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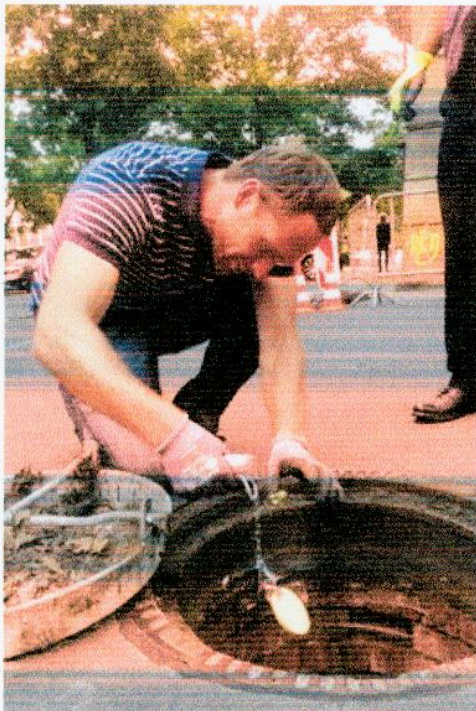
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Dry Humor: Too Much Water Doesn't Damp Germans' Thrifty Habits

Nation's Love of Conservation Criticized By Some as Overkill

By ANTON TROIANOVSKI

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A deodorant pad is used to reduce the stench in the Berlin water system. Anton Troianovski/The Wall Street Journal

BERLIN—There are many subjects of German soul-searching. Among them: Is the country saving too much water?

People here are known to flush toilets with old bath water and to take turns bathing in the same tub without refilling it. New German toilets typically use about two gallons of water for a full flush and less than one for water-saving.

Conserving water is an expression of personal virtue and social responsibility. But as scholars, utility managers, and municipal officials point out, there is a dark side to the impulse. Sewage stagnates in too-large canals and noxious gas is corroding cement. Basements in Berlin are flooding because of the rising water table.

As good as saving water might feel, they explain, a shower skipped in Marburg won't add to rainfall in the Maghreb.

"The water-saving was good," said Alexander Limberg, a geologist for the city of Berlin, choosing his words carefully on a rainy morning as the Spree River sloshed outside his window. "Let's just say: We do not need to

save much more."

But when the children leave half-full glasses standing around, Dilek Güngör dumps the contents into her watering can. Same goes for the bowl of water left over after she washes lettuce. If the watering can is full, there is also the old coffeepot in the kitchen.

Ms. Güngör, a writer in Berlin, is aware that saving water in the hydrologically rich capital isn't necessarily a good thing.

Nevertheless: "I feel sorry for the water," she said.

Some experts have undertaken a quixotic re-education campaign.

"I have no problem using a toilet somewhere that doesn't have the water-saving flush button," said Hans-Jürgen Leist, an engineer and social scientist at the Ecolog Institute in Hanover. "In fact, I generally prefer to use the normal flush button."

Mr. Leist fired his first broadside in a 2002 article in the Frankfurter Rundschau daily titled "Water Saving in Germany Is Nonsense." Undeterred by howls of protest from environmentalists, he said, he followed up with his 266-page 2007 treatise: "Water Supply in Germany: Criticism and Solution Approaches."

The abstract to the tome begins: "The Germans have become true fanatics in water saving."

The basic problem, Mr. Leist and other experts say, is one of conscience.



Mr. Leist argues that Germans are obsessive about water-saving thanks to a steady stream of reports about droughts elsewhere in the world. Germans learn from elementary school on to turn the water off while shampooing their hair, soaping their hands and brushing their teeth.

To be sure, one reason Germans save water is to save money. And because the majority of utilities' costs are fixed, declining use has led to an increase in the per-liter price of water, causing consumers to become even more use-conscious. A German household consuming 21,000 gallons a year—roughly enough water for two people—paid an average of about \$260 in 2013 for the privilege, compared with \$235 in 2005, at the current exchange rate.

A water utility in the Ruhr Valley, the Rheinisch-Westfälische Wasserwerksgesellschaft, has tweaked its pricing model in reaction, including a greater fixed-price portion on its bills. But many executives say the problem

runs deeper than euros and cents.

Siegfried Gendries, head of marketing at RWW, says one customer told him she saved water by spitting out what she used to rinse her mouth after brushing her teeth and using it to water the plants.

"It is impossible that this is economically motivated," Mr. Gendries says.

Other Europeans save water, too, according to a survey conducted by the Institute for Empirical Social and Communication Research in Düsseldorf last year. But in Germany, more than half say they do it to protect the environment, while in Italy, Spain, France, and England, that figure ranges from 30% to 38%.

Mr. Gendries and other water-company marketers are trying to take their customers' minds off saving water. They highlight the idea that people should conserve the "virtual water" they indirectly use when buying coffee beans and bluejeans.

"People have a bad conscience when they use a lot of water," Mr. Gendries explains. "We want to give them the chance to do something for their good conscience."

But in the saga of German water-supply design, it may have been the utilities that committed the original sin; their pipes are too big.

In past decades, infrastructure investments mirrored expectations of rising water use. Instead, frugality and water-efficient appliances led household use to decline to 32 gallons per person a day in 2012 from 38 gallons in 1990. France and the U.K. use about 45 gallons, according to Europe's water-utility trade group. A U.S. government survey in 2005 found Americans connected to the public water supply used an average of 99 gallons per person a day.

Now utilities such as Berliner Wasserbetriebe face a reckoning: The sewage isn't moving quickly enough through the system.

The company has an Odor and Corrosion Task Force that battles the consequences of slow-moving sewage by deploying salt, filters, and sticky panels of deodorant with names like Gelaktiv and Kleargel.

It sometimes flushes fresh drinking water through its pipes to clear them out.

An engineer on the task force, Henrik Marczinski, says his household also does its part. "I myself—along with my family—still take baths and shave in the shower," he says. "It's true. I admit it."

But an informal survey at a hardware store in the former East Berlin found that very few people are about to change their ways. One man said he showered no more than three times a week "for the future and for the children." Another said he had installed a device in his toilet tank to reduce flush volume and insisted that one to two minutes for a shower is "completely sufficient."

Beate Schleicher, a bookkeeper, explained that she had built a contraption on her terrace that collects rainwater for her plants. Susanna Scharrer, a doctor, compares notes about her consumption with friends to see who is using less.

Ms. Güngör, the writer, is trying to take the new message to heart. When it rains, and the plants on her balcony have no need for the water she has been studiously saving, she sometimes brings herself to dump it down the drain. "This is hard," she said.

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