Life in the west, which we longed for so desperately, would that have any shortcomings and weak points?…[F]or many of us, everything that went on beyond the invincible Wall was inflated into an extraordinary exaggeration, an excellent breeding ground for paradi-siacal fantasy and projection (Hans-Joachim Maaz, 1991).1

It appeared from the stories in the previous chapter that East Germans had learned to be selective about which negative aspects of their lives they preferred to keep to themselves. The only thing that was more or less in the open were people’s complaints about the previous material situation. The power of attraction of the western world mainly derived from its material conditions. In East Germans’ eyes, the plentiful West German consumer world was so special that people visited the Intershop despite the fact that this was precisely the place where they knew they were being closely watched by the Stasi. In the GDR, western goods were regarded as little relics, the value of which could not be measured by any objective standard – they were a western fetish. Why did western goods have such value in the GDR? What did they appear to promise?

According to Dutch anthropologist Patricia Spyer, the “extraordinary power” that is often attributed to certain categories of material objects, specifically in socially unstable situations, is linked to the promise that material objects seem to evoke – a promise that proves to be irresistible especially in uncertain times: “[The] promise of fulfillment and ultimate arrival.”2 Thus, completely out of context, these words may come across as too vague and general an indication, but in my opinion they capture the essence of what the West German consumer world previously seemed to promise in so many East Germans’ eyes.

On the subject of his friends rising above him, Helmut remarked that “one only really became someone in the GDR when leaving the country.” This statement suggests that apparently only beyond the borders of the GDR was it possible to really make something of life. Thus, the ultimate realization of East Germans’ existence was to be found beyond the borders of their own country. In many East Germans’ experience, the fulfillment of their desires was found in the material wealth of the
west. They imagined that in the western world that looked so fine, so soft and so bright, and smelled so good, they would – slightly paraphrasing Helmut’s words – “finally become what we could not be in our own country.” This image was both related to and enforced by the materiality of objects.

Irresistible Prosperity

When I asked East Germans about their past views of the western world, their stories never ended. The wonderful world of the west!! The golden west!! Everything that came from there was special. If you received a present from the west, you felt as happy as a king because the possession of western objects had a certain status attached.¹ Heiko, the young man who was a sales assistant in an ironmonger’s both during my stay in Rudolstadt as well as at the time of the GDR, said that in the past, people were happy to have the smallest things from the FRG. Whether it was a pen or a packet of chewing gum, a bar of soap or chocolate, everything was equally desirable. Contact with West German friends and family was indeed extremely important for East Germans, and one of the reasons why West German visitors were always welcomed with open arms in the GDR was that they often brought all kinds of gifts – varying from spices and tins of preserves to do-it-yourself materials and entire furnishings.

Mr Linke, the middle-aged man who used to be a taxi driver and had built his own house, told me that he had fitted out his entire bathroom with equipment from the FRG. Every time his West German family came to visit, they brought something with them, one time it was a load of tiles, another time gold-colored taps or a beautifully decorated mirror. Such luxury goods were not available in the GDR. Also bathtubs were always scarce, and he proudly boasted how his West German relatives even managed to bring him a bath. As he was afraid of jealous looks from the neighbors, they secretly smuggled it into the house while everyone else was at work. Once it was finally in place, he was really pleased as he did not know of anyone who had a real West German bathroom!

Another way in which many East Germans were able to acquire the highly coveted western goods was through the Christmas parcels sent to them every year by their West German family or friends. These parcels featured significantly in many East Germans’ recollections. “Now that was something,” was their regular heartfelt comment. And how miserable people were if they did not have any family in West Germany and never received a parcel! In fact, they just did not really fit in, for Christmas was all about a parcel from West Germany, it was as simple as that.⁴
Neither the parcels nor their contents were ever taken for granted or considered as normal, on the contrary: “Those parcels were little relics,” a middle-aged woman who worked for Rudolstadt’s parish explained.

If for example you received some soap, it was out of the question to use it to wash yourself. Only exceptionally and at the very last moment (getting on towards next Christmas when yet another new parcel was expected, mv), but in the first instance it was kept in between the clothes in the cupboard for a long time, on a different shelf each week, to give off the lovely scent. That was something, that scent...you could enjoy it for hours and lose yourself in dreams about it. And then the chocolate and the coffee!! It was all a miracle. It came from another world, a wonderful world – one which was beyond reach.

Many people told similar stories. Western goods were so special in the GDR that even West German plastic bags had a high exchange value, and empty West German beer cans were displayed in many an East German living room cabinet. The *Intershops* where western goods were sold also exerted an almost irresistible allure on many East Germans. With their sparse western money they often went there to buy what for westerners were everyday consumer goods – such as chewing gum and chocolate or bars of ordinary household soap.

East Germans’ desire for western things was certainly partly prompted by the status attached to possessing them, but their power of attraction went way beyond this rather clear-cut social determinant. An East German student recalled, for example, how he and his countrymen almost lost their sense of reality when they saw westerners:

When we saw them, with their expensive clothes and posh cars, we almost forgot that they too went to the toilet and had to eat to survive. They seemed to be a different, better, and more perfect kind of people. And that image, that notion, was linked to certain outward appearances. Up till the Wende, we believed that the people on the other side of the Wall were better, because they looked better.

