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Chapter 5: East Germany. The contested story

The fact that in the one and only democratic election in the existence of the German Democratic Republic, citizens voted to dissolve their country is the stuff of classic tragedy. The revolution eats its children, we are told, and so it happened in East Germany in 1989. Sebastian Pflugbeil, a leading East German opposition activist, voiced the fallen hopes of many which followed in the wake of his country's revolution: "We have helped give birth to a child that quickly turned into a rather ugly creature" (Philipsen 1993: 161). East Germany has been the subject of countless publications since its demise more than fifteen years ago; yet still there is no consensus on the meaning of the changes which occurred there in its 'spring in winter' (Reich 1990).

In March, 1990 I heard Jens Reich give a lecture at Cambridge University on the upcoming elections in East Germany. The research questions which I pursued over the following few years directly stemmed from what I heard on that day. In the months preceding his talk, Reich had become a familiar face to many. He was one of the founding members of the East German political group *Neus Forum* (New Forum) which had spearheaded many of the changes of that momentous autumn. Reich was a microbiologist with an international reputation, and a well-known public figure in East Germany. With unusually eloquent English, and a long history of political

struggle in his country, for Western media he embodied the voice of 'the bloodless revolution'.

It was clear as Reich spoke that for him, the events of Autumn 1989 were substantially already over. This was a new phase of the East German political struggle. He described in detail the level of financial backing which was available to political groups such as *Neus Forum*, and for me the image which has endured most is that of the old-fashioned mimeograph machine which leaves traces of purple-blue ink on ones hands as the lever is turned around to make copies. Was this machinery sufficient to combat the resources being galvanized by Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in the then-upcoming March elections?

Reich predicted that the first time the East Germans would take to the polls they would do so to vote for the dissolution of their country. He described the glossy, Western-style campaign of CDU, and compared it to the inexperienced and, most importantly, impoverished campaign of Alliance '90, the umbrella organization which groups like *Neus Forum* had banded together to create. Though the outcome of the elections had seemed predictable, when the results came out, the margin of difference was staggering, nevertheless. The CDU alone captured 40.8% of the vote, and the Alliance for Germany (of which the CDU was but one part) had 48% of the votes. In comparison, only 2.9% of the votes cast on March 18, 1990 were in support of Alliance '90. How could this be? What had changed in the six months since East Germans had taken to the streets with their emancipating cry "We are the people"? The tidal wave of support for critical reform dissipated as quickly as it had swelled.

The story of the unfolding fate of East Germany that Reich related to the mesmerized audience in Cambridge was utterly compelling. What intrigued me most was the lingering question: how did those who were living through these changes make sense of them? It was clear to me that the story of East Germany as it was told in the Western media was mostly a simple tale of liberation, and the images with which we were bombarded at that time seemed to lend credence to this position. In the academic world, this viewpoint was championed by people like Political Economist Frances Fukuyama in the United States, who wrote unapologetically about “the triumph of the West, of the Western idea” (1989: 3), and in Germany by Joachim Fest and other conservative historians involved in the *Historikerstreit*. For them, the fact of the growth of western capitalism was itself proof of its evolutionary superiority. The present situation was one to be celebrated. How different it was to the tragic tale that Reich described in such detail. I knew instantly that I wanted to go to East Germany, almost needed to go there, to learn more.

It was just less than two years after this encounter that I arrived in Berlin to begin my research. By this time, the German Democratic Republic no longer existed. Rather, the project on East Germany which I had designed would be carried out in the newly unified, or reunified (depending on your political perspective) Germany. Weeks before I arrived, the files of the *Ministerium fur Staatsicherheit* - the ‘MfS’ or ‘Stasi’ - had become open to the public. The Stasi, officially designated as the ‘sword and shield of the Communist Party’, kept files on approximately one quarter of all East Germans, but their eventual goal was to realize their internal slogan ‘We Are Everywhere’ (Andrews 1998). The opening of the files, an historically unprecedented

act, had a very powerful effect across the population. The political atmosphere had changed immeasurably since the time of 1990 elections, and the questions which I originally wished to explore now carried different meaning.

Background to the original project

While my research in the years preceding 1989 had focussed on sustained political commitment, what drew me to East Germany was the challenge to explore deeply held convictions at a time of acute social and political transition. The socialist activists who had held my interest for so long in England were exceptional because of the duration of their activism. The focus in that research was upon retrospective meaning-making; I was interested in how, in their eighth and ninth decades of life, these women and men pieced together the stories of their lives which had been guided by a constant principle for more than half a century. But East Germany presented me with an altogether different opportunity. What happens, I wondered, to political commitment when the structures informing the ideology change irrevocably? How is new information incorporated into already existing belief structures?

It is often said that only in retrospect does one come to realize the extraordinary nature of events which one has lived through. This was not the case with the Autumn of 1989. One could not help but realize, even as events were unfolding, that these were exceptional times. The maps of Eastern and Central Europe would never look the same. When nations change, I wondered, what happens to the stories people tell about themselves in relation to their country which is no longer? It was this question which led me to East Germany.

The project which I originally designed focussed primarily on the founding members of *Neus Forum*, a group of thirty people who gathered at a home in the outskirts of Berlin one weekend in September 1989, and which only two months later had attracted half a million signatures for its petition to the government. My attraction to this group was not only based on the fact that it had been the largest of the groups created in September 1989. I was fascinated by the language of the founding statement of the group: the combination of the failure of its leading members to dissociate themselves with socialism while at the same time repudiating the socialist state. The first meeting of the group happened in the home of Katja Havemann, the widow of Robert Havemann, symbol of East German resistance whose persistent criticism of the state was offered, in his words, “Not as one disappointed in the socialist idea but as its confirmed partisan” (Allen 1991:62). Havemann spent the last few years of his life under house arrest, and it was at this very home, in Grunheide, that eight years later *Neus Forum* was founded. However, as I began conducting my research, I came to feel that much of the mass support which *Neus Forum* had garnered was based on a negative identification; many people signed the *Neus Forum* appeal because they saw this group as challenging the existing state, not because they identified with the group’s political platform.

Therefore, very soon after beginning my data collection, I decided to expand my investigation to include other internal critics of East Germany, who were not necessarily affiliated with *Neus Forum*. In keeping with earlier research which I had conducted, I decided to conduct in-depth interviews with leading internal critics of East Germany, a portion of whom were founding members of *Neus Forum*. Of the

approximately twenty-five questions contained in the interview schedule which I developed, only one specifically addressed the role of *Neus Forum*, and this was pitched at a very general level (“Can you describe the role of *Neus Forum* in contributing to the major changes – ‘*die wende*’ – which have occurred since Autumn 1989?”) For those individuals who were associated with *Neus Forum*, there was an additional portion of the interview schedule which probed for information on this group. Later, however, I came to feel that the enhanced focus on members of *Neus Forum*, simply because they were members of the group, was inappropriate, given the breadth of the questions which guided me in my research.

