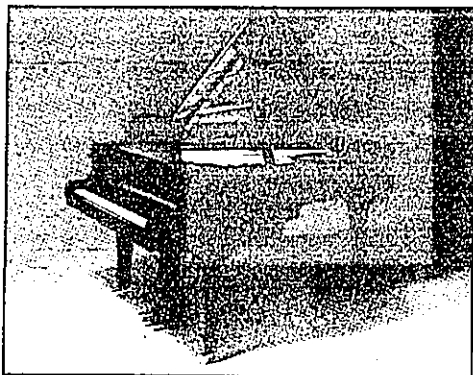


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O tannenbaum The country of your roots is devastated by acid rain

All across the land that gave the world the Christmas tree, spruce and fir are dying.

In Bavaria, where the devastation is most visible, specialists believe that millions of the mighty evergreens are doomed. Eight percent of the Bavarian forest died during the last year.

In the storied Black Forest of Baden-Wuerttemberg, almost half of the trees are suffering from the apparently irreversible illness.

The German word for it is waldsterben, forest death. A new government survey shows that 35 percent of the nation's 17 million acres of forest are diseased.

The agent of destruction is acid rain, an airborne poison that originates in factories, power plants and automobile engines. In a chemical reaction still not fully understood, when the effluent sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides are brought down out of the atmosphere by rain, the resulting liquid renders both water and soil unable to support the life that has flourished there for millennia.

IN THE United States, most public attention to the acid rain problem has centered on lakes in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. All of the fish die; smaller organisms pass so efficiently away that the water becomes eerily and unnaturally clear.

Many American trees have been damaged — red spruce in Vermont, for example — but they have not received the national attention given to the lakes.

Even as Canadians have bitterly criticized the United States for exporting its fossil-fuel pollutants, so have some European countries protested about what their neighbors have sent them. Scandinavians, for example, blame factories in Great Britain, northern France, and Germany's Ruhr Valley for the acid rain that has killed many of their lakes.

But it is only in West Germany, a nation whose 61 million citizens love their 20 billion trees with emotional intensity, that the problem has reached the proportions of a national crisis.

Federal Minister of Agriculture Ignatz Kiechle says that more than 6,175,000 acres of woodland are visibly damaged. And the deadly process is accelerating. From October 1982 to October 1983 the area of West Germany with diseased trees has quadrupled, Kiechle says.

TREES THAT appeared healthy only a few months ago have begun to turn yellow. Soon they will be brown. Then the needles will fall off and the trunks will rot. Scientists say that if the illness continues the gentle hills will not hold their soil any more, nor the mountain slopes their snow, and floods and avalanches will be yet another heritage of industrialization.

Tourists who see the big conifers decay and fall ask: Is central Europe's present North America's future?

Virtually every German town boasts its own forest, sometimes in the middle of town, sometimes right on the edge. The woods are not some remote ideal, to be approached only in literature or hiking boots, but an intimate part of even the most urbanized life. The German of the 1980s may not feel that the forest seems with the supernatural, as his ancestors did, but he is in awe of its

beauty and he wants to preserve it.

Forest management as taught and practiced all over the world was developed in Germany. That one-third of West Germany's surface area is forestland in spite of high population density attests to a zeal to preserve a national treasure. But some of the most lovingly nurtured trees in the world are dying — and German foresters seem able to do very little about it.

"INTER NATIONES," a government-supported research agency, reports that not only does acid rain kill the trees' needles and leaves, but it changes the composition of the soil. "Once the soil has been chemically polluted, there is no cure for the situation," says the report.

The acids of the rain pay no more attention to borders than the winds that carry them. Officials estimate that West Germany sends about half of its air pollution to other countries and that, in turn, about half of the air pollution in West Germany comes from other countries.

East Germany, which produces practically no oil or hydro-electric power, burns enormous amounts of crumbly lignite, the sulfurous low-grade coal that helps it to outpace the East Bloc (except the Soviet Union) in industrial production. Residents of West Berlin and the Harz Mountains, along the inter-German border, know that the brown smoke is sickening to breathe. The Czechs and Poles burn it too, and breathe it, and send their acids to West Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and even to Denmark.

While the East Germans have acknowledged their own rampant waldsterben, the measures they now propose have failed to raise any hopes in the West. The keystone of the communist plan is to replant the devastated areas with "smoke-resistant" trees.

IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1.25 million acres of forest are dead or dying. Scientists believe that the current rate of coal burning will lead to the destruction of one-third of that nation's forests by 1990.

At first, the dying of the trees was blamed on hot weather. No one knew until recently that the killer was a chemical brew pattering down through the foliage; nor that, when trees become the victims of industrial pollution, they die faster than human beings.

For most Americans, acid rain has been a threat, not a depressing fact of daily life. For Germans, some of the future predicted by environmental Cassandras has arrived.

A word has been coined to sum up both the domestic and international challenges that face the Germans. It is *Hochschornsteinpolitik*, which sounds as formidable as the concept it names: smokestack politics.

"Our forests are of inestimable importance for the water cycle, for our climate, for our health, for our recreation, and for the identity of the German landscape," says West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. "If we do not succeed in saving our forests, the world in which we live will be changed beyond recognition."

— National Geographic News Service

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