OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS

FLOWERS FOR THE OLD FOOL

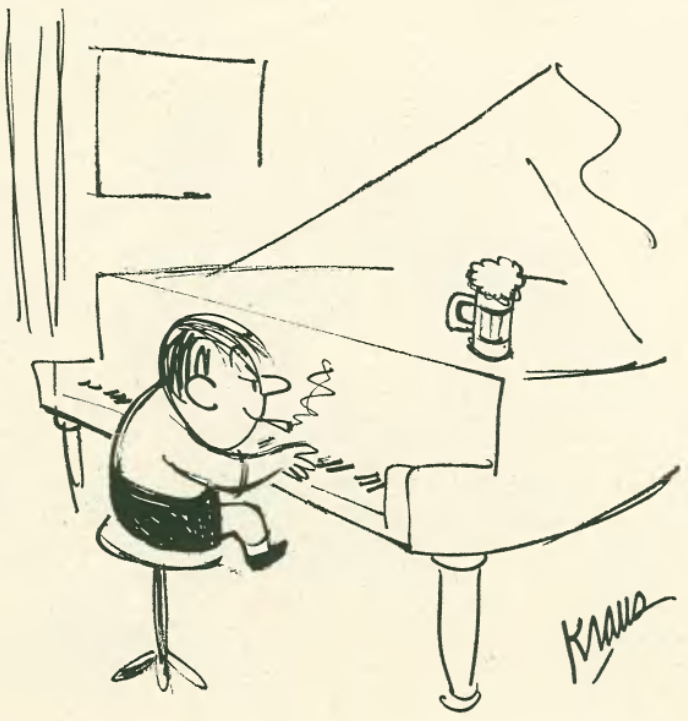
West Berlin

WHEN I first met the man whom I will here call Ludwig Bender, he had a bad case of nerves. This was late last October, and Bender, a sixty-seven-year-old factory owner, had just fled here from a large industrial city in the Soviet Zone of Germany, where he had spent practically all his life. In making his getaway, he had taken along a week's payroll that should have gone to his employees. While *Westflucht*—escape to the West—is a serious crime in East Germany, punishable by fifteen years in prison, stealing a payroll is even worse, and in some cases has been punished by death. Nevertheless, it wasn't fear of retribution that had brought on Bender's highly nervous condition. It was something quite different—an emotional conflict of a sort that only a solid citizen trying to remain alive among the caprices and distortions of the Soviet Zone during the past few years could ever fully comprehend.

For Bender is a solid citizen. He doesn't look like, and isn't, the sort of man who ordinarily makes off with a company payroll. He is a heavyset, serious-looking man, and he has a deep sense of duty—to his family, to his employees, to his country. All his life he has practiced what he calls the German virtues—honesty, industriousness, and thrift. When I talked with him, he told me of his pride in his factory, which produces mining machinery and which, in thirty years, he built from a small workshop into an enterprise known all over Germany for the quality of its products. His credit rating has always been excellent and his personal reputation unquestioned. He had never been in trouble with the government and had paid his taxes punctually. He had survived two wars and several inflations and currency devaluations, although, like most other people in Germany, he lost his savings three or four times in the process. With the dogged persistence that is so typical of the Germans and is once again making Germany a challenging economic power, Bender had staged a comeback after each disaster. But last October he had had enough, and was ready to quit.

"Let me begin at the beginning," he said to me. "I've always tried to be systematic, and perhaps telling you the story just as it happened will help me get my thoughts into some sort of order. No one in the Western world can possibly imagine what my family and I have been through in the nine years since the end of the war. But that's hardly the way to begin. Where was I? . . . Oh, yes. I started my factory shortly after the First World War, and I ran it along what I suppose you might call patriarchal lines. I knew my workers well, and I knew their families. There were never more than eighty men in the factory, and each man was an expert, for we were engaged in highly specialized work. My men came to me with their troubles, and I consulted them on some of my management problems. We had our own retirement plan, and we had a profit-sharing arrangement before most people in Germany had even heard of such a thing. Sometimes an old worker would ask me to take his son on as apprentice, and I was always glad to; that sort of thing builds up loyalty. My daughter Irmgard became my confidential secretary and my strong right hand. Everybody liked her, and it was taken for granted that she would someday get married and that she and her husband would eventually take over the factory. It was also taken for granted that I would run the factory as long as I lived. That's the way we have always done things here in Germany."

