

Rose welcome at the border

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Susan Viets in Budapest
and agencies in Bavaria

CHOCOLATES, roses and welcome handshakes awaited the East German refugees who began arriving in their thousands yesterday morning at Passau, on the Austro-German border.

Exhausted, but jubilant, the refugees — mostly young couples or families with infants — queued to register with West German charities and border authorities. As parents stretched, filled out forms or cupped hands around containers of coffee handed out by volunteers, their children lined up in the morning mist for teddy bears, picture books and other donated playthings.

Two thousand had come by mid-morning and the numbers continued to climb throughout the day. At Passau, the Red Cross and the border police set up 700 beds in public buildings and 1,300 in special tent sites.

Those with relatives or friends in West Germany will drive on to join them while others will get basic housing and a small allowance for several months. Temporary camps have been set up in the Passau area at Hengersberg, Tiefenbach Freilassing, Trostberg, and Vilshofen. Demand for trained labour is so high that the refugees should have little trouble finding jobs.

West Germany's ZDF television said the total number expected to reach the West could be "well over 10,000".

Most of those arriving in the early morning opted to drive on to relatives in cities as far away as Hamburg, more than 370 miles north of the border.

For many of the thousands who began crossing into Austria shortly after midnight local time, leaving Hungary had been occasion for tumultuous celebration.

Lines of cars, horns honking, had formed on the Hungarian side, with some passengers waving champagne bottles out of car windows.

On arrival in Nickelsdorf, an Austrian border town, dozens had jumped from their cars to dance on the street, cheered on by a growing crowd of Austrians.

The crossing into West Germany was more subdued for most.

In Budapest, more East Germans arrived by car, bicycle and foot at the Szarvas Gabor camp where they will rest before continuing West. "We'll stay open for at least one more week. Our centre will be here to provide information for the refugees and to help them sort out their paperwork before they leave for West Germany," one of the camp's organisers said.

"Relief, that's what I feel, and excitement. I can't believe that we can finally leave. I've been waiting for this news for three weeks. It's a new life," said Anka, a 24-year-old economist standing in queue to board one of the Austria-bound luxury tour buses.

The Hungarian Foreign Minister, Mr Gyula Horn, said that 60,000 East Germans are estimated still to be holidaying in Hungary. It now appears that many of these will cross over.

Champagne bottles poked out of the rubbish bins in the campground.

"I have a terrible hang-over. It was a real party here last night. Everybody's so happy," a young East German said.

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