

"Away from here - that is my goal". Hitchhiking and Youth Culture, circa 1986



The volume *Jugendliche Tramper*¹ was the result of a contest in which young Germans were asked to recount their experiences of a trip abroad which involved hitchhiking. The contest was organized by the *Studienkreis für Tourismus*, a social scientific interdisciplinary research institute dedicated to the research of international tourism. As the researcher of the volume noted herself hitchhiking was a rather ephemeral activity and notoriously hard to delineate and study scientifically. The study was therefore designed as an essay contest, in which participants were asked to recount their

travel experiences. This source offers a vital insight in the practices, expectations and experiences of young hitchhikers in the 1980's.

Automobile tourism

The invention and diffusion of the car as a consumer good proved to have significant consequences for the transformation of tourist practices. Where the train had democratised and collectivised travel in the nineteenth-century, the car had the potential to realise new travel ideals of independence, individuality and freedom. As the use of automobiles was popularised and the logistic infrastructure was drastically expanded in a great number of countries, touring by car allowed tourists to travel more often, visit new destinations, and experience the landscape in completely novel ways.²

In the 1960's and 1970's, travelling by car intensified drastically: while in 1961 38% of the tourists travelled by car, this percentage had almost doubled to 61 percent in 1970.³ Increasingly, travelling by car became an important marker of distinction. As the definite break-through of mass tourism took place in the 1960's, the package tour became the dominant travel format in Germany. Serialisation and standardisation evoked critical comments of mass-tourism as being uniform, shallow and repetitive. From this perspective, travel agencies started to offer rental cars in their package tours, enabling tourist to individualize their itineraries.⁴ Apart from social distinction, the sense of individuality and

¹ Birgitte Gayler, *Jugendliche Tramper: Beiträge zum Wettbewerb 'Jugend reist und lernt Europa kennen'*. (Starnberg, 1986). HAT FV-X/STFT-986-1

² Orvar Löfgren, *On Holiday: a History of Vacationing* (London, 1999), 58-63.

³ Axel Schildt, "'Die Kostbarsten Wochen des Jahres'". *Urlaubstourismus der Westdeutschen (1945-1970)*, Hasso Spode ed., *Goldstrand und Teutonengrill. Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte des Tourismus in Deutschland 1945-1989* (Berlin, 1996), 69-85,

⁴ Sina Fabian, *Boom in der Krise: Konsum, Tourismus, Autofahren in Westdeutschland und Grossbritannien 1970-1990* (Göttingen, 2016), 262.

independency was the key aspect, tourists associated with travelling by car. According to a social-psychological study on holidays by car, the most significant emotional factor associated with the car, was the inherent freedom and independence it enabled. In addition, the car was a considerable expression of individuality: one was not 'in der Masse' and among his own family, when driving in the private and encapsulated space of the car.⁵

The automobile however had a distinct significance for a particular age cohort. In the 1950s something, which could be termed a youth travel culture, gradually crystallized. The car and hitchhiking played a pivotal role in this process. In the 1950's, adolescents, who sought to distinguish themselves from their parents, increasingly employed hitchhiking as a travel form. Where their parents would visit the south of Europe, youths would trek to the north or west of Europe on self-consciously styled *Bildungsreisen*.⁶ Youth tourism was partly commercialized in the 1960's, as tourism companies offered package tour specifically tailored to the perceived needs of youths. According to contemporaries, the activities which the German youth partook in during their sojourns, amounted to not much more than drinking, swimming and having sexual liaisons. However, for some youths, travel greatly influenced their perceptions of self and home.⁷ A significant strand of youths, both in the BRD as the DDR, took to hitchhiking as their means to mobility. Hitchhiking, as a travel form and practice, was considered to be a pregnant rejection of pre-packaged mass tourism and signified freedom and autonomy. Travel, and in particular hitchhiking, was often signified as a motor of international integration, and thus keenly encouraged and promoted by governmental and societal organizations.⁸

