

Wall Neighborhood [*Mauerkiez*] (August 11, 1986)

Abstract

This journalistic snapshot describes the gradual normalization of the Berlin Wall on its western side. Eventually, residents of West Berlin began to take advantage of this no man's land, parking their campers in it and growing elaborate gardens, much to the delight of the ubiquitous rabbits.

Source

“You Live with It; You Grow Old with It”

This week, West and East remember the building of the Wall twenty-five years ago – with commemorations of the dead over here, parades over there. The helpless rage about the “Wall of Shame,” where 74 people have died, has given way to familiarity. Artists, oddballs, and alternative-types define life along the Wall.

When Horst Halwass relaxes on weekends in the Havel hamlet of Kladow, he's shielded from unpleasant surprises. Here, he has a mobile summer home (“The latest on the market”) and an inviting awning (“Café Octagon”). In front of him are the leisure lovers of the Camping Club, behind him the GDR: “It basically begins at the tow bar of my caravan.”

As a so-called *Unterbaugelände* [a territory belonging to East Germany but located in front of the Wall on the Western side], the grove between the trailer and the Wall (“All of it purest nature”) is officially part of the other side and cannot be entered even by Berlin's public officials. But occasionally someone goes “mushrooming” there, Siemens employee Halwass gushes: “The quietest spot in all of Berlin.”

Right behind the tennis courts of the company athletes from Schering, not far from the Chausseestrasse crossing, children from the Wedding neighborhood climb over the fence onto the green strip in front of the Wall. There they play in an enclosed miniature jungle full of thickets and critters (“a snake, a dead rabbit, a dead cat”), and are only in the sightline of the Eastern border guards (“they always stare, you know”).

Recently, as one boy recounts, a girl “who isn't exactly underendowed” under her sweater, actually “did a striptease for those over there. Laughed myself silly.” And a fourteen-year-old girl contemplates: “If I sit on the corner here, I'm here in Berlin. If I sit on the other side, I'm in the East. And if I sit on it just so, I'm exactly in the middle.” A Berlin situation report for a study on “Children and youths in the big city,” recorded by a team of educators at “places where dreams are still possible.”^[1]

In the Buckow neighborhood, at the corner of Ringslebenstraße and Auf der Planweide, Gerhard Dieterich's cat has climbed over the old concrete wall of the demarcation line. Dieterich climbs up the wall on a ladder and holds up a cardboard sign to the GDR men on duty at the nearby observation tower (coordinates according to the maps of the Western police: UU 94 8 08 8). The sign reads: “Cat went over, may we lure her back from there?”

Neither the border guards nor the pet can be enticed. Next, police officers send a message to the GDR side via a megaphone: “Is it possible to pass the cat back?” Two days later, the owner gets his feline critter back – “by means unknown” (police report).

The campers who have found their niche in the no man's land, the youngster in the forbidden border thicket, the escaped pet – by now everyday stories of the Wall. Have the Berliners gotten used to the

structure?

By Western reckoning, 74 people have died there since 1961. The last officially known fatality along the Wall was an eighteen-year-old East German woman; she lost her life in a hail of bullets in November 1980. But now when shots are fired, as happened again on June 25th, the GDR at least tries to offer an explanation. In this instance: following a heat stroke, border guard Jürgen Zöllner supposedly wanted “to summon help by firing off signaling shots.” Is it a guilty conscience after all those years, during which the [East German] People’s Police shot “at humans as though they were rabbits”? This was the reproach that former ARD East German correspondent Lothar Loewe leveled at Erich Honecker, the Chairman of the Council of State of the GDR, in 1976.

Once again, there is an occasion for interpretations of every kind – the Wall turns twenty-five on August 13th. The event will be observed on both sides, with grand speeches and a human chain on this side, with parades by paramilitary company brigades on the other side. The Western side is planning a commemoration of the dead, including GDR border guards who died in the line of duty. The Eastern side is inviting its citizens to a Wall reminiscence in a museum, in the department “Socialist Fatherland GDR.”

