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For my Grandchildren

Christoph Werner

LIFTING THE IRON CURTAIN

Tales from a Country Bygone

Edited by Michael Leonard

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FOREWORD

Much has been written about socialism but very little about what it was like to live as an ordinary citizen under socialism in East Germany. With the fall of the Berlin Wall now 30 years past, the realities of that time have begun to fade. Some have even become nostalgic, such as former Party functionaries and others who benefited from the communist rule. For the rest, however, I think it is important to bear witness to what it was really like to live in those times before the memories begin to vanish. What follows is by its nature far from complete because memory is not linear but impressionistic. Still, I hope the reader finds them of interest because they are the legacy of a lost socialist world.

Michael Leonard, who encouraged me to write these tales of a country bygone and then did his best to bring my English up to standard, has my lasting gratitude and praise for his efforts.

PRELUDE

*May bug soar,
Father's at war,
In Pomerania Mother stays,
Pomerania's burnt away,
May bug soar.*

Our maid used to sing this lullaby when she put us to bed. She was a *Pflichtjahrmädchen*, a “duty-year girl”, a compulsory year of service for every girl under 25 years old that had been mandated by the Nazis in 1938. In order to prepare the girls for their future task as German mothers and at the same time to free every able bodied man for service to the fatherland about 300,000 girls or young women per year had to work for twelve months on a farm, a small enterprise such as a restaurant, or often in a large family for a token wage of about 5 *Reichsmarks* per month, roughly the equivalent of 6 loaves of bread. We were four children and qualified as a large family. My mother even got the “Mother’s Cross of Honor” for presenting the *Führer* with two daughters good for propagating the master race, and two sons useful as future soldiers to spread the master race over the globe.

Without this compulsory year a girl couldn’t get an apprenticeship or a place in higher education. Sometimes those girls were used by the Nazis to spy on the families in which they worked. So, while my father was away in the war, my mother made sure that our maid was not in the house when

she listened to the BBC, for which one could be sent to a concentration camp.

Our maid didn't of course realize how macabre this seemingly sweet song was, which was sung to the tune of

*Sleep my child sleep.
Your father tends the sheep.
Your mother shakes the apple tree,
As down a dream falls unto thee.
Sleep my child, sleep.*

Some say the “May Bug Soar” song (German original: Maikäfer flieg) stems from the Thirty-Years’ War (1618-1648), in which Pomerania suffered heavily. This war is still deeply ingrained in the German national memory and lives on in books, legends, anecdotes and songs. As soon as I could read, I devoured a shortened version of Grimmelshausen’s “Simplicissimus”, a novel about the adventures of a boy in the Thirty-Years’ War, and also stories and anecdotes about that time, of which my father had quite a number in his library. And of course, our father told us about the life of Paul Gerhardt, the writer or rather translator of “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” and the losses his family suffered during that war.

Our father had been sent to Romania, a lieutenant in an anti-aircraft unit, protecting the oil fields at Ploesti. At home we heard almost daily, towards the end of the war, the American and British bombers fly high over our village in the direction of the cities of Halle and Leipzig.

This filled the adults with both horror and relief, horror because many villagers including our family had friends or acquaintances in nearby Halle, and relief because they themselves were spared, at least for the time being. A large open-pit lignite mine and a briquette factory were situated near the village and in order to destroy these facilities and thus damage the energy supply to the population and the weapon-producing factories in the region they might have been a target for the bombers.

It must have been in the summer of 1944, when I was 5 years old, that I had been sent with my little basket on my back to the baker's to fetch bread. Suddenly the village's only siren on the local pub cum movie theater started howling, the streets were at once deserted and I found myself alone in the middle of a crossroads. A door opened and a man came running out and called to me in the local dialect: "Run home, boy!" This I did, startled and frightened, and before I even got to our street my mother came hurrying towards me, took hold of my hand and ran with me to the cellar, our air-raid shelter.

The American army arrived in the middle of April in our part of the country. They had, according to the Yalta Conference of February 1945, to withdraw their troops a few months later when the final border was established between the Western and Eastern zones of occupation. I and my classmates stood at the main street watching the American tanks driving through in pursuit of German tanks who had passed a short time before. At least this is what I remember. It seems quite unreal looking back on it now, but I can

remember seeing the ragged uniforms of the German soldiers on their tanks and the clean and orderly battle dresses of the Americans following them.

I must have felt that something decisive had happened, because some time later I used an old rusty nail to scratch a swastika into a sandstone wall, obviously believing I had to do something for Germany. I recall looking around furtively while doing it, so I must have known that this was no longer acceptable.

When a bit older, about eight or nine, my classmates and I often talked about how “we” could have won the war had the miracle weapons the Führer had promised been produced in time.

In 1946 my father came home from an American prisoner of war camp in the Rhineland. He had been on leave in Germany and had thus escaped being seized by the Russians in Romania after the defeat.

