



West-Central Europe

HISTORY

Living Behind the Wall

On November 9, 1989, the communist government of East Germany began allowing the citizens of East Berlin to travel into the free, western half of the city. For decades East Germans who tried to cross the border into West Germany or West Berlin without government permission risked being arrested or even shot. In Berlin, a high wall kept East Berliners in their part of the city. By 1989, however, communism was collapsing in Europe, and the Berlin Wall was soon torn down. In this reading, East Berliner Helga Schültz remembers the night the wall tumbled down.

It was clear to me that the Wall had to come down. . . . I knew that it wouldn't be possible to open the Wall only a little bit, for only a few people to be allowed to travel, or for only a certain number of people to be able to have a look at the other side. . . . Even so, November 9 was a tremendous surprise for me. I thought the announcement meant an easing of travel restrictions, but I expected that people would still have to apply for permission to travel and that only a small number would be granted that permission. I knew that our people would simply not be satisfied with that. The Wall had to go. But I imagined it would happen differently. I thought the Wall would disappear overnight, that they would come with hammers and wheelbarrows and take it away. It didn't happen like that of course, but the whole thing . . . was very hard to comprehend.

I lived for eighteen years with the wall in my backyard in Großglienicke, on the border to West Berlin, and we talked about the Wall every single day of the year, how inane [stupid] it was. You could hear people on the other side talking but you would have been shot if you had tried to talk to them. When the wall was finally down, we rode our bikes over every evening with hammers and chopped away at it, trying to get it out of our sight. We would ride along the Wall, looking for a hole that was big enough to slip through. It was completely crazy. Suddenly you could walk where only weeks or days before you would have been shot.

On November 9 I came home at around midnight. . . . On the bus I heard some people saying that now everyone would be allowed to travel; they had heard it on the radio. When I got to my stop, there was a group of young people who said that they wanted to take the bus . . . to West Berlin. The driver told them to get on if they thought it would work. Then we saw the first Trabis [a type of car manufactured in East Germany] driving in the direction of the border. When I got home my son and I sat and watched TV, intoxicated with joy. We watched the entire night. The next day he told me that they were going to open the Glienicke Bridge at 6:00 P.M., so we all marched over the bridge. . . . I was with friends of my son's, and we simply floated over the bridge. It was pure joy. . . .

It was wonderful for me that it was no longer a privilege to cross the border—now everyone could cross. I had always had the feeling that our people here were being deceived; they didn't know what was really going on over there because they couldn't see it. . . . When I was in the West I felt I could do without many things that were available there: I didn't need that pair of shoes, that book. Then I got home and realized that I really did need those things. My son wanted a certain record, for example. They were little things, but because you couldn't get them they represented paradise. Now everyone could finally see this paradise themselves. . . .

I see unification as positive because I don't think there was any other way. . . . I wasn't a supporter of the so-called Third Way, the establishment of a democratic but separate East German state. . . . I didn't feel like a citizen of the German Democratic Republic [East Germany]; I felt a part of something bigger. . . . I never had the feeling that the common cultural heritage between West and East had been broken off.

From "The Wall in My Backyard" (retitled "Living Behind the Wall") by Helga Schütz from *The Wall in My Backyard: East German Women in Transition*, edited by Dinah Dodds and Pam Allen-Thompson, translated by Dinah Dodds. Copyright ©1994 by the **University of Massachusetts Press (Amherst)**. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. What was the announcement to which Schütz refers in the first paragraph of the reading? How did East Berliners react to the announcement?

2. Besides preventing escapes to West Berlin, how else does Schütz think the Berlin Wall helped the communist government keep the people of east Berlin under control?

Activity

Imagine that you are a young East Berliner on November 10, 1989. Write a journal entry describing your feelings and activities on the previous night.