



A bittersweet gay romance narrated by an African-American expatriate landing in West Berlin as Cold War tensions ease and the infamous Berlin Wall soon to fall. His infatuation with East Berlin wunderkind Heiko Heinz precipitates an emotional journey of self-discovery. Heiko's own self-reinvention parallels the dramatic changes Germany undergoes in the swiftest political and socioeconomic transition recorded in modern times. The first original English-language novel depicting the East Berlin

cultural underground and the thriving gay scenes on both sides of The Wall.

Goodbye Heiko, Goodbye Berlin

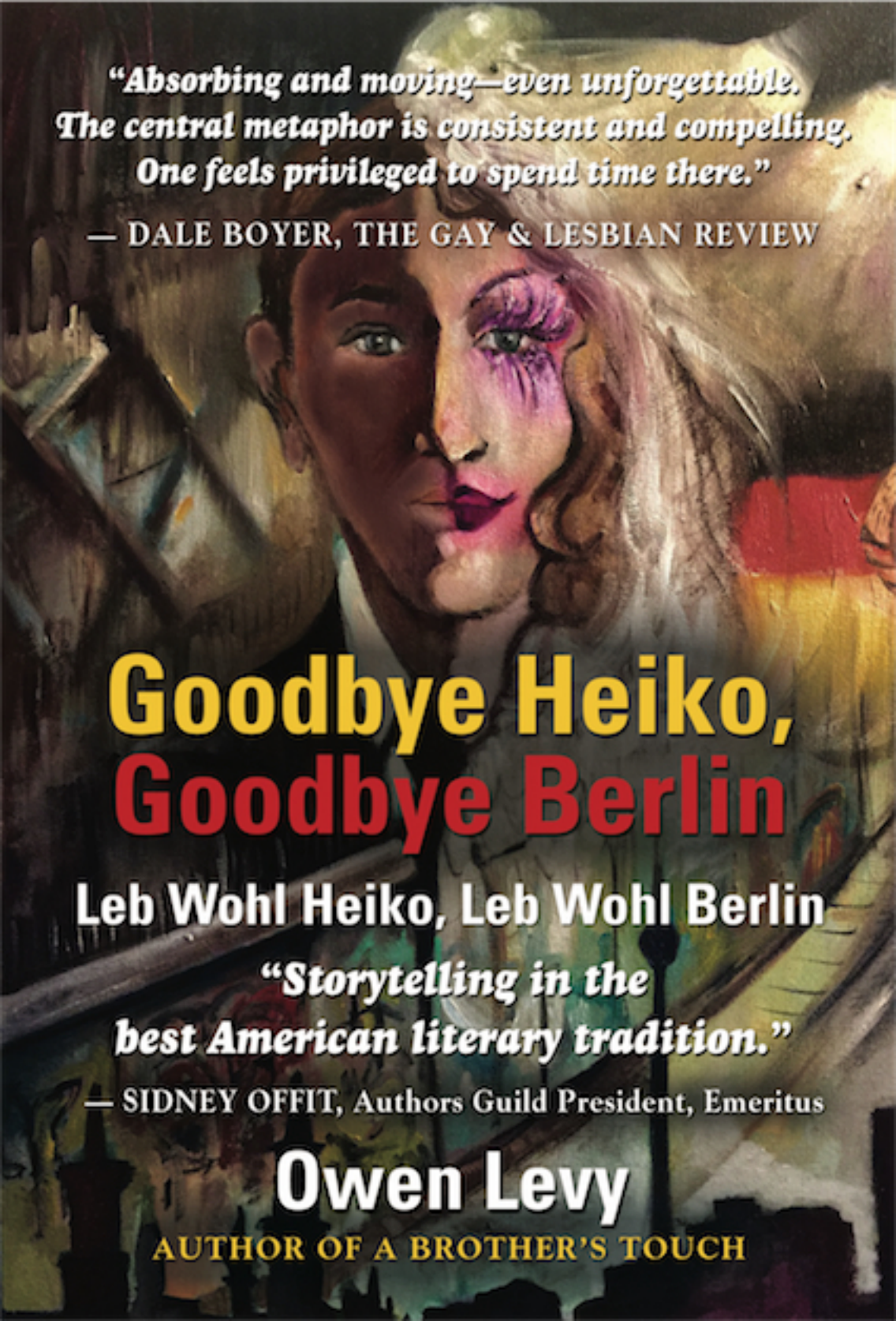
by Owen Levy

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Goodbye Heiko, Goodbye Berlin

Leb Wohl Heiko, Leb Wohl Berlin

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Owen Levy

AUTHOR OF A BROTHER'S TOUCH

GOODBYE HEIKO, GOODBYE BERLIN

(Leb Wohl Heiko, Leb Wohl Berlin)

A City Divided

Then Reunited

After Fall Of

Infamous Wall

A Novel by

Owen Levy

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-63490-733-0

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-63490-734-7

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida, U.S.A.

Printed on acid-free paper.

This is an original work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed are fictional or based on historical fact; any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2016

First Edition, November 9, 2015

Cover Illustration by: Jessie Brugger

Cover Design: Todd Engel, Engel Creative

Proofreader: Nina Cannon Copyeditor: Page Jackson

RUMINATIONS

How reliable is memory? Is what is remembered really what happened? With the passing of time comes embellishment and omission. Is what we see or think we see a reliable record? A recent incident precipitated a wistful glance back.

My first thought was 'I saw a ghost!'

Had I?

I strained to get a better look.

It was he! I was almost certain.

Then again, maybe not.

Blame it on optical wish fulfillment: conjuring up what I want to see based on vague semblances—sloping shoulders, wind-whipped locks of hair, the distinctive stride of his 'don't-give-a-damn swagger' that drew me to him in the first place.

It just could be possible, I kept telling myself. It just could be he.

What if it wasn't he? No big deal! I have been mistaken before.

Still I had to be sure—sure that my aging eyes were playing tricks and it was not at all whom I thought it was.

Then again what if it was—what if Heiko was back in Berlin? The prospect made me giddy.

Naturally, the sighting was inopportune. Routine tasks needing attention occupied my thoughts. I was riding the Berlin subway. After nearly three decades of interruption, regular train service once again freely crisscrosses the reunited city.

Suddenly daylight flooded the car as the train burst from the gloomy tunnel ascending elevated tracks. Century-old tenements rushed past, many spruced-up with modish paint jobs and crowned with glistening glass and chrome cupolas—like grand dames of a certain age gussied up in stylish garments and trendy hairdos.

Casually glancing out the window at shoppers crowding the sidewalks below was when I saw him—or thought I saw him!—dashing into an 'Adults Only' video store! I pressed closer to the glass for a better view but he was up the single step, across the threshold and through frosted-glass doors in a blink, no doubt minimizing exposure to passersby.

Though the glimpse was fleeting, the resemblance was remarkable; so much so, I got off at the next stop and hurried back to the location by foot to investigate.

I had yet to patronize this particular purveyor of adult erotica, so now I had an excuse. With so many new businesses popping up along the one-time seedy Schönhauser Allee, staying current was getting harder.

A sign posted at the entry announced Kinotag or Discount Movie Day. I gave the cashier ten euros and got back change—a few euros saved if I were not mistaken! Buzzed into the arcade's shadowy backrooms, I recognized the all too familiar layout: a maze of dimly lit passageways, private viewing cabinets, and pitch-black cul-de-sacs.

Raw techno beats—mercifully subdued—pulsed through overhead speakers. Determined to make connections, patrons of diverse ages and proclivities lurked about, sizing each other up. The place was popular enough—or at least on this particular afternoon—perhaps owing to the reduced cost of dalliance.

