

## Fifty years of waiting for the right to vote. A conversation about power and powerlessness, culpability and reconciliation

Joachim Gauck was 50 years old when, on March 18, 1990, he first voted in a free, democratic election. The Berlin Wall had fallen a half-year earlier; the German Democratic Republic, the GDR, was now holding its first – and last – real election. Just half a year later, on October 3, 1990, the GDR ceased to exist, and what had been the GDR became part of the Federal Republic of Germany, i.e. former West Germany.

When Gauck left the polling station in the port town of Rostock, where he was a pastor, he had tears in his eyes. He was asked why he was crying.

“I have voted”, he answered.

But Joachim Gauck was not only voting in a real election for the first time. He was also a candidate. And even though the election was a disappointment for his civil rights movement party, he himself was elected to the last East German *Volkskammer*. Here he became chairman of the committee that supervised the dismantling of the East German security service. In the reunited Germany, he subsequently became the director of the special department that was established to deal with all documents found in the archives of Stasi (GDR counterintelligence). In popular parlance, his department was given his name: *Gauck-Behörde*.

The seditious pastor had, in one year’s time, become a high-ranking official in a reunited Germany.

At the end of October 2009 Gauck visited Södertörn University. Here, he was the keynote speaker at the large twenty-years’ memorial conference. Gauck chose to describe the great change and transformation that had taken place in East Germany, *die Wende*, as a long process of moving towards a civil and civilized society, during which people changed from being subjects to being citizens.

**When Joachim** Gauck introduces himself, he emphasizes that he comes from a part of Europe in which two generations have been deprived of their democratic rights. Gauck was born under Nazism and grew up under the Communist Soviet system. Starting in early childhood, he had been brought



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up neither to choose nor to question those who were to decide for him. The GDR incorporated one into a totalitarian system, at first innocuously – in elementary school – and then in the public youth movement Free German Youth, FDJ.

“It is all about conformity, and is, in the beginning, not especially ideological. In the beginning, one is supposed to see oneself as part of a group, not as an individual. The opposite of Communism is not really anti-Communism but individualism”, he emphasizes.

During the Nazi era, people were supposed to show docility and conformity, *Gefolglichkeit*. And even if Communism was – “of course” – better than Nazism, the two systems bore obvious resemblances when it came to social control and the lifestyles they promoted.

“To try to understand an ideology by studying its dogma is a mistake. Instead

one must analyze concrete actions, how power is enforced and powerlessness created.”

The church was the only alternative to the society’s and the Party’s institutions.

“The church’s work among young people was semi-legal”, says Gauck during our brief talk at the opening of the conference.

**As a young pastor**, he took his first trip abroad, to Sweden, with an ecumenical youth delegation. He took a great number of slides, and when he came home he showed them at a youth congregation in the church. He was subsequently accused of “contempt of the state” and his passport was revoked.

“I have since learned that the leader of the delegation was a Stasi informer.”

For many years, the goal of the church and of other East German social

critics was to improve the system and socialism, to find a genuinely socialist system. In Poland and Czechoslovakia people were more realistic, in his view. Author Václav Havel, who became independent Czechoslovakia’s first head of state, spoke of the necessity of being able to live in truth and of how the authorities’ power was founded on the powerlessness of the powerless.

The change came in the spring of 1989. Young people, in particular, wanted individual freedom. They realized that freedom could not be won within the system. One had to flee to the West, which one could do via Hungary.

“In my sermons in 1989, I said that we must see ourselves as powerless, not try to make the system better. We must abandon fear, I urged.”

In the fall of 1989, the wave of protests swelled. There were demonstrations in Leipzig and mass meetings were held in the churches.

“This was a strange transformation. The rationality of obedience, which had existed for generations, was replaced by a longing for freedom, nourished by religion, music, and culture.”

The demonstrators’ slogan, *Wir sind das Volk*, could not have been uttered in West Germany. There it would have been associated with the nationalist idea of a greater German Reich. In the GDR it referred not to nationalism but to citizenship.

“If we, in the street, are the people, then what is the Party? If we are the people, then we are citizens.”

Joachim Gauck became spokesman for *Neues Forum*, one of the opposition groups that after the fall of the Wall assembled at the negotiation table to discuss the GDR’s political future with the old party bosses and power holders. The meeting took place in a parish house located in a side street in central Berlin.

