

'NOTHING GROWS FROM ABOVE TO BELOW'

— ON THE OLOF PALME PEACE MARCH —

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Between 1 and 18 September 1987 an event took place in the GDR that is unprecedented in the history of our country: the Olof Palme peace march for a nuclear weapon-free zone. The German Peace Society — United Opponents of Military Service (DFG-VK) in the FRG, the Peace Council of the GDR, the Austrian peace movement and the Czechoslovak Peace Committee — reached agreement on organising the event.

No sooner than the opening day in Stralsund something happened which no one would have thought possible only a short time before: friends from peace circles took part with slogans such as 'For a social peace service', 'No to nuclear power stations' and 'No shootings on the border'. They were not molested. The Union of Evangelical Churches and Action and Sign of Atonement organised a pilgrimage from Ravensbrück to Sachsenhausen. The route was originally to have been followed by Christians and local religious groups involved in the peace movement alone, but at short notice the Peace Council took the decision to participate.

After the opening ceremony in Ravensbrück two blocks formed: at the head the official marchers, a group of singers and workers from factories and institutes; at the rear the pilgrims gathered around a cross which they would take turns to carry on the long journey. Then came the departure from Ravensbrück, with waving Pioneers, Free German youth and local inhabitants lining the route. All the participants had first to get used to how it felt to pass through such crowds of well-wishers bearing placards like 'Peace education, not military lessons', 'Free contact with East and West', 'The right to refuse military service and Disarmament in school and nursery too'. To begin with they were not sure if they were dreaming. Both blocks soon mingled, pilgrims and marchers using the opportunity to establish contacts with each other. As a result the pilgrims were encouraged again and again by the amount of friendship and solidarity they were shown. Of course everyone they met was quite astonished initially at the totally unfamiliar inscriptions and slogans. Most of them, however, were glad that something of this kind was at last possible and expressed the hope that from now on things would always be so. Shortly before Oranienburg about 5,000 marchers joined the procession of pilgrims, which had meanwhile increased to 500 to 600 people. In the town the workers from the factories and institutes and the pupils from schools in the vicinity lined the streets. When they saw the banners and placards they were naturally very surprised. Many reacted with applause, cheers and waving, as well as by joining in the songs of the pilgrims.

The journey came to an end at Sachsenhausen concentration camp, with an official event performed by various artists and with a service on the site of the former 'Z' station.

The day after, a second pilgrimage took place in Berlin, this time from the Church of Zion to the Gethsamane Church in Prenzlauer Berg — a joint event on the part of the city's youth pastorate and independent peace groups, without official participation but under the protection of the traffic police who led the 1,000 demonstrators safely along the streets.

This was the first permitted demonstration by the independent peace movement in our country.

A few days later, however, there were incidents once more. In Torgau peace groups met with force and placards were torn up. In Dresden at the closing rally of the Palme march in the GDR on the other hand, it was possible to display banners bearing slogans for which one would in the past have gone to prison.

The demonstrators — demanding freedom of travel, information, speech and assembly — advanced through the city unhindered.

At a peace forum in the Kreuzkirche the previous day the experiences of the Palme march had been discussed. Besides great hopes, scepticism was also expressed. Leaflets signed 'Dresden Active' fluttered down from the choir loft. Several extracts follow:

"What appears so unusual in the framework of the conventional political conditions of our country, in fact corresponds only to the freedoms which have been promised for decades by the GDR constitution without being granted. If the government now deigns to concede these self-evident freedoms for a while, we must be aware that the freedom of the street, the right to demonstrate, can only be maintained in the long run if the population exercises it. What was possible between Ravensbrück and Sachsenhausen and in Berlin must become the normal political state of affairs for the entire GDR. The freedoms laid down in the GDR constitution must finally become a reality. The criminal law must be made to conform with the constitution and not the reverse! We consider the establishment of a nuclear weapon-free zone as the by-product of the Palme march. Internal and external peace belong together

For a few years and increasingly under Gorbachev, the GDR government has advocated peace talks, which is indeed laudable. But what will happen if the steel helmet wing gains the upper hand in the Politburo? The population will then be ordered 'About-turn'. The current policy of détente is an expression of the economic weakness of the Eastern bloc. It is a tactic for safeguarding in power the Eastern and Western governments. What we must do is to ensure from below the preconditions for a real and lasting peace....

In a nuclear weapon-free zone the right of co-determination of the population must be safeguarded, the freedom of speech, assembly and the press effected, and the right of referendum enforced. Not to mention such obvious demands as the establishment of a civil alternative [to military] service ...

In the framework of the Olof Palme march it is these demands which we advocate. Agitate for these demands, exert pressure, for "NOTHING GROWS FROM ABOVE TO BELOW!"

'Dresden Active'

The leaflets were distributed on 17 September 1987

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