Constructing/constructed audience

It is clear that as people tell me the stories of the lives they lived in East Germany, they are producing them not only in a particular historical context, but also that they are telling them to a particular audience. Ostow states that “by early 1992, there was reason to suspect that citizens of the former German Democratic Republic had become the world’s most interviewed population” (Ostow 1993:1). Elsewhere she refers to the “carnival of interviewing and biographical publications” which followed the revolutionary changes of 1989, stating that “Being interviewed played a part in the reconstruction of the self that informed every GDR citizen’s *Wende* (or turnaround)” (1993:3-4). I was constantly questioning who these individuals perceived me to be, and reflected on how this might impact upon the stories which they told me.

One never knows exactly how one is viewed by one’s interviewees, but on many levels, I was an outsider to those I interviewed. For some, this was a bonus. Several

people told me explicitly that the interview had been a useful experience for them, providing them with an opportunity for a ‘strangers on a train’ encounter. However, in a small number of cases, the fact that I was not only from the West, but specifically from the United States, produced an overtly hostile reaction.

My meeting with Christian Furher, the pastor of Nikolai Church in Leipzig, the site of the Monday night candle-lit vigils which had become the sign of the changing times, was an example of this. I was staying at the squat of a young woman who had agreed to act as my translator for a number of interviews which she had helped to arrange in Leipzig. (In recent years, I have come across her by-line in international publications several times). One of these interviews was with Furher, and I had anticipated this meeting with great interest. When we arrived, and he realized that I was an American, he became clearly agitated. He spoke one sentence to her in German, and she, without a moment’s pause, turned to me and, translating his sentence, she announced “He said ‘not another fucking American’”. There was a moment of real tension which followed this. He was both appalled and surprised that she had related his comment to me. I asked if perhaps he would prefer not to go ahead with the interview, giving my assurance that I understood the basis for his frustration and apologized for contributing to it. Somewhat embarrassed, he said he wished to continue. Of all the things I learned from that meeting, the one which has stayed with me longest was the raw emotion which he spontaneously displayed when he learned where I was from.

Fortunately, while none of the other interviews reached that overt level of tension, there were moments when it was clear that a similar dynamic was in motion. In Chapter 2 I described a tension-filled moment in my interview with Bärbel Bohley in which she passionately criticizes the questions I have posed to her, and the assumptions upon which she feels they are based. Researchers like me from the West come to ask questions of others, without posing questions to ourselves. This interview format does not allow for genuine discussion; indeed, in her words, it is ‘meaningless’. This was important feedback for me. Before we began the interview, we had had coffee and had discussed my personal background and my reasons for interest in this subject. Similar to my experiences in other research settings, I felt that I had been interviewed for the job of interviewer, and that approval had been granted. Correctly, she placed me in the category of ‘people from the west’, but I was clear that part of what had driven me so to go to East Germany when I did was to challenge some of my own political beliefs, which formed a core part of myself. Had the format of the interview itself, with me guiding the questions to learn more about her understanding of her own life and times, introduced a one-sidedness which I had not intended?

Encounters like this caused me to reflect deeply on the cultural specificity of standard research practice. How is it that we come to know and understand the meaning-making system of other people? What criteria do we apply when we assess the quality of the interpretations we make of other people’s lives? Is there such a thing as getting an interpretation right? Or wrong? What is it that we base our judgements on? And how do we see ourselves as feeding into the process we are documenting? These

questions would stay with me long after I had finished collecting my data in East Germany.

And yet, outsider though I was, people opened their doors to me, time and time again. I had arrived in East Germany not knowing a single person who might participate in my research (though of course I had some contact leads). Almost without exception, people were welcoming and generous with their time, despite the fact that many had been asked to 'tell their stories' by others before me. Yes, I was an outsider, but maybe this was how outsiders were to be treated in East Germany: trusted, despite experiences of being betrayed; welcomed, despite experiences of being exploited.

Oppositional activists and Internal critics in the GDR

Although I had begun my research by describing my focus as 'the politics of opposition'. I soon came to appreciate the complexity of using the term 'opposition' in the East German context. Torpey reports that in his research with long-time independent political activists of East Germany, many felt the term 'opposition' was "a label pinned on them by the 'bourgeois' media of the West" (1995:9). They felt that their audience was not the west, but rather their fellow citizens. Many people perceived their political positions as being critical of the system, but not in opposition to it. They wished to reform really existing socialism, but not to do away with it altogether. They believed that change could happen within their country, leaving the nation-state in action. On the very day that the wall was opened, leaders of the main opposition groups issued a public appeal called 'For Our Country' reflecting a fidelity to the principles of socialism: "We ask of you, remain in your homeland, stay here by

us... Help us to construct a truly democratic socialism. It is no dream, if you work with us to prevent it from again being strangled at birth. We need you..." (Borneman 1991: 34-35).

The balance between being in opposition to the state, and wishing to enter into dialogue with it, was a very fine one. Having quickly realized this, I decided that a discussion of the terminology itself would be a useful starting point for the interviews, and so I began these with a question about the meaning of the term 'opposition' and its relationship to internal criticism. Through these many conversations, I came to a better appreciation of the complex nature of criticism, theoretical and actual, as it functioned in the one-party state of East Germany. Bärbel Bohley describes the transformation in her own political consciousness in the following way:

The premise of oppositionists in the GDR had always been: "We want reforms. We want to reform the existing society. We are not really an opposition". [Later, through forced exile, she came to feel that] opposition is an integral part of a normally functioning society, and that a political opposition plays an important democratic role (Philipsen 1993: 294).

There is no word or phrase which easily encapsulates the spirit of the critical movement in East Germany which had existed since the mid-1970s; many East Germans identify the expulsion of the popular singer Wolf Biermann, in November 1976, as a critical moment in the awakening of their political consciousness. As I listened to a range of descriptions of the impact of this event, I envisioned Bob Dylan, at the height of his career, being stripped of his US citizenship on the grounds of his

provocative lyrics, and imagined the rippling effect this would have had across the country. Biermann's expulsion alienated many East Germans, and from this time forward there existed a small, but significant critical movement which was forced to operate underground.

