

Berlin Memoire 7

It's that time again. Another anniversary for the fall of the Berlin Wall. This one will celebrate thirty years of capitalism's victory, and the usual commentators will be up and shouting about how great the defeat of the evil empire was. Authors like Anna Funder will no doubt be pushed into the media spotlight once more to flog more copies of her ridiculous book *Stasiland* — an exposé on the former East Germany secret police network (with a sexy chick on the front cover masquerading as a Stasi agent, as if espionage was hot stuff, don't you know). 1. Funder was never there. 2. You can go and find a dozen citizens in any country who have been worked over by their governments — for starters, try some of the families whose relatives became statistics, like Aboriginal deaths in custody, in free capitalist Australia.

By now, anybody who wants to know can find out about what was wrong with a place like the former German Democratic Republic. Full employment, guaranteed housing, universal healthcare, cheap public transport, paid holidays, totally free child care ...oops, I'm reading from the wrong list. The stuff we want to hear is how Vopos shot 140 people trying to escape over the wall in the space of 28 years (actually most people wanting to get out of the GDR chose less overt methods, like carrying false travel documents through third-party countries). But let's compare the Berlin Wall figures to the number of US police shootings just in 2019 for crimes not much more dangerous than 'driving while black' — 734 deaths so far this year.

Anyway, enough of my curmudgeonly bitch. From 1985 to 1995, I lived in West Berlin and worked in both West and East Germany — some years more in the East than the West. These were some of the most vivid and enjoyable times of my life. Despite the feeling of being an expendable extra in a John Le Carré novel, the prime appeal of working in the GDR was the well-subsidised concert network for improvised music. My last GDR tour entailed thirteen concerts in twelve days, with two matinées and one day off. I realise that this wormhole into another reality was not available to the average GDR citizen, but it was available to my East German colleagues: they made a good living as state supported artists (they also were able to travel and represented their country performing in overseas festivals of new music). Improvising musicians in the West were considered mostly (and still are) as the bottom of the musical heap, so it was something to be treated as an artist with nodding official respect. Now, if you strummed away three chords on your electric guitar and sang 'I don't like the government', the chances were you'd not do so well in the East block. But wild, anarchic improvisation somewhere left of free jazz was just fine with the authorities (if they'd been smarter, they might have perceived this music as more dangerous to social cohesion than any pop/rock alternative).

In the early 1990s, some of my GDR colleagues checked out their Stasi files. The cliché that Germans are efficient? Not true. They are thorough, which means when they are inefficient, they are thoroughly inefficient. And so with the Stasi. According to my fellow GDR musicians, most Stasi files were completely inaccurate and pointless — endless reports from a dysfunctional, moribund bureaucracy. If we compare that to the surveillance states we now live in (CCTV cameras on every corner armed with the latest facial recognition algorithm), where our every internet transaction and communication is collected and used to manipulate us into compliant consumer conformity, I'd say the Stasi (with their cameras hidden in plant pots, lamp posts, umbrellas, etc.) were more a Heath Robinson fiasco than a competent spy organisation.

Salomea Genin was one of the most extraordinary 'comrades' that I met in East Berlin. An Australian citizen, she had been a member of the Eureka Youth League (an organisation for young Communists). Persecuted by Menzies, she had moved from Melbourne to Berlin in 1954 (the height of the Cold War). Eventually in 1963, she was allowed to move to East Berlin (two years after the Wall went up) to support the revolution and build socialism; she rose to a quite high position in the party. I didn't know her well, but it was clear by the late 1980s that she had a troubled relationship with what Communism had become. She was paranoid that her apartment was bugged, so anything important was said in the street; she had been a longtime a Stasi recruit. On our second meeting, she asked me to smuggle the manuscript of her book to the West and hand it to her son who lived there. With typical unthought-out bravado, I agreed, arriving at Frederich Strasse Bahnhof with the manuscript stuffed into the inside pocket of a long winter coat. Having just played a concert, I was also carrying an East German double bass that I had bought for a song from my cash fee. It was illegal to take anything out of East Germany, let alone

