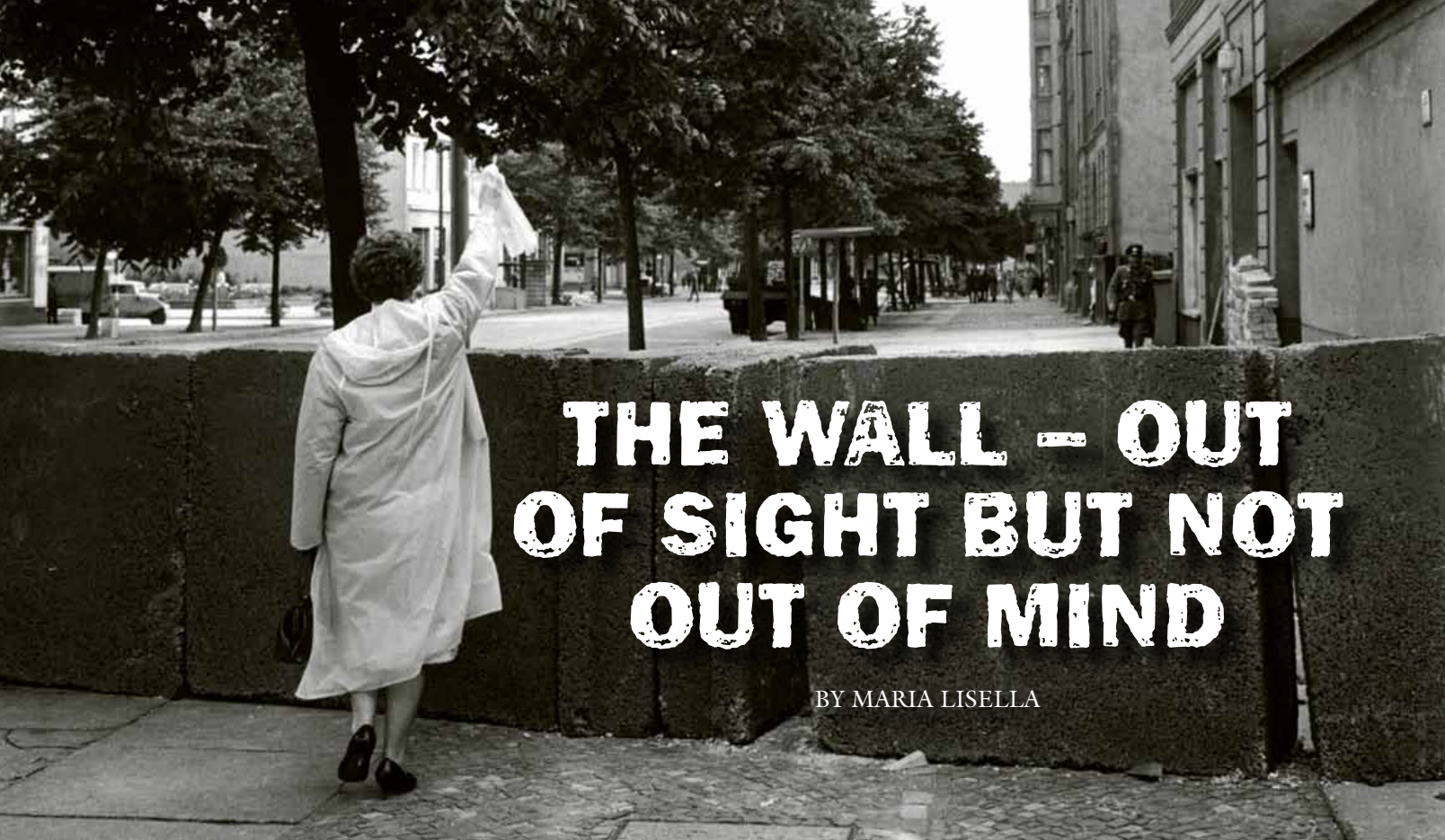




THE WALL – OUT OF SIGHT BUT NOT OUT OF MIND

BY MARIA LISELLA

At twelve feet in height, it divided a city, a nation, and families – forever changing the world they knew. We look back at the Cold War icon on the fiftieth anniversary of its construction.



ALTHOUGH IT IS SOMEWHAT UNCLEAR AS TO WHEN THE FIRST BRICK WAS SET IN PLACE, THE IMPACT OF THE WALL THAT DIVIDED FAMILIES, A CITY, AND A NATION, STILL LIVES TWENTY YEARS AFTER ITS FALL.

