

The following two articles about Die Wende appeared in New Zealand newspapers in 1990, soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall. They were later translated and included in Dies ist eine wahre Geschichte, an anthology of writing by New Zealand authors in Berlin (DAAD/Goethe-Institut 2002).

THE MORNING AFTER

When the Berlin Wall was opened on 9th November [1989], it was the end of a nightmare for millions of East Germans. Euphoria and thanksgiving punctuated the climactic weeks that followed. But the end of the Wall has also provoked strong feelings of loss, bitterness and anxiety. PHILIP TEMPLE reports on the experiences and perspectives of two very different East Berliners.

1 -JUTTA

Jutta offered me tea and cake in the house that Hitler built. Semi-detached with a garden, it stood in a 1930s East Berlin housing development for working families. Outside, warm February sunshine stroked the bare fruit trees with a false spring. With evident pleasure, Jutta arranged the flowers I had brought from West Berlin. Between October and April it was not possible to buy flowers in the east.

She told me: 'When I first heard that the Wall was open, I had a feeling of relief, of release from jail after serving a sentence of more than 28 years. But no euphoria. Friends who rang me from overseas were much happier about the situation than I was. The strongest feeling I had was one of mourning. For the 30 lost years of my life. I thought- "They have stolen 30 years of my life. What for ? What for?" She began to cry.

I first met Jutta in the sub-zero snows of January 1987. She was the old school friend of a Berliner who had emigrated to New Zealand. 'You should meet her when you are there,' he said. 'Jutta will be so happy to see someone from the west.' A translator, Jutta had specialised in English and Spanish but had never visited Spain or England. As a non-Party member, her opportunities for work were severely restricted, her opportunities to travel almost non-existent.

It was my first crossing of the Wall. The Vopos at the Friedrichstrasse Station checkpoint enjoyed their power to intimidate with a stare. As one examined my everyday notebook with scrupulous care, there was the suggestion of a game. But a frightening game whose rules were entirely in the hands of one's opponents.

Jutta was waiting for me on the other side, standing discreetly behind a small impassive crowd of grey waiters on good news from the west. We recognised each other from agreed signs: a head scarf, beard, spectacles. She greeted me quietly, careful not to attract attention.

Beyond the confines of the station she relaxed and we soon found rapport in talk about books, films, politics. I felt rich and privileged, feeding her hunger for information about new events, trends and ideas. As we walked down icy streets scarred by wartime bullets, past a museum ruined in the bombing holocaust, I seemed to have entered a time warp. Past events, decaying dogma and old secrets were preserved behind a Wall that seemed both absurd and deadly serious.

Courtesy of my credit card, we ate at the plush Palast Hotel, reserved for visitors and officials with hard western currency. Here we had to be discreet again. Whom of the curious eavesdroppers might be one of the 160,000 strong network of informers for the STASI? But it was difficult to subdue my outrage as Jutta spoke of the restrictions on her freedoms. 'What is most difficult for me to accept,' she said, 'is that I have worked hard all my life, believing in my country, in the socialist way. I don't want to leave my home. But now, at the age of 48, I am still treated like a child. Told what I can read, where I can go. They do not trust me, allow me to make judgments and decisions for myself.'

As we said goodbye at the Friedrichstrasse checkpoint, I began to invite her to visit me in West Berlin. Then realised that she would never be able to obtain a permit. I could express only helplessness, sorrow and anger.

Over the following three years I visited Jutta several times at her home. Each time I took items of food -such as coffee or oranges - that were difficult to obtain in the east. It was too dangerous to carry western newspapers or magazines, but I always stuffed a novel or two into the bottom of my bag. I met her husband, Meck, whose career as an architect had also shrivelled under the pernicious restrictions on non-Party members. The same system, impersonally vicious, had denied him the right to visit his dying mother in West Germany, or attend her funeral.

