks. In Berlin one such village stands in what was once the no man's land along the wall. Some cities, notably Frankfurt am Main, have negotiated with squatters to provide them with alternative sites for their settlements. Hamburg provided toilets, a cook, a wagon and social workers. But these gestures are rare. In some cities the homeless continue to seize and occupy empty buildings, a practice that began in the late '60s. But there are fewer and fewer houses to be had, as gentrification proceeds.

The "temporary" dwellings, provided by federal and local governments include shipping containers, abandoned barracks, industrial sites; Cologne even put an unused Rhine ship at the disposal of a homeless agency. The most common procedure involves housing vouchers that allow a person to spend the night in selected cheap hotels and rooming houses. The landlords of these places have a reputation for brutality and exploitation; some are known to be pimps. Others simply make a profit by charging exorbitant rents, since the government picks up most of the bill. The number of nights allowed at any given place is limited. Critics complain that these government policies keep the homeless on the run, unstable, dependent and without hope of staying anywhere long enough to become part of a community.

In addition, during the last ten years the federal government has almost entirely withdrawn from the construction of subsidized housing. Very few new apartments are being built—estimates of the shortfall range from 1.7 to 3 million—and almost

Dummy
"homeless man"
on
Cathedral Square
in Cologne.



none at the lower rent levels, or with government control. Those dwellings that are subsidized initially can go onto the open market after ten or twelve years, at which time the landlords can sell them at a profit or renovate them, kicking out the renters in favour of a more affluent clientele. Such yuppification of neighbourhoods is a major source of homelessness. Even people with "normal" incomes often can't find a place they can afford. In addition, Bonn has recently made a number of cuts in social welfare benefits, which naturally hits people without a place to live the hardest.

A variety of self-help and advocacy groups have been formed, many of them created by the homeless themselves, out of a recognition that it is futile to hope for a solution from those who had created the problem. These alliances tend to see the situation in the same light as Alex Vitale saw it—as a structural problem that demands structural changes to solve it, addressing not only the lack of housing, but the lack of work, money, educational opportunities and health care. (People on the street in Germany have a life expectancy ten years shorter than the national average.) These groups demand that lodging be made a constitutional right, not a commodity. In a strong statement in 1993, the German Federation of Labor Unions blamed deregulation and privatization in the housing market, and demanded rent ceilings and affordable living space for all, under permanent government control!

In addition to actions directly aimed at obtaining housing, a number of initiatives have been undertaken to raise consciousness and fight passivity. Several films have been made by homeless people, dramatizing their situation. A number of German cities have restaurants run by and for the homeless. These are not soup kitchens, though they too exist. At these restaurants, the homeless eat for less or for free, while the public pays a higher, though still reasonable

price. Besides engaging the homeless in a constructive activity that uses their skills and brings in some money, the restaurants bring them together with other citizens around one table, where they can talk to one another and dispel the prejudice that grows out of ignorance.

Two of the most important forums for the homeless have been theatre groups and publications. One theatre in Cologne, which rehearses in an occupied house, considers itself the "fuse on the powder key of homelessness." In Berlin two groups, called The Rats and Under Pressure Street Theatre, present plays specifically taken from life on the street, and try to educate audiences about homelessness. Among the effects reported by participants are an increased sense of self-esteem, self-discipline and above all, a desire for political action.

The publications vary in size, circulation and quality, but all attempt to provide a forum for the homeless to air their grievances, share vital information and survival tips, and reach out to "normal citizens." Some, such as the Cologne magazine *Bank Express*, publish poetry and fiction. (In a recent issue a satirical poem called "Frankie, Go Home!" protested a performance by Frank Sinatra at 350 DM, about \$220, a ticket.) Other papers, such as *von unge*, *Adler Express* and *Casa nostra* [sic], are wholly of a practical nature. Some of these papers report on a wide array of subjects such as racism, prisoners' rights and the special problems of homeless women. One writer recalls Hitler's attraction for the thousands of homeless and jobless in the 1920s, and makes a plea for solidarity and resistance to such appeals today.

While in Cologne this past June, we witnessed several kinds of symbolic political actions. Cologne Cathedral is at the heart of Cologne. Next to it on one side is the main railroad station; on the other are clustered the city's principal museums,

and a block away is the Rhine River. Normally this high-density area is full of commuters and tourists. In recent months the large square in front of the cathedral has also been the site of a more or less permanent encampment of homeless—they call themselves "Berbers"—and of almost continuous demonstrations and confrontations between them and their advocates on one side, and the city, the business community and officials of the Catholic church on the other.

One of the most visible and provocative elements of their presence on the square is the so-called

some consistent topics: nuclear weapons, racism, the attacks on foreigners, world peace and homelessness. Some address German militarism, such as the poster showing Chancellor Kohl in Bundeswehr uniform and asking "Which of these soldiers need not go to war?" They commemorate atrocities old and new, and are written in German, French, English, Arabic, Hebrew, Gaelic, Russian and Lakota.