All this, Bender said, came to an end with the Second World War, when the government started telling him what to produce and how much to pay his men. Bender was no longer master in his own firm, but he assumed that he was a victim of a wartime emergency; when the fighting was over, he thought, things would be more or less as they had been before—a little more difficult, perhaps, but not so difficult that a man with diligence and ability couldn't get along. "But then the Russians occupied East Germany, and in their drive to nationalize industry I was ordered to hand over my factory to a trustee of the state," he told me. "The idea was that I should stay on as technical adviser until the trustee could be properly trained. As if you could train a man in a few weeks to do a job it took me a lifetime to learn! But I was lucky. After a while, some officers of the Soviet Military Administration visited my factory, proclaimed it essential, threw out the trustee, and told me to run it as I had before the war. You see, the Russians needed mining machinery badly. Some of my friends owned factories the Russians didn't care so much about, and they were less fortunate. After the trustees had picked up a smattering of the business, the owners themselves were arrested on some fake charge or other and sent away to the Bautzen or Waldheim concentration camp."



During the summer of 1950, Bender said, his good luck began to fade; the government began taking over even the factories that had been classified as essential. There was always an appearance of legality about its moves. The tax collector's office would suddenly discover that an owner owed an enormous amount of back taxes, impose a heavy fine on him, and order him to pay both fine and taxes within a week. If he couldn't, the state took over his factory. Bender succeeded in placating the tax collector, but he was

constantly harassed by government snoopers, who kept coming around to check his inventories. "Factories were permitted to keep only a seventy-five-day supply of raw materials on hand," he explained. "Checkups of inventories were made regularly, and then special checkups were made of the checkups. If the investigators found that a factory had so much as an extra pound of copper, aluminum, zinc, tin, or lead, the owner was liable to arrest and twelve years' imprisonment. There wasn't a day that I didn't feel I had one foot in the concentration camp. Usually the government sent two inspectors around—one technical expert and one political official. The expert might be fair-minded, but he had to take orders from the political man, who was obviously out to get my skin. I know of one political official who smuggled a kilo of aluminum into the storeroom of a factory in his briefcase and then claimed to have discovered it there. The owner was sent to prison for twelve years."

Every fortnight, Bender had to fill out a number of forms dealing with estimated production and actual production. If his actual production didn't measure up to his estimate in his previous report, he was in trouble. Every four weeks, he had to produce a list showing materials received, materials used, and materials on hand. Furthermore, he was under orders to use all the scrap metal he received within fourteen days of its delivery; it was considered economic sabotage to keep it any longer. Bender and his daughter sometimes worked until two o'clock in the morning filling out forms. And, as likely as not, they would have to be ready to show their books to still another investigator at seven-thirty the next day.

Bender's difficulties took a new turn in December, 1952, when the Communist *Kreisrat*, or district organization, began sending agitators into his plant to turn his workers against him. The *Kreisrat* promised the workers better jobs once they were rid of Bender. "THROW THE OLD FOOL OUT" was scrawled on the factory walls. Bender wasn't much concerned about his older workers, but the younger men were something else again. Some of them had been ardent Nazis and were now trying to atone for their past by becoming ardent Communists. The worst of all was an engineer—I will call him Reinhold—who had owned a small but prosperous factory of his own during the Nazi era. In 1945, the Russians had

arrested him as a violent Nazi, and he had served two years in prison. Upon his release, Bender, who admired his technical skill, gave him a job. Before long, Reinhold, whose technical skill was matched by his political ambitions, became a relentless advocate of the Communist Party and was elected chairman of the workers' council in the factory. He told the workers that he was going to drive Bender out, and began tripping the old man up at every opportunity. As head of the workers' council, he ordered Bender to give a party at Christmas for the workers and their families. Bender had to pay for it, but he was not permitted to attend. Furthermore, the tax collector ruled that the party could not be written off as a legitimate business expense. A couple of months later, the police came to investigate a transaction in which Bender had been involved in 1946. At that time, Bender had been desperately in need of a set of tires for one of his trucks and had been able to get them only by offering some copper wire in trade. It was a commonplace sort of deal in those days, though not strictly legal. The police who came to Bender's factory ordered him to pay a fine of forty thousand marks within ninety-six hours. (A mark means as much to an East German as a dollar means to an American.) Bender told the police he was unable to raise that amount in so short a time, and they replied that failure to do so would be considered "an effort to sabotage the plan," for which the invariable penalty is a stretch in a concentration camp. Bender got a sixty-five-thousand-mark mortgage on the family villa his father had built at the beginning of the century and paid the fine. A week later, his bank, with which he had done business for more than twenty-five years, demanded that he repay a long-term loan of twenty-two thousand marks within eight days or stand trial for "withholding state-owned property." That took the rest of the money from the villa. It was plain to Bender that the Communists were out to finish him.