Making a brisk sweep through narrow intersecting corridors, I feared my phantom was settling into a booth and, as some cruisers are wont to do, would pass the next hours encamped and engorged, stimulated by hardcore video images while simultaneously hosting all comers through 'glory' holes strategically cut in the common wall to adjoining stalls.

I checked the WC and adjacent beverages vending machine area. No sign of the apparition glimpsed from elevated tracks. Who knows how long it might take our paths to cross, especially with so many horned steeds rutting about to keep him distracted.

Patronizing such places was a bit out of character for Heiko, when I gave it some thought. He never seemed that interested in sex to begin with and was never very promiscuous. Of course, we change over the years and so do appetites. Perhaps middle age found him more comfortable with his sexuality. From the hubbub going on all around me, he was not alone.

Up and down cubicle rows, I wandered. Some users kept their doors ajar, one eye sizing up prospects, the other taking in lusty on-

screen antics. Quite a few closed doors left to the imagination what transpired out of sight. He could be behind any one of them.

What if I was wrong? Once more doubt set in. What if it was not my old pal but somebody else, somebody resembling him: a doppelganger? That would not be surprising either. Not the first time I hit a brick wall looking for Heiko. Fact is, I had pretty much given up on finding him, but here I was once again clinging to the slenderest of threads.

I positioned myself at what looked to be a central vantage point. Give it an hour, not more, I told myself, my original errands long forgotten.

Meanwhile I had no interest in “connecting” or even amusing myself for that matter. I was firm but polite when overtures were insinuated, indicating with a shrug that I was pursuing a different kind of tale.

That was true. Anticipating an encounter with Heiko after so many years was daunting, exposing conflicting emotions I had not yet fully come to terms with. I was managing to get on quite nicely, not knowing for sure where he was or what he was doing.

Yet, on this particularly cold clear wintry day, he once again took center stage in my ongoing interior monologue. Yet, like anything you want too much and ultimately never fully attain, selective memory has its own seductive appeal.

Time passed with no sightings. I was beginning to worry he might have made a quick purchase—toy, video, lube—and left in the time it took me to backtrack.

It was beyond frustrating yet consoling to know that some patrons are wont to stay out of sight, lost in these labyrinths of lust for hours on end. Then suddenly emerge, vaguely disoriented, adjusting garments, heading toward the exit.

Not so many years ago, I periodically whiled away hours in such places. Now I just wanted to see if it were Heiko or not Heiko. Even in reluctant memories, my old Ossi comrade commands full allegiance.

I was about to call it quits when, finally, the object of my pursuit emerged through the door of a shadowy video cabinet. He moved briskly away down the dim corridor. I followed, heart racing.

The murky lighting and the awkward perspective made partial facial features hard to distinguish. The height was right though, and so was the hair texture: that thatch of thick tangled locks he was forever cutting and styling, streaking and frosting.

I wanted to call out his name but held back, fearful that if it were Heiko, he would not have appreciated so artless a singling-out.

Maneuvering around a partition, I attempted to meet him head-on. When I got to the other side, he was gone! Somehow, during the brief time-lapse he slipped out of sight, perhaps going into yet another video booth.

I was intrigued more than ever, even while convincing myself I had to be mistaken. It couldn't possibly be he. How could it be? How could he be resurfacing all these years later? Maybe he never really left Berlin. Then again, why did he have to live in Berlin anyway?

He could be living in Brandenburg, Hamburg, or some other German 'burg. Anywhere! Abroad! Paris for that matter! So maybe he's here on a visit. Still, how does one substantially disappear without trace in the age of DNA and electronic paper trails?

Yet, that is how it appeared: Heiko had simply vanished.

SEDUCTION

In the mind's eye, snapshots of cherished moments crystallize and become iconic: *tableaux vivant* minutely etched in memory. That's how it is with Heiko.

Memory easily recaptures the first time he entered my consciousness: blithely striding into a crowded café near Alexanderplatz. Animated in lively discourse with two mates, yet clearly keeping an eye open for places to sit.

Perhaps it was the flowing locks, glowing complexion and long vintage military overcoat draped dramatically across his shoulders. In that first glimpse, he was luminous. Natural and charismatic, oblivious to impressions he made, or so it seemed.

That was my maiden trip to infamous East Germany, the first of many visits as it turned out. It was years before the infamous Berlin Wall would come down. I arrived days before in what world press had long dubbed "The Divided City." It was my first trip to Europe.

The oppressive Cold War fortification was solidly in place. Lives were still being lost in attempts to breach it. I found the city's parallel histories fascinating. It made me eager to get on the inside and embrace the romance that had drawn so many others before me.

To know truly a foreign country, understanding the language seemed imperative. To that end, I took a crash conversation course in German only to discover that most people I eventually encountered spoke better English than I did Deutsch.

The first days wandering West Berlin were haphazard with no particular plan. What struck me was how Americanized the city looked and felt. Sartorial styles, international-brand advertising, fast food restaurants were all too familiar.

Ironically the two meat dishes American food culture embraces had origins here—frankfurters and hamburgers, and particularly notable because not only are the names adopted from German cities of origin but, essentially, the forms—sausage or *wurst* and meat patty or *boulette*, as the lumps of ground meat are dubbed locally.

Both served with a roll or bun making them convenient takeaway. Classic German street fare regurgitated for US consumption, now

repackaged, and reintroduced to the Fatherland by Mickey D and The Burger King. The budget bites had come full circle.

The woman who managed the pension where I was staying told me to definitely visit the Empress Sophie-Charlotte's Summer Palace, and in a museum nearby, see the celebrated bust of Egypt's legendary ruler Nefertiti.

I hit the museum first and was startled to discover a grave robber's trove of impressive artifacts and antiquities displayed along with the Nile queen's iconic headdress, but most alarming was seeing the actual Gates from the ancient City of Babylon! How in the heck did they get those? I wondered aloud.

Instead of touring the massive stone pile where German monarchs once summered, I opted to wander the expansive garden out back. There were others taking brisk strolls and one or two joggers.

The grounds looked neglected and the plantings probably not as elaborate as they once were. Certainly, nowhere near the lavishness of Versailles but more than adequate for a seasonal royal residence.

My energy ebbed as daylight dwindled into dusk. I found myself yawning. Still jet lagging, I headed back to my room to grab a nap.

Hurling my weary body onto the fluffy duvet and big soft pillows of the rented bed was unanticipated luxury. At modest prices, too. Once comfortably positioned, I easily drifted off . . . but woke with a start.

For a moment not sure where I was. Enveloped in inky darkness I groped around for a lamp switch. Whatever I was dreaming was gone leaving no trace. Yet it gave me an unsettled feeling—and sudden pangs of hunger. I had barely eaten all day.

I jumped out of bed, pulled on shoes, and went outside looking for something to eat. At the nearest street corner snack wagon, I gobbled down bland currywurst sausages and oily French fries, chased with local brew.

The night air was damp, chilly even. Seduced by the Ku'Damm's glittering display of luxury goods and services I drifted up the broad thoroughfare idly window-shopping.

It was late and traffic was light. Several strikingly attractive young women lingered in doorways or leisurely strolled curbside. They were

stylishly dressed and wholesome looking. Slowly it hit me they were “working girls” discreetly offering themselves to potential clients in passing vehicles.

The women gave me hardly a second glance, street-savvy enough to recognize my orientation, I imagined. Here indisputably was a commercial street tendering to the full spectrum of consumer goods!

Before leaving the States, I collected from various friends and acquaintances phone numbers for three, possibly four, local contacts. As it turned out the first I tried had moved away—or at least the line was no longer in service if I understood the German message correctly. “Kein Anschluss unter dieser Nummer!”

Listed next was Holger. He was the one-time romantic partner of Lorenzo, someone I knew hardly at all. Lorenzo was a genial Venezuelan of Italian ancestry who hit on me one night in a crowded Westside bar. I mentioned my upcoming trip to Berlin.

