

## **A personal report behind the Annual Report 1990 of Tandem Computers**

By Fritz Jörn

*I'm coming back to an old memoir of mine, written originally in 1991:*

In these days Tandem Computers' 1990 Annual Report is being circulated among common shareholders, interested prospects and customers. There is a very personal adventure behind one of the business reports there, which you might enjoy sharing with me (even if English is not my best language for story telling):

One autumn day back in 1990 an old friend, who likes to make long intercontinental phone calls at very small hours, contacted me and said: "Fritz, we want to 'shoot' in Erfurt." He's George Browne from Carmel in Northern California and produces Tandem's annual reports since now thirteen years – always in a hurry. And since over ten years I'm busy promoting Tandem in Germany. So I had suggested to Tom Waldrop, Tandem responsible for the Annual Report, this first "eastern" installation as a subject for the Annual Report. Remember, Germany had just been reunited.

Erfurt is an old German town with the mishap of having been behind the Iron Curtain for forty bad years. So it's a very, very old looking town. Houses are rotting from the top down, as leaking roofs do not get repaired – if uncomfortable, the upper floors are just evacuated. Our Erfurt taxi driver, Andreas Hopfe, had had to write to the town authorities to get his windows, made in 1908, fixed; after eight years he succeeded to get just one of them repaired. For a telephone he waits for twelve years already and still waits, despite reunification of Germany. You call him on CB-channel 30. But all that seemed past.

Here was the present: I sat with my Californian friend George and his photographer George Fry in a rented Volvo station wagon full of well packed photo gear. We were still in Heidelberg, in the pretty West. We had finished the photo of a printing machine in production at Heidelberger Druckmaschinen. Without the previous scouting to find the scene, this one picture had taken over five hours, and Heidelberger Druckmaschinen had just agreed to release the supposed result for publication in our report. My role had been organizing people, equipment and scene as suggested by the two Georges – and starring as the little man in the upper right corner of the picture you now see on page 13 of the report.

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More than 400 terminals, workstations, and personal computers, as well as a number of local area networks and an IBM mainframe system, are connected to the Tandem network at HDM's main factory at Wiesloch, Germany, where an average of four presses per hour are produced. HDM plans to add NonStop SQL database management software in the future.

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Following this George now wanted to go to Erfurt, some short 350 kilometers (220 miles) northeast in the “new” German state of Thüringen (Thuringia). After seven hours of Friday evening “driving”, partially through eastern villages full of coal-smelling early evening chimney smoke, we got there, while Ulrike Wiesel of the Tandem Frankfurt office had taken nearly as much effort to phone ahead for rooms. [Today the autobahn has been connected across the former Iron Curtain border.]

Erfurt’s “Erfurter Hof”, the best hotel in town, is high class 1950, with soft simulated Persian rugs and window panes nicely shaking when the elevator moves. In Erfurt George wanted pictures of shops, of very specific shops, the ones our customer “Tegut” now supplies with a never ceasing flow of goods from nearby Seebergen with one of the first eastern computer system by Tandem. The shops were called “Konsum” during communism, when even for the very basic consumer goods you had to queue up, a queue ironically dubbed “Socialistic Waiting Community”. And under K as “Konsum” you still find these shops in the Erfurt phone book – if you can find an Erfurt phone book. There are only a few official telephone books of the region around, and they are so small you mistake them for theater programs. Our selected Konsums offered “goods of daily relevance” (Güter des täglichen Bedarfs) in “Kaufhallen” (buying halls) in streets named Karl-Marx-Alle, Gorki-Straße, but also Papiermühlenweg (way of the paper mills), Bahnhofstraße (Railway Station Street) or Am Anger (at the common meadow). We visited all of them by Taxi, we walked in “unobtrusively”, as three stylishly dressed foreigners with an enormous photo bag, and took Polaroid pictures of windows, of genuine little shopping carts that looked like toys for pre-school children, of derelict neon signs, of blonde children and of a man offering fresh geraniums out of the back of a Trabant station wagon.

Then we retreated to the only Kaffeehaus that operated before eleven in the morning, as in contrast to the rest of them it was and is privately owned. Here we selected cheese cake for George Browne, and for George Fry two possible sites for taking the final “shot”. George Browne casually let me know what he would like in the picture: an elderly couple, then a typical middle aged family with two children (not in the printed picture on page 9 of the Annual Report), plus a light blue model Trabant car (“Trabi”), and would I be so kind and ask around for them. He also courageously requested: a young Soviet soldier! As if this were as easy as to bribe an American Customs officer to stare for an hour onto a bag of heroin being photographed by United Press International ...

