

Behind Berlin's Wall of Shame

The distance from tyranny to freedom may not be far – but when you are on the other side, it is further than the longest journey in the world.

Fresh from the clear, unchanging, sunny days of Israel, I was caught unprepared by the cold, misty weather that wrapped itself around Berlin. My light-weight acrylic cardigan was little protection against the cold and even less against the rain. But today was the day on which I was to visit East Berlin, and all arrangements had been made.

I was accompanied by a retired pastor, who acted as my guide and interpreter, and as we approached the renowned Checkpoint Charlie, I began to wonder if the weather was not appropriate!

Even being in West Berlin was an uncanny experience. At that time, in 1978, the city was like an island in an ocean of Communism. Completely surrounded by East Germany, its only easy link with the West was through the air corridor to Frankfurt or Hamburg. And only the airlines of the three major powers – Britain, France and the U.S.A. – were permitted to operate there.

It was possible to travel across by road, and many people did so, particularly in tourist buses. For local inhabitants of West Berlin, however, it was a constant annoyance. There were passport control points each time you entered or left East Germany territory. Sometimes there were long delays. I was told the road was patrolled by dogs and laced with minefields. Drivers traveling through had to keep to their assigned routes. As a result many locals did not bother to leave the city unless they could do so by air, where there were less controls.

West Berlin itself was a beautiful city of over 2 million people. Its wide boulevards and beautiful modern buildings were a delight. The center of the main shopping street, Kurfurstendam, was adorned with colourful flowers. Cafes and restaurants spilled out on to the footpaths. Modern cars and buses patrolled the roads. The shops were clean, efficient, prosperous – and expensive!

Right in the center stood the ruins of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, its spire blasted by a World War 2 bomb, a constant and somber reminder of the terror and tragedy of war. And in the distance, one could see rising high, the distinctive East Berlin television tower – a further grim reminder of the awful nearness of further conflict.

I was told that at certain times the sun so shone on the great shiny sphere of this tower, that its reflection formed a brilliant golden cross. West Berliners called it the “Pope’s revenge”!

In the midst of West Berlin’s prosperity, however, were signs of decay. Porn theatres and peep shows openly advertised their wares in glowing neon signs in the main streets. Explicitly sexual literature was readily available. Perhaps this is a reflection of the

fact that it was still a partly occupied city – some 10,000 Allied troops were to be found there. However, I observed the same kind of thing in Frankfurt, where right at the airport, pornographic material was blatantly thrust before the casual traveler.

The very freedom and liberty and joie de vie that the West was experiencing also meant – as it always does – freedom to pursue the desires of the flesh.

“I’ll have to leave you here and go to another check point,” my friend and interpreter explained. “Locals are not permitted to use the same entry as visitors.” He pointed to a street corner over the other side. “I’ll meet you along there,” he said.

His little Renault car turned away and went out of sight. I shivered, took my camera in my hand, thrust the other hand into my pocket, and wandered towards the crossing. I would like to have carried my tape recorder, but I had been advised. It would probably be checked and might be confiscated.

I stopped at a large sign which read, in four languages, “You are leaving the American sector.” Two or three U.S. soldiers in a guard-box took no notice of me as I walked past. Near me, to my right, was a wooden platform built by the Westerners, from the top of which you could see over the Wall and into the East. In the cold, gloomy weather, I did not notice it. It was only two days later, when the sun shone again, and I returned for a further look, that I saw it.

I paused to look at the Wall itself. “The Wall of Shame”, the Berliners called it. Built in 1961, it went up layer by layer until it ran like a great gray knife blade through the city, dividing it neatly into two parts. Overnight, thousands of East Berliners found they were unable to go to work in the West the next day. One congregation I visited in the West was decimated. From one Sunday to the next, its numbers were reduced by about 80 per cent. That same church was now flourishing and alive. Under the easy-going but positive, faith-filled leadership of Pastor Volkard Spitzer, its auditorium was crowded with 500 people twice each Sunday morning to accommodate the 1,000 who wanted to get in. Hundreds attended mid-week meetings. Enthusiastic children’s meetings were conducted. There was outreach to young people. The whole place, known simply as the “Jesus Centre”, was an exciting place to visit.