He boasted of living there the year before, assured me I was definitely going to like it. He suggested I look up his former lover.

“Holger Bambeck,” chimed a melodious baritone on the second ring.

In halting German, I introduced myself and explained how I got the number. The voice on the other end quickly pooh-poohed my awkward phrasing.

“Don’t stress out,” he said. “I speak English.”

His tone was matter-of-fact, not at all condescending.

“I’m never going to get any practice if everybody speaks English!” I pouted.

I mentioned the Lorenzo connection prompting the call.

“Lorenzo!” he gasped giddily. “Where did you see Lorenzo?”

“He’s living in New York.”

“Really?” He sounded surprised. “I thought he went back to Caracas. Who can keep up with that sexy empanada?”

“I have a feeling you did,” I kidded.

“Well we’ll just have to compare notes,” he retorted coyly. “Where are you staying?”

I told him the name of the pension.

“You’re practically in the neighborhood. Come over for coffee now if you want,” he gamely suggested. “I’m off today.”

“I’d love to.”

He told me how to find his place on foot. His directions easily followed. When the ornately carved door of his flat swung open, a great bear of a man greeted me with playful hug and double cheek brushes.

Stepping back to look me over, he smiled and shook his head approvingly.

“With your beautiful skin and big brown eyes you are going to have lots of fun in Berlin,” he assured me.

He led me down a long corridor into a bright spacious kitchen flooded with afternoon daylight.

“This place is huge,” I gushed.

“Yes” he said, “These flats from the Kaiser’s time are wonderful but expensive to maintain.”

While fresh coffee filtered into a clear flask, he arranged packaged cookies—the kind thoughtful hosts keep on-hand for unexpected guests—on a colorful plate.

Picking up the coffee pot, he told me to grab two mugs from an open shelf. We settled at one end of the long dining table. He poured. The coffee was stronger than my usual brew. I added more milk.

“So what’s Lorenzo up to these days—that mad Latin stud?”

“Well, last time I saw him, actually the only time I saw him: he was doing great, a very agreeable guy.”

“South Americans are good company; and so good in other ways,” he beamed. “Did you and he get *acquainted*?” no mistaking the inference.

“Technically, no, we never got that far,” I sheepishly confessed.

“Well, you missed out. We had great times when he lived in Berlin. Let’s just say he has natural gifts—and he keeps on giving!” Holger gushed.

While we chatted, Holger’s flat mates floated in and out, some saying hello, others completely ignoring us. He explained that this was a ‘WeGe’ or ‘wohngemeinschaft,’ a cooperative living

arrangement as it were. He shared household costs and chores with five others.

“Two lesbians, two other gay guys, Yolanda—she’s transitioning—and I make six,” he tallied. “It’s much better than living alone. I could never afford a flat like this on my own.”

To pay his share he jobbed as a home health attendant for housebound retirees, quickly adding, “My real love is music. Weekends I lay down tracks at dance clubs around town. You come hear me work my magic sometime.”

“Yeah, definitely, I’m open for anything.”

“I can put you on the guest list,” he offered.

“In Berlin, do as the Berliners do! Put me down.”

“So you’re a photographer, I believe you mentioned?” he asked somewhat awkwardly.

“Not exactly, I do photo research and archiving.”

“Sounds like a great job: sitting around all day looking at pictures.”

“Well I like to think it’s a little more complicated than that, but basically you’re right!” I conceded. “Some days I can literally slog through thousands of images looking for the right ones.”

“Well, you came to the right place. Germany is full of picture archives. You think you might stay and work here for a while?”

“Who knows, I haven’t given it much thought yet. Anything’s possible.”

“It’s easy to get flats. Rents are cheap. Checkout Kreuzberg, it’s sort of our East Village. Factory spaces converted to studios. Used to be mostly Turkish guest worker families, but artists and musicians are moving in. There’s even a cruisy café to check out the local action. If you stay longer you might want to get a place.”

“At the moment I have no plans other than a visit,” I assured him.

The next day I followed Holger’s lead and took my first Berlin subway ride to visit Kreuzberg. The rundown tenements and former commercial buildings certainly had scruffy charm to match any gentrifying Manhattan neighborhood.

Rather than Hispanics, swarthy, hairy, heavily bearded Turks set the ethnic flavor. They created a Little Ankara with thriving businesses offering the specialties and services of their homeland. Heavily veiled women in traditional burkas were common sights.

Gentrifying interlopers were easy to spot. They sported goofy haircuts or cleanly shaved pates, garbed in funky thrift shop finds or outré fashions created by upcoming designers.

For a brew and a nosh, I stopped by the gay-friendly Café O that Holger lauded. Mohawk-coiffed punks, bearded longhairs, and jackbooted skins spiced up the lunchtime mix. Thick smokers' fog gave the place a nighttime feel.

I sat at the bar, ordered a beer, and pointing to already prepared sandwiches displayed in a glass case ordering in what I thought was passable German, "Ich möchte gerne eins." I would like one.

"You want it—take it!" the server snapped back without missing a beat. Not sure what startled me more—his unaccented English or the self-service!

"Plates are on the bar next to them," he added.

Without a street map, I just wandered. As I turned into one relatively deserted side street, an arresting stretch of the notorious Wall abruptly confronted me.

Here was one of those places where the city had been unceremoniously chopped in two, irrespective of traditional or logical boundaries. Colorful layers of overlapping graffiti and caricatures lent a note of optimism to the otherwise sinister and depressing landscape.

The curvature of the Wall at this jointure and proximity to nearby tenements gave the cul-de-sac prison-yard ambience.

To better decipher the gaudy markings, I moved closer. The Wall was easily nine-feet high and topped with spikes and barbed wire. The jumble of slogans and crude drawings scrawled on the barrier were passionate.

A photographer was snapping pictures of the Wall art. There were voices of children playing nearby. Their shrieks and laughter offered a hopeful note. How similar to this was life on the other side of the Wall?

The more I thought about it the better question seemed: Is the Wall meant to keep us *out*—or keep them *in*?

I posed the question to Holger on my next visit.

His answer was emphatic: “Both! In fact, to understand what the Wall is really about, you have to experience it from both sides. Only then can you fully appreciate the human dimension it represents. You must definitely go east for the full Berlin experience,” he urged.

Privately, I was skittish about making a visit. Except for their extraordinary athletes, I heard nothing but negative stuff about East Germany: a rigidly controlled society and the secret police were everywhere. It sounded downright Orwellian, especially the way they restricted foreigner access to the country and did not allow its own citizens to travel outside the East Bloc.

Hard to imagine an entire populace convinced that the Wall was there to protect them from the evil West! It was definitely a living history lesson. Still, confronting the collateral damage of such edicts left me ambivalent.

Sensing my hesitation, Holger sweetened the proposition: “I’ve got family over there. I can get my cousin to take you around.”

The prospect of having a native guide was tempting. I had come this far. There was no point in not going over for at least a few hours. Meeting Holger’s cousin would be a great advantage. On the fourth day after my arrival, I made plans to go east.

Check Point Charlie is the more celebrated of two crossing points open to transiting foreign nationals. The first thing I noticed approaching the border was a prominently positioned sign—translated into four languages no less—English, French, Russian and German—warning ominously:

You Are Now Leaving The American Sector

Monitoring traffic were wholesome-looking American soldiers smartly uniformed in crisp fatigues, white safety helmets, and red

armbands emblazoned with MP—Military Police. Fresh-faced and disarmingly earnest, many were barely out of adolescence.

Four groups paused to pose and snap photos of one another with the kiosk and soldiers as backdrop. On a nearby corner, what looked from their somber dress to be a group of East European dissidents or refugees milled around chain smoking, looking expectant, even anxious.

Beyond the multi-lingual warning sign loomed the forbidding barrier. Constructed of stark gray cinder block topped with metal spikes and grids of barbed wire, it was intentionally inhospitable.