a dissident's manuscript, and impossible to disguise a brand new musical instrument as huge as a double bass. The check at the border went without a hitch, but as I was casually sauntering away (in a display of overacting), the guard yelled me back and demanded my passport again. He disappeared for fifteen minutes, and I started to sweat. If I were searched ...I was loaded, alright. He reappeared and grunted 'In Ordnung'. Being so relieved, I quickly slung the double bass onto my back and, in so doing, hit the guard hard right in the solar plexus. His eyes watered with the sudden pain, but, determined to show GDR toughness, he took no notice of my grovelling 'Das tut mir sehr furchtbar leid' (I'm so terribly sorry) and ordered me through. I delivered the manuscript to Salomea's son on the other side of the Wall. I met the author again in the mid-1990s; she was now helping the numerous East German newly unemployed adjust to the joys of capitalism.

A tour in the GDR went something like this. I would receive a pencilled note in West Berlin: 'Have tour, 19 - 27 May, be at Checkpoint Charlie 10 am. Jimmy'. (Jimmy was Mr. Fix-It for concerts of improvised music in the GDR). From there, I would be taken some blocks to a dilapidated building and up crumbling flights of stairs to Frau Austin. She was the official for Die Künstleragentur der DDR. Apart from the mass of forms to be filled out, the enduring memory of Frau Austin's bureau was the black telephone. It was reminiscent of those ancient artefacts from early telephony and silent movies. To one side of the phone was a handle that had to be wound up to create the electrical power required for functionality (hard to fathom in the 1980s). After signing, I would be ushered down a light beige wood-lined corridor (common in all official GDR buildings), out of which a panel would suddenly explode into life and an outstretched hand would give me thousands of East Marks in low denominations. 'Hier, nochmal unterschreiben' (sign again). With this twenty-centimetre-high stack of paper money between my hands, I would descend to the touring van and distribute the various percentages to Reinhard (the driver) and Jimmy (the manager), leaving heaps for myself to figure out how to spend in a country almost devoid of consumer items.

Apart from various clothes, hats, shoes, including a three-piece suit, music, LPs, and food, I spent my East Marks on Super 8 film. Since all copying in the GDR was illegal, there was consequently no Xerox copying or video; however, a huge hobby culture utilised Super 8 film. A three-minute roll of ORWO film cost but a few East Marks (literally a few cents in Western currency). I purchased countless rolls for my experimental film works. The only caveat was film developing: the raw footage had to be sent away to Moscow for processing and big brotherly control of content. Not a problem for me, because many of my movies were expose, etch, and scratch technique. I often wondered what the censor thought of them — some sort of nondescript Western decadence? There is now an all encompassing collection on the net of thousands of Super 8 home movies from GDR times. It makes for an alternative and relaxed view of the evil communist state (<https://www.open-memory-box.de>), with smiling citizens on holiday at the beach and families entertaining themselves at home; in this communal country, the bartering of goods and services often replaced that which required money in the West.

Eating was an issue for touring musicians working in the GDR. There was food but accessing it late at night after a concert gave limited options. In East Berlin it came down to Hotel Stadt Berlin, a twenty-nine floor colossus near Alexander Platz packed with Russian soldiers, Comecon elites, and ladies of the night (Hallo, ich bin die Gabi, was kann ich für Sie tun?). By 11pm, the restaurant on the top floor was completely empty but still staffed by a dozen waiters offering no pretence as to carrying out their function. The obligatory bribe gained entrance (think of bribes not as corruption but as the equivalent to the 15% tip expected by employees in the badly paid service industries of the USA). And there we would sit eating Russian caviar, drinking Sekt, and ordering the most bourgeois dishes on offer.

