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Berlin Alexanderplatz, with its TV Tower and Hotel Stadt Berlin scraping the sky

IMAGO/PETER HOMANN

Sunset in the east

The culture of the GDR is fading with time

BY LEONID MLECHIN

November 9, 1989, was the day the world first experienced sympathy for the Germans. In fact, the international community was surprised to find out that that the Germans were even capable of experiencing deep human emotions. And it seems to me that East and West Berliners had never – neither before this day, nor after – been so truly happy for each other.

East Germany disappeared within a matter of days. No one from the GDR could have seen this coming. It had been the poster child for success and prosperity in the Eastern Bloc. Soviet leaders loved traveling to thriving East Germany, so that upon their return they could triumphantly proclaim: "Now that's how the socialist model is supposed to work!"

Then, suddenly, that modern-day Atlantis, that tangible proof of the righteousness of innovative ideas, disappeared from the political map of the world – not by will of celestial forces, not via natural disaster, not due to the guile of an insidious enemy, and not even through the fault of the few East German dissidents whom the authorities saw as their main enemy.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was a particularly significant event for our family, as my mother, Irina Mlechina, had devoted her life to 20th-century German literature. It was also the moment when my mother found herself on Alexanderplatz, the square she knew like the back of her hand.

She still remembered it as nearly empty, gloomy and bearing the wounds of war. Gradually, the square grew prettier, more developed and, perhaps in line with the architectural preference of the day, not very elegant. A huge hotel appeared, Hotel Stadt Berlin, where she stayed many times; the large Centrum department store was constructed, and filled predominately with visitors from socialist countries. Most of them were Poles and Russians, and there was even a joke that went around: "There's a shootout at Alexanderplatz. The Poles are defending their department store."

It does not mean that it was better then, nor does it mean that it's better now

But now the square looked completely different. It sparkled and shone!

The GDR collapsed overnight, yet the East German citizens themselves, in essence, regretted nothing, although still to this day part of the population of the "new German states" recalls that time with little or no remorse – Ostalgia, it's called, as Ost is German for "east." Like many Russian citizens who had wholeheartedly embraced perestroika, they became convinced that real democracy has failed. But something has in fact changed. And my mother misses that which has departed. She did not forget that in those bygone days, relations between people were structured along slightly different lines. This does not mean that it was better then, nor does it mean that it's better now. For her, it was always the individuals themselves and their own integrity that ultimately meant the most. She could only befriend decent people, and never could conceal her likes and dislikes.

But if decent people were forced in those – and these – times to play a specific social role imposed on them by time and history, from which they could not escape without heavy casualties, then how can we relate to this now?

It's not about executioners and murderers, nor those who marched over the corpses. It's about the people who did not do any harm, the people at Alexanderplatz on Nov. 4, 1989, who copied down the iconic author Christa Wolf's speech in their notebooks. Shortly thereafter, these same people would write her furious and threatening letters as she tried to explain away her associations with the Stasi and prove her identity as a true East German.

Freedom, guilt, responsibility – German literature in the second half of the 20th century offers the most brilliant and valuable material for reflecting on this theme. But then who will take upon themselves the mission of delivering the singular proper judgment? This is all just to say that, for my mother, people like her old friends Christa Wolf or Günter de Bruyn, whatever others may say about them now, remain friends.

It is difficult to understand all this today, as there is neither the GDR itself, as if having crumbled into the abyss of history, nor many of those who with genuine enthusiasm accepted the changes instituted after the defeat of the Third Reich. In the years of the GDR, especially until the 1970s and 1980s, these individuals lived with the belief that they were building some kind of new and more just society. For them, this passion of the first years was doubly justified by the fact that in their youth or adolescence, they had survived fascism, war and then discovered – as many truly had not previously known – the horrific crimes of the Nazi regime.

Mother lived in an era that, after a number of years, no one will understand, with the exception of those who also lived through it. And even those who were alive in this era are beginning to have doubts: Is it possible that none of it happened? Was it all a figment of the imagination?

