

The Berlin Times

A special edition of *The German Times* marking October 3rd, the Day of German Unity

THE VENTURE CAPITAL

“Poor but sexy” no more. With real estate prices on the rise, is the German capital losing its unique allure among European metropolises? *The Berlin Times* tells it as it is

PARTY LIKE IT'S 1929

The hit TV show *Berlin Babylon* portrays the people and the excitement in the city in its final years of freedom during the Roaring Twenties. **page 3**

BASKETBALL NEVER STOPS

The Alba basketball team has developed a one-of-a-kind youth program – to find the next roundball star and teach all kids how to play the game. **page 5**

THE RAVAGES OF TIME

From Russian spies to haunted houses: The photographer Ciarán Fahey has captured both glorious and obscure Berlin relics of a time gone by. **pages 6–7**

CAPITAL CRIBS

The boom in luxury apartment buildings is but one reason for an increasingly tight real estate market. Who gets to live in the city tomorrow? **page 8**

A tale of many cities

Facets of meaning abound – in an ever-changing city. The novelist *Annett Gröschner* tells the tale of Berlin today

Berlin, Prenzlauer Allee, just behind the Ringbahn subway line. A drunk and staggering, somewhat shabby looking older woman with a second-hand cigarette butt in the corner of her mouth stretches her left fist into the air and shouts out to the folks waiting for the walk signal to flash green: “Enough of this nonsense! You all have enough blankies!”

I love these kinds of exclamations in public places. You surely hear them in most big cities, but in Berlin, where the locals – especially in the east and around the edges of the city – still foster a strong dialect, they are the most direct, at times mean and quite often comical.

The woman stands on the bridge over the Ringbahn, which demarcates the inner city from the outskirts of Berlin. Especially in the east and northeast of the city, the train line has become somewhat of a social barrier over the last ten years. Behind the Ringbahn bridge, SUVs turn into compact cars. As soon as pedestrians heading away from the inner city step off the bridge and onto solid ground, baby strollers suddenly become cheap or second-hand; coffee comes out of a big thermos and is actually called coffee – or Plörre, German slang for dishwasher; an ice cream cone costs 40 cents less; and you can try your luck at the slots in any number of one-room casinos well into the wee hours of the night. There are old people who spend all day perched on a pillow in their window sill gazing down at the street, lighting one cigarette

after the other. But there's also the well-dressed woman who, on early Sunday mornings, moves from one trash bin to the next in search of returnable bottles.

This year will make 35 I've spent in Berlin – just about the whole time in Prenzlauer Berg. In this hot summer of 2018, as I was walking across Schönhauser Allee, I felt a few drops of rain turn to steam on the crosswalk baking in the sun, and for a brief moment I was able to recall the expectations of that young woman who had just fled the countryside. The hopes I had back then were inseparably linked to the big city's olfactory reservoir at that time: the scent of lime blossoms and water sprayed on dry streets, mixed with the crueler smells of season-old potatoes, pissoirs and dead mice, sooty chimneys and lentil soup with bacon, that is, if you happened to venture through a building's gate to its back courtyard.

The dilapidation of the city dovetailed with my vanquished illusions of childhood, which begged for something new to take their place. The city's unrenovated spaces and cemeteries ensured that past generations were never far from our thoughts. Another constant presence in our lives was the insuperable concrete wall, which I never imagined I would see disappear. Its virtually over-night disappearance six years later marked the advent of a truly exhilarating time.

The first few years after the Wall fell are rhapsodized, often by people who weren't there, as a time when property, houses

and apartments – especially in the east – seemed to belong to no one. Money was not an issue. A new culture was emerging from the rubble, like the vinegar trees that come to life in autumn, in colors so vivacious, a box of watercolors could never echo them. But the two halves of the city, in their own right and in competition with one another, had lived beyond their means, a gargantuan self-service shop of corruption and subsidy. Thus,

at the start of the new millennium, the deeply indebted state of Berlin was forced to hawk its silverware, which included the sale of up to 60,000 apartments from non-profit housing associations at a give-away price to return-oriented, market-listed housing associations. There are barely any vinegar trees remaining today in the inner city; every once-vacant lot is developed, only rarely with social housing; open spaces for artists are shrinking; studios and rehearsal spaces have been repurposed or have simply become unaffordable.

Ten years after the start of the financial crisis, it is clear who got the short end of the stick in Berlin – the renters, i.e. the overwhelming majority of Berliners. Low interest rates have made real estate investment a high-yield endeavor, the result of which has been a continual rental-price explosion with particularly grim results for Berlin; for, in contrast to other European capitals, 86 percent of the city's 1.6 million apartments are rental

THE IDEA OF BERLIN WAS ALWAYS LARGER THAN THE LIVED REALITY

flats, 72 percent of which are owned by private lessors. The rest are divided between housing cooperatives and municipal housing associations. The fragmentation of entire rental houses into individually purchasable condominiums, expensive and often pointless façade insulation and a modernization allocation of 11 percent still make for an unfettered business model and a license to print money – a situation that is quickly becoming an irrevocable reality.

