

'The heart beats left': The end of the GDR, part 2

By YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

EAST BERLIN—The headquarters of the former Communist Party, a grey building fronted by a long row of thin columns, occupies an entire square block. Until a few months ago, no one entered here unless they were meant to. But in the weeks before the recent East German elections, the public was suddenly invited into the forbidden building, whose occupant now calls itself the Party of Democratic Socialism, the P.D.S. Passersby who tentatively ascended the wide staircase into the marble lobby were greeted by friendly students handing out P.D.S. buttons and posters with the hopeful slogan, "We Are New!"

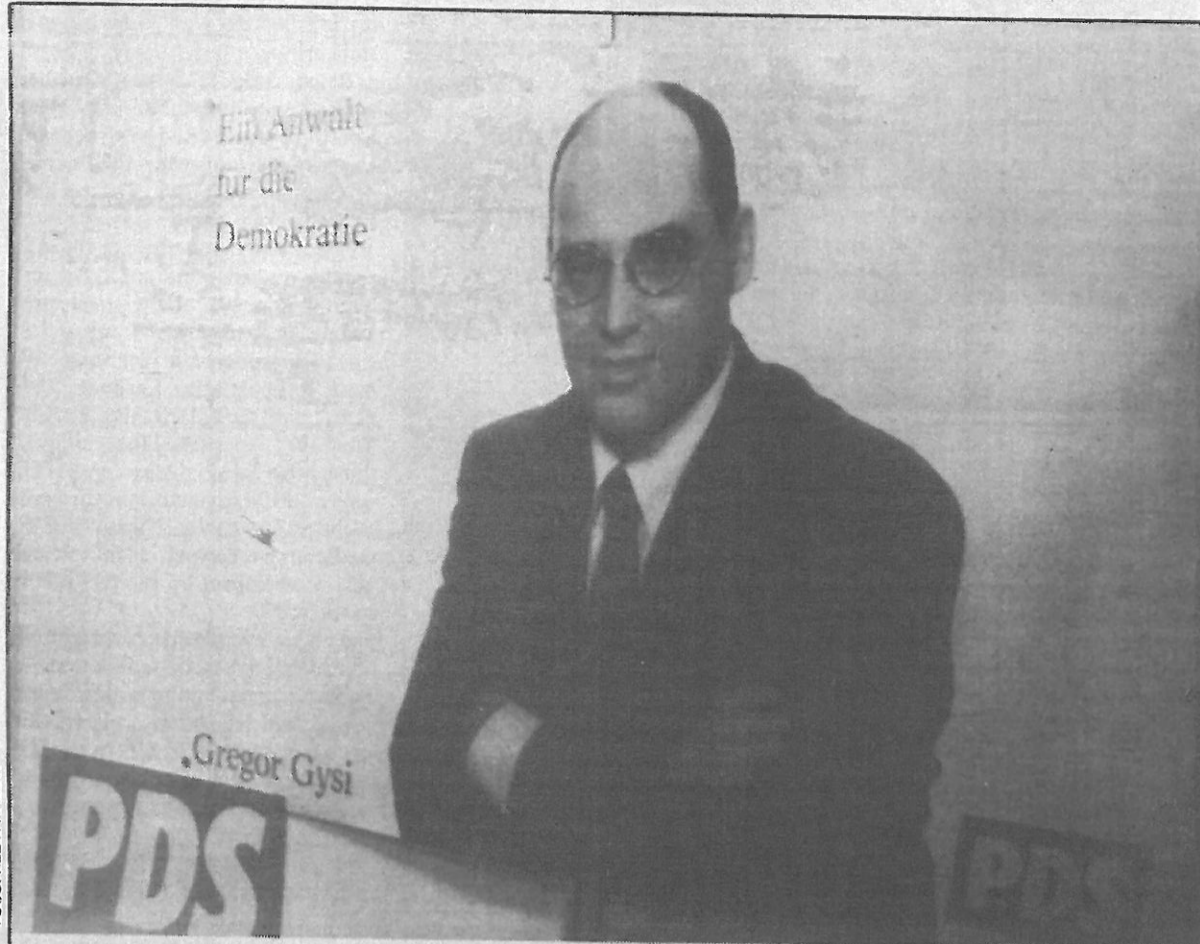
Even the guards smiled. I spoke briefly with one of them, a young mustached man whose eyes nearly bulged with enthusiasm. I mentioned I was from Israel, and he said, "Our chairman, Mr. Gysi, is also Jewish! What a man! No one has a heart like him." The guard kissed his fingers, and then hugged me. The new P.D.S.

