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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BERLIN: IN SEARCH OF HISTORY



The Berlin Wall on the day of its demise, November 9, 1989.

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Dear Peter and friends:

I've just returned from the city of international intrigue: Berlin. The purpose of my trip was to investigate German policy toward refugees. But I soon realized that no discussion of German social policies in 1990 is possible without first considering the anxious mood in Berlin on the eve of German reunification.

Carol Rose is an ICWA fellow writing on the cultures of South and Central Asia and a visiting fellow at Oxford University's Refugee Studies Programme.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

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Although almost entirely destroyed in World War II, Berlin is now a bustling city of 3.3 million people, set in the heart of the former German Democratic Republic (now the unified Federal Republic of Germany). As you know, Berlin was an occupied city for more than 40 years and a divided one until last month. Before that, the Soviet Union controlled the East, while the United States, France and Britain dominated the West.

These days, "West" Berlin has been entirely rebuilt with restored Bismarck-era classical buildings, post-war cafes, and post-modern art galleries. Indeed, the sense of design throughout Germany is so planned as to border on artifice. Said one Berliner: "We Germans have a unique ability to erase history." Whether unique to Germans, or true of all peoples, this idea of disappearing history became a recurring theme throughout my journey.

Anyone who visits Berlin will stroll along the Kurfurstendamm, the main street in downtown Berlin. Here, wide litter-free sidewalks are decorated with large showcases that display the latest in German jewelry, furs, fine china, and leather handbags. Prices are out of sight: \$400 for a pair of pants; \$350 for a blouse; \$400 for a pair of shoes; \$200 for leather gloves.

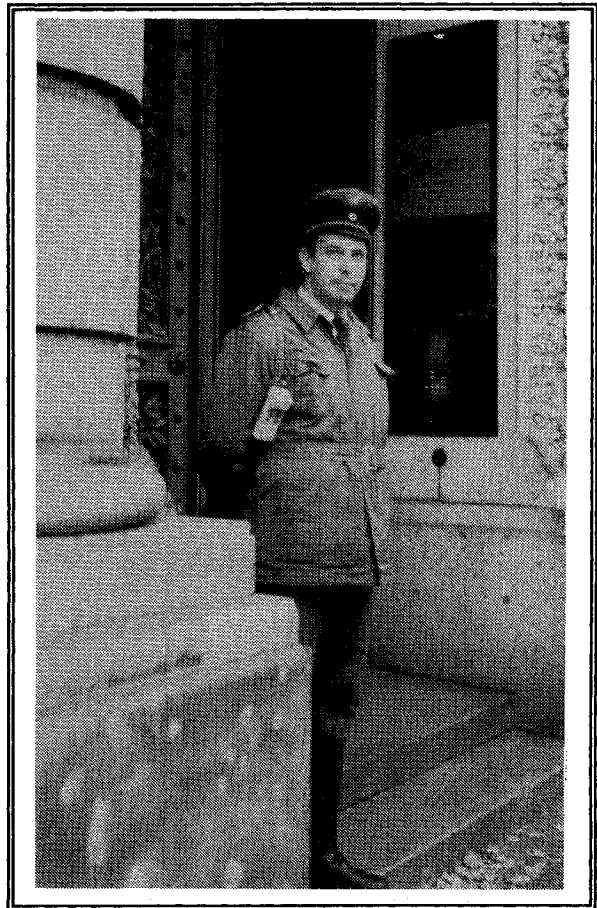


Before unification, it was strictly forbidden in East Germany to decorate automobiles, such as this artistic masterpiece -- topped with pieces of the Berlin Wall.

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In the middle of the city is the "Emperor William Memorial Church," the bombed remains of which are supposed to serve as a reminder of the war. But even this has a sense of the unreal as it is lit by floodlights during the night, and dominated by an ultra-modern cathedral during the day.

The Jewish community center, just off Kurfurstendamm, also gives surprisingly little feel for history. The only sign of the pre-war community is a marble archway salvaged from the old temple and placed against the modern facade of the present-day building. An armed guard stands at the entrance, evidence of continuing neo-Nazi activities in Berlin. Inside is a tiny display of menorahs, a talmud and other religious objects. This is all that remains of the 170,000-strong Jewish community that thrived in Berlin before the war. Today, only around 5,000 Jews remain in Berlin. Still, it is the largest Jewish community in all of Germany.