In order to get closer to that ideal image, East Germans were even prepared to put up with Stasi glares when buying western goods in *Intershops*. Such shops, according to Mr Linke, were extremely alluring: “They were fitted out attractively with more attention to the lay-out. And although you paid much more than the goods were worth, you could tell if someone bought their clothes there. It was truly *gehobenes Einkaufen* [upper class buying].”
This was also the case, although to a lesser extent, with the Exquisit shops where East Germans could buy luxury goods made in West and East Germany. The desire for such goods came at a heavy price, as shown for example in an anecdote from November 1967 – when an East German woman returned to the Exquisit shop in Leipzig, complaining at the top of her voice that the stitching on the West German shoes she had bought two days earlier for 150 East German Marks had already burst. When the shopkeeper contacted the supplier, the shoes appeared to have been purchased from the FRG by the East German state for the mere sum of eight (West German) Marks “im Interzonenhandel” [via inter-zone trading]. For that low price, the supplier explained, “könne man ja wohl keine Qualität liefern” [one cannot deliver quality].

The situation really becomes ridiculous once one realizes that it was not possible to be entirely sure if the shoes in question were actually West German. It is highly probable that the so-called West German shoes, which had provided the state of East Germany with a profit of 142 (East German) Marks, were originally manufactured in the GDR. As the GDR was always looking for ways to obtain hard cash, and wages in the GDR were much lower than in West European countries, the GDR manufactured many products for West German and other western companies. It was rarely stated on the product that it was manufactured in the GDR. The lady who ran a furniture manufacturing company both at the time of the GDR and after the Wende said that the furniture produced in the GDR for the west was transported unlabeled to the FRG. The place of origin was not displayed because the West Germans who placed the order did not want the West German buyers to know that they were East German products.

Thus, it could transpire, Heiko explained to me, that people were buying “western” chocolate in the Intershop with their frugal West German DMs, while in reality this was the very same chocolate sold in the Exquisit shops in an East German wrapper. This meant that some of the chocolate made in the GDR was wrapped in East German packaging to be sold as an East German luxury product in the Exquisit shops, while the rest was exported to the FRG to be packaged there, in order to be sold as a West German product. This latter category could then be imported back again to the GDR, where it was sold for many times the West German price as Westprodukt in the Intershops.

It is hard to imagine a more extreme example of producers being alienated from their manufactured goods. Most interesting, nonetheless, is that even the knowledge that some of the “western” products were manufactured in their own country did not diminish the irresistible power of attraction that “western products” presented. According to Heiko, people were willing to part with their limited...
DMs for things that had become so attractive thanks to the charisma of the west. His statement touches on one of the most fascinating issues concerning the study of consumption: how is it possible that people allow themselves to be so deceived and/or tempted?  

When asked how the irresistible allurement of the western material world came about, people often replied quite vaguely, searching for words: “Well, yes, they just had all the things that we didn’t have.” And when I probed further, trying to fill in the general description of “all” (whether things from there were so much finer or better, or if the significance of “all” was perhaps related to the fact that so little was available in East German shops?), such suggestions were mostly greeted with a kind of mumbling, such as, “Yes, no, it had nothing to do with that. Here you could often get lots of things as well, but…there they just had everything we didn’t.” The confused vagueness of their reactions left no doubt that although the West German material world’s power of attraction was related to genuine concepts such as beautiful and ugly and full and empty shops, it all went much deeper than such descriptions suggested.

The irresistible power of attraction the western material world wielded over so many East Germans was linked to a number of factors, some more specific than others. I shall discuss them below, beginning with the most specific: appearance, then move on to less discernible ones.

The main way that East Germans’ perception of the west evolved was through West German television. From the numerous statements I recorded on this subject, it was apparent that East Germans collectively regarded the highly attractive image they saw on West German television as a realistic reflection of the way things went on in reality. “Virtual reality was seen as everyday reality,” according to historian Hermann Glaser. And a middle-aged woman in Rudolstadt worded it as follows:

We really believed what they said on West German television. We thought that the western washing powder could really remove the stains. Not long after the Wende, when we were able to buy all these things here too, I went shopping with my son, and he was very keen for me to buy a certain washing-up liquid which he had seen advertised. It was a well-known and expensive brand, so I thought it would be good and wanted to try it anyway. At home he put water in the washing-up bowl, then added the liquid and the plates. Then he stared at the water, waiting for a miracle. When he took out one of the plates, what a disappointment: it was not shiny and clean like they had said in the advertisement. It was still dirty.
One reason why the critical approach towards the West German consumer world, as broadcasted by the East German media every day, could not succeed was because East German media were notoriously untrustworthy. No one believed anything of their statements and broadcasts. A social worker from Rudolstadt explained: “In our country, the gulf between word and reality was becoming wider all the time. Everyone noticed it. You only had to open the newspapers and read the rose-tinted stories that were reported there, and then look out of the window to see how dismal reality was.” This factor certainly played a role in many East Germans’ belief that what they saw on West German television and in West German magazines was the truth. The question remains, however, what exactly did they see in the western programs and magazines?

While handing out and collecting surveys, I was able to examine many different East German homes within a short space of time. I was struck by the sharp material contrast between the dwellings that had been renovated since the Wende and those that had changed very little or had nothing done to them. The non-refurbished houses had typically straight lines, dull colors and excessive amounts of chipboard pasted to look like wood, whereas the newly furnished apartments looked very different. I was particularly struck by three specific aspects of their appearance.