If there is any credibility to the P.D.S.'s claim of democratic renewal, it was thanks to Gregor Gysi (pronounced Gee-zi). The son of a former Communist leader and of partial Jewish descent, Gysi is a lawyer who had defended dissidents in court. It is common knowledge that Gysi only reluctantly accepted the post of party chairman, seeing it as a duty rather than an opportunity. In campaign posters Gysi appeared slightly hunched, arms folded awkwardly, almost hugging himself, as if to protect himself from the public's attention.

Even P.D.S. opponents refer to Gysi as "an honest Communist"; on one P.D.S. street poster that I saw, someone had drawn a halo over Gysi's head. His homely face, with its raised eyebrows, tender gaze and slightly protruding lower lip, left no doubt that here was a man without pretense, a man you could trust. "Why Worry," a P.D.S. sticker said, "Take Gysi." A button with a sketch of Gysi's round wire-framed glasses even made an English word play on his name: "Take It Gysi." The P.D.S. was hiding behind Gysi's harmlessness: socialism with a funny face.

As the only party to oppose unification with West Germany, the P.D.S. was East Germany's last, forlorn chance. It was no coincidence that the Communists were such avid East German nationalists; for East Germany—the G.D.R.—was the only country in the world to be formed by communism. Other nations in Eastern Europe overthrew their Communist governments and created new ones; but the G.D.R. could not survive the failure of its founding ideology.

East Germany's old Communists were hoping for a miracle, that somehow Gysi would win enough votes to block unification and keep the G.D.R. alive. You'll see, they told each other with almost mystical faith. Gysi will surprise everyone. For the G.D.R.'s founders, Gysi was proof



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that they hadn't entirely failed. Here was a young man who publicly identified himself as a G.D.R. patriot, who was not ashamed to call himself a socialist and an anti-fascist. Gysi represented everything decent that the Communists had always believed about themselves, but which somehow had become obscured. One Jewish Communist, who remains even now a fervent believer, said to me with moist eyes, "This little Gysi is our son."

I had wanted to meet Gysi, but in the days just before the election that was impossible. And so, instead, I went to see his father, Klaus. As a former member of the Communist anti-Nazi underground, Klaus Gysi was part of the G.D.R.'s founding myth; as a former Minister of Culture, he had been part of the G.D.R.'s establishment. The elder Gysi lives in one of the modern high rises that surround the Communist Party headquarters, as if those buildings had been meant to shield party leaders from the grey tenements that fill the rest of East Berlin. In the elevator of Gysi's building someone had written in large red letters, "P.D.S.: Partei Des Stalinismus," party of Stalinism; on the door to Gysi's apartment, as though in response, was the playful slogan of

the P.D.S., "Take It Gysi."

Klaus Gysi, a tiny man in his 80s, was formal in a grey suit and tie. The apartment is filled with books, and those that cannot fit the crowded shelves are stacked in high piles on the living room floor. On one shelf stands a small statue of Lenin, chin resting on fist, pensive.

I asked Gysi how he felt about his son as the last hope for the G.D.R. He spoke slowly, with bemused detachment, as if acknowledging that his life and its passions already belong to history. He said: "The night my son became head of the Party, he called and told me, 'It happened, I couldn't escape.' I said to him, 'Dear son, dear son, I never would have wished this for you.'" Gysi smiled, enjoying the irony of the old Communist warning his son against involvement with the Party.

I asked Gysi why he thought the G.D.R. had failed.

He said, "At first you couldn't recognize that things were going wrong. And in fact for a while it wasn't bad. The Social Democratic and Communist parties united—and it's not true that it was done only with violence. Many Social Democrats wanted to join with us. We could have created a very interesting experiment.

"The anti-fascist writers who were

in exile during the Hitler era—they all came here. None of them went back to West Germany. Here they found the editors and the public for their writing.

"But the Cold War changed everything. The Soviet Communist Party was imposed as our model; we weren't allowed to take our own course. During the struggle against Hitler, people of all opinions came together. But now it was said that the only real anti-fascists were the Communists. And this was our mistake. We didn't create a broad humanistic coalition in the G.D.R.

"It is true that most of the Party believed in the Soviet system—I did too. But it was difficult for us to understand the contradictions we lived in. There was no discussion about it. This was not possible.

"I always had the feeling—the feeling—that things were going wrong. But my head said, No, you have to explain it in such and such a way, even if it is difficult to accept. Very German of me: the head always won. Today I can tell you, my feelings were right.

