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Report about an Excursion to Geumgangsan (Diamond Mountains)

Citation:

"Report about an Excursion to Geumgangsan (Diamond Mountains)", November 5, 1956, Wilson Center Digital Archive, SAPMO-BA. Translated for NKIDP by Bernd Schaefer. <https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/112735>

Summary:

A report on the excursion to Geumgangsan of a delegation of the Soviets and East Germans.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from ROK Ministry of Unification

Original Language:

German

Contents:

Translation - English

SAPMO-BA

[no archival signature]

GDR Embassy to the DPRK

Pyongyang, 5 November 1956

Report about an Excursion to Geumgangsan [Diamond Mountains]

Participants:

USSR Embassy:

Attache Ognjev

Comrade Rosanov

Comrade Suvorov

Chinese Embassy:

one counselor and two additional diplomats

Vietnamese Embassy:

Attache Siang

Czechoslovak Embassy:

Trade Attache and his assistant

Mongolian Embassy:

Attache and two assistants, one of them with his wife

GDR Embassy:

E. Behrens, F. and R. Glückauf

Altogether: 16 people

As an escort from the DPRK Foreign Ministry: Mr. Ri, member of the Protocol Department

1st DAY

9 October

Departure to Wonsan at 1100 hours. Mr. Ri from the protocol department is riding in our car [from the GDR embassy]. He said the Foreign Ministry has no vehicles for such purposes. On the road Mr. Ri tried to shift responsibility for the schedule of the excursion to Colleague Glückauf. Yet we were rejecting this since the Foreign Ministry is the organizer, not our embassy. Open air lunch break after four hours of driving. The Mongolian friends and the Vietnamese brought no food along because the protocol department gave assurances to take care of meals. The road from Pyongyang to Wonsan is in good condition. Everywhere you see Chinese volunteers. Arrival in Wonsan at around 1900 hours. The Intourist [state travel agency] hotel was unable to provide a meal in time.

2nd DAY

10 October

Departure from Wonsan. En route visit to a fishing harbor. Fish processing involves women, in part with children on their back, equipped just with a knife who slaughter fish on the bare ground. There were two fishing cutters sitting in the harbor. On one of them participants in the excursion had a one-hour tour to the open sea. You are sailing past very picturesque and steep overhanging cliffs.

After a 6-hour car ride arrival in Onjeongli (location for our stay in Geumgangsan). The entire coastal area, where the street is running through, is mined. The visitors were accommodated in scarcely renovated and primitively equipped Korean houses. The kitchen was not prepared for our arrival: There was hardly any food. During dinner in the tent, we figured that the Foreign Ministry had not prepared any kind of schedule for the visit to the mountains. Mr. Ri said the protocol department had instructed him to figure out options for a visit on site with the tourists.

3rd DAY

11 October

Accompanied by a mountain guide from Intourist the visitors depart for the mountains. The first part of the route is done by car. Very soon we had to leave the cars since the road became impassable. Halfway to the destination, different opinions were expressed in the group. The Intourist guide proposed to walk deeper into the mountains, while a Czechoslovak friend and the Soviet friends disagreed. The latter said there is nothing to see there except for rocks, but they wanted to visit the lake in the valley. The Chinese and other friends, however, wanted to move on. Apparently Mr. Ri from the protocol department was unable to handle the situation. When he asked Colleague Glückauf for his opinion, the latter said he himself does not care which route to take. However, it would be bad if the group, which so far had acted together, will split up. Yet the participants headed by the Czechoslovak friend insisted on their opinion. Especially the Czechoslovak friend railed with extremely drastic words against the bad organization of the excursion. Ultimately, the Chinese friends and the other group members refrained from walking further into the mountains and came along to the lake.

4th DAY

12 October

On this day we had a day trip to the waterfalls. They were in 4 kilometer distance on a route leading through rough terrain. After we visited the waterfalls, the Intourist guide suggested to continue the climb with those interested to visit the lakes located above the waterfalls. Though he hinted the path will be in part steep and difficult, everybody (except for two women and a Mongolian friend) came along since nobody had concrete ideas what may be ahead. In our opinion, it was entirely irresponsible to have the group join this climb. The way up was, as one can certainly say, life-threatening. In part, the climb had to be accomplished on wooden ladders with rotten staves et cetera. Mr. Ri said a decision has been already made by the Cabinet of Ministers (it had been made this spring, R. Glückauf) to repair the facilities in Geumgangsan. We also spotted pioneer units who repaired the car road for now. When the group returned to its quarters, a discussion began about next day's program. Previously Mr. Ri had promised it will be possible to visit the so-called coastal Geumgangsan. He had negotiated accordingly with the military commander of the area, and it was said we will be provided with a military vessel for that purpose. However, now Mr. Ri informed the vessel embarked on a nightly raid on the sea. It would be uncertain whether the boat will return in time until tomorrow morning. Ultimately we agreed to have a final discussion early tomorrow morning about the program for the day.

5th DAY
13 October

After it became clear the promised boat will be unavailable, the Intourist guide suggested to make a tour all day long to a nearby mountain. Yet there was no agreement on this. The Chinese friends stated they are not tourists. In general, they wanted to see the most scenic parts of Geumgangsan. Even if there are no chances to visit the interior of Geumgangsan, as well as coastal Geumgangsan, they still do not intend to spend their time climbing but prefer to return home. The Soviet friends proposed to return to the lake to hunt and fish. Most group members, however, thought this to be an unnecessary waste of time. Ultimately one agreed to follow the suggestion of the Czechoslovak friend to return to Wonsan. En route one could visit the cascade electricity plant where Czechoslovak specialists are on site. We departed after the participants paid their bills with the local Intourist (by the way, they charged inexplicable high rates).

