

MIDNIGHT IN BERLIN - 2 AND 3 OCTOBER 1990

A *Festrede* to mark the
Tag der Einheit
[German Unification Day]

By
Gregory J Thwaite

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For a boy growing up on the semi-rural North Shore of the 1950's, Berlin was a distant and mysterious city. Even, a sinister one. Our fathers in the neighbourhood, then men only in their 30s, were veterans by land and sea of the hard campaigns in Europe and North Africa.

After something called The Wall was built in 1961, and the handsome President Kennedy with an elegant wife made a speech which people cheered wildly, Berlin somehow seemed half-friendly and half-free. A darkness cloaked the other half.

Unusually, four of us studied German for three years in high school. We had a teacher half-time, so we spent the other half studying German out of a textbook as if it was Latin. We grappled with the grammar, read Heinrich Heine's *Die Lorelei* and the whimsical verse of Wilhelm Busch, and learnt about the Black Forest. That is: Düsseldorf; Hanover; Stuttgart. No Berlin. This study ended in 1972.

The 1985/86 year was spent at a University in Boston, USA. Hans-Jürgen, a Prussian from Berlin, became a good friend. He found my ideas of Germany rather antiquarian.

Visiting England in 1989, I resolved to set foot in Berlin. Flying British Airways, as each Occupying Power - Britain, the USA, the Soviet Union, and France – was restricted to one airline.

The plane landed in Tempelhof. A cramped, simple, inner-city airport, with a plaque for the Raisin Bombers delivering food in the 1948 Soviet road blockade.

Hans-Jürgen was away from Berlin, but put me in the hands of his friend Rüdiger, a student friend from Tübingen days. He brought along his brand-new girlfriend Barbara. My new friends took me to the middle of Berlin. I learnt three things not in the grammar book: the German love of limitless speed on an *Autobahn*; the large amount of forest in West Berlin; and the tall *Mietskasernen* apartment buildings with their inner courtyards.

Every foreigner wanted to confront Communism by staring at the Berlin Wall. We approached the Reichstag via the large Tiergarten park. The Building sat just inside West Berlin, glum and largely vacant. The real Government lay still in Bonn.

A stone's throw away stood the sturdy, practical Wall, barbed wire and all. East German border guards could be glimpsed, going about a day's work.

Immediately behind the Wall, directly to the rear of the Reichstag, stood a brick building with boarded-up window's. A couple of minutes away loomed the Brandenburg Gate. Further to the right was a vacant lot, within the Wall perimeter. In the 1920s it had been the lively Potsdamer Platz, as captured in the frenetic painting of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.

The horse sculptures atop the Gate were apt for the political situation of paralysis: they depicted energy, but it was frozen in time. An atmosphere of desolation, neglect, and indifference to human community, with a hint of violence.

The next day Hans-Jürgen took me across to East Berlin. *Drüben* - Over there - it was known as *Die Hauptstadt der DDR* - "The Capital of the German Democratic Republic". For the fiercer West Berliners, the one authentic word was "German".

We queued in separate lines to obtain a visa - he as a West Berliner, I as an Irishman. Next we queued to sell our Deutschmarks at a depressed rate for the compulsory minimum of East German Marks.

All this under the observation of healthy young men in uniforms, who could have been doing real work in a productive area of the economy. Above, in the ceiling of the Friedrichstraße Station, a man with a rifle paced a walkway.

Ten we walked the streets. Very little traffic. Most cars were the tiny Trabants.

Prominent on Unter den Linden stood a statue of King Friedrich the Great, of Prussia. Unexpected, but a Communist signal that History decreed that the one cultural Germany is to be divided into different political Germanies. The publicity for the former Archduchy of Weimar, and its poet and statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, sent the same signal. The inclusive word Deutschland was shunned.

The remnants of the Soviets were visible on many buildings, as bullet holes. The atmosphere was one of gentle decay. Historic buildings e.g. the Opera House, the Red Town Hall, the Cathedral, and handsome 19th century ones, as well as monotonous tall DDR apartment buildings and plain office buildings.

We found the statue of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, looking suitably wise and genial. [After Unification, one wit graffitied the base: "We are sorry, not our fault, we will do better next time."]. The absence of commercial advertising was conspicuous. The Five-Year Plans rendered it redundant.

To dispose of East Marks, bookshops were high on our list. In one, a Border Guard still in uniform looked like a poster boy for the DDR state, as he flipped through the collection of Marxist literature.