To begin with, by 1994, all over Rudolstadt you could buy objects which were predominantly advertised as having natural, nostalgically authentic features. Wooden furniture and objects were very popular. Cabinets were recommended as *echt Eiche rustikal* [genuine rustic oak], bedrooms as *natürlich und gut* [natural and good], and advertising leaflets and shop displays were decorated with numerous elements referring to nature: autumn leaves and flowers, but also cats, birds and other animals, sometimes in the form of sculptures or pictures. This tendency towards natural elements often took on a nostalgic form, which was evident for example in the many reproduction antiques, which had been opposed so fanatically at the time of the GDR: from flowery teaset to ornamental furniture and from the well-known *Hummel* figurines to the promotional description *original Alt-Bürger Blau-Weiss* [old farmer’s blue and white] on dinner services. Publicity brochures often showed sentimental black and white images. If the combination of natural and ostensibly nostalgic elements did not suggest enough authenticity, the impression that this was a significantly enticing item was strengthened by allusions to exotic countries. Shops advertised *originale Nepal-Teppiche* [original Nepalese carpets], while exotic attributes such as palm trees and wild animals were used extensively in shop window displays and in the promotional designs.
Second, the western material world – certainly in comparison to East German design and objects – appeared to be extremely polished. Many items were ostentatiously decorated and embellished. While I was staying in Rudolstadt, (quasi-) crystal vases and glasswork were immeasurably popular, and the same applied to otherwise shiny objects, whether they were silver or gold-colored. Formerly, many floors were covered with various types of dull-colored floor covering, but since the Wende, deep-pile carpets were all the rage. And in contrast to East German chairs which were usually covered with fabric in muted shades, the settees and armchairs
purchased more recently almost glowed with their shiny material which seemed to have been made with luminous elements.

The third thing that struck me in Rudolstadt was how much effort people made in order to conceal precisely the function of objects, compared to the old days when functionality was what was propagated. This was not only evident in furniture with ornate edging, decorative panels or curled and twisted ornaments, but also in the wooden conversions for central heating, built-in kitchens, ceilings decorated with fake wooden tiles, an L-shaped wall unit to conceal the corner of a room, concealing wires by building cupboards around them and decorating the sides by bringing the thick-piled carpet up a bit higher, then finishing off the wall with a wooden skirting board.

During the GDR’s more than forty years of existence, the East German public was instructed by the designers and editorial teams of magazines such as *Kultur im Heim* and *Form und Zweck* above all to adopt a reasonable and rational attitude towards their material environment. Under the motto that one had to learn to accept the current reality (industrial production methods, short supply of raw materials, and limited state budget), people were encouraged to no longer disguise things by adding so-called romantic flowers or frills, which evoked false associations with a past that had never existed. The preference for such designs was merely an escape, which unleashed a kind of false consciousness – according to the strict socialist instructors. However, attempts to influence East German consumers to be more rational in their preferred taste always met with opposition. Conventional lampshades were given a flowery edge, and chipboard was provided with a surface that looked like wood. Apparently, many East German consumers always continued to desire the non-functional but perfectly polished, natural-looking objects which were for sale on every market stall and on every street corner at low prices in the west, and which they saw on television every day.

When investigating the power of attraction that emanated from the western world, it was striking that, apart from the visible differences I could discern myself, many people answered my questions by referring to the strong sensory stimulus these had provoked. Western things were recalled for having had such a lovely smell, and for shining and sparkling so beautifully, and feeling so different. Furthermore, the colors were so much more vibrant and beautiful, and as far as food was concerned, it usually tasted so much more intense and nicer than in Eastern Germany. Annette Simon gave a concise description of her first visit to the west (which took place in 1980) as follows: “Today I know that the inner motto of my trip was ‘don’t be seduced!’ I was particularly impressed by the west-
ern world’s sensory-aesthetic characteristics: those smells, and colors, the many different foodstuffs.”

The most frequently mentioned alluring characteristic of the western world was its smell. When Heiko told me about the smell of the Christmas parcels which his family received every year, even six years later it seemed to send him off into a day-dream: “Just the smell of it...that was indescribable. I shall never forget it. You can ask anyone and they will all confirm it. The smell of the soap, the washing powder and that coffee...The clothes that were wrapped in the parcels smelled of that strange mixture of scents for months.”

East German writer Thomas Rosenlöcher has described how as a young boy he was walking around the station in Berlin and almost against his will was compelled to follow a “secret neon smell” that seemed to be wafting from an Intershop. Although there was absolutely no point in him entering the shop at that moment because he had no Westgeld, which made the goods on display there unattainable to him, time and time again he was drawn inside “by the aromas.” In Rosenlöcher’s opinion, it was not just thanks to their aroma but also to their radiance and shine that the East German population was collectively enthralled every December by the West German Christmas parcels. He describes how the entire kitchen changed when a parcel arrived and was then set on the kitchen table to be opened, as a “little glacier of prosperity.” At that moment, it was as if the room was bathing in the imaginary light that even seemed “to come from the pudding mix.” Although the parcel was wrapped up again after a quick look and only properly opened on Christmas Eve, the smell lingered in the kitchen for days afterwards and was so strong that every passerby asked, “Have you received a parcel?”