The biggest change in the city’s urban development since the war has shaped the consciousness of builders and abutting neighbors. The “barbed-wire worm” (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*), which was expanded, refurbished, and renewed for the fourth time and by now snakes around West Berlin at a length of 165.7 kilometers, ultimately saved the GDR from economic collapse.

The cordoning off ended the “voting with feet.” This is the label that Western politicians, who were counting on an economic weakening of the Ulbricht regime, attached to the constant stream of people out of the East. In August of 1961 alone, the turning point “when the clock suddenly struck thirteen” (headline of the East’s *Berliner Zeitung*), 47,437 GDR citizens fled from East to West across the eighty-one crossings still open at the time. At that point, 50,000 GDR commuters were working in the West anyway.

[...]

The wider that East Berlin opened up the gates – since 1971, West Berliners have paid around 37 million visits to the East – the more West Berlin residents lost sight of the Wall. West Berliners prefer to cure their occasional claustrophobia with trips to Costa Brava or the island of Sylt; to this day, they top the West German vacation destination statistics. But the smoother the concrete wall became (with the gloomy, coarse, hollow blocks that were held together with sloppy mortar having been replaced), the more obtrusively the Wall moved back into the cityscape and into the consciousness of the people.

This “Wall of Shame,” so was the stereotypical label of the first years, remained tainted with the memory of utter powerlessness in the face of the dissection of a city center that had evolved organically: 193 main and side streets were cordoned off, 74 transit points were closed. In 1985, right-wing activists, like the “Conservative German Youth,” went at the Wall with pickaxes; at the end of July, some individuals who have yet to be identified blew a hole approximately one square meter in size into the structure.

The partition was burdened by legends of barrier breakers [*Sperrbrecher*] and escape helpers. Any attempt to look at the Wall in a more nuanced way was burdened by the fate of escapees like Peter Fechter, whose name has been emblematic of the “victims of the Communist Wall” (according to [a West Berlin] Senate brochure) since August 17th, 1962

The young man had been shot and wounded at the top of the Wall during an attempted escape. He lay on the ground for fifty minutes, just barely on Eastern territory. Hundreds of West and East Berliners could hear his screams, an American officer did not dare intervene: “Sorry, but this isn’t our problem.” Even U.S. generals who had been alerted shied away from taking responsibility. When President John F.

Kennedy had finally been briefed on the purpose of the “order,” the section staff from Berlin reported that the situation had “just been resolved.” Fechter had bled to death.

[...]

To this day, most West Berliners prefer to turn before reaching the Wall – unless they are being visited by West German relatives. As the West German writer Peter Schneider (*The Wall Jumper*) notes: “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.” The writer Karl-Heinz Jakobs, who hails from the GDR, hit the nail on the head a few years ago: “One day we woke up and realized we were living with the bomb, with marriage, with the Wall.”

And so, the feelings of the Berliners about the Wall alternate between political fatalism and the “weekday, Sunday, everyday indifference” as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* observed.

Whereas wall-admonisher Axel Springer – the publisher’s West Berlin premises on Kochstraße adjoin the Wall for a 410-meter stretch – once denounced it as the “most horrendous absurdity” in Europe, Berliners today prefer to tone it down a bit.

One resident of Leuschnerdamm in Kreuzberg recalled that, as late as 1961, his wife had “thrown flowerpots at the People’s Police.” Now, twenty-five years later, he sits amidst the glorious geraniums on his balcony overlooking GDR territory and shows understanding for the ways of the world: “After all, the People’s Police are just doing their job.”

One Bethaniendamm worker, who, in the days following the building of the Wall at the Brandenburg Gate, had “helplessly clenched” his fists in his pocket, is taking a detached view: “You live with it, you grow old with it.”

NOTES

[1] Gerd Harms, Christa Preissing, and Adolf Richtermeier, “Kinder und Jugendliche in der Großstadt,” Training Institute for Pedagogical Practice, Berlin; 505 pages, 18 Marks.

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Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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