They didn’t get much to eat in the American camp, which he said he understood because the American army suddenly was in charge of more than 300,000 prisoners in that camp alone, so when he was finally released he went first to his brother’s estate in the American zone where he could once again eat his fill before returning home.

By then the Russians had arrived and my father as a former army officer had to report regularly to the military authority in the nearby *Kommandatura*.

He had taken up his old position as the village pastor and we lived in the very ancient rectory with a big garden, a backyard with a duck pond and a barn, which was rented out

to a farmer. We also hosted evacuees from the former eastern parts of Germany now under Soviet and Polish administration. There were roughly 12 million of them, and for a while we had two families at the same time living in the attic.

Food at the time was very scarce. We kept chickens and rabbits, which helped, and in the summer and autumn, when raspberries and currants as well as tomatoes ripened, my brother and I were sent out into the garden with a slice of dry bread where we had our breakfast before setting off for school. The garden was big enough for my father to grow tobacco. I can still remember the smell from the attic, where he dried and then fermented the tobacco leaves from which he rolled his cigarettes or filled his pipe.

We used to cook sugar beets gathered from the fields in the autumn, cut into small pieces, in the laundry room to get sugar syrup. We boys had to take turns stirring the dark mass in the big copper pot with a huge wooden stirrer. Using sugar beets to this end was illegal, as the state needed the beets for the production of sugar, which was in short supply. My father, who never missed a chance of saying something derogatory about the new political system, maintained the sugar was needed to pay reparations due to the Soviet Union.

We also went out to the fields after the harvest to pick potatoes and grain such as barley, wheat, and rye, left by the machines that our mother turned into flour by means of the coffee grinder.

The farmers had it best (before they were collectivized), and when they celebrated weddings, baptisms and even funerals my father, after performing the ceremonies, was

invited to take part in their meals and often brought home leftover cake for us. For a time, this happened so often that we became fed up with cake and couldn't eat any more, though on other days we went hungry.

I had a classmate, a farmer's son, whose lunch packet consisted of sandwiches thickly laid with butter, liverwurst or cheese, and I sometimes stood close to him during the breaks and watched him eat. From time to time he would offer me part of his lunch which I devoured hungrily, afterwards feeling ashamed.

My brother, one year older than I, once got severely caned by my father because he was so hungry that he entered the larder, which was off limits to us, and served himself from the jam pot and the bread. Later, when we were adults, my father told us how much he regretted that punishment.

On the whole our position as the children of the pastor was disadvantageous. Our father forbade us from sneaking into the apple and plum orchards as some people did - at harvest time they were guarded by the owner or tenant, who often spent the nights there in a hut with a fierce dog for assistance. But a few times we took part in the raids anyway, hid the apples or plums and devoured them in secrecy.

People also scavenged coal from the trains that had to slow down as they approached the suburbs of Halle. A number of my classmates climbed on the wagons and threw briquettes down which were then gathered and taken home. This was really a dangerous business because there were guards armed with clubs on every third or fourth wagon.

At that time the phrase “The Iron Curtain” began to be used. Although its popularity as a Cold War symbol is attributed to a speech Winston Churchill gave in March 1946 in Fulton, Missouri, the German Minister of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, had already used the term in reference to the Soviet Union in 1943.

For a time, at least until the construction of the Wall in 1961, the border between East and West Germany was more symbolic than an actual fortified frontier. There was in fact no Iron Curtain between the two Germanys, and if you knew your way about you were able to cross “the green border” without much danger. It was even easier in Berlin, where you simply got onto the municipal railway in East Berlin and alighted in West Berlin.

One day around 1950 my father decided I was to spend my summer holidays at his brother’s in West Germany. He contacted a *frater-in-Christo*, a Lutheran minister who had his parish near the border in the Harz Mountains, and he helped us find a footpath through fields and woods that landed us in West Germany.

This was my first outing to the free world. When my father and I had walked to the nearest railway station in the West, we felt hungry and entered a butcher’s shop to get a roll with minced meat. I remember how the woman behind the counter looked at what she thought must be a starved child from the East. She gave us two bread rolls with sausage, which tasted delicious. When re-crossing the border on our way home, we

were caught by a border guard and my father was fined a sum of money.

In 1949, the founding year of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), we moved from the village to a suburb of Halle. It was the time of the Marshall Plan, which had helped create the *Wirtschaftswunder* in West Germany. The East German Government, under the orders of Stalin, refused all assistance from the imperialist West. I remember a poster with the slogan “We do not need a Marshall Plan; we crank up the economy ourselves”.

At the time, there was also a growing hostility to the *Junge Gemeinde*, a kind of congregation of the young within a protestant parish. This was not an organization in its own right, but a special form of activity within the parish embracing young Christians. The supreme body of the Party, the Politburo, passed a “Plan for the Exposure of the Young Christians as a Camouflage Organization for Warmongering, Sabotage and Espionage directed by West German and American Imperialist Agents”. Those who refused to leave the Young Christians were thrown out of secondary schools and universities.

