Falling German birthrate dispels baby miracle myth [DE] [1]

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EXCERPTS

In baby-starved Germany, the hip eastern Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg appears to be nothing short of a miracle. Strollers jam the sidewalks and block the narrow cafes. The playgrounds of the largely gentrified Helmholtzplatz in the northern part of the neighborhood crawl with infants and toddlers, ringing with their cries and the creak-squeak of swings.

Henrike Peresse, 33, at a park with her year-old son, Malo, says she feels comfortable in the child-friendly area and repeats what is conventional wisdom here. "It's the neighborhood with the most children in Europe." This bold but common statement is usually accompanied by speculation that there might be something in the water that promotes the area's mythic fertility. Those who are not ready for children are even warned to steer clear.

Treasure hunts most often end in disappointment, and this one is no exception. The Prenzlauer Berg miracle is the reproductive equivalent of fool's gold, what demographers are calling an example of false fecundity. "If you look at the different quarters of Berlin, Prenzlauer Berg has one of the lowest birthrates," says Reiner Klingholz, director of the Berlin Institute for Population and Development, who has been trying to debunk the myth since late 2004 with mixed results.

Still, it is hard not to see the allure that some miraculous reversal of the rapid graying of its population would hold for Germany, and for other countries around the globe facing the same trend.

A United Nations report this year called this global aging "a process without parallel in the history of humanity" and predicted that people older than 60 would outnumber those under 15 for the first time in 2047.

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Although the German government has begun to address the issue, it was particularly slow out of the blocks in dealing with its low birthrate, and, since 2003, the contraction of its population, in that first year by just 5,000 people, but in 2006 by a 130,000. The German population stands at 82.4 million people.

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Chancellor Angela Merkel and her minister for family affairs, Ursula von der Leyen, have made it a prominent issue. A program known as Elterngeld, or, literally translated, parent money, which began this year, replaces up to two-thirds of a new parent's salary to a maximum of 1,800 euros a month, about $2,530, if he or she decides to stay home. It replaced a program that only helped lower-income families with at most 450 euros, about $630, a month.

The new program lasts for a year for one parent or 14 months if both mother and father share the time off. The government has allocated 4 billion euros, about $5.6 billion, a year for the program, which it reported fulfilled all expectations in the first half of the year, with applications rising to 140,000 people in the second quarter from 60,000 in the first.

The federal government will spend another 4 billion euros as part of a 12 billion euro program including city and state money to build day care centers in 2008 through 2013. Officials expect to add 500,000 slots to a total of 750,000, filling a dire need. "That would mean one day care spot for every third child under 3 years old. Today there is one for every 10 children," said Iris Bethge, a spokeswoman for the ministry.

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Parents at Helmholtzplatz, whose incomes vary widely, expressed far greater support for the building of day care centers than for Elterngeld, in large part because of a perceived bias since the payoff is based on earnings. "They want the rich people to have children and not the poor," said Catherine Girke, 37, who has a daughter and three sons.

"It would be better if they focused on providing enough day care spots," said Ms. Peresse, suggesting that all the money should go to building centers and then subsidizing the cost for parents. "That would be a real inducement to have children."

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