These days, my mother is filled with regret that the literature of the GDR, like the GDR itself, this new Atlantis, no longer concerns anyone. Perhaps interest in the topics of war and fascism will again flare up, subjects about which today's younger generation has but a superficial, meager and inaccurate awareness. And sometimes they are deliberately misled. As for Nazism, it is currently enjoying an undeserved level of respect among segments of the Russian population, and even has emulators. But this is a separate issue.

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Effective immediately

The night my scoop evaporated. Deputy Ambassador James D. Bindenagel recounts the night the Wall came down when he was a diplomat in East Berlin

BY JAMES D. BINDENAGEL

On that fateful night of November 9, 1989, there was no sign of revolution in the air. Sure, change was coming – but slowly, we thought. As the US Deputy Ambassador to East Germany at the time, I lived on the communist side of the Berlin Wall, but I was spending the afternoon in West Berlin at an Aspen Institute reception with leaders from both sides of the divided city. We were absorbed in our day-to-day business; there was no whiff of the excitement that would soon engulf Berlin. Not one of us had an inkling of the events that were about to turn the world upside down.

When the event came to a close, Wolfgang Vogel, the famous East German spy exchange lawyer, asked me for a ride. I was happy to oblige as I hoped to discuss changes to the GDR travel law, the target of his country's widespread demonstrations for freedom. As I dropped him off at his golden-colored Mercedes, Vogel told me that the Politburo, the executive committee of the socialist party, planned to reform the travel law and that the Communist leadership had met that day to adopt new rules to satisfy East Germans' demand for greater freedom of travel. Happy about my scoop on the Politburo deliberations, I headed to the US Embassy. Vogel's comments would make for an exciting report back to the State Department in Washington.

I arrived at the embassy at 7:30 p.m. and went directly to our political section, where I found a much-excited team of diplomats. At a televised press conference, government spokesman Günter Schabowski had just announced the Politburo decision to lift travel restrictions, leaving everyone at the embassy stunned. East Germans could now get visitor visas from their local People's Police station, and the East German government would open a new processing center for emigration cases. At that point, an Italian journalist asked Schabowski when the new rules would go into effect. Schabowski fumbled with his papers, unsure – and then mumbled "Unverzüglich," that is, immediately. With that televised statement, my Vogel scoop evaporated.

Excitement filled the embassy. None of us had the official text of the statement or knew how East Germans planned to implement the new rules. Although Schabowski's declaration was astounding, it was open to widely varying interpretations. Still dazed by the announcement, we anticipated the rebroadcast the next hour.

At 8 p.m., Jon Greenwald, our political counselor in East Berlin, and I watched as Tagesschau, West Germany's news program, led with the story. By then, Imre Lipping, a political officer at the embassy, had gathered the official statement and was prepared to report back to Washington. Heather Troutman, another political officer, wrote an on-the-ground report on the guards at Checkpoint Charlie telling East Germans to get visas. Mr. Greenwald cabled the text of Schabowski's announcement to Washington: East Germans had won the freedom to travel and emigrate.

As the cable arrived in Washington, I called the White House Situation Room and State Department Operations Center to discuss the report and alert them to the latest developments. I then called Harry Gilmore, the US Minister and Deputy Commandant of the American Sector in West Berlin. "Harry," I said, "it looks like you're going to have a lot of visitors soon. We're just not sure yet what that rush of visitors will look like."

We assumed that, at the earliest, East Germans would start crossing into West Berlin the next day. In those first moments, the Wall remained impassable. After all, these were Germans – and they were known for following the rules. Schabowski had announced the visa rules, and we believed there would be an orderly process. East

DPA/ZENTRALBILD

Günter Schabowski during his history-making press conference

30 YEARS FALL OF THE WALL

Oh, what a night! A police officer from West Berlin awards his eastern colleague a peace medal as the people around them celebrate.

