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Life and "The Wall"

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Life and “The Wall”

By Josh Murphy

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Foreword

I spent four years living in Berlin, Germany and I have always been fascinated by the idea of the Berlin wall. Not the historic significance of the wall – that is more than well documented – but it’s significance on the life and mentality of Berliners and Germans from both sides. My school was located in Potsdam, former East Germany, but my home was located in Mitte, former West Berlin. For four years I travelled to the former East almost daily. Although the country has long since reunified, something about the former East and the former West still feels very different. Because of this, I have always wondered how different it was when the wall was up. I have also always been fascinated and puzzled by the resentment I have heard toward “Ossis” that was widespread in West Berlin. Kids with whom I was friends who had no reason to resent former citizens of East Berlin used the term as a regular insult. Where did this come from? These were the driving questions that initiated and helped me form this project. I set out to learn what life in a Siamese city actually looked like, and how it was possible for two distant worlds to come together again.

Chapter 1: November 9, 1989: What Was and What Could Have Been

On November 9, 1989 the border at the Berlin wall was opened, giving citizens of East Germany the ability to cross the border freely for the first time since August 13, 1961, when construction on the wall began. After decades of living separate lives in separate sociopolitical climates, East and West Berliners were all of a sudden introduced to the possibility that nobody believed was possible. The 9th of November, 1989 is a well-documented and famous day in historical textbooks. However, much of the coverage of November 9 focuses on the positive outcome, without considering the volatility of the situation and the likely motives of those involved. Before examining the periods both before and after the reunification, it is first crucial to understand the confusing, hectic and surreal night of November 9, 1989. Harald Jäger, a former head of command at the Bornholmer Strasse checkpoint, is lauded as a hero for giving the order to allow free passage both in and out of West Berlin for DDR residents on the night of November 9. Analyzing a 2013 interview that Jäger gave in conjunction with the work that East German poet and essayist Uwe Kolbe published about his experiences coming of age in Prenzlauer Berg helps paint a multi-perspectival picture of how the night unfolded. The two, very different, sources give context to the circumstances surrounding the night and insight into the pandemonium and confusion that was present, which could have easily turned into a disaster.

Jäger states on multiple occasions throughout the interview, conducted on September 11, 2013 by Anne Haeming of die tageszeitung, that it was a coincidence he was on duty that night.

He also, however, makes a point of saying that the destination of the events that occurred was not a coincidence. He tells the interviewer that the Bornholmer Strasse checkpoint was “the most well-known checkpoint with the best travel connection”. (Jäger, 2) Beyond this, Jäger describes the area surrounding the checkpoint and specifically the inhabitants of Prenzlauer Berg. He states, “in Prenzlauer Berg lebten damals, wie wir sagten, die meisten ‘feindlichen negativen Kräfte’ der Hauptstadt.” (Jäger, 2) This translates to Jäger saying that the neighborhood surrounding the Bornholmer Strasse checkpoint, Prenzlauer Berg, was home to the highest concentration of “inimical negative forces” against the capital. Interestingly, Jäger put the term “feindlichen negative Kräfte” in inverted commas during the interview, highlighting that this was the jargon used by the Socialist Unity Party (SED) to describe the inhabitants of Prenzlauer Berg. He then goes on to contextualize why the people of Prenzlauer Berg were referred to by the SED as negative forces. The inhabitants of the neighborhood were described as non-voters, people who had applied to exit the DDR, environmentalists and overall rebellious people toward the DDR government. Jäger believes that the rebellious nature of the people who lived in Prenzlauer Berg was pivotal to the events that took place on November 9.

The poet Uwe Kolbe grew up in Prenzlauer Berg and was 32 when the wall came down. Kolbe wrote a poem, “Auf ein paar alte Bekannte”, which details the time of a rebellious minded generation of mid-twenties year olds, to whom he belonged as well, living in Prenzlauer Berg. The poem describes the collective rebellious nature of the group living in Prenzlauer Berg. Firstly, the year that the poem was dated, 1979, is notable because the scenario in the poem takes place 10 years before the wall came down. With this in mind, the roots of dissent were present in Prenzlauer Berg well before the fall of the wall, and were probably something Jäger had been

observing at his checkpoint post for years or even decades. The poem begins with a rebellious tone, saying “we are in our mid-twenties, we are many and we are astute. We have no questions.” [Wir sind um Mitte Zwanzig, sind viele und denken/ scharf./ Wir haben keine Fragen] (Kolbe, 30) With this opening line, the poem establishes a powerful “we” of young people, presumably in Prenzlauer Berg and beyond, who know firmly what to consider and are like-minded revolutionary thinkers collectively dissatisfied with their living circumstances. By stating, “we have no questions” the poem is insinuating that the group it is describing, no longer had questions for government or the ruling class because they had already assessed the group and come to their own conclusions. Every day, the willingness to take on “the fight” was growing within the ranks, the poem states (Kolbe, 30). The poem further proves Jäger’s point about counterculture and Prenzlauer Berg’s rebellious nature when referencing that the group is understood well by Frank Zappa, who is ‘crazy like they want to be’. Zappa was a Rock n’ Roll artist in America who was particularly famous for how he used his music to speak out against the injustices of the social and political system in which he lived. Prenzlauer Berg was a hotbed for rebels during at least the latter half of the DDR reign so it is no coincidence, as Jäger pointed out, that the barrier was first pressured and then lifted in Prenzlauer Berg.

Uwe Kolbe’s writing following the fall of the wall details his own childhood, his fascinating experience on November 9, 1989 and his personal attempt to reconcile himself with the fall of the wall. As previously described, Kolbe was a controversial writer living in East Berlin, yet he was granted a travel visa. In the fall of 1989, he was invited to be a guest lecturer at the University of Texas in Austin. After living in Prenzlauer Berg for almost 30 years, Kolbe was forced to watch the revolutionary first opening of the wall on a television screen in Austin Texas. Happening to be situated in Texas around the time of those uprisings and changes in

central Europe during that time, Kolbe initially enjoyed his role there as the “Deuter der mitteleuropäischen Sterne”, or, “interpreter of the middle-European stars” (Kolbe 34). However, after seeing the wall fall from afar on November 9, he no longer saw being in Texas, thousands of miles from the action, as an advantage. He writes, “first and foremost, I felt cheated out of the biggest celebration of my life.” [Ich fühlte mich zuallererst um *das* Fest meines Lebens betrogen] (Kolbe, 35) Kolbe describes that the situation was particularly surreal for him, because he grew up “a few steps away from the one-sided, unconquerable Bornholmer bridge”. (Kolbe, 35) Seeing people from both sides of the wall hugging and rejoicing at the very location he grew up, prompted tears, joy and shock from Kolbe. He states, “‘Wahnsinn’ war fast alles, was ich tagelang meinen neuen Freunden erwidern konnte“, or, „Crazy‘ was the only thing I could manage to say to my new friends all day”(35), showing that the rush of emotions that day was too much for him to fully process.

In a separate text, written in 1990, titled *Bornholmer Brücke* Kolbe discusses the experience growing up directly next to the Bornholmer bridge checkpoint. In his autobiographically grounded prose piece, Kolbe addresses the particular experience as a young boy playing soccer with his friends next to the S-Bahn station by the checkpoint, using a part of the wall (presumably as a goal). The text states about this ordinary looking stretch of the wall, “I liked it. The kid (in me) found it pretty. The fact that someone could hop over the wall never crossed my mind”. [Ich mochte sie. Das Kind fand sie schön. Dass man sie etwa überqueren könnte, gehörte nicht dazu.] (Kolbe, 43) The reality that Kolbe grew up in was, if the ball was kicked over the wall it was gone forever. Whoever kicked it over had the duty of getting a new ball, because they would never see the old one again. Kolbe suggests with this experience the implicit cooperation with authority that all DDR inhabitants were expected to have. The text then

switches to the perspective of an adult looking back on these childhood memories, stating, “Der Erwachsene schüttelt den Kopf. Die Ansichten der Brücke haben sich anders erhalten.” (43) Kolbe, with other grown-ups, shakes his head in wonder and disgust, as his opinions of the wall that he experienced as a child changed drastically. These feelings are then contextualized stating what translates to, “maybe it was the aesthetic of an American Jet, when the landing lights illuminated the bridge before landing on a different planet... it was definitely the many S-Bahn trains heading direction North, under the bridge, it was the few hundred meters of the border area where it was always so eerily quiet. The silence definitely knew which side was not real.” (Kolbe 44) The concept of silence coupled with the expectation that all DDR residents would respect the societal borders they lived within became a consistent theme in Kolbe’s writings.

Kolbe describes the collective silence felt by DDR residents, but he points out that the silence was felt and understood differently for each generation. The silence of Kolbe’s grandparents’ generation was rooted in the shame and grief they felt having lived through the Second World War with all its excess in violence and – unacknowledged – guilt. The silence of his parents’ generation stemmed from the “Armageddon” they experienced in their youth. He describes that his parents’ generation “tumbled from dictatorship to dictatorship, only needing to keep marching, say yes and not engage.” [(Sie waren) von Diktatur zu Diktatur getaumelt, brauchten sich nun nicht zu engagieren, mussten nur wieder marschieren und Ja sagen] (Kolbe, 169) The third type of silence he describes is that of him and his peers. Kolbe describes his generations’ silence as stemming from a feeling of helplessness, and a lack of seeing an alternative. The feelings his generation felt were conflicting, on the one hand they hated taking part in the silence and wanted to break free, yet on the other they felt ashamed for not being more appreciative of the system they lived in. (Kolbe, 170) Reflecting on these contradictory feelings,

Kolbe asks the question, “were we supposed to be thankful for the lack of action from our parents?” (Kolbe, 170) Kolbe’s summary of the different feelings toward collective silence, which differed from generation to generation, helps to explain the social climate that was present in 1989, a generation after Kolbe. As Kolbe states in his text, “the Eastern (German) silence will vanish with us.” [dieses östliche Schweigen... wird mit uns verschwinden] (Kolbe, 170) After decades and generations of systematic silence, the willingness to comply and “say yes”, as his parents’ generation did, was phased out and was replaced by a hunger for freedom. This feeling culminated in 1989 when many DDR residents, quite literally, found their voice and staged mass protests before collectively chanting and eventually walking across the border for the first time on November 9.

After reading Kolbe’s account of the longtime silence that generations within the DDR practiced for many years, it is easier to conceptualize the frenzy that occurred on the night of November 9, 1989. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Harald Jäger’s 2013 interview is the confusion and disconnect within the SED that he describes took place that night. The announcement that declared the wall open, created mass confusion and excitement, and led Jäger to act the way he did later in the night was made by Gunter Schabowski during a press conference on the night of November 9. Invoking fate, Jäger claims he never would have seen the announcement and subsequently acted had it not been for the fact that he was hungry and happened to see the press conference while waiting in line for a sandwich. (Jäger, 2) Jäger details how, after hearing Schabowski say “this will take effect immediately”, he found a group of his colleagues and asked what Schabowski was talking about. “Die wussten gar nicht, was ich meine” (Jäger, 2), his colleagues had no idea what he was talking about, because he had seen the press conference and they had not. There had been no official direction or mention given to the

border guards about allowing citizens free passage through the checkpoints prior to Schabowski's press conference. After talking with his colleagues, Jäger immediately called his "Oberst", or colonel, and asked for guidance. "if people come, send them back" the Oberst responded, and hung up. The confusion created by Schabowski's press conference statement extended to the DDR citizens gathering in numbers outside of the Bornholmer Strasse checkpoint as well. Jäger notes that people were asking him and his colleagues if they had seen Schabowski's press conference and if it meant people were allowed to leave. (Jäger, 2) The confusion and lack of response from the border police created an environment that began to get hostile and threatened to escalate into violence. Jäger claims that by 10 o'clock pm, there were hundreds of people marching toward the border in groups chanting "we want to leave".(Jäger, 3) As Uwe Kolbe alluded to in his writings, the people finally abandoned the "Eastern silence" and found and claimed their voice.