The activists who fought against the abuses of the state did not see themselves as trying to bring down the government, much less the state, but rather as citizens of East Germany, trying to build a better East Germany. This sentiment is precisely that encapsulated by Bertolt Brecht's statement: "Let others speak of their shame, I shall speak of mine" (Woods 1986:200), an example of Walzer's 'connected critic' discussed in the previous chapter. The paradox of this position, embodying both a sense of identification with, as well as a critical stance apart from, the object of its scrutiny, was evident throughout my interviews. Leading internal critic Werner Fischer explains "we never questioned this system as such ... we did believe in the reformability of the system, particularly after '85, during the post-Gorbachev era. [We wanted] to adapt socialism to a more human face, as it was known to us since ... Dubcek coined this phrase in '68". However, after the crushing defeat of the Prague Spring in August 1968 (ten months into Dubcek's liberalization), the critical intelligentsia of East Germany were unique amongst dissidents in the Soviet bloc, in their conviction that socialism could be reformed from within.

In the mid 1980s, East German dissidents found cause for hope in the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, who in 1985 introduced his policy of '*glasnost*' (or 'openness') which was to lay the foundations for *perestroika*, his plan for the economic, political

and social restructuring of the Soviet Union, announced at the Twenty-seventh Party Congress in 1986. Because of East Germany's uniquely close ties with Moscow, East German internal critics hoped that Gorbachev's vision would have a particular relevance for their country. However, when it became clear that Honecker had no intention of following Gorbachev's lead, and indeed only increased the rigidity of the system, hopes for the reformation of socialism died.

When I look back on the early stages of this research, I see that in some ways I was trying to save, if not socialism as it was practiced, then at least its founding principles. This is not surprising given my preoccupations of the previous years and my own political leanings. I found solace in terms like 'really existing socialism' which, from my perspective, mediated the blows for the principles of socialism. Following the events of 1989, Frida, who I had originally met through my project on lifetime socialist activists in Britain, wrote to me:

Can you imagine turning your back on the Ninth Symphony just because it has been badly performed? Well, I can't! What is great and good and beautiful does not turn out to paltry and rotten because the wrong people got hold of it and misinterpreted it.

I had some sympathy with this view, and one of the questions I included on the interview schedule, for instance, reflects this: "Various people have commented that because of the reality of existing socialism, the left is now deprived of a language. If the language of socialism has been tainted, is that also true about all of its principles?" As I reread this question now, it seems to communicate a sense of yearning and loss on my part, especially evident in the word 'all' contained in the phrase "all of its

principles”. For myself, I wanted to know what of socialism, if anything, they felt there was worth salvaging. Of course the responses which I received varied considerably, but most agreed on this: socialism had died, not in 1989, but probably some decades earlier, when the leaders of the country lost their own beliefs and decided that if socialism were to survive, it would have to be imposed from above rather than organically nurtured.

It was not that I wanted to resurrect socialism in an unfettered way, however. If I did not want to accept, unquestioningly, the triumphalist interpretation of the reasons for the demise of socialist states, neither could I simply dismiss all critiques of socialism as originating from that position. I knew that by going to East Germany and speaking with the people who had spearheaded these changes, I would be confronted with stories and perspectives that were otherwise not available to me. And so it was that I did everything I could do to make it possible to go to East Germany, finally arriving in Berlin in February 1992.

In the course of the following six months, I conducted in-depth interviews with forty women and men – including Jens Reich – all of whom had been closely involved in the changes which occurred in Autumn 1989. Some respondents had been part of the (underground) citizens’ movement for a long time, others were involved in the arts and had helped to organize the November 4th demonstration – which many identify as the harbinger to the opening of the wall five days later - some were affiliated with the church (which had played a critical role in negotiations between the citizens’ groups and the state), and some were lifetime members of the Communist Party who had

expressed their criticism of the state from within this powerful organization. Two of the forty had been official employees of the Stasi who, at the time of our interviews, were forming an “insider’s committee” as they called it, gathering together persons like themselves who had worked for the Stasi, who wished to discuss and analyze the past. The interviews were primarily in East Berlin, with about one-quarter of them taking place in Leipzig.

Looking back nearly fifteen years later on the research that I conducted in East Germany, four themes emerge from the data I gathered: 1) the difficulty of recounting and evaluating life experiences in a dramatically altered context to the one in which the experiences were lived; 2) the impact of generation on engagement with and perception of political changes; 3) the relationship between the physical wall and the wall ‘inside the head’; and 4) the presumed importance of, and complexity surrounding, the negotiation of forgiveness.

Before turning to any of these, it is important to emphasize the political and historical context in which I was operating. In the spring and summer of 1992, when I conducted my interviews, East Germany was already a place of the past, but for many East Germans, the pace and the extent of the changes which had taken place since the fall of the wall two and half years earlier had presented ongoing challenges. As human beings, we are always rewriting our pasts in light of new circumstances in the present. Certain events which once seemed crucial to who we are later appear devoid of significance, while other experiences are recalled with a new-found importance. The situation for East Germans in the early 1990s represented an acute form of this

everyday challenge, as people re-thought and re-crafted the lives they had lived under state socialism.

Nowhere was this challenge more dramatically illustrated than in the plight of East German historians, most of whom lost their jobs after 1989, and virtually all of whom publicly revised arguments which they had put forth in publications written prior to 1989 (Berger 2003). Some of these historians later published autobiographically based histories, such as Gunter Benser, who wrote that “I was surprised to see how closely the different phases of my own life corresponded with the evolution and passing away of the GDR” (cited in Berger p. 74). The role of East German historians is significant, as ultimately it is they who will, or will not, contribute to the way in which the ‘story of the GDR’ is ultimately written. East German historians have tended to argue against reducing the forty years of the history of the country to its “inglorious end” (Berger 2003: 75). What occurred in 1989 was not inevitable, but rather was the outcome of not taking opportunities which presented themselves. “There had been alternatives and turning-points at which, in A.J.P. Taylor’s famous phrase, history failed to turn” (Berger 2003:75). But these same historians, who provide rather different accounts of the downfall of their country to those offered by their western counter-parts, have been marginalized. “At worst they are completely ignored by the ‘official historical discourse in the FRG [Germany]. At best they are perceived as espousing a ‘half-hearted revisionism’” (Berger 2003: 81). Their perspective on, and retrospective accounts of, the critical historical events in the forty years of East Germany are an important contribution to the writing of their country’s history. Yet, whether these accounts will be written in to the official national narrative of East Germany remains to be seen.

The Search for a Narratable Past

There has been a longstanding debate within the social sciences regarding the veracity of accounts which individuals provide about the details of their own lives. When those who engage in life history research try to collect personal accounts of people's lives, how can we assess veracity? There are a number of angles from which to answer this question. First, we might ask ourselves how do we ever know if what we are told is true? Sometimes there are resources which are available to assist us in our attempts to determine the factual basis of the stories we hear. But very often, the accounts are so deeply rooted in the biographical, that external fact-finding is difficult, and possibly irrelevant.