The meeting I had attended the night before was a great blessing. I listened from my seat on the platform, as chorus after chorus was sung in German, to the accompaniment of grand piano and organ. The young American playing the piano was a brilliant musician. And when he sang (accompanying himself) a song in English about the Lord Jesus coming again, it was a special moment for me. And you can imagine my joy when a short time later, I realized that the tune the people were now singing had come from Australia!

When I stood to bring a greeting, I asked them if they knew this. No? “Well,” I went on, “that song was actually written by a girl who graduated from Crusade Bible College in Adelaide, South Australia, where I was Dean of Students, and was first sung

there.” It was Nolene Prince’s “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts.” They had learned it from America!

I shared a few thoughts on spiritual weariness. Many people told me afterwards how blessed they had been by this. It was only then that I learned that this had also been Pastor Spitzer’s theme that night. I had watched him preach. The people were on the edges of their seats. At times he had them so enrapt that you could have heard a pin drop. At other times, they were laughing helplessly. At others, they responded with a loud “Amen”. He was obviously loved and respected by his people.

“How well does he preach in English?” I asked his attractive wife Erica.

“Even better,” she replied, “than in German.”

I learned later that Volkhard had recently spent one week in Seoul, Korea, ministering to the young people of the great church pastored by Dr. David Yonggi Cho.

But now, I was going into the Eastern sector, where years before, hundreds of Christians had been cut off from their spiritual home.

I stopped at a wire mesh gate with no handle. How did it open? A guard materialized and the gate opened, apparently controlled electronically by someone caged away out of sight. I produced my passport. Above me, to the left, stood a drab, deteriorating watchtower, where two men sat in silent surveillance. Other watchtowers were spaced at short distances along the Eastern side of the Wall. I looked down the Wall. There it stood – a smooth, gray forbidding concrete serpent, totally barren of hand-grips or foot-holds. It was so sloped that climbing it would be impossible. Behind and beyond it, on the Eastern side, was an open space, presumably mined; and then another barrier, a mesh fence, topped with barbed wire. Dogs also patrolled it.

“Swedish, eh?” asked the guard, a young man, unexpectedly cheerful in his military uniform and great-coat.

“No, Australian,” I replied. From the office at the gate, came the sound of other young men laughing. They were playing some kind of game, it seemed, guessing people’s nationality.

He gave me a slip of paper, and I continued along a pathway fenced either side like a sheep-race. A car from the East was being checked by the guards. One of them slid what looked like a large jack under it. As he wheeled it out, I saw that it was in fact a big mirror, lying horizontal on a low trolley. It is no longer possible to escape from the East by clinging to the chassis of a vehicle.

No one seemed to be checking the cars going the other way – not until they crossed into the East, anyway. It was impossible not to think things like, “It must be great in the East. How good of the authorities to go to such lengths to see that people stay there to enjoy it!”

I entered a building and found myself in a small, gloomy room. But I was relieved and grateful for its sudden, pleasant warmth. Here my passport was taken by a stern-faced

woman behind a glass window. Then a shutter dropped and I was left alone. Maybe I had seen too many movies, but it was impossible not to feel unnerved. Without my passport I was stranded. I waited anxiously for its return. Meanwhile, I filled in a form telling how much money I had with me in various currencies. To my relief, the shutter was raised and my passport returned. I paid about \$2.50 visa fee, and was directed out through another door. Another short passage. Another office.

A gruff, unsmiling official simply mumbled, “DM6.50”. I fumbled in my pocket for the money (about \$3.00 at that time) and handed it over. Without words, he handed me a plastic bag with some more money in it. Puzzled, I took the bag and saw that it also contained DM6.50, but this time in East German currency. The only problem with this apparently fair exchange, was that Eastern Germany currency was worth only one-quarter of its West German equivalent! This struck me as a very capitalist enterprise for a communist regime!

Finally, another passageway, another official, another gate – and I was behind the wall, behind the Iron Curtain, in East Berlin. I waited in the cold street, and finally the little Renault appeared. I climbed aboard, which at last gave me protection from the wind, and we drove on.

East Berlin was also a gracious city. Like the Western side, it had wide boulevards and garden median strips. But the buildings were different. Many of the older cultural centres of Berlin were kept in the East after the partition. Large Moscow-style buildings lined the main streets. Graceful, slender light poles marked the pavements. The city was the showpiece of Eastern Europe.

