

A MEETING POINT FOR OLD AND NEW BERLINERS:

“The need for a welcoming and stable anchor after turbulent times will never change”

by **Annamaria Olsson**

“**R**efugio? Oh, I really liked it there. We’ve gone back several times just to drink coffee and hang out. I met with a lawyer, but I saw there are yoga and music classes also,” Oksana said.

The artsy Ukrainian graphic designer had been in Germany for about six months and she was very clear about what made her appreciate the support she got. “We are refugees, but I don’t feel like one. I sure don’t want to be treated like one.”

Just a stone’s throw away from Hermannplatz, Neukölln’s beating heart and center, lies Refugio, the headquarters of the NGO I founded 10 years ago: An integrated co-housing, project space, and meeting point to break down barriers between old and new Berliners through sharing space, time, skills, and resources. Inclusion as a two-way process on the other side of the spectrum of what I sometimes call “bed and breakfast integration”, managed by bureaucratic institutions. It’s a much slower process that continues way after urgent needs are covered, war fatigue kicked in and the media lost interest in refugees at train stations.

2015, amid the summer of migration, the house was founded by writers Sven and Elke Lager who got access to the building from the City Mission. The wish was to contribute with solutions for the topic on everyone’s lips: refugee integration. By then, Give Something Back To Berlin (GSBTB) had already made us a name in migrant support circles. Since 2013 we had built up a big

grassroots movement of volunteering and skill-sharing all over Berlin. GSBTB was by no means a refugee project, it was a migrant led-community project that simply reacted to the current needs of the city. One of the most pressing was for modern and human-centered activism supporting newcomers.

THE FOUNDERS OF Refugio invited us to build up the house: To bring in life, activities, and the broader community since GSBTB was already working with self-organized refugee groups as well as NGOs all over Berlin. The buildings have six floors, three of which are residential, and house roughly 40 inhabitants of whom half have experienced forced displacement. The rest is project and office spaces, as well as artists and other NGOs. The rooftop has an urban garden and bees and acts as an extended living room for birthdays, BBQs and casual shisha catch ups. Above all, its breathtaking view over the city skyline is a constant reminder that whatever turbulence might be going on, in the outer or inner world, there is always a horizon and the sun will rise also tomorrow.

“One of the strengths of our project is the multi-facilitated provision offered within its frame. We organize up to 20 regular activities per week,” says Mine Nang, GSBTB’s German-Afghan community manager in her office. “Often people might start by joining the language café but end up as participants or vol-



Familiar faces, a hug and a coffee
– Refugio café is a place for connection.

PHOTO: GSBTB

unteers in our music or cooking project. There people end up practicing what they learned in the language café. Our German one currently has around 100 participants every Tuesday but we also have English, Arabic, and women's only cafés, all community-run. Newcomers also get integration courses from the state but they come with conditions and obligations. It creates a barrier. Of course, you need the language to integrate but the pressure can also become detrimental to learning success. Something that can also feel empowering or at least comforting for the participants with a story of displacement is also that all of our activities are mixed and not only offered to refugees. To see that also more privileged newcomers are struggling in the same way with the language, like it's not only due to my refugee story, it's a human experience of relocating," Mine continues.

"Another big challenge after arriving is getting psycho-social support. Refugees need space to process their experiences but this is not something that is thought about or offered in the very beginning. In some cultures, this type of healing work doesn't have a real space within society. It's not common practice to go

to therapy or self-help groups of different sorts." She saw similar patterns both among the recent Ukrainian new arrivals as well as the Afghan-Iranian community that she knew both through her family history and the activism sphere.

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“Other things simply have priority in the beginning. For themselves and the receiving society. But it's important to not lose sight of the women. A big need is safer spaces specifically for women and children. When the spaces are mixed men tend to dominate or it ends up with a focus on their problems.”

A COMMUNITY MEMBER expressed it like this:

“When I was in Syria, I felt like I didn't belong there. It was too strict for me. I thought I would feel at home in Europe. I didn't. There was this huge gap and I felt very lost after arriving as a 16-year-

old. I was super worried about how I would be able to continue studying. How did the system even work? I also felt fed up with learning new languages and refused to learn German at the beginning since I first needed to go to Turkey, learn the language, then Sweden, same procedure, to then arrive in Germany. I was



Award-winning activist Fatuma Musa Afrah.

PHOTO: GSBTB



GSBTB's Open Arts Space in action.

PHOTO: GSBTB

exhausted. Meanwhile, the support given often came with a feeling that you were supposed to change your beliefs, or people showed pity for your situation. Therefore it felt important to find a place where I felt accepted for who I am.”