A book on Roman law appealed, published that year in Berlin and Weimar. Its introduction recognises *Klassenkampf* (Class Warfare) in Roman law, and carefully analyses the

distinctions between capitalist law and the law of the DDR. I keep as a bookmark the transit visa DU 1267044, which permitted travel to the West, but only in the time necessary for my immediate journey through the DDR.

We finished off in a modest café, for coffee and cake to use up the DDR money. The waitress was distinctly reserved, and took the tip curtly. Likely a neutral caught up in the Class Warfare. Still, a psychic Wall now stood between her and my friend, although they lived only kilometres apart and spoke German with the same accent.

One subway served both parts of Berlin, but responsibility was split. At the border station, the middle-aged male driver in the East German uniform took up his lunchbox and nodded brusquely to the replacement for the further trip westward, who was a young casually dressed woman from the West.

People in the East were subdued. Their public places were quiet. All in all, a well-run police state.

Yet looking back, two incidents anticipated events of the year later:

1. An honour guard of soldiers goose-stepped from the Zeughaus on Unter den Linden to the Memorial for the Victims of Fascism. Complete with helmet, rifle, and bayonet. Another soldier, dressed like an officer emerged from the Zeughaus. He stood and watched, with his hands cheerfully in his pockets. A staggeringly casual attitude towards his men and towards the memorial ceremony, which celebrated the heart of DDR history and authenticity.

2. The queue to depart included a family: a grandmother, a couple, and two children. The man kept moving forward the ten or so suitcases and bags as the line moved. Presumably a family with an exit visa, and all its belongings.

The incidents suggested firstly that those in authority had lost faith in the DDR philosophy, and secondly that those not in authority wanted to leave.

I flew back to California, confident that the trip to Berlin was a once-in-a-lifetime detour to a city tumbling in a slow collapse.

But, times were a-changing. By 1990 I was living in Cologne. Television had showed trainloads of East Germans leaving Hungary and steaming into West German cities amid scenes of jubilation. Eventually East Germany just slid into West Germany, as a diplomat of the era predicted.

At Cologne, all trains were booked out on 2 October, except the earliest. In the dark I followed the tramline's path from my friend Pierre's house to the station. People were crammed into the carriages. Nobody cared too much about tickets.

It was a historic day for the women and men of the Rhineland. Even miraculous. Because, in my experience, rarely do they travel willingly to Berlin. As the archetypical Rhinelanders Dr Konrad Adenauer used to say as his train crossed the Elbe, "Now we are in Asia".

The train slowed markedly when it reached East Germany. The low quality of the East German tracks. Their repair was high on the list for our solidarity taxes.

The people visible from the train looked listless. Stillness covered the land. At a small train station, an East German railway official, in full uniform with enough medals for a Soviet General, gazed up and down the full length of the modern train. Her face was a look of resignation, and even bewilderment. Quite rightly so: only the land and the people endured. As Karl Marx might say, the whole superstructure of government, philosophy, and economy, had been blown away.

West Berlin was crowded and festive. A group of us spent the afternoon in one of those elegant Berlin cafés, and then ended up outside the Reichstag in the dark. A large crowd of peaceful and cheery people. Overwhelmingly German. Some arrived from the Tiergarten in the west, and others streamed in under the Brandenburg Gate from the east. Some wore bits of German border guard uniforms; some carried flags (one being the Kaiser's battle flag).

Somewhere on a platform the leaders of the about-to-be-united Germany were assembled.

- President Richard von Weizsäcker, whose outstanding personal qualities were to be devoted to harmonising the different parts of Germany.
- Former Chancellor Willy Brandt, known affectionately as *Weinbrand Willy* for a human failing, whose wisdom was that "What belongs together, must grow together".
- The Man of the Hour, the Chancellor Dr Helmut Kohl, who had seized the moment to put the nation back together.

Somewhere, probably to the back, stood a parson's daughter from the East. She had carefully avoided politics and focused on physics. Over the years, step by step, as the men around her faded, Dr Angela Merkel reached the Chancellorship.

At first the atmosphere was restrained, perhaps hesitant. This was the first ever peaceful formation of a united Germany, even if the procedure was short on democratic participation.

At midnight, just as at *Sylvester* (New Year's Eve), fireworks exploded. Glorious music soared - I believe, *Land of Hope and Glory* from the Englishman Edward Elgar. People cheered and whistled. Hugs and handshakes broke out.

Nobody ventured a speech: Unification spoke for itself, with no human intermediary.

A foreigner, I felt an intruder among the enlarged German family. It was like a clan reunion, where people need space to meet distant wilder cousins for the first time.

