

And the wall fell down flat

Uwe Siemon-Netto (From The Tablet, London, August 12, 2011)

Exactly 50 years ago, work began on the construction of a lethal barrier dividing Berlin that was to last nearly three decades. Years of protests by East German Christians led to its destruction and that of the Communist regime which tried to contain the faith of its people.

On August 13, 1961, a Sunday, the Associated Press sent me to Berlin where East Germany had begun building a Wall that morning to stop the mass exodus of its citizens to the Western sectors. Fifty years later, I recognise that this turned out to be not just a reporting assignment for me but the beginning of a long story of faith.

I was 24 then, myself a refugee from Leipzig. From what I saw I did not expect Germany to be reunified in my lifetime. Yet it happened 28 years later, in large part thanks to a peaceful Christian resistance movement. This is actually the most important story about the Wall; it is a tale of hope.

I flew from Frankfurt to Tempelhof Airport and drove to Bernauer Strasse, a street dividing the French and Soviet sectors. On the eastern side, people were roping themselves down from windows, while Communist cops stormed their buildings from the backyard. Some refugees jumped into nets spread out for them by firemen, some fell to their death.

I watched East German workmen render the Protestant Church of Reconciliation inaccessible with barbed wire. Located on what became known as the death strip, it symbolised Christianity's condition in divided Berlin, where both the Catholic diocese and the regional Protestant church were split into two halves.

I observed workers' militiamen open fire on a fugitive family of nine prompting a French lieutenant to blast off warning shots from a machine gun mounted on his jeep. "Stop shooting or I'll shoot you," he yelled. The escapees made it across the border. I accompanied them to the Marienfelde refugee camp, the central stage of this drama in the heart of Germany. Of the 2.6 million fugitives thus far, 1.5 million had been housed here before being flown to West Germany. By the time East German leader Walter Ulbricht ordered the Western sectors of Berlin sealed off, up to 2,500 left his country every day. Its economy was about to collapse. Entire branches of industry no longer functioned because their skilled workforce had run away.

Ironically, the flight of highly qualified craftsmen, of scientists, engineers, professionals and farmers, was not just a catastrophic loss to the Communists but also had a religious dimension. These refugees belonged primarily to the social strata that had been the Christian Church's mainstay. Ulbricht's regime was intent on establishing a "dictatorship of the proletariat", relegating the former upper and middle classes to an inferior status, and driving them out. This was the main cause for the decline of church membership from some 95 percent of the population in 1945 to one quarter at the time of East Germany's collapse in 1989.

The persecution of Christians began well before the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was established in the Soviet zone of occupation in 1949. I remember it well from my childhood in Leipzig. A Marxist teacher had taken over our class. Every morning he admonished his 80 pupils: "There are three Christian swine among you who still go to church. Go beat some sense into them after school". The three of us, one Catholic and two Lutherans, learned to outrun our roused classmates; eventually my mother had me smuggled across the border to the British zone of occupation, where I ended up in a boarding school.

In the GDR, young Christians were denied access to higher education, unless they joined the Communist youth movement and subjected themselves to a ceremony called Jugendweihe, a Marxist substitute for confirmation. Some did this, for example Angela Merkel, a pastor's daughter, who was allowed to study physics and later became chancellor of reunified Germany. Others made no such concessions. They fled or accepted discrimination at school and work in order to live a life of faith.

The three daughters of my uncle Horst Persing, a Lutheran minister, accepted this fate. In 1976, Rev. Oskar Brüsewitz made an even greater sacrifice. He immolated himself in front of the parish church of Zeitz in protest against "the suppression of our children in school." His sacrifice was one of the first steps toward the popular protest movement that eventually brought down the Wall in 1989.

One day as I was covering the Berlin crisis in the autumn of 1961, East German police stopped me at the Heinrich Heine Strasse border crossing to question me about the source of a highly sensitive story of mine they had read on the AP wire. I did not give them her name. A few weeks later my grandmother sent me a poppy seed cake from Leipzig. Inside I found an aluminium tube with a message warning me against travelling again to the GDR. A well-meaning neighbour who was a "people's prosecutor" had tipped her off that I would be arrested for espionage if I tried to do so.

