

The German Democratic Republic

*I visited the German Democratic Republic four times between November 1988 and September, 1990, the month before it disappeared. In all other countries where I worked between 1985 and 2000, I continued to return often after the publication of *Out of the Shadows* in 1991 so I could continue following the trajectory of Jewish community life. But I did not return to the GDR, mainly because: A.) the country no longer existed, B.) there were only a handful of Jews there anyway and most of them were quite elderly in 1990, and C.) I launched my project on documenting Jewish life in all of Germany, which I worked on, intermittently, between 1991 and 1996. The essay below was published in *Out of the Shadows*, and I have updated it in 2017.*



From morning until night East Berliners were standing in line. Sometimes I counted less than a hundred, other times twice that. They waited not less than an hour, at times as long as three. And this was November: a bitterly cold wind blew across the city. Still, no one complained and no one gave up his place. These Berliners were standing in line not for food or new goods from the West. They were waiting to see the GDR's first exhibition ever on Jews in Germany which had opened just before November 9, 1988, the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht.



Considering that the hard line Communist (or SED) regime of Erich Honecker had barely mentioned Jews before, everyone was surprised to see the party chief himself on television handing out awards to Jewish leaders they had flown in from all over the Communist bloc, chatting with western reporters about Jews in his country, attending solemn ceremonies (I took the photo on the left during one of the receptions). Kristallnacht was an important date for all Germans, Honecker said, something that no one should forget. Not that GDR citizens ever had a chance to remember: for forty years there had barely been a mention of Jews in their school books, museums or from the government.

But every night that week, there were television programs about Jewish life, concerts and documentaries of Kristallnacht itself: the date in 1938 when Nazis burned and destroyed synagogues throughout the Third Reich while Jews were beaten, paraded through streets and sent to concentration camps. Kristallnacht, the beginning of the end for German Jewry, was beginning to be commemorated in the German Democratic Republic.

The GDR was a country that had trouble with commemorations of any kind. This wholly artificial creation, carved out of the Soviet Zone of occupation after World War Two, had no reason to exist other than being the communist portion of Germany. That meant it had no history or culture of its own. With such dangerous waters to skirt, people joked that the overriding cultural program for East Germans was: what is not compulsory is forbidden. And since the Soviet-installed leadership had decided World War Two itself was part of the great class struggle between capitalists and oppressed workers, the party relegated the cause — and subsequent guilt — of Jewish suffering to the Federal Republic, or West Germany, where capitalism lay.

That meant the GDR — the world's first and only 'anti-fascist state' — shared no guilt of the Holocaust. Which explained why the GDR refused to make reparation payments to Jewish victims, why the Buchenwald concentration camp's exhibitions denigrated Jewish suffering while promoting the war against the working class, and why party functionaries interpreted Kristallnacht by saying the killing of Jews was a dress rehearsal for a shackling of the workers.



Although less than 500 Jews were registered in the GDR during its last year of existence (and perhaps another few hundred were unaffiliated) many of those over 60 had spent the war abroad. "Both our parents sent us out on the children's transports to England in the late '30s," said Gisela Lindenburg of she and her husband Walter (pictured on the left). "We met in England but both of our parents stayed behind. They died. Afterwards, we felt that we could help build a just society here in Germany and many of us felt that it was our duty."

The Lindenburgs were not alone. Throughout the GDR, there are still a few dozen highly educated, well placed Jewish intellectuals, many of them the country's leading historians, scientists and engineers, speaking English with crisp British accents, reminders of the time their parents spirited them out of a doomed Germany.

Helga Eilet came from a well to do furrier's family in Leipzig and found herself on a kibbutz in Ireland during the war. "It's where I learned to slop pigs and speak Yiddish!" she said laughing. Afterwards, with her parents murdered and nothing left at home, "I moved to Chicago where wealthy relatives 'helped me,' and I use the term loosely, to become a shop girl. But my future husband kept after me, thank God, and I came back to Germany, to Dresden and him, where we started a new life and a new country. I thought, 'if I'm going back to Germany, at least I'm going back to the part that's making a new beginning.'"



In the immediate postwar years, even before the GDR came into being (1945-1948), Jews were welcomed to settle there. The newly created government restored or built synagogues in Erfurt, Leipzig and Dresden while several thousand Polish Jews settled in its cities. But once the Stalinist period began in 1948 and lasted until the early 1950s, it took little time before it turned anti-Semitic. Jews began losing their jobs and found harassment instead of welcome and by 1952, almost the entire Polish contingency had fled to the west along with most of the others. "The party had said you are a communist or a Jew but never both," said Dr Herbert Lappe (pictured on the left), a 40-ish computer specialist in Dresden, "and that was all Jews needed to hear. Around 80% left."

Jews who remained—and these were almost exclusively German-born Jews — were strong believers in the socialism they had come back to. The majority raised their children in the same vein. Or at first they tried to. But as the heavy hand of party agit prop pounded the populace in print, on the airwaves and at school while in the 1970s and '80s the standard of living deteriorated and West Germany grew obviously richer and more secure, young people in the GDR began seeking more meaningful contact with themselves and the world. Many turned to their churches. Other GDR citizens found other roots.



90-year-old Henrietta Schwager, accompanied by the caretaker, visits the Dresden Jewish cemetery.

Said Walter Lindenburg, "We had been raising our two sons, Gerhardt and David, in a totally secular household, telling them that sure, they were of "Jewish origin," but that it had no relevance to our lives. This lasted until one day I found David with a book. 'What are you reading,' I asked.