Downstairs the café is buzzing with activities. In the big meeting hall, once a church room, the house’s Iranian handyman, Habib, chef, and always a friendly face, is setting up the room for a conference. All NGOs in the house are partly run as social businesses hosting external bookings from ministries, companies, civic initiatives, and political actors. In the café, the Syrian barista is teaching a volunteer how to make coffee on the fancy Italian machine. Customers of different nationalities and backgrounds are having zoom-calls, chatting over cake, or informing themselves about the weekly schedule. In the afternoon, a GSBTB project focusing on trauma healing for women and children is having its Open Arts Space. Soon the backyard will be full of paint and canvases, paper, crayons, glitter, and glass materials.

Sometimes kids join in but for many activities, childcare is offered so the women can have some space for themselves. The healing work often takes place through art or music or simply being together. Art and culture works as a common language where a shared language or even the right words for oneself don’t yet exist. Important (verbal) conversations come with time and trust. Both in internal surveys and in the academic field, studies using GSBTB as an example found that “finding friends” and “the sense of a community” were among the main motivations to join the activities.

A COMMUNITY MEMBER expresses it this way:

“After my partner’s sudden and painfully tragic death, needing to attend the bass class was the one certain thing that helped me reconnect with other people and reconnect with myself. So as of now, community for me is a place that helps me heal, while at the same time allowing me to impact others in whatever way I can while being able to do something I love.”

Another community member says:

“WIDENING AND BROADENING NEW ARRIVALS’ NETWORKS IS NOT ONLY SUPPORTING HUMAN PSYCHO-SOCIAL NEEDS; IT IS ALSO MAKING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP SMALLER.”

“The Open Kitchen project anchored me to Berlin and served as a place that I can go, that I feel a part of since my arrival to the city. I feel like people were made to live in a community. I think one of the reasons that COVID was so hard for people is that we weren’t made to live in isolation.”

Many newcomers participating in GSBTB’s programs come from societies that traditionally have very strong extended family and community networks. Losing these bonds due to displacement instantly feels like a loss of stability. Re-creating similar social fibers is one of the most important steps in making the new place a home. But it’s not easy. What the Covid pandemic clearly showed us, though, is that being cut off from one’s community is somewhere on the scale between distressing and traumatic for the majority of people. “I prefer a cold bed in a hot city, because paradise without friends is hell”, as the Syrian Palestinian poet Ghayath Almadhoun wrote in one of his poems. Having a network is also something that is often taken for granted by people without migration or refugee experience.

In our interconnected society, this is how jobs, opportunities, flats, and information, also in terms of values and cultural capital, are shared and distributed. Widening and broadening new arrivals’ networks is not only supporting human psycho-social needs; it is also making the opportunity gap smaller.

GSBTB and Refugio being based in Neukölln are proof of that. The neighborhood has for decades had a reputation in the whole of Germany of being a so-called *Brennpunktkiez*, a social flash-point, with a migrant-dense population, high levels of poverty, and people living on social benefits as a consequence of segregation, inequality and a stratified educational system.

THE OTHER STORY – it’s an area buzzing with life and activity, and in the last ten years became popular with artists and creatives, making it one of the most hip areas in Berlin with rapid gentrification and rising rents. Several generations of migrants and refugees and the so-called ‘guest workers’ dominate businesses



Language learning in big and small groups.

PHOTO: GSBTB



Afghan, Kurdish and Persian Newroz celebration.

PHOTO: GSBTB

in the area: Turkish, Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians. One street down from Refugio lies Sonnenallee with nicknames such as Little Beirut and Arab Street, and with Ramadan evenings and Eid Al Fitr it has more in common with Amman or Ramallah than more well-off areas in the city.

After the Second World War, the devastated German post-war economy began to flourish in the “German economic miracle”. The country was in desperate need of labor and ‘guest workers’ were brought in to work in West German factories. Over fourteen million migrant workers came and worked in Germany between 1955 and 1973. Work visas were issued for a few years, and the whole idea was that they would then return. Few efforts were made to encourage the migrants to feel at home, learn the language, or become a part of the local society. Today, the second and third-generation family members of the three million guest workers who remained still pay the price to this day. It is a story that is shared with many refugees after them and it was not until the year 2000 that Germany officially acknowledged being an *Einwanderungsland*, a country of immigration.

Fatuma Musa Afrah still thinks the country has a long way to go. The Somali activist and speaker used to live in Refugio when she arrived in Germany after spending her childhood as a refugee in Kenya. The outspoken powerhouse constantly needs to interrupt our conversation to say hi to some friend or acquaintance during our talk. For many years she has organized projects supporting isolated communities in Brandenburg, a rural, former East German Bundesland outside Berlin.

“The lack of participation from the locals, especially in the countryside, is a huge problem. We had projects that have been running for eight years and only two Germans attended. The newcomers are super isolated. Some have never met a German person apart from during interactions with the authorities or in supermarkets, even if they have been in the country for ten years. Sending refugees to already socially weak areas with high unemployment and social issues is bad for everyone. By the way, I hate the word integration! Like, only the migrants should mold themselves to the new society, and not the locals open up to them too. It’s a dream of diversity where the newcomers are supposed to add extra spice. For us on the other side, it’s about survival. We need to come into everyday contact with Germans in the same way as we need to drink and eat,” she said while cheek-

kissing a Somali resident of the house and the children that she fought for years to be reunited with after being separated.