Besides having a different smell, western goods also looked totally different than East German ones, as all the stories confirmed. Among other things, the color appeared to be an important aspect of the allure. A middle-aged man explained to me: “The stuff from the FRG was far more colorful than ours. We just had plain old green, but in the FRG there was also lime green and grass green and spring-bud green. And it was like that with all the colors.” It also struck me that whenever East Germans tried to describe western goods’ power of attraction, they often referred to West German things having such a remarkably shiny appearance. That shine was so typical for the west that many referred to it shortly and sweetly as “the golden west.” In a similar vein, Rosenlöcher describes the Intershop at the previously mentioned Berlin station as a “shiny grotto” in which he was especially struck by the “splendor of progress” which radiated a “spiritual” and “exalted brilliance.”

Some mentioned the brilliance and shine of western objects in one and the same breath, thereby referring to the incomparably different tactile perception
they left behind compared to East German products. For example, when I asked an older woman who had waxed lyrically to me over the shine and smell of western things how she would have explained the difference between things from the GDR and from the FRG to me if I had been blind, she responded: “I would have let you feel how soft the West German material was and have you experience how differently those things felt.” With that she made a gesture as if stroking a round thing. To make her point, she told me about her neighbor who had just bought a new couch with matching side table. The couch in particular was so beautiful, so “colorful and smooth.” She made it clear to me that it was vastly different to the rough fabric in the GDR. When I asked Heiko what it was about West German goods that appealed to the senses so much, he replied:

The smells held a promise that there was more to life than here – that it was more than mere functionality and purposefulness. Look, our washing powder did clean. It was functional and was fit for the purpose. But the washing powder from the west, the soap from the west...that was completely different, something unique. That soap, its lovely smell...That soap enticed you to use it, to enjoy it: that was an experience-soap. Whereas our soap... Well, perhaps it did not really stink – the washing powder for that matter did stink – but then it was not intended that you enjoy the experience. Our soap was meant to clean things and that was that. And that is how it was with everything. Our salt was just salt and that is what it said on the label. It was a plain white packaging with ‘salt’ on it: *stincknormal* [bloody normal]. And in fact the same applied to everything. Compared to cabinets from the west, our cabinets were downright straight. Western cabinets had a little ridge here and a little edge there and there again a bit of decoration. And take our clothes, they did not tempt you at all to put them on. The jeans for example: at some point the stone-washed trousers were in fashion. But the GDR did not have that material. Finally, Schalck Golodkowski succeeded in importing that material, and at last those jeans were also made in the GDR. The government knew very well that the people could only be satisfied with consumer goods, and so it was constantly doing its best to purchase what was required. But it never succeeded. There was always too little, and it was never right. The same with the jeans: they did indeed come, but the style was just not quite right. We wanted them with a label here, and a stitching of a certain color there. But what did we get? Those straight up and down trousers. They were of course jeans, and the
denim material was right, but without the trappings and decoration we wanted.

And that is how it happened with everything. It was all too functional, too unappealing, and looking at it gave you little sense of experiencing anything. But appearances count too, don’t they? And therein lay the secret of western things. The power of attraction of western things lay in the fact that they had a completely different charisma than ours. Our things were functional, and if you looked at them it was obvious that they were meant to function, and to be useful, but that you should not expect anything else from them.

I am in all honesty compelled to admit that I was the one who had introduced the concept of functionality into my conversation with Heiko. But once I had mentioned that word, he exclaimed: that was it! That is what it was all about, I had taken the word right out of his mouth. East German things were functional, no more than that, while western things were, as he called them, “things to experience.”

With his reply, Heiko demonstrated that the visual impressions of functionality (as nothing-more-than-usefulness) versus non-functionality (as pleasure-providing-experience) through the smells and other sensory perceptions amounted to an all-embracing physical experience, which in the western case was felt as unmistakably enticing and in the eastern case was not. The extraordinary powers of “western” goods that featured in the stories people told me were explicitly related to their physical characteristics, showing that this was one of the factors responsible for western goods being recognized as incarnating the ultimate realization of how East Germans’ lives should have been.

The fact that East Germans’ fantasies of “fulfillment and ultimate arrival” were being evoked and fed by western goods connects to the significant role material(ist) issues have played in East German history. From the outset, the desire for material redemption figured centrally in the pact between the state and its inhabitants, as described in chapter three. Both sides assigned an important stabilizing role (socially and mentally) to the material sphere, as being able to bring salvation. One thing that became clear while recording the stories in Rudolstadt was that materialist developments had indeed become pivotal for East German subjectivation and identification processes. More than any other external criteria of value, collective images of “who we are” and “what we want to be” were often directly related to and expressed in terms of the value and significance of goods.
East Germans’ Identification with the West

The fact that material living conditions in the GDR did not develop as favorably as promised nor as favorably as on the other side of the Wall had a profound effect on many an East German’s confidence and feeling of self-worth. This for instance was voiced as: “We were not worth anything because our money was not worth anything,” or “we were worth nothing because nothing was achieved or built up here.” Many people criticized domestic consumption, and even the critique on the impossibility to go abroad was usually expressed in economic or material terms: “We worked hard, but we couldn’t even leave the country! Our money, our coins, our nationality was worth nothing abroad.” Or: “The worst thing about the GDR was that we were not worth being given permission to go abroad.” One of the few times that someone spontaneously put forward a more general complaint about life in the GDR, “wir sind immer so gehalten daß wir gebückt und geduckt durch das Leben gingen” [we have always been required to go through life stooping and crouching], even this statement was prompted by a comment on the material conditions: “Wir haben ja nichts gehat, man hat uns als Bettler angesehen [we didn’t have a thing, we were looked down upon as beggars].”

