

The end of the 'anti-fascist' Germany

By YOSSEI KLEIN HALEVI

EAST BERLIN—I almost didn't get a visa to East Germany. I had bought my plane ticket without inquiring about East German visa regulations, assuming that the Berlin Wall was now permeable for foreigners as well as Germans. That seemed to me a logical assumption; one of the first acts of post-communist governments all over Eastern Europe had been to open their borders to the outside world. Foreigners were no longer subjected to month-long waits for visas while the secret police checked their histories for anti-socialist activity; tourists, no longer spiritual subversives, had regained their innocence.

Still, just to be certain, a few days before I was to leave I called the Paris consulate of the German Democratic Republic, the G.D.R., as East Germany is formally known. An official there told me: "You must apply for a visa two months before entering the G.D.R."

I said, "But that's impossible. I have a ticket for this coming Wednesday."

The official was sympathetic. He said, "Here is what you do. Get a day visa at the Wall—that is no problem—and go straight to your hotel. There they will arrange your visa."

"But I'm planning to stay with a friend. Can I get a visa at a police station?"

"I'm afraid not. Once you are inside the country, only hotels can arrange your visa."

He had one more suggestion for me. "Stay in a hotel for your first night, get your visa there, and then go stay with your friends. And be sure they take you to register with the police."

"But why do I have to register with the police?"

He said, his tone still friendly, "Because we have to know the locations of all aliens in the country."

That phrase stayed with me: Four months after the G.D.R.'s democratic revolution, a government official still spoke of tourists as aliens whose presence needed to be monitored. Aside from the unexpected sympathy of that official, nothing seemed to have changed. The old system—with its impossibly arcane laws, whose purpose seemed only to harass and control—would not be reformed, or even gradually dismantled. Instead, it would be preserved whole, until the time came for it to be swallowed into West Germany, obliterated.

I tried to book a room, but every hotel I phoned was filled. Desperate, I called Thomas Simon, of the G.D.R.-U.S.A. Friendship League. His name had been given to me by an American journalist, who said he could be useful for contacts. I told Simon I was a journalist working for American Jewish newspapers, and I explained my problem to him. He offered at once to help me: I had only to come to his office when I arrived in East Berlin and fill out a form. His organization would sponsor my visa. It was an unexpected kindness; and I felt that it was Simon's way of



The entrance to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

The leaders of the GDR—many of whom had been interned at Sachsenhausen and other Nazi camps—intended not merely to uproot Nazism...but to reverse it.

welcoming a Jew to the G.D.R.

I had imagined Simon to be an old man in a shapeless gray suit with very thin lapels, on which would be pinned a red star or a medallion from World War II. But he was a tall and lean 41-year-old in jeans, with black hair falling in strands over his ears and nearly into his eyes. I liked him immediately: he seemed a serious, even brooding man, but one whose interest in people protected him from self-obsession. He was friendly, but cautious, waiting to see who I was before revealing too much of himself. I felt he would reciprocate whatever was offered him, that he was capable in equal measure of generosity and hardness.

I told Simon I was interested in meeting people who cared about the G.D.R., and who regarded its demise as a loss, even a tragedy. That pleased him. He took out his miniature phone book, most of whose pages were no longer bound. "I've had it for years," he said, smiling. He was not a man interested in appearances.

Simon gave me the names of some friends, including one Jewish Communist who had returned to the G.D.R. after the war. Simon said, "There are only a few thousand Jews in the G.D.R. Most people here have never even met a Jew. It's like in the States, where communists are a strange breed. Americans were shocked when I told them I was a Communist."

Simon looked at me, to see whether I, too, was shocked to find myself in

the company of a Communist. But I respected his integrity; he could hardly be accused of opportunism for declaring himself a Communist in today's G.D.R.

I asked Simon what personal experiences had led him to link his identity with communism. Had he simply been taught communism at school and in the youth group, or was there a deeper connection? He said: "Before the war, my parents had been Social Democrats. In the time just after Hitler came to power, before it became too dangerous, they participated in small acts of resistance. Very small, like joining a secret May Day celebration in a forest in 1934. They did it more for themselves, to keep their own humanity, rather than with any real hope of changing the system."