As evinced from the contributions in this volume, hitchhiking still was associated with a distinctive youth culture, defined by travel. As a travel form it implied a great degree of autonomy and adventure: flexibility, freedom, meeting people of their own age, and the minimum of costs implied were the main considerations for hitchhikers. According to one Jörg Elder, a 22-year-old recently unemployed young man, as soon he was picked up a considerable feeling of independence and freedom took hold of him: 'a feeling, similar to which Columbus must have felt when he discovered America. I haven't felt so free in the whole year.'⁹ Hitchhiking as a travel form had several social functions. From these recollections its importance as a rite de passage is mentioned several times. In the case of Meike Schaffer, who hitchhiked to Greece after she finished high school, the trip was a clear liminal moment in which would marked her transition from childhood and adolescence to adulthood: the trip functioned as a 'line drawn [under my childhood], which will simultaneously mark my new way of life.'¹⁰

⁵ Gudrun Meyer and Wolfgang Meyer, *Autotourismus. Einstellungen und Gewohnheiten deutscher Auto-Urlaubsreisender* (Starnberg, 1975), 18.

Richard Ivan Jobs, *Backpack Ambassadors. How Youth Travel Integrated Europe* (Chicago and London, 2016), 35. See for the broader context of youth mobility and travel in this period: Rainer Schönhammer, 'Unabhängiger Jugendtourismus in der Nachkriegszeit', in: Hasso Spode ed., *Goldstrand und Teutonengrill: Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte des Tourismus in Deutschland 1945 bis 1989* (Berlin, 1996), 117-128.

⁷ Axel Schildt, 'Across the Border: West German Youth Travel to Western Europe', in: Axel Schildt and Detlef Siegfried ed., *Between Marx and Coca-Cola. Youth Cultures in Changing European Societies, 1960-1980* (New York and Oxford, 2006), 149-160.

⁸ Jobs, *Backpack Ambassadors*, 1-18.

⁹ Birgitte Gayler, *Jugendliche Tramper: Beiträge zum Wettbewerb 'Jugend reist und lernt Europa kennen'*. (Starnberg, 1986), 151.

¹⁰ Gayler, *Jugendliche Tramper*, 125.

The desire to develop foreign language skills is a common travel motivation in the reports. Hand in hand with this desire to improve one's language skills, was the idea that this would ameliorate international relations. According to one contribution, communication enabled the fostering of sociability and understanding: 'Dort haben wir auch erfahren, wie wichtig es ist, dass Menschen verschiedener Nationalitäten eine gemeinsame Sprache sprechen, um sich miteinander verständigen und über die fremden Sitten und Gebräuche sich informieren zu können, um Verständnis für einander zu finden.'¹¹

In some cases, the vivid and new impressions with which young hitchhikers returned after their travels could confer a holistic experience of personal transformation. Jens-Martin Meyer for example experienced such a subtle but powerful sense of transformation, after his trip through the Scottish highlands: 'Leise, fast unmerklich, hat sich ein neuer Ton in das Alltagsleben, in die Beziehungen zu anderen Menschen in die Gefühle und Gedanken einer bisher vertraute Welt geschlichen.'¹²

In addition, the educational potential of hitchhiking was considerable, as it allowed hitchhikers to discover vacation destinations, as opposed to shallow mass tourists, off the beaten track. It allowed them discover the true nature and character of countries and their inhabitants.¹³ According to a psychological study, this critical discourse on tourism as being socially conformist is reproduced in various diaries of adolescent travellers and was one of the principal motivations to explore the continent by way of less conventional means of transportation: "Zusammenfassend läßt sich sagen, dass der Deutsche Reisende weder gelernt hat, seinen Bauch einzuziehen, wenn er in ein anderes Land kommt, noch seine Turnschuhe abzulegen, wenn er einen Berg besteigt! Es bleibt ziemlich unverständlich, warum sich Norwegen noch nicht zu dem Entschluß durchringen konnte, in Zukunft deutschen Urlaubern die Einreise zu verweigern."¹⁴ Hitchhiking was still an important component of the repertoire, which youths employed to distance themselves from pre-packaged tourism. Especially the twenty-year old Stefan Heck was critical of the commodified image and experience of Scotland which was presented to shallow tourists: 'Man wird den sattgefressenen Faulenzern gerade das zeigen, was ihrer Vorurteile (...) und damit ihrer Zufriedenheit förderlich ist.' Hitchhiking offered a radical different perspective on the country: 'Unser Motto hieß schließlich: Nicht, oder weniger Erholung, sondern Problematik, die Leute, die Geschichte und die Wirtschaft und deren Wirkung auf die Lebensinflüsse der nahezu kennenzulernen, sie zu verstehen'.¹⁵