Many East Germans experienced their country’s material shortcomings almost as a personal failure. They sometimes admitted to being ashamed of their living conditions. A woman told me that she was always ashamed whenever she had West German visitors: what on earth do you offer people who came from a country where you could get everything? And a good friend of mine, Diana, explained how exceedingly insecure she always felt when going into an Intershop, just because it represented such an un-East German world.

I always felt like a beginner in there. And many people seemed to feel that way. You saw them getting themselves all pumped up before they went inside. Although they then appeared to be very confident, anyone could see they were just putting on a front. Everyone was unsure. There were so many things you did not know, everything looked different, and besides, the stuff was laid out so that you could not reach it yourself or even hold it in your hands; you could only look at it. It was all so unknown that you really felt very small when you were there. In order to reassure myself a bit, I used to think about the sales-lady being just an ordinary East German woman as well.

Diana’s explanation showed that the excess of western material goods evoked feelings of inferiority. Similar feelings were recollected vaguely now and then in peo-
ple's stories of their encounters with West Germans who visited the GDR. These stories featured swaggering West Germans behaving as if they were God in the GDR, and East Germans on holiday in foreign socialist countries being treated as second-class Germans because their money was only worth a fraction of the DM. There were countless stories about objects, and anecdotes in which people reduced themselves to objects, and considered themselves in relation to one another through and as objects.

Many East Germans seem to have been permanently comparing their own material existence with the western side of the border and constantly felt themselves to be the less successful, less endowed, poorer, little twin brother. “Existing in the shadow of West German society continued to shape the lives of GDR Germans.” In contrast, the GDR seems to have played a less significant role for West Germans forming their identity, but it was beyond dispute that West Germans also compared themselves with their East German neighbors, and that the respective material attainments of both countries also played a major role in that comparison. In the eyes of many westerners, the disintegrating and drab material state that was the scene of East Germans’ existence was an apt symbol for the backward general development of life in the GDR – as shown in chapter six.

The assertion that the material differences between the two countries gave rise to feelings of pride and shame, respectively, and of looking down at or up to one another is wonderfully illustrated in the numerous anecdotes recorded by the West German author Hanns Werner Schwarze in his volume *Die DDR ist keine Zone mehr* [the GDR is no longer a zone]. This is all the more remarkable since the theme of the book has nothing to do with material or consumer developments as such but covers the situation in the GDR in general. The volume contains an interview recorded with a West German who was just back from a holiday on the Black Sea (the interview dates from October 1967). Asked if he had had any contact with people “from the zone,” he replied that this had scarcely happened. “I only got chatting with one because he was admiring my car: BMW 1800, latest model.” After he had named the price, the contact between the two was over immediately. The East German had become angry and swore that he was just as proud of his Wartburg, even more so because he had had to wait four years to get it and, in converted currency, had paid more for it than the West German had for his BMW! Elsewhere in the book an East German explains why he would never want to live in the Federal Republic. He is fed up that every time when West German relations pay him a visit, he has “to make a good impression...dish up enough food to make the table sag, and say that he is doing well and is definitely not to be pitied.”
How profoundly the respective national material achievements could arouse feelings of inferiority and superiority in individual East and West Germans was demonstrated in the letters presented below, which were prominently displayed at an exhibition on Christmas culture in East and West Germany, held in December 1992 in Berlin. The letter on the left was written by a West German woman to her East German sister-in-law, the one on the right by an East German niece to her West German aunt. For the sake of clarity: the two letters and letter writers have no connection with each other.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Würzburg, 10.12.1987</th>
<th>Luckenwalde, 26.12.85</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dear Sister-in-law,</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dear Aunt Henny!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Have a Merry Christmas at your home in Leipzig!</strong></td>
<td><strong>Thank you very much for the lovely Christmas parcel. It arrived on the 23rd. We were really worried. It was falling apart a bit as if it had been round half the globe.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Many thanks for the invitation. You always make such an effort. Unfortunately, we have to keep an eye on our house, we are flying to Sanfangi [?] on December 20. We would have liked to join you, are the Wuppertalers coming?</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mama says that it did not have all the things that you usually always send. No 'Tosca,' but that does not matter. Mama still has some left from last year. It does not go off and still smells the same. Yesterday we had goose, and for dessert, chocolate pudding made from your packet, it is not as lumpy as ours. In the evening we went to the Schneiders, they had Apfelkorn which their grandma had sent them. I liked it. Mama prefers dry wine and papa cognac.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Give everyone our regards. How are you all doing? Has Hans got the new Wartburg [East German car, mv] yet, surely the ten years must have passed by now? We have so much to do, and I have not yet got round to sending you a parcel. I have already been using the writing paper that you sent me. Merry Christmas, we are thinking of you,</strong></td>
<td><strong>Your dearest Romy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Your Hannelore and Kurt</strong></td>
<td><strong>P.s. Hope you got our Dresden stollen and the candles you wanted so much.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both letters are almost exclusively about matters of consumption, and it is noticeable how condescendingly one side of the border thanks for the invitation (for which the addressee obviously had neither the time nor the inclination – such an effort! Unfortunately, we have to go to our house in Spain), while on the other side, the pleas for more gifts are scarcely disguised.