We visited the famed Pergamon museum. What a magnificent display! It was like walking through the Bible world at the speed of light. You were instantly transferred from the temple of Pergamum to the shrine of Miletus to the magnificent Ishtar Gate from Babylon. And these were not just models – these were the real structures, transported stone by stone and rebuilt here under cover!

But, in East Berlin, something was still missing. For all its capitalism and its immorality, the West was bustling and lively. Here, in the East, one had the impression that you could only go to the baker or the grocer or the butcher – there seemed to be only one per suburb. Competition appeared to be non-existent. Maybe this was a good thing. But gone with it was something that money can't buy and capitalism can't destroy. Freedom!

Part of the highlight of my visit to East Germany, was the opportunity while I was there to spend some time with a Pentecostal pastor and his wife. How delighted they were to have the opportunity to fellowship with a brother from the West. And what a thrill it was for me to meet a brother from the East.

He spoke no English and I knew no German, so initially we could only smile at each other and praise the Lord at first! But my guide was able to interpret for us and we

managed fairly well. So we enjoyed steaming coffee and beautiful German cakes in a warm dining-room while we talked. Much of what I was told, I was not able to report at the time. That is no longer the case.

Pentecostal churches in East Germany could exist, but only by being part of the Union of Evangelical churches. This meant that intending pastors must be trained at the Union seminary. No doubt, they were given excellent training, but it was not really Pentecostal. There was no teaching on the gifts of the Spirit, or the manifestations of the Spirit. The attitude to healing and deliverance was different. Hence, new Pentecostal pastors were really more Evangelical than Pentecostal.

However, Pentecostal pastors could meet together a couple of times a year and it was at these gatherings that they did have opportunity for teaching in these areas. There was urgent need for the Spirit to be outpoured in a special way on these gatherings.

Furthermore, there was need for a tape ministry which could be used among all the pastors to give them teaching in the areas of spiritual renewal.

Pentecostals in East Germany were not allowed to advertise their meetings. There could be no distribution of leaflets, no radio or television ministry, no open-air meetings. Only word of mouth!

When I heard this, I thought that perhaps if we in Australia were similarly restricted, we might be able to learn more quickly how to be soul winners ourselves!

What about Bibles? “Most of our people have at least one Bible,” the pastor told me. “Other Christian books are hard to get. But sometimes we can obtain them.”

At this point I happened to glance over the bookshelves in the study to which we had now gone. Suddenly I saw two familiar books. One was a Revised Standard Version of the Bible in English, identical to the one I had with me. The other was a book about the Pentecostal churches – a book written in German and published a few years ago. I recognized it, for I had, through rather unusual circumstances, written two chapters for it, and I had a copy of my own. So, I took it from the shelf and showed the pastor my name. He was as delighted as I was. Something I had never expected was to find something I had written behind the Iron Curtain!

Well, we continued in fellowship and sharing together. I saw pictures of his church and took a photo of his wife and family. Finally, it was time to leave.

When the time came for us to go back into West Berlin, my guide suddenly remembered something. When he had crossed the border, he had already had some East German currency with him. “You should spend it here,” the guard had told him. “Don’t bring it back with you.”

But he had forgotten to spend it! If he had thought of it, he would have given it to the pastor, but it had slipped his mind.

“Would you take it with you?” he asked me. “I don’t want to run into difficulties which might make it hard for me to get back in future.”

“OK with me,” I answered and pocketed the few marks he gave me.

Later, as I walked into the check–point, I wondered if I would have to complete another form declaring what currency I had with me.

“Oh, probably not,” I thought and wandered in.

My relaxation was short-lived. Within a few minutes, there I was once again having to count my money and declare what I had.

“Lord, what do I do now?” I prayed silently, but urgently. Receiving no angelic message or anything like it, I did all I could do. I started filling in the form. American dollars. So much. Write it down. German marks. Write that down. East German marks? I was just about to count them, although I knew already that I had more than the DM6.50 I had taken in, when the official pointed to the form.

“Sign here and put the date,” he said impatiently.

I did so, and he snatched the paper and walked off. I asked no questions and made no protest! I went my way and was soon back in the Western part of the city. As soon as I could, I gave the East German money back to my guide. He would find some way to dispose of it.

That night I thought much about my visit to the East. The distance from the Eastern side of the Wall to the Western side was not far. But when you are on the other side, it is further than the longest journey in the world.

“Wall of Shame,” the Westerners called it.

It was an appropriate name.

(2895 words)

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