“We knew that if the leaders agreed to participate in a dialogue, they had lost. I had previously tried to invite Party representatives to partake in our church days, but they never dared to come.”

**At an anniversary** celebration of the fall of the Wall, Gauck is less inclined to dwell on the years during which he was in charge of Stasi documents. But he does stress the importance of demanding accountability for injustices and outright crimes (as when people were killed while trying to flee over the Wall). When someone questions the legality of holding former leaders of another state responsible for crimes committed by the regime, his irritation is noticeable.

Among the former GDR leaders, Gauck respects Günter Schabowski. Schabowski became a personage in history books after he, at a press conference in the late afternoon of November 9, let it be known – in an aside – that the GDR would introduce exit travel. A few hours later, the Wall was opened.

Joachim Gauck believes that Schabowski, unlike the other bosses, has thought things over and is sincerely repentant. The two met, and Schabowski said that he did not understand how

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JOACHIM GAUCK

he could be indicted and convicted. Gauck coldly responded that it was not a question of personal remorse but of a state governed by law that demanded accountability for the exercise of power. Schabowski must be sentenced and accept his punishment, even if Gauck believed his remorse was sincere. But Gauck promised to visit him in prison on Christmas Eve.

Schabowski was sentenced to prison, Christmas Eve came around, and Joachim Gauck went visiting – not to the prison, however, but to Schabowski’s home, as the latter was on leave:

“The prisons are not what they were during the GDR era.”

Now Schabowski claimed to understand what Gauck had meant with accountability and punishment.

“Had I still been a pastor, I might have been more forgiving”, says Joachim Gauck, turning to a pastor within the group. “But the principle is important. Democracy rests on the assumption that a human being is a responsible subject.”

**As an old theologian**, he is also uncertain about whether it is right to use reconciliation as a political concept, as is done today. When the news magazine *Der Spiegel* brought together Gauck and the South African archbishop Desmond Tutu, head of the South African reconciliation committee, they were not in total agreement. In South Africa, crimes were also investigated that were committed under the apartheid regime and during the fight for freedom. But those who bore witness and confessed were neither prosecuted nor punished.

“The bishop is, of course, an impressive person and it was incredible to meet him and talk to him. After a while,

we agreed that the conditions for reconciliation can differ from country to country, according to the contexts.”

Like former members of the opposition in Poland and the Czech Republic, Joachim Gauck often expresses bitterness about the politicians and intellectuals in Western Europe who, during the Cold War, did not seriously criticize the Communist regimes. The peace activists he met in the West attacked USA’s or NATO’s militarism much more than they did that of the Soviets. They did not conceive Communism itself as a fundamental problem. This was also reflected in the attitude to Poland’s Solidarity movement:

“The resistance in Poland was clerical, nationalist, and anti-Communist. It was seen as not quite proper.”

Like regime critics in the GDR, who – for far too long – sought to improve socialism, many intellectuals in the West believed in “a third way”.

“But they had no model for how the economy was to function. No country has been able to offer its citizens prosperity without a market economy”, Joachim Gauck points out. “Free socialism” was doomed because its advocates knew nothing of economics.

“It is good that there are ordinary people”, he says. People want that which functions in practice.

Even today, Joachim Gauck is not satisfied with the Germans’ views on freedom. They believe most fundamentally that security is more essential. Obedience remains more important than responsibility. He can, however, live with the fact that not everything turned out the way that, for a brief moment 20 years ago, one might have hoped:

“We dreamed of paradise but woke up in Nordrhein-Westfalen. That is also rather nice.”

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### FACT FILE

- # Joachim Gauck, 69 years old, born 1940.
- # Former pastor of the evangelical (Lutheran) church in the GDR. Spokesman for the opposition group *Neues Forum* and from 1990 to 2000 responsible for the Stasi archives in Berlin.
- # Keynote speaker at Södertörn University October 22, 2009.
- # Has just published his memoirs, *Winter im Sommer — Frühling im Herbst: Erinnerungen*. (Munich: Siedler Verlag 2009. 349 pages). In that book, Joachim Gauck depicts his younger years and his activity as an evangelical pastor in the GDR, a uniform surveillance society; the nearly unreal transition period of peaceful popular protests that led to the unification of Germany; and his activities as head of the preserved archives of Stasi (the Ministry for State Security).