“Racism is everywhere but in the countryside, it’s really bad. What do you do when a neighbor throws an egg at you because you look different or wear a headscarf? Some people can identify those who spat in their faces but don’t dare to go to the police because they know nothing will happen.”

THE OFFICIAL DATA speaks for itself. In 2022 there were over 121 assaults, attacks, and damage to property directed toward refugees and migrants. That’s an increase of 73% from the previous year. The number of unreported cases is likely to be much higher and people talk about a situation similar to the beginning of the 1990s when the country was plagued by violent xenophobic attacks.

Lulëzim Ukaj came as a refugee from Kosovo as a child and was a volunteer at the weekly *Sprechstunde* (drop-in consultation) taking place within the frame of the Ukraine-café. He sees both similarities and differences to the 1990s.

“A positive change is that it feels like the state has finally understood that refugee reception can only work if the government supports civic initiatives to do part of the job,” he said over an Italian-Syrian cappuccino.

“One thing that definitely hasn’t changed is the unfriendliness of the authorities that many people experience.”

“The people coming to the *Sprechstunde* often felt overwhelmed, needed a lot of orientation, and were afraid of doing something wrong: Which they also often did and all of a sudden their social benefits were cut. Not even ethnic Germans understand this bureaucratic lingo – how should the new arrivals cope? From the Berlin authorities’ side I think it was a combination of being chronically understaffed, badly organized and a lack of translators. Of course, there were cases of xenophobia but if you compare with other refugees from Muslim countries the Ukrainian were treated rather well,” he said.

“A very big topic was how to find a flat. Many people were soon to be kicked out of their initial emergency housing or reception centers. It was very obvious that a lot of people were taking advantage of the crisis and offered dubious places for astronomical sums just because they knew that the authorities would be willing to pay.”

In comparison with just a couple of years ago and the 2015

refugee generation, Berlin has an exploding housing crisis with a lack of apartments and rent increases. Even non-immigrants have a problem finding apartments. A foreign name makes it much harder. Where the Ukrainian refugees got fast-tracked due to the European temporary protection directive, meaning they were spared the asylum-seeking process, they instead arrived in a very tense housing market in the capital and many places in Germany.

“Another part of our support was keeping people up to date with juridical changes. The laws changed several times which meant new waves of people and questions. The ‘third country citizens’ were in particularly challenging situations as they ended up in a bureaucratic gray zone.”

Students from different African countries became regulars at the Ukraine café while waiting for answers on whether they were allowed to stay and receive the same rights as the Ukrainian citizens. The implementation of the temporary protection directive was a direct consequence of the wars in former Yugoslavia but was used for the first time in European history after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. That being the case was a source of both a certain irritation, anger, and sadness among many people who had arrived in 2015. “How many obstacles could we have been spared?” was the general feeling.

A COUPLE OF DAYS later I meet Hakan Demir, a social-democratic member of the parliament directly elected representing Neukölln. We chat over a Turkish tea close to the city hall, where he knows the café owner by name and several people that walk by will stay for a chat. Despite being involved in high level European conversations about the topic he also starts with the everyday basics.

“We don’t have enough preschool places; even people like you have a problem finding one! Imagine arriving in the country not knowing the language in a small village of 2000 people. You need school, preschool, and social benefits but even if you have the right to them, it’s simply not fixed in two weeks. Last year one million refugees arrived from Ukraine plus 200 000 from other countries. That’s a huge challenge for the local municipalities. Among these around 30 percent will have no right to asylum since they come from countries like Georgia and Moldova. Since there are no real ways for them to relocate for economic reasons they end up in the same system as the refugees. Seeking asylum is the one way they can try to make it here. This adds extra pressure on the asylum system,” he says, sipping his tea.

“Don’t get me wrong here, I’m all for people having an opportunity to seek a better life! These people should have the possibility to come, but our current legal system doesn’t have a framework for that. This needs to change! Last year Germany deported 1000 people from Georgia; meanwhile the country needed at least 400 000 people in the workforce. It’s obvious

that we need to make bilateral agreements with these types of countries. We already did it with the West Balkan countries like Bosnia and Serbia for people to be able to establish themselves in our labor market. As a country we are not “at our limits” but I have the feeling this group of 60 000–80 000 people in the gray zone makes some people think we are.”

HE MOVES ON TO the bigger European picture.