The contrary experience to this dilettante dabbling could be found at the restaurant in Leipzig Hauptbahnhof (a huge and largely empty railway station), again packed with Russian soldiers and the odd member of the proletariat, and armed with a rotund waitress marching up and down the aisles between far reaching wooden tables bellowing at the top of her voice 'Fisch oder Fleisch!' (fish or meat). Strapped to her waist was a large tray with the choice of tinned meat or tinned fish - the food arrived inexplicably free but the tin opener cost ten east marks, the dining experience washed down with vodka and beer.

Unrelaxed describes the Deutsch-Deutsch Grenze (German/German border): the intimidating atmosphere of Friederich Strasse Bahnhof, where one caught a train from the East to the West, the anxious queues at the Tränenpalast (The Palace of Tears), the internal lead wall dividing the main station from the S-Bahn station (so the DDR burgers could not see or hear the trains leaving for the West), the holding pen in which all prospective passengers were herded while barking dogs and guards searched every nook and cranny of the train for hideaways, the dozen guards high up on the walkway with machine guns trained on waiting passengers. Checkpoint Charlie was normally a little lighter in Grenzervibes, except for the time I hit a total Stalinist nut job. I dramatised this event as a Rosenberg story in *The Pink Violin* (ISBN 0 646 08003 2, NMA Publications): 'Das ist Kein Cello' (That's not a cello). Reading it again, most of it is as it happened.

In the midst of a tour in the GDR, I returned to Berlin for one concert in the West (at Die Küche, a loft and concert venue in Kreuzberg where I lived). I had with me my non-conformist 19-string cello and a completed customs form that stated: 'one cello -used'. After unpacking the cello twice and explaining that this was simply a musical instrument, I was told 'Das ist Kein Cello' and 'Do you think we all stupid here, we know what a cello is, and it has four strings, this instrument has too many strings for it to be a cello'. Next, I was marched into the interrogation room by the on duty head of Checkpoint Charlie. The interchange went like this:

'This is clearly not a cello, and you are not a musician. What are you doing in my country?'

'Here is my contract with Die Künstleragentur der DDR'. (Whereupon he squishes the contract into a ball and throws it into the corner of the room.)

'I don't know anything about any Künstleragentur!' (Gulping with the perceived threat, I realise I have a serious interrogator in front of me.)

(He draws his finger across the cello.) 'Here is dust. If you were a proper musician, you would at least clean your cello'.

(I lose it and start yelling about wanting to see an embassy official.)

(He leaves the room and locks the door, returning after some time with three other Vopos, one of whom is a cello-playing policeman. The head crazy orders me to play. The cello playing policeman shifts nervously in his seat, a chance to show and shine? Plucking up courage he points to the various appendages on my instrument.

'And how does that sound?' (pointing to the dowel rods that pierce the body of the cello).

'And how does that sound?' (pointing to the plastic inserts stuck to the top of the instrument).

'And how does the sound?' (pointing to the metal springs attached to the side).

'And how does that sound?' (pointing to a string that transects the bridge).

If I had a video of this performance ...yeah, a YouTube hit.

My demonstration of avant-garde techniques complete, as a final gesture of supreme knowledge, the Vopo picks up one of my bows and announces 'But how can you play with such terrible bows?'

'Ah, I bought that one in your country', I parry with glee. But my pyrrhic victory is short-lived. They stand up as one and march out the door, locking it once more. I'm left to stew for at least an hour. Eventually the head crazy comes back and barks at me to go. I ask for my passport; he shakes his head. He's fucking with my brain. Without a passport, I can go neither to West nor East. As the stew dries out and several 'whiles' later, the first Vopo who inadvertently had started the whole story comes to me and wiggles her finger to indicate that I should follow. We go through a maze of service corridors, and eventually we are heading along the East side of the wall. She opens one of the many iron doors that the East Germans built in the Wall (often used to arrest publicity-seeking graffiti artists painting on the Wall's West side), hands me my passport, pushes me through, and slams the door. I find myself on the West Berlin side of the Wall. Trying to digest the dream sequence I had just experienced, I amble back to Checkpoint Charlie where my lift is still waiting to take me to the concert in Kreuzberg.