The press conference that Schabowski delivered on the night of November 9, 1989 tells the story of an almost comical mistake on Schabowski's part with immense historical consequences. This also gives significant context to the mass confusion and hysteria that Jäger describes. In a 2011 interview, the last leader of the German Democratic Republic, Egon Krenz, gives an explanation of how such confusion set in on November 9, and just how volatile the situation was. In Alexanderplatz on November 4, 1989 a group of DDR citizens totaling between 500,000 and 1 million, staged the largest non-state organized protest in the history of the DDR advocating for immediate democracy. The people protesting held signs such as "krenzenlose Demokratie", a play on words calling for both the removal of borders and of the Communist party leader Egon Krenz. (Alex Rally video) The people were particularly focused on the DDR government lifting or easing travel restrictions, allowing citizens free passage in and out of the

DDR. In the 2011 interview, Krenz explains that he was handed a packet by the “Regierungschef”, or head of government, that contained the “Reise Verordnung” or an administrative order pertaining to travel. (Krenz interview, 1) The administrative order was created as a reaction to the growing unrest of the DDR public. Furthermore, Krenz highlights how fragile the situation with the public was by sharing a short conversation he held with the cultural minister on November 9 regarding the administrative order. The cultural minister told Krenz that the order was branded “zeitweilig”, or temporary, which made him uneasy. (Krenz interview, 2) The minister pointed out to Krenz that the government would be far better served to cross out “temporary” because, if the word remained, the DDR citizens would panic and fear that the order could be immediately reversed in the coming days. (Krenz interview, 2)

After a late afternoon meeting of high-ranking DDR officials concluded on November 9, the decision was made that the government speaker, Schabowski, was permitted to immediately inform the public of the administrative order. However, Krenz points out that the document also stated very clearly that the order would not take effect until November 10, because preparations still had to be put in place and orders such as how to specifically deal with residents crossing the border had yet to be handed out to officials like Jäger. (Krenz interview, 2) According to Krenz, “all Schabowski had to do was say that the order would not take effect until tomorrow, (November 10) nothing more and nothing less.” (Krenz Interview, 3) With this in mind, the confusion that occurred on November 9 was due to the fact that Schabowski read over an integral part of the administrative order, and then further improvised and exclaimed the border would take effect “immediately”. Krenz states that this mishap on Schabowski’s part landed the DDR government in a “very very complicated situation” that night. Krenz emphasizes that the situation was particularly volatile because the borders, and guards at the borders, had no

forewarning of this order, as Jäger also described. With the heightened emotions and animosity between the East and West in the fall of 1989, Krenz adds that a stampede situation could have easily arisen, which would have been “disastrous” for both East and West Berlin. (Krenz Interview, 4) In other words: the revolutionary night of November 9, 1989 took place by complete accident, due to an improvised and incorrect answer during a live press conference. It is impossible to know how the night would have unfolded had Jäger not made the decision to open the border, but it is clear that there was a real fear of a violent outbreak.

After decades of following strict orders and protocols, Jäger was left helpless by his superiors in a time of clear and present danger. As angry DDR citizens gathered outside of the border checkpoint, Jäger once more called his supervisors seeking direction. Instead of telling him what to do, his superior officer questioned whether he was too scared to handle the situation, and hung up. This particular comment, Jäger states, opened his eyes to how “rash and unprepared the state and military leadership (of the DDR) was” [kopflös und unvorbereitet unser ganzer Staat und die militärische Führung war] (Jäger, 3). Before he could collect his feelings about the conversation, his superiors called him back and instructed him to “let the loudest group of protestors outside the checkpoint go to the West, but with a stamp half on the photograph to signify that they would not be allowed to come back in. But they were not allowed to know this.” (Jäger, 3) Proving the disconnect and panic within the hierarchy that Schabowski’s press conference created, Jäger says that he still does not know who gave the order to secretly stamp the passports and restrict reentry of those who the SED referred to as “troublemakers”. Jäger says he did not realize just how much of injustice the order to secretly stamp passports barring re-entry was until an hour after the order was given. He only realized how unfair his orders were when a young couple tried to cross back from the West to the East, only the man had the stamp

on his photograph barring entry and the wife did not. In that moment, Jäger realized that these people were not enemies of the state and did not provoke the government, and that the order to deny re-entry to people he had let cross over earlier was inhumane and would have to have been decided in the ministry, not as a reaction by one of his superiors. (Jäger, 3) “After the situation with the couple, I immediately gave the order: let everyone come back in. Period.”, Jäger recalls. (Jäger, 4)

This is a fitting time to note that the interview transcript is titled, “Ich habe nur das Menschliche getan”, or “I just did the humane thing”, and to examine the validity of Jäger’s claims. In the interview, Jäger states, “My job was to keep the border secure (safe) which I did in good conscience for 28 years... and that is all I wanted to do in that moment as well.” (Jäger, 3) [Mein Job war es, die Grenze zu sichern. Das habe ich 28 Jahren guten Gewissen getan.... Das wollte ich damals ehrlichen Herzens] Harald Jäger worked as a border officer for 28 years, protecting the border with lethal force and not allowing anyone to leave without the correct paperwork. He had orders to shoot anyone who tried to cross the border illegally. With this in mind, it is difficult to believe that Jäger had a humane epiphany on November 9, 1989 which lead him to open the wall. In light of the press conference, the public tension and the clear hierarchical disconnect, it is more believable that Jäger acted in a last-ditch effort to prevent what seemed to be guaranteed violence. Before officially opening the border, Jäger called his boss one last time pleading for direction, and was informed that he was already told what to do, before the line went dead. Jäger said that in that moment, he realized there was only one option, and that “for the first time I (he) did not care.” (Jäger, 4) Jäger claims that the experience he went through on November 9, 1989 exposed him to the injustices the DDR practiced and lead him to realize that no regulations, guidance or protocol prepared him to deal with the events of the night.

Despite his claims that he had an eye-opening experience on November 9, Jäger's answers to questions later in the interview complicate if not contradict this view. When asked by the interviewer when he first visited the West, he answers by saying "not until the 5th or 6th of January, I was not allowed to go before that." (Jäger, 5) [Am 6. Oder 7. Januar... ich durfte nicht früher] Keeping in mind that Jäger defied orders to open the border for all East German citizens on November 9, why did he feel the need to stay in the East until he was officially "allowed"? When asked by the interviewer if he celebrated with the citizens on November 9, he answers "yes we could have joined the loud celebrations- but we were on duty". (Jäger, 5) [Ja, wir hätten rauschende Feste feiern können- aber wir waren ja im Dienst] This answer, in combination with his reasoning for not visiting the West until January, make it difficult to believe that Jäger lost faith in the DDR and SED on November 9, 1989. It is more plausible that Jäger primarily wanted to prevent sure violence.

An interesting aspect of Jäger's interview is his description of people's reactions in the immediate aftermath of the border opening. Jäger describes the people who crossed the border the night of November 9 more as tourists than revolutionaries. He states, "Die meisten haben sich kurz den Ku'damm angeschaut" (Jäger, 3) or, most of the people crossed over, got a quick glimpse of Ku'damm and returned to the east. Jäger notes with this observation that the overwhelming majority of people were not hellbent on escaping the DDR, but instead were focused on experiencing the consumerism and shopping that the West offered. Ku'damm is the traditionally luxurious central shopping strip in West Berlin. Jäger's assumption that East Berliners flocked immediately to Ku'damm suggests not political dissatisfaction with the DDR but minor materialistic motives drove people to cross the border. Jäger goes on to explain that from November 9, 1989 (Thursday) through the weekend, more than 400,000 DDR inhabitants

could have crossed over from the East to the West, and very few of them crossed over with luggage. (Jäger, 3) The vast majority of people did not want to flee the DDR, according to Jäger's view, they just wanted the freedom to experience the capitalist ideals, such as shopping, that the West offered.

On a more personal level, Jäger had an interesting interaction in the immediate aftermath of opening the border. Having lived his entire life based on strict discipline and censorship, it was logical of him to assume that he would be punished for his actions. As he describes it, he was not sure how he was able to walk the 80 meters to the office, his knees were buckling and sweat was pouring down his back. (Jäger, 4) After he got to the office and found the courage to tell his boss what he had done, the reaction he received shocked him. His boss turned to him and said, in a very non-military manner, "It's all good, my boy" [Ist gut mein Junge], which Jäger describes as the tone a father would use speaking to their son. In this moment, Jäger notes he had realized that he had done the right thing and that he had acted exactly how his superiors were hoping he would act. Jäger frames this interaction as his Oberst congratulating him on making the humane decision to open the gate for the people, but it is more likely that his superior was congratulating him for preventing mass casualties. In conjunction with Jäger's comments about how he and his colleagues did not celebrate that night because they were on duty, it is clear that the collective feeling and conviction of Jäger and his SED colleagues was that they were still working for the state. Although these answers by Jäger and his Oberst can be read as proving how ready DDR society was to open the border, at every level of job and rank, it is more realistic to believe that the SED and East German Border Police reacted the way they did and made their decisions with damage control in mind.

Examining November 9, 1989 through Jäger's interview and Kolbe's writings is particularly interesting because it also highlights a fascinating story within the story. Uwe Kolbe spent his life dreaming of and hoping for the wall to be officially opened from the East side of Bornholmer Brücke, but he was thousands of miles away in Texas on November 9. Jäger, alternatively, spent the majority of his adult life, until that night, strictly following orders to police DDR inhabitants and ensure that no one crossed illegally, yet he became the person who opened the border. As Kolbe alluded to in *Bornholmer Brücke*, he frequently played soccer with friends directly next the bridge checkpoint where Jäger worked at for 28 years. With this in mind, the lifelong proximity of Kolbe to Jäger coupled with the role reversal on November 9 paints an interesting picture. Uwe Kolbe's texts help detail the feelings of DDR activist residents, operating in a world of fear and silence and getting reprimanded and policed by SED officials such as Jäger. Jäger's interview and story, on the other hand, give insight into what life in the DDR was like working as an SED official. He was the head officer of what he describes to have been the most popular border checkpoint in East Berlin.

Although Jäger and Kolbe offer two quite different perspectives of what life in the DDR was like, it is important to note that both grew up there. What does the division of Germany look like when comparing the view of someone who grew up in the West with that of someone who grew up in the East?

Chapter 2: Life in The Siamese City

Over There and Over There

Understanding what life was like living within a divided Germany requires a comparison between similar individual experiences from both an Eastern and Western perspective. The book, *Drüben und Drüben: Zwei Deutsche Kindheiten* or, “Over There and Over There: Two German Childhoods” offers this unique perspective, written by two authors, Jochen Schmidt and David Wagner. Schmidt, born in 1970, grew up in Buch, the northernmost suburb of Berlin that was located in the DDR, while Wagner, born in 1971, grew up in the West, near the city of Bonn.