The strong identification with the respective material conditions on both sides of the inter-German border was linked with the central role of materialist themes and promises in both countries’ post-war history. As chapters three and four showed, after 1945 both sections of the country sought to recover by focusing on material reconstruction. Both parts of the country worked equally hard to remove the damage of war and build up a new society and a new confidence in the
future, but the conditions in the FRG were more favorable than in the GRD. The Americans dished out chocolate, coffee and cigarettes, whereas the Russians dismantled the East German railway lines and other industrial attainments. From the outset the GDR excelled in fine (materialistic) promises which came to nothing, while the material reconstruction and associated mental and social pay-off in the west of the country were much more successful. On that subject, Borneman's conclusion is significant: “The major difference between East and West Berliners… lies in the fact that the Wirtschaftswunder is translated into prosperity by West Berliners, whereas the Aufbau [reconstruction] is translated into hard work by East Berliners.”

From the moment the Wirtschaftswunder began to bear its fruits, the inhabitants of West Germany managed to disguise increasingly well what I previously, and inspired by Geissler referred to as the Void under a relatively shiny, polished, material presentation of who we are. “Consumers. We are a nation of consumers. Ties and conformism, shirts and non-conformism – everything has its consumers, the only important thing is that it – shirt or conformism – presents itself as branded article.” Generally speaking, West German post-war consumerism is described rather critically, as in the included quote from Böll, because it supposedly expressed the collective denial or suppression of the burden of the Second World War.

After the Second World War, material aspirations unmistakably helped the inhabitants of both Germanys to aim their sights at the future and away from the past. More openness towards and collective involvement with the past came later, forced by the revolt of the illustrious 68er Generation [generation of 1968]. From then on, the collective guilt became an integral part of West Germany's official self-image, and even up to the present time, hardly a public debate can take place in the FRG without some reference or other to Germany’s blame for the Holocaust.

The steadily increasing material prosperity in post-war FRG formed the basis for a newly developed mutual trust and, with it, a form of mutual/national solidarity. Post-war developments in the eastern part of Germany were less unambiguously positive. Although material prosperity had improved, it was still less compared to the west. During my research in Rudolstadt, a woman with whom I was discussing the newly acquired prosperity explained to me: “Oh you know, I lived through the war and then forty years of the GDR. I will always be an Ossi.” Asked what that meant, she replied: “That is someone who always grabs if he sees something and always stocks too many supplies.” In her experience there was one continuous line from 1945 to 1989; the continuity of shortage and always wanting more.
In the previous chapters I have tried to illustrate that the East German state powers did not fulfill either the material or social promises underpinning the pact with the population that gradually came into being after 1945. Certainly from the time of the Wirtschaftswunder years, East Germans’ eyes were continually focused on the west in order to compare the FRG’s developments with those in their own country. This comparison suggested that everything East Germans desired for, and everything their state promised to realize, was accomplished on the other side of the border. That is why the East Germans’ interpretation of growing West German prosperity was much more far-reaching.

The all-encompassing significance attached to material possessions, consumption and excess in collective identity formation processes in both parts of the country since 1945, and the role of the lost war in this, are illustrated by a brief anecdote dating from 1958. In it, a little East German boy appears on the scene, and when a Mercedes parks right in front of him in the eastern part of Berlin, he asks his mother: “Mama, are those Germans, too?” The mother replies: “Yes, Günter, they are German, but I think they didn’t lose the war like we did...at least that’s what it looks like.”

After the Wende, English-Dutch author Ian Buruma conducted interviews on German unification with a number of leading West German intellectuals. One unnamed “famous West German writer” commented on his new compatriots: “I don’t like those people in the east. I feel that I know them. I don’t want to have anything to do with them.” When Buruma put these words to a “literary critic” from the former FRG, the reaction was as follows:

I understand him completely...In fact, it is a miracle how quickly the Germans in the Federal Republic have become so civilized. Now we really belong to the West. We have internalized democracy. But the Germans in the former GDR, they are still locked in a pre-modern age. Those are the ugly Germans.

Thereafter, Buruma concluded that:

[West Germans] antipathy towards the ugly Ossis in their badly fitting suits, their stone-washed jeans and plastic shoes...[was] more than just snobbery. The unspoken message was that the Wessis themselves had only narrowly escaped remaining crypto-Nazi, goose-stepping Germans, and because of that had become different, perhaps modern Europeans.

The statements show that the identification of the two German nations with their respective material standards of living had also given rise to mutual processes of
projective identification. West Germans looked down on the “ugly” East Germans with their shabby, old-fashioned appearance because in them they identified a defeated, historically removed part of themselves – their “contemporary ancestors.” “There is an Ossi hidden in every Wessi – at least a little left over.” And vice versa, East Germans seemed to look up to West Germans with their radiant appearance, because in them they recognized the better developed part of themselves. “In comparing their life course with those of West German peers, for whom material prosperity was a constant...they developed a sense of themselves as weaker and poorer, ‘lacking’ something ineffable.”