Within the walls of restrictions Jutta and Meck, with their son Markus, turned - like hundreds of thousands of others - to the satisfactions and joys of private and family life and a network of trustworthy friends. The network was not only emotionally, intellectually or spiritually rewarding. It performed a vital practical function. So many of the basic requirements of life, from onions to nails, were hard to find, so much time was spent searching and queuing, that the network grapevine was essential to the mechanics of day-to-day existence. Services such as car or household repairs were also hard to arrange so that friends traded skills.

Visiting Jutta and her friends, I became aware of an uncanny similarity to life in New Zealand, as it was in the 1950s and early 1960s. Like East Germany, that New Zealand was an isolated small country. There were restrictions on travel (financial controls) and some consumer goods and services were hard to obtain. Under a social welfare umbrella, it was a classless and often colourless society with a puritan ethic where emphasis was placed on family and friends.

There the similarities ended. That older New Zealand had hope and freedom, growth and an open future. East Germany had been locked in a cold, grey past by masters whose thinking had been moulded by the terrors and blunt ideologies of the 1930s and 1940s.

Jutta was educated during the 1950s, brought up to build a socialist future. She was 22 when the Wall was built in 1961. Her hopes of a travelling career as interpreter and linguist disappeared. 'I tried hard to live with the Wall, to understand and accept all the ideological explanations.' For years she worked for an international socialist women's rights organisation. And saw her country systematically violate the human rights provisions of international agreements it had solemnly signed. Friends and colleagues were jailed simply for expressing points of view different to the Party line.

Jutta continued to believe that socialism was right, though her rulers were wrong. From a distance, she lent her support to the activities of socialist groups in Spain. But as these splintered and lost direction, she became disillusioned. 'I began to doubt the very essence of my belief.'

When the Communist system in East Germany collapsed, it seemed to her as if the entire basis for her life had gone with it. 'I have lived all my life with two Germanies. But without the socialist system there is no East Germany. It has never existed in any other form... The rational consequence is reunification.'

She dismissed suggestions that there were some benefits of communism - social security, classlessness, common ownership - that should not be lost in the stampede towards capitalism. 'Those are simply the ideals of western intellectuals. They haven't lived here. They have no idea what it is like to live under a socialist system. It doesn't work. It does not function. I cannot listen any more to ideas about working for a socialist future.'

Jutta, Meck and all the rest of their East German compatriots now have freedom - the freedom to travel, to read what they like, to say what they think, to vote for whom they like. But now they have the sanctions of poverty. Despite a long working life, Jutta and Meck directly own very little in the way of material goods. What money they have has little value outside East Germany. As the economy begins to fall apart, there are fewer and fewer goods and services available. Only a few kilometres away lie the riches of West Berlin. The doors of the big western department stores are open, but Jutta and Meck have little to spend.

The new freedoms have brought new hardships and anxieties. Choices are more apparent than real in a country where no-one knows which rules apply from one week to the next. Jutta has had no work for two months. She can claim no unemployment benefit because unemployment does not exist, of course, in a communist state. Meck comes home with rumours that his design institute is to be closed down. For son Markus, aged 19, the future seems to hold much more promise than it could ever have done under the old regime. But he expresses anxiety about whether the qualifications he has been working towards as a draughtsman will be acceptable in a new state dominated by West Germany. Around them, social services begin to falter. Hospital wards close as many nurses and doctors exchange Marx for marks in the west. Jutta's best friend is a pediatrician. Alone she runs a clinic designed for four doctors, coping with 80-100 children a day. In good socialist fashion she also brings up her own two children, joins queues for food and tries to find someone to repair the chronically leaking roof of her house.

Jutta interrupted me to turn on the television. 'I must watch the news. Every day now something new and important happens.' Today, the news is of the latest currency union proposals between East and West Germany, and dismantling of the Wall near the Brandenburg Gate.

It seemed a long way from that snowy January three years before when I first met Jutta. The world was changing shape between breakfast and lunch. I could offer Jutta and Meck no suggestions or advice. Only

sympathy and understanding for a future that was beyond prognostication. If nothing else, I could - at last - take them to dinner in West Berlin.