While for Kolbe and Jäger the night of November 9, 1989 is linked to dramatic experiences echoing the collective historic significance of this date, David Wagner and Jochen Schmidt, who were 19 and 18 respectively at the time, paint the same night as completely insignificant to the German youth and their popular culture. Their disregard and borderline disrespect toward this historic event in Germany’s recent past suggests two things. Firstly, that the border finally being opened was not due to a dire, life or death situation in the DDR and, secondly, that the night of November 9, 1989 gets more credit than it is due, the real unification was a process and not something that could be fixed overnight.

Ironically, November 9, 1989 marked Jochen Schmidt’s 18th birthday, requiring him to complete 18 months of mandatory military service as a DDR citizen. Schmidt was not yet sure what profession his skill set translated to, and was therefore extremely anxious about his future prospects. With this in mind, he planned on taking the 18 month mandatory service very seriously, with the possibility in his head that he would decide to remain a soldier. Schmidt

describes the day of November 9, his first day in the service, in great detail before explaining that he went to bed early. Toying with the reader, he states “in the night I woke up to the smell of alcohol” (Ost, 184) but, instead of the alcohol having to do with celebration and independence as the reader may expect, Schmidt explains that he was drunk because they had the cold early morning shift. He goes on to describe the rest of his miserable morning cleaning dishes at 5am and preparing breakfast before concluding his story brashly, “someone said ‘the wall is open’ I would have rather had a few more hours of sleep.” (Ost, 185) [jemand sagte, ‘Die Mauer ist auf’. Ein paar Stunden mehr Schlaf wären mir lieber gewesen.] By ending his narrative with this quote, Schmidt makes a point of saying that the wall being opened for the first time on November 9, 1989 did not immediately effect his life or the lives of those around him at all. Schmidt and his colleagues were in the middle of their service, and a border being opened miles away from them did not magically change their lives or relieve them of their duties. Although Schmidt may have longed to live in the West at times during his childhood, he grew up in the East and that was the world he knew. Schmidt suggests that a border being opened did not change his life, but what followed November 9 did.

David Wagner’s parallel passage titled November 9, 1989 echoes Schmidt’s nonchalance. Like with Schmidt, this passage is both Wagner’s shortest and last passage of his narrative. The narrative persona in Wagner’s storyline generally is one of a naïve, materialistic boy, so his remembrance of November 9, 1989 is accordingly blunt. Wagner recounts that, “The 9th of November 1989 was a Thursday, and in the discotheque... every Thursday was Independence Day.” (West, 1480 [Der 9. November 1989 war ein Donnerstag. Und in der Diskothek.... War jeder Donnerstag Independence-Tag] Comparing the Independence Day of an entire population with a Thursday night at the club is of course provocative, and it is supposed to prove Wagner’s

point. Thursday, the 9th of November, 1989 was not a special Thursday for him or for his peers. In fact, they couldn't care less and it was business as usual. Twenty eight years of life and business in a divided country will not simply be reversed by opening a border overnight.

Drüben und Drüben: Zwei Deutsche Kindheiten is formatted in such a way that each author shares his own personal experiences surrounding specific snippets of growing up, such as their memories of his house, garden, school, vacations etc. To understand what life in a divided Germany was like, I read these two parallel accounts as examples and analyzed them in an exemplary way rather than a representative approach grounded in surveys and statistics. As a book co-authored by two accomplished literary writers, *Drüben und Drüben* does what literary and essayistic writings like this can do: to provide a perspective on History through the bottom-up lens of multiple stories.

Jochen Schmidt has published over fifteen books, many of which cover East Germany and growing up in the DDR. After the fall of the wall, Schmidt studied at Humboldt University, initially earning a degree in computer science before earning further degrees in German studies and Romance studies. In 1999, Schmidt won his award, the prominent Berlin Open-mic Literature Prize: in the two decades since, Schmidt has gone on to win four more individual awards. Several of Schmidt's books, like the 2014 novel *Schneckenmühle*, take place in the DDR or a unified Germany and he draws character inspiration from his own life story.

David Wagner has also published over fifteen books, and his debut novel, "Meine Nachtblaue Hose", based on his childhood in the 70's and 80's was his breakthrough. After the novel, Wagner wrote feature articles for the Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung for two years before returning to Berlin as a freelance writer. Wagner has won ten individual prizes and his 2013 bestseller *Leben* won the prestigious Leipzig Book-fair prize that year.

One implicit as well as explicit theme of *Drüben und Drüben* is to confront the problem of bias and stereotypes. Dealing with these issues is a challenging aspect of this paper and all attempts to be as objective as possible when discussing life in a divided Germany was like. The first layer of bias that needs to be addressed emanates from me, the author of this paper. Although I attempt to be as objective as possible, I do recognize that I came into this project with the predetermined understanding that East Germany was a bad place to live and West Germany was a good place to live. Throughout my life I have been taught about the censorship and general lack of freedom that DDR citizens experienced versus the vibrant, prosperous and free West Germany.

Another, trickier to navigate, layer of bias comes in the form of the stereotypes expressed and perpetuated by the authors I am reviewing in this chapter, Jochen Schmidt and David Wagner. Although they each discuss their respective childhoods, the stories are each filled with stereotypes, mostly about the other side. Because of this it is sometimes difficult to determine whether the authors are conscious of the stereotypes and using them intentionally to provoke or ironically, are not. Although the book is relatively objective, both authors paint a picture where the West is a vibrant, technologically advanced place and the DDR as a far more drab, eerie place. This stereotypical juxtaposition is already introduced by the book's cover layout. The front cover consists of two pictures, one on top of another, each depicting one of the two authors as a child. David Wagner, who grew up in the West, is pictured above and Jochen Schmidt, who grew up in the DDR, is pictured below. Wagner's picture is an in-color close-up picture of him and his sister standing in a garden in front of colorful flowers. David Wagner's picture is a black and white zoomed out picture depicting him standing in an orderly twenty-person line that wraps around a building. These pictures were not selected randomly, they were selected to present the

stereotypical image that the West was a place of happiness and color while the East was a place of grayness and standing in line.

Another difficult aspect of comparing Schmidt and Wagner's narratives stems from the fact that they did not grow up in exactly comparable situations. Jochen Schmidt grew up in a city atmosphere whereas David Wagner grew up in a suburb. Due to the layout of the chapters and the fact that each discusses the same childhood topics as the other, it is important to remember that the fundamental difference of life in the city versus life in the suburb is a contributing factor to some of the contrasts the authors outline. A main theme of the book is that people growing up in West Germany had material items in excess, whereas people growing up in East Germany did not and therefore cherished their seemingly inferior objects more. While both authors give ample evidence to back this claim, they also occasionally mislead the reader by insinuating the differences of living in the suburbs versus living in the city are representative of the country's division. A good example of this is the authors' depictions of their respective gardens growing up.

The tone of voice and style that Jochen Schmidt uses to recall his garden creates a negative or unsatisfactory memory. He states, "The garden tools came from our old garden plot in Friedrichshain, of which I only have a blurry memory... the path to get there took you over an S-Bahn bridge, with a little luck you'd stumble into a thick cloud of locomotive fume." (Ost, 64) [Die Gartengeräte stammten noch aus unserem alten Schrebergarten im Friedrichshain, an den ich nur eine verschwommene Erinnerung hatte. Der Weg dorthin hatte über eine S-Bahn Brücke geführt, mit ein bisschen Glück war man in eine dichte Wolke Lokomotivendampf geraten]

Schmidt's first two sentences recalling his garden portray a negative, tedious place. Although he barely remembers the garden, he does recall the path to get to the garden and sarcastically recalls

the risk of being engulfed in locomotive fumes when crossing the bridge to get there. Beyond this quote, the only other reference to that garden in the chapter is that it was torn down by bulldozers to create space for a new apartment block. Schmidt further pushes the narrative of his inferior living conditions and his wishing to have been able to live the life described by Wagner in the same chapter by saying, “My dad always wished for his own garden, actually his own house too. He wanted to at least have control over a small part of his world in this state.” (65, Ost) [Mein Vater wünschte sich immer einen Garten, eigentlich mit Haus. Er wollte in dieser Stadt wenigstens über ein kleines Stück eigener Welt bestimmen.] With these two sentences, Schmidt unfairly insinuates that his living situation was solely due to living in the DDR, and furthers the importance of possession and property in the DDR. The way Schmidt refers to his father’s ‘wish’ for a house and a garden in the context of his overall negative narrative of the DDR makes it seem as though Schmidt’s family could not live in a house with a garden because they lived in the DDR. While the socialist regime in the DDR undoubtedly made it difficult to purchase a house, the reality is that Schmidt and his family lived in a city. It is rare for a family living in any world city to have a free-standing home, let alone their own garden, which Schmidt does not take into account in his narrative.

When comparing Schmidt’s story of his childhood garden to Wagner’s memory, Wagner seems snobby and focused on menial things. He begins his narrative of the garden saying, “The sand box was in the back of the garden, behind the playhouse and out of sight from the terrace.” (West, 54) [Der Sandkasten lag hinten im Garten, hinter dem Spielhaus, von der Terrasse aus nicht zu sehen.] Because Schmidt’s account comes before Wagner’s, Schmidt’s drab and negative memory of his own garden, far from his house and torn down years ago, the reader compares his image to Wagner’s. By beginning the description by saying the garden was so large

that his parents could not keep an eye on him when he was in the sandbox, Wagner continues to reinforce the point that he grew up with excesses and luxuries as compared to Schmidt. Wagner goes on to discuss his play house made of wood, complete with windows and big enough that “we” used to sleep in it sometimes in the summer. (West, 55) Wagner’s memories and description of the garden he enjoyed as a child would have been completely foreign to the experiences and recollections of Jochen Schmidt. Having said this, it is essential to note again that, while memories were influenced by the side of the wall they grew up on, an important reason why the situation would have been so foreign to Schmidt is because he grew up in a city and Wagner grew up in the suburbs. Schmidt grew up in an urban apartment building while Wagner grew up in a suburban home. The authors do not reflect on this significant difference in their narratives.

Although the stories are sometimes exaggerated or romanticized, it is clear throughout the book that Wagner grew up living in excess while Schmidt grew up living modestly. Due to this difference, the children grew up with different values and priorities. In one of his chapters, Schmidt states, “my memory of the things that we did not have was just as strong as my memory of the things we did have.” (Ost, 54) [Meine Erinnerung an Dinge, die wir nicht hatten, ist so intensiv wie die an Dinge, die wir hatten.] This quote furthers the theme of regret in hindsight, that Schmidt often refers to such as his father’s wish for a house with a garden. By highlighting negative memories, Schmidt poisons his own narrative. Listing things he remembers not having as a kid, he says “A bread cutting machine, that was only in the village on vacation.” (Ost, 54) [Eine Brotschneidemaschine, die gab es nur im Urlaub auf dem Dorf.] While Schmidt discusses the things he remembers not having in his kitchen as a kid, Wagner cannot remember all of the overabundance of fancy electronic gadgets his family had in the kitchen. After listing the

different nifty kitchen gadgets his family had, ranging from the fancy microwave to the electronic can-opener, Wagner says “and many other electronic gadgets that were barely or never used ended up in the cellar, the museum of decommissioned gadgets.” (West, 34) [und viele anderen elektrische Geräte, die selten oder nie benutzt wurden, landeten im Keller, im Museum der ausgemusterten Apparate.] Surely, this ‘museum of decommissioned gadgets’ would have looked peculiar to Schmidt, living in awe of the rare gadgets in his surroundings.

