

EXCURSUS III

ALFONS HECK on WEST GERMANY'S "GUEST" WORKERS

West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt used a term common in railroading to announce a major shift in his government's policy on the sensitive issue of foreign workers and their place in German society. "We are going to throw the switch," he said, admitting that the once-unthinkable has happened: West Germany has become a land of immigrants. In a move that signals a complete turnaround, Schmidt has scheduled a high-level conference of German leaders in an attempt to come to terms with the fact that nearly 4 million "guest" workers and their families are a permanent part of German life.

The chancellor, fully aware of the vital contribution the foreigners are making to German prosperity, wants to send them a badly needed message of reassurance: You are welcome to stay among us. The trouble is that many of the 60 million Germans don't share his sentiment. They feel that the foreigners were not brought into the country as future citizens, but merely to fill the many jobs, often menial, disdained by most Germans, grown prosperous during the boom of the "*Wirtschaftswunder*." Although the Federal Republic still has the most powerful economy in Europe, some of the bloom has worn off. As a result, more than a million guest workers have been repatriated either by inducement, such as high severance pay, or by straight expulsion. But any massive further reduction is not feasible. West Germany, like other European Common Market nations, is faced with a drastically declining birth rate and, if anything, will become ever more dependent on foreign labor in the future. Schmidt, always a supreme realist, knows that his country has to deal with the problem now, before it becomes unmanageable.

As a highly popular leader, he is in a strong political position and can afford to risk a certain amount of criticism. He will get it. Nineteen eighty is

an election year, and his opponents are sure to make much of the whole emotional issue. Bavaria's ultraconservative and powerful prime minister, Franz Josef Strauss, who will contest Schmidt for the chancellorship, is against all concepts of meaningful integration. He believes, for instance, that all foreign children should be educated in their own schools. His view, though quite popular, is destined to be defeated--if not by Schmidt, then by time. Of the more than 3.9 million guest workers and their families, 2.4 million have already lived in Germany longer than six years, and a million more than ten. What makes their stay even more permanent is their 935,000 offspring who go to German schools and work in German shops. Half a million of them were born in West Germany. But their chance of rising to the top is very slim.

At present, only 40 per cent finish elementary school, and only a third fulfill their legal obligation to attend vocational school and finish their apprenticeships. In such an achievement-oriented society, which puts inordinate value on formal education as well as training, such a poor performance almost surely condemns them to a sharply reduced income and continued second-class citizenship. Schmidt, commendably enough, is determined to change that. He, better than anybody else, has no illusions about the task.

CURRENTLY, most guest workers are socially ostracized and live in urban ghettos such as "Little Istanbul" in West Berlin. Here, most of the city's 100,000 Turks live in their own restricted world. Berlin's Senator Ulrich has just made the almost revolutionary suggestion that Turks be hired as policemen. Although, according to his estimate, no more than two or three candidates would presently qualify, even such a modest number has led to a chorus of protest. The senator, however, like Chancellor Schmidt, believes that the real test is not what might happen should a Turk dare arrest a German, but whether the country is tolerant of minorities.

Schmidt has appointed Heinz Kuehn, the former prime minister of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, as his special repre-

sentative for guest workers. Kuehn has already come up with a list of demands designed to upgrade the rights of the foreigners. The most important is his proposal that all foreign children born and raised in Germany receive all the benefits of German citizenship "by post-card" as soon as they turn eighteen. As it now stands, it is difficult for many juveniles to feel permanently at home in Germany. They can be deported for such a relatively small offense as shoplifting. While most Germans think this just and fair, Wolfgang Bodenbender, assistant director of the Ministry of Labor, disagrees sharply. In his opinion, no integration is possible without the chance for social rehabilitation. Unlike many of his countrymen, he is willing to admit that much of the crime committed by foreign juveniles is directly related to their feeling of rejection and inequality. He therefore wholeheartedly endorses Kuehn's other major proposal, which would give foreign children parity with German children for available apprenticeships.



SCHMIDT ENCOURAGES this politically unpopular trend toward equality, but not solely or even primarily out of concern for a spurned minority. He wants to spare his nation the social strife he witnessed on his many tours of the United States, where many inner-city ghettos--in a view shared by most Germans--resemble combat zones. The "guest" workers are no longer guests but in Germany to stay, and they will eventually exert pressure to rise from the bottom of the social ladder, just as blacks have done in the U.S. But immigration is a problem new to Germany, and Schmidt closely watches the U.S., which, in the sense of achieving equality, has done much for such eager masses of immigrants as the Irish, Poles, Italians, and Germans. Ironically, it has been much less successful for the oldest, involuntary immigrants from Africa.

There are other parallels. In the mid-

Twenties, America also imposed, for a time at least, a virtual halt to large-scale immigration, just as West Germany is now doing. The Federal Republic's borders have been closed to foreign job seekers, and, as Federal Minister of Labor Herbert Ehrenberg bluntly warns: "They won't be opened again to anybody waiting on the Bosphorus or Tajo with a shoe carton under his arm."

There is some illegal immigration, but much less than into the U.S. West Germany levies drastic fines and prison terms against anyone hiring so-called "black workers," who are ruthlessly deported. We in America will soon face some hard decisions, including the question of severely restricting immigration, All of which puts the U.S. and West Germany in a position to learn from each other.

Alfons Heck, freelance writer, is a native of Germany and a naturalized American citizen.

SOUTHEAST ASIA RAINSONG

Monsoon rain beating on my roof of tin,
Rain is very angry but he knows he can't get in,
Husband mine fixed roof before he gone,
Now warm and dry I listen to rain song.

Rainsong tell me life is very sweet,
Rain makes rice grow so there's food to eat;
Rain makes men put down their guns and come
Back to homes and wives, to daughters and to sons.

Monsoon rain pounding on my roof above,
Baby sound asleep in my arms of love;
Was that noise big gun,...or just thunder I hear?
Don't cry, little one, it's men not rain we fear.

Monsoon winds blowing strongly from the sea,
Blow husband in from wherever he may be,
Then he will hold me in his arms so strong,
But, just for now, I only have rainsong.

Rainsong tell me life is very sweet,
Rain makes rice grow so there's food to eat;
Rain makes men put down their guns and come
Back to homes and wives, to daughters and to sons.

Monsoon rains, bring my husband back to me,
Then we go to land where people all are free;
When we, in our boat, with all the family rest,
Please, monsoon, turn, and blow us to the West.

JOHN McDOWELL