

## **My Story: The Fall of the Wall**

Before recounting my experiences of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, I will reflect on my first and often lasting impressions of the Wall.

### **Origins of the Wall**

When I arrived in Berlin, Germany had been a divided country for some decades and the Wall in particular had divided Berlin for nearly twenty-five years. So my story and my association with the Wall begin when I arrived in Berlin in 1985 to study art with Professor Georg Baselitz at the Hochschule der Künste.

I was of course already aware of the division of Germany and Berlin between the Allies. The government of the German Democratic Republic (GDR-‘East Germany’) claimed that it needed to be protected from outside attempts to disrupt the establishment of a socialist state. However, it is commonly accepted that the GDR experienced a massive depletion of workforce and other defections in the fifties with 3.5 million moving to the West. As



a reaction to this drain, the Wall (initially a fence and other barriers but soon reinforced as a solid wall) was erected in 1961. It was comprised of 45,000 separate segments. The structure was topped with a smooth pipe, to make it more difficult to scale. It was reinforced on the eastern side by mesh fencing, barbed wire, dogs on long lines, ‘beds of nails’ under balconies hanging over the ‘death strip’, minefields and armed guards on watch towers.

The Wall was built virtually overnight and tore through the middle of streets, even through individual city homes. People were cut off from their jobs in the West; relatives, friends and neighbours were split up from each other. In Berlin, the Wall divided the city but it must also be remembered that it divided West Berlin from West Germany. West Berlin was an island entirely surrounded by East Germany; an isolated enclave in a hostile land.

## Berlin – a divided city

On an international level, the Wall became the symbol for the East-West divide: the Iron Curtain.



After the War, Berlin had essentially become a city of old citizens and it desperately needed to attract young people. So the city offered generous tax concessions, cheap accommodation and free university education. Young men in West Berlin could also avoid the national service that was obligatory in West Germany. The city became a magnet for the

younger generation attracted by the bohemian way of life. Many of those politically engaged were often rebelling against parents who could or would not explain their part in the war. In the early seventies, Berlin was a centre for student protest especially reacting to the political aftermath of the War which was still felt in Germany but also to political and social issues of the day. Houses were squatted and there were frequent demonstrations, often combatted by riot police with water cannons. By contrast cultural subsidies ensured that attention was kept on West Berlin during that time of east-west tension and there were regular music concerts, exciting festivals and cultural events. The situation for those in West Berlin was therefore as much of an artificial way of life as in East Berlin. However, there was (and still is) an exhilarating, edgy atmosphere to the city, which made it a mecca for artists, writers and musicians. All this combined to establish Berlin as a leading place on the world's cultural map, with a vibrant arts scene of which I suppose I've been a small part.

In my experience, other factors have also shaped Berlin and its people. In the eighties, the average age for completing a degree in West Berlin was twenty-eight. However, there were few jobs at the end of study so, as I found among several of my own friends, study became a way of life for some people into their forties: enjoying an exciting free style life, debating politics in the pub into the small hours,



taking casual part time jobs such as driving taxis. An influx of foreign, mainly Turkish and Italian, workers in the sixties also added a multi-cultural flare to Berlin. It is a very 'green' city full of parks, woods, gardens and tree lined avenues but for those who lived there they were never quite enough to completely dispel the unease of being in a place surrounded by barbed wire.

For these and many other reasons, visitors flocked to visit West Berlin (West Germans, international tourists, school groups with Berlin on their curriculum) – and mainly they came to see the Wall.

### **My first visit to East Berlin**



Against this background it's not surprising that I vividly remember the first visit I made to East Berlin in 1986.

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.

Berlin and particularly the Wall was a world-wide tourist attraction, especially at the important historical sites on the west side. Apart from the ubiquitous 'I was here' remarks made by visitors and tourists, a group of spray artists, who lived near the Wall, became famous for their paintings: motifs of windows, doors and ladders were an attempt to make the Wall's existence more bearable.

On one occasion, I looked over the Wall from the top of a viewing platform in front of the Brandenburg Tor which was just on the East side. At that part the Wall was covered with graffiti. Directly in front of me someone had boldly scrawled 'they came and looked then

did some shopping'. I felt humbled. Later I made a painting of the experience, which was bought by the then Honorary German Consul in Glasgow.

I also vividly recall that across the road from the Reichstag there was a row of wooden crosses for some of those who had died attempting to cross to the West. It was a site of intensification, memory and pain. There was a date on each, sometimes a name but others stated 'Unbekannt' (unknown). After the fall of the Wall, people from the East came and scratched names onto these previously anonymous crosses. Those who had died were mostly young boys in their late teens, with no family responsibilities but with the bravado of youth. That was one of the saddest sights, one that I always remember and one that subsequently influenced some of my artwork.



After my study with Baselitz came years of commuting between Berlin and Scotland, my life divided between the two. Family, the landscape, and the familiar normality of life in Scotland were necessary to balance the plethora of extreme feeling and encounters of Berlin life at the time. In my painting, sometimes the barbs from the Wall surrounded figures, an allusion not only to the geographic island situation of West Berlin but also to

personal borders and limitation. This divided city, with its dual identity, seemed to parallel my own life, split between home in Scotland and artistic life in Berlin.

## The Fall of the Wall

A set of circumstances and events combined to cause the fall of the Wall. A series of radical political changes was occurring in the Eastern Bloc especially with the erosion of authoritarian systems and political power in the pro-Soviet governments in nearby Poland and Hungary. Protest within the GDR had been building up through 'New Forum'. Many GDR citizens were demanding reforms like those of Glasnost in the Soviet Union; peaceful Monday marches took place in Leipzig and Berlin often organised by pastors.