TOP PHOTO: AUGUST, 23, 1961: WEST BERLIN WOMAN WAVES TO RELATIVES ACROSS A PROVISIONAL WALL IN EASTERN SECTOR, BRUNNENSTRASSE

You have seen the newscasts, the photographs, watched with horror and delight, heard the stories – some tragic, others courageous, some ordinary and plain – even after its demise, the Berlin Wall is riveting and remains arguably the most compelling icon of the Cold War.

Last year, Germany celebrated the twentieth anniversary since its citizens stormed the gates, destroying much of the Berlin Wall leading to official reunification in 1990. Since then, the city has undergone major redevelopment, shoring up neglected buildings, painting others in bright colors, and just three of the three hundred two watchtowers remain.

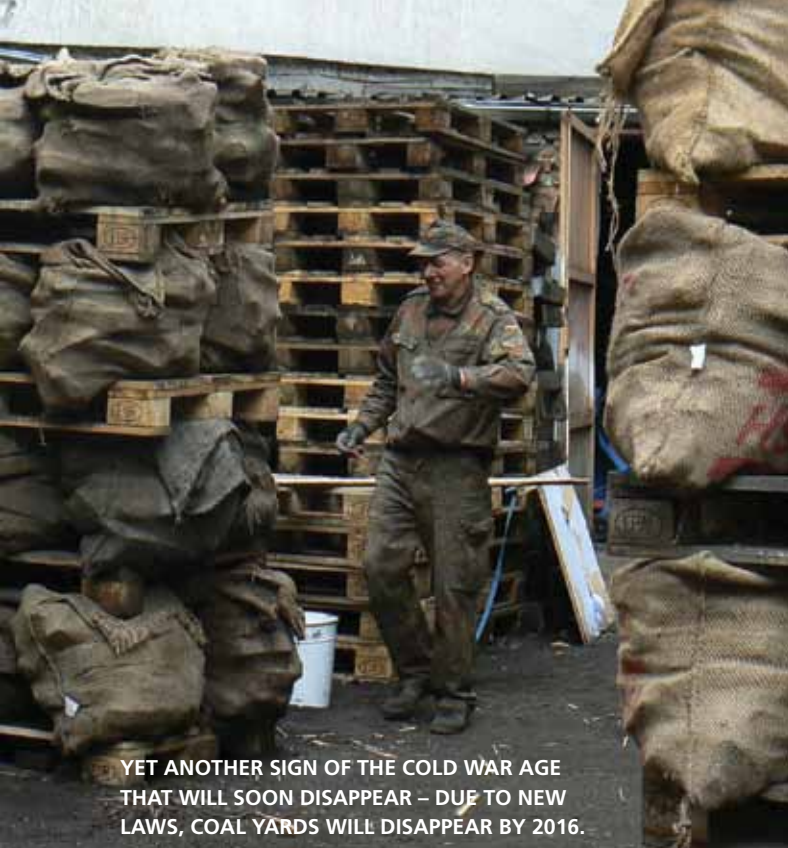
Once standing at eleven and eight-tenths-feet high for sixty-six of its ninety-six-mile border length around West Berlin – little remains of the Wall. The intangible, human elements are, not surprisingly, the most complex chapters not easily blotted out of history.

A series of events will commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Wall's construction although historians are still unclear when or where the first brick was laid – so stealthily did it go up.

Appropriately, commemorations will bear a more somber tone than last year's, says Dorette Auerswald, who is working with Kultur Projekte Berlin, the nonprofit organization coordinating the events. Born in 1967 in East Berlin, "My memories are very emotional of that time; my family was divided between East and West."

Commemorative events will focus on back-stories to the Wall that split Berlin in two – the lives lost, the division of families and neighborhoods. After World War II, the Allied Powers agreed to a joint occupation of Berlin, thus dividing the city into four sectors, but the vision of a wall was inconceivable until the moment it happened.

Top photo Courtesy Landesbildarchiv Berlin/Horst Siegmann.; Bottom left photo unknown.



YET ANOTHER SIGN OF THE COLD WAR AGE THAT WILL SOON DISAPPEAR – DUE TO NEW LAWS, COAL YARDS WILL DISAPPEAR BY 2016.

When Walter Ulbricht, the leader of East Germany's Socialist Unity Party, declared on June 15, 1961, "No one has the intention to build a wall," people continued following their daily routines.