“Our main challenge now is the overall political landscape. We have a post-fascist government in Italy, French right-wing

policies and a country like Sweden which used to be a humanitarian superpower is now gone with the Sweden Democrats and the right-wing government. This is very problematic. Accepting refugees is an act of solidarity but the problem now is that this responsibility is not shared even between different European countries. Today Germany takes by far the most. Refugees choose to a lesser extent to go to France, Austria, or Sweden. Germany is also alone, together with Luxembourg, in pushing for safer migration routes to the European Union.”

He takes a break.

“Currently Germany is the only country in Europe that gives state support to civic sea rescue on the Mediterranean; meanwhile other countries accuse us of contributing with a pull factor. In an ideal world people would of course be able to seek asylum without the dangerous journeys over the sea but the question is who is supposed to take care of these years-long and complicated processes? Frontex? The states on Europe’s borders like Libya and Tunisia?”

WE SAY GOODBYE and I think about how everything and nothing has changed in the last ten years since Give Something Back To Berlin’s founding. I think that regardless of which direction fortress Europe may take and whatever journey people have behind them when they arrive, the need for a welcoming and stable anchor after turbulent times will never change. As a community member described it:

“The organization still keeps going and still makes the space available for people to turn up. My point is just the importance of consistency and availability, no matter what. I think that that is amazing, and it’s something that’s really valuable.” ✕

Annamaria Olsson is Founder of Give Something Back to Berlin, GSBTB, and an Swedish author and essayist.

The quotations from community members are to be found in a recent report about the center. See Christopher Taylor, *Community organization, music and human rights: Community participation as a human right and how music can play a role in the feeling of ‘connectedness’* (The Alice Salomon Hochschule: University of Applied Sciences, May 2022).

“ACCEPTING REFUGEES IS AN ACT OF SOLIDARITY BUT THE PROBLEM NOW IS THAT THIS RESPONSIBILITY IS NOT SHARED EVEN BETWEEN DIFFERENT EUROPEAN COUNTRIES.”

**BÄRBEL HEINRICH,
REFUGEE HELPER:**

She was imprisoned for helping people escape the GDR



PHOTO: PRIVATE/AUTHOR

by **Annamaria Olsson**

Berlin Hohenschönhausen

“I did time in Hohenschönhausen, if that means anything to you. I helped people escape the GDR. We got caught. You and me should talk sometime.”

I had just finished a presentation about my NGO's refugee engagement when a striking lady with strawberry-blonde curls and neat, Marlene Dietrich eyebrows, who had moved restlessly around the room until my right side was clear of small-talkers, put a hand on my arm.

A couple of weeks later Bärbel and Wolfgang Heinrich, both in their 70s and convicted refugee helpers, met up with me at the S-Bahn station Hohenschönhausen in the former East Berlin. Wolfgang came across as warm if slightly introverted, yet comfortable in the role of a loyal ally striding at his wife's side, while Bärbel, the extrovert, chattered away and held forth about this and that.

It was the first of many meetings, forming a relationship that continued over the years. The timing couldn't have been more symbolic as the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall was approaching, and the media was buzzing with accounts of those earth-shattering days in 1989.

The November wind was biting as we approached the notorious Stasi prison Hohenschönhausen where both of them had been detained while awaiting trial. The charges involved of-

fenses against Section 105, subversive human trafficking. Their motives for getting involved lay on different pinpoints of the spectrum between private and political. On 13 June 1961, when news of the Berlin Wall's construction was broadcast, the then fourteen-year-old Bärbel was with her foster family in Sweden together with her sister. Her mother was in a residential health facility in West Germany and her brother was in the East, while her father was at home in West Berlin. The family reassembled at home in West Berlin in the end, but all their other relatives ended up in the GDR. It would be ten years before they saw each other again when they got permission to go to a wedding in Dresden in 1973.

“I'd seen a bit of the East before, when I'd taken the train to Sweden through the transit section,” said Bärbel. “Dresden was something else. Unimaginably depressing and grey. It was called *Tal der Ahnungslosen*, valley of the clueless, as they couldn't get Western TV channels there. My relatives used to come on holiday to East Berlin just to watch TV. They couldn't tear themselves away!”

At the wedding, she got into conversation with a cousin who said she wanted to escape. There was also a man there who discreetly enquired whether Bärbel would consider helping people get out. “I said yes without batting an eyelid or thinking of the potential consequences.”



Bärbel and Wolfgang Heinrich, Christa and Peter Gross Wolf-Feurich at the Fall of the Berlin wall celebration

PHOTO: PRIVATE/AUTHOR



At the meet up in former prison Bautzen.

PHOTO: PRIVATE/AUTHOR

IN THE END it wasn't relatives but complete strangers Bärbel was going to help flee. The same was true of Wolfgang, although his motives were different.

"I was 25 when I was caught, and I'd recently finished military service. The whole logic of the army is based on the idea of an enemy. Which meant Russians and the East. There was ideological brainwashing about everything to do with communism. While I was in the army I got involved in a group that carried out special missions."

"So it was a kind of state-organized operation?" I asked.