The checkpoint at Bornholmer Straße

And the border guard wept

How we came to film the decisive moments of the fall of the Wall at Bornholmer Straße

BY GEORG MASCOLO

I remember the feeling well – a mixture of frustration and disappointment. It was the morning after we'd shot what we thought was going to be some incredibly exciting and spectacular footage of the opening of the Berlin Wall. November 9, 1989, marked the climax and the grand finale of a peaceful German revolution – and it had been a Thursday. But the *Spiegel TV* news magazine I was working for at the time was only going to broadcast our images three days later, on the following Sunday.

Who would possibly want to see the footage we'd shot that night, three days after the fact, I asked myself. By that time, people all over the world would have already been shown countless images of that historic event over and over again on their television screens.

My trusted colleagues, cameraman Rainer März and his assistant Germering Biester, were both seasoned professionals and had a better sense of things. "What we just experienced," Rainer insisted, "was something incredibly special."

It was only in the days thereafter that I began to have hope, especially as I sat in the hotel watching all those special broadcasts and seeing almost identical images of lines of Trabants and jubilant Berliners. Maybe Rainer was right; maybe we truly had gotten lucky that evening.

As it turns out, the images we captured of the opening of the border crossing at Bornholmer Straße in Berlin are indeed exceptional. UNESCO has even declared them official World Heritage documents, just like Goethe's oeuvre and Beethoven's 9th Symphony.

The footage is unique because Bornholmer Straße was the first border crossing to open on that historic night, and because the images provide proof that the end of the brutal Berlin Wall was not the result of a well-calculated plan devised by the East German Politburo. No, it was something forcibly accomplished by the citizens of the GDR. In fact, the fall of the Wall was the result of citizens pushing aside and storming through an unjust border. To this day, our images show the drama of those hours, the courage of the people gathered there as well as the uncertainty and instability of an oppressive state apparatus teetering on the brink of collapse. Our images document the very moment when fear changed sides – from the people to the state behind the East German dictatorship.

Among the individuals who ventured across the border to West Berlin that night was a young woman who had come directly from a nearby sauna to the checkpoint at Bornholmer Straße. At the time, she was an unknown physicist. Today, everyone knows her name: Angela Merkel.

If we had stayed sitting in the hotel bar of our East Berlin hotel near the Brandenburg Gate – a hotel designed exclusively for foreign guests – those legendary images would simply not exist. Just a couple of hours prior, Politburo member Günter Schabowski had held a press conference in which he had uttered the now-famous words that, as far as he knew, the new visa rules for GDR citizens wanting to travel to the West were effective "immediately."

What exactly did he mean by that statement, and who exactly was allowed to cross the border? Well, these were exactly the questions that I, a freshly arrived newcomer, was debating with my more experienced GDR-correspondent colleagues as we drank our overpriced Radeberger beers on tap in the hotel bar. As far as I can remember, even the most daring and opinionated of my colleagues did not predict that the Berlin Wall would fall and the division of Germany would end that night. As for me, I was just 25 years old and hadn't a clue about anything.

We sat there, baffled by what was going on and uncertain about what would happen next. That is, until it became clear to us that a hotel bar in Mitte was probably not the best place to carry out our best research. So we packed our things and drove to Prenzlauer Berg, a stronghold of the resistance. Anyone in East Berlin who was dissatisfied with the GDR, and anyone who belonged to the opposition, lived in this area where residential buildings reached right up to the Wall. If anything was going to happen, I thought, it was going to happen here.

It was quiet on the streets, so we ended up at a bar again. There, too, the only topic of discussion was the Schabowski press conference. Nobody knew what it all meant. Soon, however, the first reports started coming in that the Wall was open. It wasn't actually open yet, of course, but many people in Prenzlauer Berg were curious, impatient and increasingly fearless. So they made their way to Bornholmer Straße. And we went with them.

Thousands of people were already standing at the border crossing. They were restless and jostling to see what was happening at the gate. Eventually they broke into a chorus of chants including "Open the gate, open the gate!" and "We'll come back, we'll come back!"

