

GDR

Daily Life

in 200

Objects

READING
SAMPLE



From the collection of the **DDR MUSEUM**

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Cover

Inv.-No. 1024480

Coffee and tea maker

AKA Electric K109

1985 | VEB Elektromechanik

Berlin-Kaulsdorf

28.5 × 12 × 27.50 cm

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GDR Daily Life in 200 Objects

**QUIRIN GRAF ADELMANN V.A.
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Introduction

History's judgement is harsh—it could almost be called inexorable. Instead of keeping its great promises, Socialism brought the people oppression, injustice, and misgovernment. Nobody will deny that life in the GDR was fine, as long as one remained silent and assimilated. Nonetheless, not even the greatest defenders of the SED state would really wish for the Wall to return, for people to be shot at the border nor for the Stasi state security service, let alone for queues in front of grocery shops and years of waiting for a telephone or a car.

Today, however, the vanished state's material legacy enjoys almost cultic veneration. If someone were to find a jar of artificial honey from the publicly owned *Zuckerwarenfabrik Elbdom* confectionery factory in grandmother's pantry now, it would cause everyone to smile. You can choose either to believe or disbelieve the information printed on the label that the sugar mass is mixed with 10 percent bee honey, for even in those days the synthetic tasting substance was almost inedible and at best only suitable for baking cakes. Although the design and layout of the label would, by themselves, not be enough to give the jar a place of honour on grandmother's sideboard or in a museum display case, such a find from days gone by could be a starting point for some interesting stories. Even though there were plenty of bees buzzing around in those days, grandmother could tell you how difficult it was to find any real honey. Maybe she would tell you about how she once visited Berlin, the capital of the GDR, where she was able to get several jars of bee honey and enough paper handkerchiefs to bridge at least five colds for both the whole family and the entire neighbourhood during the coming winter months. Used often and frequently repaired, the objects of everyday life and consumption were held in higher value than today. Whereas the West was described as a throw-away society, one could in the same way speak of the East as a "society of keepers".

Above all, there was a story behind each individual everyday object. Shopping was a daily adventure full of disappointment and success. Anyone who came home in the evening with a full net of oranges could tell everyone where and when they were lucky enough to buy the tropical fruits. Purchasing a fan heater was worth at least a short tale, renovating the bathroom could equal a novel, possibly with many sequels. But unlike many products—such as the jar of artificial honey—these stories had no expiry date. After the monetary, economic, and social union between the two German states came into effect on 1 July 1990, consumer goods in the GDR lost their "moral value", as economists liked to call it. Of course, on 1 July 1990, the radio worked exactly as it had the day before, but it suddenly no longer met the highest technical standards or corresponded with the latest tastes in design. In tune with Theodor W. Adorno and other left-wing theorists, one could perhaps call this "the terror of consumption," but it worked



Queue in front of the *Intershop* on Friedrichstrasse in East Berlin, 1979

nonetheless. Never before in history did one occurrence cut so sharply through the world of objects as it did on 1 July 1990. The realm of objects now fell into two categories: those from the past and those from the present. However, after several years of basically throwing everything away—which was even in itself a new concept—there was a return to products from the East.

We must let the objects tell their stories. The late Romantic poet Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff wrote: "Sleeps a song in things abounding, / that keep dreaming to be heard, / Earth's tunes will start resounding, / If you find the magic word." This may be a nice way of putting it, but it is only half the truth. The stories that things tell us connect the past with the present. Using a term from the theory of the *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, they create collective and individual identities. These can be places in the topographic sense, but also objects or immaterial phenomena. The Trabant car is definitely a *lieu de mémoire*, as is also the song "Alt wie ein Baum" by the *Puhdys* or the smell of "Wofasept" disinfectant. These sites of memory encourage historians to recount stories. Yet the objects can sometimes stay grimly silent, even if they are already in safe custody in museum collections. They can also stubbornly repeat the same lies given to them along the way by their creators. Just as a police detective interrogates crooks, a historian must make things "sing." The sought-after "magic word" is often far less magical than Eichendorff had imagined while trying to animate the world's concealed poetry; both the detective and the historian must sometimes ask some tough questions. This is even more true when the investigator and the interrogated person are actually good friends and the accused is shamelessly and sentimentally reminded of the old friendship.