"I didn't realize until later what kind of enormous machinery there must have been behind it all. We smuggled out academics, a well-known physicist, for example. I think there must have been agreements. Otherwise some of our actions would have been impossible to carry out."

Bärbel, meanwhile, had met a group of students organized into more grassroots-level assistance shortly after the wedding.

The set-up was always the same. West Berliners with entry permits to the East were given the addresses of GDR citizens who wanted to leave – individuals to whom they either passed on the time and place for transit, or drove out to the transit sections themselves. The transit sections were the corridors of regulated mobility for goods and people to move in and out between East Germany, its neighbors and West Berlin. Foreign and Western vehicles had to pay road tolls, under strict instructions to cross the section more or less in one go, unless they had an urgent need to answer the call of nature, get a snack or petrol. Brief stops during which GDR citizens could, with careful planning, hop into a car boot or hide between goods and packages. Unlike traffic between the border crossings in Berlin, lorries in the transit sections were only sporadically stopped.

"I managed to get ten people out. We failed with the last two, and they ended up in prison like us," Bärbel said.

In 1975, aged 28, she was taken to Hohenschönhausen, little suspecting that she was about to spend the following 28 months

in prison. Wolfgang, then 25 years old, still a stranger to her, had already served some of his 33 months.

"You know, in those days the prison wasn't marked on the map, because officially it didn't exist and only the most loyal Stasi and party people lived in the area."

Hohenschönhausen was a well-kept secret and during its lifetime over 11,000 people who in different ways were considered a threat to the foundations, order and existence of the GDR were imprisoned here. Even though the GDR's constitution of 7 October 1949 stated that every citizen had the right to emigrate, the new state was quick to start persecuting people intending to find a new life or future other than the one offered by the 'workers' and farmers' state'. Before the Berlin Wall was built to stop the 'flight from the Republic' – *Republikflucht* – 2.5 million Germans had managed to escape to the West. In 1979, attempted escape could mean up to two years in prison, and in "serious cases" up to eight. 9,196 people were charged with the offense of flight from the Republic in 1988.

FLOODLIGHT CAST A COLD white light over the yard when we arrived at the metal gate of the prison. Like many other GDR memorial sites, the prison had been allowed to stand more or less untouched once it ceased to be used. A door opened and we found ourselves standing in a room with something that looked like a combination of a windowless lorry and an ambulance.

"The prisoner van. That was what all of us were taken here in. With no windows, so we wouldn't have any idea where we were and people wouldn't see us being taken away. I just vanished off the face of the earth! No one knew where I'd gone, as I hadn't told anyone what I was up to. A well-known rock band was detained at the same time as I was, but as prisoners were brought in and out so discreetly we never saw each other. Total isolation was one of their many torture methods. Often you only met your interrogators. It was like being the only person left alive on earth," she said as we continued through the prison.

Four hundred interrogators, trained in psychology, were tasked with breaking down political prisoners through constant interrogations that sometimes went on for years. From its foundation, the GDR prison system was a brutal one and physical abuse was extremely common. From 1976 onwards there was a gradual move towards what was called ‘operative psychology’. This wasn’t just down to the international criticism of how prisoners were treated, but also because of the discovery that mental abuse was at least as effective as physical abuse without leaving visible, more provable traces. Mental abuse was as comprehensive as it was crushing, involving different types of isolation cells, blackmail and threats, disinformation and prohibitions. Even in the 1980s, when many sentences were relatively short in comparison with the previous decades, over 69 percent of prisoners reported post-traumatic disorders after release – 44 percent of which were long-term. The food – low in nutrients and almost entirely lacking fruit and vegetables – often led to malnutrition and other serious illnesses, as did the lack of sunlight.

“It was all terrible, but in a way it was a good thing that I was a bit older when I ended up here. The younger ones were easier to break down. I knew who I was and my value as a human being. When I was locked up in Bautzen I was put in the same working team as a female murderer. *Bärbel, you’re worse than her. You’ve done worse things than her*, the guards said. I’d helped people find a new life, while she’d taken people’s lives. There’s no point in discussion with anyone who even compares the two.”

WE WENT DOWN STEPS leading to underground corridors of cells. I sat down on the bed while Bärbel, as she did in every other room, stood as if to attention, as if perpetually ready to flee. Wolfgang chimed in, whispering as if to not wake up ghosts.

“One punishment was to sit bolt upright at a table without moving your hands. For hours, for days on end. Nothing to read, nothing to do. Nothing to look at but the walls. It was psychological terror. People went crazy in the cells. You could hear them screaming from the corridors. Some of them hanged themselves. You couldn’t go outside for more than one hour a day, usually just twenty minutes, half an hour. There was a guard with an AK47 watching you all the time.

After ten months in detention, the time came for Bärbel’s trial.