A young German man beside me tapped me on the shoulder. This felt ominous. Maybe a nationalist who had heard my accent? Was I to glimpse the *furor Teutonicus* of which the first century BC Roman poet Lucan wrote and about which Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was so anxious - the "German vigour"?

I turned. He held up a beer bottle: *Haben Sie einen Flaschenöffner?* - Do you have a bottle opener?

I showed him a trick we used in the Takapuna 3rd Grade rugby team. You apply the top of one bottle to open another. This discovery thrilled him. The 40 or so German law graduates or law students who've been in my law office hear with amusement and perhaps scepticism that it was I who brought this technique to Germany on Unification Day.

Margaret Thatcher was wrong I realised. All safe for a generation: the chap is friendly to foreigners, a bit disorganised, and focused on a beer. Of course, we now stand a generation later.

Along with Hans-Jürgen's cousins, natives of East Berlin, we walked to their apartment. The building was shabby, the street showed war damage, and public lighting was dim.

As we neared their home, a line of vehicles turned a corner and drove past us. Slowly. At the front a jeep lead, in the colours of the *Bundesgrenzschutzpolizei* - (Federal Border Police) and behind a number of trucks. Asserting jurisdiction.

Revolving blue lights on the roof of each vehicle traversed the deserted street, and broke into the shadows. In the west the entry would have seemed part of the Unification. But in that street, at that time, the convoy felt like an occupying army.

In the fascinating five years that followed, the German people and their busy diplomats strove mightily:

- (a) to integrate the two parts that belong together,
- (b) to strengthen bonds with the European Union countries, after 1992,
- (c) to forge relations with the sliver of nations from Poland southwards, which were undergoing their own transition, and
- (d) to maintain and develop relations with a new Russia which was undergoing severe convulsions, while firmly repatriating the soon former Soviet troops in the eastern sector of Germany.

A passer-by could tell which former Wehrmacht barracks in Potsdam had been evacuated. The windows gave the clue. When the pane of glass and the frame was absent, that window, plus the occupants were on the long road back to Russia.

What may be the meaning of the Berlin midnight of 2/3 October 1990?

- A spiritual view is that Good triumphed over Evil, and Communism collapsed. As Lord Byron wrote in another context:

*For the might of the Gentile
unsmote by the sword
has melted like snow
in the glance of the Lord.*

- An economic one is that the free market, in combination with democracy, exhausted an authoritarian regime operating a command economy.
- A nationalist one is that the collection of the German-speaking parts in the centre of belong together, whether they originated as kingdoms, principalities, archduchies, free cities, Archiepiscopal realms, or abbeys.
- An urban one, particularly held in Berlin, is that any division of a large, successful, and historic city, is artificial and will be short-term, when imposed by the force of arms.

- A common sense one is that a person in the Kreuzberg neighbourhood should be able to walk a kilometre to a suburb in the eastern area, enjoy a *Bratwurst*, buy a newspaper, meet a friend, and drink a local beer.

Maybe one meaning is correct. Maybe all are correct. Maybe none is correct.

The era of internationalism that took flame at midnight on 2 October 1990 was dampened at midday on 20 January 2017. Then the patriot Donald Trump assumed office as President of the USA. A ceremony which I also attended, as marking the other bookend of a benign era.

And what of Rüdiger and Barbara, with whom my adventure began? Well, the romance bloomed. They must have passed their 25th wedding anniversary. Each has achieved success as a jurist. Their home is one of harmony and hospitality. They have raised two fine young men, one of whom spent a year in New Zealand.

Governments may come and Governments may go. Economies swell and shrink. The human soul endures, with its urge for individual companionship.

The opening sentence of the Grundgesetz - the provisional Constitution of 1949 - sums up the humanist experience of the 20th Century: *Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar* - "The value of the human being must not be violated".

I might finish with a passage that I was assigned to read at the church wedding for my godson James and his German bride Chrissi. Now the parents of little twin girls in the Rhineland. The grandparents are with us today. Another godson, my nephew Simon, has a companion who is another Rhineland girl, and the third, Christian of Frankfurt, has Swabian/St Petersburg parentage.

Martin Luther, the "little monk" from Saxony rendered into German the words of the Apostle Paul, in his translation of the New Testament printed in 1545 A.D.:

Nu aber bleibt Glaube Hoffnung Liebe diese drey Aber die Liebe ist die groessest unter jenen.

"There endure only faith, hope and love. These three. But love is the greatest among them."