Though I was the son of a pastor and active in the Young Christians, they couldn't expel me from the school since it was the primary school, which was mandatory for everybody to their fourteenth year. I had little hope however of being accepted to high school. But luckily, our examination in *Gegenwartskunde*, a kind of social studies, actually a subject of purely political indoctrination, was due to be held on 17

June, but hurriedly cancelled because of the June 1953 uprising.

People obviously believed in an imminent toppling of the communists, so some teachers said they would give me good grades to help me continue my education at high school.

This belief was not absolutely unfounded, given Soviet strong man Berija's plans for the future of East Germany. They were not common knowledge, but that something was going on behind the scene and particularly behind the backs of the East German communist party was whispered about. In the wake of the June uprising, Beria was suspected of being willing to trade the reunification of Germany and the end of the Cold War for massive aid from the United States, as had been received by the West after World War II. Now the East German uprising convinced the other Soviet leaders that Beria's policies were dangerous and destabilizing to Soviet power. Within days of the events in East Germany Party Secretary Khrushchev organized a Party coup against Beria. On June 26, 1953, that is ten days after the beginning of the revolt in Berlin, Beria was arrested, tried and executed with his closest allies in December 1953.

The *SED* (East German Communist Party) headed by First Secretary Walter Ulbricht, whose very existence had been in jeopardy during the uprising, was again securely in control.

But of course, I wasn't aware of any of those things on 17 June, incidentally a Wednesday. I got on my bicycle and went to the center of Halle, where about 60,000 people had gathered on the Market Place in front of the town hall, which was cordoned off by Soviet soldiers, supported by a number

of tanks, which from time to time moved forward a few meters to push people back. A man said to me to be careful with my bicycle because if I should fall in the crowd, I couldn't get away quickly enough to escape the tracks of the tanks.

Everybody rejoiced, communist banners and pictures of the so-called representatives of the working class were torn down, functionaries when recognized abused, sometimes beaten up, and a general belief that everything would basically change for the better took hold of the crowd. I watched a truck breaking the doors of the remand prison, and the prisoners set free, including those who were investigated for their involvement in Nazi crimes before 1945.

The East German communist party and government turned to the Soviet army for help, which together with the People's Police crushed the uprising, during which many people lost their lives or received prison sentences.

Despite the communists' promises to change the course of its policies and make life better and more democratic, it soon turned out that these promises were just a means to keep people calm. But at least I could continue my education and eventually go on to the university.

1 FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

My bell was ringing as if a very determined thumb was pressing the button. The November day was dark. A slight cold rain fell, with gusts of wind pushing against the old window-panes of my student digs, making them rattle. I had just settled down in my clammy study to work on my examination paper about Graham Greene's latest book, *A Burnt-Out Case*, and was losing myself in the characters of Querry, Dr. Colin and Rycker. My brother in West Germany had promised to send me as much secondary literature on Greene as he could lay his hands on. He had smuggled *A Burnt-Out Case* into the German Democratic Republic, then commonly known in West Germany as "The Zone", when he had last visited me. The frontier was still sort of open, the erection of the Berlin Wall one year ahead of us.

Since I was impatiently waiting for the mail service to deliver the promised books and journals, I jumped up and ran to the door to get the parcel from the postman. But alas, it was not the postman who had rung. Instead, two tall gentlemen in the uniforms of customs officers were looming above me and asking, could they come in? I was so surprised that it didn't occur to me to inquire what they wanted. And anyway, being a well-trained GDR citizen and a German at that, I respected uniforms as a matter of course.

When they had settled down on my bed and my only spare chair, one of them, obviously the ranking officer, started to inform me that a parcel with books and journals from

Hanover (in West Germany) had been impounded by their customs comrades, because it contained printed material from the class enemy. I ventured to answer that I was expecting books by and about the British author Graham Greene, who was well-known for his critical attitude toward Western imperialism and who particularly disliked the Americans, as could be seen from his book *The Quiet American*. And, moreover, this book had been favorably reviewed in the *Organ of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party, SED, Neues Deutschland*. I soon suspected the two comrades to be officers from the district branch of the Ministry of State Security (or *Stasi*), so to put them in a good mood I used the full title of the *Neues Deutschland* newspaper and let it be known by my remark and the tone in which it was voiced that I was an avid and faithful reader of the Party's most important instrument of popular enlightenment and propaganda.

But they were not to be distracted. They insisted that the propaganda of the class enemy came disguised in many forms, so that under the cover of a certain anti-Americanism an author like Greene could easily get into the minds of unsuspecting and, particularly, young people. Had he not maintained that society can only be changed by first making the individual happy? Now I was flabbergasted. Educated *Stasi*-people, who even knew about Graham Greene? And was it not, the other visitor chimed in, the socialist revolution, the fundamental changes in our country, that was the precondition for making the individual happy? And not, as my author wanted to make us believe, the other way around?