"I knew German comrades who had disappeared in the Soviet Union. I could never understand: what had happened to them? I remember the news about the 33 Jewish doctors ar-

rested for supposedly trying to poison Stalin. Thirty-three doctors? It seemed like complete nonsense to me: why did they need so many doctors to kill Stalin? I remember talking at that time to a friend of mine—he had been in Soviet prison and had lost his teeth because of hunger—and I asked him what he thought about these 33 doctors. He said to me, 'The class struggle is so intense that these things can happen.' I said, 'Listen old friend, just say you don't understand it.' He said to me, 'I don't understand anything.'

"But even after Stalin the system here didn't change. Why didn't we have a public discussion about Stalin? My opinion is that the leaders were afraid of comparisons with Hitler. What had happened in our country? Hitler came and called to the people—and they followed. Stalin called them—and they followed. I believe we could have shown the difference between Hitler's and Stalin's social systems. But that required open discussion. And our leaders were too afraid of this. Because we didn't honestly debate Stalinism, the people continued to identify it with socialism. We didn't try to explain the difference. And now young people reject socialism entirely."

"But if you, and others within the Party, had made a stronger stand for democracy, could you have saved socialism here?"

My question didn't annoy him. He said, "All reasonable people of my generation are now worrying about this point."

"Do you feel discredited by the failure of the G.D.R.?"

"Am I discredited?" Gysi laughed. "Of course I am. And yet at the same time I must protest against this easy condemnation. In my experience—and I would say this is true in all of history—I found that you can't get rid of a dictatorship unless it faced some desperate situation. Take Hitler. Perhaps it would have been possible to stop him in 1931. But later on, we couldn't do it. The same thing was true with Stalin. And in our own very small scale, it was true as well here.

"Perhaps I should have done more. But I don't know what I could have done. You could retire—and let them do what they want. But those who are condemning us now—what about our dear brother party, the Christian Democratic Union, which all those years went along with us? And our young people shouting in the streets, 'Forty years of mistakes.' They are 18 years old; what do they know about 40 years? It's all a bit ridiculous.

"I don't think we could have changed things. The Soviet Union was the occupation power in this country. The fact that we had a Big Brother watching over us meant that we had to be very careful."

Then, abruptly, Gysi asked me, "Would you like to see the Wall?" He led me to his terrace, high above the city. Directly below us was the Berlin Wall; from this height it looked

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like a grey winding path. It was surrounded by marsh, a wasteland in the middle of a city. "Here is the Wall," Gysi said. I waited for something more from him, an apology, even an explanation, but he said nothing. Here is the Wall: as though it were an ancient rock formation, beyond the power of individuals to alter. And yet Gysi had not been merely another hapless G.D.R. citizen, but a member of the government that had built the Wall.

I asked him, "How did you feel when this Wall was built?"

"I was convinced at the time that the Wall was necessary. And it was. We were under such pressure from the West; we had to protect ourselves. After the Wall was built I thought: Now that we have our security, we can begin to build democracy. But the situation only got worse."

"Could you really have had both the Wall and democracy? Aren't they opposite ideas?"

He repeated what he had said earlier: "We couldn't have democracy here because of Big Brother."

"But was the anti-democratic pressure always coming from outside? Wasn't there a dictatorial tendency within the party itself, within the G.D.R. leadership?"

Gysi nodded. "The whole idea of the leadership was: 'We were anti-fascists. The people were fascists. We know the way; we have to lead the people.' There was not the idea of bringing democracy to the people, but of leading them—in the right way, of course."

"The situation was very favorable to such false thinking. 'We lead the people. The people are with us. We build socialism together.' But it was an illusion; and it became a dictatorship."

Could the leaders of the G.D.R., those hard old idealists, be entirely blamed for not trusting their own people? And yet West Germany did manage to form a democracy out of the same human material. Perhaps the G.D.R.'s flaw had been in trying to create a perfect society, rather than merely a good one. West Germany abandoned the romantic German yearning for an ideal society, but the G.D.R. had clung to it, imposing its notion of perfection.

Yet for Gysi, the failure of the G.D.R. didn't mean the end of the socialist ideal; the collapse of his life's vision was merely a setback on the road to the inevitable victory of socialism. He said, "If you look at the history of Christianity, it is also full of murder; many more people were killed by the Church in all its wars than by Stalin. But all those crimes couldn't take away the light of the Bible, and the evangelical fervor. I'm convinced that socialism is also such a vision of life and justice; and it will stay. When my son called to tell me that he had become head of the Party, he said to me, 'It can't only go wrong. Do you see any other way?' I said, 'It's always necessary to fight.'"