Simon's father, drafted during the war, served in the medical corps, and then voluntarily surrendered to the Americans. He was brought to a POW camp in the American South. There, he was shocked to see that German POWs were treated better than black GIs. He returned to Berlin after the war; when the cold war began, he recalled his encounter with American racism, and was convinced that justice was not on the side of the West. He joined the Communist party.

Simon was born in 1949; he said to me, with a small smile, "I'm a few days older than the G.D.R." Simon was raised on stories of the war. His parents told him of a family friend, a

resistance fighter who was captured and committed suicide rather than betray the names of his colleagues; Simon wondered whether those names included his parents. He read books about anti-Nazi resistance fighters, and identified with Germans who had fought in the Soviet Army against Germany. He felt grateful to have been born in the Germany founded by Communists who had resisted the Nazis, the "anti-fascist" Germany, as the G.D.R. called itself.

I asked Simon, "Wasn't the Berlin Wall a betrayal of the G.D.R.'s anti-fascism?"

He said, "I was a border guard at the Wall for three years, from 18 to 21. I never shot anyone, but to be very honest, I would have. I volunteered for this—I wanted active duty, I wanted to serve the G.D.R. How can I justify this? 'Liberty is acceptance of reality'—we were taught this phrase by Marx. My understanding of freedom was that there are always limitations. There is no such thing as absolute freedom: in the West too there are limits on personal freedom. It seemed to me that in the G.D.R. at that time, one of the necessary limitations on freedom was not to leave to the West."

"Why was it a necessary limitation?"

"Before the Wall went up, I saw how much damage West Germany was doing to the G.D.R. by economic sabotage. They were trying to create a brain drain here, to destroy the G.D.R.'s economy. I knew cases of

the West German secret service actually warning people—falsely—that they were about to be arrested by the G.D.R. police and offering them refuge in the West, to increase the numbers of refugees.

"When the Wall was built, I had very mixed feelings. My grandmother lived in West Berlin, and now we were cut off. But I saw the political necessity of it. If not for the Wall, the G.D.R. would have been destroyed in the early 1960s."

"Thomas, was it necessary to shoot people at the Wall?"

"It's a question of morality. States must decide on when to apply the death penalty."

"Is death an appropriate penalty for people trying to leave a country?"

"No, not now."

"And before?"

"No one would have followed the law otherwise. There was also a responsibility on the Western side. If you motivate people to cross, even if you know they can get shot—"

"Weren't there people who sincerely wanted to leave, even without Western prodding?"

He avoided the question, and said instead, "The G.D.R. in the '60s and '70s, even in the '80s, was not a country where you couldn't live."

I had other questions for Simon. He had said that it was the Wall that insured the survival of the G.D.R.; yet hadn't the Wall in fact destroyed the G.D.R. by reinforcing the regime's illegitimacy among its own people? And, more important, could any system be worth preserving if it meant shooting your own people trying to leave it?

But there was no point in asking these questions; Simon's position was clear. I felt myself recoiling from him, imagined him standing atop the Berlin Wall, his face hard behind a searchlight.

But then I thought of myself at the age Simon had been when he volunteered for guard duty at the Wall. At 18, I had been an activist in the American protest movement for Soviet Jewry. Nothing then was more important to me than freeing Soviet Jewry; I was willing to justify the most outrageous acts of violence and terrorism if those contributed to the cause.

At first glance, Simon and I seemed opposites. He had defended Soviet power, while I had tried to subvert it. And yet I felt a certain kinship with Simon. For both of us, World War II had been our starting-point, against which we tested our moral and political decisions. The war taught us extremity, to view all politics as an epic battle between good and evil. And it taught us to protect, at all cost, that which we considered precious. For Simon, that had meant protecting the G.D.R., creation of the anti-Nazi Germans; for me, it had meant retrieving the last community of East European Jews, cheating the Nazis of another victory. We had this, too, in common: both of us had fought retroactive wars against Hitler.

But more than the kinship of an

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ideologue, I recognized in Simon my own struggle against the limits of ideology. Neither of us had stayed as we were; as we grew older, we had both struggled to remain loyal to our original ideals even as we acknowledged other truths.

