



**CHINA
SHOP**

THE GOOD LIFE

I've been asked to write this column for ALR many times in the past, but until now I've always been too preoccupied with various other pressing matters. But it's not difficult to see why my name was so often mentioned as a possible contributor to the part of the magazine devoted to inconsequential but witty diatribes.

Anyone who has read any volume of my *Collected Speeches to the Ninth Presidium of the 14th Congress of the Socialist Unity Party* will know that there's nothing I like better than to poke a bit of idle fun at an easy target. In fact, I had something of a reputation among other working class leaders for my cheeky sense of humour. How well I remember whiling away the evenings after Comecon meetings in front of a roaring fire in some hunting lodge or other. After a few too many brandies, Leonid would always say, "Hey Erich, let's hear the one about the government electing a new people again". How we laughed.

So I wasn't altogether surprised to get the long-distance call from the ALR office the day after I received the good news from the doctor. Believe me, there's nothing like finding out that you're not going to die within six months to put you in the right frame of mind for writing 800 words for a publication that is. Picking the right topic was a little trickier, though I thumbed through some back issues to remind myself of what previous *China Shop* authors had railed against. It seemed, sadly, to be mostly TV-generated. Now, don't get me wrong, I've got nothing against television, as long as it's kept in the right hands. But personally I don't watch much of it these days.

They used to have a few good documentaries in the old days. Who could forget *And The Children Are Smiling!*—*The German Democratic Republic 1958-59*. But you know what they say, no one ever really enjoys their own party. I do wish they'd put all those great old Bulgarian sitcoms on again, though. I was always a big fan of *Ceausescu and Son*, *Man Outside The House*, *Keep an Eye*

on Thy Neighbour, *Are You Being Watched?*, and *Yes, Interior Minister*. Not forgetting *The Good Life*, of course. They don't make them like that any more.

So TV was a bit of a non-starter. "Come on, Erich", said the ALR minion, "there must be something that really gets your goat." "Well," I said hesitantly, "what about disloyalty to the anti-fascist state?" That went down like the arrival of the Stasi at a writers' workshop, I can tell you. It's meant to be a humorous column, they explained, not a little testily. "People have enough trouble getting through all that stuff about Foucault in the rest of the magazine, without you rabbiting on about the anti-fascist state in the light relief section."

"Look," I said, "I don't have to do this, you know." After all, it's not as though I can't get published elsewhere. Just the other day I got a call from my agent in North Korea. Sales of my latest book, *Memoirs of a Bear-Shooting Man* have apparently been very encouraging. "Of course, they're not actually reading it," he said. "They're eating it." Still, business is business, as I believe the saying goes.

All of which didn't get us much further towards deciding on a topic suitable for ALR's last issue. "What about foreign travel?" they suggested. "Well, I'm against it," I said. "But I can't see what's so funny about that." "No," they said, "your own. Surely you've got some amusing anecdotes about living in Chile. You know, cultural differences, that kind of thing."

Well, I must admit, they do have some pretty strange customs here. The ruling party doesn't even get close to 98% of the vote, for instance. No but seriously, the ordinary Chilean workers seem to be a

pretty dour lot. On the whole they prefer drinking and dancing at their rather tedious all-night fiestas, rather than the flamboyant parades Margot and I used to enjoy so much back home. We still reminisce about May Day 1983, when she and Mrs Krenz got the giggles after the truck carrying the 'Let Us Strive for Efficiency in Socialist Production!' float broke down, and they both had to be escorted from the podium.

The only time the Chileans seemed remotely willing to share a joke with me was during the speech at my welcoming banquet by the Minister for Tierra del Fuego Affairs. (The rest of the cabinet had been unavoidably called away at short notice—something to do with the start of the annual Alpaca Festival.) I must admit I didn't quite catch the nuances of his reference to "a long and honourable tradition of former German leaders settling in South America", but the rest of the audience broke into gales of laughter, much as the Supreme Soviet used to do whenever Khrushchev took off his trousers and did his conjuring tricks.

"All right," I said exasperatedly. "I'll do you a nice little travelogue of Soviet dachas in the old days. A sort of nostalgia-piece, right down to the ..."

But somehow, unaccountably, the line had gone dead. ■

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