

A little story of a missed sensation – A big story of world history

In 2009 we will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. This was the start of an incredibly exciting time for all Germans – especially for people like me who grew up in East Germany. It so happens that I was in Berlin the night the wall came down. Can you believe that I have missed such a historic moment? I did!

In September 1989 I moved from a small Thuringian town to Berlin to study at the Humboldt University. Like many other students I was accommodated in a huge dormitory, sharing the room with 3 other girls. The dormitory was located about 8 miles away from the Berlin city centre and the Wall. Not that far you might think. You are right, but it was not a transportation problem – it was all about communication! We had no TV and no landline phone, not to speak of mobile phones. Our radio was turned off that night. So there was just no way to know about what was going on.

Besides, it was a very spontaneous and dynamic action caused by an accidental announcement: On the evening of November 9th 1989 at a live press conference the SED party official Günter Schabowski announced that every GDR citizen is now allowed to travel abroad including West Germany and West Berlin, which was formerly impossible for most East Germans. He was asked by a journalist when this becomes effective and he answered: “As far as I know,...immediately.” That was it. Already half an hour later the first people showed up at the checkpoint and everything else is history. But I was totally clueless that night! No one had the chance to call me or just to stop by and I missed one of the most important moments of the modern German History.

The next morning started normal – just another day with lectures I thought. When I arrived at the University a classmate of mine told me about what happened. Of course I thought he was teasing me, but it did not take long to convince me and to check it out myself. Our department was just in walking distance of the Berlin Wall and an – open – checkpoint to West Berlin. It was an overwhelming stream of so many jubilant people crossing the border that none of the border control officers even bothered to check IDs. They were there and officially on duty, but smart enough to stay in their booths and to do simply nothing. My feelings were a weird mixture of excitement, happiness, astonishment, disbelief and even fear. It was very strange for me just to walk to a part of the same city which was always there. I could almost physically touch it, but until that moment it was unreachable such were all Western Europe countries and the rest of the entire World. As a child, you do not really miss traveling abroad and you do not notice to be fenced in. As an adolescent in the mid-80ies I started realizing that something was very wrong with the entire political system in the former GDR. That was the time when in the former Soviet Union President Michael Gorbatschow launched the “Glasnost & Prestroika” movement and the world famous “Montags-Demonstrationen” started to force political changes. In the fall of 1989, people in East Germany were in a spirit of optimism and awaiting something to happen. We were excited and ready. Nevertheless, the occurrences in that one night 18 years ago were a big surprise for everyone. I was also afraid because the military was present and everyone was aware that the party and secret police officials would not be willing to give up their power easily. In retrospect, the biggest miracle – and relief – for me was that this revolution was peaceful. Sometimes I am still wondering if it was luck, destiny or the fact that many – little – people

made the right decision in a critical moment. I personally know classmates of mine who finished school and had to join the army in September 1989 for their mandatory military service. Boys 18 – 20 years old found themselves in a situation where they were expected to defend the failed and dying political system and to carry out orders, the same boys who participated a few months or even weeks earlier in anti-government events. They were armed, overwhelmed, confused and scared – a very dangerous combination. But no shot were fired miraculously anywhere. Those people who took responsibility for their own actions and put down their weapons are true heroes of that revolution.

I consider myself lucky. I was 18 years old when the Wall came down and a gate opened to explore the world. I had my entire life in front of me to take advantage of all the new prospects. I travelled extensively all over the world and finally in 2006 I came to the USA – to Houston, Texas. It was a coincidence, but I like the dynamic spirit of this exciting city and I made many very good friends. To make a long story short, I ended up starting a small business with a partner in Houston – to connect people in Germany and the USA. Hopefully in 2009 on the evening of November 9th I will be sitting in one of Houston's nice pub patios enjoying a mild fall evening – and remembering the historic moment in Berlin which I missed 20 years ago. But much more important I will pause for a moment to appreciate all the opportunities and experiences I have been enjoying since then.

Ute Boese

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