I got up to leave. Gysi put on a black fedora and insisted on waiting with me downstairs for a taxi. He took me by the arm and asked me



Klaus Gysi.

'I'm convinced that socialism is [like the Bible] a vision of life and justice; and it will stay.'

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about myself. "Which Jewish organizations do you belong to?"

"None," I said, "I'm an independent Jew."

"An independent," Gysi said, laughing. "That is the hardest thing to be."

National suicide

I met Jens Reich, molecular biologist and head of the tiny Alliance 90 party, a few days before the elections. Reich had been a leader of New Forum, which had organized the giant demonstrations in November, 1989 that had brought down the government. Like Havel in Czechoslovakia and Mazowiecki in Poland, Reich belongs to the new post-Communist East European politics, almost an anti-politics that despises rhetoric and insists on honesty. But unlike Havel and Mazowiecki, Reich would not become a national leader. The more conventional politics of West Germany, with its big budgets and mass rallies and simplistic slogans, had taken over the G.D.R.'s first free elections; Reich's party could not compete. The electorate's disinterest in Reich and his friends—the leaders of the G.D.R.'s democratic revolution—was one more indication that the country was committing suicide: the East Germans were not interested in reforming their country, but erasing it.

Reich, tall and thin with short greying hair, is an intensely serious man who spoke at times with confessional frankness. In the first minutes of our conversation he seemed nervous and distracted, and frequently checked his watch. But when he realized that I was not interested in asking him the usual, transient questions about the election, but rather his perspective on the historical meaning of the G.D.R., he leaned into his armchair and relaxed.

I asked Reich what he considered the G.D.R.'s most morally damaging legacy. He said: "This system created a universal, all-pervading cowardice. It taught people double-speak. Young people especially were forced to say one thing in school and the opposite at home."

"Almost no one was untouched by the system. Even we in the opposition made compromises. I've made compromises. I waited too long to become a dissident, and I reproach myself for this. We can't say we're completely just and the others are cowards. I had been silent on many occasions; I would have never become a professor if I hadn't compromised."

"One of the G.D.R.'s leading dissidents, a scientist, had a summer cottage next to ours. One day we received an invitation from him to come visit. We didn't go. Well, I was able to rationalize it: I found him personally arrogant and patronizing as a scientist. But that was a pretext. In fact I rejected his invitation because of cowardice. I sympathized with the dissidents—but I didn't take part. Perhaps it is for the good; I would have been thrown out of the country. But even that is a pretext. A subtle system of repression acted on everyone. The Communists created a moral disaster. Our society needs to be psychologically healed; people will have to learn to say publicly what they really believe."

In the name of anti-fascism, the G.D.R. had encouraged the very traits of obedience and mistrust that had made Nazism possible. The East German people had gone from one system of repression to another, without pause. The results were evident in the newspaper headlines: just the day before I met Reich, the leader of the conservative Christian Democratic Union had been forced to resign after confessing he had worked for the secret police. Other politi-

cians, too, were being accused of collaboration, and the newspapers quoted their denials. This, then, was the legacy of the "anti-fascist" Germany: to once again force Germans into the embarrassingly familiar contortions of denying knowledge of state crimes.

Reich said, "This past October, when the revolution had just begun, a petition was drafted by writers and other intellectuals who still dreamed of German socialism. The petition said that our choice was either to create a real democratic egalitarian society or become a capitalist and 'elbow' society, where people just cared for themselves. I refused to sign; I considered it dishonest. We were intellectuals, Berliners. We hadn't paid the bill for this socialism. We hadn't experienced the scarcity of those who lived outside of Berlin, where the only available produce was cabbages and apples. It wasn't for us, the Berlin intellectuals, to impose our idea of socialism on the rest of the country."

And yet even Reich could not entirely dismiss the Communist system. There had been "good points" here, he said, which he hoped would not be lost when the two Germanies united: the GDR's protection of workers' rights, its Third World orientation, its anti-chauvinism.

He said: "I haven't fully adapted to the idea that we're being engulfed. West Germany is so patronizing. Of course we're weak in economic affairs. But they wipe out all our accomplishments."

"A strong anti-chauvinist feeling was created here. I spoke at a rally in January in a very conservative community, at the height of nationalist feelings. Poles were being treated badly, not served in shops; the newspapers were accusing them of smuggling. I said at this meeting, 'How we are treating Poles is unjust,' and the audience applauded."