“They offered me a lawyer from the East with no interest in defending my interests. It was a show trial. I got five years for offenses against Section 15, *staatsfeindliche Menschenhandel*, subversive human trafficking. I spent about a year in Hohenschönhausen, one year and six months in Bautzen and then in Lindenstrasse in Potsdam. When I got out I weighed forty-five kilos and had to slowly eat my way back to a normal weight.

In 1977 she and Wolfgang were bought back by the West German government. Price: 95,000 Deutschmarks per person, around 140,000 Euros today, to be released. Taking political

prisoners wasn’t something the GDR did just to punish and make people submit to its system. It was also business.

“The politicians in the East claimed that West German smuggling organizations were conducting human trafficking when they helped people escape, whereas it was actually the GDR carrying out human trafficking.”

BY THE TIME THE WALL came down, the cynical trade in prisoners, the financial game that the Heinrichs would become part of, had brought in more than 3.4 billion Deutschmarks for 33,755 prisoners. That is around 5 billion Euros at today’s value. The poorer the GDR became, the higher the price. Between 1964 and 1970, the average price was 48,000 Deutschmarks, but between 1977 and 1989, the typical price had increased to 95,842 Deutschmarks.

“They kept people they needed. A senior doctor at the Charité hospital: no, he’s staying. A builder: no, you can have him! 30,000? No, let’s say 35,000 and he can go! It was harder to get out if you had an academic education. It was a kind of reverse class privilege. And a game. If the West was interested in buying you, the GDR could practically delete you from the list just for the sake of it.”

The increasingly hard-up state even had a department called ‘Koko’, *Kommerzielle Koordinierung*. The task of its 3,000 employees was to bring valuable Western currency into the GDR by almost any means, by trading via two hundred and twenty mailbox firms and

thousands of bank accounts around the world. This included trade with toxic waste from the West; it was not unusual for this to be dumped without adequate safeguards, contributing to massive environmental damage in the GDR. Other sources of income included illegal trading in art, where private collectors in the East often had their collections confiscated and then sold to the West. Although the state claimed to be pacifist, it secretly traded in weapons, and during the Iran-Iraq war it sold weapons to both sides.

I asked what the first thing they had done was when they were released.

“We went to Schlachtensee Lake,” she said, putting her hand affectionately on Wolfgang’s.

“We? The two of you?”

“Yes. We met at the lawyer’s office when we were awaiting release. We were freed on the same day. July the thirteenth, 1977. Our double anniversary. We got together at the lawyer’s and spent the following three days and nights just walking around in the surroundings of the lake.”

It took almost twenty years before they could bring themselves to visit Bautzen prison again, but since their first visit with a kind of self-help group for former political prisoners they’d returned regularly. But even within that group there were different opinions and experiences and sometimes they ended up at loggerheads.

“TAKING POLITICAL PRISONERS WASN’T SOMETHING THE GDR DID JUST TO PUNISH AND MAKE PEOPLE SUBMIT TO ITS SYSTEM. IT WAS ALSO BUSINESS.”



Freigang in Bautzen prison.

PHOTO: PRIVATE/AUTHOR



A bordercrossing in Potsdam.

PHOTO: PRIVATE/AUTHOR

“People were treated in different ways in prison. Us ‘Wessies’ were often treated better than the ‘Ossies’ but that doesn’t make our experiences less important or traumatic. And then you mustn’t forget that they actually grew up in a police state where people denounced one another. Those behaviors can stick with some people, even if they hated the state and were crushed by it. It’s complicated. Others are frustrated because they never caught up economically after the Wall fell and now they take it out on any ‘Wessie’ they can, even though we were all in the same boat in prison.”

Bautzen prison

It could have been a school reunion when the group of former prisoners stood arranged for the yearly official photo in the Bautzen courtyard, a pensioners’ outing to the Bayreuth Festival or a leaving do for the year’s trade union representatives, with their files tucked ready under their arms. Eight of the thirty-two people in the official photograph were women, and Bärbel soon vanished with three of them into an office, where they exchanged experiences specifically as female prisoners. Meanwhile I talked with Wolfgang, who showed me around the workrooms and cells.

“Eight hours a day, six days a week. All prisoners, working in teams of twenty. We made current switches for vessels and lifts. The least signs of rebellious inclinations were punished harshly. When I was released, I started my own business, selling cleaning products, cosmetics and jewelry at different markets. I don’t think I could have had a normal job after prison. Someone else decided what I was going to do, when, where, and how.”

He pointed at the toilet, shared with his cellmate with no privacy. The cupboard for the few personal belongings.

“We got two books to read a week. You could only hope you got the thickest book possible, so you could drag it out. Often it was wretched propaganda books. Bärbel was always raving about some book about Vladivostok she’d got that made her really want to go there after reading it. Apart from that there was nothing to do.”

He tapped his head with his finger.

“All your time was spent in here.”