I couldn't help thinking how familiar the whole setting was from post-war spy fiction—both cinematic and literary! It was hard not to imagine the rogues' gallery of facile sleuths and crafty villains—real and conjured—that had passed back and forth through the years. I started seeing the assembled cast of characters in a more melodramatic light.

An outburst of cheering and applause grabbed my attention. Some hundred paces or so from the checkpoint a crowd was gathering along the Wall. My first thought was somebody had escaped, had fled to freedom.

The mix of uniformed police, emergency vehicles, press trucks and spectators was what one expected to see on such spectacular and fraught occasions. I edged over to see what was going on.

Closer, I saw what was causing the commotion. Moving deftly along the notorious boundary's ersatz canvas was a bespectacled sylph of immense dexterity. He was efficiently sketching a chain of interconnected figures in broad bold brush strokes.

I soon recognized the guerilla art pioneer by his trademark spectacles and milky complexion. Nimbly he applied vivid strokes of color in his singular minimalist style.

The chilling barrier, I later learned, besides being an impediment to free movement, provided a public canvas—on the Western side at least. Where artists, from rank novices to renowned masters, feel compelled to leave their mark to protest what the Wall represented.

The nimble artist, splotted with color, totally focused on his creation as cameras recorded and the curious swarmed around asking questions and making comments.

My impulse was to stick around and eventually say hello—do the fellow gay American flirt thing, but it didn't look like he was anywhere near taking a break. Better just to keep moving if I wanted to see the old city center by daylight. It was already past noon and knowing how fall days get shorter and shorter, I headed back to the border crossing.

Once again, beaming GIs waved me along. Maneuvering around cars lining up, I found the pedestrian walkway and made my way into the customs shed—for in truth it was no more than that—to secure the mandatory travel visa.

The hall was crowded and not terribly well lit; the wait was long; and the décor not especially visitor friendly. Signs clearly designated each queue: some for West Germans and some for foreigners or *Auslanders* like me. There was no seating; you stood no matter how long it took.

The facility's stripped down look probably had not changed too dramatically since hurriedly put in place with the building of the Wall in the early 1960s.

A great sob broke the muted silence. A rejected applicant fled past in tears; a man steps out of line and walks briskly after her, eyes averted.

A cluster of East German border guards entered the hall conspicuously armed with automatic weapons slung over their shoulders, no doubt of Soviet origin. The drab green uniforms, imposing arms display, and rigid unforgiving demeanor made their intentions clear.

They were in the business of intimidation. Upon closer inspection, many were young, raw recruits, barely out of training probably, yet already carrying themselves with palpable insolence, sinister reminders of the totalitarian authority they embody.

The deadly earnestness of their deportment made me uneasy. I was not alone. There was guarded wariness in faces all around me. It

was one way the “Vo-Po,” Volkspolizei or People’s Police, discourage potential troublemakers.

This palpable intimidation controlled a nation. Seldom spoken outright but treacherous pressure dictated that “if you do not do as required, conform to state priorities, you will be dealt with.” The same way gangsters operate, an impression reinforced by the nation’s thuggish creator Josef Stalin.

The infamous Soviet dictator zealously brokered the division of Germany after the War while gobbling up much of Eastern Europe as the Soviet lion’s share of war spoils. Later exposed as a mass-murderer, Stalin was responsible for tens of millions of non-combat deaths during his reign.

Finally, my turn came to approach the Customs counter. The uniformed official sitting behind tinted security glass is hard to make out. The lights positioned to best illuminate the visa candidate, not the customs agent.

He never looks directly at me.

“*Passe!*” he barks. Passport!

I pushed the document through the slot at the bottom of the glass. The setup reminds me of precautions cash businesses take in high crime areas of the US.

He picks up my passport and examines it closely; I assumed looking for any flaws that might indicate forgery. He opens to the photograph and raises the document closer to his eyes. He looks at me, he looks at the passport photo; he looks back at me and then at the photograph for a second time.

They match; now, patronage!

In halting English, he demands 31 West German marks: six for a one-day visa and 25 in an obligatory exchange for East money—a currency with no free market value. Such transactions were one way the GDR obtains hard currency to bolster their stagnant economy.

The agent stamped my passport and pushed it back through the slot. Tucked inside was the visa document, an illegible photocopy on a slip of paper. For my West German marks he returned the equivalent in freshly minted East German bills and light alloy coins.

“Keep the visa with you, it must be returned,” he warned, adding, “It’s forbidden to carry East German currency back to the West.”

His tone suggested disobedience garnered severe consequences. The encounter made me anxious, as if harboring independent thoughts somehow violated their all-encompassing authority. I was already a suspect; so unwelcoming the border keepers made the crossing.

At that moment, I had an interrogation fantasy—strapped to a chair, sensory deprived. It was a depressing vision. I vowed to be careful. Once I passed through to the East side of the control point and stepped beyond the gated barricade into the open street a sense of relief washed over me having been through the worst of it.

I refocused to take note of new surroundings. The Eastern side of the infamous checkpoint left one in a relatively desolate part of town. Down long narrow treeless streets, few pedestrians were visible. The squat but massive Prussian-era buildings loomed like staid old Teutonic shamans—austere and vaguely forbidding.

Later I discovered desolation was true of streets with any proximity to the Wall. Activity too close to the sacred barricade was discouraged. Buildings along the Wall stood derelict, sealed shut, whole blocks demolished.

Left standing, there was too much temptation to escape, despite the deadly buffer zone known as No Man’s Land that runs between the barrier’s double-walls. Closer to the city center, approaching the celebrated boulevard Unter den Linden, pedestrian and vehicle traffic picked up considerably.

It was immediately apparent that this side of town was older, grander, much of the architecture monumental, if clearly neglected. Crumbling, bullet-pocked facades were reminders of the pitched battles that took place on these streets during the war.

I promptly noticed the absence of commercial advertising, no colorful billboards or electric signs enticing consumers with flashy slogans and seductive product depictions.

The visual dullness of the cityscape made it hard to ignore the aesthetic eyesores the State raised in the 1950s and 60s. Housing blocks and office towers, constructed of unadorned brick or metal alloys, in numbing utilitarian blandness.

There was little interaction among pedestrians crossing streets or waiting at lights. Compact Trabans—or Trabbis as the beloved automobiles are affectionately called—rumbled by in intermittent packs spewing noxious fumes, sputtering and choking.

They moved awkwardly, boxy crates strapped to four wheels, seemingly lacking any true sense of auto-dynamics. A sprinkling of other makes, mostly Eastern European and Russian-made, shared the roadways, but Trabbis by far outnumbered.

With map in hand and help from a passerby, I made it to Museum Island where housed are two of the city's notable collections of antiquities. The austere Pergamont and baroque Bohan are just steps from each other.

Whether it was the striking friezes on the plundered Altar in the Pergamont or gallery after gallery of neoclassical statuary in the Bohan, the sheer enormity of the pillaging was astounding.

There was more than enough art and artifacts contained in the two vast structures to overwhelm the senses of the most inveterate visitor much less casual tourists like myself. Apparently, what Germany lacked in securing colonies they made up stockpiling ancient treasures.

Sadly, the chambers exhibiting these impressive artifacts desperately needed refurbishing. Peeling walls and ceilings gutted in places from water damage needed attention. Display cases, visibly sagging, showed their age.

Monitoring the galleries at every turn were zaftig matrons in dark blue uniforms. Something about their smug expressions was off-putting. Reminiscent of prison guards in a B-movie, I thought. I could easily see one of them giving wayward visitors a good throttling.

Relieving myself in the Herren WC at the Bohan, I noticed scrawled over the toilet water tank a chastising reference to the emerging AIDS epidemic. *Es gibt kein AIDS im Ostern--oder?* (Loose translation: There is no AIDS in the East—or is there?)