Solidarnosc, 'Solidarity', the Polish opposition and anti-communist political movement in the eighties, was certainly an influence. I had experienced this at first hand in Przemysl, Poland near the Ukrainian border when I was invited to take part in a large group exhibition in 1988 organised by Solidarity. At that time politics, art and the church in Poland were intrinsically intertwined.



In October 1989, the GDR Head of State, Honecker, stepped down to make way for the younger Egon Krenz. Russian President Gorbachev advised Krenz to allow GDR citizens the right to travel. More specifically, the East German government announced on the evening of 9 November 1989 that GDR citizens were free to cross the country's borders.

As this news emerged, thousands of East German citizens streamed to the border crossing at Bornholmer Strasse, demanding to pass into the West. To constant chants of 'open the gates', the confused guards eventually took down the barriers. That night East and West citizens held hands and danced on the top of the Berlin Wall. Although,



officially, borders and controls were still in place, large parts of the Wall came down in the following months and throughout 1990.



I was on a visit to Scotland on 9 November 1989 when the unimaginable news came through that the Wall had suddenly and dramatically come down. My German husband came breathlessly into my studio to tell me.. That day I'd been struggling with a particular painting which I immediately spontaneously overpainted and changed the subject matter to reflect the experience and my overwhelming feelings at the news. I painted on into late evening and called it Berlin 09.11.89 – the date the Berlin Wall fell. The mask like face suggests any man or woman, the stretching, striving arms aim through different shades of dramatic red and orange. They

represent many other arms and hands some scratched into the background. The hands, linked for strength have reached the light area and almost the top of the painting. A vote has been taken and achievement reached.

My husband had moved to Berlin in the early seventies as a student at the age of twenty. He had witnessed and participated in the political extremes and intensity of the particular style of life that was 'divided Berlin'. He was incredulous when the Wall fell: "look what happens when my back is turned!" he said.

We avidly watched the news, exchanged excited phone calls with Berlin friends, acutely aware that we were missing those first tumultuous moment and returned to Berlin as soon as we could. A few weeks later thousands of Germans from both sides of the Wall streamed to the opening of the Brandenburg Tor, that iconic Berlin site of major historical events. On that evening my husband, a friend and I walked through with the crush of the first wave. The GDR guards, still perplexed from this complete turnaround in their duty didn't quite know how to react to the thronging crowds.

There was singing, sekt bottles popped, elated laughter, tears, hugs, the mood was emotive, ecstatic, and I cried too. Afterwards we left the bright lights and revelry to venture first into the wide boulevard street Unter den Linden in the East then tentatively into dull grey side streets to find a bar. The one we found was bulging full; the service was sullen and we scuttled back to the West, to the bright lights and our trusted island of West Berlin.

## Unification



West German Chancellor Kohl in 1989 seemed like Santa Claus for the majority of East Germans who felt themselves materially disadvantaged in comparison with their cousins in West Germany and who now expected the good life as their right. Most had led extremely limited and sheltered lives, never encouraged to be

self-motivated. In the former GDR, everyone was employed by the state and everything was owned by the state; now the state was bankrupt. GDR companies were no longer viable; over-staffed and with obsolete machinery, they were sold off by the appointed Treuhand (Trusteeship) on occasion for one Deutsche Mark. The initial euphoria of the GDR citizens soon turned to confusion and insecurity. In the spring of 1990, Chancellor Kohl's promise to create a 'Blooming Landscape' out of the former GDR that had won him a crucial election, soon turned into a bitter joke. With the old communist factories rusting all around, their workers found themselves abruptly and sometimes permanently unemployed.

At the same time, property developers were moving into previously less desirable areas near the Wall and rents rocketed. On the West side, artists and small business owners sharing industrial buildings cheaply had to move out as a centre of united Berlin began to emerge. At the same time, the peripheries of the city began to shift as West Berlin gained suburbs it never had during the time of the Cold War. In the surrounding areas, I knew of former West German owners of property in the East who had managed to escape or were forced to leave, and were now returning to demand their houses back from those East Germans who had lived in them for most of their lives. Of course discomfiting questions started to arise regarding original owners - often Jews who had their homes taken from them by the Nazis in the thirties or forties.

For most GDR citizens, who were little travelled, the people in the next town were like strangers. Aggression against foreigners especially black people or asylum seekers began to surface as right radicalism spread in the East. I particularly recall the news about a shameful incident in Rostock in the nineties when an asylum refuge was set on fire and the crowds of ordinary citizens applauded as the asylum seekers sought to flee the blaze; an incident that was extremely shocking and a scandal for Germany at the time.

Psychological devastation came for GDR citizens with the opening of the Stasi (secret police) files when it was discovered that one in three citizens were informers and they included colleagues, friends and even family. The totalitarian regime was administered like the Nazis through rules based on restriction of personal freedom, fear and chicanery.

It seemed to me at that time that other major West German cities experienced only weak ripples of the radical changes brought about in the lives of the West Berliners who were on the front line of unification.



The socio-political, economic and practical ramifications could hardly be foreseen. From the outside, even the position and power of a unified Germany on the European political stage evoked misgivings. All this shows that unification was not an easy or entirely welcome process. It seemed that once the process got underway there were misgivings and in my view even mistrust on both sides. But nonetheless I was shocked within the first months to see tee shirts in West Berlin with the slogan demanding, in bold print, 'Bring Back Our Wall'!

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*Postscript: In the writing above I have tried to explain the origins of the Berlin Wall and the ways in which it influenced me. Elsewhere on this website, I write about the development of the East Side Gallery and my mural 'Joint Venture' which has subsequently been recreated as a large-scale gallery painting entitled 'Re-Statement'.*