

# Berlin through one side of the Wall

by Colleen Keenan

The cities of Europe live in history: one can go virtually nowhere without being assaulted by visual reminders of a grand and glorious past. In Berlin the assault is perhaps the most vicious and the past the least grand. And the past permeates every aspect of the city.

Upon leaving the railway station, one is immediately confronted by the bombed ruins of the Kaiser Wilhelm Cathedral. Once a magnificent church, all that now remains is the front portion. Once-beautiful stained glass windows are haunting holes reflecting the open air. The slender spire of the cathedral still reaches toward the sky but crumbles into jagged, bomb-ravaged peaks half way up.

Our perception of East Germany was tempered by two incidents in particular. As in any case, there is a tendency to judge a nation in terms of an action or event. Our experiences in Berlin painfully portrayed what a disservice this is to a people. On the train through East Germany to Berlin we sat with a young German doctoral student. We discussed the complexity of Berlin's history. When the East German border guards entered our compartment to check our passports my friend and I feigned great fear. As they left we gasped: "Our first Communists!" Wulf corrected us: "No. Your first functionaries of the Communist state." That one sentence radically altered our thoughts as we watched the officials. How many of them really believe in what they are doing? And how many endure only because there is no other option?

The second incident was simply a message we read in a pictorial museum of Berlin since 1961. It was entitled **Look Beyond the Uniform** and it read: "It is a bad thing to fear the traitor in a friend but it is much worse not to recognize the

friend in the friend...Sincere thanks to all East German guards who have helped to do away with the notion of enemy-friend...who never wanted to and never will show any accuracy in shooting at refugees."

In stark contrast, the western side of the Wall is covered in graffiti. Its messages range from: "The blood of the east and west is on this Wall. Lord have mercy on our souls" to "Breschnev is a burnt weenie". Someone had painted a man reaching towards the other side; the ladder next to him was on fire. We walked along the Wall for over a mile. All my understanding of the history of Berlin crumbled in the face of its reality.

The Berlin Wall almost defies description. Having read a great deal on the events that led to August 1961 and what has followed, I felt prepared to view the Wall as an aware and interested tourist. Its impact was overwhelming: all fact and knowledge and political analysis sink into irrelevance in the presence of the fifteen foot high concrete barrier that splits a city, its people and its spirit.

On the eastern side, the Wall is

bordered by fields guarded by dogs, barbed wire and watch towers. Any buildings within easy viewing distance of the Wall have their windows barred. We watched a man looking through the bars of an office building window as he watched us. We could not fathom what he must have thought when we turned to walk away and he knew that he could not.

There are many such reminders of history in Berlin. What makes the anguish so real is that history's generation still walks the streets. Its ghosts are yet alive and the agony of an all too recent past reflects in the eyes of every old Berliner.

The populace of Berlin is a dichotomous one; by its very dichot-

omy it exacerbates the tragedy that is Berlin's story. There is a noticeable lack of middle-aged people and a plethora of the young and the old. West German youth can evade the mandatory draft if they move to Berlin. An increasing number, becoming more and more hostile to the West German status quo, have taken this route. Their rebelliousness is manifested overtly in their lifestyle; from their outrageous garb to the highly political street plays they regularly perform. The city is electric with the vitality of the youth. In contrast, the elderly hold up the past that many of the young have rejected. Watching them walk past the Cathedral and gaze up at its shell, the sense of pain becomes almost tangible to the observer. In

a city like Berlin those who lived through history relive it every day.

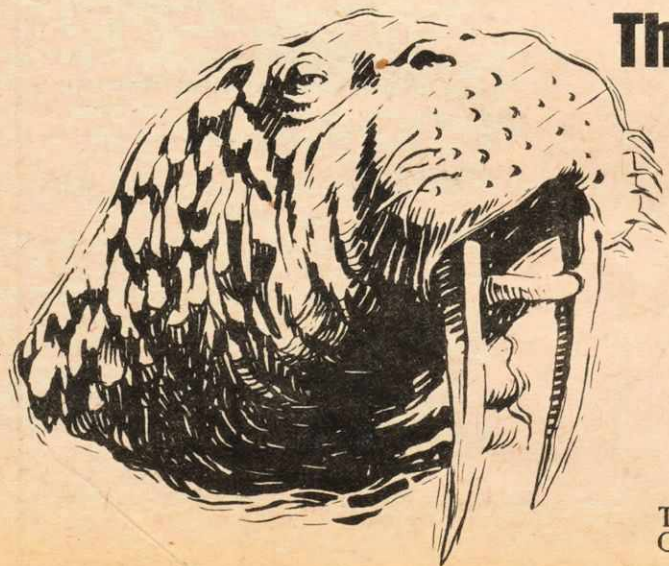
We left Berlin knowing we would never forget it; in a very real sense we felt its pain ourselves. We left richer with compassion for the East Germans divided from their families and freedom. We left it richer with understanding of history in terms of humanity. And we left with a new appreciation of John F. Kennedy's famous words: "Freedom is indivisible and when one man is enslaved who are free? When all are free, then we can look forward to that day when this city will be joined as one...All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin. And therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words, 'ich bin ein Berliner'."



A view of East Berlin from the side where West Germans still roam (comparatively) freely.

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over ice. Fire in 1 ounce  
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its bite. And you thought  
Walruses didn't have teeth,  
(tusk, tusk, tusk). Inspired  
in the wild, midst the dam-  
nably cold, this, the black  
sheep of Canadian liquors,  
is Yukon Jack.

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