It startled me. In those early days the sensitive subject was barely discussed in Western circles. There had been recent claims in the Soviet press that the disease was purely a phenomenon of the

decadent West. There was no such thing as homosexuals in communist Europe!

This was additionally jarring given that I hadn't let appreciation of the astonishing collections distract me from admiring other admirers crossing paths in pursuit of high culture. Most were Western tourists like me and not as interesting.

I wanted to meet locals, real East Berliners or Osis as Holger called them—coming from Ost, the German word for East. Happily, I was getting a chance. Nearing five o'clock, I headed over to the Friedrichstrasse train station to keep my date with Holger's cousin. I was to wait in front of a bookshop located in the shadow of the train overpass.

As arranged, Natasha was standing outside the bookstore. In one hand, she prominently displayed a copy of "Neues Deutschland," the East German state newspaper. That was the agreed upon signal for me to recognize her. As I approached, she was in animated chatter with another girl about the same age.

I waited a moment before interrupting.

"Natasha?" I confirmed.

"Yes, Natasha Polovich, reporting for escort duty," she joked, nearly clicking her heels. She made a little curtsy and looking into my eyes, batted heavily made-up lashes.

"You're Russian?" I asked a bit startled by her routine.

"Yes, darling," she laughed, "half Russian, half German—a baby of the *other* occupation."

Later I learned her German mother "married" a Russian soldier stationed in East Berlin with post-war Soviet forces.

"So what are your impressions of the German People's Republic?" she demanded somewhat imperiously.

Was she putting me on?

"So far"—long pause—"so good!" I quipped. What else could I say at that point? Her English was impressive. So was her outfit. She turned heads in full punk regalia, a wardrobe that was probably not hard to come by given the bales of used surplus clothes shipped in periodically from the West.

Her flaxen hair cut in a modified Mohawk. She had blackened eyebrows and eyelids, probably exhausting more than one eyebrow pencil in the process. Definitely achieving the menacing punk babe look, one that would be very competitive were she in the Western part of town, even more so noted for punks among many scene alternatives.

The irony, of course, I was soon to discover, Natasha was a sweetheart. She just looked intimidating.

"This is Elke," she said introducing her companion. In contrast to Natasha, Elke looked comparatively ordinary; her clothes unadorned, hair pulled back, no makeup.

"You are my first Black American!" Elke gushed and, realizing how it might sound, grew slightly flush.

"And hopefully not your last," I deadpanned. "And since you're keeping count, you're my second East German!"

She giggled, relaxed.

I thanked Natasha for coming to meet me.

"No problem. I enjoy meeting people from the West," she replied. "And you are *not* my first Black American!" Her tone implying they might have been more than passing acquaintances.

We all laughed.

"So let's get going," Natasha proposed. "Before Stasi take notice."

We started walking.

"Who?" I asked.

"The secret police," she growled under her breathe.

Before long Elke excused herself, saying she had marketing to do before shops closed.

"We'll probably see us again," she said, perhaps knowing something I did not. As she walked off, it dawned on me Elke was there to make sure everything went well before leaving Natasha alone with a stranger from the West.

"So my cousin says you want to see the *real* East Berlin."

"I want to meet natives like you, maybe go to places Western tourists wouldn't find on their own."

"Like gay locales?" she teased.

“Busted. Is it that obvious? Yeah, I guess that would be of interest. I’m surprised that—well, a straight girl is going to show me around.”

“Are you forgetting my gay cousin sent you? Nothing is normal in East Germany,” she assured me with a wink. “And we don’t discriminate. Now let’s think: it’s too early for the night bars and too late for the day cafés, so the best place to have coffee now is Café Horn by Alexander-Platz.” She led the way.

Street traffic was picking up. Shops were closing. Workers poured from office buildings, many descended nearby subway steps. Lines of patient commuters crowded tram and bus stops. Pretty much unencumbered by traffic, a steady stream of single-driver cars zipped along the wide avenues.

Despite the clank of metal streetcar wheels and the sigh of bus air-breaks, the city center was remarkably quiet. Even waiting in close proximity there was little interaction. In his or her own way, each was decompressing from the day’s demands. Indeed, most seemed either oblivious or slightly wary of those around them.

When we got to Café Horn I was immediately intrigued. The space age architecture was dramatic and the place was lively. We had to wait for seats. The crowd was hip looking in a Western sort of way.

They resembled the exact counterculture archetypes supposedly anathema to the People’s State—longhairs, punks, garden variety slackers; and then types you might expect to see in a workers café—young mothers tending babies in strollers, powerfully built laborers in stained work clothes swigging beers and chain smoking.

Officially, alternative lifestyles did not exist in East Germany. Yet here they were. The café’s futuristic decor only tweaked the atmosphere. The glass and chrome design was both sculptural and functional. A circular counter dominated the interior. Around it fixed stools alternated with nooks seating four, designed so servers could reach each patron without ever stepping out from behind the counter.

A couple leaving indicated two places freeing up. We settled on adjoining stools and studied the menu. Between puffs on an unfiltered cigarette she parked in an ashtray under the counter, the server turned to us. We ordered regular coffees and the cake special.

“You're going to be disappointed,” Natasha warned.

“What do you mean?”

“The cakes here are not sweet like Western cakes. Amis always say it.”

“Well, in the long run it's probably healthier,” I noted, adding dryly, “In the States sugar is practically a basic food group,”

Speaking of which I noticed there was no dispenser for packets of sugar on the countertop. Other diner basics like catsup, salt and pepper, Sweet & Low, even napkins were also missing in action. A single cube of sugar and a thin paper napkin came with the coffee order.

“Has Holger played any of his club mixes for you yet?” Natasha asked.

“No not yet. Actually I want to go to a club when he's mixing live sometime.”

“Lucky you! What kind of music do you listen to?”

Before I could respond, she announced, in case I was not a fan and would say something disparaging, “I *love* Iggy Popp—don't you? He lives in West Berlin. Holger says he shares a flat with David Bowie. What I would give to be there just once.”

“I tend more toward R&B and some danceable pop,” I offered diplomatically.

“Oh you mean Motown, Michael Jackson, Prince—or even that new glam-gal Madonna? I can't get enough *Material Girl*.”

“Yeah, she's good. I love the video,” I said, a little surprised by Natasha's familiarity with Western artists. “Is Madonna already a known commodity in East Germany?”

“Of course, but so far have only heard her sing,” she said a bit wistful. “I'm dying to see the videos.” She scrunched her face in disgust. “Some people get West German TV broadcasts but in my neighborhood reception is lousy. I hear MTV is coming to West Berlin.”

Natasha not only spoke remarkably good English but also seemed up on the Western popular music scene. I was a little embarrassed my German was wanting.

“What about the Brits—Queen, Duran Duran, the Pet Shop Boys?” I asked, not that I was a fan. It was more to make conversation.

“They’re cool too,” she allowed. “But they don’t get to me like the Amis.”

“How do you manage to keep up on the Western releases?” I finally asked so impressed at her familiarity.

“AFN, of course!”

“What’s that?”

“The Armed Forces Network, the radio station in West Germany for your soldiers,” she explained, incredulous. “Don’t you know about it? We get it on most radios though sometimes Stasi jams the signal. And Holger always smuggles in compilations of new stuff when he visits.”

I was astonished. I heard so many stories about how oppressive living in the East is. How rigid and conformist, how strictly the state censored Western influences. Yet here was Natasha blithely managing to overcome that obstacle and go undetected. Apparently, she was not alone.

Even under a rigid system, that presumed cradle-to-grave jurisdiction, there were clearly subversives. This exposure to a ‘communistic socialist counterculture’—an oxymoron to be sure—is something I never suspected existed. Yet it made perfect sense. This glimpse of a parallel society made me an unwitting conspirator and for some reason that gave me pleasure.