The city and the church hierarchy want the wall torn down. They say it frightens tourists, desecrates the Cathedral, and is bad for busi-

APPEAL FOR SOLIDARITY

According to the judgement of the State Court the church authorities have the right to remove the Wailing Wall from the Cathedral forecourt. We are appealing against the court decision. You may send a letter against reviction of the Wailing Wall to: Cathedral Chapter, c/o Domprobst Bernhard Henrichs, Mararethenkloster 5, D-50667 Cologne. Copy please to: Klagemauer, Domkloster 4, D-50667 Cologne.

Klagemauer—the "Wailing Wall"—a structure made up of wires strung from poles, and hung with hundreds of hand-lettered cardboard placards bearing messages from people from all over the world. I spoke with the "keepers of the wall"—two homeless men, who live in sleeping bags on the square, and guard the structure, as well as sell postcards of it and talk to visitors. They began the wall during the Gulf War, as a forum for people to express their anger and frustration. Everyone was invited to write a message, which was then hung on the wires, until a wall arose. The two men, Jupp Riedel, who uses a wheelchair but is in no sense confined to it, and Walter Hermann, an artist, have maintained the wall ever since. Walter told me that the subject matter of the placards changes as people's concerns shift. But there are

ness. It has been attacked several times by neo-nazi skinheads and was rebuilt each time by Walter, Jupp and their friends.

The wall and the encampment are well situated for challenging and informing people who emerge from the train station onto the square. For this reason the Dom-Platte, the Cathedral Square, was selected for a major demonstration in solidarity with Germany's homeless population, held on June 25-26, 1993. This was the "Nacht der Wohnungslosen"—the Night of the Homeless—which included the mass action "Euro-Sleep-Out." People were invited to bring sleeping bags and stay on the square overnight to demonstrate their support of the homeless, and to publicize their demands for action. The Sleep-Out was scheduled simultaneously in over ninety German cities as well as in

"Which of these soldiers need not go to war?"

Welcher von diesen Soldaten muß nicht in den Krieg ?



England and Ireland. Invitations were sent to all members of Parliament, as well as local politicians, public figures and the press. There were TV cameramen there, but by the next day the Sleep-Out had been upstaged in the media by a series of Kurdish attacks on Turkish establishments all over Europe. On the Dom-Platte that morning I found several hundred Kurds demonstrating peacefully against Turkish genocidal policies—a demo supported by a number of the same people who had gathered to support the homeless the night before.

In addition to the Sleep-Out itself, various events were planned to attract attention. There was a podium discussion with politicians from the Greens and the Socialist Party. A number of rock bands and the Grey Panthers Chorus donated their talents. Among the most striking activities were several examples of street theatre. First the organizers laid out a dummy, dressed as a homeless man, complete with wine bottle. Then they placed around him placards like those on the Wailing Wall, with messages specifically relating to homelessness. People coming around the corner of the Cathedral and stumbling on the "man" lying on the ground were challenged to join in the discussion.

A conversation I had with a homeless man who was looking on added another perspective. He was neatly dressed, gregarious and articulate; however, he wore no shoes, and carried his own open wine bottle. I asked him what he thought of such actions. His reply was that they were good as educational tools, but that they didn't go far enough. When asked what should be done, he said, "We should go to Bonn and blow the whole thing up."

The final act of street theatre involved a volunteer from the crowd. A young worker named Dieter was brought up a short flight

of stairs onto a platform and made to stand facing a construction fence in front of the Cathedral. One of the organizers began wrapping Dieter's body with black electrical tape, taping him to the fence. At first everyone joked, passing him beer and cigarettes. As the taping proceeded, people gradually realized that something uncanny was happening. Finally, when Dieter was securely taped to the fence, the platform was removed, and he was left hanging.

The crowd was very quiet. One of the organizers made a brief statement, fleshing out the metaphor which we had before us. This, she said, represented the state of the homeless in German society: abandoned, suspended without support, left hanging by the network of bureaucracies that should be helping them. The organizers had wanted to "hang" the man on the doors of the Cathedral itself, but had decided to use the fence instead. Even so, the symbolism of the "crucifixion" of the homeless in front of a church that just wanted them to go away did not need verbalizing.

It was almost dark by this time. A thin stream of tourists and homebound workers flowed into the square. Some mingled with the crowd to find out what was going on. Heated discussions continued. Some people began drifting away to find places to spend the night. Dieter was left hanging for another half-hour before he was cut down. The question on everybody's mind was, how long before the homeless would be "cut down" and become part of society again? Based on everything I've read and seen in post-Wall Germany, this will happen only when the pressure from the homeless and their advocates becomes intense enough that the system itself is changed.

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