The inhabitants of the two German states have often been compared to twins, and in this context Borneman remarked that in the eyes of East Germans, West Germans were “the desired other.” I believe, however, it would be better to replace the description “the desired other” with “desired self.” When looking at West Germans, East Germans were seeing who they themselves could have been if history had taken a different course. In this regard, it is telling that in the GDR, East Germans who did not possess any DeutschMarken were called Aso (abbreviation from Asozialen, anti-socials). Apparently, people who had no Westgeld did not belong; they were anti-socials, who had dropped out of society. A similar description was applied to the area around Dresden – the only area of the GDR where West German television reception was impossible. This was called the Tal der Ahnungslosen [valley of the clueless]; no access to the west was obviously seen as having “no idea what was going on in the world.” The constant comparison of the world within the Wall with the world outside it made East Germans consider existence in their own country to be not only relatively worthless, but above all a weak extract of the so-called real existence taking place in the west. When Helmut spoke about the Nische breaking into pieces, he put it slightly differently: according to him, you could only “really become someone” if you left the country.

The confusingly vague responses to the question of what was so special about the west also left no doubt that its power of attraction might be linked to demonstrable characteristics, but was primarily stronger and more all-encompassing than could be determined by any specific criterion. The West German material world “[represented] the real one,” and the main reason for that world being so irresistible was that the people there had everything they did not have on the east side of the border. The material world beyond the Wall represented what East Germans lacked. It was not just about what East Germans wanted to have but could never really get, it was also about who they wanted to be but could never become. Significantly relevant in this context is the difference between the ways West and East Germans outlined their life stories. While the stories told by West Germans
born between 1910 and 1955 focused on the themes of economic and material success (such as leisure time, consumer goods, and prosperity), East Germans of the same generation characterized their existence in terms of “lack.”32 This lack was not an isolated experience: it was related to life in the west. In the GDR people missed what had been developed in the FRG. The same applied to the west's power of attraction: the images of western excess were so alluring because they were close by, geographically and emotionally, while at the same time unattainably far away. Thus they formed the perfect basis for collective fantasies about “fulfillment and ultimate arrival.”33 The prosperous western world with its beautiful appearance, its enticing smells, and its wonderful glow seemed to be the ultimate materialization of the socialist message of salvation – in which a materially improved existence was the basis for social harmony and mutual solidarity.

The Material as Fulfillment

The images that residents of the GDR could see every day via West German television presented a world that was the opposite of their own to a certain extent. Whereas they were constantly asked to accept functionality, rationality and honesty as their guiding principles (our accommodation is just a bit small, get on with it! we are now in the 20th century, so just accept that!), life in the west seemed to embody a sort of timeless harmony, where problems and tensions scarcely existed.34 That the West German picture was intuitively interpreted as being outspokenly harmonious is in my view primarily related to the sensory ways East Germans were informed about the material world of the west. What people saw was strengthened by other sensorial impressions: the smell, taste and tactile attributes of the western world were so strong that its visual attributes, and the associations they elicited, were confirmed through the other senses. What people thought to see in that world (non-functionality and a shiny, polished but still natural authenticity) was experienced in an all-encompassing physical way. Thus, what they saw and the temptation this aroused were more difficult to resist rationally than if it had only been an outward appearance.

The second reason East Germans imagined they saw all-encompassing harmonious fulfillment on the other side of the Wall was due to certain external features of western material culture. According to Katrin (the designer from Chemnitz with whom I regularly discussed East German images of the west), the outward appearance of the west seemed so natural, nostalgic, and authentic. “All those dried floral arrangements and flowery settees,” Katrin explained and she continued:
All those forms of ‘naturalness’ – they express a desire; a desire to go back in time; not back to a particular age or to a particular period. It is the desire to return to a kind of primitive feeling. We want to go back to the time when there was no separation within us, back to the time when we were still one, undivided. We miss that feeling of unity and look for it in nature. Nature is real and honest.

Katrin tried to put into words the chord that was struck by the previously described pictures, displays and objects. According to her, such images evoked an almost intuitive, common human desire for an ideal world which could be, as she described it: “One and undivided.” According to her, that was what East Germans were seeking and thought they had found in the prosperous west (and their collective identification with it). That was why they desperately longed for and identified with it. I think Katrin’s interpretation is extremely relevant. It refers to the desire for an existence without gaps and cracks, an existence without chasms between the self and its lived experiences on the one hand, and the demands and needs of the social and symbolic order on the other. Generally impossible to achieve everlastingly, East German history painfully illustrates the on-going dialectics between the promises dominating the social order, their fallibility, resulting in collective experiences previously described as the Void or “lack” (East Germans), and the increasingly pressing desire for “fulfillment and ultimate arrival.”

The GDR came into existence in an era when material shortage affected every aspect of life. Also as a result of the poignant material conditions suffered by the people living in the area that was to become the GDR, they were painfully confronted with what Geissler called the Void – a situation in which social cohesion was painfully absent and where even the last remnants of society were shattered. In chapters three and four, I described how people succeeded in jointly writing off a reality which had manifested itself so intrusively.