The café was doing brisk business. My seat faced the entrance. From the opening and closing of the café’s doors, I could not help observing arrivals and exits, unconsciously keeping track of those coming and going.

I was about to remark on how this once unimaginable scene was possible in a city in the Soviet bloc when in burst a commanding radiance flanked by fawning acolytes. At first take, he was nothing less than dazzling. Long-limbed, flowing mane, self-assured—I was smitten on the spot. I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

“Oh that’s Heiko,” Natasha volunteered matter-of-factly, seeing how his arrival had usurped my attention entirely. “We were at university together.”

“Is he into guys?” I asked, cutting to the chase.

“I don’t know but it probably wouldn’t be a big deal. He is very easygoing. He gets along with everybody.”

Heiko and his pals soon found seats in a nook comfortably within view. “So say hello,” I prompted.

“That’s so un-cool!” she protested. “Be patient, you’ll meet him.”

Other people Natasha knew said hello. She dutifully introduced me as an “Ami direkt aus New York.”

New York. The two words eliciting envy or desire or other imperceptible reactions.

Natasha was right. Heiko was keenly interested in foreigners. As soon as he got wind of a Black American, he came over ostensibly to bum a cigarette. The rest was easy.

“Marlboro filters!” he cooed taking one from a pack I proffered. “American brands are the best.”

With a smooth flick of my Bic, I lit his then mine. We both took deep drags and exhaled simultaneously creating a billowing pillow of smoke on the countertop between us. He was amused and so was I. I was determined to make it the first of many shared ‘cigarette moments’ to come.

Natasha made introductions.

“So how do you know each other?” he asked, curiosity trumps restraint.

“He knows my Wessi cousin. You remember Holger?”

“Yes, yes, you gave me his tapes. Do you make music too?”

“No, no. Holger is a friend of somebody I met in New York,” I explained.

“*New York,*” he repeated the two syllables as if it were some mythical place. “One day I visit America, maybe even live there” his certainty of tone convincing. “I will shop on Fifth Avenue at the Saks, dance all night at Studio 54, and visit Andy Warhol in his art factory.”

“Hey, take me with you,” I teased. “I lived there for a while and haven’t done any of that.”

“Meet Andy Warhol?”

“And go shopping on Fifth Avenue!” I joked.

He threw a slightly confused look my way. I winked back playfully.

He got my jest and laughed.

“You live directly in Manhattan?” he asked.

“Yes I do!” No point adding it was not a particularly desirable neighborhood.

“How big is your flat?” he asked unabashedly. “Maybe you can put me up for a few days when I first arrive?”

Wheeling and dealing, and his chances of visiting the US under current restrictions were nil at best.

“No problem! Plenty of room,” I said, playing along, half wishing it could really be so. I thought he was having fun with me. “You can sleep on the inflatable guest mattress,” I offered, adding in thought, *until I get you into my bed!*

“So what do you do?” he asked. “Are you an artist?”

“Oh no, not quite, though I like to think what I do is an art in itself. I do photo research. I pore through picture archives looking for particular images book publishers, ad agencies or documentary filmmakers need for projects.”

“Photo research,” he repeated. “Sounds like a great job: looking at pictures all day.”

“Yeah, I like it,” I allowed. Often the reaction I get.

I wasn’t sure if he was gay or not, but he was accessible and easy to get along with, just as Natasha said. So many people with exceptional looks like his tend to be a bit stuck on themselves, nose in the air. He came across as natural and guileless. Of course, this was the East, and things were different. Narcissism is probably more a Western gay thing.

Yet what most immediately impressed me about the fabulous Mr. Heiko was that he, too, spoke English. I complimented him on his command of my native language.

“My mother learned from the Brits,” he explained. “She worked in the British sector after the War. As long as I can remember we talked in both German and English.”

“Well that certainly is a gift,” I assured him. “I wish my German was as fluent.” Clearly, his mother’s aspirations for him stretched beyond the borders of East Germany.

“How long you stay in Germany?” he asked.

“Open ended at the moment. I’m on extended vacation.”

“Will you be coming back to the East? I want to show you my drawings. You must come hear my band. I play bass guitar and do backup vocals.”

He sure wasted no time reeling me in. “Sounds like you are a busy guy,” I said.

He beamed appreciation and gave me a little wink. I felt we were making instant connections. The more he revealed about himself the more smitten I was.

“Paint, play, sing— you’re a true multi-talent!” I extolled.

“What is that?” he demanded. “Multi-talent?”

He seemed about to take it the wrong way.

“A man of many talents, multiple gifts,” I clarified realizing that perhaps he was unfamiliar with the expression.

“Oh yes, many talents—and talents yet to be revealed.” The most inscrutable expression crossed his face. “But not here in the East,” he confided, his voice dropping perceptibly. “As soon as I can swing it,” he made a jumping motion with two fingers on the palm of his other hand. He then let out a hearty laugh. I wasn’t sure if he meant it or was being ironic.

Natasha was getting antsy. We were kind of ignoring her even though she was sitting there and could butt in at any time.

“The café closes soon,” she snorted. Indeed, the server had stopped taking orders and was tidying up.

“Oh schisse, I got to go!” Heiko announced abruptly. He signaled his pals across the counter.

“I’m coming back over again soon,” I mentioned quickly. “Maybe I could check out your band, see your artwork.”

“Super!” His face lit up. He tore an edge off Natasha’s newspaper and jotted down a phone number.

“Call me and tell me when you are coming. Leave a message if I’m not there. We normally jam on weekends.” He handed me the scrap of paper.

I didn’t think much of it at the time but soon learned that to have a home telephone in the East you needed to have very good connections or lots of patience.

“Here,” I said. “You take these,” and gave him the rest of my cigarette pack.

He smiled appreciatively. “Don’t forget to call me!”

“I won’t!”

Heiko joined his pals. They headed out the door. I wished he stayed longer, or better, I was going with him.

Natasha touching my hand brought me back to earth.

“He’s really terrific,” I purred.

“Yes, he’s a charmer,” she concurred. “If you still want, now’s a good time to check out the gay locales.”

After the encounter with Heiko, going off to what would no doubt be tawdry dives seemed anti-climatic. “I’ll just head back across the border,” I said. “It’s been a long day.”

Natasha seemed indifferent. “It’s up to you; we can do it another time. You said you’re coming back.”

“Oh before I forget...” I reached into my backpack and retrieved a plastic shopping bag. It contained a half-kilo of fresh ground coffee, gummy bear candies, and a jar of strawberry preserves. “Holger told me these are your favorites.”

When she saw the goodies, her face lit up.

“Oh, gawd, real coffee,” she cried, “and decent jam for my toast! You don’t know how happy this makes me!” She threw her arms around me in a big hug.

Holger told me to purchase them as a thank you for Natasha meeting me, explaining its customary when you visit people in the East to bring gifts, and Western foodstuffs were always popular.

No matter how well the communists said the system was working, there were definitely limited consumer choices. Eventually I came to understand that people in the East felt they deserved these little

tributes from their better-off Western brethren. Presumably, they would do the same if roles reversed.

Natasha offered to take me back to the border crossing. I resisted. “Just point me in the right direction, I’ll find it.”

I wanted to walk alone, sort out the day and get a feel for this strangely divided city’s nocturnal side. I was feeling very privileged. There was something exciting about stumbling into the East Berlin underground—and better, unanticipated.

Off the main drags, the city streets were poorly illuminated. I saw no signs posted for Checkpoint Charlie along the way. No point in rubbing it in the faces of their citizens that there was a way out that they, for the most part, had no chance to use.

