

# Reflections from the Wall

(from *Tufts Journal*, March 1990)

*Mark DeVoto, professor of music, and Lois Grossman, lecturer in Spanish, were in Berlin just after New Year's. Here is DeVoto's report from the Wall.*

Most subways in West Germany are handsome, quiet, and fast, and the stations are well equipped and clean, with a bustling commerce below the ground level, with newsstands, supermarkets, and even good restaurants. This is partly due to their modern construction, because one-third of Germany's urban centers were bombed to unrecognizability between 1943 and 1945. Changing to another line at the Kurfürstendamm station, we were reminded of the difference between old and new. The east-west U-Bahn to the Friedrichstrasse looks more like the Red Line in Boston, faded and shabby, but smooth enough nevertheless, and much cleaner even than Park Street Under.

The last mile or so of the run to the Friedrichstrasse is above ground. Under a thin layer of snow that fell the day before, the approach to the border looks bleak, with open areas and high cyclone fences topped with barbed wire and the wreckage of buildings knocked down in 1961 to make room for the Wall. But crossing the border at the Friedrichstrasse station is unremarkable and speedy for everybody. The station doesn't have as many signs as a West Berlin station, but we have no trouble locating the Passkontrolle. The visa for non-Germans costs 5 marks (about \$3). We avoid the Geldwechselstube, where there's a long line of people waiting to change West German marks to East German, one of the former for three of the latter. There are a few signs in English and one or two in Polish, but only once do I see any sign in Russian. The only trace of a Russian presence that I can detect, in fact, is the fur hats worn by the East German border guards, and even these once formidable officials are now smiling. The smiles aren't hearty, but neither are they forced. There's no longer the official obligation to be suspicious of people who don't speak the same language, like Americans, and best of all, there's the realization that all those people on the other side of the Wall who do speak your language are your brothers and sisters, and the hell with governments.



It's an unsettling feeling. Everywhere we're told that it's only economic reunification, so to speak, that can save East Germany. How much rescuing does East Germany's economy actually need? Despite being less than half the size of West Germany in area, East Germany has, in 40 years, remained the most productive nation, per capita, in the entire communist world, and its industrial output, despite the staggering inefficiencies of a Marxist planned economy, compares favorably with that of any of the Western European nations of comparable size. That productivity, of course, has been achieved at the cost of a drab and restrictive daily life that the East German population rightly is no longer willing to

suffer. And here I am, spending my few West German marks, adding my bit to the good feeling that is sweeping over this beleaguered land like a summer breeze.

At the end of Unter den Linden is the Brandenburg Gate, with its massive stone pillars topped by a square block with heroic turn-of-the-century bronzes. A line of visitors forms at the right, walking across territory where, only a few months ago, you could get shot in the back in ten seconds. Beyond the Brandenburg Gate runs the Wall, and I become aware of an amazing and thrilling polyphony, the rhythms of literally dozens of people hammering away at the other side of the concrete. It's like the 18 anvils that Wagner wrote for in the Nibelheim scene in *Das Rheingold*. I can see the oval openings in the wall sections, with reinforcing rods dangling where thousands of "Mauerspechte" (wall woodpeckers) have chipped away, night and day. We want to get closer, but this is still a border crossing, after all, and the fur-hatted guards wave the West Germans through, telling us that as *Ausländer* we must go back to the Friedrichstrasse station to exit East Germany.

At the station, we ask to have our passports stamped as a souvenir of our visit. The official must be used to this request from Americans, because he grins as he stamps a multicolored design in my passport. At the bottom of the stamp is a border that looks like "XOXOXO," which to me at least means "love and kisses." We take the U-Bahn back to the last station in West Berlin, the Lehrter Bahnhof, and walk east about a quarter mile, crossing the Spree River at the Alt-Moabit Bridge and following a path through the snow across the Platz der Republik. Soon we come to the huge Reichstag, a hundred yards from the Brandenburg Gate with the Wall running in between. Looking at this massive and grimy building, which in its neo-Renaissance architectural excess is as bad as anything in Vienna, I remember that it was here, in 1933, that the Nazis set the Reichstag on fire in an act of terror calculated to frighten the German Parliament into granting Hitler emergency powers. I know all about historical coincidences, but it's impressive to have them conjoined geographically by a distance you could throw a baseball across.

Along the Ebertstrasse, directly behind the Reichstag, we find the multitude and the Wall. When we saw it on American television a few weeks earlier, it was covered with graffiti; these are visible now only six feet above ground level and higher, to the top of the eight-foot-high Wall, with every square inch of the surface below having been chipped away. Today there are hundreds of people pecking away at it with passion, with calm determination, or just for fun, taking pictures everywhere. A dozen people are eager to sell you a piece of the Wall, from thumbnail size to football size, and a dozen more will rent you hammer and chisel (5 marks for 15 minutes) to do your own chipping. I pay my 5 marks and set to work. I must be more energetic than most, because fragments fly everywhere, and the left sleeve of my parka is soon covered with dust. Somebody moves to my right pointing a video camera, and I smile. Next time, I remind myself, I'll bring a proper chisel and a six-pound sledge. After 15 minutes, my pockets are full. I take a few pictures, including one of a graffito demanding (I think) freedom for Lithuania. One or two people bring heavier tools, and there are a few standing on ladders. Some little kids, hardly big enough to pick up a hammer, come to take a few swings. Lois and I, plus Diane, a student from Indiana whom we met on the U-Bahn, are the only Americans at our end; one person who speaks some English identifies himself as Greek, and everybody else seems to be West German. The whole place has become a vacation spot, even a business opportunity, but not — at least not yet —

a tourist trap. We've heard that even the East Germans are expecting to get into the act. While we're there, none of it seems like an act. The overwhelming impression is one of welcome relief, of joy, of looking to a real future.

I can well remember when this Wall went up in 1961. I was just out of college and expecting to be drafted at a time when East-West relations were bad and getting worse. The building of the Wall was recognized almost at once as one of the most shameful symbols of the Cold War, and the swashbuckling Khrushchev must have realized that fact almost as soon as everyone in the West did, but by then, of course, it was too late. I remember that only a year after the Wall went up, East and West went eyeball to eyeball in the Cuban missile crisis, which was as close as the world has ever come to total destruction; yet in 1963, less than a year after that unimaginably desperate moment, the United States and the Soviet Union were able to negotiate a limited treaty banning above-ground nuclear testing, and that treaty has done as much as anything since to slow down the arms race.

The balance of terror was, of course, politically useful, and it did preserve what we called a peace. I always worried that if America and Russia ever really did start shooting, it would be over these few square miles of international urban island, a world capital in the middle of communist East Germany. But I don't worry about it here any more. If it happens, it won't happen in Berlin. John Kennedy came to this very place in 1963 and rallied the dispirited citizens to the cause of freedom. But he wouldn't be needed here now. The Wall endured through Vietnam, through the Six-Day War, through Afghanistan, through Watergate, and it even survived the Floating Summit at Malta. But today it is the people who are bringing it down, with hammer and chisel.