The pictures that the two authors paint of their “Kinderzimmer”, childhood rooms, in relation to their comparative economic stability also shows the different standards of “wealthy” or “well-off” that were present in the DDR versus in West Germany. Jochen Schmidt begins his account of his childhood room by stating, „In the mornings, my bed had to be folded up before anyone could get through the narrow room to the window.” (Ost, 9) [Morgens musste erst mein Bett hochgeklappt werden, bevor man im engen Kinderzimmer zum Fenster durchkam] The lack of space to move freely around his room is a defining memory of Schmidt’s childhood room, and evidence of his family’s close living quarters in the DDR. Emphasizing that his family living situation was not unique, Schmidt described the five story, newly constructed building, adjacent to three other identical, newly constructed buildings. He stated that all of the other families in the complex lived in similarly close-quartered living spaces.

In comparison, David Wagner describes his “Kinderzimmer” as a very different scenario. Instead of having to fold his bed to move around the room like Schmidt, Wagner recalls jumping up and down on the soft mattress. „The room was big or at least seemed big to me, and it was filled with every possible thing, that could be found in the childhood room of an elementary-schooler.” (West, 6) [Das Zimmer war groß oder kam mir groß vor, lag voll von allen möglichen Dingen, die im Kinderzimmer eines Grundschülers herumliegen konnte] Unlike Schmidt,

Wagner's room offered him a lot of space to play and move freely. Wagner's memory of his room is vague, yet he still recalls having everything he could possibly have needed. This serves as another example of Wagner describing a childhood of material excess.

The authors' respective feelings they had as children toward their own living situations highlight the differences in values between children growing up in the East versus the West. Although Schmidt describes his living situation as cramped and generic for DDR residents, considering he lived in one of four identical five-story apartment buildings, he still viewed himself as lucky. He states, „we had many things that no one else had, which I was proud of.” (Ost, 30) [Wir hatten viele Dinge, die sonst niemand hatte, darauf war ich stolz] Schmidt viewed his family life and quality of life as superior to that of his friends and everyone else with whom he interacted. While Jochen Schmidt believed his living situation was privileged due to the belongings that “we”, or his family, possessed, Wagner saw himself as privileged due to his gargantuan toy collection. Wagner states, „I had a lot and always wanted more. I never had enough toys... were we that rich? Was I a spoiled kid? Could my parents afford this?.” (West, 11) [Ich hatte viel und wunschte mir immer mehr, Spielzeug hat ich nie Genug..... waren wir so Reich, war ich ein verwohntes Kind? Konnten meine Eltern sich das leisten] Wagner measures his family wealth in his personal belonging count, and he does not even know whether or not his family was rich; he only knows that his parents could afford more toys. Here, Jochen Schmidt's memories of his childhood belongings revolved around “our” or his family's communal belongings. Wagner, on the other hand, scarcely ever refers to his childhood belongings as communal, and instead mostly uses “I”, referring only to himself. Did the importance of personal material belongings differ between children growing up in the East versus those in the West?

Wagner and Schmidt viewed many aspects of life such as what constituted a “good quality of life” differently due to the different environments they experienced when growing up. The fear of nuclear war, something that each boy could have reacted to similarly due to their geographic proximity to one another, evoked entirely different reactions from the two authors. Schmidt describes, “I was always afraid of the moment, when the television program cuts off in the middle of the day, and a news reporter tells us that the Third World War has begun and we only have five minutes to live.” (Ost, 31) [Ich hatte immer Angst vor dem Moment, wenn das Programm einmal mitten am Tag unterbrochen würde und ein Nachrichtensprecher uns mitteilte, dass der Dritte Weltkrieg begonnen habe und uns noch fünf Minuten blieben] The gravity and consistency of these fears are articulated by Schmidt stating that he “always” was in fear of nuclear war. Schmidt was terrified of nuclear war, and he emphasized this even further stating, “if/when the bombs fall, I’m going to swiftly kill myself, that was a definite.” (Ost, 21) [Wenn die Bombe fiel, wuerde ich mich schnell umbringen, das stand fur mich fest] Schmidt’s assurance that he would rather die than try to survive a nuclear fallout speaks to his general lack of hope and his ability to accept the truth. Growing up in the DDR, Schmidt was conditioned to accept some things as fact without questioning another alternative. He believed what he was told by people he deemed to be credible sources, such as the newscasters, so when he heard that the nuclear holocaust would end in sure death for all involved, he did not question this or look for another option.

Comparably, when David Wagner describes his family’s cellar in the west, he speaks about the prospects of a nuclear war in a significantly calmer manner than Schmidt. He notes that his family kept many “Konservendosen” or “Tins for preserving food” in the cellar. Instead of harping on the anxiety and fear he has of the potential nuclear war, he casually states “the

nuclear war awaited, who knows, maybe we'll need to stay in the cellar for months?" (West, 14) [der Atomkrieg wurde ja erwartet, wer weiß, vielleicht mussten wir monatelang im Keller bleiben?] The key difference in how Wagner speaks of the potential war is the hope in his voice. Schmidt associates a potential nuclear war with sure, unavoidable death but Wagner associates it with a potentially lengthy stay in his cellar. The difference in hope and optimism between the two authors is a consistent theme in the book that is highlighted by the nuclear reaction comparison. David Wagner's optimism and insistence that he would survive the nuclear bombs speaks to the freedom of thinking that was instilled in him as a child growing up in West Germany. Wagner was always raised to be curious and open-minded given the inherent freedoms provided by the West, so he was able to reach his own conclusions about various aspects of life. Jochen Schmidt was conditioned by the DDR system to believe many aspects of life without questioning them, while David Wagner was conditioned by his freedom and experiences.

Soccer is a passionate theme in both author's childhood accounts that highlights fascinating similarities and differences in how they respectively experienced the sport. Primarily, Schmidt and Wagner discuss their experience playing pickup soccer with friends. Wagner explains that he and his friends were so addicted to playing soccer, that they would play with a tennis ball during their breaks in school. (West, 84) Schmidt shares very similar experiences playing pickup with friends on the asphalt field by his school. Soccer was so popular among his friends, Schmidt claims, that "if one person started to play, there would be two full teams in no time because more and more people would show up." (Ost, 108) [Fing einer zu spielen an, waren nach kurzer Zeit zwei Mannschaften zusammen, weil immer mehr dazustießen] Given this shared passion for playing soccer and the geographic proximity between the West German and DDR kids, it is fascinating to read how different their experiences of following professional

soccer were. Jochen Schmidt reveals that he was a huge supporter of BFC Dynamo, a team currently playing in the fifth Bundesliga as he adds. Despite West Germany having won the World Cup in 1974, Schmidt explains that he has been taught to praise the Brazilians instead. He says, “Brazilians were extremely unpredictable players due to their natural-born body defects... the best player in the world was Pele and we were all convinced of that.” (Ost, 108) [Brasilianer wurden durch angeborene körperliche Gebrechen unberechenbare Spieler.... Der beste Spieler der Welt war Pele, davon war man überzeugt] In Wagner’s account, he discusses his childhood opinion on the best player in the world almost as if responding to Schmidt. He says, “Was Pele better than Beckenbauer, the big Franz? The Kaiser outshines everyone.” (West, 90) [War Pele besser als Beckenbauer, der Große Franz? Der Kaiser überstrahlte alle] Beyond this, Wagner speaks about teams such as FC Bayern, HSV, FC Barcelona etc. and it is even likely that he had never heard of BFC Dynamo, despite the club being located significantly closer to him than clubs such as FC Barcelona. Schmidt’s lack of reference to West German players compared to David Wagner’s obsession with them is further proof of how distant the DDR felt from West Germany and vice versa. Despite West Germany winning the World Cup in 1974, Schmidt felt no affiliation to the team. He was systematically taught that Brazilians were untouchable as soccer players in an attempt to delegitimize the successes of the West German team. Schmidt and Wagner experienced soccer similarly in social circles, but the soccer that they watch and follow is completely different with the no real overlap other than the equally far away Pele.

While both Schmidt and Wagner shared stereotypes about people on the other side of the wall, they both also described the almost mythical existence of the other side as well. Both Schmidt and Wagner share stories of specific experiences they had or rumors they heard that

contributed to the thought of this unimaginably different other place. Jochen Schmidt recalls how difficult it was to connect a call to the West, stating “Calls to the West were not easy. My mom sat in the living room half of the day and waited next to the telephone for her calls to go through.” (Ost, 32) [Anrufe in den Westen waren nicht leicht, meine Mutter saß den halben Tag im Wohnzimmer, nah beim Telefon, und wartete, dass sie durchgestellt wurde.] By framing his childhood memory of calling the West as an exceedingly difficult and taxing affair, Schmidt reveals, literally, how difficult it was to be in contact with the West. This, and other similar quotes and stories helps the reader to see that Schmidt thought of the other side of the wall as a completely foreign place. During his stories about vacationing in Poland and distant parts of the DDR, Schmidt discusses these locations with significantly more familiarity and lack of shock than when he discusses the geographically proximate West Berlin. Furthering Schmidt’s inability to understand the West were the rumors he heard about everyday life in the West that were completely different from everyday life in the East. One example, due to the fact that the DDR was a socialist land, Schmidt says “in the West they have white price stickers, and the same product doesn’t cost the same in every store. How does that work? You could just ask where it’s the cheapest and get it there?” (Ost, 97) [Im Westen hatten sie weiße Preisaufkleber, und das gleiche Produkt kostete nicht in jeden Laden dasselbe. Wie funktionierte denn das? Man konnte sich doch erkundigen, wo es am billigsten war, und es dort holen?] Due to the fact that Schmidt grew up in a socialist regime, and all of the places he visited were part of the same regime, he simply could not understand anything else. The fact that the same product could cost a different amount in different stores was completely foreign to him, and it contributed to a confused, unsure, mythical vision of the West that he had as a child.

David Wagner, growing up in the West, also shared a lack of understanding of the other side, but his interpretation of the East was far more negative than Schmidt's interpretation of the West. While Schmidt highlighted a lack of understanding of Western practices, Wagner refers to the East as a miserable prison-like land. On two separate occasions in his narrative, Wagner refers to the DDR inhabitants as "eingesperrt" or "jailed" in the DDR without the ability to leave. The most fascinating aspect of these two separate comments is who Wagner cites as influencing and legitimizing them. First, when discussing his first time in the DDR during a school trip, he says "and then we were over there with the jailed inhabitants, as my grandmother says, with the communists." (West, 98) [und dann waren wir drüben, bei den Eingesperrten, wie meine Großmutter sagte, bei den Kommunisten] By explaining that he adopted this opinion from his grandmother, Wagner suggests that the Western stereotyping of the DDR was quite systematic and widely practiced among West German residents and families. Further proving this point, Wagner reveals in a later story that he was taught that DDR inhabitants were jailed during his school lessons and curriculum.

Elaborating on this, Wagner recalls meeting a boy approximately his age on a ski lift in Switzerland, and he could not entirely understand the boy's dialect. When Wagner asked where the boy was from and the boy answered "DDR", Wagner was perplexed and confused. When he asked the boy if he fled the DDR for freedom and the boy responded that he would be returning to Berlin soon, Wagner could not understand why he would return. Recalling his confused thought process at the time, the young Wagner wondered: "How is he allowed to go skiing in Switzerland? The DDR inhabitants are not allowed to leave, they're all locked in, we learned that in school." (West, 130) [Wieso darf er sonst zum Skifahren in der Schweiz? Die Staatsbürger der DDR dürfen doch nicht heraus, sie sind doch alle eingesperrt, so lernten wir in der Schule]

Although he does not elaborate on what else he was taught about the DDR in school, he was clearly given a mostly negative interpretation of the land, considering he could not understand why anyone in their right mind would return there. This suggests that the stereotypes in the West regarding the DDR were among other sources derived from a curriculum to teach children that the DDR was inferior.

