Homecoming of Ethnic German Immigrants Sours

The New York Times

March 24, 1996, Sunday, Late Edition - Final

Distribution: Foreign Desk

Section: Section 1; ; Section 1; Page 3; Column 1; Foreign Desk ; Column 1;

Length: 1420 words

Byline: By ALAN COWELL

By ALAN COWELL

Dateline: SOHREN, Germany

Body

Emmi Schleicher arrived in Germany from her native Kazakstan six years ago and thought she had finally come home to the land her ancestors left over two centuries ago. Since then, she has learned a painful lesson.

As an ***ethnic*** ***German*** in Kazakstan, she said, she faced nationalist hostility among Kazaks who called her a foreigner. Now she confronts another kind of animosity from Germans who do not accept her as a ***German*** and who say she and others like her receive social benefits they do not deserve.

"In Kazakstan they said we were Germans and should go back to Germany," said Mrs. Schleicher, 32, who was a librarian in Almaty, Kazakstan, and collects admission at a public swimming pool in this small town in western Germany. "Now we are in Germany and people here curse us as 'the Russians.' "

She is not alone. Since the late 1980's, in one of Europe's greatest population shifts since the end of the cold war, more than a million ***ethnic*** Germans from the former Soviet Union have taken advantage of ***German*** laws permitting them to reclaim full citizenship, and thus automatic access to Germany's bountiful welfare system that provides unemployment pay, housing allowances and state pensions.

But their arrival has coincided with economic straits for many Germans, who are facing record unemployment at a time when the abundance of social benefits is being called into question. A result has been a greater readiness among Germans to attribute their woes to their ***immigrant*** kin, and an equal readiness among politicians to play to those passions for votes.

The animosity threatens Germany's social fabric with perhaps the most emotional collision of identities since neo-Nazis rampaged against foreigners, particularly the country's two million Turks, after reunification in 1990.

"Burning houses have shown that the readiness to accept people is not without limits," Oskar Lafontaine, leader of the opposition Social Democrats, said, referring to attacks on foreigners elsewhere in Germany. With three important state elections scheduled for March 24, he is campaigning for limits on immigration by ***ethnic*** Germans.

The hostility has a particular twist here in Sohren, a town south of Coblenz where many of the 1,200 ***immigrant*** Germans have moved into apartments vacated when some 15,000 United States troops and their dependents pulled out from the nearby Hahn air base two years ago.

"For 40 years we lived in good, neighborly relations with the Americans," said Heinz Michel, Sohren's Mayor for the last 22 years. "But right now, all these people moving in at once is just too much."

For many of the new arrivals, the hostility has come as a shock after the upheaval and persecution their families faced since 1941, when Stalin banished them to Siberia and Central Asia to punish them for Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union.

Throughout the cold war, ***German*** leaders routinely campaigned for the right of ***ethnic*** Germans to return home. ***German*** governments even paid millions of dollars to the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu to allow ***ethnic*** Germans to leave Romania.

West Germany even made it a constitutional right for ***ethnic*** Germans to acquire full ***German*** citizenship, even though it had been 200 years since the czars invited Germans to Russia, where they were prized for their agricultural skills and organization.

The end of the cold war changed the equation.

German reunification cost taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars. An economic slowdown added to unemployment and strained the state's ability to finance pensions and other social benefits. The opening of Eastern Europe's frontiers threatened Germany with an unchecked flow of poor migrants. Hostility to outsiders inspired the ***German*** authorities to enact a string of laws to keep the numbers of foreigners -- and ***ethnic*** Germans -- within tight limits.

Since Jan. 1, 1993, the number of ***immigrant*** Germans accepted in Germany has been limited by law to 220,000 a year. And now Mr. Lafontaine wants that number halved, a demand that has struck a responsive chord among many Germans. One recent opinion survey said about 70 percent of Germans support his campaign.

The end of the cold war also meant a drastic reduction in the number of American forces in Germany. At the height of the cold war, American military personnel stationed in Germany numbered around 250,000. Now the total is 76,000.

In Sohren, where the original inhabitants number some 2,000, the American presence injected thousands of jobs and $180 million a year into the local economy. When the last Americans left two years ago, Mayor Michel said, "we became poor."

