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The Wall Berlin Can't Quite Demolish

Hagen Koch was a 21-year-old cartographer in the East German secret service, and he could not have been prouder.

Forty years ago this week, he received a major assignment: to use his maps to double-check the work of construction crews building a massive wall that Communist officials said would protect East Berlin, but would in fact block people from fleeing to the West.

Jürgen Litfin was a locksmith and window-glazer, also 21. Less than two weeks after Mr. Koch got his marching orders, Mr. Litfin learned that his brother Günter had become the first person to be shot and killed while trying to cross the new Berlin Wall.

It has been almost 12 years since Germans jubilantly celebrated the reopening between east and west, dancing atop the hated wall and attacking it with sledgehammers.

And as a reunified Berlin prepares on Monday to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the day when East German leaders shocked the world by starting work on the "anti-fascist barrier of protection," Mr. Koch and Mr. Litfin have become improbable allies.

They are championing preservation of the wall at a time when little remains beyond a few crumbling remnants to remind Berliners of an unhappy division that many have since worked hard to heal, and to put behind them.

"Fewer and fewer Berliners ever go to see the wall or care about it," said Mr. Litfin. "People want to forget about it. They want to be rid of it and think that life is beautiful. It's a tragedy."

Germans still routinely talk about the "wall in the mind" to describe the social and cultural differences that continue to divide easterners and westerners. What little remains of the physical wall embodies an era that Germans have yet to resolve for themselves.

For some it represents a part of history that is being lost. For those from the east who once believed in Communism, it is a reminder of dashed hopes. And for those just hoping to get past the old wounds, it is a relief to have it gone.

In an attempt to commemorate the building of the wall, and to recognize the mixed feelings that surround it today, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder will start a two-week trip through eastern Germany on Monday. Flags will fly at half-staff in Berlin and several other states. Memorial services will be held.

But, even so, there is not much to see. Most of the graffiti-covered concrete has been bulldozed, jack-hammered into rubble, sent to museums around the world, hoarded by collectors or sold as souvenirs. "No man's land," the deadly strip between the walls that separated east and west, is all but impossible to recognize -- buried under shopping centers, office buildings and new apartments.

At Checkpoint Charlie, the famous crossover point for foreigners, American real estate developers bulldozed the watchtower last December to make way for more offices and shops.

One section of the wall ended up in China, as decoration in a hotel's beer garden in the city of Dalian. But the hotel scrapped the beer garden, and the wall section has disappeared.

"There is not one single place in Berlin where you can see all the components of the wall at one time -- the rear wall, the electric fences, the observation tower, the guard houses," said Rainer Hildebrandt, director of the Checkpoint Charlie Museum. "It is a sin."

Now, as time has softened old hatreds and most of the wall is a memory, a growing number of Germans worry that too much has been lost.

"When the wall fell, there was a feeling of liberation and people wanted to tear it down as fast as they possibly could," said Maria Nooke, director of a documents center at a section of the wall that has been preserved on Bernauer Strasse. "It is understandable, but now there is an awareness that at least parts of the wall need to be preserved."

To be sure, no one has forgotten the wall. Indeed, it has become a central issue in Berlin's coming municipal elections, in which the successor to East Germany's old Communist Party is pushing to get enough votes to become partners in a coalition government.

But the former Communists, known as the Party of Democratic Socialism, are torn amongst themselves on how to reconcile themselves with the wall. Their media-savvy leaders have repeatedly expressed sorrow at the suffering it caused. But, beholden to old-line members, they have refused demands to apologize for the party's complicity.

The complex and conflicting emotions are evident in the curious campaign waged by Mr. Koch, who helped build the wall, and Mr. Litfin, who lost his brother and was imprisoned twice as a result of it.

East German leaders started building the wall on Aug. 13, 1961, having failed to stop a flood of easterners from fleeing to West Berlin. East Germany could not match West German wages, consumer comforts and freedom.

Mr. Koch had been recruited by the Stasi when he was 19, and he had started out brimming with enthusiasm. He never doubted the East German cause, or that Americans were the enemy. At five, as World War II was ending, he watched as an American soldier took a knife and cut the eyes of out a picture of his father, who was wearing a German uniform.

When orders went out to build the wall, Mr. Koch was ordered to take his maps and go out and double-check the accuracy of all the construction crews.

"It was how the system worked -- you took very young men and put them in important jobs," he recalled. "They didn't know how to say no. And that was the kind of role I came into."

By the 1980's, Mr. Koch had become disillusioned and desperately wanted to get out of the Stasi. Just as the wall was falling, he was put in charge of overseeing historical artifacts. And amid the chaos of East Germany's collapse, he acquired scores of old Stasi documents and more than 1,400 photos that included many the wall from an eastern perspective.