Simon said, "When I was 16, and Biermann [a dissident folksinger] was banned, I accepted the judgment of the authorities. I adapted too easily to the system. But over the years I slowly changed. Especially once I began working for the G.D.R.-U.S.A. Friendship League. Here I met artists and others with different views. They influenced me, and broadened me. Not on the basic political issues; I remained a communist. But I came to realize, for example, that it was silly and unhealthy for us to be separate from the world.

"I knew that I couldn't affect national policy. So I decided to fulfill my ideals in a sphere that I could influence. That's what I have tried to do, bringing people from the U.S. and the G.D.R. into contact. I had the chance to give at least a few people in the G.D.R. the chance to travel in the U.S. When I look back on the work I did here, it's difficult for me to know how much I did that was dogmatic, and how much I helped open up the G.D.R. I know that both tendencies are in me."

Apocalypse

The cobblestone road from the gate of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp ends at a museum devoted to "anti-fascist" resistance. At the entry is a large stained glass mural, which depicts gaunt, bent men in striped prison uniforms, gathering around a red flag. The stained glass evokes a shrine, and that effect is deliberate. If communism—as one old German Communist told me—was a revelation, then World War II was its apocalypse, the battleground between light and darkness from which the East German millennium emerged.

The leaders of the G.D.R.—many of whom had been interned in Sachsenhausen and other Nazi camps—intended not merely to uproot Nazism, to break with the German past, but to reverse it. The G.D.R. would replace fascism with brotherhood, racial superiority with equality, militarism with a policy of peace. Moral alchemy: conjuring from Nazi Germany the ideal socialist society.

In the beginning, it seemed that the G.D.R. might at least partly fulfill its promise. Denazification—never seriously attempted in West Germany—was drastically implemented here. The police, the courts, the schools were purged of Nazi collaborators. After the war, 90 percent of all teachers were fired in the Soviet zone of Berlin. Thomas Simon's father, with only seven years' education, had been made a teacher, simply because of his anti-Nazi credentials. West Germany tried to distance itself from the Nazi past, while East Germany attempted to undo it. "The West Germans paid for Nazi crimes with

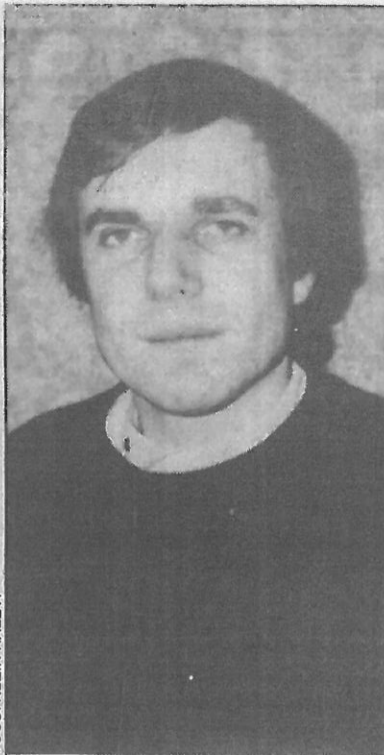
money," one G.D.R. Communist said to me. "But we paid by trying to build a socialist Germany."

It was this notion of radically transforming the German national character that attracted so much initial sympathy for the G.D.R. Hundreds of anti-Nazi German writers and artists who had gone into exile during the Hitler era returned to the G.D.R. after the war, a mini "ingathering of the exiles." They believed that Germany, humbled by the suffering it had caused, would be the first nation to create a humane socialism: that the G.D.R. would become a light to the nations.

It is, perhaps, no coincidence that the G.D.R. experience—with its founding legends of ingathering the exiles and becoming a light to the world—echoed the birth of Israel. The G.D.R. and Israel were the two countries created as a result of World War II; each saw its own national existence in mythic terms, as proof of the triumph of good over absolute evil. Both nations saw the essence of their national mission as reversing the consequences of Nazism: for Israel, transforming its victims into a self-reliant people; for the G.D.R., transforming its collaborators into benign, selfless socialists. Just as Israeli schoolchildren are taken to Yad Vashem, Jerusalem's Holocaust memorial, so were G.D.R. children taken to Sachsenhausen.

And yet, an Israeli identity was successfully created, while a G.D.R. identity collapsed, or perhaps had never been formed.