"The next thing that happened was that one of my foremen came to me in great distress," Bender said. "Reinhold had ordered him to turn in bad reports on me if he wanted to keep his job. The Communists were suspicious of him because he had relatives in Western Germany. He asked me what he should do. What could I tell him? The Communists also distrusted some of my other workers, because they had been prisoners of war in the West. Now these men were given a chance to show their loy-

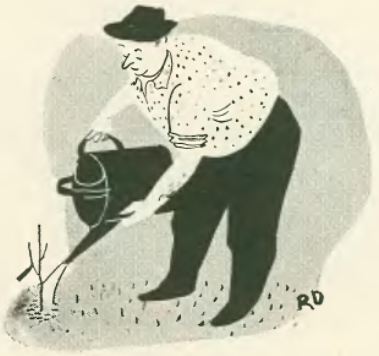
alty by denouncing me as an enemy of the regime. They spied for everybody—for the State Control Commission, for the State Security Service, for East Germany's Communist Party, for the Communist trade union, for the German-Soviet Friendship Society, and for the Free German Youth. It was a lovely setup. Everybody was afraid of everybody else. During the lunch hour, Reinhold would make speeches urging my men to throw me out so that they wouldn't be ashamed when they met workers from state-owned factories. I'd fought the tax people, the investigators, the Communist agitators, and the bank, but I couldn't fight my own men. I was ready to give up."

ONE morning early in October, Bender said, a young man entered his office and, after closing the door carefully, told him in a whisper that he was working for the Investigating Committee of Freedom-Minded Jurists. This is an effective anti-Communist organization in West Berlin whose excellent underground connections throughout the Soviet Zone has enabled it to compile an immense amount of material on political criminals in East Germany. The young man said he'd learned that Bender was about to be arrested by the State Security Service, and he advised him to get out of town immediately. In return for his information, he asked Bender to give him three thousand marks to help the Committee carry on its work. Bender told the man that he didn't have the money on hand but would see what he could do about raising it. He suspected that the stranger was a Communist agent, but, of course, he couldn't be sure. "Suppose he had been a Communist and I'd raised the money somehow and given it to him?" he said. "They'd have arrested me on the spot. But then suppose the man did represent the Committee and knew what he was talking about? If he did, I was equally done for. That night, I talked it over with my wife and daughter. All of us were terribly on edge—a long history of sleepless nights and terror-stricken days. My wife's heart isn't very strong, and our doctor had warned me that living under such a strain wasn't doing her any good. We talked and talked that evening, and finally made plans to leave. It was decided that Irmgard would go right away, by train, and head for West Berlin. I would follow in my car a day or two later. Irmgard still had her identity card, but the police had confiscated mine, which meant that I

wasn't supposed to travel anywhere, and all I could do was hope I wouldn't be asked to show it. My wife would stay on another day, to allay suspicion, and then we would all meet at the home of a friend in West Berlin. When this was settled, Irmgard said, 'What are we going to live on in Berlin, Father?' I hadn't thought of that. We didn't have a pfennig in the West, and I couldn't go to the bank and withdraw what little money I had left; I'd have had to give a convincing reason. Then Irmgard had an idea. The next day happened to be a Thursday. Every Thursday, I'd go to the bank, sign a number of papers, and get the weekly payroll for the factory. The men were paid on Saturday. 'Get the money and take it with you to Berlin, Father,' Irmgard said. 'Mother can leave on Saturday morning, before it's missed.' I said I would never do such a thing, and talked of our family honor, but Irmgard and my wife convinced me that this was not the moment for scruples. The next morning, Irmgard left, and an hour later I got the money."