“Berlin, where have you gone?” asked Fabian Hinrichs in his 2013

performance “Die Zeit schlägt dich tot” (Time beats you to death). In his book of the same name, actor and essayist Hans Zischler argues that “Berlin is too big for Berlin.” It's one of the most truthful sentences I've ever read about Berlin. There are so many different ways one could interpret those words. One is that the idea of Berlin was always larger than the lived reality, and this contradiction produced decisions in Berlin that were disadvantageous to the rest of the world. Another is that Berlin transcends far beyond the conception any individual has of Berlin. The totality of opinions possessed by all 3.5 million Berliners on their city results in anything but a closed narrative.

Every Berliner who walks through the city sees something different. This fascinates me. A person who lives affluently in Zehlendorf moves through the city with a different orientation and knows a Berlin that is entirely different than that known to the young Turkish woman who grew up in Neukölln. The old woman I spoke to for years about Berlin, and who are now almost all dead, were tough and unsentimental, sometimes mean and scared of nothing.

Those coming to the city to find success never let their image of Berlin crumble, and when it does, they just rebuild it. One of the old women had a saying back then: “Everyone gets their slice of Berlin.” This is no less true today, only the slices have become more unfairly divided than they were 30 years ago.

Thus far, anyone who has come here with great plans and an arrogance stemming from prejudice has failed in Berlin. Even the worst blowhards who have been in town for just a day and start holding forth on the habits and customs of the city are swallowed up in a flash. One could say that Berlin has always drawn in people who would arrogate to clean up the city, and then rubbed their faces into the Brandenburg dust. The price has often been high, and sometimes required the help of others, as with the liberation of Berlin in 1945.

Unfortunately, there is at present a tendency to segregate, as it is commonplace in the big cities of the world. But Berlin has no such tradition, as one sees from the few villa districts in the southwest of the city. Living in close proximity to people with vastly different origins, income levels and education – a fin-de-siècle apartment block is a popular and revelatory example – was a wonderful peculiarity of Berlin. But now every pre-war apartment building is in great jeopardy. The “locals” – long-established tenants are now commonly referred to by this English or “new German” term – are seen as inherited liabilities among stacks of gold bricks. They are increasingly being forced out of their familiar neighborhoods in the inner city and deposited in the outskirts of town. Berlin, now as before, is a conglomerate of 3 cities, 59 villages and 12 former estates. Those who have lived in Prenzlauer

IT'S ABOUT EDUCATION, STUPID

Filmmaker and author *Güner Balci* argues that Germany is neglecting its immigrant children. A polemic

The misgivings harbored by many Germans with regard to migrants are steadfast and long-standing. This will not come as a surprise to anyone who has taken the time to examine the state of migrant integration in German society over the past decades. What is alarming, however, is the number of Germans who judge the failed integration of migrants and their children more harshly than they do the failings of their fellow Germans. It's not only those on the right who see every criminal with Turkish, Iraqi or Tunisian roots as an opportunity to demonize all migrants; they are not the only ones who sneer at "Kanake" talk, a derogatory term used to describe the German spoken among migrant youths that often comprises crude colloquialisms and expressions in their native tongues. In fact, no matter where they stand on the political spectrum, people who are quick to criticize migrants inevitably have one thing in common: a false sense of superiority.

Many of us in Germany have yet to learn how to share our lives with people who are "other." This seems to be a value and an approach to life that we rarely strive to achieve. Few people in Germany seem to even have the ability to view "strangers"

as equals. Today, this inability is creating an even greater rift in German society. All too often, public debate on integration is characterized by a willingness to focus solely on the shortcomings of "others."

Indeed, it would seem that for years no one has been prepared to take the social and political responsibility needed to be able to seek out and find new solutions. How else can we account for the fact that over several decades, large numbers of youth socialized in a Muslim context in Germany have consistently lost out in terms of education? How else can we explain why Germany's current government has not been able to fill a single cabinet post with a person with a "migration background"? And even after nearly 60 years of recruitment agreements, the prospect of having a head of state with Arab or Turkish roots remains wholly inconceivable.

A recent TV program examined the conditions at a school in the Berlin district of Neukölln where almost all students come from immigrant families, including so-called problem students, that is, those whose families depend on welfare funds (Hartz IV). The report begins by stating that 18 of the 24 students in the class arrive late for first period. We

are told that many parents fail to wake up in time to get their kids to school on time. According to the report, these kids are often made to attend school only to render their parents eligible for Kindergeld (child benefits – a social security payout for all parents and guardians). A teacher with a thick Eastern European accent – a man who thinks the plural of "crisis" is "crises" – is seen lamenting the lack of interest in education among his students. The film then shows close-ups of children who, though they appear self-conscious, are nevertheless proud to be the object of media attention. Although most of these students were born in Germany, not a single one of them can deliver a grammatically correct sentence in German.

