

The Wall in Our Heads (1982)

Abstract

While chronicling various ingenious efforts to cross the barrier, the West German writer Peter Schneider warned that the fortified border was gradually leading to alienation between East and West, creating a “Wall in our heads” that engendered frequent misunderstandings.

Source

The Wall Jumper: A Berlin Story

[...]

It will take us longer to tear down the Wall in our heads than any wrecking company will need for the Wall we can see. Pommerer and I can dissociate ourselves from our states as much as we like, but we can't speak to each other without having our states speak for us. If I insist on majorities as instinctively as Pommerer distrusts them, it is because we have been equally receptive sons of the system that has brought us up. The possessive “yours” and “ours,” “on our side” and “on your side” that creep into every German-German family reunion are not just a simple shorthand for the two states. They indicate a kind of belonging that transcends political options. The shorthand conceals a lesson preliminary to any exchange: only when both speakers have recited it can they begin to discuss the life that each still lives behind the Wall.

Two different wartime experiences: In 1945, Pommerer was living in Berlin, in Prenzlauer Berg. Down to the cellar every day during air raids, up to the kitchen for a half hour at noon to cook. His father had left a pistol behind in case the Russians came. His mother was supposed to kill herself and the children to save them all from rape. The Russians came on foot and with tanks. There were rapes, but not in his mother's house, not in their neighborhood. Other images remained: a Russian unties a farmer's cow and brings it to a German mother who can't nurse her newborn child. Slit-eyed Mongol subhumans cook for the vanquished, seat children on their tanks, and pass out candy. Pommerer's shame at the contempt of the defeated master race for the lowbrow victors who don't know what to do with a light switch or a napkin. Fifteen thousand Russians died where the Soviet Memorial stands today.

In 1945, I was in Bavaria with my mother, fleeing from the Russians. The whistle of low-flying American planes; trains stopping in open country; rumors of five hundred dead bodies in the woods. The Americans arrived in planes. Later, jeeps drove into our Upper Bavarian village; they tossed sacks of sugar and groceries onto the street. Their clean, handsome uniforms, their bright faces, the casual posture of the soldier in the passenger seat who dangled his leg on the running board. Then the Care packages – turkey, salted butter, yellow cheese in cans. The Americans were luminous as gods, chewed something when they spoke, smoked and passed out cigarettes. They didn't rape; they had love affairs. They were rich, generous; they had white teeth.

The first English sentence Pommerer learned: Ami, go home.

My first English sentence: Have you chewing gum?

Thirty-five years later, these differences are the cornerstone of defense budgets. The experts' columns of figures on enemy nuclear firepower are haunted by the articles of faith we acquired in childhood: the Russians want to conquer the world. Or: the Russians know what war is like, and they want peace.

[...]

I turned forty last year. The two states which bear the word “German” in their initials have just celebrated their thirtieth birthday. So, I am ten years older than the state that has grown up around me and in me. On the basis of age alone, I can’t call it my fatherland. What’s more, this state represents only a part of the country that would be my fatherland. If my fatherland exists, it isn’t a state, and the state of which I am a citizen is not a fatherland. If I respond to queries about my nationality by saying without hesitation that I’m German, I am clearly opting not for a state, but for a people that no longer has a state identity. At the same time, however, I assert that my national identity does not depend on either of the German states.

The same thing applies to the expression: “I come from Germany.” Either it has no meaning, or I am speaking of a country that appears on no political map. By Germany, I am referring neither to the DDR nor to the BRD, but to a country which exists only in my memory or my imagination. If I were asked where it lies, I could only locate it in its history and in the language I speak.

If the Germans still have a fatherland, it survives mostly in the mother tongue; and if it is true that land comes from our father and language from our mother, then our maternal heritage has proved the stronger. In this respect the Germans seem to have returned to the beginnings of their history. After all, the word *deutsch* originally referred neither to a nation nor to a state; it meant “people,” “of the people,” and designated the common language of various tribes who had begun to assert their spoken tongue against the Latin of the bureaucracy and the Church. This linguistic unity existed for centuries before the founding of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and it has survived the rise and fall of all other unholy Reichs. Today, the word “German” can be used without confusion only as an adjective, and even then with reference neither to a state nor to a fatherland, but – at least for the present – to a single noun: “language.” And finally, as was the case a thousand years ago, the attempt to speak a common German language has to begin with a refusal to parrot the Church Latin of East and West.

[...]

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