Bender and his wife spent Thursday night burning letters and other personal papers. At dawn on Friday, Bender left his villa and walked to the garage where he kept his car. To his dismay, he was unable to start the engine, and had to wake the attendant, who was sleeping on a cot in the garage office, and ask him to look at the car. After a little tinkering, the man had it fixed. "He didn't say anything, but I suspect he knew what I was up to at such an early hour," Bender told me. "I didn't know the man well, but somehow I had a feeling he wouldn't report me, and apparently he didn't."

Bender drove without incident to East Berlin and then on into the American sector, where Irmgard was waiting for him. Meanwhile, Frau Bender, a perfect *Hausfrau* even in a crisis, took down the curtains in her villa, swathed the furniture in dust covers, rolled up the rugs, and put mothballs in her clothes closet. She hoped that anyone who no-



ticed all this activity would think she was about to leave for a month's vacation in Bad Nauheim, as she had done every fall for years. It had been decided that Frau Bender, being the least suspect member of the family, would take with her in a suitcase what little was left of the family jewelry, as well as a treasured Swiss clock. The police, Bender thought, were not likely to bother a sixty-five-year-old woman.

Frau Bender took an early-morning train for Berlin. Her papers were checked in the station and again on the train, but no one stopped her. In Berlin, she got on the subway for what she thought would be an uneventful fifteen-minute trip to the Western sector. But at the Friedrichstrasse station, about a mile from the sector boundary, two policemen walked through the train, saw Frau Bender's suitcase, and took her into custody. She said that she was only going to visit in West Berlin for a couple of days, and stuck to her story so well that after three hours of questioning they let her go. "They pried off the soles of her shoes to make sure she wasn't carrying secret information," Bender said. "Then a policewoman searched her. After that, they accused her of trying to escape from East Germany, but my wife stubbornly said no, no, no—she was only going to visit. How she managed to stand the ordeal, I don't know. But at last they stopped bothering her and, after telling her to report to their office in forty-eight hours, turned her loose. She took a taxi to our friend's house. Irmgard and I heard the taxi drive up and rushed down the steps to greet her. My wife got out and collapsed in my arms. Then she started to cry. We put her to bed, but she kept crying for hours. It was horrible. We couldn't seem to make her realize that it was all over now and that she was safe with us. For nearly a week, my wife lay in bed in a sort of daze. The doctor said there was nothing we could do but be patient."

BENDER and Irmgard found a two-room apartment, and as soon as Frau Bender began to feel better, the three of them moved into it. A few mornings later, while Frau Bender was resting in one room and her husband was sitting in the other room with Irmgard, drinking coffee and reading the paper, the doorbell rang. Irmgard went to answer it. "I knew something was wrong as soon as she came back," Bender told me. "She looked shaken. She put her hand on my shoulder and said, 'Father, please don't get upset when you

hear this. Reinhold is here. He says he has good news for you. He also says he has come to ask a favor of you.' Well, you can imagine how I felt. Here I'd thought I was rid of the man, and now he was waiting for me at the door of my apartment in West Berlin. How he found me so quickly I suppose I'll never know. That was one thing he didn't want to talk about when I went out to meet him. He was standing there in the hallway with his hat in his hand, and when he saw me he clicked his heels and bowed from the waist. He seemed very ill at ease as he told me that the workers at my factory had sent him to urge me to return and take control again. The *Kreisrat*, he assured me, would guarantee my safety and my family's. He seemed to be almost pleading with me to come back. At first, I was indignant and told him he was a fool to think I'd fall into such an obvious trap, but gradually I began to feel that he was telling the truth, and that someone higher up had decided that I was needed to run the factory—and in my own way. But I was noncommittal, and he finally left, saying he'd be back in a few days with written guarantees from the *Kreisrat*, the tax collector, and the police that if I returned, it would be on my own terms and there would be no reprisals."