Jürgen Litfin recalls his family spent August 12, 1961, a Saturday, with his mother and brother visiting relatives on the west side of the city. They took the S-Bahn back to Weissensee late that evening. It was not until the next morning that a radio newscast announced the sector border had been completely sealed off during the night. Eleven days later, his brother, Günter would be among the first to defy the wall.

Just after 4:00 p.m. on August 24, 1961, Litfin began his attempt to reach West Berlin by fleeing between the Friedrichstrasse and Lehrter train stations. As he crossed Charité Hospital grounds, he climbed over a wall bordering the bank of the Spree River. Once Litfin dove into Humboldt Harbor, border police opened fire.

Today, Jürgen keeps vigil at one of the remaining watchtowers that bears a memorial to his brother. Developers, he says, tried to destroy the watchtower. "It is as if they want to deny the history of this place, wipe it out," he says. His stalwart position is to guard the tower, the plaque, the memory of his brother, and those like him.

To be sure, there is a tug-of-war between preserving historical symbols and the impulse to start anew. Numerous traces of the Wall are scattered in out-of-the-way places. Cemeteries such as St. Hedwig's and St. Elizabeth's straddle hot points along the border, with exposed bullet holes from World War II as well as the Wall era; shards of glass clumsily embedded on the tops of their walls were last-ditch obstacles to the West.

The Berlin Memorial contains the last piece of Berlin Wall with the preserved grounds behind it on the former border strip, which helps to make Germany's division comprehensible to visitors. At The Window of Remembrance one is face to face with photographs of individual victims who were shot or died in accidents near the Wall; a nearby column lists the names of border soldiers who died while on duty, noting their political exploitation as well.

As early as 1961, people began erecting crosses and commemorative signs at sites where fugitives had been killed or died. Not far from the Memorial site along Bernauer Strasse, what has come to

be known as the Berlin Wall Trail, markers are embedded in the sidewalk commemorating those who died or fled; columns continue to be erected at every site where a person was killed or died while trying to escape.

Estimates vary but about one hundred fifty people were killed or died at the Wall between 1961 and 1989; and at least two hundred fifty-one travelers also died during or after they had gone through checkpoints at the Berlin border crossings. The Visitors Center across from the Nordbahnhof S-Bahn station is a good rest stop and is the starting point for registered groups and visitors to the memorial. (www.berliner-mauer-gedenkstaette.de)

About fourteen thousand people visit the Günter Litfin Memorial, combining a trip to this part of town with a walk along the pedestrian and bicycle path that runs from the memorial along the Spandauer Schifffahrtskanal and across the historic cemetery Invalidenfriedhof to the former border crossing at Invalidenstrasse.

This year, through the end of August, large archival photographs depicting the "Berlin Wall pictures" will be exhibited along thirteen prominent places where the Wall once stood. Featured right in the middle of town the eight-foot high and eleven-foot wide photographs (approximately the size of the wall in some places) document the hours around August 13, 1961.

Peddling through Berlin's neighborhoods, wending your way to Mauerpark, and along Bernauerstrasse is a lot less taxing than walking from place to place. For anyone in good health, Berlin on Bike is highly recommended for individuals and small groups. (www.berlinonbike.de)

