Victim Narrative (Retrospective Account, 2005)

Abstract

This autobiographical account by a Stasi victim begins with her capture during an attempt to escape from the GDR. It goes on to describe her brutal interrogation and her lengthy incarceration in a secret police prison, where she initially had no recourse to legal representation. A year after her early release from prison her petition to move to West Germany was granted.

Source

Get Out! The Trip Is Over!

Heide-Marie H.
Born 1946, photographer, arrested December 3, 1978

Wanting to leave the GDR was an internal process that extended over years, until it was completely clear to me: I no longer want to live in a society, in a state that is so vehemently closed off against the "rest of the world" and that, internally, allows no freedom of action, not even freedom of thought. I would not continue to live my life under such societal conditions!

When you achieve that insight, you naturally think about the possibilities that exist. Waiting until retirement is not an option, and if you don't have a profession that takes you abroad, that leaves only escape. When I was about thirty, I no longer had any doubts that I would take the difficult path of escape. Even though some of my friends and acquaintances were unwilling to give up hope for change in the GDR, I was done with this state that offered me nothing.

Already during my student years in Leipzig, I found access to certain circles, to people who were covertly engaged in undermining existing conditions. We procured literature; somehow, we got hold of what we wanted to read. And we took advantage of the [GDR] trade fairs for an intensive exchange with West German students. Such contacts gave rise to close friendships, some of which were sustained for years.

In the mid-seventies, my boyfriend and I no longer felt safe. A West German friend therefore offered us his help. He was willing to take the risk to get us out of the GDR; he wanted to take us in his car along the transit route to West Berlin, that is, West Germany. Of course, he knew how dangerous that was for him as well. But because of an illness, he was hoping that if things really went wrong, he would not be healthy enough for detainment and would be quickly released from prison. This was also the decisive reason for accepting his help, because I thought that if the escape failed, he might get lucky and not have to serve a long prison term on my account. And that is what happened.

This West German friend first took my boyfriend successfully across the border by hiding him in the trunk of his car. My turn came the following day, December 3, 1978. At a precisely arranged place along the transit route, I climbed into the trunk of his car. But in my case the escape failed. When the car reached the Drewitz crossing point around midnight, my friend had to open the trunk and I was discovered. These were the words I heard then: "Get out! The trip is over!"

I had to climb out of the trunk. We were both arrested on the spot. There was a lot of yelling and a flurry of flashes going off. They even performed a body search on me right there at the border crossing. But I had the impression that I was quite calm. After a while I had to get into a darkened car, from which I was not able to look out. At the time, I did not know where the car was taking me.

After about an hour of driving, I found myself in a prison cell. I had never before seen such a cell. As far as I remember, it was about a meter-and-a-half wide, four meters long, and fairly high. The rear wall had glass blocks instead of a window; attached to the wall was a slatted bed frame that could be folded down. This cell also had a small table with a stool, a sink, and a toilet.

I was startled when the cell door shut for the first time, making a peculiar sound that subsequently imprinted itself so strongly in my mind that I will never forget it. I reckon it was two in the morning then. At some point I did fall asleep, but I had nightmares; to this day I can well remember the "ghosts" of that night. The following morning, I was taken to be interrogated. I only discovered what time it was when I read my Stasi files: it was 5:30 am. I no longer had a watch; they had taken it from me. It was very strange to suddenly be without a sense of time.

This first interrogation lasted until the late morning. After a short break came a second interrogation, again lasting several hours, and then a third into the late evening. These interrogations were very arduous, because I was trying in everything I was saying to give my friend a head start for his statements. I correctly surmised that he was sitting in another room only a few meters away and was also being interrogated. At times I was dealing with several interrogators, and then there was a constant coming and going. Sometimes they entered in a very agitated state, and I suspected that they were coming straight from the room where my friend was being interrogated. Some of their questions were quite awful. That is how the first day passed.