That afternoon, Bender went to see the director of one of the several committees that have been set up here to help refugees from the East. He told the man about Reinhold's peculiar visit, and found out that there had lately been many cases in which the owners of businesses in East Germany who had fled here had been entreated to return to their homes and offices by the very Communists who had driven them out. In each instance, the businessman had been given every assurance of safety, coöperation, and restitution of personal property. Several hundred of them had gone back, and the promises that had been made to them had been kept—thus far, at least. "As the director outlined the situation, it all looked very simple," Bender told me. "The Communists wanted these people to come back because they needed them badly. They'd thought they could manage without them, and then found they couldn't. The Russians have taken so many technical experts from East Germany that the home-grown Communists there haven't anywhere near enough to get by on. The director said that in the whole East Zone there are only five men left who really know the mining industry. He named them, and I

recognized every one of them—and I couldn't for the life of me think of a sixth."

Outside the director's office, Bender had the good fortune to run into an acquaintance from back home who had only just arrived here. Before making his escape, he had heard all about the developments in Bender's factory that led to Reinhold's visit. A couple of hours after Frau Bender closed up the villa and departed, he said, Reinhold had notified the People's Police, or *Vopos*, that the payroll money was missing, and that the man who had taken it out of the bank was very likely gone, too. The *Vopos* said that they would handle the matter, and began to question everybody they felt might have had a hand in helping the Benders escape. Around noon, while this was still going on, three members of the Criminal Police appeared on the scene, announced that *they* would handle the matter, by order of the Minister of the Interior, and threw out the *Vopos*. They told Reinhold to call a meeting of the workers' council, and when the members were assembled, they told them there would be no changes of personnel at the factory until further notice. Then they left. At half past two, an official from the *Kreisrat* appeared and ordered an immediate meeting of all the workers. He told them that *he* was in charge of the factory, by order of the *Kreisrat*, and was going to run the factory as a trustee for the State Security Service. With that, he went into Bender's private office and made himself at home. He had just ordered the desk moved nearer a window when five members of the Criminal Police drove up in a radio car, strode into the office, and arrested him. One of the police called another meeting of all the workers—the factory didn't break any production records that day—and told them that since the government of the German Democratic Republic was interested primarily in continuous output, it considered the immediate return of Herr Bender a matter of supreme importance to the state. The workers thereupon voted unanimously to send Reinhold to find Bender and ask him to please come home.

IT was a couple of days after Reinhold's visit that I first met the Benders; a friend of mine took me around to their apartment and introduced me. As Bender talked, I could see that he was very much upset about the decision he had to make, and later, when he and Frau Bender went out for a walk, Irmgard, a young woman whose en-

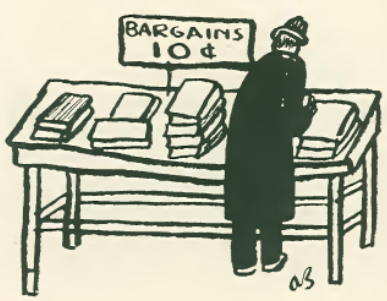
ergetic manner made it clear at once why her father had found her such a comfort in his business, told me that she was terribly worried about her parents. "Especially Father," she said. "Except for his alarm over Mother's condition, he was all right after he got here. The factory meant everything to him, and leaving it was the worst moment of his life, but once it was done, he was able to write off the past and think of the future. And then Reinhold came, and Father was confronted with the worst dilemma yet. Should he trust them and go back? Who can say? It's destroying Father. He hasn't eaten or slept for forty-eight hours. I do so wish they'd left us alone. I've told Father that no matter what he and Mother decide to do, I won't go back. I'd rather be a refugee in the West than a factory owner's daughter in the East, and I don't feel it's impossible to make a fresh start here. Of course, it's a different story with Father. He's old and tired."

When the Benders returned from their walk, a change had come over them. Frau Bender, a gray-haired, soft-spoken woman who had been extremely reticent earlier in the afternoon, now seemed quite genial, and her husband carried himself with a new air of confidence. "Well, Irmgard," he said, patting his daughter's shoulder affectionately, "we've decided. If Reinhold returns with his assurances and guarantees, and everything still looks all right, we're going to go home."

After a long silence, Irmgard said, "I wouldn't trust them. They've changed their minds once. Suppose they change their minds again—in a month, or six months, or even six years?"

Bender sighed. "I know," he said. "But we've made up our minds. We two are old. I don't know how much time we've got left. What are we going to do here? Everything that's dear to us is back home." He looked at his wife, and she smiled back at him warmly. "No, Irmgard," he said. "I think we'll take the chance."