After several false turns and improvised hand gestures from helpful passersby, I got back to the border crossing. It was eerie how desolate the area was, the air chilly and damp with fog. My approach out of the mist startled a pair of armed border guards standing at the gate. They eyed me first with some alarm, then gestured me through.

Exiting East to West went faster than entering. The processing area was nearly empty. As I moved from the oppressive atmosphere of the German People’s Republic into the tranquil West Berlin night, I felt both relief and a lingering fascination.

No longer in an environment that felt intimidating, yet eager to return. Meeting Heiko had certainly sweetened the visit. I was already making plans to see him again—and soon.

DAY TRIPPER

Nearly overnight, I became interested in all things East German. On a bookshelf in the pension common room, I found some tourist guides that described the post-war division. I was eager to share impressions with whomever I encountered—even the elderly clerk working nightshifts at the reception desk. He was ‘a born Berliner,’ he frequently boasted.

“Yes, I can still remember when American soldiers walked the streets with bayonets at the end of their rifles,” he told me one night when we got to talking. “It may sound scary but it wasn’t. They were great for us kids. I got to ride in a tank more than once.”

“Lots of chocolate candy too,” I corroborated. Every Hollywood war movie set in occupied Europe always showed American soldiers giving children of the conquered bars of chocolate.

“Chocolate yes, but cigarettes are what we preferred,” he assured me. “They were as good as hard currency. In the weeks’ right after the armistice, anything you really wanted sold on the black market. I got my first boots for packs of Lucky Strikes a drunken Ami gave me!”

“In America cigarettes are sometimes called ‘brown gold.’ Now I see why.”

I called Holger and told him how well the visit East went. I thanked him profusely for urging me to go and having Natasha meet me.

“Quite a reversal, my reluctant traveler,” he teased. “I practically had to push you over.”

“You were right. It is definitely worth a visit. Not to mention how friendly the locals are.”

“So you met someone!” he quickly sensed.

“Yes, sort of...” I stammered. “We’ll see.”

“Come over soon and tell me all about it. In fact, I have some friends you should meet. They both grew up in the East and managed to get out years ago.”

“Yes, great, I’d like that.”

A few days later Holger introduced me to Manfred and Franc. They were a committed couple who had been teenage lovers in the

Peoples Republic. They managed to escape and survived to talk about it.

“We were Young Pioneers,” Manfred allowed, not concealing his disdain. “It was the communist youth organization for all loyal East German boys who aspire to Party membership.”

“Manfred was group leader,” recalled Franc. “The first time I set eyes on him in those skimpy uniform shorts and chest full of merit badges I was in love.”

“Yes, I was an excellent prospect,” laughed Manfred. “On the fast-track you might say.”

“I can’t imagine what that would be like now,” Franc offered.

“I can and it’s best we’re out of it,” Manfred snarled. “The moment we became lovers it was over. Eventually Stasi find out everything and start keeping a file. You never knew who informs on you. It can even be your own mother.”

“Don’t say that!” Franc shuddered. “They made Mutti’s life miserable when I left. They threatened to jail her. It was terrible. The poor woman knew absolutely nothing about our plans.”

“They are ruthless and methodical,” Manfred agreed.

I was fascinated. They were living history.

“How did you get out exactly?” I asked.

“For Manfred, it was easy,” Franc shrugged. “He got transit visas and permission to work in the West. One day he doesn’t return. Me? I escaped in the false bottom of a VW bus. My first cousin from Bremerhaven rigged it and drove me out.”

“Getting out was the best thing we ever did,” Manfred added. “Had we not taken the gamble and stayed, we would be bitter like so many others who wanted to leave and couldn’t.”

“Yes, but we pay a price. We lose our families,” Franc bemoaned.

Though forbidden to maintain contact to family in the East, they stayed in touch secretly, sending hard currency and presents through intermediaries whenever possible.

“Soon Mutti retires and then is freely able to visit us,” Franc sighed happily. Retirees, presumably beyond their use as labor and dependent on state pensions, are regarded low flight risks.

Earlier Germany's travails in the post-war era vaguely interested me, but now I wanted to know everything. The consequences of division and occupation engaged my imagination. Relations between the various allies; the appropriation of city sectors; the little nuances of protocol between East and West that kept tensions down—were suddenly more fascinating than I ever imagined...

It was late. The video booth crowd was thinning out. I was getting restless. Little by little, I was accepting that this pursuit was a complete waste of time. Heiko had disappeared years ago. For all I knew he might very well be dead. He had to be! There was no other explanation. Yet, he was not the kind of person who could go missing without repercussions. Seemingly, he had. It fit with other unpredictable aspects of his character.

On my second East visit—little more than a week after the first—I arranged to meet both Heiko and Natasha—separately—or so I thought. To my surprise, Natasha greeted me at the Friedrichstrasse subway station at the time Heiko had agreed. She told me he went ahead to get setup for rehearsal.

"They use space in a factory ruin on the edge of the city," she informed me. "It's not official. You'd never find it on your own."

She was right.

We took a long subway ride and then hopped on a tram. Passing along dreary street after street of crumbling tenement blocks and vacant lots, things looked bleak and inhospitable. I had no idea where we were.

We got off the tram and, after a longish walk through an abandoned industrial park, the faint squeal of screeching guitars pierce the stillness. Natasha roughly pushed open a battered metal door to one of the buildings and the music got louder.

We climbed a flight of rickety wooden steps. Opening a second door revealed an expansive loft space flooded with daylight. Dead center Heiko's rehearsal was in progress.

The four musicians played harsh gritty rifts. A pretty woman with a high scratchy range handled vocals. She kept sweeping wisps of

long dark hair away from her face as she screeched out lyrics over the band's driving beats. After a while, I was not concentrating on the music so much as watching Heiko give his all on bass guitar and backup vocals. He was immersed completely in the moment. It really turned me on.

Natasha grabbed me and pulled me onto the floor. We danced with playful abandon to a couple of energetic numbers. It was fun and a way to keep warm. The place was freezing but the adrenalin rush was so authentic we ignored the frigid temperature.

While the musicians took a short break, Natasha gave me the Four-One-One. Heiko and his bandmates set up the impromptu studio without official clearance. Essentially, they were squatting but that too could never be official.

Arranged haphazardly were battered pieces of furniture—odd chairs, a rickety table. Crude piping vented out a window led to an oil barrel re-fitted for wood burning. A long power cord snaked across the floor and out the window to a pirated source in an adjoining structure.

When the second session ended, Heiko came over and gave me a big friendly hug. Performing clearly energized him. His enthusiasm was palpable. Droplets of perspiration made his face glisten.

I told him I was glad he invited me to watch rehearsal.

"I am too! We don't get to play for many Americans," he teased. "In fact, before today none at all," he chortled. His elation was contagious.

"A fitting command performance then," I teased back.

Reaching for my smokes, I completed the gesture by offering him one.

"I thought you'd never ask!" he quipped, deftly plucking from the proffered pack and smoothly inserting the filtered tip between his full lush lips. He waited for a light.

I flicked my Bic. A high blue flame spouted forth. I lit the smokes. His devilish smile was seductive. We inhaled simultaneously and slowly exhaled intersecting streams of smoke. The rituals of tobacco use gave us connection.

“And if you’re very good, there may be even more where these come from,” I winked. Whatever he wanted, I was game to get.

“So what do you think of the stuff we played?” he inquired casually, smoothly bringing around a subject I was prepared to ignore, and which he was determined not to let me.

I hate moments when you don’t quite know what to say. I didn’t want to say anything that wasn’t constructive or misconstrued as negative.

“Geil!” I roared, “so geil!”

It was a word I recently learned meant among other things ‘hot’ or ‘horny’ and a nice catchall of a compliment.

His face lit up.

“So where do you want to go with the band?” I asked moving to a more neutral topic.

“Mostly we make music for ourselves and might play at one of the art show happenings.”

Happenings? Very sixties, I thought.