When I was taken to the cell or fetched from there—incidentally, the cell was called the "detention room"—I always had to stand with my face to the wall and my hands behind my neck when the doors were unlocked. These orders, which were shouted by the turnkeys, were meant to keep me from looking around to get oriented. Still, by now, I knew where I was. The first time that I sat in that interrogation room, and it was still dark outside, I was able to recognize from the windows that I was in a beautiful building in my hometown of Potsdam, on Otto-Nuschke Street. That was the name of Lindenstraße back then, and it could only be this building, whose lovely facade, I knew, concealed a prison. And this was confirmed the following day, when I had to go out for my first walk in the yard.

For this walk, I was given an enormous and heavy dark-blue uniform coat, and gigantic, heavy shoes. I had to put these things on at the exit of the cell block; then I was taken into the yard, into one of those outdoor cells that were coarsely plastered on the inside and closed off by a grate on top. When I looked up, I saw, so to speak, "armored boots" through the grate. I felt they were watching me down below; that was a very bitter feeling. I would have liked to refuse this walk in the yard, but I was forced to do it.

There is something else I very clearly remember about the Potsdam Stasi prison: the assessment of my fitness for incarceration, which was conducted immediately after I was committed. I felt an enormous aversion to being physically examined by a doctor, because it meant a situation of double force. I remember that as very harsh.

The interrogations in Potsdam revolved chiefly around clarifying the facts of the escape, whether it was a matter of professional assistance or a privately organized escape. The most important thing for me, especially also because of my friend, was that we not be accused of a professionally assisted escape, otherwise they would have also pinned the charge "subversive human trafficking" on us. That was my greatest fear.

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Food was not an issue for me in the Potsdam Stasi prison. In the beginning, I could not eat anything at all, later a little bread. I can still well remember the plastic dishes. The forks and spoons were also made of plastic, there were no knives. On Sundays I was given goulash, red cabbage, and potatoes for lunch,

because it was Sunday—right.

Altogether, I was in pre-trial detention for more than three months; of that period, [I spent] only four days in Potsdam, after that [I was] in the Stasi prison in Leipzig, to which I was “transferred” because that is where I lived at the time. When they brought me to Leipzig, I again had no idea where we were going. I had to climb into a darkened car and sit in a “cubbyhole” with a floor area of perhaps 80 square centimeters and an air hole. At first, I tried to figure out, is the car going left or right, but that was useless. Later I realized that I was on the autobahn, I felt the slight jolting of the car over the concrete seams and heard the typical rumbling sounds. After about two hours, the trip ended in the courtyard of a prison. I was taken inside and led to a cell. When it was unlocked, I saw a young woman who stared at me with wide eyes. I had to join her in the cell, then the door was locked again. Now there were suddenly “two of us.”

In Leipzig the interrogations took place in a completely irregular fashion, sometimes several times a day, then nothing for days, and then every day again. They revolved once again around the reasons behind my escape and how it had transpired. The interrogators were also trying to determine what I was thinking.

What was awful during the entire pretrial detention was the permanent surveillance through the peephole in the cell door. We were also watched at night. When I could not sleep and sat up in bed, they opened the hatch and yelled that I had to lie back down immediately.

After sentencing, I had to remain in custody for several more weeks and endure further interrogations. I was now supposed to provide information about my circle of friends, which I refused. They then put me through cross-examinations, but I remained silent. In the process they struck considerable fear into me, because they were threatening that I would not get out again under any circumstances and that my future was over. They also presented me with long lists of names of friends to whom I had sent letters and packages over the previous two years; in other words, they had been watching me for that long already. The biggest fear that tormented me after I was sentenced was this: What did they know about activities in my circle of friends?

I still have a very good memory of the trial. Shortly before the trial date I saw a lawyer for the first time, the lawyer Jarausch, who was assigned to me. To this day I don’t know what law firm he belonged to. Although my family had retained the lawyer Vogel, he never came to see me, and I myself was not allowed to contact him.

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When I arrived in the courtroom, a judge, two jurors, a recording clerk, and a female prosecutor were there; the public was not allowed to attend. First, the indictment was read out. Then they presented photographs that showed me climbing out of the trunk at the Drewitz border crossing. When I looked at those photographs I had to laugh, and in order not to show it, I held a handkerchief in front of my face. After that they spoke at great length about my “blameless” conduct up to that point; I was also credited with having had an “exemplary” development. It was all so grotesque!