What I miss most of the divided Berlin was the inherent theatre of the absurd. For example, the ghost stations that inhabited some of the U-Bahn lines that went from the West to West, but under the East, where stations were lit by one dingy lamp and guarded in the fading yellow by one under-employed Vopo. As they passed these urban myths, the trains would slow down as if to

stop, but didn't. Bowed against reality or lost in prayer, no one looked up. Later in the 1990s, we shot a film sequence in a passage way at one of the central U-Bahn stations in the East. Archaeology recently revealed; its time-lapsed walls covered with late 1950s advertising. Department store propaganda lost to its consumers for thirty years.

Radio in Berlin had me hooked every night. The various stations were all created and loaded with political intent — Sender Freies Berlin (Free Berlin Radio), RIAS (Radio in the American Sector). I loved the East German news with its positive statistics about the rise in tractor manufacturing or the construction of apartment blocks and its mirror image of whatever the West blasted out about corrupt Communists. The 'Number Stations' broadcast from both East and West with religious lists of number sequences, coded messages for agents right up to the end of the Cold War and beyond. A Berlin meditation. Die Schwarze Kanal (The Black Channel) was the best twenty-minute mind fuck on television, watched by fans in the West and nobody in the East. This was GDR Government propaganda at its best, articulated by the brilliant and slightly scary Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler, featuring the worst stories of decadence on Capitalist TV, complimented with astute Communist commentary.

And then there was the moment in 1988 when a couple of hundred Kreuzberg punks escaped over the Berlin Wall but in the wrong direction! The geographical line of the Berlin Wall is arcane knowledge. It was built in such a panicked hurry that parts of the East ended up on the wrong side of the Wall. Such was the case at Potsdammer Platz, where a small triangle of land (the Lenné Triangle) on the West side was actually owned by the East Germans. On a certain date (I think it was June 1st), the West German authorities were to buy this parcel of land off the East with a plan to build a freeway along the West side. Kreuzberg Punks and environmentalists looking for a summer cause (as was their wont) squatted on the land in question next to the Wall. The West German police built a wall to contain the punks, with a view, come the allocated day, to charging in and beating the hell out of these kids. For their protection, the punks built their own defensive wall. So there we have it, three walls in the place of one. And the day did indeed come. Armed to the teeth with batons, water canons, tear gas, and guns, the West German police did verily charge the punks, who, fully prepared for this eventuality, climbed up ladders and escaped over the Wall and into the arms of unarmed East German police ('Welcome to East Berlin, boys!'), who took them away for a slap up breakfast, sending them home again by train. This was likely the last propaganda win for the East before the unloved nation state of sixteen million fell apart.

At the time I was a member of a band - two Ozzies and two Wezzies. We used a photo of this escape to the East on one of our Slawterhaus album covers (http://www.jonroseweb.com/c_articles_slawterhaus.html)

When the wall was built in 1961, I was ten years old, and that news item was probably the first moment of political awareness that entered my head. Why build a wall? I remember asking myself, and from that moment on I wanted to visit, if not live in, Berlin. My first concert in Berlin took place in 1981, which convinced me to enter the parallel realities of this extraordinary town.

In 1990, as the Wall was chipped into personal souvenirs and 'art' to be sold off in New York galleries, I overheard a conversation between two retired teachers from the East. They spoke of the hopes of their youth. Along with many who had physically built East Berlin from the rubble of the Second World War, their lifetime of commitment to a better society now being ridiculed and cheapened: GDR lifetime service medals, education awards, and the like were also being sold off along the disappearing Wall. As Marx wrongly predicted about Capitalism (so far) - 'All that is solid melts into air'.