Perhaps a more interesting question, and one which is relevant to our considerations here, is what does 'truthfulness' in the context of life history research actually mean. When people tell us about their lives, they are always doing so from a particular moment in time – the present – and the meaning of previous life experiences is forever changing in light of new circumstances. Thus it is that our understandings, of our selves and of our past experiences, are always subject to review over time. Moreover, not only are we always audience to our own tales about who we are, and who we have been, but we also tell our stories to others, and our perceptions of who they are undoubtedly colours what we tell them.

In the months and years following unification, there was a widespread pressure to tell a particular kind of story about one's experiences under state socialism. Nowhere was

this more explicitly reflected than in the remit of East Germany's truth commission, the *Enquet Kommission Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktator in Deutschland* ("The Study Commission for the Assessment of History and Consequences for the Socialist Unity Party (SED) Dictatorship in Germany) (Andrews 2003). In contrast to other truth commissions, such as that of South Africa, the *Enquet Kommission* was almost wholly unconcerned with personal testimony about the conditions of life under state socialism. Indeed, only 327 individuals were invited to give personal testimony, and most were the 'unsung victims of SED rule' (McAdams 2001:91). The first *Enquet Kommission* was followed by a second, established in May 1995. Here, the explicit purpose was to investigate, in the words of Rainer Eppelman, Chair of both the first and second commissions and himself a former dissident of East Germany, "the thousands of people... who did not permit themselves to succumb to the criminality or immorality... of the SED dictatorship, who complained, stood firm, and achieved some kind of protest" (as quoted in Yoder 1999: 73-74).

The two *Enquet Kommissions* thus identify two kinds of narratable pasts: that of the victims, and that of the unsung heroes. Most East Germans, however, were neither heroes nor victims, but rather did what they felt they needed to do in order to achieve a particular quality of life for themselves and their families. Even small resistance came at a very high price, for instance the compromising of educational opportunities for one's children. There have been numerous accounts of reading Stasi files since they were opened; the more nuanced of these refuses the stark portrayal of good and evil which such files might suggest. As Timothy Garton Ash writes:

What you find here, in the files, is how deep our conduct is influenced by our circumstances... What you find is less malice than human weakness... And when you talk to those involved, what you find is less deliberate dishonesty than our almost infinite capacity for self-deception... If I had met... a single clearly evil person. But they were all just weak, shaped by circumstances, self-deceiving; human, all too human. Yet the sum of all their actions was a great evil” (Garton Ash 1997:223-224).

Still, the trend has been to categorize the 16 million East Germans in dichotomous terms: they were either good or bad. As Monteath (1997) comments: “It remains to be seen whether history will remember that group of people who neither engaged in persecution nor offered resistance, but simply conformed to the daily pressures of life in the GDR, living unheroically within the restrictions imposed by an authoritarian regime” (p. 284). Moreover, the assumption underlying East Germany’s truth commission is that the categories of victims and perpetrators were distinct. In one of my meetings with Wolfgang Ullmann, one of the architects of the commission, he said to me: “if you look into Stasi files you see there are spies and there are those who are spied on: there is a very clear borderline between those”. However, not everyone I spoke with agreed that the borderline between these categories was indeed so clear, as we will see later in this chapter.

When the wall came down, East Germany was flooded with oral historians from around the world (myself included), most of these from the west. With hearts and minds captured by the images which they encountered through the media, most of these researchers were in search of a particular kind of story (not necessarily the same story, of course). In the months following the fall of the wall, there was much talk

about the anticipated 'liberation of memory' which it was thought would follow from the collapse of the Iron Curtain. But what they found when they turned on their tape recorders was often different to that which they had expected. The different stories which respondents had to offer were taken to be a sign of speechlessness, epitomised by the claim, widely held amongst Western academics, that "East Germany's harsh political structures had led to a general speechlessness: to a popular memory full of blank spaces" (Thompson 1990:20) (For a discussion of this, see Andrews 2000).

Virtually none of the East Germans with whom I spoke gave any evidence of seeing themselves as newly liberated, in memory or in anything else. Only months after the wall came down, Jens Reich posed the question "So, are we happy that this unloved and deformed creature of the cold-war period is now at last dying?". His response reflects the ambivalent emotions experienced by many of the East Germans with whom I spoke:

Strange to say, I am not happy and neither are others around me. Now that the state is decaying, people begin to yearn for some of its more sympathetic traits. In a peculiar way, many of us feel homesick for that inefficient and lazy society which is so remote from the tough and competitive society into which we are now thrown.... So we say farewell, but with an oppressive sense of uneasiness (Reich 1990: 97).

In the months that I was there, daily life for those around me was in acute transition. One example which epitomised for me the special characteristics of this transitional moment concerned the physical remapping of Berlin. After unification, many street names in East Berlin had been changed to reflect the ideals of the newly formed

country. However, Berlin maps available at that time did not show the correct names of the streets. In some cases this was not a problem, as new labels were placed above the old (and were considerably larger), but more often the new labels simply stood alone. In effect what this meant was that people living in the eastern part of the city, what had so recently been East Berlin, could not tell you how to get from one place to another. East Berliners could of course travel themselves to places which they knew, but they could not direct others, like myself, who were new to their neighbourhoods; on the other hand, those who knew the new names could not supply the insider knowledge, such as descriptions of tell-tale landmarks along the way, which customarily accompany the giving of street directions.

Identity, imagination, and the Wall

But if the renaming of the streets of East Berlin serves as a metaphor for the confusion of many of its habitants, the psychological challenges posed by the disbanding of the wall posed were far more widespread and enduring. For many years, and for many people, the Berlin Wall was representative of the captivity of a people, not just in Germany, but around the world. Jens Reich describes “wall sickness” which afflicted East Germans:

“Wall sickness” was the eternal, lamenting analysis of our life blighted and circumscribed by *Die Mauer*. It came from being in a cage in the centre of Europe. Wall-sickness was boredom. We felt condemned to utter, excruciating dullness, sealed off from everything that happened in the world around us. Wall-sickness was loneliness, the feeling that you were condemned to die

without having ever seen Naples, or Venice, or Paris, or London (Reich 1990: 76).

The Berlin Wall has been the source of countless books, art works, poetry and music. To say that it has captured the imagination of millions of people is not an exaggeration. Indeed, typing the phrase 'Berlin Wall' into Google results in just under 30 million hits.

