

My Story: East Berlin – and Poland

I vividly remember the first visit I made into East Berlin in 1986. A day visa cost 5 Deutsche Mark and it was necessary to exchange 25 DM into East Marks (Mark der DDR), which were of little use to the visitor.

There was a tinge of apprehension, passing unfriendly border guards. I had heard frightening stories about the Stasi, secret police and spies. Moving through the city from West to East was like passing through a large house; there was a sense of recognition, but with one half opulently decorated, colourful, bright and glitzy and the other half, dilapidated. My first impressions of East Berlin were therefore of potholed roads, crumbling buildings, dusty and grey; an overwhelming feeling of drabness.

By then I was together with one of my former flat mates, Joachim Gross, who assisted me in my work. We would travel together to exhibitions of my artwork in the UK and in mainland Europe. As the former GDR (East Germany) opened up in the early 1990s it was particularly interesting to exhibit in Dresden, Halberstadt and Görlitz. Many of my friends at the time in West Berlin were still distrustful, reluctant to visit with the comment “well the Wall may go up again just as quickly as it came down”. However I was made very welcome, people really wanted to speak to me. Perhaps as a Scot I was seen as more neutral.

In fact, in 1988 even before the Fall of the Wall I was asked to take part in an exhibition in Poland organised by Solidarność (Solidarity).

With an official invitation from the Archbishop of the area, it was held in the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Przemyśl, situated less than 10 miles from the Ukrainian border. I learned first-hand about the connection between the church, politics and culture in the Polish People’s Republic. It was the role of Solidarity that was significant in heralding the fall of Communism in Soviet Bloc countries, including the Fall of the Berlin Wall.

As we were leaving Germany for the exhibition, at the Polish border the young guard waved his rifle, pointing towards the back of the car and my paintings. He repeatedly asked something in Polish. I tried answering in English? Nie, Deutsch? Nie. He was

becoming more angry until I produced the official invitation signed by the Archbishop. His expression changed, he stared at me then pushed a piece of paper and pen through the window: autograf he demanded, autograf!

Przemyśl was the setting for one of the most memorable exhibitions in which I ever participated. Many art works from mainly Polish artists were hung with all sorts of wire, retrieved from old electric cabling and using only a few passed around tools. I was amazed at how inventive people could be with very little means. When we arrived at the Cathedral for the opening it was full to bursting and our translator pulled us to be seated at the front where the Archbishop was already on the raised platform waiting to start his speech with a microphone and surrounded by video cameras.



Marek Kuchciński left, Ryszard Żółtanieck 2nd left; my partner Joachim right with me next



Przemyśl cathedral

I had underestimated the importance of my appearance as a Scottish artist; perhaps it was presumed that we'd driven all the way from Scotland. I was presented with a prize and invited afterwards for a meal served by the nuns in the gardens of the monastery. We were shown around the city, told about the town's history and current situation. Most people seemed to feel an identity with a Scot. Perhaps also because many Polish people settled in Scotland after fighting for the allies during the war.

We were a mixed bunch in the old tumble-down mansion where we overnighted, head to toe on mattresses on the floor. One of the group, a professor from the University of Warsaw, was picked up by the secret police from the street for no obvious reason; it was apparent we were all being watched. He returned after two days, rather shaken.

It was later insisted that I might like to visit the place where the Solidarność underground newspaper was printed. I had misgivings however, when we were followed by a Lada car containing four large men, I was relieved when the trip was abandoned. It was the first time in my life that I questioned the protection of my British passport.

It was five years (i.e. after the unification of Germany and demise of the eastern bloc) before Joachim and I could face the 900 kilometre drive back to Przemyśl to pick up my paintings; it had been a difficult journey on poor roads although past beautiful countryside. However what a huge change; it was like a different town, as if lights had been switched on, lively with people sitting chatting at outdoor cafes and taking in the sunshine.

We discovered that the political group who had organised the exhibition had splintered, separating to pursue their different political interests. However while we were there they came together again and we watched one of the videos made at the time in the church. There was great excitement as one man in the film was pointed out, later uncovered as a spy! The meeting brought them together again and it was a good reunion.

Almost ten years later I was offered an exhibition in Cracow and invited to a previous exhibition opening to view the space. Across the room, amongst the guests, I recognized the professor from Warsaw University, Ryszard Żółtaniec, who had been picked up by the security police years before. Now however he looked more important, well dressed and imposing. We had a chat and he told me that after the breakup of the Warsaw Pact countries he'd been Director of Cultural and Scientific Policy in the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then Republic of Poland Ambassador to Greece.

Marek Kuchciński the organizer who had invited me into the exhibition also soon took over important posts in politics and has held the position of Speaker in the Polish government (Marshal of the Sejm) for four years. Marek's assistant contacted me in 2021 and asked if I would contribute a text about my earlier experience for him to use in a book he is writing.

I feel enormously fortunate to have experienced first-hand the momentous world changing events that happened during the 1990s.

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