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## FIRST PERSON

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# And the Walls Came Tumbling Down

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Tobias Schwarz

As I cross what was once the border between East and West Germany, as I walk over the "death zone" that once lay beneath the Brandenburg Gate, I am usually thinking about everyday things, about work or what I'm going to eat for supper. But sometimes, when I look up and remember, I am amazed by the changes that have occurred in these three years since, by the grace of God, *Die Mauer* (the wall) came tumbling down.

A few years ago, I was a vocational art student in my homeland, then known as the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Like most of my peers, I didn't think much about the political system under which we lived. All of us avoided conflict with the authorities by offering only occasional criticism well within the limits of the regime's philosophy. As we attended school, time and time again we would hear the threat, "If you don't do *x*, it will go on your record..."

Anyone wanting to study at that time was forced to make compromises. I was 19 and, since male citizens had to serve three years as petty officers in the army, military service was one of my obligations. My one-and-a-half years in basic military training and service in the construction unit, during which I was exempted from bearing arms, posed numerous difficulties. Faced with the same choice today, I might not have chosen to do what I did, but by God's grace, it turned out to be an important experience in my life.

Public life then was centrally controlled, and in the army, restrictions were multiplied. The reaction among those of us fulfilling our military service was initial puzzlement: "What do they want anyhow?" and then simply indifference. But in spite of the general situation, certain basic free-

doms were upheld: my unit commander granted me permission to attend church services on Sabbath morning, for which I thanked God.

During this time East German Christians initiated the Evangelical Peace Movement. People were reacting in fear to the build-up of massive missile bases in East and West. They were bewildered by the growing pollution that made the forests look like lunar landscapes, by the overmilitarization of life, represented memorably by the establishment of military camps for 10th graders, and by the increasing deterioration of the country's economy.

The peace conference assembled Christians with shared concerns and perspectives. The foundations laid there did much to facilitate the work of groups that later opposed the restrictions on freedom. While at my army post, I anxiously awaited my father's report of the conference that he had attended as a Seventh-day Adventist delegate.

When I was released from military service in the spring of 1989, I found that there had developed, in the words of Marx, a "revolutionary situation" in my country. The government and the citizens were on a collision course. Two decisive events became catalysts of the subsequent events: the blatant falsification of the national elections and the bloody defeat of the students' democratic movement in China. The GDR government considered the Chinese government's reaction correct and even

necessary. The nearness of West Germany also played an important role. If threatened by government forces, we still had the possibility of filing an application for immigration to the West.

The weekly prayer meetings for peace in our city church drew a growing number. As we later learned, the *stasi* (the state security force) collaborators were very busy during this time. When I began school again in September, I remember our professor at the Socialistic Sociology seminar informing us that she knew "exactly how to deal with students who intentionally make provocative statements during the discussion."

In the meantime, citizens' movements such as the New Forum gathered signatures for a restructuring of the government. It demanded U.N.-supervised elections, an unheard-of request at the time.

One Sunday in October, a public meeting was held in our university auditorium, where people publicly expressed their views about the system for the first time. During the course of the meeting, someone discovered a *stasi* informer-rigged tape recorder hidden behind a curtain.

That afternoon, thousands of people gathered in the Jena city church, where peace and citizens' movements reported on *stasi* civil abuses. As they aired their dissatisfaction, the speakers emphasized nonviolence. If initial steps had not been taken by the Christian churches, including Seventh-day Adventists, I believe there would have been much more violence during the process of change in my country.

Although my coursework placed increasing demands on my time, I joined the New Forum that day because I wanted to support people willing to put their lives on the line

for the public well-being.

I have to admit that many of my colleagues remained uninvolved with the movement. For example, within the FDJ (Free German Youth), it was customary for each group to establish a "controversy program" for each year of study. The wording of the program was almost always the same: "We struggle for a better understanding of the historical mission of the working class and make the ideals of the historical and dialectical materialism our own, etc., etc...."

Although I had been a rather loyal citizen up to this point, the Jena experience changed me. When my group presented a similar statement, I stated that I could not reconcile such a program with my Christian convictions. Thankfully, the program soon disappeared for good. My fellow students who had developed this program had only copied former versions without much thought about what they were writing.

Important changes continued to occur at a rapid pace during the fall of 1989. University lecturers who just a month before had wanted to push all male students into declaring willingness to serve as army officers no longer recruited. My Socialistic Sociology professor now claimed that "Communism should have had to cash it in a long time ago." Younger and more radical students pushed for, and achieved the replacement of the FDJ as the only representative of student interests by a democratically elected student council.

The night of November 9, 1989, when the wall dividing East and West Berlin ceased to exist, pictures of rejoicing East German people in the "death zone" at Brandenburg Gate were broadcast around the world. A border that seemed to have been built to last centuries suddenly and miraculously was no more.

My first visit to West Germany was a shaking experience. As I walked down the Kurfuersendamm, West Berlin's main boulevard, I compared the high-tech products and structures I saw with the output of our old

East German factories. A Communist Party slogan rang in my ears as I gazed all around me: "Socialism in its course can neither ox nor ass bring to a halt." I saw only too clearly the hypocrisy of a system whose ruling class lived riotously while trying to convince the working class of socialism's superiority. I felt far from unchristian in standing up against such a state, because to remain silent would have made me be untrue to myself.

In the former GDR the struggle continued. People who had never seen the interior of a church suddenly began attending each week to pray for peace and to participate in the peaceful demonstrations that followed.

Immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, many believed that everything would be well. They euphorically thought that the reunification of Germany would bring a high, Western standard of living. We students were less optimistic, however, since we were aware that our economy was actually in terrible shape. As I became acquainted with the seriousness of the economic situation during my internship, I realized that for many people democracy would be a rude awakening, accompanied by declarations of

bankruptcy and massive layoffs.

Naturally, there were and still are people who took advantage of the situation. Many who held high positions in the Communist Party are now back in managerial positions. Yesterday's citizens' movements have become insignificant. In spite of it all, I have no desire to experience "the old days" again, not for a minute. In education, positive changes can be seen. Attendance at seminar lectures is no longer strictly enforced. Students can choose subjects freely, and I no longer encounter any conflicts regarding my faith.

Too much has been changed too thoroughly to go back. A world view has collapsed and regional problems have become global problems. However, it was painful to discover that the people of East and West were divided by more than a line on the map. A just socio-economic order does not exist on either side of the fallen wall, although democracy is supposedly the best system available to us in this world. Whether we will wisely utilize our new opportunities for a new and better cooperation between the former East and West Germanies, only the future will show.

In the meantime, today's problems crowd out the past. People now ask themselves how they will pay the rent, and whether they will be able to keep their jobs. Unfortunately, churches are emptier than before since most people find it much more interesting to catch up with all the amusements they have missed in the past. But now, there are no limits to Christian work in public. And the church is now able to reach out to this newly liberated people searching for guidance and truth.

I thank God that in all these changes there was almost no bloodshed and that new, undreamt-of freedoms and exciting possibilities now exist to live and share our faith.



Illustration: The Bettmann Archive

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