The more thoughtful people here, and especially those who cared about the G.D.R., are now asking themselves: How is it possible that a national identity, relentlessly pushed for 40 years, could disintegrate in a matter of months? And with so little apparent regret on the part of most of



Thomas Simon

'My understanding of freedom was that there are always limitations.'

the G.D.R.'s people? What had created this sense of national rootlessness?

At least part of the answer lies in the G.D.R.'s official perception of World War II, its founding myth. The G.D.R. taught its people that Nazism was the demented but inevitable result of capitalism. By transforming "Nazism"—a specific name for a unique event in history—into the more general "fascism," the G.D.R. removed the Third Reich from its real ideological context. The

political motive for dehistoricizing Nazism was obvious: by blurring the distinction between Nazism and other forms of repression, the Communists could then taint their enemies—from Reagan's America to Kohl's Germany—with demonism.

The effect of the government's abuse of "anti-fascism" was disastrous for the G.D.R.'s national identity. Rather than accept the notion that the capitalist West was somehow Nazi, many East Germans grew cynical toward the government's "anti-fascist" pronouncements. And "anti-fascism," the moral basis of a G.D.R. identity, became synonymous with government propaganda. One young East Berlin Jew, who had been raised in a Communist home, told me, "Every day our teachers talked about anti-fascism. Also in the newspapers everything was fascism and anti-fascism. The West's policies were fascist, the G.D.R.'s policies were anti-fascist. The whole purpose of this was to justify the Communist Party: 'We are the best because we are anti-fascist.' But everyone knew what the Communist Party was. So what did anti-fascism mean?"

By using anti-fascism to legitimize every government policy, the G.D.R. cheapened its own founding myth. Worse, it used anti-fascism to justify policies which were themselves repressive—in a word: fascist.

And that, finally, is the irony that undermined the G.D.R.'s national identity. For instead of reversing the German past, as it had intended to do, the G.D.R. created another version of German totalitarianism. It was not capitalist West Germany but the "anti-fascist" G.D.R. that demanded obedience to the state and that shot people trying to escape the country and deported dissidents who were trying to stay. Perhaps worst of all, the G.D.R. abused the trust of

those who believed in its promise and who, in trying to atone for the German past, discovered that they, too, had become accomplices in evil.

What madness?

Thomas Simon sent me to his friend, Carl Ordnung. Ordnung, round-faced and middle-aged, was the advisor on "peace and security issues" for the Christian Democratic Union, the C.D.U., the conservative party favoring immediate German reunification, which was to win the elections a few days after I met Ordnung. Ordnung's politics are the opposite of the party he works for. In the lobby of the C.D.U., where Ordnung has his office, is a giant poster of West Germany's chancellor, Helmut Kohl; but Ordnung's small office is crowded with posters supporting Third World causes, Chile, South Africa, Angola, Palestine.

I asked Ordnung how he reconciled his left-wing sympathies with working for the C.D.U.

He laughed and said, "It's just my job."

Ordnung had worked many years for the C.D.U. Until the revolution in November 1989, the C.D.U. had been in effect a Communist-controlled party; the regime had used the C.D.U. to confirm the G.D.R.'s pretense of being a multi-party democracy. After the revolution, the C.D.U. became instantly conservative; but Ordnung's politics hadn't changed.

I asked him if he was planning to vote for the C.D.U. He laughed again. "Oh no. I'm against reunification. Why must there be one German state? If there is an independent Austria, why not a G.D.R.? I'm afraid of a big Germany. That was my generation's experience."

Ordnung told me his story. He was drafted into the German army on Christmas, 1944, at the age of 17. He was wounded in a training accident before being sent to the front, and spent the rest of the war in a military hospital. "Fortunately, I didn't have to shoot at anyone."

In 1945, Ordnung looked at the ruins of Germany and asked himself: How could this have happened? What madness had taken over us? The values of the German middle class had offered no immunity against Nazism; even Ordnung's father, a Social Democrat, a decent man, had respected the Nazis for restoring German power and prestige. Of all the political groups, only the Communists had gone underground and fought the Nazis. Perhaps the Communists had to be given a chance to build a better Germany.

