



CULTURE, HISTORY

25 YEARS SINCE THE BERLIN WALL CAME TUMBLING DOWN

NOVEMBER 9, 2014 CONNY KAUFMANN 3 COMMENTS

My first trip to the *German Democratic Republic* was not the nicest one I've ever been on. It was the summer of 1988, and it took my parents all the way from Solingen to the border to lull one-year-old me to sleep. We were on the way to visit friends in East-German city Dresden.

"When we got to the border at Herleshausen, I was hoping they'd wave us right through, with you sleeping away on the backseat", my mum Marion recalls. However, the border guard was not sympathetic.

"We had to place you, in your car seat, on the street, they woke you up to check whether we'd hidden anything underneath you and then they completely took the back seat of our new car apart."

The border they guarded is long gone by now. 25 years, to be exact. Communism came to an end in Germany on the night of 9th November 1989, when a slip of the tongue by **Günter Schabowski**, one of East Germany's high ranking officials, opened the borders with immediate effect, and allowed East Germans to travel freely into the West.





When the Berlin Wall fell and the borders were opened, many Germans could not believe it.

"I first saw it on the news that night, around 7pm. I saw the people pushing through the checkpoints, walking through the death zone and climbing onto the Wall. And all I thought was 'Thank God! Finally! The border is open and they are free again'", 87-year-old Hanna Kaufmann remembers.

"I was surprised by how peacefully it all happened! People were breaking through the barriers, and the East German border guards didn't shoot!" Marion adds, reflecting on the guards' order to open fire on everyone who was caught fleeing the state.

In the 28 years the Wall was standing, this resulted in dozens of people getting shot; even those who stumbled up to the Wall clearly drunk as well as those already injured or retreating. The sheer mass of people pushing through on 9th November 1989 and the lack of orders for the border guards, meant that the turnpikes opened and the guards stood back. West Berliners lined the streets and clapped, greeting East Germans who came across with hugs and lots of happy tears.

Many East Germans just wanted to have a look around. One [video clip](#) that has stayed with me for a long time is of an East German lady, standing in front of the guards at Pariser Platz (in front of the Brandenburg Gate) and pleading with the guards to let her through, asking them why they continue to form a barrier and whether they think such a barrier is useful. She just wanted to walk through the Brandenburg Gate, just once in her life. She even told the guards that her own son is a border guard. Eventually, others come to her defense. The guards keep arguing that she can use a newly opened checkpoint to get into the West, but that's not even what she wants. All she wants is to walk through the Gate – and eventually they let her, while the crowds cheer her on. Her name is Bärbel Reinke, but she's known as "The Woman at Brandenburg Gate."



Although East Germany was in a transition, due to Hungary letting German refugees escape to the West, nobody would have dared to dream that the Wall would fall.

“It was unbelievable, the sheer mass of people coming through, taking their Trabis across into the West” 59-year-old Marion explains.



Travel journalist Cornelia Kaufmann in an East German Trabi at the DDR Museum, Berlin

Hanna adds: “We’d been granted visas seven times, and knew what it was like over there. One time, our friends asked us to bring strawberries and a roast, because you couldn’t get these things over there. We arrived in Dresden around midnight and our friends insisted on making the roast right there and then because they were so excited about it. Western newspapers and books were confiscated, though.”

News about the new travel arrangements and the opening of the border spread like a fire across both sides of the divide. Mario Ständer was working the late shift when he heard the news.

“I planned to take my chance and flee into the West right after clocking off. At that time, all I knew was that those willing to leave could do so – but never return.”

However, his mate refused to drive him to the border.

“Fortunately, the borders stayed upon, and I eventually made it into the West”, he says.



Iconic Alexanderplatz with its TV Tower, one of East Berlin's most famous squares. McDonald's has found a home at the train station. Photo: Cornelia Kaufmann

Bernadette Disler was living in Lucerne, Switzerland, when the Berlin Wall fell.