An East German policeman smiles from his guardpost. Once somber police now talk freely with foreign visitors.

I decided to visit the wall and "East" Berlin on November 9, the first anniversary of the collapse of the wall after a 28-year division of the city. November 9 has significance in German history for other reasons as well. On that day in 1848, the first attempt to reunify the princely states of Germany collapsed and its leaders were imprisoned. On November 9, 1918, the first German Republic was proclaimed in the Reichstag building. In 1938, November 9 was "Kristolnacht", the night when Nazi thugs took to the streets looting Jewish shops and homes, presaging the horrors that were soon to follow.

This year, the day was strangely quiet. I arrived at the Reichstag building eager to witness the first meeting of the united German Upper House (Senate or House of Lords) since Hitler dissolved the Parliament and burned the Reichstag in 1933. Yet I saw no fanfare surrounding the meeting.

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I then walked behind the Reichstag, to the spot where the Berlin Wall stood just 12 months ago. I had expected to see a gaping hole, a wound of some sort. But there was nothing. Where once there stood an impregnable wall, there is now an open, paved lot. The only indication that the wall ever existed are eight small graves marked with white crosses: monuments to the people who died trying to escape over the wall.



Cameras mounted on lamp posts outside an abandoned East Berlin government office. The wires have been pulled, rendering the cameras -- like the government -- useless.

Walking across the open field that not long ago was the "no-man's land" between East and West, I was struck again by the human ability to raze history. Later I learned that this land is the site of future high-rise apartment buildings.

At the Brandenburg Gate, where crowds gathered to celebrate reunification last year, street vendors now sell history to a few tourists: East German military uniforms, Russian army hats, pieces of freshly painted, fake "wall." There is great irony in the fact that the wall has become the ultimate commodity in capitalist consumer culture. I succumbed to the pressure to buy, paying a dime for an East German map of Berlin. On it, the writing is in Russian and German, and the "West" is a blank white space: History obliterated.

Crossing the grassy field into the "East," I stopped at an abandoned East German guard post. An army coat hung on a hook and a bottle of soda was left open on the desk. It looked as if someone had stepped away for a moment and never returned.

Physical evidence of the wall is gone, but it is very much in evidence in the economic situation in the East. On the main avenue, Unter den Linden, the shops have more consumer items than they did

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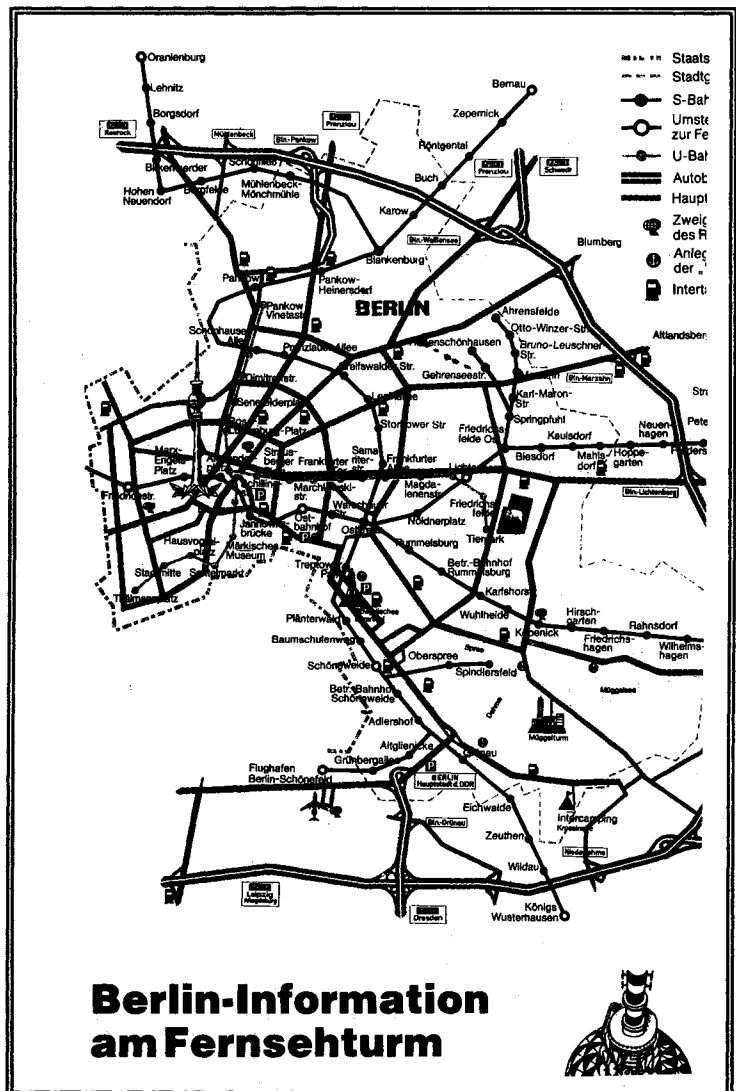
when I was there in 1985, but still far fewer and of cheaper quality than in the West. Shops that do have things to sell are owned not by East Germans, but by foreign companies such as Toshiba and LeCoste (which advertises expensive clothing for the "New Man").