Scenes such as these should be enough to warrant a thorough analysis of how and where things went wrong. How is it possible that huge numbers of children circumvent the legal obligation to attend school? How can this happen in a country that had a €48.1 billion GDP surplus in the first two quarters of 2018 alone. And what's wrong with the students themselves? Can it be possible that all their problems are related to their oft-cited "migration background"? In all honesty, do we even want them



Güner Balci

to be mixed in with the majority of students? Should they lead "normal" lives, where they attend school regularly, that is, where the state actually carries out its supervisory duty with regard to mothers and fathers who are overwhelmed by their circumstances? These children live marginalized lives in districts that many non-migrants actively avoid; and they are cared for and receive their education in kindergartens and schools that are widely known to be problematic.

Kids like these can be found throughout Germany, especially in areas where large numbers of immigrants reside. From a statistical perspective, they are the "losers" of German society. After all, the cold hard reality is that access to education is directly related to a child's social and economic background. For these

kids, the Muslim ghetto is their only place of influence, a place where the often romanticized traditional values of their grandparents' culture become the benchmark for their lives in Germany.

By the end of the TV report, attentive viewers will have begun to notice – almost accidentally – the longings and hardships etched into the heart and mind of one particular pimply-faced teenage boy. This boy with Turkish roots sits down and begins to play a piece on the piano – something he taught himself to do. His teacher admits that all these years, she's never known he could play piano.

It goes without saying that we cannot single out teachers as being solely responsible for the thousands of students who leave school every year without attaining their degree or with a certificate that condemns them to

dead-end jobs. This state of affairs is a consequence of massive political neglect, as well. In fact, the school featured in the TV report was slated to be shut down due to declining student numbers – a fact that was left unmentioned by the producers of the program, which was broadcast on German public television. Instead, the school became a repository for students who were not accepted elsewhere. Now, with an increased budget and new friendly-sounding support programs, the school has become an institution for those who are more or less biding time before a likely adulthood spent on Hartz IV or in prison. I guess it didn't occur to anyone to put the few remaining students into a different school.

Instead of disrupting a classroom populated by the children of the ambitious middle class, these children are left to fend for themselves, causing more strain on weary teachers and creating fertile terrain for Islamists in search of new souls. These are clearly not the goals of integration. ■■■

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A tale of many cities

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Publisher and liable for editorial content: Detlef Prinz

Printed in Berlin by Dogan Media GmbH An der Brücke 20-22 64546 Mörfelden-Walldorf

© Times Media GmbH, Tempelhofer Ufer 23-24, 10963 Berlin, Germany

www.times-media.de

Berg for decades feel displaced in places like Reinickendorf or Hohenschönhausen, especially when they haven't moved there voluntarily.

For decades, the poor in Berlin had always had a roof over their heads and a lock on their door. They have now become much more visible. Many people with precarious employment – and there are many in Berlin – who rely on the dole or are raising children alone are afraid of losing their homes and having to live on the street. I will never forget the moment when my almost 90-year-old neighbor came down the stairs

crying, a note in her hand informing her that her lease was being terminated because her landlord wanted to move into the apartment himself. But where to go if Berlin is the only place that gives you life, where no one gives a hoot if your hat's on crooked, your belly is big and round or your skin is dark? To live in abandoned shacks, allotment gardens or tents?

The number of born-Berliners who still live there is dwindling. At present the figure is 47 percent, while in Berlin Mitte, the city's most central and most gentrified district, it's only 34 percent.

As has always been the case, young people without a penny to their name are moving to Berlin to try their luck. They come from Brandenburg, Hamburg, from Dresden and from the Ruhr Valley, and despite the cliché, not so much from Swabia. In terms of non-Germans, most newcomers are from Poland, followed by Turkey, Russia, Syria and Bulgaria. In the past five years, Berlin has become a Noah's Ark, not only for refugees from Syria and Afghanistan, but for artists and intellectuals from Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Croatia and

even Great Britain, who cannot tolerate the rise of new nationalism in their countries or have lost their work prospects for political reasons. They are all forming communities that are more or less mixed, but often exist in parallel as well.

Most of the older generation of born Berliners is relatively composed in facing these changes. Their city has always reinvented itself anew, even during the time of the Wall, when it served as center stage for the Cold War.

Imagine, if you will, that all those who moved to the city over the past 30 years disappeared

for just 10 minutes, and with them their habits and customs, the tables lining the sidewalks in front of cafés, the late-night convenience stores, the fruits, spices and meals, and the ways of walking, dressing, dancing, working and raising families. Even the most parochial born-Berliners wouldn't wait a minute before screaming: "Enough of this nonsense!" ■■■

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