While the Berlin Wall had a very real effect on the lives of East Germans from the time it was built, in 1961, until the time it 'fell' (and was eventually dismantled), in 1989, the force of its existence is still in evidence. I asked each of the forty people I interviewed about their reactions to the opening of the wall on November 9th, 1989. The responses which I heard were deeply moving, and revealed to me the complexity of the relationship which my respondents had to the demise of their country (Andrews 2003).

A powerful example of this is the account given to me by Reinhard Weißhuhn, an East German who had been part of the small underground opposition in his country for more than twenty years, beginning in the 1970s. The interview takes place in the front room of his flat, which is situated two hundred meters from the border between East and West Germany. Here he describes how he experienced the opening of the wall, and the psychological challenges this posed for him:

On the way home [at about 10:30 pm] I noticed many people all running into the same direction... they were all running to the end of the world... the street was full of cars and one could hardly walk at all... I then walked with the

stream and got to the border crossing, Bonnholmer Strasse... which was the first crossing to be opened. Two hundred meters from here. It was so crammed full with people you couldn't move. And everybody was pushing through the crossing. The policemen were just standing around, they didn't know what to do and were completely puzzled. I asked a few people... what was happening. Of course, I know, I could see, but I didn't actually, I didn't understand. And I stood there for about a half hour in this crowd and then went home and switched the television on. Then I watched everything on television, transmissions from everywhere, Ku-damm and all other border crossings. And I could see that people were coming over, that is as seen from the west.... I was totally paralysed... all this continued for the next few days and it took me a whole week before I went across, Potsdammer Str. It is difficult to describe... this was such a very elementary transformation of one's existence, of ... the whole world in a way...

Weißhuhn's description of how he learned of the opening of the wall is interesting for several reasons. First, it is clear that although he was active in the opposition movement, he, like others, was surprised by what he encountered as he returned home that November evening. While in retrospect it is possible to identify the signs of imminent demise that now seem so clear, it is important to remember that only ten months before the fall of the wall, in January 1989, Honecker defiantly pronounced "The Wall will still stand in fifty and also in a hundred years", and on October 7th of that same year, the date marking the fortieth anniversary of the creation of the country, he again expressed his belief in the future of the country, even in the face of evident growing disquiet. "Socialism will be halted in its course neither by ox, nor ass" he proclaimed. It was only one month later that Weißhuhn encountered so many

people running “to the end of the world” – that is to say, to the world that lay on the other side of the wall. In Weißhuhn’s account, first he followed the flow of the people, until he arrived at the border crossing, the wall. There he stood for a half hour, trying to take in what he observed. The policemen stood around, not knowing what to do, and Weißhuhn himself struggled to make sense of what he saw but could not understand. Ultimately, he returned to his own home, and watched the events through the lens of West German television. From this mirrored perspective, the crowds poured in, rather than rushed out.

But the effect of witnessing these events, even from the once-removed position which Weißhuhn tried to adopt, is paralytic for him. He cannot join the crowds, but neither can he resist travelling across the border. Weißhuhn then elaborates on his response to the opening of the wall. Here one can see that his explanation is framed by his perception of me as someone from outside of the two Germanies. He describes to me in detail the geography of the corner of Berlin upon which his psychological transformation was played out:

I’ll try to explain. I have lived.. I have been in Berlin since ‘73 and I have always lived two hundred meters from the wall. And this wall, to me, has become a symbol of ramming my head against for the last twenty years. And I had, as a way of survival, I had resolved to ignore this wall as far as I could... And I tried to do the same throughout the week, when the wall had gone. I did not only try to suppress the fact that the wall had been there previously, but I also tried to suppress the fact that it had gone. And it didn’t work. When I went across the wall for the first time, I did so at Potsdamer Platz, where there hadn’t been a crossing, they had only torn a hole, simply torn a hole into the

wall, yes. And that's where I wanted to go through, precisely there. I walked through like a sleepwalker. I could not conceive of the idea up to the moment when I was through, that that was possible. Well, and then I stood for a very long time over at the other side in no-man's land, and could not move forward or backwards. And then I cried, I was totally overwhelmed.

For Weißhuhn, it was important that he cross the border not where there was a clear opening, such as Bonnholmer Strasse where he had seen the masses cross on the night of November 9th, but rather at Potsdamer Platz, where a hole had been torn into the wall. Somehow this hole contained within it more evidence of the struggle which had led to these events. A number of respondents with whom I spoke mentioned to me the difficulty of accepting that the wall, which had symbolized the strength of the repression of the people, could be disbanded so suddenly and so totally. To what extent had its strength merely existed in the eyes of those whose lives it restrained?

Actress Ruth Reinecke was one of the organisers of the now famous demonstration in Alexanderplatz on November 4th, which attracted more than half a million people, who chanted '*Wir sind das Volk*', 'We are the people'. Looking back with hindsight, many now identify this moment as a critical event which contributed to the opening of the wall five days later. But for those who lived this experience, there was no such sense of inevitability. Indeed, when, on the night of November 9th, Reinecke watched the television and heard the news, she simply did not believe it, and went to bed.

"*Ganz normale*" she told me, "totally normal". It was not until the following day that she realized what had happened. What was her reaction? I asked. "I was not happy, not happy. The wall, the wall was something very special. It was in all of our heads. That it had come down, this had to be a positive thing of course... Maybe somehow I

felt in advance that what we had stood up so vehemently for on November 4th was giving way to this new thing”. What exactly ‘this new thing’ would turn out to be, no one could have known. But that a fundamental change had happened was unmistakable. Reinecke expands on her feelings at that time:

When the wall was opened, suddenly another world existed which I did not know, which I would have to live in, whether I wanted it or not. There was of course a great curiosity to explore the world. This still exists. On the other hand... there was some fear that I could not stay any more the same person I had been so far. At that time, this was a problem for me.

As a repertory member of the Maxim Gorki Theatre, a theatre of international repute, Reinecke had travelled many times to the West. Perhaps for this reason, it held less of a mystical appeal for her. She explains:

Because I worked in a theatre, I had the privilege to go to the West... When I went to this other Germany, I knew I could have nothing to do with this other Germany. My home and my roots are in the GDR. The question which was always posed to me was why I had not left this country for the west. I always answered that I belong to this country.

Reinecke’s repeated use of the phrase ‘this other Germany’ reveals the distance which she observes between herself and the West. Elsewhere in our interview, she tells me that when people ask her where she is from, three years after the demise of East Germany, she responds “I am from the GDR. Here. I am from here. Where is the West?”. Would she still respond in this way today, fifteen years after unification? It is difficult to know, but in our interview, she speculates on this: “The GDR citizen inside myself will always accompany the movements which will take place in my

life.. You can't say, 'well on Sunday I will deal with the past'. It's going on and on. And it is a good thing that it functions this way". For her, and others with whom I spoke, one of the greatest challenges facing them, in the first few years following unification, was to re-evaluate their sense of national belonging. Reinecke, in her late thirties at the time of our interview, had grown up her entire life in the GDR. But this country, her home, no longer existed. What then happened to this sense of belonging? Michael Ignatieff states that "belonging...means being recognised and understood" (1994:7). This is precisely what many East Germans were searching for after the loss of their country.