Although much of Wagner's opinions about the DDR were taught to him, they were also further expanded by rumors and stories from classmates. In a story similar to Schmidt's inability to understand how products could cost different in different stores, Wagner recalls, "a classmate of mine, who had to go to the DDR to visit relatives during summer break, explained, he ate wild boar a few times in the DDR. Wild boar, he said, tastes fabulous... Did they hunt wild boars there? Was the supply situation over there really that bad?" (West, 35) [Ein Mitschüler, der in Sommerferien zu Verwandten in die DDR fahren musste, erzählte, er habe dort einige Male Wildschwein gegessen. Wildschwein, sagte er, schmeckte fabelhaft... Wurden da Wildschweine gejagt? War die Versorgungslage drüben wirklich so schlecht?] The most fascinating and telling aspect of Wagner's recounting of his classmates secondhand story is that, despite the fact that the classmate said wild boar was marvelous, Wagner still interprets the story as negative and barbaric. Simply because Wagner cannot imagine being allowed to hunt wild boar, a common practice in Western countries such as Italy, he adds this to his reasons that the DDR is inferior and ill-equipped.

The project that Jochen Schmidt and David Wagner agreed to take on for this book was a daunting task. Not only did the authors attempt to grapple with the stereotypes about both themselves and "drüben", but they also wrote this book attempting to recreate their perspectives at the time of the events. As a reader of the book, I personally also found it difficult to

distinguish between the truths claimed by the authors and those things influenced by bias or stereotype. In an attempt to better understand the interactions and stereotypes between East and West Berliners during the time of the wall, I additionally read Peter Schneider's *The Wall Jumper*. It offers a vantage point on the biases and perspectives East and West Berliners had of one another, that offers an additional critical lens on *Drüben und Drüben*.

The Wall Jumper

The Wall Jumper, a book whose genre the German original *Der Mauerspringer* calls Erzählung and whose tone has elements of fiction as well as of reportage, was written in 1982, seven years before the fall of the wall,. In his book, Schneider details the narrator's quest to understand the thought process of people on either side of the wall, and his own personal quest for the truth. Like the title, much of the book revolves around stories of actual wall jumpers, who crossed the border illegally, often times more than once, and their reasons or lack of reasons for doing so. Beyond this, the book examines close relationships between the narrator, whose biographical features are very close to Schneider himself, and 'intelligent dissidents' on either side of the wall. Additionally, the book examines how the state-imposed views of their respective original homelands play a significantly larger role in their general thought process and world view than the author and intelligent dissidents care to admit. Ironically, as Schneider's narrator pursues this quest for the truth and continues to frequently cross the border, he himself begins to question the legitimacy of his upbringing and begins to lose a grip on his own identity. The

experiences and views that Schneider shares in *The Wall Jumper* help to better understand Jochen Schmidt and David Wagner's perspectives and struggles dealing with stereotypes.

Peter Schneider establishes early in his narrative, that West-Berliners see their city as a "Siamese City." (Wall Jumper, 5) The narrator comes to better understand the individual mindsets by travelling further from the city into both East and West Germany. He realizes that, "the further you are from the border, the more casually each half people imagines itself as whole." (Wall Jumper, 7) This striking formulation could help to better understand the slight undertone of arrogance or ignorance that was present in David Wagner's narrative. As previously mentioned, Wagner grew up in a suburban area near Bonn, almost 600 kilometers removed from the wall, while Jochen Schmidt grew up in Buch, the Northernmost district of East Berlin. With Peter Schneider's phrase in mind, one may suggest that the undertone of arrogance in David Wagner's narrative is not a product of the West, rather one of geographical distance from the wall that is shared in the East.

Peter Schneider's narrator acknowledges through his travels that East and West Berlin, both socially and geographically, are two very different places but he also acknowledges that both sides have their advantages. For example, he recounts a story of his former landlord in West Berlin, Gerhard Schalter. Anticipating the imminent arrival of a woman fleeing her husband for him, Schalter made frequent trips to Schonefeld Airport in East Berlin. Although the woman never came, as the frequency of the trips to the airport increased, Schalter's appearance began to change. He made friends in East Berlin, came to the realization that food and alcohol were cheaper there, and began spending increasingly more of his time in East Berlin. Finally, Schalter packed up his things and relocated to East Berlin. The narrator explains Schalter's moving to East Berlin and willfully adhering to a socialist regime as follows: "Schalter came to see the

advantages of the social system in the other part of town.” (Wall Jumper, 26) The anecdote about Schalter helps to further the point made by Jochen Schmidt in his *Drüben und Drüben* narrative: we were not happy with everything, but the system worked and we were happy living in it.

Through his interactions with people on both sides of the wall and through honest self-reflection, the narrator firmly establishes that pre-determination plays a critical role in the thought processes of DDR and West German minds. After sharing one of countless social arguments he had with his highly intelligent DDR-based friend Pommerer, the narrator reveals a crucial realization. He states, “There it is again, the state language, the state grammar, the lesson dutifully learned... the foreign country I come from is called the Federal Republic of Germany and my views, like Pommerer’s, are pre-determined by a half country that over thirty years has acquired an identity in opposition to the other half.” (Wall Jumper, 72) By acknowledging that his views are just as tainted by the West as Pommerer’s are by the East, Schneider gives legitimacy and reasoning as well as a pause for the power and inescapability of mass, systematically perpetuated stereotypes such as those that Wagner and Schmidt refer to consistently in their own narratives as well. Schneider suggests that due to the fact that each half-country formed its identity in opposition to the other half country, a systematic, widespread inability to accept the other side as normal or correct seems almost inevitable for inhabitants on both sides of the wall. In a further conversation with a West Berliner who shares the traditional Western view toward the East, the narrator is asked the question, “Are their really intelligent people over there who stand by their state?” In response, the narrator remarks “Let’s say by their social system- even if they think of themselves as dissidents, they certainly don’t want the Western system.” (Wall Jumper, 77) Schneider’s narrator learned through his travels that the general opinions of each side were significantly tainted and influenced by the identities that the

two half-countries formed in opposition to one another. In other words, dealing with stereotypes or prejudices becomes an almost impossible. The stereotypes and presuppositions that Jochen Schmidt and David Wagner grappled with and put forward were more than that, they were part of their identity and view of the world. Without evidence that a stereotype is wrong, it becomes a reality.

Tying the Two Sources Together

The attempt to remember and recreate the beliefs and thoughts of their younger selves was an impressive and challenging task for Wagner and Schmidt. As with all attempts to retell distant memories, it is likely that some things within their narratives were misremembered or possibly even entirely fabricated. When the challenge of recalling unbiased memories is compounded with the challenge of trying to produce authentic work not influenced by the overbearing stereotypes surrounding the topic, this project becomes difficult. It is important, also, to remember that these accounts represent a specific generation of children growing up in a divided Germany. Namely, the two perspectives in the book describe the feelings of the people born between 1965 and 1975. This book represents the people who grew up through their adolescent lives with a divided Germany being the only thing they knew.

Despite the fact that both authors tell their own stories and accounts of their respective childhoods, the book as a whole does have a driving set of narratives, principles and differences between the East and the West that the authors want to convey. The work reads as a collaborative effort of two exemplary citizens, one from either side of the wall, who are each defending and legitimizing the authenticity of their respective childhoods. While 'druben', or 'the other side',

played a role in both of the authors' lives, it was very much a periphery role for each, surrounded in much intrigue. The authors make a point to say that the other side was not close to an obsession for either of them. The accounts of each author acknowledge the presence and strangeness surrounded with the idea of the other side, but the existence of the other side was a fact of life to them and nothing more.

The book itself was published in 2019 in the context of the thirty year anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The authors each point out, as discussed above, that the day of November 9, 1989 and reunification did not, at first, have profound meaning to either of them. Both authors used this opportunity to shed light on separate experiences about growing up in a divided Germany and both authors agree: ignorance was bliss for them, they grew up where they grew up so they each enjoyed and made the most of their respective childhoods.

Before reading *Drüben und Drüben*, I had an entirely different image of what life in a divided Germany was like. My assumptions were based on movies such as *Goodbye Lenin*, which depict the DDR youth as rebelliously fed up with their quality of life, and depict the DDR elderly as being completely obsessed with their homeland and anti-West. My view of West German citizens' feelings toward DDR residents was shaped by my time living in Germany, namely the general disgust with which some of my German peers would refer to East Germans as "Ossis". After reading Schmidt and Wagner's respective accounts, I now view living in a divided Germany as growing up in a developed country with abnormal circumstances. The reality that *Drüben und Drüben* suggests is, rather, that children who spent their entire childhoods in a divided Germany accepted that it was a strange situation, but did not dwell much on it. After reading *The Wall Jumper*, I have a better understanding of the thought processes of the respective writers. Both Wagner and Schmidt were taught the entirety of their lives, until

November 9, 1989, that the opposing side had inferior living conditions. Both Schmidt and Wagner were raised under the principle that the opposing way of life was wrong, so the prospect of reunification was a negative one for both of them. As Schneider's narrator explains in *The Wall Jumper*, even the most intelligent dissidents on both sides of the wall would never willingly want the opposing system.

Chapter 3: Putting the Puzzle Back Together

The Year of Change

After reading *Drüben und Drüben* and *The Wall Jumper*, I became even more intrigued by this unfathomable reunification period that took place in the aftermath of November 9, 1989. How could two societies, born in opposition to one another with entirely different political systems, simply join back together? How did the people who endured this reunification feel and think about it at the time? The detailed and nuanced perspectives presented by Jochen Schmidt, David Wagner and Peter Schneider have all made it clear that neither side overwhelmingly wanted to reunite, so how did it unfold for people who lived through this period of unexpected change?

Generation '89: Growing up in the Year of Change (Erwachsenwerden im Wendejahr), is a 2015 documentary film that gives great insight into the aforementioned questions. The film is directed by Anke Ertner, who was born in the DDR and was 14 years old when the wall fell. The

documentary is multi-perspectival and allows six of Anke's friends from the DDR to share their personal experiences from the period of reunification. All six characters in the documentary were between fifteen and eighteen in 1989, a strange age to be when something so monumental happens. On the one hand, they all have concrete, real memories from the DDR and an understanding of the system. On the other hand, they were being forced into reunification so they had no choice but to learn the new system. It is important to note that the film only depicts the opinions of DDR citizens and therefore only reflects the young DDR perspective on reunification. The documentary gives all six characters a chance to share their experiences, and the wide range of differing experiences is a testament to the hectic, disorganized sociopolitical nature of the time period. The things that each character echoed in their narrative was that it all happened very fast, and it was initially a very uncomfortable transition. By focusing on three specific characters, Jan Tautenhahn, Silke Jentsch and Anika Mattis, I will examine what it was like for adolescent teens to be forced out of the security of their world and into a new, unfamiliar one. I chose Jan Tautenhahn, Silke Jentsch and Anika Mattis because they represent three entirely different paths and life choices after the wall fell, each of whom had drastically different outlooks on reunification. While *Generation '89* spans over a wider range of time post-1989, my focal point will be the immediate Wendezeit of 1989/1990. I chose this specific time period because it was a period of limbo after the Berlin wall opened and before official reunification in October, 1990. For this brief period of time the future was unpredictable, forcing people, particularly in the DDR, into an anxious, opportunity-filled routine.