Today, he ekes out a living from writing and lecturing about the wall, preparing television documentaries and collecting royalties from film producers and publishers who use his archives.

"What remains of the wall today is what westerners saw of it, but that was entirely different from the view that easterners had," he said. "People in the east were not allowed to get near the wall. We knew there was a wall, but what did it look like? How high was it? How deep did it go? People didn't know."

Four years ago, Mr. Koch stumbled across one of the last major watchtowers from the Berlin Wall. Standing along the Spree River, it had been one of three main command posts that coordinated the activities of 300 smaller watchtowers.

Though registered as a protected landmark, the tower was -- and still is -- in crumbling disrepair. He has since acquired the rights to the property. Meanwhile, the tower had become surrounded by new condominiums. And the developer of those condominiums, a company based in Munich, has gone to court to revoke its status as a landmark and allow it to be knocked down.

The court fight is still under way. But Mr. Koch gets little sympathy from new residents here.

"I would rather have it gone," said Rimma Lekman, whose apartment overlooks the watchtower. "It is a reminder, naturally. But that memory was of very sad events. People already remember how it was here." Last January, Mr. Koch teamed up with Mr. Litfin, who was desperately trying to salvage some sort of memorial for his brother Günter.

Günter Litfin, a mild-mannered waiter, had been shot and drowned on August 24, 1961, as he tried to swim through a canal that separated East and West Berlin.

He was the first person killed trying to cross the wall, but he remained little known because the second death, of a waiter named Peter Fechter, was captured in dramatic pictures that were published around the world. In the years after his brother's death, Jürgen Litfin said, he faced almost continuous harassment from East German authorities. In 1980, he was imprisoned on charges of aiding a refugee -- he had bought furniture from a person who had tried to cross the wall.

In 1981, the West German government bought Mr. Litfin's freedom and he moved to West Berlin. But he felt ignored and lost in the west as well, unable to find work in his own profession. His hurt only increased in 1996, when construction workers buried over and lost a memorial stone marker to his brother that had been laid near the site of his death.

The stone remained unsought and unfound, lost for more than four years, until another construction worker stumbled upon it. Mr. Litfin joyously announced plans to find a new place for the stone, but he feared his brother would nevertheless be forgotten.

Along came Mr. Koch. Desperate to drum up interest in his beleaguered watchtower, he proposed an alliance. If Mr. Litfin would support his effort, he would dedicate the watchtower to victims of the wall, and to Günter Litfin in particular.

"It doesn't bother me that he worked for the Stasi," Mr. Litfin said.

"Almost everybody worked for the Stasi. What mattered to me was that he cared."

Both men are passionate about the need to preserve what little remains of the wall, and often bitter.

"They just want to be rid of it all," said Mr. Litfin. "I am afraid that this part of the historical documentation of postwar Germany will be lost, and that people will forget what it was really like."

Others are far less sympathetic. Walter Zwick and Rainer Thiel both worked on building the wall during those turbulent weeks in August 1961. Both were convinced that the wall was absolutely necessary to the existence of East Germany, and both were proud to put aside their work at the Academy of Science to pitch in with the construction.

Today, both men know the wall and much of the East German government was a big mistake. But, until invited by a reporter this week, neither had ventured near the wall in the 11 years since it fell.

"I know that people have an interest in preserving it as a memorial, and that there is increasing concern about maintaining what is left," Mr. Thiel said. "I know that people suffered for 28 years. But I do not need the wall to remind me about that."

Mr. Zwick, who bricked up windows of buildings on Bernauer Strasse in order to keep people from jumping over wall, just grimaced and shook his head when asked whether he wished that more of the wall still stood. But standing on Bernauer Strasse again last week, Mr. Zwick clearly did regret being caught on the losing side of history.

"I was convinced that the wall was necessary if the German Democratic Republic was going to survive," he said as he walked along Bernauer Strasse this week. "At the time, I thought the wall would have a limited existence, because the G.D.R. would become stronger and that things would balance out between east and west. Then the wall wouldn't be necessary.

"But that didn't happen," he continued. "Over time, the condition of the G.D.R. did not get better. It got worse."

Not far away, at his sad little watchtower, Mr. Koch was more buoyant. "Come, and I will show a piece of good news," he said, beckoning visitors to the courtyard behind the new condominiums. The new buildings adjoin old apartments that existed before the wall fell. And between the two is small thin slice of the old wall about 10 feet long.

"This was not preserved by the government, but entirely voluntarily by the people who lived here," said Mr. Koch. "This is the proof for me that people who actually lived with the wall do not want to forget it."

By Edmund L. Andrews