Apparently, sex shops and used car dealers did the biggest business after the wall opened. With freedom comes exploitation.

In contrast to the West, you still can see signs of World War II in East Berlin. Buildings remain pocked with bullet and shell marks. A few of the buildings have been restored to their pre-war condition. But the only new buildings are enormous box-like monstrosities similar to those seen in Moscow. I have long suspected these types of buildings were designed by bureaucrats rather than architects.

At the famous "Neu Wacht" or New Watch, the monument to Germans who died fighting "fascism and militarism," the goose-stepping soldiers who once stood guard on the steps are gone. In their place someone has placed television screens that play rock-n-roll videos.

Here, too, artifice prevails. Government buildings are abandoned because there is no East German government. Signs proclaim that the buildings are closed because of asbestos, but I was told that isn't true.



Now defunct map of East Berlin, showing blank space in all areas west of the wall.

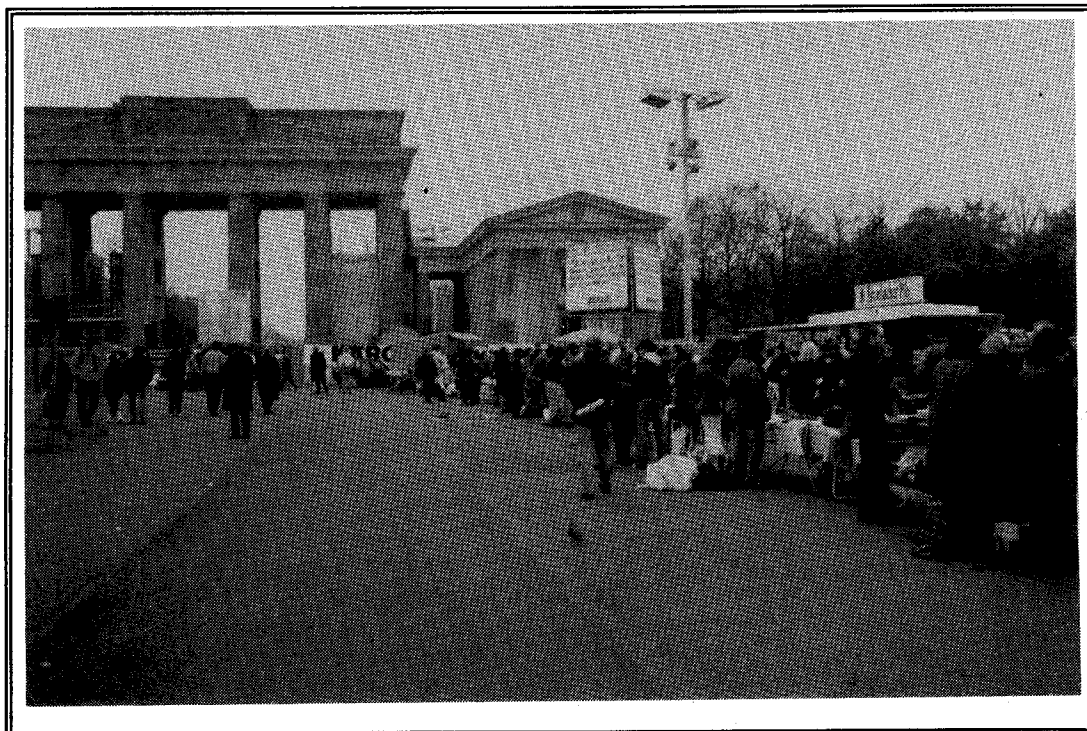
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Surveillance cameras are mounted on lamp posts outside the entrance of abandoned government building, pointing toward the shuttered doors. The wires have been pulled free, rendering the cameras useless.