Silke Jentsch was sixteen going on seventeen when the wall fell, and her immediate response was to travel as much as possible and see the world. When discussing her mindset at the time, she says all she was thinking about was "diese Freiheit zu leben, die Welt zu sehen, ander

Länder zu erkunden” <To live the freedom, see the world explore other countries> (22:22) She attributes her excitement with the reunification partially to the fact that, despite growing up in the East, her parents were very West-oriented. She says “Ich bin schon von klein an so aufgewachsen, dass meine Eltern sehr westlich orientiert waren, im Gegensatz zu anderen Kindern, durfte ich immer West-Fernsehen gucken.“ <I’ve grown up with parents who were very West-oriented, unlike other kids I was always allowed to watch Western TV> (22:43) Silke, as compared to the other characters in the documentary, was extremely optimistic and hopeful after the wall fell. The reason for this was that she, metaphorically, had one foot in the West her entire life. While the families of other characters presented enjoyed life in the DDR and had no interest in the capitalist system, Silke’s family had been secretly promoting the idea of the West within their household for years. She reveals that her father frequently made trips to the West to visit relatives, and would always bring back things from the West that she had never seen before. Naturally, after years of watching Western television and receiving Western gifts, some part of Silke felt that she belonged in the West. With her increased wonder of the West, Silke began taking long walks by the Brandenburg Gate wondering what it was like on the other side and why she couldn’t go. She then says “Irgendwann habe ich bemerkt, ich kann in diesem Land nicht leben, ist für mich wie ein Käfig irgendwie und das war ganz schlimm am Ende das Gefühl.“ <At some point I realized, I cannot live in this country, its like a cage for me and the feeling got very bad at the end> (24:35) Silke knew before the wall even fell, that she needed to leave.

Ironically, Silke was in the process of fleeing the DDR when the wall was opened. Just days before November 9, 1989, Silke’s parents sat her down and detailed a plan to flee to the West through Prague. The family packed their bags and “wir sind einen Tag, bevor die Mauer

gefallen ist geflüchtet. Wir nahmen den letzten Zug sozusagen.“ <we fled one day before the wall fell, you could say we were on the last train out (of the DDR)> (41:21) She then recalls being crammed into a school sports hall, with many other families fleeing the DDR, and watching the news of the opening of the borders on the small television set. She said, “Alle Menschen waren fassungslos, und es war auch echt ein böses Gefühl... Ich dachte auch zuerst es ist ein Witz... Ich wollte es glauben, aber konnte es nicht, weil ich es mir nicht vorstellen konnte.“ <Everyone was dumbstruck, and we felt really stupid... at first I thought it was a joke... I wanted to believe it but I couldn't because I couldn't imagine it> (42:18) Silke's experience of physically being in the process of fleeing the country in search of freedom when the wall fell is proof of the DDR mindset in the DDR (and in the West) prior to November 9, 1989: they could not imagine reunification. Even in the same week as the massive Alexanderplatz protest and the heightened hostility between protestors and the Government, DDR citizens like Silke's family never thought that the protests would actually lead to change.

Unable to return home due to the fact that her family was already in the process of fleeing the DDR, Silke and her family were caught in physical limbo on top of the metaphorical limbo that engulfed the nation during the reunification period. With nowhere to go, Silke and her family travelled to live with relatives in Hamburg. Upon arrival, the family faced the harsh reality of the sudden change in political system. Silke recalls a family conversation, stating “wir haben jetzt alle nichts mehr... jeder muss arbeiten, wir fangen bei Null an.“ <Now all of us have nothing... everyone has to work, we are starting from scratch> (42:42) Silke was of working age, so she began working at a factory immediately after moving to Hamburg. Silke remembers a situation that took place shortly after starting at the factory: her entire pile of work that she had spent hours on that day came crashing down to the ground. Instead of helping her, all of her

Western coworkers laughed and told “Ossi” jokes. She recalls that the only person to help her clean up was a Turkish woman, because “we were in the same situation”. The story is telling and emblematic of Silke’s initial experience in and of itself, but her comment comparing her to the Turkish woman captures how she felt in the West. Despite being German, Silke felt like a belittled migrant or refugee. She states, “Ich war ein super positiver Jugendlicher als ich in den Westen gegangen bin, und innerhalb eines halben Jahres, war es wirklich so, also ob sie mir ein bisschen mein Positivsein und meinen Glauben genommen haben.“ <I was a super positive teenager when I moved to the West, and within six months it was like they kind of taken some of my positivity and my belief> (43:24) The sad reality is that Silke, who was comparatively positive and unusually West-oriented prior to reunification, felt suddenly illegitimate and alienated in the West. She felt as though people in the West saw her for where she came from, not who she was.

Despite the grueling start to life in an integrated Germany, Silke was able to accomplish her initial goal of travelling all over the world. She explains that for ten years, she spent all of her money on travel and travelled “everywhere”. Beyond just travelling, Silke reveals that she has moved, whether it be cities or apartments, virtually every year since the fall of the DDR. While she attributes some of that constant displacement to her affinity for travelling, she also shares an insightful, honest introspective view in her final interview in the documentary. She says, “Dadurch, dass ich irgendwie einmal alles verloren habe, habe ich so ein bisschen meine Heimat verloren”. <As a consequence of the time I somehow lost everything, I also kind of lost my home> (1:07:39) Silke admits that moving to the West and living in the West has been great for her and has introduced her to much opportunity, but she knows that she lost her ‘Heimat’ in the process. It is interesting that, all these years later and despite wanting to leave the DDR, she still

refers to it as her Heimat. Silke Jentsch always had a metaphorical foot in the West, but when she truly entered the West and the DDR collapsed, part of her was lost with it.

As mentioned before, Silke Jentsch's story is unique because she had always dreamed of living in the West, while the rest of the characters in the documentary had not. Anika Mattis, who was 14 at the time of reunification, shared her initial thoughts, stating, "Es ging mir gut. Ich war ein glückliches Kind und war in einer glücklichen Familie... Ich wollte definitiv nicht in den Westen, das war unser Feindbild, das haben mir nicht meine Eltern einge-redet, ich denke der Grund war die Schule." <Things were good. I was a happy kid in a happy family... I definitely did not want to go to the West, that was our enemy, and my parents did not teach me that, I think that was from school> (18:45) Further elaborating on what scared her about the West, she says that she was taught the West was a place where the people were not supported. She and her classmates were taught about the horrors of the Western system, citing unemployment, a lack of a social welfare network and a general lack of security. It is understandable how the stark differences between capitalism and communism would have scared the students as they grew up in a communist state and had never seen anything else. Presumably, the inverse was likely true for pupils in the West who were systematically taught that the entire 'communist block' is an ideological black and white portrayed as a Gulag. Humans are afraid of the unknown, and Anika reveals that the Western system was incomprehensible to her and, therefore, scary.

Anika describes that the increased chaos and jubilation of the demonstrations in the immediate aftermath of the wall being opened helped her begin to see the injustices of the DDR system. "Da habe ich erst angefangen, Fragen zu stellen und mich zu fragen: Warum war es immer wie alles war? Warum ist es jetzt anders?.... Das hatte ich vorher nicht so empfunden." <That's when I first started to ask myself questions and to ask 'why was everything always how

it was? Why is it different now?' I didn't feel that way beforehand> (20:10) These quotes are in reference to the period of limbo between November 9, 1989 and the eventual official reunification in October of 1990. According to Anika, the most alarming aspect of the demonstrations was how little people were suppressing their emotions and censoring their speech. She would hear people chanting accusations about free speech and would ask herself if people really were not allowed to say these things months ago. While she does admit that she was too young to have been affected by the restrictions on free speech, she does introduce the idea that many DDR citizens were completely unaware of the social and political injustices of their system until the wall was opened and they were able to actually see and live the differences.

Despite being given the ability to cross to the West overnight on November 9, 1989, the rapid change was too much for Anika to immediately accept. Instead of immediately exploring the new available terrain like many others, Anika initially refused. "Ich hatte nicht das Bedürfnis gleich und sofort auf die andere Seite zu gehen. Das war für mich immer noch der Feind. Es war für mich alles zu viel.... Wollte ich einfach nicht." <I didn't feel the need to immediately cross to the other side. To me, they were still the enemy. It was all too much for me, I simply didn't want it> (34:53) Anika's virtual denial of the happenings surrounding reunification in the immediate aftermath of November 9 strikes me as the standard, logical response to such immediate change. Given that Anika was truly happy living in the DDR in combination with the fact that she essentially woke up one morning being told her way of living was wrong, it is entirely understandable that she experienced an information overload. When she arrived in school a week after the wall was opened, all of the pictures of Erich Honecker had been removed, and that was when it finally began to strike Anika that the changes were permanent and real. She did not make her first trip to West Berlin until Christmas time, and her analysis of the

city after the first trip was, “Einfach zu viel von allem” <simply too much of everything> (36:08), citing the excess of lights, sound, smells and people. Anika took comfort in the peace and serenity of her East Berlin suburb, and West Berlin was the complete opposite of that.

On the other hand, being 14 years old when the wall fell gave Anika an advantage compared to her older peers. She was still of schooling age and not yet at the age where she would be expected to work and immediately conform to the new system. “Mit 15, nach der Wende, habe ich die Entscheidung getroffen: ‘Gut, es ist alles anders, das politische System ist anders, ich muss mich hier anders bewegen.’” <At 15, after the wall fell, I made the decision: ,Ok, everything is different. The political system is different, I have to move differently here> (48:58) With the foresight to know that she needed to adapt, Anika was finally able to see the advantages that the new system presented. Namely, she decided at 15 that she would go to University and get an economics degree, “einfach um Chancen zu haben, auf diesem Markt bestehen zu können.” <simply to have a chance of surviving in this market> (49:20) Anika’s fears of the West subsided after she mapped out a plan for herself, but it was very clear to her that if she had to live in this new country, this was the only way to do it. In a way, reunification instilled in her a sense of hunger and desperation to succeed.

In Anika’s final interview, looking back on her past 25 years since the wall fell, she expresses both happiness and sadness toward the reunification. She explains that she is extremely glad to have experienced the reunification in the way she did. She stresses the importance for her, that she was 15 at the time and able to learn some of the tools she needed to survive in the West before having to use them. She comes full circle from her first interview, saying “Und ich habe bestanden. Es geht mir gut” <And I have survived. I am doing well> (1:04:04) Her criticisms and sadness looking back on reunification come from the parts of DDR culture that

were lost and buried forever. She says, “Ich bin nicht froh, dass so vieles verloren gegangen ist“ <I am not happy, that so many things were lost> echoing the sentiments of Silke Jentsch as well. Anika clarifies that she does not miss the political system, but she does miss the culture and the way that people treated one another. Although Anika has survived and thrived in the West, she was born and raised under values of community and helping people, two things that she believes the West lacks.

