

Nov. 9 marks 20th anniversary of fall of Berlin Wall

Written by Chris Lee

It divided a city. A wall that claimed the lives of many as they tried desperately to cross. And after 28 years, let people walk freely back to loved ones.

Monday, Nov. 9 marks the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and when the people of East Berlin crossed freely to the West for the first time since Aug. 13, 1961.

Every day, an estimated half a million people crossed the border between east Berlin and West Berlin. Many of the east Berliners went to the west for work or to shop. This was all before the Communist parties got together in Moscow on Aug. 3, 1961 and by Aug. 12, the decision had been made to close the border.

Construction began early in the morning on Sunday, Aug. 13, 1961. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) made the decision to stop East Berliners escaping from the Soviet-controlled East German state into the West, which was then occupied by the Americans, British and French.

The first wall wasn't the wall many think of when thinking about the Berlin Wall. It in fact was 96 miles of barbed wire fence. The wire proved too easy to scale and in 1962, work started on a second fence that was parallel to the first but up to 100 yards apart. Everything between the two fences was demolished to create an empty space which became known as the "death strip." It was here where many people "met their doom."

The strip was covered with raked gravel, making it easy to see footprints and locate people trying to cross. There were a couple of more phases throughout the years that reinforced and made the "wall" that much more difficult to cross.

The "death strip" was also mined and trip wired. Armed guards were instructed to shoot on site from the wall's 302 watch towers.

It is said nearly 5,000 people made it across the wall during the 28 years it stood. One big moment was when 18-year-old Peter Fetcher was shot while trying to cross along with Helmut Kulbeik in August of 1962. Fetcher laid near the wall and died after calling for help for nearly an hour. Many others were shot trying to cross into the West.

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In the Nov. 19, 1964 edition of the Holyoke Enterprise, a letter from Janet Smythe was printed. This letter was also printed in the Nov. 23, 1989 issue of the Enterprise after the borders had been opened on Nov. 9 of that year.

1964 letter from Germany

Janet (Smythe) Hubp wrote a letter home to her parents, from Schwabisch Hall, Germany where she lived with her husband, Frank who was stationed with the 37th artillery division of the U.S. Army. In her letter she describes a trip she took into Berlin.

The letter read, "Dear family, I have been, I have seen and have returned from the divided city. Quite an experience to say the least, and a place all free people should see. It really makes one realize how precious our freedom is, though even it seems to be slipping.

We left here Monday at 8 a.m. and arrived in Berlin at 11 a.m. the next day by train. Had a few hours of layover in Frankfurt then on a train with berth for overnight trip. We were supposed to be in blackout cars but the fog was so bad one couldn't see anyhow, at the stops in East Germany. In fact along both sides of the track all the way was a high fence, then at the stops the stations were patrolled by Russian and East German soldiers.

The tour of West Berlin showed a city of beauty; most of the new buildings are very modern. The official buildings, palace and many of the old churches are in East Berlin, so actually the sightseeing is rather limited in the West zone.

The wall is unbelievable! I could not imagine what it was or how it could be, but it is UGLY and the difference between the East and the West is like life and death. There are happy faces and much fun in West Berlin, perhaps the circumstances of the wall cause the air of contrast and constant gaiety as I understand it is.

The East people are dressed fairly well, everything is owned by The People's Republic. They

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have apartment houses that house up to 5,000 families. That I could do without! The war damage is still quite evident, and I doubt if they ever plan to rebuild some parts of it.

Our going into East Berlin was a frightening experience. They put you on a bus and under no circumstances are you allowed to leave the bus. Our passports were checked over and over by a Russian soldier and from the tops of the building we could see submachine guns, and soldiers everywhere in full pack. As we were waiting to be processed they were searching cars going and coming, and they all but tear a car apart. It's a very uncomfortable feeling to say the least. The wall itself must be about 12 feet high with barbed wire and broken glass on top.

The East Germans have cleared out all the houses and buildings to within one block of the wall, and these are empty and boarded up for the most part. The wall is painted white and at night huge lights line the whole way through Berlin which is about 33 kilometers or approximately 25 miles of solid wall.

The people looked sad or mad, I was not sure which, but they stared at our bus. Their buses, trains and cars are all old models and not too many are in evidence at that. It was Friday afternoon at 3 o'clock and not many people on the streets. It is difficult to believe there can be such a short distance!

All in all our trip was certainly enlightening, fun and sad, but perhaps this problem will be solved one day soon, but how, I can not now imagine."

After a recent morning of "quizzing" local community members, this reporter found a few people who could recall memories of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Police Chief Phil Biersdorfer doesn't remember exactly what he was doing when the news of the wall coming down broke, but recalled a couple of memories where he felt "connected" to the wall and the situation in Germany.

While taking a year of German in college, his professor had relatives on the East side of Berlin and remembers her saying she was going to get to go and visit them over Christmas. She did

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get the opportunity to go and visit them during the spring semester.

Another memory for Biersdorfer is of a sergeant working in the Sheriff's office in Eagle County who had a great K-9 unit. He was selected as an alternate for the world canine competition in West Germany.

Biersdorfer said while his friend was there, the German police had arranged for him to visit the communist side. He wasn't allowed to carry any identification that would show him as a police officer and was forced to convert some cash into the currency used. After converting the currency there wasn't anything to purchase, according to Biersdorfer. His friend also said it was a pretty sad sight on the East side.

Sheila Gift remembers sitting at home watching the events unfold on her television in 1989. She recalled watching all of the people standing there tearing parts of the wall down and throwing rocks. She also remembers seeing a woman crying as she crossed over to see her brother for the first time in years.

Today, only a part of the wall remains. A section of about .8 miles remains and is known as the East Side Gallery. A restoration was recently conducted to be finished in time for the 20th anniversary.

The weather, vandals and time made the wall somewhat of a depressing sight until the recent restoration.

East and West Germany was reunified on Oct. 3, 1990 nearly a year after the "collapse of the wall."