Whether referring to the menu at the *zum Goldbröiler* restaurants, the air cushioned lawnmower, or the drinking glass with a decal image of the hotel on the Brocken Mountain, the question



Crèche children on their daily outing in Cottbus, 1978

remains the same: how much influence did the state and the Party ideology have over people's everyday lives? Two opposing alternatives are repeatedly put on record: some people remember a government that constantly tried to control and dominate its subjects' lives, even in the most insignificant ways. They think of a state that sophisticatedly used either preferential treatment or discrimination to do whatever it could to prevent any deviation from what it set as the norm. The other viewpoint, however, describes colourful, diverse, even happy and fulfilled lives in which people paid little attention to the phrases used in propaganda. These people talk of a state whose power may still have sounded loud, but which over the years appeared flat, old, and tired—a state that had lost faith in itself.

Everything was scarce and yet everything was in abundance. Everyone was dissatisfied and everyone—or almost everyone—adapted to the situation, took care of the important things, tried to get by, did the best they could in the situation they were in. People assimilated; they knew the rules of the game. They did not take the Party's slogans particularly seriously but, as long as these were official announcements, they remained silent. The mismanagement, the queues in front of shops and overcrowded restaurants were a constant source of everyday grievance but, in the evening, people tuned to Western television and were happy to see a world in which everything was on offer. Narrow-minded people everywhere, as far as the eye can see? Conformist, cowering bourgeois people, anxious subjects who were happy living on a small plot of land behind barbed wire?

Getting off work at the end of the day was more important than the job, the weekend house in the countryside, family, friends, drinking coffee together. There, at home, the state, the Party and its ideology were far removed from their lives.

Did the system end at the garden fence, or were the house's inhabitants still living there

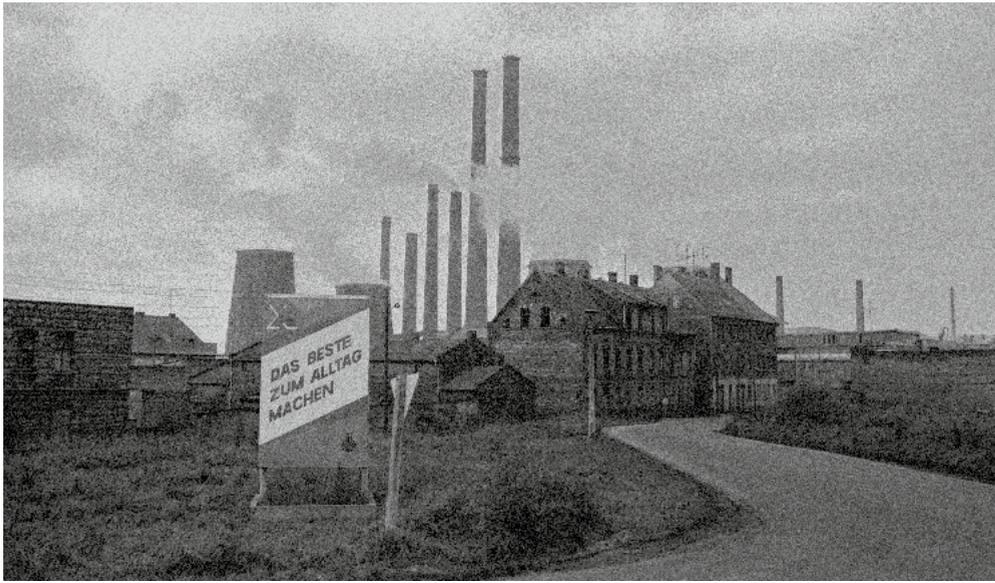
in an invisible enclosure of serfdom? Did this little piece of bourgeois happiness provide an alternative world to the SED dictatorship, or was it instead part of it? Was the GDR a society of willing subjects who had secretly concluded a social contract with the state, or were they exercising their resistance against it by withdrawing into the sphere of their private lives? Was the mocked and vilified petty bourgeoisie people's real way of life and survival in socialism, which ultimately triumphed over all utopias and ideologies?