Reinhold came back three days later, bringing along the documents he had promised and also a high-ranking of-



ficial from the *Kreisrat*, who, Irmgard told me later, explained that he'd taken the liberty of coming so that he might add his voice to Reinhold's in urging the Benders to return. Bender replied that there was no need, for he and his wife had already made up their minds to go back. In that event, said the *Kreisrat* man, perhaps he could expedite their journey and make sure that everything was done according to their wishes. He had thoughtfully brought along a new identity card for Bender, and a car was waiting downstairs. Reinhold and the *Kreisrat* man eagerly helped the couple into it and put Frau Bender's suitcase at their feet. The *Kreisrat* man suggested that they stop in East Berlin for a schnapps to celebrate the Benders' return to the German Democratic Republic. Then the car drove off.

I HAVEN'T seen Bender since, but I ran into Irmgard not long ago, and she told me that she'd just come back from a visit to her parents. (As an additional concession from the Communists, her father had obtained permission for her to travel freely between West Berlin and her home town.) "I've found a job here," she said happily, "but I'm glad I can go home once in a while and see my parents. Who would ever have thought that such a thing could be possible?"

I asked her about her father's arrival back home. She laughed and said, "Oh, it must have been quite an experience. I'm sorry I wasn't there to see it. Reinhold is an old hand at organizing mass meetings, and he had arranged a fine reception. The workers were lined up in the courtyard when the car stopped in front of the factory. The factory whistle was blowing, and the entrance was decorated with flowers. When Father and Mother got out of the car, a terrific cheer went up, and Reinhold's seven-year-old daughter handed Mother a big bunch of white flowers. Then Reinhold made a speech of welcome and everybody cheered again. Another member of the workers' council made a speech. More cheers. Father told me that the men who had made the most trouble for him cheered the loudest."

The local chief of the Criminal Police was waiting in Bender's office. He greeted Bender cordially, and said nothing about his absence or about the missing payroll. After ceremoniously handing Bender food-ration cards of the most liberal type, he escorted the couple to their villa. Inside, everything seemed to be just as Frau Bender had

left it—the curtains down, the dust covers on the furniture, the rugs rolled up, the mothballs in the closet. Only some of her old Dresden silver was missing. The chief was very apologetic about this. It was a most unfortunate incident, he said. The day after Frau Bender left, a neighbor had come by and, finding the place deserted, had made off with the silver. The neighbor had been arrested, but the silver had not been found. The *Kreisrat* was going to pay Frau Bender for every piece that was missing.

"The next day, Father went over to the City Hall," Irmgard told me. "It's only a few blocks from our place, but it took him three-quarters of an hour to get there. Everybody in town wanted to shake hands with him. At the City Hall, they gave him an ovation. And business is booming. Father no longer has any difficulty about raw materials. The inspectors have stopped coming in to check his inventories. No one knows how long it's going to last, but while it does, it certainly is wonderful for him. Oh, and another thing. At the City Hall, Father was informed that he and Mother were going to be given ten marks for every day they had spent in West Berlin. The official who made this announcement explained solemnly that the money was to be paid to them as an indemnity for their suffering in the West." —JOSEPH WECHSBERG

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NO COMMENT DEPARTMENT

[*Press release from WCCO Radio, Minneapolis*]

FAN LETTER SURVIVES AIR CRASH

The fan mail must go through!

Glenn Champlin, WCCO Radio announcer and disc jockey, received a fan letter today (March 5) from a listener in Van Nuys, California, and the letter carried an unusual story.

It arrived in an official post office department envelope from the post office at Gillette, Wyoming. The original envelope was badly stained and torn, and the letter was crumbled and stained. Attached was a post office note reading: "Damage caused by air mail interruption near Gillette, Wyo., date, Feb. 26, 1954."

The letter was aboard an airliner which crashed that day in eastern Wyoming, killing all nine persons aboard.

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Maine's attractive Senator Margaret Chase Smith, the only lady member, wearing a fresh red nose—sent her every day by a Washington auto dealer. . . Not to be outdone, North Carolina's dignified Senator Clyde Hoey shows up each day with a red carnation in his lapel.—*Drew Pearson in the Havana Post.*

We think he *is* outdone.