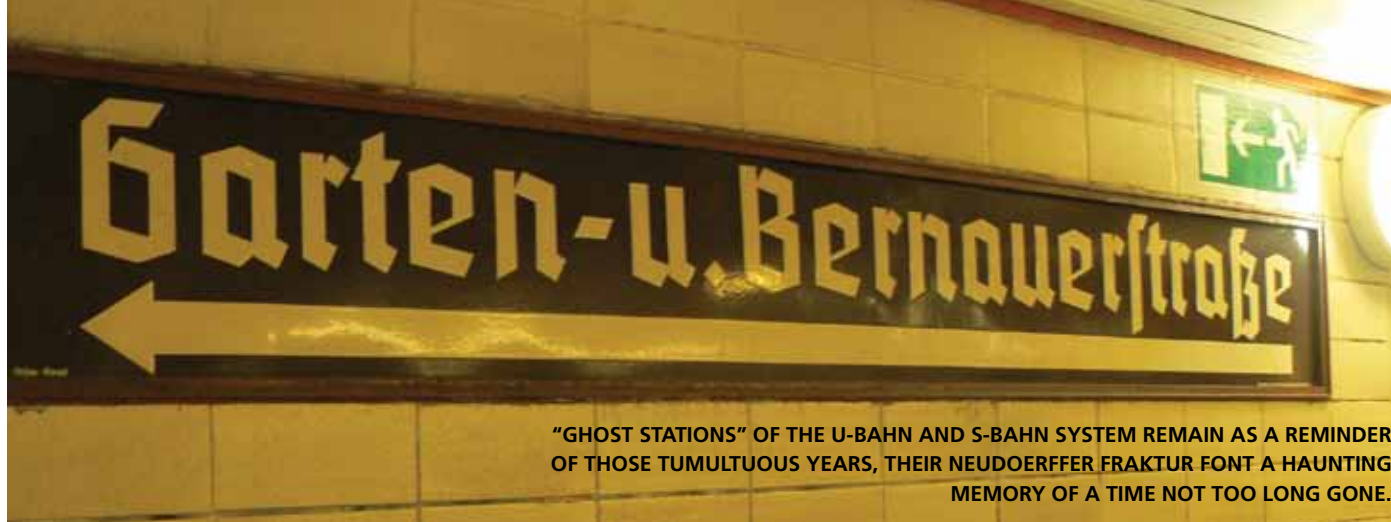
One is hard pressed to trace the outlines of former East Berlin as its blocks of gray flats for instance, are now painted in bright colors. About thirty meters of original wall top the steep slope at Mauerpark (literally wall park) located on the border of Prenzlauer Berg district in the East and Gesundbrunnen district of former West Berlin is the site of the former second "inner wall" (Hinterlandmauer) or death strip that was added in the 70s. Today, the park is a wide swathe of green, used for picnics adding to Berlin's reputation as among the greenest cities in Europe (twenty-seven percent of its land mass consists of parks and woods).

With the help of a cunning guide, one can still visit less-redeveloped corners of the city like Arkunaplatz, with its old-fashioned signs that were not replaced during the division, its ongoing food market on Fridays, antique market on Sundays, a nineteenth-century school, and an authentic Gasthaus at the southwest corner. Not to mention one of the last coal yards in the city. This too, will soon be a thing of the past as all coal stoves are to be removed from Berlin by 2016. When asked what he thought of the new law, the coal miner who was familiar with the housing stock in East Berlin, shrugged, "It will take a long time for them to get rid of them all."

"The Wall really took fifteen years to build," recalls Ekkehard "Ekki" Busch, a musician and Berlin on Bike tour guide. Early barricades were buttressed by wire mesh fencing, anti-vehicle trenches, bunkers, column tracks, contact or signal fences, three hundred two watchtowers and a broad Death Strip that now forms much of Mauerpark, a vantage point to see a panorama of changes in the city and one of the places one can actually see portions of the original Berlin Wall.

"To be sure the loopholes, tunnels, escape hatches would be well guarded, border patrol troops would aim and shoot; but by the time all the holes were cemented, East Berlin had already lost much more than the official report of just six percent of its population – its professors, intellectuals, artists, innovators – would, for the most part, find a way out." Busch's father was among them.

Wolfgang Busch led the way for his family the year before the Wall went up. As a professor at Humboldt University, he was asked to take a loyalty oath, but declined. With that, the thesis he had



"GHOST STATIONS" OF THE U-BAHN AND S-BAHN SYSTEM REMAIN AS A REMINDER OF THOSE TUMULTUOUS YEARS, THEIR NEUDOERFFER FRAKTUR FONT A HAUNTING MEMORY OF A TIME NOT TOO LONG GONE.

submitted disappeared, sealing his suspicion that things were about to take a turn for the worst.

Joining the pool of "border crossers," those who lived in the East and worked in the West, the elder Busch eased his way out by sharing an apartment in the West and moving personal possessions a day at a time. It was not unusual to see a tailor on the U-Bahn with a sewing machine in his lap or a landscaper with his pick and shovel riding the train to the west in the mornings, some never returning.

Today, visitors can tour the U-Bahn and S-Bahn metro network's "Ghost Stations," once deserted platforms and stations where trains did not stop. Ekki recalls, "From the West we would pass through these underground stations that were like time capsules with signs still in the Neudoerffer Fraktur font, and yellowed newspapers and periodicals with 1961's headlines in the kiosks."

