

Phosphates smother Knapsack, W.G.

by Jachim Moskau
Newsweek Feature Service

KNAPSACK, West Germany--Among whatever notes are being left for future chroniclers of 20th century pollution, a few words should be included to explain the disappearance of this little town in the rollings hills of the Northern Rhine country. The following is a beginning.

To the historians of the 21st century:

Until the summer of 1971, the town of Knapsack had a population of 2,500 people and a thriving phosphate industry. Unfortunately, the two did not get along together.

Knapsack was an old town, dating back to 1566, and was believed to have gotten its name from the shoulder bags in which its people toted their food when going to work in the nearby peat moss and soft-coal operations.

By 1971, however, Knapsack was most famous as the home of Knapsack AG, which was then the world's second largest producer of phosphate and turned out 15 per cent of all phosphorous products. Its two factories, on the east and west sides of town, consumed 2 per cent of all the electric power generated in West Germany and they did

an annual business of about \$216 million.

But despite its importance, the people of Knapsack during the 1960s increasingly found fault with Knapsack AG's methods.

They objected to its soot, smoke and fumes, which had turned the town black, filled it with an acrid, nauseous smell and so darkened the sky that they could barely make out the sun.

They protested about its "infernal racket" which, at 60 decibels, was equal to a car racing its engine 20 yards away and made sleeping difficult.

And they complained that when particularly dense clouds of gas descended, the fumes wiped out potato patches, defoliated the fruit trees, made their clothing look like fish nets and caused a burn on any exposed skin.

In response to these complaints, officials of Knapsack AG instituted an "environmental protection" program to limit pollution. They agreed, moreover, to settle claims made for soot damage to gardens, crops or clothes, and began dispensing several thousand dollars a year in such settlements.

But despite these attempts at harmony, friction between the two factions continued to mount. The firm's officials



A Knapsack villager brandishes a potato plant that has been defoliated by pollution from the Knapsack AG phosphate factory in background.

claimed that no actual harm to health had been proven and that the fumes, soot and smell were simply "bothersome." But the townspeople kept on complaining.

One morning in July 1971, for example, the following incident took place:

A wave of black soot exploded from a smokestack and fell upon the people and houses along Industriestrasse in great, sticky, flaky clouds.

The sooty downpour blackened a baby in a carriage from head to toe and took off its hair up to the line of its cap. Its mother expressed criticism of the environmental

protection program. Children playing on the grass nearby looked as though they were ending a shift in the coal mines.

A hausfrau on her way to a funeral was also caught in the sootfall and took it with bitter humor. "Thank God I'm wearing black today," she said.

As a result of such incidents, tensions grew steadily worse and there were repeated demands for a solution. But moving the plants where so many Knapsack people worked, company officials maintained, would be prohibitively expensive.

The upshot was that the town fathers decided to evacuate the people.

The officials of Knapsack AG, however, refused to take part in the evacuation. "When we approached industry about moving the population out of Knapsack," reported selectman Hermann Sieger, "they just said, 'We don't want anything to do with it. That's strictly up to you.'"

Nonetheless, at a total cost to the town and the state of about \$14 million, the evacuation was begun. By late summer of 1971, the people of Knapsack were being resettled

in Pescherhofe, a new town about 3 miles away. The morning after a family moved out, a bulldozer came and knocked its house down.

The people of Knapsack had mixed feelings about the solution. "When they tear down your house," said retired evacuee Alfred Frey, staring out of his new, seventh floor window across from an open pit soft-coal mine, "it's as if someone you know well has died."

"But," another Knapsack evacuee remarked, "at least we can breathe."

Some 50 houses, or one twelfth of those in Knapsack, were razed during the summer of 1971. Full evacuation, said a town official, would be over "within a few years," and then there would be almost no Knapsack left.

But Knapsack AG, of course, would still be flourishing and the phosphate factories would not be able to do without townspeople altogether. A few company houses would be left for night-shift workers.

They were to be the skeleton crews of a ghost town and they were to be there for emergencies.

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