

Old Tensions Haunt New Europe's Financial Capital

MY BUSINESS-JOURNALIST friends shove their tape recorders onto the head table. There the respected German banker sits with a female assistant. We all pour ourselves glasses of mineral water and wait for him to speak.

"I meet the whole of Europe in the elevator," Dr. Otmar Issing cheerfully tells our gathering of foreign correspondents. He's describing life at the brand-new European Central Bank, which draws its staff from the 11 nations of the new European monetary union.

Frankfurt's financial world regards the arrival of the bank as faintly messianic; it is, after all, charged with the impressive mission of setting monetary policy for Europe. It will have custody of the euro, the currency that will help centralize European commerce when it is introduced into member nations in January.

Issing is a gray-haired man in a gray suit, but he is not the typically somber, wooden German banker. When he speaks about Europe's experiment in phasing out national currencies for a single one, he is animated and optimistic. This is something to celebrate. The pan-European euro, Issing grins, will be "a world premiere."

In Frankfurt's main shopping district a giant glass thermometer measures the months left until the euro comes to life. By July, 2002, it will be the only legal tender in the 11 participating countries. Meanwhile, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the soon-to-be-abandoned deutschemark the German finance ministry has put together a traveling exhibition on its famously strong national currency. Ironically, this dull little exhibit was mounted in the basement of Frankfurt's historic Paulskirche as though to salute and bury the national currency in one gesture.

From the way campaigns are being run for September's national elections, you would never know anything new was on the horizon. It would be naive to expect the coming euro to breed an atmosphere of

openness or tolerance in a nation where many people are feeling pinched by a shrinking job market and the omnipresence of immigrant workers.

The latent German contempt for foreigners now expresses itself in thoroughly petty ways. I go to buy cherries from a fruit stand and am furiously — hatefully — shouted away by the German purveyor when I touch his luscious black-fruit. Nothing is said to a German man who casually pops a cherry into his mouth. Politicians sense a resentful anti-immigrant, anti-Europe sentiment and shy away from peddling the notion of "European unity," while taking a hard line against foreigners, who make up nearly 10 percent of Germany's population.

The former East Germany has a particularly bad reputation for racism. My husband and I drive through the ghostly boulevards of East Berlin lined with anonymous high rises and are told by a friend who sells insurance out there that the skinheads are out in full force at night with their dogs, ready to thrash both West Germans and foreigners. In April's parliamentary elections in the former East German state of Saxony-Anhalt, the ferociously anti-immigrant, far-right German People's Union came out of nowhere to capture 12 percent of the vote. Since then, mainstream conservatives have taken their cue to swing further right.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl, seeking his fifth term in office, recently drew enthusiastic applause from elderly guests at a health resort when he promised stricter restrictions on refugees and advocated deporting foreigners who commit serious crimes. I ask a spokesman for Kohl's Christian Democrat party: What about foreigners with permanent resident status? That can be revoked, he replies off-handedly. Though few citizens can be expected to sympathize



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with convicted criminals, the threat of their deportation nonetheless signals a disturbing trend toward curbing immigrants' civil rights.

In a highly controversial case, the culture minister of the state of Baden-Württemberg recently banned a fully qualified young teacher from teaching in public schools because she, as a Muslim, wears a scarf around her head. The young woman, an Afghan refugee raised in Germany, tells TV interviewers that the political fury generated by her scarf has made her feel she's wearing a weapon on her head.

Leaders of the chauvinistic Christian Social Union, Kohl's coalition partner in government, threaten to make the German language a weapon against foreigners, calling for a language test to be the deciding factor in granting residence permits to foreigners. Even the left-wing Greens, tapping into the new conservatism, make it clear they don't support the reinstatement of earlier, more liberal political asylum laws.

— Continued on Page B15



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Europe's Tensions

— *Continued from Page B4*

A couple of weeks ago, Germany's favorite tabloid, Bild, raised the alarm that the proposed free movement of workers among European Union nations would require Germany to pay welfare benefits to foreigners who came here searching for work. For example, Bild bizarrely conjectured, Brazilian families living in Portugal might make their way into Germany and, if the wage earner couldn't support his dependents, the state would have to provide a handout.

For all the millennial rhetoric surrounding the new Europe, Germany still seems haunted by some very old ghosts. The European union that excites the directors of the European Central Bank seems distant indeed, when its host country still inclines to delusions of Brazilians (and other unwanted) bleeding the "real" Germany dry.