THE MORNING AFTER 2- JÜRGEN

The silhouette of the Reichstag in West Berlin - its gigantic West German flag starkly triumphant - loomed over the dark dereliction of East Berlin near the Wall. The street before me was poorly lit, redolent of blocked sewers and brown coal smoke. Incongruously among the crumbling facades, a neon sign glinted through the gloom - 'Die Möwe' (The Seagull). I wondered if I had clearly understood my friend's instructions. The sign seemed more appropriate to the darker side streets on the western side of the Wall; not to the Club for the Artists' Trade Union of the German Democratic Republic.

Jürgen came down to the desk to meet me. A thickset and genial 46 year-old, he was director of a cultural research institute attached to the Ministry of Culture. I was seeking an informed, socialist viewpoint of the dramatic changes in East Germany and had been assured that Jürgen was my man. He guided me upstairs to the neo-classical salon of what had once been the 19th century town house of a Prussian nobleman. Jürgen told me that it had become The Seagull (after Chekhov's play) when occupying Russians had declared it a centre for artists.

As we sat down for a meal Jürgen said, with a shrug, 'It was a great emotional shock, the opening of the Wall. It has all been too much, too fast. People have become both confused and withdrawn. They have lost their..... their....' He groped for the word. '..... their serenity.' But surely their new freedoms were compensation? Jürgen thought for a moment and said, 'Many bad things have happened over the past 40 years. Of course. But it was not all bad. The socialist experiment has failed. But there has always been a feeling of security in our society, and a spirit of friendship and co-operation. I like this. I don't want to fight and struggle.' He leaned back and tried to attract the attention of the waitress. There was only one to serve perhaps thirty patrons. Staff shortages had become chronic in all spheres of life as up to 2000 people a day continued to flow from east to west.

He gave up, gesturing apologetically, and added: 'I can't say I've had a bad life. I have my books and my friends. I don't need so many material things. Perhaps a new car.....' Jürgen seemed content with his lot, curious rather than perturbed about the uncertain future. But then, life for a long-serving member of the SED, the Party, rarely had been too bad. There had been career opportunities, occasional travel to international conferences; privileges to soften the day-to-day rigours of life in an authoritarian state. Like membership of The Seagull, open only to those who had, at the very least, accepted the Party's role in the cultural life of the nation.

Jürgen was a genuine Berliner from the working-class suburb of Pankow. His father was a chauffeur, his mother a nurse. 'Without the free education of the socialist system, I could never have reached the position I am in today.' His membership of the FDJ, the Communist Youth, and then the Party had also helped. Becoming a doctor of law, with strong cultural interests, he had established the institute he now led, and become part of the massive bureaucracy which he was soon to blame for preventing change and development in East Germany.

Jürgen had joined the Party when he was 21. By then the Wall had been in place for three years. Was the Wall necessary? 'Yes. In 1961 we had to protect the socialist experiment; the attempts we were making to find new ways of co-operation in society. The boom of West German development was sucking out labour from East Germany. And we were continually subject to acts of sabotage.' He finally caught the attention of the waitress and secured a bottle of quaffable Riesling-style wine. We ordered from a menu where everything, no matter what the description, included pork.

I said, 'But surely the Wall restricted vital freedoms.' Jürgen leaned forward, emphasising his words with his hands. 'The Wall was a protection. Behind it we had all the security of the socialist system - free education and health care, the guaranteed right to work, the right to cheap housing.' The way he spoke, the system sounded ideal.

Jürgen went on: 'The problem was that it became an absolutist system.' He enjoyed the suggested parallel in this phrase with past régimes not necessarily socialist - perhaps the Kaiser's Reich, or Hitler's. 'The state said, "We will do the best for the people; but what that is, we will decide."' I agreed that had been the problem.

But hadn't he been able to do anything within the Party? He said, 'We tried hard for 40 years to build a better world, believing in the socialist way. But there was so much we didn't do because we were told - or felt - it was not good for the country. And we thought we could bring about change by influencing the leadership. But we failed and we members of the Party have a feeling of responsibility for that.' He pressed on, perhaps reading scepticism in my face. 'There have been many victims within the Party, as well as outside it.' Victims? 'Of the bureaucracy. Of the controls that became worse and worse as the economic situation deteriorated.'