A question of generations

All East Germans lost their country, but clearly people experienced this loss in very different ways. One of the most important factors influencing this experience was that that of age; how old was a particular person at the time of critical events in the country's history? Mannheim's (1952) work on the sociology of generations, discussed in Chapter 3, hypothesizes that when someone is born is highly influential in how they regard history, and that those events which occur during an individual's youth exercise a particularly powerful influence. John Bodnar reformulates this equation slightly, arguing that "generational memory is formed in the passage of time, not simply born in pivotal decades and events" (1996:636). Bodnar asserts that while individuals' basic narratives may be moulded from memories of their formative years, these memories are not static but rather are themselves under constant reconstruction. Thus, experiences of youth are both internalized and used as a central framework of identity, even while they are revisited and reinterpreted throughout an individual's life

in light of new circumstances and knowledge. Henning Shaller, the head of set designs at the Maxim Gorki Theatre at the time of our interview, echoes this sentiment when he tells me “Identity is related to the consciousness of history”. One’s consciousness of history, in turn, is influenced by one’s standpoint in relation to historical events.

There are three key dates in my East Germans interviewees’ biographies which have helped to shape their reactions to the demise of their country (Andrews 2003): October 7, 1949, the founding of the country; August 13, 1961, commencement of the building of the Berlin Wall; and November 9, 1989, the opening of the Berlin Wall. The age of the respondents in my East German project ranged over about fifty years, from the young Steffen Steinbach who, as a key grassroots member of *Neus Forum*, was responsible for answering the telephone in Bärbel Bohley’s home in the ‘heady days’ of the autumn of 1989, to Ursula Herzberg, who was in her early 70s at the time of our interview. Virtually all of the women and men with whom I spoke indicated to me the impact of the timing of historical on their own biography.

The salience of generational consciousness amongst my interviewees manifested itself not only in the content of stories people told but also in what stories were regarded as tellable. Ulrike Poppe, for instance, describes growing up near to the forest, “and through this forest, the wall was built. I remember my parents always reminding us not to go too deep into the forest because there were soldiers with guns... We heard the shooting day and night”. As she was only eight years old when the wall began to be built, she and her friends made up a game, “the frontier game”:

One was a soldier, and the others smugglers, and we smuggled 'leaflets' and the leaflets were the leaves from the trees. I remember once being very proud because no one found my leaflets because I had swallowed them. The smugglers were always the good guys, and the soldiers were the evil ones.

In this story, one is transported into the experience of looking onto to the building of the wall, from the perspective of a child. The wall is something to be overcome; and this is achieved by making it a feature of the game. There are other potential stories which are more difficult to articulate than this one, because they are marked by inaction and silence; they are defined by their absence of story, the course of events which did not happen. Wolfgang Herzberg, the first oral historian in East Germany, says that a primary reason why the founding generation was left unchecked for so many decades was because his own generation, those born roughly at the same time of the nation, had 'too much respect for anti-fascism'. It was not until these 'GDR babies' themselves had children that this spell would be undone. Their children, the grandchildren of the founding generation, would be the ones to say that the emperor had no clothes.

My interview with Ruth Reinecke was particularly marked by the theme of generations, which emerged time and again throughout our conversation. For instance, when Reinecke describes the enormity of the challenge that the opening of the wall presented for her, she completes this discussion by contrasting her own experience with that of her then nine year old daughter: "For my daughter it is completely different. She is growing up in a different, a wider world, a more colourful world". Reinecke's daughter was only six at the time of unification, and though Reinecke recalls her daughter telling her "I am afraid. I am afraid", in fact the

transition for her has not been too tumultuous. The experience of Reinecke's mother, a Jew who survived the Holocaust, is very different. She, and those of her generation, helped to build East Germany out of the ruins of the Second World War. For them, East Germany was both a place and an idea. For this East German cohort, the demise of the country, coupled with the apparent moral bankruptcy of the ideology upon which it was built, was paralytic. Reinecke describes the devastating effects of the recent changes on her mother's generation:

Of course it is much better and much nicer if in the end you can say you have worked for something which has brought happiness to people. And now nothing, absolutely nothing, has remained... My mother... shares part of the responsibility, myself as well. She helped to construct this country, she worked for this country. And now when she realizes what the country was really like, she became ill... She is unable to say anything at all.

Reinecke is compassionate towards this generation, regarding them as both "the most responsible and the most punished" regarding the demise of the country. She describes this generation as:

very bitter now; they will be silent for the rest of their years. Their youth, their thoughts, their creativity has been invested in a life which is now nothing. And this is a very bitter knowledge... therefore I have a lot of sympathy with this generation.

But not all of Reinecke's generation share her sympathy. Annette Simon, born three years before Reinecke, is a psychologist, and the daughter of the East German novelist Christa Wolf. The older generation, she says,

...feel very much betrayed, and they are very much still identified with East Germany. To me this is very strange. I don't feel like this. It's typical this attitude of the elderly, but it also makes me angry. I can't understand this attitude. There is so little working through for them, but of course it is understandable because this means questioning your whole life... With the vanishing of the state, their own identity becomes lost. I cannot prevent being sour with this generation. It is a combination of pity with anger.

For people of Reinecke and Simon's generation, there is a pronounced sense of a generational divide, especially between them and the generation of their parents.

Reinecke is noticeably more sympathetic with the plight of her mother and others like her than Simon, but the two women share a sense that this older generation is deeply responsible for socialism as it was practiced ('really existing socialism') in East Germany.

My interviews with Ursula Herzberg were amongst the most emotionally challenging for me, personally, in this regard. At the time of our meetings, I had already conducted many interviews with older people who were engaged with their own life review, particularly in relation to my project on sustained socialist commitment in Britain. Never before, however, had I encountered someone who genuinely felt that they had wasted their life. As a young Jew living in Germany, Ursula had been sent on the *kindertransport* to England. Her family stayed behind, and there they were murdered by the Nazis. At the end of the war Herzberg, who had by this time become involved in left-wing politics in England, was persuaded to return to help build the new Germany. This decision was 'not easy' for her. She explains:

I knew what had happened in Germany... I was Jewish and I knew my mother would probably be missing and not be there any more. I had had some experience with the Nazis until I was seventeen... I found it very very difficult emotionally to return to that country voluntarily. But on the other hand we were told by our comrades “who else would be there to reshape Germany and rebuild Germany if it’s not these few anti-fascists who survived or came out of concentration camps?” because a majority of the Germans had been with Hitler and supported him... and for that reason I thought it was my duty to return to this country. So I returned...

