

U.S. soldiers feed black market

East Berlin black market thrives on U.S. dollars

BERLIN (AP) — American soldiers, by their own account, are bringing black market money into East Berlin to buy goods — sometimes on tours conducted by the U.S. Army.

There is no way to determine the scope of the transactions, which are illegal in Communist East Germany, but they appear widespread.

A dozen soldiers interviewed recently at the big Centrum department store in East Berlin freely admitted they brought East German marks into the country and implied that everyone else in their 70-member group had done the same.

The uniformed soldiers were seen buying goods ranging from rocking horses to vodka at prices that would be extravagant at the legal exchange rate but, with smuggled marks, were in fact dirt cheap.

"This is a great savings, even over the PX (in West Berlin)," a soldier from Connecticut said, fingering a 318-mark black leather jacket. "At the PX, leather jackets are 135 bucks. But here, this one would only cost me about 30."

One soldier, clutching a liter of vodka, crowed, "Quality stuff, and just 16 marks, so I paid... about a dollar sixty." Another soldier carried a stuffed rocking horse worth 78 marks or \$32.50 at the legal exchange rate, but only \$7.80 when bought with East German marks he had brought into the country.

All talked only on condition they would not be identified.

At currency exchanges in East Germany, one West Germany mark buys one East German mark. But in West Berlin, you can buy for

East German marks for one West German mark, worth about 41 U.S. cents at current rates.

Although East German law requires all East German marks to be purchased in East Germany, and forbids taking them in or out of the country, the soldiers said it was common practice to buy East German marks in West Berlin.

Tourists also pay five West German marks for a day visa to East Berlin, and must change an additional 25 West German marks into East marks at one-to-one rate.

Leftover East marks must be deposited in a tiny state bank within the checkpoint area or donated on the spot to the Red Cross or other charity. Deposited marks can be withdrawn if tourists return to East Germany, although there is a time limit. The minimum exchange requirement does not apply to U.S. soldiers.

The law is designed to protect the Communist currency.

However, as one West German money-changer openly selling East German marks put it: "That's their law, not ours."

"Of course it's all black market money," said a cashier at the IWS currency exchange in Frankfurt.

While tourists attempting to take East marks into East Berlin run the risk of being caught, the soldiers do not.

"This uniform is a shield," boasted a young sergeant.

Under the Four Powers agreement at the end of World War II, American, British and French soldiers have free access to East Berlin, the Soviet sector of the divided city.

Sheik loses half his fortune in divorce

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A judge overseeing the largest divorce action in history ordered Arabian Sheik Mohammed Al-Fassi on Thursday to give his wife half the fortune that she claims is worth \$6 billion.

If Sheika Dena Al-Fassi's claims prove accurate, the default judgment granted by a superior court judge would be the largest divorce judgment in history — \$3 billion.

But the sheika's attorney has indicated she would settle for about \$500 million in cash.

Judge Robert Fainer postponed implementation of his order until May 27 to give Fassi time to meet certain conditions that he has so far refused to comply with, including appearing in court and giving a deposition.

"The court understands that

this is a harsh remedy," the judge wrote. But he said his action was warranted by repeated defiance of court orders by the sheik.

"The court has already found the respondent to have acted willfully and without substantial justification for failing to answer interrogatories," Fainer said.

The 28-year-old Fassi fled from Florida to his homeland of Saudi Arabia last October, taking along his four children without court approval. His trip followed a dispute with a Miami hotel over an unpaid \$1.5 million bill.

A federal warrant is outstanding for him for removal of the children from the country and Fassi has said he cannot return to the United States to take part in the divorce proceedings because of the

warrant.

The sheika lives in a bungalow behind the sheik's gaudy Sunset Boulevard mansion, which was gutted by an arson fire in 1980.

Neighbors had complained that the mansion was painted a bright green, had plastic flowers planted in urns outside and the genitalia of nude statues were painted red.

Under the default judgment, the 24-year-old sheika must prove the value of her husband's property and is entitled to one half of it under California's community property law.

Her attorney, Marvin Mitchelson, had said previously that if default were granted they would probably seek \$500 million in community property because "it might be difficult to prove he is worth more than \$1 billion or \$2 billion."



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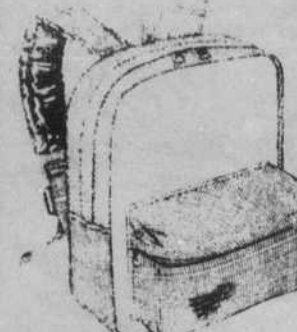
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