The SED leadership, nonetheless, did not relinquish any of its power until October 1989. As the country's ruling sovereignty, it held onto its capacity of deciding over the welfare and woe of its citizens, its monopoly on the truth, its system of hierarchies and privileges. Giving any of this up would have meant relinquishing its power altogether.

In autocratic systems, there is no life beyond the dictatorship. The notion that people could live in niches, as diagnosed by plenty of foreign observers in the GDR, was just a misperception or perhaps the wishful thinking of those concerned: the niches were illuminated, controlled, and dominated in every area.

Nobody could escape the Stasi, nor the tightly knit network of social control, nor the constant assessment carried out by superiors at work and by the social authorities. There was no such thing as data protection, banking secrecy, nor medical confidentiality; neither letters nor telephone calls nor people's private lives were officially safeguarded. Seen only from a technical point of view, the state had the power to control every aspect of life, to intervene wherever and whenever it wished, and to eradicate any resistance. As such, there was no clear distinction between assimilation and resistance, but instead only between different forms and degrees of assimilation.

The socialist system in the GDR did not fail because of its mistakes, but instead because of its growing perfection. It was not brought down by its political opponents, whom the state spent so much time and money persecuting, but rather by the SED leadership itself. The principle of issuing orders and demanding obedience produced subservience, a lack of active civic interest, indifference, sloppiness, incompetence, a rejection of any self-motivation and creativity. The dying state lay under a diffuse twilight. Some observers, especially those living in the West, misinterpreted this lethargy as stability. Even within the GDR, however, many people hoped that things would continue forever as they had done before, because not only the system's officials had done well at assimilating. Even though—across the entire communist sphere of power—the signs were pointing towards collapse, nobody really wanted to believe it. It seemed as



Above VEB Steinzeugkombinat in Bitterfeld, 1981 | **On the right** workers in Görlitz, 1981

if world history had forgotten the small country between the borders fixed by the Rivers Oder and Elbe. There were some specific reasons behind the oppressive calm in people's intellectual lives. The socialist utopia was dead, and especially those who suffered psychologically from oppression in the GDR were not really attracted to the real existing capitalism. All this created a strangely unreal state of mind that continued to exist after the fall of the Berlin Wall—the feeling of parting without ever leaving.

But how does the attempt to make the objects of the GDR speak end? There is no question of either guilt or innocence, but any interrogation should bring forth at least some results— or the interrogator must keep starting again from the beginning. This means he must listen carefully and ask tough questions. The “magic word” conjured up by Eichendorff can only mean “critical analysis” and if there is even a hint of any sentimental recollection—then that is the way it is.



Food and Drink

The supply of food was one of the SED leadership's main problems throughout the decades and the continuing shortages were a constant source of dissatisfaction and grievance for the population. The government's goal was to base the food supply on domestic production. Until 1945, the territory of what was to become the GDR had been an area of agricultural surplus, i.e. more agricultural products were produced than consumed, and it therefore should have actually been able to accomplish this goal, but the land reform in September 1945 had a profound effect on the structure of agriculture: for political and ideological reasons, all land holdings larger than 100 hectares were expropriated without any compensation and apportioned into small farms. The new farmers, however, were lacking in tools, seeds, livestock, stables and buildings. In addition to this, many of the people who moved to the countryside had no agricultural background



1021803
Tinned vegetables Mischgemüse

1988 | VEB Kombinat Obst- und Gemüseverarbeitung
Ogema Magdeburg | 12.2 × Ø 10.2 cm | RSP M 2.10

1022195
Tinned meat Halko Rinderbrust

1989 | VEB Halberstädter Fleisch- und Wurstwaren-Werke
Halberstadt/Harz | 6.4 × Ø 10.3 cm

1021736
Tinned meat Frühstücksfleisch

1988 | VEB Gothaer Fleisch- und Wurstwarenwerk
6.3 × Ø 10.2 cm | RSP M 7.20

and were therefore lacking the necessary experience. In 1950, agricultural production was only at 50 percent of the level achieved before the Second World War. The basic supply of food, at least, had been secured since about 1953, this enabling ration cards for food to be discontinued in 1958. However, the enforced collectivisation (collective) of farms in 1960 led to new difficulties in the supply of food, which only stabilised in course of the sixties.