AFTER A POTATO-HEAVY LUNCH, we met up with the group Bärbel had been talking with in the women’s block. They looked like the political rehabilitation version of a retired Spice Girls: each with her own unique personality, aura and style, enchanting in her own unassailable vitality.

Sigrid, a little over 80, had a blonde Prince Valiant-bob and near-translucent blue eyes. On release she’d weighed 31 kilos and she didn’t appear to have gained all that many more since, and she spoke with an intensity worthy of a small wind power station. Brigitte’s hair was cut short. Anja laughed easily, and it sounded like Alpine bells ringing as she guided us to the isolation cell that her rebellious youthfulness had led to her spending quite some time in.

“Yeah, you didn’t want to go in there,” chuckled Bärbel.

“Thank goodness I never had to either.”

“Well, I was only nineteen when I was arrested,” said Anja. “For refugee help?”

“Yes. It’s hard to put a nineteen-year-old down.”

Just as ‘Ossies’ and ‘Wessies’ were put in different prisons, women and men were in different buildings. They could see each other from the cell windows though, and an alphabet of taps was developed to communicate and socialize.

“It was strictly forbidden. But also an incredibly fiddly way to communicate. Twenty-six letters, each with a unique combination. It took ages to send a message – but then again, there wasn’t much else to do,” Anja said.

NEARLY ALL OF Anja’s periods in the isolation cell were for tapping messages.

“The longest I got was fifteen days in a row. A girl from a cell nearby threw a packet of cigarettes in front of the little vent, so I could smoke, thank goodness.”

She didn’t stop knocking, despite constantly ending up in isolation.

“With Ove, I agreed that if I was released before him, I’d go and call on his aunt so that we wouldn’t lose touch. Two years later my doorbell rang and it was him. He’d been released and now we’re married.”

“You’re joking!” I said.

“No” she replied, with a laugh and a little toss of the head.

“You know, one time when I was inside I got a visit from my then-boyfriend,” Bärbel said. “We smeared shoe polish onto our eyelashes to look nice but good lord it stung. We curled our hair with toilet paper rolls. One of the two Iranians always had immaculately pressed trousers. He always placed them under the mattress before he went to bed and always woke up to a perfect crease. All to create some kind of normality.”

While the two Western birds’ laughter chirped across the room, Brigitte told her story rather more quietly. Unlike the other three, she’d grown up in the East.

“I’d submitted several applications for a travel permit to be reunited with my relatives in Hamburg,” she said, her hands clasped together on her knee.

“Time after time they were turned down, and in the end I began to believe I’d never get out. So one winter, our family went on a skiing trip to Czechoslovakia. The country was open to tourists from the GDR and in Prague I met an Austrian man at a restaurant. Come and visit me in Vienna, he said. I laughed and said it was impossible, Why? he asked, not understanding. Because we aren’t allowed to travel anywhere. He had no idea! We can get married so you can get out, he suggested. He was a widower and must have thought he’d never find anyone else again.”

“But were you romantically involved?”

“God no. He just wanted to help. Marrying a foreigner was one of the few ways you could leave. A lot of people entered into fake marriages like that. We didn’t have any other options. We got

married but had to wait two years for it to be approved. I mean, I’d asked for an exit permit a few times already, so they must have suspected something was up. On the way to Dresden for the ceremony they chucked him off the train and sent him back over the border. Finally we managed it though, and I left for Austria. When I got to his flat in Vienna, I saw all the liquor bottles. He was an alcoholic. I stuck it out for a year and then asked for a divorce. I lost my Austrian passport when we divorced, but I was allowed to stay in West Germany. There I soon got involved in one of all the networks helping people escape. I began working as a courier; I wanted to help people the same way I’d been helped.”

“How many people did you help leave?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I was just a courier but I was sentenced to nine years in prison. I was bought out after two and a half years. But when I heard nine years – I simply wanted to die. Just think, some people were inside for fifteen! You can’t believe it, right?”

“Yes, unfortunately,” I said and told her about my Syrian colleague Saraardini, currently awaiting her trial in which she and several activists risked twenty-five years in prison for having helped recently arrived refugees on the beaches of Lesbos. Sara’s case was one of the most publicized, but many like her sat awaiting similar trials on the periphery of Europe.

Border crossing at Bornholmer Straße

On the 30-year anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall I met with Bärbel and Wolfgang at Platz des Neunten November, at the border crossing of Bornholmerstrasse. The place didn’t look like much today: just a metal bridge over a busy S-Bahn station and a piece of graffitied wall. In another life, it was a border crossing between the district of Wedding in the West and Pankow in the East. One of many despised places now compressed into a mundanity that made it virtually invisible unless you took the trouble to look more closely or were a visiting tourist, or it was an anniversary day like today.

Bärbel and Wolfgang led the way through the buzzing crowd. In one of the countless texts she’d sent me in recent

days, she told me about her friends Peter and Christa Gross Wolf-Feurich who I absolutely had to meet. The couple were well-known ‘fall of the Wall’ personalities – in 1985 a film had been made about their fate.