Ordnung didn't become a Communist himself; he was a religious man, a believer in a higher determinant than historical materialism. Still, a German, especially of his generation, could not ignore politics and seek refuge entirely in religion; it was through politics that evil had come into his country, and through politics that it would have to be purged.

Ordnung accepted the division of Germany as the judgment of God. And he was grateful at least to find himself in the anti-fascist part of the country. In West Germany they spoke in the old war-like terms, spoke of "containing" communism; while

'We ask the Jews of the world to forgive us'

Representatives of American and world Jewry were quick to respond last Thursday to the East German parliament's unequivocal apology to the Jewish people for their suffering in the Nazi era, and its acceptance of responsibility as an heir to the Third Reich.

A statement, filled with contrition and self-reproach, was delivered at the televised inaugural session of the new *Volkskammer*, where Christian Democrat Lothar de Maiziere, elected just a month ago, was installed as prime minister.

"East Germany's first freely elected parliament admits joint responsibility on behalf of the people for the humiliation, expulsion and murder of Jewish women, men and children," said the statement, read by Sabine Bergmann-Pohl, speaker and acting head of state in the new regime.

"We feel sad and ashamed. We ask the Jews of the world to forgive us."

Apologies were extended as well to Israel, with whom the parliament expressed hope of soon establishing diplomatic relations.

The statement was a total rejection

of the position held for 40 years by East Germany's Stalinist rulers that East Germany bore no responsibility for Nazi atrocities because it was founded as an anti-fascist state.

"There's widespread recognition that this is an important historical statement turning over from the past and looking to the future," said U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher.

Dr. Israel Miller, president of the New York-based Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, welcomed the East Berlin declaration.

"We are heartened by the readiness of the G.D.R. parliament to follow its sentiments with deeds by providing just compensation for material losses," he said.

"We look forward to early negotiations by the government of the GDR with the Claims Conference as the recognized designated representative of the organized world Jewish community and with the state of Israel," Miller said.

World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman called the statement "the first step in the

foundation of a new relationship between the Jewish people and the whole of the German people."

Bronfman added, "We believe the next step in the process is to arrive at arrangements for appropriate material amends on the part of East Germany for crimes of the Nazis, as has already been implemented by West Germany."

Benjamin Meed, president of the American Federation/Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, observed that "what is really important is what effect the statement will have in preventing any repetition of the Holocaust in the future."

According to Burton Levinson, national chairman of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, the East German declaration "demonstrates that the country stands ready to confront its Nazi past."

B'nai B'rith International President Seymour Reich welcomed the statement as a "belated recognition of historical fact," and "a hopeful sign that the planned reunification of Germany will be a positive development."

—Combined Services

the G.D.R.'s leaders constantly invoked peace. The G.D.R. promised to fulfill Ordnung's deepest prayer: that from Germany, place of war, would go forth the message of "no more war." And so Ordnung offered himself to the political judgments of the G.D.R.

For 30 years, Ordnung coordinated the Christian Peace Conference. The conference was sponsored by the C.D.U., but the government had no reason to be displeased with it: it promoted almost entirely the Soviet bloc's "anti-imperialist" foreign policy. The "socialist" and Third World blocs were for peace, the West was against peace. Ordnung travelled to left-wing peace conferences around the world as a representative of the Christians of the G.D.R. The government knew it could trust him not to deviate from its own line—not because he was intimidated by Communist power but because he believed in its benign intentions.

I asked, "Were you serving the cause of peace, or Soviet foreign policy?"

Ordnung said, "I did find some of the rhetoric at our meetings too strident. I was hoping for less confrontation, and more synthesis between East and West."

The posters on Ordnung's walls are not strident: flowers and smiling children instead of fists and Kalashnikovs. They promise peace and happiness, rather than revolutionary justice. Even the PLO poster—bearing the sinister name "Fateh"—offers a benign vision of human solidarity: a menorah sprouting into a cross and capped by a Moslem crescent, and over this vision of human solidarity the words, "A unitary democratic non-sectarian Palestine."