Nevertheless, even in the two decades that ensued, the shelves in the grocery shops were often empty long before closing times. This was the case at the baker's, the butcher's and especially the greengrocer's. Instead of fresh fruit and vegetables, housewives could be glad to get their hands on a jar of peas or beans. Imports from the socialist states, such as apricots and peaches in jars from Bulgaria or tinned peppers from Hungary, were able to offset the deficit to a certain extent.

There was, however, never any real hardship or hunger in the GDR. In fact, as the shortages also led to waste in the food sector, the opposite was true: due to the subsidised prices (subsidies), customers often bought more than they needed. Nonetheless, there were hardly any products that were constantly available in sufficient quality. Thus, especially in the GDR's later years, random rationing, hoarding, and bartering became widespread. The poor supply of food played a major role in displeasing the people and significantly contributed to the GDR's downfall.



1022197
Tinned brussels sprouts

1988 | VEB Spreewaldkonserve Golßen
7.3 × Ø 9 cm | RSP M 1.20



1021349
Rhubarb juice Eden
 1989 | VEB Havelland Beelitz
 14.2 x Ø 5.5 cm | RSP M 0.75



1015569
Lemonade Contratherm
 1988 | VEB Getränkekombinat Berlin
 17 x Ø 7.5 cm | unsalable



101753
Raspberry cordial Schkölener
 1987 | VEB Obst- und Gemüsekonserven Gera | 24 x Ø 6.5 cm | RSP M 2.05



1021038
Advertising board Neukircher Zwieback ["For You and Your Child"]
 1966 | VEB Zwiebackfabrik Neukirch/Lausitz
 23.8 x 34 cm

★ Tempo meals

Inv. no. 1003235 / 1003236 / 1018965 | 1983
VEB Nahrungsmittelwerke Suppina Auerbach
12.5 × 17 × 4 cm | RSP M 0.60 / 1.05 / 0.85

Under the headline “The Ten-Minute Pea”, the *Berliner Zeitung* newspaper reported on a new development at the *Institut für Getreideverarbeitung* [Institute for Grain Processing, in short IGV] in Potsdam on 2 December 1962. The food technologist, Peter Kretschmer, told the newspaper that the peas were treated with steam under overpressure and then dried again. “Granted, the pea’s closed, round appearance has been lost,” he said. “It has split open. But as soon as the pea goes into boiling water, it returns to its old shape [...] The important thing, however, is that the fruit does not lose any of its nutritional value. In fact, its nutritional value is increased by about 15 percent.” Kretschmer, who later became known as the inventor of numerous other fast food products, did not limit his experiments to peas. After being similarly treated, lentils and beans also only needed to be cooked for between 10 and 15 minutes. “How much time does the housewife gain”, the newspaper cheered, and that was exactly the point: because the economy was in urgent need of manpower, the GDR leadership was trying to integrate women into the labour force. Technical innovations of all kinds should enable women to achieve a good work-and-family balance in their lives. By doing so, it was tac-

itly assumed that women would take on the kitchen work, something which still also corresponded to everyday reality at the time. One further benefit, however, was that domestically cultivated legumes did not need to be imported at high prices paid in foreign currency (foreign exchange).

In 1964, the publicly owned *VEB Nahrungsmittelwerke Suppina* (VEB), a food factory in Saxony’s Auerbach, began producing the brand name “Tempo peas”. These came packed in cartons with a net weight of 250 grammes and were sold for 60 pfennigs. One year later, “Tempo beans” were launched on the market for 65 pfennigs, and “Tempo lentils” for 1.05 marks. These and other pre-prepared meals were so inexpensive, time-saving and tasty that they were often difficult to find in the shops. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, *VEB Suppina* was bought up by the West German food company *Knorr* based in Heilbronn which discontinued the *Suppina* product family in 1991. With the acquisition of the trademark rights in 2003, however, the “Tempo” meals made a come-back. Since then, they have been offered in the classic cardboard boxes with a slightly modernised design and are not only bought by the fans of former products from the GDR.