The arrival of the ***immigrant*** ***ethnic*** Germans, by contrast, has produced only a sense of division and strain. In the area surrounding Sohren, ***immigrant*** ***German*** children already outnumber the children of the original inhabitants in some schools. Five new kindergartens have been built, and resentment has grown.

"They have a completely different mentality," Mayor Michel said of the ***immigrant*** Germans. "They have trouble with the language. Most of them have no work. The living standards we have are totally strange to them. We have no jobs to offer them."

Neither do they shop, visit the bars or spend money as the Americans did, people at several stores on the town's main street said.

Mayor Michel said that when Mr. Lafontaine brought the issue into the public spotlight, "he destroyed the only little bit of reconciliation that had happened in this town."

Indeed, in other places where ***immigrant*** ***ethnic*** Germans are housed in former NATO barracks until they find homes, ***German*** officials worry that disaffected young men among them, speaking no ***German***, are rapidly forming a crime-prone underclass that will arouse even greater ***German*** hostility.

In her new three-level house that she shares with 10 other people from two generations of in-laws, Mrs. Schleicher does not see it that way.

"Our people are disappointed, upset, confused," she said, speaking only slightly accented ***German***. "They are people who have lost themselves. Here, they thought they would find a home where they wouldn't be discriminated against. But they have been disappointed."

Her father-in-law, Johannes Schleicher, 69, a former truck driver, seemed to agree. In 1941, he said, he and his family were ordered out of the autonomous republic set up for ***ethnic*** Germans in the Volga region and sent to Siberia. They built a house, he said, but then the family was sent on to Kazakstan. They built a house there, too.

Now, propelled by anti-***German*** sentiment in Kazakstan and lured by the better economic prospects here, he has come to Germany. So the family pooled their pensions, their wages and their own labor to build yet again. "Where am I supposed to go?" Mr. Schleicher said. "Back to the Volga? The Russians don't want us there."

Such was Germany's desire in the early 1990's to avert massive immigration of ***ethnic*** Germans from the former Soviet Union that Bonn offered tens of millions of dollars to Moscow to rebuild its onetime republic on the Volga. That plan foundered on the refusal of Russians now living there to give up their land and the reluctance of ***ethnic*** Germans to return.

According to official statistics, the ***immigrant*** ***ethnic*** Germans as a social group are notably younger than average in Germany's aging society, meaning that they draw proportionately less in pensions and contribute more to the work-force paying social security contributions.

At the same time, the statistics suggest that unemployment last year among ***immigrant*** ***ethnic*** Germans, while disproportionately high in some areas like Sohren, was lower than the average in states like Baden-Wurttemberg, where the most contested of the March 24 state elections is taking place.

In Mrs. Schleicher's neat living room, with its new furniture, its television and a garden gnome as decoration, the perception is different.

Sure, the older people said, they are drawing pensions of around $900 a month -- 30 percent less than the ***German*** average -- to which they have made no direct contribution. But they said their children wanted to work and pay their dues, even with jobs other Germans would not look at, and well below what they were qualified to do in the Soviet Union.

"People say we've brought unemployment here," said Olga Borge, another ***immigrant***. "But the Germans who come here from Kazakstan want to work. If there's work and they can get it, they do it, whatever it is. Sometimes, it makes you weep."

Graphic

Photo: Emmi Schleicher, an ***ethnic*** ***German*** from Kazakstan, thought she was bringing her daughter Veronika home to a better life when she and her family immigrated from Russia. Instead, she has found resentment. (Jim McDonald for The New York Times)

Map of Germany highlightine Sohren: New arrivals to Sohren have been shocked to find hostility there.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (89%); CITIZENSHIP (77%); UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE (75%); WELFARE

BENEFITS (75%); CITY GOVERNMENT (74%); MAYORS (74%); COLD WAR (73%); WORLD WAR II (72%); ELECTIONS (70%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (68%); HOUSING ASSISTANCE (66%); POLITICAL PARTIES (63%)

Industry: UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE (75%)

Geographic: GERMANY (96%); UNITED STATES (92%); RUSSIAN FEDERATION (79%); EUROPE (79%); CENTRAL ASIA (79%)

Load-Date: March 24, 1996

End of Document