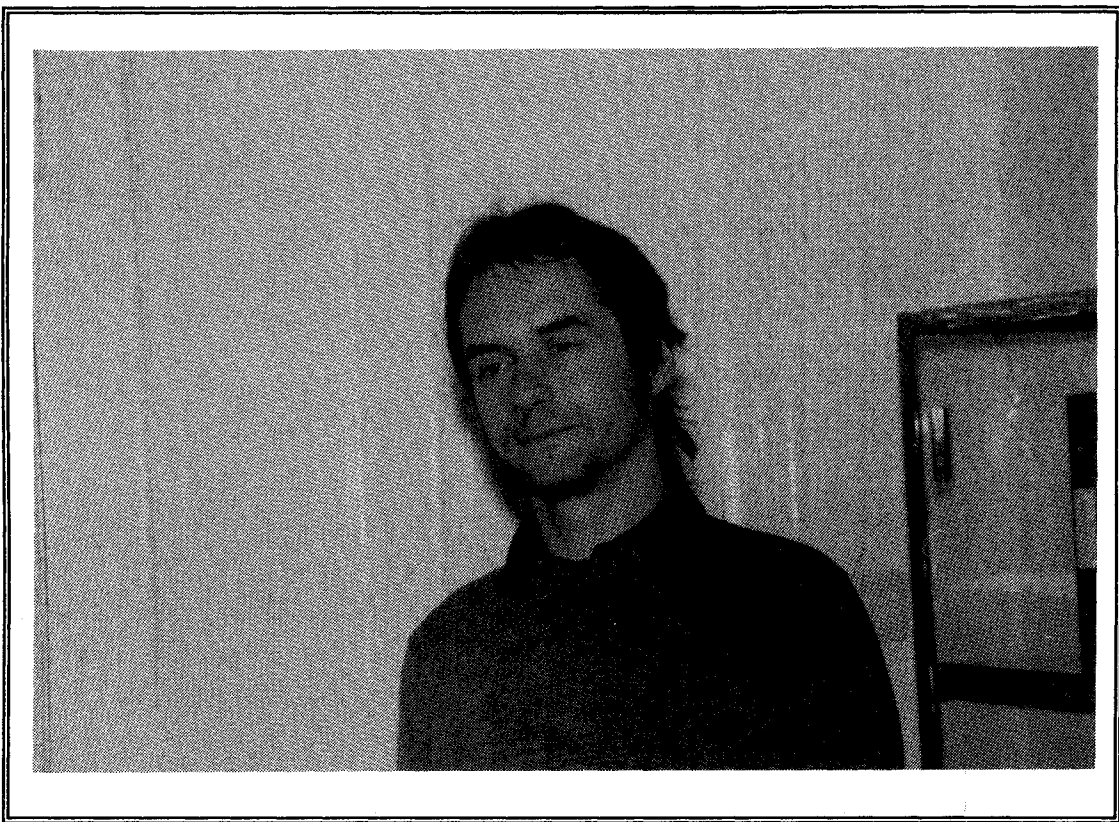
East German restaurants now stay open all day, as in the West. But I went to four different places before I found one that had any food to serve (scrambled eggs). In the main plaza of East Berlin, an American evangelical singing group (The Kelly Family: Ma, Pop and five children) was entertaining a large crowd with gospel tunes. Peeking beneath the back of their portable stage, I discovered that they were lip-synching to a pre-recorded tape. The East Berliners didn't seem to mind. Facades seemed to be a way of life here.

Unification has profound implications for German refugee policy as well. West Germany last year accepted more than 380,000 ethnic Germans from East Europe, and another 340,000 settlers from "East" Germany. In addition, Germany recorded more than 121,000 requests for asylum, the highest in its history according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

These refugees, as well as the 120,000 Turkish "guest workers" who were invited to take the menial jobs in West Berlin in the



Vendors selling history at the Berlin Wall, November 9, 1990.