So what did he think of Honecker and Company now? 'The younger ones - like Mittag - they became corrupt. But for Honecker I feel pity. It is a tragedy. He was convinced he was doing the best for the people but became increasingly unaware of what was happening in the country, increasingly isolated.' In the ghetto of country villas? Jürgen leaned forward again. 'That was part of it. Remember that Honecker spent twelve years in a Nazi jail. He had no real experience of freedom. He continued to have a prison mentality. Keeping close control on our society. Isolating himself. He was a victim of his own crime. And now it is a tragedy. A sick old man who has to go to a church to find a bed to sleep in.'

The meal I had been served was only just palatable; indistinguishable, it seemed, from all the meals at the other tables. To the accompaniment of the Club's soft rock muzak, I chewed on the idea of Erich Honecker, the builder of the Berlin Wall, the last champion of Stalinism, as a tragic victim. No matter how hard I tried, I could summon up little sympathy.

I met Jürgen once more, in his flat at the top of a six-storey high rise overlooking a busy arterial road and railway line in Friedrichshain. He had been there for three years, since his divorce, and regretted moving away from the older Pankow district where there was a greater sense of community. For his small one-bedroom apartment he paid 84 East German marks a month. At the official exchange rate that worked out at about \$28; at the unofficial, only \$8. The traffic noise was obtrusive but Jürgen had some comfortable pieces of furniture and the walls were lined with books which mostly disguised the rough finishing and the cracks. The shelves included the complete works of Marx, Engels and Lenin and a surprising collection of Western titles which, he explained knowingly, there were always ways of obtaining. Looking around his cramped flat, I reflected that, although he lived in relatively good circumstances for an East German, a man of comparable status in Munich or Hamburg would most likely drive a Mercedes to university from a comfortable villa in its own grounds in one of the better suburbs.

Jürgen placed before me a large bottle of excellent Berlin Pilsner. He wouldn't drink himself; he had to drive that evening and the blood alcohol limit in East Germany is zero-zero. He began talking about the confusion and fear in East Berlin. 'You know, people are hoarding, buying up anything they can lay their hands on - washing machines, anything - for fear the east mark will collapse..... nearly every family is losing someone in the migration to the west..... Ach, the problems... jetzt haben wir politische Freiheit bei ökonomischer Unfreiheit... now we have political freedom with economic 'unfreedom' ... and, you know, overnight they sacked everyone in the STASI (secret police). Eighty five thousand people without a job, no money. Already there is talk of them forming clandestine organisations to fight Fascism. There could be terrible trouble...'

And the Party? 'There is a great hate among the people towards the Party now. But it is really self-hate, at not doing anything about the situation before. And now it is difficult to make the right changes in the Party with the volatile situation in the country. There are 22 political parties, all fighting each other, rather than trying to reach consensus, to solve problems.'

Would he remain a Party member? He didn't know. On the one hand he didn't want to be disloyal, to be seen as one of the rats leaving the sinking ship. But on the other... 'The experiment of socialism in Europe is dead. There is no possibility of stopping the move towards a free market economy. At the same time, I hope that we will be able to bring about a new approach to socialism, a democratic socialism. In the cultural field, at least, there will be the chance to question and experiment from a different starting point to those in West Germany. Already people in the cultural field began to feel new strengths, ideas and opportunities, though there is a fear that this won't last. There is a trend towards nationalism, to look to the past for identity.' He became vehement. 'We cannot go back to our culture. We must go forward. There is a danger in trying to find our identity in the past.'

Jürgen had to leave. I accompanied him down in the creaking lift. We shook hands when we reached his car, a Wartburg, a cut above the ubiquitous, evil-smelling Trabants. 'Are you going to the theatre?' I asked. He laughed. 'No. I must visit my wife. Anyway, there is no need to go to the theatre. There is enough theatre in society!' Jürgen clearly enjoyed these exciting times. In continuing his research into life's cultural and political experiments, he would survive whatever the new Germany held in store for him.