And yet, however benign the rhetoric, there was no hint of "synthesis" in Ordnung's choice of posters, no cause that didn't fit into the Soviet bloc's worldview. Ordnung surrounded himself with the right slogans, reminders of the beauty and goodness of the anti-fascist Germany. If he ever had doubts about his work, he needed only to look at the posters on his wall and know that he was serving the right side.

I asked, "Did you protest against the treatment of dissidents in the G.D.R.?"

"I used to argue about many things with the chairman of the C.D.U. We had fights all the time. And among ourselves in the Peace Conference we discussed the problems here."

"But not publicly?"

"Most of the criminal things that happened here I didn't really know about. Government corruption, for example. Or the way some people were treated."

"But you had to know that dissidents were imprisoned."

"I knew that, of course. But I didn't know—well, for instance, I really thought that the crimes of Stalin were exaggerated."

"Don't think I saw everything in a positive light. In the early years of the G.D.R., I worked as a teacher. Because I was a Christian, I was forbidden to teach secondary school, only primary school. But still I didn't feel a terrible oppression here. Well—I had many possibilities to travel. To Cuba, to Beirut. In my travels I could compare the G.D.R. with other

socialist countries, and I felt we were, relatively speaking, the most liberal. The G.D.R. was the only socialist country with a multiparty system. It was the only country where you couldn't really speak of the persecution of churches. The government said, 'Only conservative Christians are bad, progressive Christians are good.' In Cuba, Christians were amazed to hear that we actually had a Christian party here."

"But it was a puppet party."
"Yes, well, that's true. But if you have such parties, you can develop

separate aims. Because we had a Christian party, church leaders could come and ask us for help. The party had three publishing houses; we could publish theology. Of course you needed permission from the Marxists for each book. So we had a struggle. There was Marxist interference, but we had room to maneuver. We could develop relations with Christians in other countries, sometimes more controlled, sometimes less."

My eyes kept drifting from Ordnung toward the posters on the walls.
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Germany

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They covered nearly every available space, an international gallery of oppressed peoples. I asked Ordnung, "Did it ever seem to you ironic to be protesting against injustices abroad but not in your own country?"

He exhaled loudly and abruptly sat back, as though struck. Then he said, "We used to say, 'Our external policy is good, we are for peace, for liberation movements. Not so many people are imprisoned here.' If you get involved politically, you take a position and decide that it is relatively the best one. There is no ideal."

"Do you feel now that you took the wrong position?"

"Yes. But it is easy to be critical now. It was different in the begin-

ning. We had real denazification here; in West Germany it was only a show. And exiled German writers returned to the G.D.R. from all over the world. We gave support to the anti-apartheid movement, to the Vietnamese—it's not just a black picture.

"We saw the Vietnam War and what the Americans did. We always thought, 'How can we criticize our country when imperialism is so strong?' Our leftist friends abroad convinced us even more that we were right. In West Germany I attended Christian peace gatherings, and people there criticized me for being too moderate, for betraying socialism!"

"How did you live with the Berlin Wall?"

"I feel a great joy now that the Wall is open. But in the past it wasn't so simple. West Germany was trying to undermine the G.D.R. economy and destroy us. The Wall protected a weak economy from a strong one.

"My wife used to say to me, 'It's not fair that only you can travel.' I couldn't convince her that it had to be so. I would say it would not last very long, that soon everyone would be allowed to travel."

He paused, and then said slowly, "When my son was 16, he tried to leave the country, via Czechoslovakia. He was caught and sentenced

to two and a half years in prison. It was a very hard time for us. But even that was not such a deep shock in my socialist consciousness. I felt that things were on the whole getting better in the country, there was more international recognition of the G.D.R., there were some signs of liberalization—"

"But how did you accept the imprisonment of your son? How could you continue to be loyal to the G.D.R.?"

"My son always did things in an exaggerated way. Not only politically. So I said, Well, he's exaggerated again. If you look back, there are many ways to justify your own decisions.

"In the beginning I believed that the problems with the government would be overcome. Now we see the result. What I feel is my own guilt—I and many of my friends didn't try to make criticism more openly. When you look back, you realize that sometimes you close your eyes to things. I kept thinking it would get better. Maybe had we protested—but it's so difficult to see things clearly when you are in the middle of it all. We wanted so much to believe in the anti-fascist Germany." □

This is the first of a three-part series.



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