I was sentenced to 22 months in prison for aggravated *Republikflucht* [flight from the Republic], in accordance with paragraph 213. At the time, I was allowed to see the indictment and the judgment only briefly. More than a decade had to pass before those papers were handed over to me.

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At some point we arrived somewhere again. It was night, and there was snow on the ground. Even though it was already the end of March, I remember snow-covered pine trees in the moonlight and the

loud barking and howling of dogs. It didn't take long before we figured out that we were in Hoheneck.

The Hoheneck women's prison was an old castle that had been converted into a prison. Immediately after our arrival, they took away our private clothes. We were given prison clothing, which consisted of dark blue pants, a blue-gray shirt blouse, and a shapeless, thick coat. As it turned out later, these were all refashioned uniform pieces. Also, we were each given a black, triangular headscarf to wear. We had to stitch our names into this inmate clothing.

For about a week, we remained as "new arrivals" in a special area of the prison; it was a kind of intermediate tract. During that time, we had to help the *Wachteln*—as prison staff was called by the inmates—deliver laundry. We had to carry large laundry baskets with blue-and-white checkered bed linens into the cells, the so-called "detention rooms"; in most tracts, those were large rooms for up to 20 women. While we distributed bed linens among the individual beds, the guards searched the beds for small, handmade stuffed animals that had been sewn by the women in secret. And it was then up to us to haul these cuddly toys away by the basketful. That these small tokens of comfort were regularly taken away from the women is among my first impressions of Hoheneck and something that has remained indelibly etched in my memory.

All prisoners in Hoheneck had to perform forced labor. For that, the women were not taken to factories; instead, certain enterprises had their own production tracts within the prison, where various goods were made: bed linens, shirts, Esda stockings, and in one division also motors for the washing machine plant in Schwarzenberg. I had to sew shirts for a Saxon textile enterprise, it was assembly-line piecework. While we were working, we were watched by both the prison staff and by the workers who came from the factories. We had to toil in early, late, and night shifts and fulfill the prescribed quotas. Anyone who did not fulfill the quota was charged with refusing to work, and after mutiny, that was the worst thing you could do. In that case, we were threatened with all kinds of punishments, including a denial of letters or the revocation of packages.

Some of the things that I witnessed and experienced in Hoheneck I had previously not considered possible. It was shocking for me to see that most of the 600 to 800 inmates were young women, thirty-year-olds, who—with interruptions—had already been in prison for ten years. They had been sentenced in accordance with paragraph 249 for "asocial behavior," often for trivial offences. They were actually kept in the prison because they were the cheapest workers. The fates of these young women reflected an aspect of GDR social reality that I had not known until then.

I had hoped to be released to the West after completing about two-thirds of my prison term, for my relatives had indicated this possibility, based on statements from the lawyer Vogel. I had therefore submitted an application to emigrate while in prison. But in the fall of 1979 an amnesty was announced, and all those who came under this amnesty were released into the GDR, including me. That was really awful for me.

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The fact that I had to live in the GDR again was very tough for me. My friends reacted in various ways. Some were afraid to have contact with me. But there were also others who went to great lengths to help me. I myself had great qualms about visiting anyone. I also suffered from persecution complex. Evidently, they were also tapping my family's phone. After some time, the lawyer Vogel took on my case again.

In October 1980, I finally received permission to emigrate and had to leave the GDR within twenty-four hours. I took the train to Hanover, where my friends picked me up. I did not have to go to a reception center, since I was able to live with friends in Bremen. There I found a job, within a short time, as an exhibition designer in a large museum; exhibition design also became my real line of work at that point.

Later, I went back to university to study visual communication and experimental film.

Around the time of my departure, my mother became disabled and, for that reason, was soon able to visit me. That was a blessing for me, since I was prohibited from traveling home. Nine years later the Wall came down—and that remains one of the most wonderful experiences of my life.

Source: Gabriele Schnell, "*Das 'Lindenhotel': Berichte aus dem Potsdamer Geheimdienstgefängnis.*" Third, expanded edition. Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2009, pp. 132–39.

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