Plans made, we carefully approached the selected Konsum store Am Anger, due to close an hour later, full of Saturday morning shoppers. Frau Anneliese Patzelt was in charge, filling in for the regular manager. She has just been laid off due to capitalistic rationalization. When I told her that we wanted to rent all her store for the afternoon, wanted to move the goods around and place them directly in front of the window looking out to the Kaufmannskirche (trading man’s church) and an olden statue of Martin Luther (not in the picture) she looked very skeptical, and I looked very lost. But then – timing makes good theater – my friendly two Georges approached and made this Hollywood story look real to her. We got her permission, even more; we got her support, hospitality and her thoughtful looks in the picture.

Then we moved the equipment, four enormous cases. While George the photographer set up his lights and lamps and cleaned the window to a shine it never ever before had enjoyed, George Browne and I searched for the elderly couple, the happy family with

children, and the unhappy Soviet soldier. The elderly couple, Herr und Frau Hillemann from next door, promised to return at three thirty, right after their lunch nap. But all shopping families had gone by now, and the few Soviet soldiers – never without accompanying officer – had returned by train to their quarters out of town. My only Russian word usable for this occasion, “Photo”, seemed to shy the last ones away even further.

But then we found young Juri Vlashin from Lwow in the Ukraine (formerly Lemberg). His shift as warehouse worker at Erfurt railway station just had finished. Married to a German girl with child, recently laid off from her work at a shoe factory, and living off seventy German Marks a month (47 Dollars) [Euro 35, the Euro came only on Jan. 1, 1999 fj], had not been introduced) in a two room apartment without bath nor toilet, he was happy to help us. (The toilet outside on the staircase of Moritzwallstraße 12 is shared by two stories and needy guests like George. To shower Juri visits his in-laws.) Juri used to work as army helicopter repair soldier in Nora [I cannot find the place any more, fj 2009], the Soviet army outpost out of town, so he still knew his old buddies – or rather “comrades”. I drove him to a hidden side street there, he went into the army outpost, and found the required Soviet uniforms for himself and some as souvenirs for us, as obviously no active soldier dared to pose. In the picture Juri looks just like in his old days in the army. What you don’t see are his stone washed jeans below and his by now too long hair held by a rubber band behind the scene, a very amusing sight for all the people who happened to pass by.

Now to the light blue Trabi car, visible just as a shadow in the picture: As the husband of Mrs. Zöllner (she works in the Konsum shop) had at this hour already taken his after work drink – one or two beers – and here in the East you may drive only absolutely without alcohol in your veins, we had to drive their blue Trabant to the location ourselves – with standard blue fumes coming out of Trabi’s famous two stroke gasoline mix engine; rent-a-Trabi for forty Marks (13 Dollars [€20])! This little car would be worth its own story: The Zöllners had waited fourteen years for it, and now their brand new treasure had fallen in value from over fifteentousand old Marks (nominally 10.000 Dollars [€7.700]) to some fivehundred new ones (300 Dollars [€250]) today. This little darling Trabi has no visible gear shift lever in the totally flat foot room, but it’s not an automatic car either. Driving it I soon discovered that where with the Volvo you set the windshield wipers to intermittent action you shift the Trabi into second gear. The first gear I never found and the reverse you don’t need: Take your left foot off the clutch, open the door (made just the right size for that), and put your heel into one of the many holes in the street or between cobblestones and push. You can see the car perfectly placed in the background of the picture.

The elderly couple, the Hillemans, came right in time before the afternoon light faded away; my Georges were happy with the result and by six o’ clock in the evening we all were sitting happily in a Gasthaus along route seven, eating Thüringer Wurst in Thüringen and waiting for Juri to come back from the military quarters, as he had to return the borrowed uniforms. To that George Fry the Third, our photographer, and George Browne, our “impresario”, enjoyed a couple of blonde East German beers, while I, the driver, remained on water.

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In the picture, from left to right: the Hillermann couple, Anneliese Patzelt, Juri Vlashin.

*In October 2009 I returned to Erfurt with my family, on the way back from a sightseeing trip to Dresden. The town had drastically changed into a hyper modern city in the center, all new, no Russians of course – at least not in uniform – but with poor side streets, small old or closed shops there. It was a cold and rainy day, but I had this spooky feeling I had all over the former GDR: a Disneyland of western commerce populated with strange people without a past.*

*In any case, our Tegut shop at Am Anger was still there, as you can see from my picture at <http://picasaweb.google.de/Siebenfahrer/Dresden#5403316352530548674>.*

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