In spite of his slightly unruly hair in a white side parting, Peter had a youthful look and an energetic voice with a Swiss accent. Christa had a soft face and friendly blue eyes, and was wearing a red quilted coat. “Officially and unofficially she is judged to be a very intelligent, mentally alert, sharp-witted, coldly calculating and refined personality” said Christa’s Stasi file, while Peter’s file depicted him as “an adventurous man whose interests were travel, photography, sailing and women.”

BÄRBEL AND WOLFGANG had met the couple through the Bautzen prisoners’ association, and their story had both similarities and

“WE GOT TWO BOOKS TO READ A WEEK. YOU COULD ONLY HOPE YOU GOT THE THICKEST BOOK POSSIBLE, SO YOU COULD DRAG IT OUT.”

dissimilarities. Peter grew up in Switzerland, where information about life behind the Iron Curtain seemed almost non-existent. In 1968, hearing of the revolt in Prague and curious, he booked a multi-stop train ticket through the East.

On a train between Prague and East Berlin he met a woman who after just a couple of minutes of conversation asked if he could find a fake passport or get in touch with some refugee helpers. Peter, equally politically naïve as he was stubborn, said he'd see what he could do. After corresponding for a few months, contact ceased abruptly, until a postcard came nearly two years later telling Peter he could never travel to the GDR again as he risked being arrested by the police. She had been arrested by the Stasi because of their letter and phone contact but been released in an amnesty and got an exit permit to the West. During the two years in which there'd been no contact, however, Peter had visited East Germany several times without anything happening, so he came to the conclusion that he was safe. In 1973 he began work as the private chef of the Swiss Embassy in the GDR. As a local hire, he didn't have full diplomatic immunity, but his car could move freely between the strictly regulated border crossings.

GENUINELY INTERESTED in life in the GDR, he travelled around a lot, but also indulged his rebellious streak by revving up his Mini Cooper in the petrol-stinking queues of Trabant and Ladas on the Autobahn. He also regularly frequented bars and clubs, wearing Western clothes and an air of freedom. With an exchange rate of 5 Deutschmarks to 20 Ostmarks he was always the king of the bar. At the dancefloor of Tanz Bar Café Nord he met Christa who worked as a pharmaceutical engineer at a blood donation center in a hospital. She couldn't understand for the life of her how someone could come to the GDR voluntarily. They exchanged numbers and a few days later Christa rang him from work, as she didn't have a phone at home. Their feelings for each other grew and soon Peter visited Christa at home. Seeing her flat for the first time came as a shock: a run-down hovel with no bath and a toilet one floor down, a kitchen in a small pantry with a bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling.

"Conditions not even the poorest guest worker in Switzerland would live in," he said.

Peter's contract at the embassy was coming to an end, which threatened their relationship, as Christa couldn't follow him back to Switzerland. They began to toy with the idea of escaping, and took an ambitious decision to visit the glitzy Western shopping street Ku'damm for a day, to see how it felt. Leaving their whole lives and families behind them without knowing if they would ever see them again wasn't a decision to be made in a hurry.

They would manage a second visit, but there was no third time. Someone from the West like Peter was of great interest to

the Stasi and his movements did not go unobserved and unmonitored. The East German state had over 89,000 official employees and between 110,000 and 189,000 unofficial informers within a highly developed system of denunciation. Like many others, Christa and Peter would later discover from their Stasi files that people they had thought were friends worked for the Stasi and had been informing on them for a long time.

"The man who opened the wall was the same one who sent Christa and Peter to Bautzen," Bärbel said, cheeks flushed

slightly with mulled wine. They were arrested at this border crossing.

Harald Jäger, the same Lieutenant-Colonel and responsible Stasi commander at Bornholmerstrasse, who on this date in 1989 had opened the first border crossing that marked the end of the Cold War, was the same person who gave the order to examine Peter's Mini Cooper when information arrived that a woman was highly likely to be hiding in the boot. An order resulting in three years in Bautzen. As if that wasn't already ironic enough, Jäger himself was born in the town of Bautzen. A man who had voluntarily signed up to

the GDR's border police in 1961 and started working for the Stasi in 1964 had gone down in the history books as 'The Man who Opened the Berlin Wall'.

"Jäger's no hero to me," Bärbel snorted. "Just a few years before that, you can 100% guarantee he would have fired into the crowd with heavy ammunition. If it had just been a few hundred people at the border, he might have fired, but then it was more than ten thousand. It just wasn't feasible; he had no choice."

BOTH COUPLES sipped on their mulled wine in front of the hated wall. I took a picture. Dressed up warm in front of the border that had brought them together, kept them apart, reunited them and created a shared experience that had forged their strong marital bonds, this glimpse of a moment gave me the feeling that love always won in the end. ❌

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literature

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