Apart from these more ideologically laden travel motivations, the promise of plain fun was an intrinsic component of hitchhiking. Some reports for instance reject this explicit critical stance towards mass tourism: 'Mich ärgert es immer wieder, wenn Leute sich für ich weiß nie wie individuell und was ganz besonderes halten. Sicher ich freue mich auch, wenn ich an Orte komme, die nicht mit Touristen überlaufen sind, oder einen Platz entdecke, der tatsächlich so wirkt, als sei noch nie jemand dagewesen, aber ich fühle mich nicht berechtigt, mich über Touristen zu ärgern.'¹⁶

¹¹ Gayler, *Jugendliche Tramper*, 157.

¹² Gayler, *Jugendliche Tramper*, 68.

¹³ Jobs, *Backpack Ambassadors*, 152-158.

¹⁴ Cited from: Anita Orlovius, *Jugend erlebt Europa. Psychologische Studie über die Wahrnehmung der Fremde bei deutschen Reisenden* (Starnberg, 1989), 67.

¹⁵ Gayler, *Jugendliche Tramper*, 49.

¹⁶ Gayler, *Jugendliche Tramper*, 59.

Confrontation with the other

Hitchhiking as a leisure practice was, as evinced from the contemporary testimonies, characterised by significant difficulties and obstacles. A 15-year-old youth had to wait several hours in the blazing sun without any water. In addition he had to stay alert for people intent on tricking him of his money.¹⁷ The perils of hitchhiking were however especially great for young women travelling alone. Various reports mention truck drivers who pick up girls and expect something in return for their favours. In some cases, physical contact was necessary to reject these drivers.¹⁸ According to a girl named Meike, many prejudices about truckdrivers were unfortunately confirmed during her hitchhiking trip to Greece: „Es läuft fast immer nach dem gleichen Muster ab: zunächst geben sie sich überaus freundlich, laden uns zum Essen ein, überschütten uns mit Zigaretten; dann erfolgt die erste Steigerung, sprich Annäherung, mit wie zufällig wirkenden Berührungen, die immer häufiger und unerträglicher werden; der "Höhepunkt" ist erreicht, wenn er einem von uns das längst erwartete unmißverständliche und allseits bekannte Angebot unterbreitet.“¹⁹

Apart from these tribulations on the road, the confrontation with other cultures and their prejudices about Germany and its past could confer a painful situation. The 17 year old Nicola Morita was for example especially vexed to be greeted with the Hitler salute by some proud Irish youngsters when it became apparent to them she was German.²⁰ In a similar vein Till saw himself continuously confronted during his travel through the south of France with 'einer starken Abneigung gegen Fremde, die ihre Entsprechung in einem starken Nationalbewußtsein und Wir-Gefühl findet.'²¹ In an entry entitled 'der Faschist', a young man recounts his experience with the Italian police and political culture, which were as might be guessed not altogether positive.

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¹⁷ Gayler, *Jugendliche Tramper*, 26.

¹⁸ Gayler, *Jugendliche Tramper*, 60-61. and 126.

¹⁹ Gayler, *Jugendliche Tramper*, 126.

²⁰ Gayler, *Jugendliche Tramper* 38.

²¹ Gayler, *Jugendliche Tramper*,. 165.