Finding a new foundation in the socialist promise of harmony was partly enabled by what one could call its “materialistic packaging.” Even if there was no solution to the social problems, the aspiration of material improvement which was offered as the concrete starting point for future social well-being seemed to be worth the effort. And people did their best: restoring the collapsed houses, they hoped to restore mutual harmony and warmth. This hope was based on experiences which people were not allowed to discuss – they were taboo. These negative experiences had been turned into positive promises, for the future restructuring of society. The negative life lessons were reported to be beseitigt [put aside] through the denazification and implanting of socialism in the GDR.
The residents of the society thus formed were mutually connected in the shared, secret knowledge of a traumatic, forbidden reality. This gap was the core around which society evolved – as shown in the previous chapters. Right from the start, the East German state attempted to ensure that the gap between word and reality did not become visible – by never acknowledging, for instance, that denazification had been unsuccessful, and later that suspicion and Stasi existed where solidarity was preached. The warmth that did exist also served to cover up socially disruptive forces and experiences, such as envy and rivalry between people.

The “lack” East Germans struggled with was not only of a material but also of a social nature. Competitiveness, jealousy and distrust between people were hidden from sight, they were taboo. The aims of material improvement as the basis of paradise to be created on earth were never fulfilled. But precisely because these material aims were potentially attainable (in contrast with the problems of a social nature which remained the hidden core of East German society), the desire for improved material conditions always remained the articulated and collectively shared façade which disguised other types of unspoken problems.

In the years before the Wende, criticism on the material situation in the GDR was so widespread and general that when West German historian Lutz Niethammer and his colleagues Alexander von Plato and Dorothee Wierling were allowed to carry out an oral history project in the GDR in 1988, they were shocked. The inhabitants of the GDR seemed to have completely reduced their existence to a materially economic concern. According to Niethammer, the complaints about material consumption were used to express another type of dissatisfaction regarding matters which were not named as such: “Criticism of provisions dominated nearly every interview, just as much so with party loyalists…The all too obvious reduction of people’s entire existence to a direct material concern had become a lingua franca in the GDR, into which all feelings had to be translated.” According to Niethammer, the reason why all possible feelings of dissatisfaction were translated into material complaints was due to a “deep-seated consensus with the material economic values of the system.” The criticism of consumption functioned as an “officially legitimate valve” because this was “the only area in which the unfulfilled perspectives of the people and the party leaders corresponded.”

These conclusions fully correspond to what I have sketched so far. The obvious identification with the close-by-yet-so-unattainable West German prosperity was so widespread because in the GDR, material prosperity used to be related to more far-reaching promises of salvation. The image of the glorious west gave way to a fantasy that if East Germans would have those things, they would be released from the “lack” prevailing in their society. “If we had that, everything would be perfect,”
is how East German fantasies about the west could be summed up. Just how far-reaching people's perceptions of life in western prosperity could be was illustrated in Mr. Linke's recollections. When talking about the house he himself had built, he regularly referred to the west. If he had lived on the other side of the Wall, he said, not only could he have built a real “dream house,” but thanks to the material wealth there, it would have definitely been possible for him to achieve everything he was never able to do in the GDR. It was in this conversation that he uttered the words I already quoted in the introduction: “In the west everything was beautiful and wonderful. People seemed to have no worries, and only there was it possible to be really happy. Everything always looked better and more beautiful than here. It all looked so wonderful! We really thought it was paradise, a Schlaraffenland pur [The Land of Cockaigne in its purest form].” While the unfavorable material situation was the only problem in East German society that was allowed to be discussed, the fictitious solution to all (unnamed) problems could be equally found in material areas. Paraphrasing: “If only we were as rich and prosperous as on the other side of the Wall, then...,” followed by a completely harmonious description of who we really could have been, from which all the existing – though not mentioned – shortcomings, problems, and frustrations were deleted. A social worker from Rudolstadt put it into words as follows:

In our country, the schizophrenia between word and reality was continuously increasing, and the western material world played an important role in that. We really believed that people in the west stood closer to their ideals; that ideal and reality were in harmony than in our country, and that people were happier there because there was no schizophrenia. That is what we thought because of everything we saw on the television. And western visitors confirmed that image. They looked like the people in the advertisements, they laughed like in the advertisements, and they even smelled like in the advertisements. The image that was spread by television advertising was confirmed by them in real life. And on that basis, we really believed that the residents of the west and their ideals were one. Consumer goods played a significant role in that fusion: Their reality was ideal because they had those things. And if we only had these things too, it would be like that here, too, and that would put a stop to the schizophrenia. Then the gap between ideal and reality would be closed here as well.

Their representation of the west helped East Germans to conceal that their society was more characterized by mutual tension and envy than they tried to feel in their Nischen. The fact that people collectively desired the west, just as they also laughed
together by poking fun at the lies which dominated the public arena in the GDR, seemed to confirm the mutual solidarity and community.

All the destabilizing elements of East German existence were removed as far as possible. And if that was not possible, people scapegoated the state – for “die da oben, die machen doch immer so ein Schwachsinn! [those at the top, they always make such a mess of it],” and the fantasy about whom they would have been if… was every bit as beautiful as the western world appeared on television: shiny, radiant, sweet-smelling, soft and harmonious. When the Wall fell, this fantasy was realized, and “the horror of the Real it conceal[ed]” threatened to be exposed.38