"Back then, although I knew something big was happening, it was too far away, in a different country, to really concern me. But now that I live in Germany, I can grasp just how big it was and how good it was for Germany to reunite."

However, this sentiment is not shared by everyone.

"Reuniting with the East only cost the West a lot of money, and we're still spending more. They should have made the Wall 10m higher, if you ask me", says one of Marion's neighbours, who wishes to remain anonymous.

But on the 25th anniversary of the Wall's demise, especially Berlin is celebrating with thousands of Germans gathering in front of the Brandenburg Gate.

The **Lichtgrenze (Border of Lights) installation** commemorates the former border between East and West Germany, and runs a total of 15km through Berlin. All along the former path of the Berlin Wall, illuminated balloons have been put up as a visual reminder that this vibrating city was once divided, sometimes right through a busy intersection.



Lichtgrenze (Border of Lights) installation along the path of the Berlin Wall. Photo: Robert Emmerich (Flickr)

Moritz van Dülmen, who recreated pieces of the Wall out of styrofoam for the 20th anniversary in 2009 and city-wide Domino campaign said: “We wanted people to really comprehend what happened back then. Like a domino-effect, the opening of the Wall changed the world.”

But Berlin resident Karima Wenner says that you can still tell East and West apart – at least in the capital.

“The way they talk about each other and still use stereotypes is very apparent.”

However, 28-year-old Karima claims that you can even see and feel it in Berlin’s entire cityscape.

“The eastern part of Berlin has this trendy vibe to it, even more so than West Berlin. Sub cultures thrive there, probably because they had a lot to catch up on. And they still have events and spontaneous street festivals everywhere, that make the East a really cool place to be.”

And then there are the Plattenbausiedlungen, of course, the high-rise blocks of flats that still dominate East Berlin’s landscape.





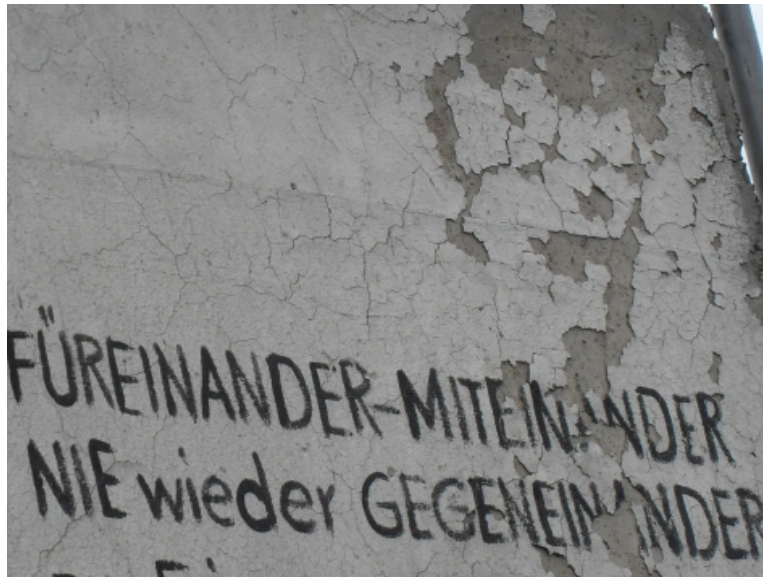
"I was only three when the Wall fell, so I didn't notice much", says 28-year-old Chris Gramke. Born in the GDR, his family finally moved to the West when he was seven.

"In my new West German primary school, the kids pointed at me, and shouted 'There's the Ossi (lit.: *Eastie*)!'" His parents told him, that their lives are now much better than they were on the other side of the Wall.

"Apparently, you always knew when there were Stasi spies around. They'd sit in a bar all day and would be the only ones not drinking anything."

However, Chris' parents also mentioned, that the way of life might have been a little easier in the GDR, because they didn't know the concepts of debt or unemployment.

"These things just didn't exist in a communist state."



For Each Other – Together. Never Again Against Each Other. Graffiti at East Side Gallery, Berlin.

Photo: Cornelia Kaufmann