Five of the six characters interviewed for the documentary expressed overall happiness towards reunification looking back on the last 25 years in the final interview, Jan Tautenhahn did not. Jan is a unique case, in that his controversial opinions regarding the DDR and the social system were prevalent long before the wall fell, but he always believed the system could be saved. Both of Jan’s parents were journalists and supporting members of the socialist party, but they often shared criticisms with how the party operated. Speaking about his parents, he says “Die waren auf jeden Fall von der DDR überzeugt, was aber nicht hieß, dass sie mit allem einverstanden waren... meine Eltern waren schon für diese Perestroika... Man will nicht das System komplett verändern, man will es nur so machen wie es eigentlich vermeintlich richtig funktionieren sollte.“ <My parents were definitely convinced by the DDR but that does not mean, that they agreed with everything... my parents were in favor of the Perestroika, they didn’t want the system to be completely changed, they wanted to make it so that it would supposedly function properly> (12:12) The ‘Perestroika’ that he is referring to was “the policy or practice of restructuring or reforming the economic and political system. First proposed by Leonid Brezhnev in 1979 and actively promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev, perestroika originally referred to increased automation and labor efficiency, but came to entail greater awareness of economic markets and the ending of central planning.” (Oxford dictionary) ‘Perestroika’ was a

way for the DDR to become more modern and efficient, while still maintaining the integrity of the state. Jan goes on to say that he was shocked by the amount of complaining his parents did about the political system behind closed doors at the dinner table. He explains that their endless complaints about inadequacies in the DDR confused him, as it was in direct opposition to what he was being taught in school and through other institutions. Jan's views of the DDR have always been born out of contradiction: he loved the DDR as an idea, but he did not like how it was run. Because his parents truly believed that the system could have been saved, he did as well.

Having grown up believing that actively disobeying the norm was an act of anarchy, Jan was shocked and disappointed when he arrived at school on November 10, 1989 to find only four kids in his class had shown up. "Wenn Leute nicht zur Schule kommen, das ist schon, jedenfalls damals war es ein Akt von Anarchie, eigentlich." <If people don't show up for school, that is, at least was definitely an act of anarchy at that time> (30:15) This eerie emptiness created anxiety for Jan, because everything was unknown and felt wrong. He says, "Kommen die Leute überhaupt wieder? Das wusste ja keine" <Are the people coming back? Nobody knew> (30:30) As the process of reunification was in limbo for a period of time after November 9, Jan began to fear the worst. He believed one of two possible outcomes could have occurred: Firstly, the military retakes the country in a bloodbath siege, or, that this was a government plan to create anarchy and then use it as proof to the people that the DDR system was the only way forward.

In the subsequent months between November 9 and the eventual official reunification one year later in October, Jan and his peers began to see reunification as an opportunity to build a better country from scratch. He formed and joined groups with peers and attended demonstrations meeting other groups discussing how they could implement refined, viable DDR

ideologies into this new country. “Das war eigentlich dann die Zeit die am meisten Hoffnung verbreitet hat, weil es wirklich darum ging mit vielen anderen Gruppen ein neues Land aufzubauen.“ <That was actually the time where the most hope was spread, because it was really about meeting with many other groups to build a new country> (46:27) Jan and his political peers’ hopes were crushed when the CDU won overwhelmingly in both the East and the West during the first official joint election. He attributed the landslide, morale-crushing victory to two things: Primarily, the influence that Western ideologies were having on people in the streets, and secondly, “dass die Leute merken, man kann doch nichts machen, dass es einfacher ist sich wiederzvereinigen.” <that people realized that nothing could be done and it would just be easier to reunite> (53:23) Jan explains that much of the DDR experienced the same dilemma of wanting to have some of the freedom and opportunity that the West offered, but also wanting to keep DDR ideals and build a new country. He claims that the CDU political landslide win flipped the mood in the streets, and demonstrations began to happen against reunification, almost the opposite of what they had been demonstrating for only weeks before. Jan took part in these counter-demonstrations and says, “es wurde, leider, immer mehr ein Kampf gegen die Wiedervereinigung und nicht 47eh rein Kampf für das Land... es gab schon viel Verzweiflung am Schluss“ <it became, unfortunately, increasingly more of a fight against reunification and no longer a fight for the country... it was hugely disappointing in the end> (53:54)

The sad fact of the matter is that Jan Tautenhahn was well-intentioned, motivated and committed to using the limbo period between open borders and official reunification to apply some of the principles of ‘perestroika’, and similar ideologies like glasnost, to create a better place. He was excited, he was organized and he was galvanized, but the overwhelming immediate political force that the West successfully pumped into the former DDR left Jan and

his peers with no chance to accomplish their vision of a fair, hybrid nation. I believe that Jan never forgot intense, shattering disappointment that he felt at the end of the fight for/against reunification and he has always blamed the West. In his final interview, he reveals “Ich habe Jahre lang ewige Problemen gehabt, mich als Deutschen zu bezeichnen, weil es war impliziert, dass man zu dieser Bundesrepublik gehört, und ich habe mich immer dagegen gesträubt dazu zu gehören.“ <I had problems referring to myself as German for years, because it implied that I belonged to this Bundesrepublik, and I always have resisted belonging to that> (1:07:48) Jan explains that he has never really shed these problems, and he understands that he is somehow German, but not fully German. Despite becoming successful, starting a family and leading an outwardly great life, Jan will forever resent the country and system to which he was forced to conform. Much like his parents, Jan was a devoted member of the SED party who saw the flaws in the system but believed, without a doubt, that they could be fixed.

Generation '89 is a unique documentary, both in its style and its content. Although I used the characters' real names, the film intentionally makes zero mention of them. In fact, the characters are not even acknowledged by name on the official movie site. Finding their names took a lot of work for me, and that is intentional aspect of the film. The names are not included because they are not important. The six people interviewed represent and embody a collective chaotic period in history. The film does not have one, collective concluding opinion or thesis, because everyone experienced the *Wendezeit* differently. In fact, the message of the movie is that there is no correct, collective narrative because the radical and sudden changes had profoundly different effects on different people. The *Wendezeit* and reunification created opportunities in many forms for DDR citizens, but it also stripped people of their culture. How one viewed it was a matter of personal perspective.

Simple Stories, Complex Meanings

The documentary examination of individual experiences is helpful in learning about what people actually were forced to endure. It does not, however, capture all of the mood and aura of the time period. Ingo Schulze's *Simple Stories* is a book of literary fiction that gives a sense of the aura of the period through confusing and clever storytelling. Much like *Generation 89*, the novel follows separate individual lives in *Simple Stories*. Unlike *Generation 89*, the different character narratives weave and bleed into one another, delving the reader into the complex maze Schulze has created. The more the reader finds out about each character, the more complex the narratives become. The abundance of details and lack of true clarity subtly propose the question of whether or not there is a cohesive, conclusive story that can be told about the experience of this post-Wende cast of characters.

Simple Stories is comprised of 29 different short stories, many of which are based in the town of Altenburg in Thuringa the aftermath of 1989. Each of the short stories follows a different character or set of characters, organized like an episodic movie, so that the reader re-encounters figures from previous stories or parallel narrative threads. Schulze's engaging and often mysterious style of writing makes the reader feel as though they are a part of each story. Through both the information that Schulze includes in each story and the information that he does not include, he paints an eerie portrait of the Wendezeit and early days of reunification.

The first story of the book, titled "Zeus", sets the stage for the collection. It is told from the perspective of Ernst Meurer's wife, Renate, and focuses on a vacation trip to Italy. Renate explains that she and Ernst were gifted an all-expenses paid twentieth wedding anniversary trip

to various regions of Italy. Based on the semi-legal, yet acceptable, nature of acquiring what Renate believed would be “counterfeit most likely” papers and the trip departure date set for February 16, I think that this story takes place in February of 1990. This is only three months after the Berlin wall border was first opened, and over seven months before the reunification will be ratified, during a time when both states still existed and their future was in the making. These were uneasy and unsure times especially for DDR citizens, and Renate Meurer’s comment that “I was depending on Ernst to not go along with it. The last few months had been hell for him” (3) is the first clue that Ernst worked in some capacity for DDR government. Whether they would have been allowed to cross over into Austria or Italy with their DDR papers is unclear, but they aired on the side of caution and risk alike, and purchased fake, Western ID’s. Highlighting the changing times, Renate constantly reminds the reader that Ernst never would have been okay with this trip if it had been suggested only months before.

Once they arrived in Italy, Renate was shocked by the surreal feeling of similarity within the difference that she experienced. She said, “You have to try and imagine it. Suddenly you’re in Germany with a West German passport. My name was Ursula and Ernst was Bodo, we lived in Straubing, Bavaria... you wake up on the other side of the world and are amazed to find yourself eating and drinking just like at home, putting one foot in front of the other as if this were all perfectly natural.” (5) This quote speaks volumes to Renate’s understanding of the world, as she views Italy as ‘the other side of the world’ despite its geographic proximity.

Zeus is not revealed until the climax of the story, but Renate suggests that he and Ernst recognized one another at the train station in Munich without either of their acknowledging it. She reveals that Zeus is not his real name, it is his cover name, further indicating that Zeus worked in some capacity for ‘the party’, likely as some sort of agent or spy. After being

described by Renate as a short, know-it-all fellow tourist with the group, Zeus suddenly and alarmingly begins scaling a wall barefoot in the snow as the rest of the group awaits the bus being fixed. When Zeus reaches the top, he begins shouting down to the confused, worried group of mostly Italian tourists. Renate describes that Ernst was repeatedly tugging her arm asking her to leave before Ernst hissed, “Nothing’s going to happen to him. That’s Zeus, come on” (8) Renate’s shock of learning that the mountaineer climbing the building was Zeus signifies an almost mythical status that Zeus held in the mind of Ernst. Once the other tourists caught wind of his name, everyone began chanting his name, furthering the mythical nature of his presence.

Zeus begins a tirade against Ernst from the top of the building, and refers to him as “Red Meurer”, indicating that Ernst, too, may have had an operative code name. The nature of Zeus’ irate anger towards Ernst is never fully revealed. All that Renate reveals is that “It had all happened so long ago. And Ernst didn’t like doing it at the time, I am sure of that.” (9) The story then concludes with Zeus climbing down, and Ernst and Renate discussing strawberries and beer, leaving the reader anxious to know what terrible thing Ernst did - to Zeus? Or the other way around? - years ago. That is, however, the brilliance and purpose of the story. The story utilizes the many layers of deceit and need-to-know information to tell the story of the protagonists, but also the history of their time. Schulze’s opening episode presents a hierarchy and at the same time an incompleteness of knowledge: Zeus and Ernst knew for the majority of the story that they were in each other’s’ presence, but Renate did not find out until it appeared that Zeus was about to kill himself. Renate knows the story about why Zeus angrily calls out Ernst, but she does not share with the reader. The reader, frustratingly, does not know the source of the anger, but does know significantly more than the tourists gathered to watch what must have looked like a suicide attempt. This first story of the novel sets the tone and shows that the complex web of

withheld information and intertwined threads from within the DDR did not vanish with the border.

The three main characters of “Zeus”, Ernst, Zeus and Renate, play recurring and central roles in the overall plot of the book. The initial confusion that is presented by the lack of information and forced speculation from “Zeus” is slowly unfolded in subsequent stories in the collection. While the book also revolves around other characters and plot lines, almost every person has some connection to either the Meurer’s or Zeus. The book both begins and ends with the Meurer’s, and the mysteries of Zeus and ‘Red’ are slowly unraveled, although never fully, throughout the collection. The inconclusive ending to “Zeus” leaves the reader frustrated and unfulfilled with respect to the relationship between Ernst and Zeus. The collection only partially answers the questions through fragmented, often anxious, accounts of those related to Ernst and Zeus.

Before either of Ernst or Zeus is re-introduced to the storyline, Schulze shares a story of Martin Meurer, presumed to be the son of Ernst and Renate. The story is told from Martin’s perspective, and is true to its title, “Panic”. After a cascade of bad news and bad luck, presumably in the immediate aftermath of the wall opening, Martin and his wife, Andrea are left with a son to care for and no money. The main emphasis of the story is how quickly everything went from comfortable to panic for Martin and Andrea. In their attempts to make money and stay afloat, Martin convinces Andrea that they did not need a car and could rely on bikes and public transportation. The chapter ends abruptly, and the reader’s focus is shifted to the story of a woman who believes she has run over a badger.