My colleagues and I made our way through the crowd until we found ourselves directly at the boom gate, which was still firmly in place. We immediately got into trouble with the border guards, because to film what was going on, we had stepped over the barrier and were now standing in the transit area. This was an absolute affront to any GDR border guard. One of them demanded to see our passports and threatened to deport us back to the West. I was arguing with him when the bolt on the barrier right next to us suddenly released, the boom gate moved to the side and waves of cheering people made their way to freedom. It was the first hole in the Wall. Only later did the guards at other German-German border crossings start letting people through without any kind of inspection.

And only later did I begin to comprehend what had really happened that night. Together with my team, I conducted interviews with all of those border guards and Stasi officers who had been on duty that night at Bornholmer Straße. I learned that they'd sent a constant flow of urgent requests to Stasi headquarters for some sort of guidance. They didn't know what to do; they were scared and alarmed. Nobody had any desire to use force, and everybody in the GDR was already familiar with the meaning of the term "Chinese solution." The first command that came through from the Stasi leadership was to place the official GDR exit-stamp directly on the passport photo of any person particularly eager to leave; this mark would allow them to identify these individuals at a later date – and provide justification for not letting them back in the country. It was perhaps the last scam visited upon the people by a sinking regime.

I still have contact with some of the officers who were on duty that night, like Lieutenant Colonel Harald Jäger, who ultimately gave the order to push the boom gate aside. This past summer, when Germany's president invited me to tell the story of that night, Lieutenant Colonel Jäger was in the audience. There have been a number of calls to award him the Bundesverdienstkreuz, Germany's Federal Cross of Merit. That medal has already been given to the Hungarian Lieutenant Colonel Árpád Bella, who opened the Iron Curtain at the Austrian border in August 1989, thus enabling hundreds of GDR citizens to escape to the West.

Late on the night of November 9, 1989, Lieutenant Colonel Jäger went looking for a quiet place at the Bornholmer Straße border crossing to have a good cry. He made his way to the processing barracks, only to find a captain already sitting there, head in hands, crying. Jäger is still proud of his decision to open the gate. "Providence brought you there that night," Jäger's wife once said to him. "Nope, it was actually the duty roster," he replied.

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Germans, however, were following West German television coverage as well and, as it turned out, decided to hold their government to its word "immediately."

I headed home at around 10 p.m. to watch events unfold on West German television. On my way to Pankow, in the northeast of the city, I was surprised by the unusual amount of traffic. The Trabant – with its two-stroke engine spewing gas and oil smoke and a body made of duroplast, a sort of plasticized pressed-wood – was always in short supply. But on this night, these iconic "Trabis," as they were lovingly nicknamed, filled the streets in droves despite the late hour. And they were all headed to the Bornholmer Straße checkpoint, where these same Trabis were being abandoned left and right.

Ahead of me, the blazing lights of a West German television crew led by *Der Spiegel* reporter Georg Mascolo [see adjacent article] illuminated the checkpoint. The TV crew, safely ensconced in the West, was preparing for a live broadcast. Despite the bright lights, all I could make out was a steadily growing number of demonstrators gathering at the checkpoint. From the tumult, I could faintly hear shouts of "Tor auf!", or "Open the gate!". Anxious East Germans had begun confronting the East German border guards. Inside the complex of the crossing point, armed border police waited for instructions. Amid a massive movement of people, fed by live TV, the revolution that had started so slowly was rapidly spinning out of control.

The question running through my mind was whether the Soviet Army would stay in its barracks. There were 380,000 Soviet soldiers in East Germany. In diplomatic circles, we expected the Soviet Union, a military superpower, would not give up East Germany without a fight. Our role was to worry – the constant modus operandi of a diplomat. But this time, our concern did not last long.

When I arrived home at around 10:15 p.m., I turned on the TV, called the US State Department with the latest developments and then called Harry Gilmore again. "Remember I told you that you'd be seeing lots of visitors?" I said. "Well, that might be tonight." Just minutes later, together with my wife Jean, I witnessed on live television as waves of East Berliners broke through one checkpoint after the other on their way across the Wall to the West. Lights came on in the neighborhood. I was elated. East Germans had made their point clear. After 40 years of Cold War, East Berliners were determined to have freedom.

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