"There is a nationalistic mood emerging in German, and with it a move to tighten asylum laws," says Rolf Bindemann, director of the Afghanistan Communications and Cultural center in Berlin.

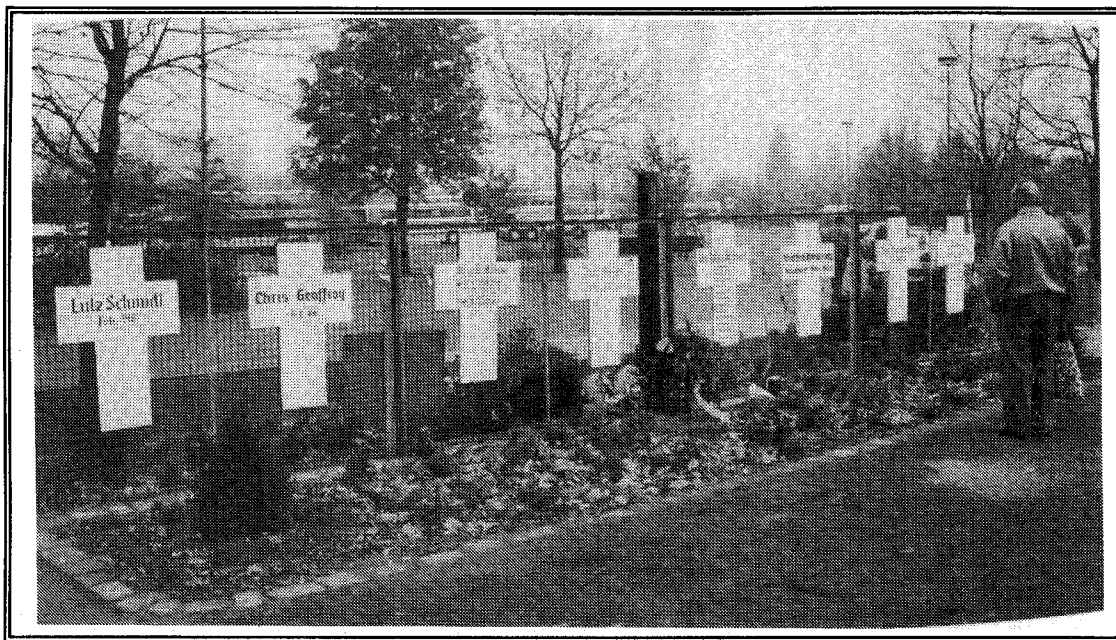
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1970s, are now targets of anti-foreign sentiment.

"The coming down of the wall means funds get channeled to East Germany and the work situation turns worse, because the labor office says refugees can get a job only if no German person is entitled to it," explains Rolf Bindemann, director of the Afghanistan Communications and Cultural Center (Afghanisches Kommunikations und Kulturzentrum) in Berlin.

Whether deserved or not, the East Germans also have a reputation for racism and right-wing politics. To make matters worse, the Turkish quarter, which once was on the outskirts of West Berlin next to the wall, has become prime real estate in the heart of the city since the wall's collapse.

"There is a nationalistic mood emerging in Germany, and with it a move to tighten asylum laws," says Bindemann. "You know the stuff: They breathe our air, occupy our apartments, and take our jobs so we should throw them out."



White crosses mark the site where the Berlin Wall stood one year ago, a tribute to those who died trying to escape.

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Other concerns about unification were voiced during long discussions in smokey cafes talking with scholars from the Free University of Berlin. Most express wariness about political unification. Some predict a German-Russian economic and military alliance. Said one: "The French will come along with us. They always do."

Already, German universities are hosting conferences from which non-German speakers are excluded. One man argued that the U.S. move in the Persian Gulf is an attempt by the U.S. to get a defensive military position vis-a-vis a future Soviet-German alliance. This theory seems a bit far-fetched to me, since it doesn't explain why the U.S. is pulling troops out of Germany and putting them into Saudi Arabia.

Overall, I cannot predict what reunification is going to mean for Germany, for Europe, or for the refugees who live there. But this much seems certain: history is being made in Germany almost as quickly as it is being erased.

Regards,

Carol

* Page 1 photograph purchased from anonymous East German woman. All others taken by C.V. Rose.

Received in Hanover 12/3/90