Herzberg had read the book I had written on the British socialist activists. She was intrigued by this study, and said to me several times that had she not been persuaded to move back to Germany, to rebuild a new nation from the ashes that remained, she could have been one of the people in my study. I was struck by a powerful sense of Robert Frost’s ‘the road not taken’; our conversations were marked by her acute awareness of the life she might have had.

She was a woman of ideals, who had lived and fought for what she thought was right, but in retrospect her assessment of her life is that she “spent fifty years of my life on the wrong horse... [socialism] doesn’t work the way I thought it would work, you see, it doesn’t work, that’s why I say I put myself on the wrong horse”. Herzberg is painfully aware of the implications of the decisions she made long ago, and knows how she and the others of the founding generation of East Germany, are regarded by younger generations, represented by Reinecke and Simon above. She is brutally honest with herself, and with me, and it is my challenge not to try to sweeten what she tells me.

Bitterness was for a long time my feeling. I was absolutely bitter after these changes. Usually, I thought to myself, my God, you have wasted, absolutely wasted your whole life, fifty years of your life you could have done all sorts of things ...I would never have returned to Germany from England if I had known what was going to happen forty or fifty years later. I certainly would not have returned. I think I could have been a progressive person and worked for progress, wherever, in England or wherever... I certainly wouldn't have gone back to Germany.

The sentiments Herzberg expresses here are not so unusual, though the implications of them in her own life are more dramatic than they are for most. The meaning of events and actions in our lives, and those of others, are most often only apparent in retrospect. We make decisions based on information we have at a particular moment in time, but this information is always incomplete, and our decision-making abilities are invariably flawed by our temporally partial vision. Freeman (2003) states that:

Oftentimes, human beings are only able to recognize and understand the meaning(s) of experience after it has occurred. This phenomenon is especially evident in the moral domain: the morality (or immorality) of an action (or inaction) is often gauged only after the action has been completed. As such, we are often, and tragically, too late in our arrival on the moral scene...(2003:54).

In Herzberg's story, we see a living embodiment of this 'tragedy'. For her, the importance of her age is critical for two reasons: 1) because of the length of time she dedicated to what she later would regard as 'betting on the wrong horse', and 2)

because she is old, and most of her years are behind her. “I’m glad I’m old now, I wouldn’t like to be young again... Enough is enough” she tells me. She is tired. Still, she tells me “now, now I have some ideas”, but the repetition of the word now indicates the unsaid part of that thought: “I have some ideas now, *but it is too late*”. It is time for others to play their role in the making of history. “It’s easier for the young ones..”. she tells me. They have time on their side, they can adjust to the new changes, and find their own way. As for herself, what does Herzberg see in her own future? “I can’t see a role for myself much really”.

The intersection between history and biography is evident throughout the conversations I had in East Germany. For some, the possibilities for the future were both exciting and frightening, represented by the ‘more colourful world’ of Ruth Reinecke’s daughter. But for some of those of the older generation, the judgement which has been cast upon their life’s work has been harsh indeed, and this has rendered them silent and without hope.

Forgiveness and reworking the past

I did not go to East Germany with the intention of exploring the meaning of forgiveness; yet, it is this topic more than any other which my research there led me to contemplate. I have already described the importance of the timing of my interviews in East Germany, in relation to the opening of the Stasi files. If I thought about forgiveness at all at that time, it was in a rather straightforward way: how, if at all, could those who had been spied upon bring themselves to forgive those who had

betrayed them? Was forgiveness a desirable goal, and if so, what could contribute to its possibility?

It was in my interview with Katja Havemann that the complexity of this term, was made clear to me. She recalls that initially she had “imagined that they that they [people who worked for the Stasi] would feel relieved when they finally were able to come out of this role... We hoped that they would readily say that ‘yes, we were really wrong about this one’ – a perspective she describes in our interview as “naïve”. She, and others who had suffered at the hands of the Stasi were, she says, ready to forgive them, and wanting to forgive them. But their forgiveness was never sought. Instead, what she discovered was something very different.

They [long pause] still can’t forgive us, what they did to us, you know... We are the living guilty conscience.... They can’t forgive us for the things that they did to us... but (pause) ...then there’s also these documents [the Stasi files]... I can’t hate. But I can’t forgive this. And I’m alive... When history is written, it will come to this: It really did happen.

But who will write that history? And what will they include? What will be left out? What ‘really did happen’ and why? The struggle to participate in the construction of this narrative is precisely the battle being fought between East and West German historians, referred to earlier. I leave the conversation with Havemann very much impressed by how disappointed she was not to have the forgiveness she was willing to extend accepted by those whom she was prepared to forgive. Not only did they not want it, indeed they could not forgive her for reminding them of who they had been and what they had done. She was, she said “the living guilty conscience”. In East

Germany, unlike in some other dictatorships, most of the victims of the state survived. Havemann emphasises this to me: “we’re still alive, we experienced it all. We’re still witnesses... And I’m alive”. Here the word ‘still’ underscores the fact of her survival; she has not been destroyed. Rather, she is a force to be reckoned with, and she will not go away. Yet, why is it so important to Havemann, and to others like her who have been wronged, to forgive those who caused them suffering? And if forgiving the wrongdoers is of paramount importance, why don’t they just forgive them? Does forgiveness require the participation of both the wrongdoer and the wronged?

Conversations such as the one with Havemann led me to realize the significance and the complexity of the process of forgiveness, something which was to become a recurrent theme in my interviews. Many people seemed to feel that only through forgiveness could they overcome the hurts of the past. But is the promise of healing, and thus of reduced suffering (for oneself, and/or others) sufficient reason to forgive? And if it is imperative to forgive, who should be forgiven, for what, and how? Elsewhere I identify a number of questions which lie at the heart of the meaning of forgiveness:

Is the knowledge of a past wrong sufficient grounds for granting forgiveness, or rather are there conditions which, if not met, necessitate its withholding? Must forgiveness, once offered, always be accepted? What does it mean to forgive, and what does it mean to receive forgiveness? Must forgiver and forgiven share a construction of forgiveness? What implications, if any, are there if their constructions of this act are at variance? Do forgiver and forgiven need each other to engage in this process? (Andrews 1999:11-112).