After we had left, Mr. Ri said he was happy that nobody got in trouble. We are not far from the DMZ. There had been frequent incidents in this area when South Korean bandits kidnapped North Korean officials and abducted them to South Korea. This is why Mr. Ri said to have been very concerned for our safety. He told us that recently a half-Korean was arrested who traveled around in the country and pretended to be a Soviet adviser. After the enemies almost never succeed any more to infiltrate agents into the North, they now attempt to abduct officials to South Korea in order to gather intelligence. Since they know that many officials visit Geumgangsan, this area is especially targeted by the enemies. There even exists reliable information from friends in South Korea, Mr. Ri asserted, that the enemies are especially eager to abduct foreigners.

En route it turned out that the Czechoslovak friend did not know exact directions. Suddenly the Chinese friends did not want to move on any more since they were afraid to run out of gas. After lengthy discussions, we finally proceeded and got lost in the midst of a military facility. It was telling that guards on duty allowed us right in. When the road ended, nobody knew where to go next. The Soviet friends suggested to move out of the military facility as soon as possible. Most of our cars moved on, only the one of the Chinese friends stayed behind. Mr. Ri asked our driver to wait as well and went to talk to the Chinese friends. It turned out the Chinese friends had approached the meanwhile arrived commanding general of the facility for gasoline. Mr. Ri was very upset about this and called the Chinese behavior undisciplined. We then asked for the correct route and ultimately visited the dam and the electricity plant. When we returned to Wonsan, it turned out that the Chinese car even had excess gasoline left.

6th DAY
14 October

After we had visited the city until 1100 hours in small groups, a harbor tour was planned on a motor boat due to a promise by the Chairman of the City Committee. However, Mr. Ri regretted to tell us it will be impossible to use the motor boat since it went out for fishing. Instead the group will be transported by a rowboat to a nearby island. When we arrived at the harbor, we had to note that also a rowboat was unavailable. At the quay, however, a large trawler was anchored. This trawler provided us with a lifeboat which was supposed to bring us to the island we could see from afar. Our disappointment was great when we were dropped not at the island, but on a pier after just five minutes. Mr. Ri apologized he can do nothing about this. Yet he said to have talked to the captain of the trawler. The latter had promised to drive us around in the harbor once he succeeded in repairing the ship over the next one and a half hours. We had no choice but to agree on this. After 30 minutes

already, the trawler picked us up. On board we met the Romanian Minister for Foreign Trade who now shared our fate with his delegation. We were given the opportunity to inspect the ship from top to bottom. We were surprised to see it was a trawler (Number 4261) built and perfectly equipped in 1955 by the People's Wharf Factory in Stralsund [GDR Baltic Sea port]. We talked with Mr. Ri about it and asked him whether there are more fishing trawlers of this size in Korea. He said he has heard there might be 4 or 5 of this size.

In the afternoon our group visited the College for Agriculture. It is located inside a former German monastery in the vicinity of Wonsan. The monastic building was partly destroyed in the war but has now been restored to its original look. Comrade Ognyev, who knew the building from before the war, however noted the interior had completely changed. We had a brief talk with the college's vice director. We were interested in the large library of German books which had previously existed in the monastery. The vice director said the major part of the library was brought to the Central State Library in Pyongyang already before the war. There it got lost during the war. Books remaining in the college mostly consisted of bibles and other religious literature. When the Americans occupied the building during the war, they used them for heating purposes. The vice director assured there currently is nothing left in the building from the former library. He advised, however, to check with the Central Library in Pyongyang whether maybe something has survived.

7th DAY

15 October

Before we went on the return trip to Pyongyang, we visited for an hour the railway repair factory in Wonsan. This factory is rebuilt since 1954 with the help of Polish specialists. In general, the factory still looks badly destroyed. Only two major workshop halls are close to completion. We have to say we expected more progress to be made, after all we had heard about the factory before. Currently, there are 4 engines under general repair and 8 engines there for partial fixes - all of them in open air. The Polish specialists we questioned said work is lagging behind schedule due to a lack of workers.

The excursion was finished with the arrival in Pyongyang at 1900 hours.

Assessment:

The course of the entire excursion was very negatively affected by the bad organization. Instead of taking care of matters itself, the Foreign Ministry too much relied on Intourist. The man from the protocol department lacked the ability to get something organized on site. Differences of opinion within the group were a result of promises made both by Mr. Ri and the mountain guide from Intourist. They offered opportunities for visits from which they backtracked the following day, claiming the promised is not going to work at all. All participants were especially displeased with the inability of Intourist to provide food and meals.

In spite of all these listed and unlisted deficits, the journey to Geumgangsan was still useful. Even though it was just a small part, we had the opportunity to get to know one of the most scenic areas in Korea. The Korean friends intend to build the Geumgangsan area into an international resort. We are of the opinion that the beauty of Geumgangsan is certainly justifying this claim.

[signed] Glückauf

[signed] Fischer [GDR Ambassador]