

## **My Story: to West Berlin**

I arrived in Berlin in October 1985. I'd finally made it, to study with Georg Baselitz – but my naïve sense of triumph was short-lived. I didn't know anyone, had never been separated from my now teenage children and had no accommodation. Initially I stayed in a hostel and panic began to set in.

Eventually however I managed to get a room in a student flat with two German men which threw me into West Berlin life at the deep end. Over time they shared their stories and gave me insights into life in this island of capitalism surrounded by communist East Germany. They would take me to their local pub, The Linde, a kind of 'cooperative'. Although most Germans speak English it was generally only for a couple of practice sentences but serious discussions, jokes and so on were of course in German and I felt dumb, self-conscious and alone. I took up smoking again in order to distract when I was addressed in German. I learned quickly in a conversation that muttering intermittently *genau* (meaning *exactly*) could see me almost through an evening, naturally with matching facial expressions.

After the war, Berlin had been a city of old people, mainly women, but government subsidies attracted many young people to the city; cheap accommodation, free university education, tax concessions. In West Berlin young men were exempt from the obligatory military conscription. Most studied and worked part time, joined the student movement, protested, and could vent their animosity against the parents who wouldn't tell them about their part in the war.

There was an edginess and electric atmosphere in the city, surrounded by East Germany (the GDR) with the constant threat by the Soviets that they would take West Berlin. There was decadence and subculture in the clubs, but also exhibitions, theatre, music and intellectual life, street parties and festivals in summer. Every self-respecting rock singer and group performed in Berlin.

There was a great feeling of personal liberty in West Berlin, a contradictory situation surrounded as it was by the inescapable Wall. No matter in which direction you would

travel in West Berlin you always came up against it. It was the symbol for the Iron Curtain during the Cold War years; it was the buffer between East and West. To leave West Berlin involved strict, unfriendly border controls and until the late seventies the guards were not averse to stripping everything including seats out of the cars in case East Germans were being hidden, smuggled to the West. From West Berlin there was a couple of hours drive on the rough transit road through the GDR and always a feeling of relief to reach West Germany.

The GDR was a police state; control was paramount, there were many restrictions and observation cameras. Lives were ruled and ordered from the cradle to the grave. On the plus side everyone had a job, rents were low, child care provided for women who worked and advantages for those who were a mouthpiece for the party. Luxuries were few since trade was between the Warsaw Pact countries and travel was only for the politically privileged. However, artists and writers who complied with the regime were supported and furthered.

At the Brandenburg Tor in the city centre there were viewing platforms to peek over the Wall into East Berlin. The graffiti on the western side of the Wall often depicted ladders or doors, the symbols of escape. During my first Berlin winter two boys crossed a river on ice floats; those who died trying to escape from the East were mainly teenagers with the bravado of youth.

Impressions came at me incessantly but there was no benchmark or comparison I could draw upon from my homeland, the small village of Fairlie on the west coast of Scotland.

Yet these situations benefitted my work as my drawings and ideas developed: I watched and became the onlooker, the outsider.

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