The more I thought about forgiveness, the more engaging I found these questions to be, both theoretically (Andrews 2000) and in relation to my own data (Andrews 1999). Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* provides one of the most thoughtful cases for pursuing the path of forgiveness. It is, she tells us, "the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven" (p.241). Forgiveness is important, because it makes possible a new beginning. But a new beginning for whom? Forgiveness depends upon developing an understanding of how a certain course of action came to be adopted, but it does not rationalize it. The road to forgiveness is one which requires the development of understanding of another party's framework of meaning, and it is for this reason that it is increasingly being considered within its wider political context. As Donald Shriver writes

the concept of forgiveness... belongs at the heart of reflection about how groups of humans can move to repair the damages that they have suffered from their past conflicts with each other. Precisely because it attends at once to moral truth, history, and the human benefits that flow from the conquest of enmity, forgiveness is a word for multidimensional process that this eminently political (Shriver 1995: ix-x).

In East Germany, in the months immediately following the opening of the Stasi files, the air was filled with conversations about forgiveness; its possibility or impossibility; why it was important for the individual, and for society; and critically, who to forgive

and what to forgive them for. Some people with whom I spoke described not only the struggle to forgive others, but the need to forgive themselves as well. These conversations caused me to contemplate the complexities of forgiveness, particularly as it transpires in politically charged and often public circumstances. Eventually, I developed a model of forgiveness (Andrews 2000), in which I argued for three vital pre-conditions for forgiveness: 1) confession, 2) ownership, and 3) repentance. Only when these conditions are met is there a possibility for a real and lasting forgiveness between injured party and perpetrator. Forgiveness, I argued, is something which happens between people, and is dependent upon a dialogue between them for its realization. In the case of forgiving oneself, this dialogue is between a present and past self, as one looks back on actions which one did or didn't do, the turning of a blind eye, to that which they knew, or should have known.

Earlier in this chapter, I quoted Wolfgang Ullmann, pastor and architect of the East German truth commission, proclaiming that there was a clear distinction between victims and victimizers. If this premise is accepted as true, then questions of who should forgive whom are rather straightforward. But many with whom I spoke thought that this stark contrast was itself an impediment to examining one's own past, for there will always be those who were more implicated than oneself. Werner Fischer, one of the leading anti-state activists in the 1980s who was later placed in charge of disbanding the Stasi, comments to me:

People are only too eager to point a finger at the other person, to the guilty one, 'that was him, the Stasi' in order to disguise their own shame of not having been able to - even only in a very minute way - show resistance. This simply must happen, but at present does not, that people ask themselves, 'how

far have I contributed to make this system function, if only by my silence?'.

This is an exceedingly difficult process.

Fischer then comments about this self-interrogation on a more personal level.

I refuse to accept a polarization of victim/victimizer, although I personally use these terms too in a careless way... I am very cautious with this categorization. Do I know in how far I, as a so-called 'victim' who was in prison and so on, contributed in a certain way to a stabilization of the system? Because the Stasi strengthened this apparatus, could only strengthen it by constant referral to the opposition. That is how the system legitimized itself. In that respect I belong to the criminals, who ensured that the Stasi found more and more reasons to expand. Who can judge this?

Lotte Templin, oppositional activist and wife of Wolfgang Templin, makes a similar comment, telling me that for her it is important to inspect her Stasi files, so she can decipher those parts of her past for which she must assume personal responsibility. Having been targeted for abuse by the state over a protracted period of time, it would have been easy for her to retreat into a position which abdicated any responsibility for the consequences of decisions she had made which affected her life, and those of her children. Jens Reich comments upon the tendency to hide behind the state:

'They' were guilty for anything that went wrong in your professional career. Indeed it is true that they stopped the development of hundreds of thousands of gifted people. But there also exist other reasons for professional failure. Yet the legitimate and the illegitimate reasons for failure could never be disentangled. As in your professional, so in your personal life (1990:78).

Individuals such as Reich, Templin and Fischer struggled to realistically assess their own biographies, as they strongly promoted others to do as well. Their motivation to do so was primarily that identified by Arendt above, simply to create conditions for a new beginning. This was considered to be important not only for them personally, and interpersonally, but for the whole of the society. Equally, however, one could argue that the rigorous self-examination which these dissident activists advocate has less severe consequences for them than it might have for others who did not criticize the state. Moreover, the heavily politicized divisions between east and west which followed unification meant that the environment was not conducive to such self exploration. As Fischer comments:

Unfortunately, what I had expected from people did not happen, that they come clean about their actions. Of course they can only do so if they are without fear. And the atmosphere was and still is today not very conducive for that to happen. ... many people hope that their collaboration with the system will never be discovered. I think that this is tragic not only for their personal future development but for the inner peace of the country. In human terms, I find this reprehensible.

Fischer's comment here echoes the sentiments of Havemann, expressed above. One can hear the disappointment and disillusion with those who did not 'come clean', which for him marks a 'tragedy' for them personally, as it is a unique missed opportunity, but which compromises the possibility for 'the inner peace of the country'. Forgiveness, which has long been regarded as something which transpires between individuals, is here imbued with a much larger importance; with it rests the hope for the redemption of the society.

Looking back on the talk I heard Jens Reich deliver in 1990, I am struck by two things: first, the world at that time seems so very far away from the one in which we now live. Literally, the globe was different. But I am also struck by the timing of these momentous happenings in terms of my own biography. Having just concluded my study on lifetime socialist activists when I sat in Lady Mitchell Hall in Cambridge University, listening to Reich, somehow the groundwork had been laid for me to be captured by the tale which he told. The demise of East Germany, and the meaning of a newly unified Germany, have been the topics of countless publications, both within Germany and beyond. In these pages I have tried to present a different kind of narrative – an account of what I saw and how I understood it when I spoke with forty East Germans in the months following the opening of the Stasi files. These stories have stayed with me over the past fifteen years; as I return to re-examine the data, I wonder about the people I spoke with for my research. Where are they now, and how do they now regard the changes of 1989? And how will they look upon these changes twenty-five years from now? The story of East Germany is one which is still being rewritten, and doubtless the process will continue. Why and how the changes happened as they did is something which continues to be debated. There is and can be no ultimate writing of this story, as inevitably the version which is told reflects the placement of the teller and the moment of the telling.

In our interview, Bärbel Bohley tells me that “the socialism that can be discussed does not exist any longer. But the people that lived through it do”. Although I was compelled to go to East Germany because of my interest in the fate of socialism, this focus soon became overshadowed by my desire to know and understand how a small

group of people who 'lived through it' made sense of the new society which they had helped to create. Their stories, individually and collectively, suggest a different framework for understanding East Germany's 'revolutionary moment' (Philipsen 1993: 22) and its powerful impact on the lives of East Germans.