I was now cut off from my East German relatives forever, or so I feared. "Eternity" turned out to be short, though. In 1975, the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe ended many travel restrictions in Germany. To my amazement the GDR granted me an unrestricted six-month visa. I drove to my uncle's parsonage near Leipzig where I first found out about of an awakening among young East Germans. One of its many centres was the Church of St. Nicholas (Nikolaikirche) in Leipzig, which later became the fount of the peaceful revolution that toppled Communism.

For weeks I travelled from church to church, monastery to monastery, parsonage to parsonage, trailed by secret police. Later I discovered that they considered me a religious crackpot, albeit a harmless one, which still perplexes me because the focus of my research should have troubled them: a large ecumenical movement luring thousands, including soldiers in uniform, to youth services and eventually providing an umbrella also for non-Christian opposition groups against the East German dictatorship.

I learned that this had begun in 1968 when Ulbricht had the Gothic University Church on Leipzig's Karl Marx Platz (now Augustusplatz) blown up. It stood on a square that was designated to be a socialist parade ground, and Ulbricht did not want it to be "blighted" by a gracile sanctuary, where both Lutherans and Catholics worshipped.

Twenty days later, an international Bach contest took place in Leipzig. Suddenly in the presence of VIPs from all over the world and of East German party bigwigs an automatic mechanism unrolled a huge yellow banner showing the contours of the murdered church flanked by the dates of its consecration and its death, 1240 and 1968, plus the inscription "Wir fordern Wiederaufbau" (We demand reconstruction).

The authors of this act of defiance were five young physicists and science students. They were captured and imprisoned. But they inspired sympathizers throughout GDR to form what became the nucleus of a "peace movement", which gradually snowballed into the avalanche that swept away Communism two decades later.

The Nikolaikirche is only a few steps away from where the University Church stood. It became known worldwide as the epicentre of this ecumenical enterprise, arguably one of the most impressive in post-Reformation history. Admonished by Protestant and Catholic clergymen not to resort to violence, tens of thousands marched on Monday evenings quietly around Leipzig's city centre. Their most momentous demonstration occurred on 9 October 1989.

On that evening, pastors and priests had preached on Proverbs 25:15: "With patience a ruler will be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone." Then a crowd of 70,000, chanting hymns, set off on a procession that softly felled a 40-year tyranny. Had they given the Communist authorities the slightest provocation, it might have resulted in a Peking-style massacre. The regime was certainly ready.

From the side streets their workers' militia had their guns trained on the protesters. Local hospitals cancelled the leaves of their medical staffs. Ample amounts of coffins and body bags had been brought into town. A concentration camp had been set up in Markkleeberg, south of Leipzig. Later lists with the names of intended inmates were found. They included pastors, priests and Kurt Masur, the conductor of Leipzig's famed Gewandhaus orchestra.

But the demonstrators remained peaceful, as did the peace marchers who emulated them in many parts of the GDR. We know what happened next: The Wall opened in the following month. The GDR ceased to exist one year later. In the interim, Christians temporarily assumed positions of power in East Germany. Rainer Eppelmann, a Lutheran pastor and pacifist from Berlin who had done time in a Communist prison, became the GDR's last minister of defence.

It is now 50 years since I saw the Wall go up and 22 since it came down. The Christian movement in eastern Germany seems to have collapsed. When Germany was reunited on 3 October 1990, most Protestant churches did not even ring their bells in gratitude, in contrast to Catholic churches, which did. Once again, eastern Germans are turning their backs on the Christian faith in droves. Next to the Czech Republic, the former GDR is the most secularized region in Europe, and Berlin is the most godless city.

What happened? A manifest expression of Original Sin in the sense of man's innate inability to believe and trust in God; but at the same time a confirmation of Martin Luther's brilliant insight about cloudbursts of the Holy Spirit that suddenly soak one area richly, and then inexplicably move on. This is what we have witnessed here.

As for me, this amazing story still gives me huge hope. For it has reinforced my faith by confirming, on a secular level, the maxim that history is always open to the future and the theological truth God is the ultimate Lord of history that the Spirit always good for surprises.

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