★ Artificial honey Elbdom

Inv. no. 1015765 | 1988

VEB Zuckerwarenfabrik Elbdom Meißen

12 × Ø 7.5 cm | RSP M 1.10

The people living in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SOZ) and Greater Berlin's eastern sector were given some good news on 22 May 1949: the Trade Organisation HO, which had been offering non-branded goods at grotesquely inflated prices since 1948, published a list of about 8,000 articles whose prices had in some cases been substantially reduced. Among other things, the kilo price of sugar fell from 33 to 24 marks and one kilo of artificial honey now cost 24 marks instead of the previously 26 marks. As the average income at the time was approximately 250 marks, it is important to look at such amounts relatively. Artificial honey was one of the typical substitute products introduced to make people happy in times of war and famine. In purely chemical terms, it was a concentrated sugar solution heated to 90 degrees and then mixed with acid to produce glucose and fructose. Containing 20 percent water and some flavouring, perhaps even a portion of real honey, the result was a thick mass which, with some goodwill, reminded people of honey. With quite simple means, the product could supposedly even be made at home.

As bee honey was consistently scarce in the GDR, the jars of artificial honey labelled by the *Elbdom* company were popular. Several companies belonged to the association of publicly owned companies, including the *VEB Kombinat Süßwaren Delitzsch* state combine where the 50-gram jars were produced. Especially as the average wage had nearly risen fourfold since 1949 (gross wages reached 1,300 marks in 1989), these were very reasonably priced at 1.10 marks. As time progressed, artificial honey was increasingly used in the preparation of various dishes and sweets, and it was one of the obligatory ingredients in every GDR baking book, especially for baking honey cakes at Christmas. By adding one spoonful, as was recommended, it could also be used with carrots to enhance fruit salad. Additionally, it was used as a spread on bread. Artificial honey belonged to the standard catering at all mass catering events, from Pioneer holiday camps to the holiday service run by the *Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* [Free German Trade Union Federation, in short *FDGB*] and the *Nationale Volksarmee* [National People's Army, in short *NVA*].

★ Lemonade Spreequell Club Cola

Inv. no. 1003593 | 1989
VEB Getränkekombinat Berlin
23 × Ø 6.5 cm | RSP M 0.65

Five companies from the GDR's beverage industry presented their new products at the Leipzig Spring Fair as part of the competition to honour the SED's 7th Party Congress in 1967. There were several soft drinks among them, one of them being "Club Cola". The workers at the beverage companies had thus fulfilled one of the party leadership's demands of expecting products of a "world class" standard from its publicly owned industry. This slogan, which was omnipresent during the sixties, expressed both the desire to produce exportable products for the world market as well as to satisfy the people's consumer wishes. And to achieve this, the SED leadership was not afraid to break old taboos. Coca-Cola at that time was considered around the world to be a strong symbol of the American way of life and thus, with its promise of prosperity, something that held the exploited masses back from fighting for socialism. Consequently, Coca-Cola was strictly frowned

upon in the GDR during the Cold War. However, the slogan proclaimed by Walter Ulbricht was to "overtake without catching up"—and this also applied to soft drinks. And there was absolutely no doubt that cola tasted much better under socialism than it did under capitalism. According to a press release from the directorate of the Staatliches Getränkekontor [state beverage office] of 21 March 1967, the "Club Cola" made by the publicly owned beverage company VEB Berliner Getränkekombinat was apparently the first "soft drink fully in keeping with international standards in taste" to be sold simultaneously in all districts of the GDR according to a standard recipe.

In the days following 17 April 1967, the SED's 7th Party Congress convened at the Werner-Seelenbinder-Halle in East Berlin and, after the party leaders' dust-dry speeches, the delegates could quench their thirst with the socialist "Club Cola" at the drinks stands in and around the sports hall.