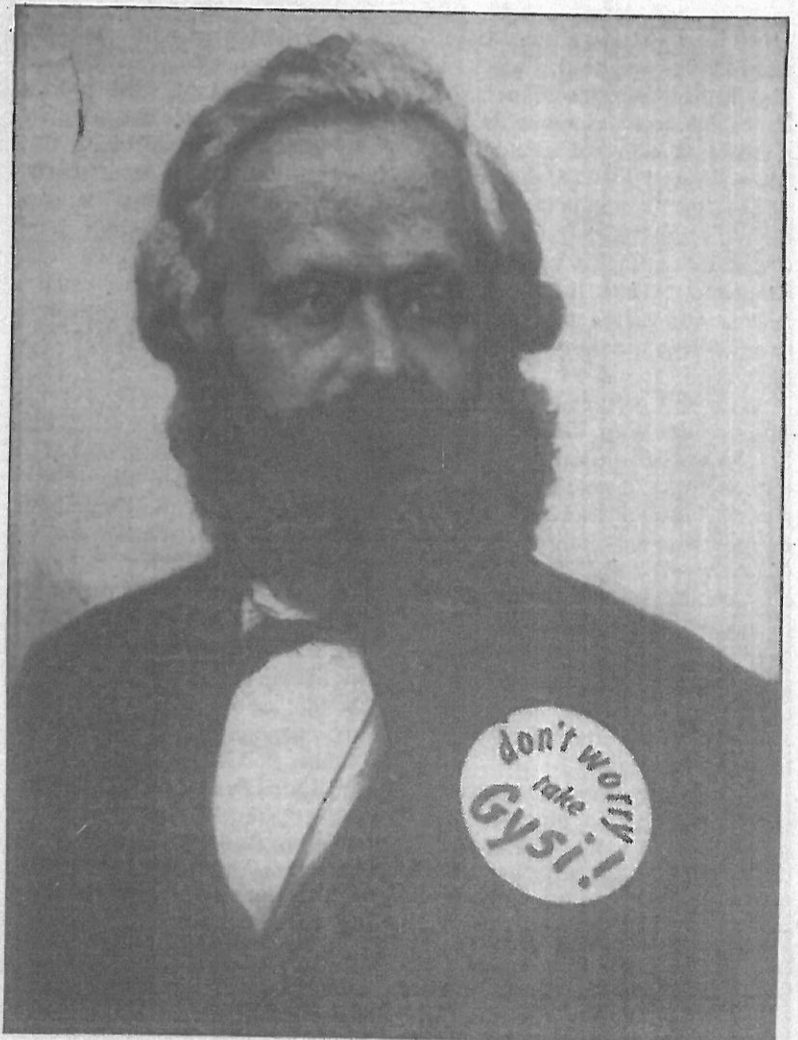
"I see our role in a united Germany as continuing the G.D.R. tradition of anti-chauvinism. Germany will need to be controlled. I'll even say it in an affectionate way: it's like a very gifted boy, a good boy, who needs control to be kept from arrogance."

"I am most afraid of a provincial Germany, a country of philistine, petty bourgeois people. I hope we can maintain some of the G.D.R.'s cosmopolitan attitudes, its concern for the Third World. I think some good can come out of the G.D.R."

Nowhere else in Eastern Europe did I encounter former dissidents who were as generous as was Reich—and other G.D.R. dissidents I spoke with—toward the old system. Far more typical was the Prague woman, an English-language translator and daughter of a Jewish Communist, who told me: "One day I said to myself, 'You must think of the good qualities of the Communist system.' I am by nature an optimist, and I couldn't bear the idea of living in a completely negative system. But, as hard as I tried, I couldn't come up with a single thing. Not a single thing! Even the beautiful ideals of communism were lies."

On the streets of East Berlin, P.D.S. posters boldly claimed, "The Heart Beats Left." It had seemed to me at first an absurd slogan: everywhere else in Eastern Europe the heart pulled in precisely the opposite direction. And yet here, at least among intellectuals, the slogan seemed to be true.

Listening to Reich speak about what had been positive—morally positive—in the Communist system, I could more easily understand how others, less capable than Reich of a rigorous, scientific approach to truth, could have rationalized their loyalty to the G.D.R. If Nazi Germany had seduced its people with the ideology of racial superiority, the G.D.R. had done so in the opposite way, with



anti-racism. Incredibly, the G.D.R. still managed to hold the grudging appreciation of even its disaffected intellectuals. Was the G.D.R.'s promise—that Germany would create not only absolute evil but absolute good—so compelling that even the country's dissidents could not entirely resist it? Had the shame of Nazism gone so deep that the G.D.R.'s failed attempt at redeeming German history could hold power even now?