'Oh, a book about Jesus and Christianity,' he said. And I really lost my temper. We started talking, and talking some more. Today he's a Hebrew scholar living in Israel and my wife and I are members of the Jewish community."

It was happening elsewhere. Thomas Bonin, a Berlin engineer not quite 40, said, "When I was growing up I knew I was different from the other kids. All my friends at school had dads who fought in the army and knew their war stories. They had cousins and uncles and aunts. I had none of these except distant relatives in Sweden, an uncle in England. And what child wants to be different from everyone else? I made a promise to myself never, ever tell anyone about my family; how my grandparents, who were German, had been murdered — by Germans. When my school made a class trip to Auschwitz, all I kept thinking was, 'this could happen to me, this would have happened to me!' It took a very long time, and it took my wife — who isn't Jewish — to encourage me and keep encouraging me; but joining the Jewish community was one of the best things I've ever done. There are some things you just don't hide. Now we send our son Timmy to all the community programs."

The Jew in contemporary Germany: here, like nowhere else, a Jew is defined by where he lives almost as much as who he is. The symbolism is inescapable. Back in the years when there were two Germanys, in the Federal Republic, years of education, hefty government support and media attention meant that West Germans understood their past and the guilt that came with it. If they wanted to, that is.

Yet while successive GDR regimes refused to acknowledge, educate or in any way face the Holocaust, it was the individual churches who often made the effort. In Erfurt, with less than 40 Jews, church groups tend the Jewish cemetery. In Eisenach, Weimar, Halberstadt and elsewhere, churches and their members published booklets detailing their towns' Jewish histories, describing the deportations and what happened afterwards. In March of 1989, I traveled with Herbert Lappe to the town of Arnstadt where he'd been asked to address a church group. "To tell you the truth," he said, "if I accepted half the invitations I got to speak at churches, I'd be a very busy man."

Oljean Jugster, cantor of the Rykestrasse synagogue in East Berlin, told me just before a Purim party in March, 1989, "People aren't afraid of being Jewish anymore. They want to know about it and they want their children to know. As a matter of fact, in 1987 the community stabilized; 16 died, 14 came in. The median age in the 1970s was 67, now its 56."

These were, no matter how one looked at it, pathetically small numbers, but he spoke with enthusiasm. Outside, as we spoke, families were gathering in the courtyard. Children played tag and by dusk, 70 people were filing inside. "I never really thought I'd ever see anything like this," Oljean said beaming. "We'll have to see what the future brings."

The future was exactly 232 days away. The future came on November 9, 1989.

There are countless ironies in Central Europe history, and this date will forever be laden with it. It was on November 9th when the short-lived revolution swept Berlin in 1918. It was the date of Kristallnacht, or Reichspogromnacht,

in 1938. Exactly one year after Erich Honecker presided over Kristallnacht commemorations in Berlin in 1988, he had rushed into hiding as thousands of people went dancing on top of the Berlin Wall.

By the next anniversary, in 1990, the Wall had been reduced to a speed bump, the GDR had ceased to exist and its Jewish community melted into the larger, western one next door. "We'll have to see what the future brings," said the cantor.

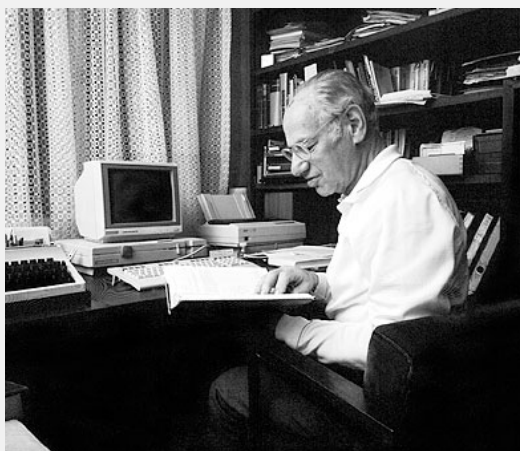
The young, of course, embraced the changes. Matters were more difficult for the elderly as they so often are. "The end of a dream," some said wistfully, others bitterly. "I've never felt so betrayed," said Gisela Lindenburg in December of 1989, just as the improprieties of the SED were coming to light. Shaking her head, she said, "We had believed in socialism. We took it for granted they did too."

How far behind the GDR had been became immediately apparent. The young embraced the change. The old were terrified by it. I recall driving into Dresden in March 1990 and I spotted a huge line of cars. Slowing down to see what they were waiting for, I saw that the first full service BP gas station had opened, complete with food shop, a garage and more than a dozen pumps under dazzling halogen lights. East Germans had come to marvel at it, not to buy gas. That spring, Deutsche Bank and others started building ATMs all over East Germany and children were leading their parents to them, teaching them how to use them.



Politically, whereas before the fall of the Wall, East Berliners lived a relatively sheltered, if one flavored, existence, after 1990 they were suddenly being confronted with punks, neo fascists and the profusion of political parties.

It was unnerving for those used to hearing the 'anti-fascist' platitudes of the Communists (however false they may have been). And even if right wing political parties were pitifully small, just watching their television commercials (air-time for all parties is guaranteed by law) was upsetting enough.



Many aging GDR Jews leaned on each other for support, just as they had for forty years. Herbert Lappe told me this story. "Professor Helmut Eschwege (above, left) joined the Social Democratic Party, but had no way to attend their meetings since he didn't drive, so every week, he phoned my father, one of his oldest friends, and even though my father stayed a member of the PDS (the reformed Communists), he would fetch Eschwege by car, and sit quietly by his side while Eschwege would stand up and yell about the Communists and make his speeches. Then the two would stop on the way home for coffee and cake and conversation. Proper friends, proper German Jews to the last."