This chapter, titled “Migratory Birds”, seems strange and irrelevant when read the first time. A woman, Dr. Barbara Holitzschek, arrives at the taxidermist office and claims that she has

run over a badger. She claims the badger was still alive after the collision and begs the taxidermist, Lydia, to drive with her to try and save the badger's life. The story is told from Lydia's perspective and she consistently notes how strange Dr. Holitzschek is acting for someone who claims just to have hit a badger. Lydia observes things during the ride to 'the badger' that seem strange to her, such as "Her hand on the gearshift knob was trembling." (39) As they arrive to the scene of the accident, traffic slows and police are at the scene. Lydia assumes it is "another bad accident" but remarks her surprise at "all we see is an ambulance, no tow trucks." (41) Lydia and Dr. Holitzschek do not find the 'badger' and the story ends, leaving the reader feeling perplexed and unconvinced that Dr. Holitzschek hit a badger. The commotion at the crime scene and the fact that no tow trucks were there leaves the reader wondering whether Dr. Holitzschek, in fact, hit a person.

The peculiar story of Dr. Holitzschek's badger hit and run almost fades from the reader's mind until Chapter 10, titled "Smiles". The chapter is told from Martin Meurer's perspective and begins with Martin stating, "It's hard for me to talk about meeting my father, about how it felt at the time." (86) Martin reveals that Ernst "red" Meurer is, in fact, his step-father, despite adopting his last name. His father fled in 1969, and has had merely written contact with Martin and his brother, Pit, ever since. Martin reveals that he 'met' his father in 1993 at a café in Munich. In the subsequent conversation, much is revealed about the Meurers, Martin's biological father Herr Reinhardt, and Reinhardt's reasoning for fleeing. Martin abruptly shares that his wife was killed in a biking accident in 1991, and states, "I wanted Andrea to die, and then it happened." (91) Reinhardt then pushes Martin on the matter, asking him "And the driver? Did they ever..." (90) but Martin quickly shuts down the line of questioning. Although it is never officially revealed, the

presumed hit and run on the side of the road sounds eerily similar to the situation Lydia described when looking for the badger with Dr. Holitzscheck.

This is an example of Schulze using the format of the book and the lack of concrete information to recreate the aura and uncertainty of the time. The reader is forced to piece different clues scattered throughout the book together to form their own conclusions. Schulze never reveals whether or not Dr. Holitzscheck was responsible for the hit and run, but he lays a trail of bread crumbs enabling the reader to confidently make the assumption. Having said this, because there is no official confirmation, the reader can never be one hundred percent sure of the conclusion, confronting the reader to feel a sense of uncertainty that might also underlie the *Wendezeit* and early years of reunification in general. Nothing was certain, and not everything was as it seemed.

Changing subjects in the conversation, Reinhardt begins to reveal more information about Ernst “red” Meurer. He asks Martin, “Were you in the party?... I know Meurer. Red Meurer! That’s what they all called him. The hardest part was forgiving him. I hated that man, but I have forgiven him... when your own children suddenly end up in the hands of a man like that... I didn’t want you all rotting away there.” (91) Although Reinhardt does not reveal exactly what Meurer does/did, the pieces begin to come together. Doubling down on the previous speculation surrounding Ernst, Reinhardt furthers the idea that Meurer had some sort of government or deep “party” involvement. Reinhardt reveals to Martin that he fled the DDR in 1969 because, “I had to start over, begin again from scratch... because back then, when I first came here- That was starting over too.” (90) Although he does not elaborate on why, exactly, he felt the need to start over, he cites that everything in this world has a purpose. “There’s a purpose behind it all, Martin, a purpose behind everything. Even if we can’t see the purpose, or at least not right off... it’s what the years have taught me.” (90) Reinhardt has found his own wisdom over the years. He

challenges Martin's idea that he is lost and stalled in life by ensuring him that everything happens for a reason. His claim that everything has a purpose may help his son come to terms with his desires and hopes, while this claim also resonates with the reader's desire and hope to discover the purpose that may hold all the 'Simple Stories' together. Will we arrive at an answer? The only thing we can do for now is keep following the characters and their stories.

Although Martin initially scoffs at the claims, he seems to finally accept that things happen for a reason in the very last episode of the book, titled "Fish". In the story set in the streets of Stuttgart where his mother lives, Martin finds himself dressed in full scuba gear promoting a fish restaurant in order to earn fast money. He is teamed up with Jenny, another recurring character from the book, and they are sent out into the streets of Stuttgart to convince pedestrians to try the restaurant. Martin and Jenny are enjoying huge success winning over customers when Martin is abruptly sucker-punched in the face. No one rushes to help Martin, except for Jenny. When she asks him what happened, Martin responds "He didn't like the sound of my accent." (278) This literal punch to the face also served as the metaphorical wake-up call that Martin needed. Much like his father fleeing in 1969, Martin finally realized that he had to get a true fresh start, and this was his sign.

As he stands in the middle of the street with Jenny, he announces that he will not be returning to the fish restaurant, not even to get his hard-earned money. He finally sees the positives in a bad situation, and recognizes that he and Jenny have a special connection. When Jenny asks him "Where to now?" he calmly responds, "Anywhere, as far from here as possible." (280) The story and book ends with Jenny and Martin blissfully skipping through the streets of Stuttgart, still in full scuba gear, as they embark on their adventure to 'anywhere'. It is in this moment that Martin finally accepts what his father said, "There's a purpose behind it all."

Although the reader leaves the book uncertain as to what the future holds for Jenny and Martin, a sense of closure is felt because Martin, one of the most consistently miserable characters in the story, finally feels alive.

The collection has 29 stories, but the story that reveals the most is chapter 22, titled “Let Bygones be Bygones”. The story handles Renate and Martin Meurer meeting with a clinical psychiatrist to discuss the deteriorating mental state of Ernst ‘Red’ Meurer’s mental health. Renate, echoing her sentiments in the first chapter of the book, reveals that she knew something “was going to happen.” Although the nature of Ernst’s mental breakdown is never fully described, Renate goes into great detail to explain the set of circumstances that drove Ernst to insanity. She reveals that Ernst was an active member of the party, but he did not work directly for the government. He was a school principal. “He let a teacher go once because a student had written “*Ex oriente Bolshevism*” on his homework notebook. They accused the teacher of knowing about it, because in the same notebook his signature was on an invitation to a recent parent teacher’s meeting. That was in ’78, or thereabouts.” (204) The big reveal is then made, that the teacher Ernst had to let go was, in fact, Zeus. As punishment for his crimes, Zeus was forced to do “three years mining coal. On probation, serving the national economy.” (204) During his time mining coal on probation, Zeus lost an eye and never failed to blame Meurer for what happened to him.

Then, twelve years after the incident and after Zeus, Renate and Ernst went on the infamous Assisi trip, Zeus got his revenge. Renate states, “The newspapers threw mud at him, and Zeus was behind it, I am certain. They rehashed the whole story about Zeus, but as if the party hadn’t even existed, as if Ernst had contrived the whole thing, made the decision on his own.” (205) The subsequent backlash that Ernst received proved too much for him, and not a

single former party member stepped up to help him. Ernst was driven insane by his undying loyalty to the party that did not repay the favor. What is most surprising, however, about this reveal is that neither Ernst nor Zeus were government operatives in any capacity in their lives. The exact origins of their nicknames is never revealed, and the reader feels a sense of shock when the other truth behind their identities is revealed. All previous evidence in the book lead the reader to believe that at least one of them was a spy, probably both. By revealing the true identities of the two as common men who got unlucky, Schulze intentionally forces the reader to question the other conclusions logically drawn from the rest of the book. This feeling of the reader questioning the truth is exactly what Schulze wanted to convey. He truly places the reader into the shoes of the characters and reflects the anxious ambiguity of the time.

“Simple Stories” is a book written in a unique fashion, forcing the reader to be fully engaged throughout in order to understand the complex nature of the multiple storylines. While some of the stories verge on boring or ridiculous, each detail is intentional and important, and many details that seem insignificant at the time take on an entirely new meaning as the story continues to unfold. Schulze does a masterful job of making the reader feel like the characters in each story. The choppy, fragmented nature of the story-telling mimics and captures the secrecy and layers of life in the DDR. It also proves how difficult it was for adults to adapt to the new system thrust upon them. While “Generation 89” focuses on the narratives of children adapting to the radical change presented by reunification, “Simple Stories” examines the effects of change on adults who were well integrated in the system. The stories examine the shadows and open ends of people’s lives in the years after the fall of the wall, and many of the stories are despairing and sad. After reading the book, the reader comes away feeling a lack of clarity that intentionally mimics the feelings of the characters. Former DDR residents who were forced to adapt to this

new way of life operated around the many unknowns of the time. Setting aside the obvious unknowns such as the strains of a new political system and economy, the novel also examines the interpersonal unknown factors. Trusting people at the time was difficult, because people often did not know the truth about one another. The constant questioning of information and people from each character, both internally and externally, captures the eerie, uncertain, anxious nature of the time. Kids had their whole lives in front of them when the wall fell, adults did not. The secrecy and uncertainty about other people was manageable and normal within the structure of the DDR, but it was uncomfortable and unsettling once the system collapsed.

Concluding Thoughts

This project has changed my perspective on how I view and accept history as a whole. The biggest lesson that I have learned is that no history can be responsibly studied through the lens of black and white. In reality, things as complex as history and human interactions can never be viewed simply as good or bad and right or wrong. Heading into this project, I had the idea in my mind that the DDR was a bad place. I believed, based on what I have been taught, that the DDR was the communist enemy on the other side of the Berlin wall. Now, my opinion of the DDR has been drastically changed. Of course, there were aspects of the DDR that I vehemently disagree with, such as the lack of room for free speech and the constant spying and government mistrust, but there were good aspects as well. Through this project I have learned that the DDR was a place that encouraged family togetherness and community togetherness. I do not agree with communism, but I am amazed at the principles and moral code that were instilled in the citizens. Again, nothing is black and white, so not every citizen shared this moral code/had appreciation for the DDR. While I was writing chapter one of the project, I was lucky enough to meet Uwe Kolbe and hear him answer questions about the DDR on a panel. I remember one question and answer above all else: “Do you suffer from Ostalgia?” “No. Absolutely not. Anyone who tells you they suffer from Ostalgia is lying.” That answer both matched up with my previous opinions of the East and was so definitive from such a credible source that I accepted it as fact. However, as I began to delve further into my research and look into the daily lives of people as opposed to just the history of events, I began to see many reasons that people had to miss the past. One person’s experience or opinion cannot responsibly speak for the collective.

Perhaps the most interesting conclusion that I have come to about what life was like in the Siamese city or during the Wendezeit is: There is no conclusive answer as to what people felt

or what people experienced, particularly after November 9, 1989. Everyone experienced things differently. While some personal accounts are similar, every character I studied for this project had a unique and different experience or opinion. This prevented me from making conclusive statements about “life in the DDR” or “life after the wall fell”. At first, this infuriated me and made me feel as though I was doing something wrong or failing to make a strong argument. Slowly, I began to see that the inability to come up with a definitive conclusion is, in itself, the conclusion. Finally, after reading Ingo Schulze’s *Simple Stories*, I was able to fully see that forming a conclusive truth was impossible and would be irresponsible to attempt. I am so grateful that I got the chance to take this project on and learn all that I have. I hope you enjoyed.

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