Mixed feelings

I met Maud Meinel in her West Berlin apartment. In 1980, Maud, together with her dissident parents, had been forced to leave the G.D.R. Maud's parents, teachers, had not been major dissidents; they had simply refused to live by the official lies. In 1968, they didn't sign a teacher's resolution supporting the invasion of Czechoslovakia; and they turned their apartment into an open house for young people, a place for free discussion. Then Maud's father was caught passing on seven photo-copied pages from a book written by a banned author. He was sentenced to a year and a half in prison. Maud's mother was expelled from her job, Maud's friends were interrogated. For Maud's family, the possibility of normal life in the G.D.R. was over. And so, when the police told the family that if they all moved to West Germany Maud's father would be freed, the family agreed to go.

Maud, a sociology student, is 33 years old but looks much younger. She has long, curly blond hair and a friendly, almost innocent face. During our conversation she often spoke with averted eyes; much of what she had to tell was painful, and especially painful to tell a Jew. A year after arriving in the West, Maud went to Israel as a volunteer with Aktion Suhnezeichen, Action for Reconciliation, the German penance movement. She said: "During my first year in West Germany, I had been very homesick. I didn't get close to people. In the G.D.R., you meet someone in a bar and you instantly feel that you know him for years. But in the West, people avoided each other; I felt a kind of emotional exhaustion. But in Israel I was at home again. The people were so warm. Israel restored my joy in life."

Israel also restored to Maud a missing piece of her family history. In Yad Vashem, Jerusalem's Holocaust memorial, Maud found her grandfather's file in the archives on Nazi war criminals. Maud had never met her grandfather; all she had known was that he had been sentenced for war crimes to seven years in prison. The file in Yad Vashem gave Maud the details: he had been a Gestapo agent in charge of deporting Jews from a town in Poland. Maud copied the file and mailed the information to all the members of her family.

On the walls of Maud's apartment are posters with photographs of the

death camps. Perhaps because of the Holocaust, Maud's politics, even after her expulsion from East Germany, remained left. Maud could not, of course, romanticize the G.D.R. And yet, the G.D.R. had placed World War II at the center of German national identity. In East Germany, Maud had never heard anyone openly support Nazism; at least there, the Nazis were shamed into silence.

She said, "One of the things that most shocked me about West Germany was meeting people with Nazi ideas. When I first arrived here, I went to work in a shoe factory. One day I went to a big anti-nuclear demonstration in West Berlin. In the factory I heard people say, 'Those demonstrators should be gassed.' In the East I had never heard such things. I knew that such people existed; but suddenly to meet them..."

However flawed the result, the G.D.R. had tried to change the German national character; but in West Germany Maud saw an unrepentant society enjoying a success it didn't deserve. How much of West Germany's prosperity is based on those big businesses that had used slave labor during the war? And then Chancellor Kohl had had the gall to call the G.D.R. a giant concentration camp, sully the memory of the Holocaust to score a political point.

I asked Maud, "Would it have been more accurate to call the G.D.R. 'one big prison'?"

Maud said, "Yes, it was a prison."

There were complete limitations on how to live your life. Everything was pre-planned; your whole life was laid out before you. The social security system was so total that people almost suffocated from it.

"But still, it depends on who is calling the G.D.R. a prison: a right-wing politician from West Germany who is trying to make politics, or someone from within the country who has suffered."

"Given all that you and your family suffered, don't you think it is ironic that the 'anti-fascist' Germany used fascist methods against its people?"

"Yes, it is an irony. But you have to take into account the G.D.R.'s political situation. There was tremendous pressure from West Germany during the cold war; the country was forced into a kind of siege."

Maud had suffered more than most

people from the G.D.R.'s repression. And yet she would not allow herself too much bitterness against the system that had imprisoned her father and uprooted her family; even she was trying to lessen the guilt of the "anti-fascist" Germany.

She said: "Of all the parties in the G.D.R. elections, I feel closest to the P.D.S. I like their platform, and I trust Gysi. I don't think I would actually be able to vote for the P.D.S., though; the distance between them and the old Communist Party is not great enough. But I would probably wish that I could vote for them."

"I never had any hopes for West Germany; even today this is not my spiritual home. But I did have hopes for the G.D.R. For me, the failure of the G.D.R. is a tragedy." □

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