Trains slowed down before entering the stations but never stopped. Armed guards from East Germany stood in the dimly-lit platforms and just before entering East Berlin, a loudspeaker announcement was made: "Last station in West Berlin!"

The exhibit "Border Stations and Ghost Stations in Divided Berlin" can be viewed during the hours of operation of the Nordbahnhof S-Bahn station. Berliner Unterwelten conducts tours that visit ghost stations, bunkers, tunnels, and subterranean escapes from East to West Berlin. (www.berliner-unterwelten.de)

Ironically, nearly thirty years later, eight months before the Wall fell, Mikhail Gorbachev announced the Soviet Union would not intervene should "something happen."

Says Sebastian Goersth, "We found... [Gorbachev's statement] shocking but liberalization movements were already taking place all around us – in Poland, Russia, and Hungary."

Looking back, he says, "We thought the Wall was forever, we had no idea how close we were to this dramatic event." He recalls family friends who sent their ten-year-old

daughter on a train headed for Budapest just months before the Wall fell. Her father carefully choreographed their reunion; the family was discovered, and moved to a Displaced Persons Center in Bavaria. "By the time the borders opened, they had lost the title to their home," he recalls.

Goersth, a Forensic Scientist, lives with his American wife and daughter in Friedrichshain, one of Berlin's hot neighborhoods, set on the north banks of River Spree between Alexanderplatz, Ostbahnhof, and Ostkreuz station (former East Berlin), near the East Side Gallery. The Gallery is nearly a mile-long palette of preserved murals painted by one hundred eighteen international artists in 1990. (www.eastsidegallery.com)

At seventeen, Goersth was living with his family in Oranienburg, about forty-five miles outside Berlin. At that time, he was recovering from a severe accident but watched the events of November 9 on television. "I thought, oh my God, I am missing the party of the century." Two nights later, Goersth's family piled into their car, drove to Berlin and stood on line at Invalidenstrasse near Moabit not far from Tiergarten, waiting for approval to make the crossing.

"We were so used to being on lines, it never occurred to us to storm the gate, but that's pretty much what happened – it was as if the border patrol had no back up anymore."

His first vision of West Berlin: "West Berliners clapped and cheered us on; there was a baker giving us all Berliners or jelly donuts – it was my first food directly from West Berlin." Once the family entered Karstadt department store, Goersth recalls his head spinning with color, and an abundance of things he never imagined seeing in one place. "Frankly, my head was overloaded," he says.

Several weeks later, he returned to school and all his friends could talk about were VCRs, films, and fashion. "It was as if a person from the 1960s were suddenly dropped on the earth in 2011." Luckily the family had relatives in the West who guided them

to their new lives in the new Berlin.

Post-Wall babies like Ekki Busch's ten-year-old daughter, identify themselves as Berliners – neither easties nor westies – a Berlin boy or girl, and why wouldn't they? Their frame of reference is a unified Germany with dusty bits and pieces of a wall and the courageous names of those who tried to escape as well as those who stayed behind.

Visits to Mauerpark, to the Memorials, and the Window of Memory will fill in the blanks as well as the oral histories of ordinary people who lived in extraordinary circumstances.

Photo courtesy Maria Lisella

A Visit to Berlin

Getting There:

Air Berlin is the shortest route to Berlin as it now operates eleven weekly nonstop flights from New York to the airberlin hubs Düsseldorf and Berlin. www.airberlin.com.

Lufthansa and **Swiss** also operate frequent flights into Berlin.

For general information, contact: Berlin Tourism, www.visitberlin.de/en.

Accommodations:

The most affordable stays are likely to be found on the east side of town. **German Life** stayed at the three-star Hotel Zarenhof, which sits on Schönhauser Allé 140, Prenzlauer Berg, a hot spot for new ethnic restaurants and its proximity to the Kulturbrauerei on Danziger Strasse gives guests instant access to nightlife, shops, and casual eateries. The same family owns Zarenhofs in Mitte, Alexanderplatz, and Friedrichshain. Stays include full buffet breakfast and free Wi-Fi throughout the hotel. The Prenzlauer property is set in a courtyard that is quiet and serene while being within walking distance to U-Bahn and S-Bahn stops. (www.hotel-zarenhof.de)

On the other spectrum is the ultra-five star Hotel Adlon Kempinski with its impeccable service, incredible setting opposite the Brandenburg Gate. Sit in the lobby and you will likely be star-spotting within minutes – it is THE place to be. www.kempinski.com/en/berlinadlon.