“What *happens* at these happenings?” I asked.

“Different artists get together. Poets recite, musicians play, actors do monologues, designers introduce fashion trends, and visual artists hang new work. It is like an alternative arts festival, you could say. All the really interesting people go or participate,” he assured me.

Other band members drifted over; Heiko made introductions. They were friendly and the lead singer Jutta was a doll.

“I’m big fan of American jazz and scat singing,” she said giving me a firm enthusiastic handshake. It was her way of making a connection.

“We all go back to my flat for schnapps and hot tea,” she offered. “You come too? It is much too cold to talk here.”

Could not have agreed with her more.

We piled into a couple of Trabbies. Heiko astride a beat up motorcycle rode shotgun, his instrument slung over his back. In the gathering twilight, the air was cold and dry; there was little wind. Though it was a Saturday night, the residential streets we drove through were eerily unpopulated. Few windows illuminated.

Intermittent streetlights cast garish white glow on the cobbled streets and deteriorating facades of passing tenements.

Jutta lived in an enormous old flat in the Prinzlauer Allee. A neighborhood, I was later to learn, where many people in the Ossi art scene resided. There were few autos on the street so we easily parked practically in front of her door.

Entering the flat, we are greeted by her bookish mate Klaus, a university professor, and their two teenage daughters. Jutta was only a weekend musician; she worked more formally as a Russian translator.

In the communal room, we gathered around an enormous table covered with thick tapestry cloth and kitschy figurines. She distributed blood red shot glasses—vintage leaded crystal—and passed the schnapps bottle around.

Klaus offered a robust “Prost” and downed his glass in a single gulp. The others followed suit. So did I.

The pungent liqueur had immediate effect. It seared my throat, cleared my sinuses, and made my eyes watery. The others laughed at my reaction.

Soon they were bantering back in forth in rapid expressive bursts of speech, much of which I did not understand but pretended to, taking my cue to laugh or react when others did. I didn’t want to stop the spirited flow of exchanges by constantly asking for translations.

Occasionally someone—mostly Jutta—translated the essence of particularly colloquial bits of phrasing for me.

Mostly they were griping in good humor over the peculiarities of life in the East: the shortages of consumer goods, the antiquated technical equipment they had no choice but to buy and use.

“Why does the Trabbi have a heater in the rear window?” asked drummer Udo, referring to a car not with the best record for reliability.

“Oh everybody knows that one,” eschewed Heiko.

Before he could get another word out, Natasha delivered the punch line: “It keeps the fingers warm when you have to get out and push—which is often!”

Measured laughter erupted.

"I have one, I have one." It was a giddy Klaus. "A man stops at a garage and says to the mechanic: 'Two windshield wipers for my Trabbi.' The mechanic scratches his head, looks at the car for a moment then says, 'Fair enough!'"

More delighted chuckles. And so it went.

I soon realized the jokes were not new but oft embellished gems that were a kind of code. They all seemed to know the punch line but it was the telling and retelling they relished, the chance for exaggerated characterizations and capricious dialects.

Listeners pretended to hang on every word and respond with equal enthusiasm. They liked repeating jokes that ridiculed the country's inadequacies. It leavened the thinly veiled discontent for the current political situation.

Both the booze and bons amis put me at ease. I looked around Jutta and Klaus' spacious sitting room. It had the cozy modest trappings of academia, sagging bookshelves, and deep-cushioned armchairs. Houseplants crowded windowsills. I got up and went over to admire them. They looked a little straggly. I pinched off some browning foliage.

"We never get enough sun in winter," Klaus remarked joining me at the window.

Adding, "We burn so much coal the sky stays dark for weeks."

"Really?" I said feigning surprise. Several times, I detected strong smells of sulfur in the air. "And it must be terrible to breathe too."

"You Americans are so correct," he observed, relighting his pipe. "So why did you come to Germany?" A cloud of pipe smoke enveloped us.

"I needed to get away from the States. I was ready for a change of scenery. I got a cheap flight. And here I am." Was I being too glib?

"You needed to get out of America? I don't understand. I thought Americans love America."

"Are you kidding? What we like about America is how much we can hate it!"

He looked a bit confused.

"The political situation is really bad. I still don't understand how Reagan got elected."

“So you are no fan of the movie actor president.”

“You got it,” I readily admitted. “I’m sure he’s basically a good guy. He always played one anyway. He is a pitchman now for special interests, in the pocket of the highest bidder. I just don’t like the new atmosphere in my country.”

“So you are in a kind of exile?” Klaus surmised.

“Yeah, you might say that. I finished a huge archiving project. It just wiped me out. I need a break, a long break. I have no major commitments coming up and money saved, so here I am.”

“But why Germany? Berlin even?”

“Why not?” I shrugged. “Berlin is ground zero of the Cold War.”

“And you are comfortable?”

“No complaints. Sounds like you don’t think I should be?”

“No, no, I’m just always amazed when foreigners choose to come to Germany. We have difficult history. And we tend to be introspective; and maybe not so foreigner friendly.”

“Well, as long as you don’t put on white sheets or stockpile cattle cars, I’m okay with it.”

While he pondered my references, it was time to turn the tables.

“So, how did you end up in the East, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“My family’s lived in Berlin for generations, and under many regimes. We thought the communists would be done in a few years like the fascists. But before we knew it, the Wall went up and here we are.”

“Do you regret not going over to the West when you had the chance?”

“At the time the Wall went up, I hadn’t finished university. I just married Jutta. Things not so bad or so we thought. If we defected, it meant starting over. I never thought the country would stay divided. Nothing we can do about it. We live as easily as we can. I sometimes miss little delicacies that can make day-to-day life more satisfying.”

“Which reminds me,” I excused myself to retrieve my backpack. I brought over treats—British tea, bars of fine chocolate, and sacks of gummy bears. I presented Jutta with the tea and offered the others

candy, giving Heiko first choice. At first keen on the chocolate but then again the gummies were tempting.

His indecision played poorly with the others. They complained he was taking too long. Jutta settled the matter by retrieving a big serving dish, unceremoniously opened all the packages, broke the chocolate into generous pieces and threw it all into the dish.

“Now everybody gets a little of each,” she proclaimed with the equanimity of Solomon.

The guys were competitive and greedy. The dish emptied quickly. What immense pleasure little treats brought. They missed so much, simply by ending up in the wrong part of town.

The clock was ticking. It was time to head back. Like Cinderella. I had a midnight curfew. Heiko volunteered to ferry me on his motorbike to the vicinity of the transit point. If he hadn’t offered, I would have been extremely disappointed.

I thanked Jutta for her hospitality—this was my first visit to an East German residence, I reminded her—and told the others how much I enjoyed meeting them. Natasha got a ride with one of the musicians.

I followed Heiko down the stairs and out to the street. Neither of us spoke. I was feeling the pain of separating and I hoped he was too.

The temperature had dropped but it was no match for my down-lined Arctic parka. Leaning close to Heiko on the back of his motorcycle made the weather so not an issue. We didn’t say much but it felt like we were getting closer.

He lingered to chat up the street from the Tranen-Palais or Palace of Tears, as the transiting building is affectionately nicknamed. He still wanted to know what I thought of his music. I told him I was not the right person to ask.

“But you know what you like and what you don’t,” he insisted.

I insisted right back that such a notion was inoperative in my case. “I’ve got a tin ear, not the person you ask for musical opinions. I had a great time dancing with Natasha.”

I could see he was reluctant to let me get away without making some judgment. I don’t think he cared so much whether I liked it or not, he just wanted an impression.

“All right,” I relented. “You know what made it really special for me?” I said.

His gray-blue eyes lit up.

“...The invitation to come hear you play. It made me feel part of something important—the East Berlin alternative music scene. I mean like how cool is that! What made it better is that you are someone I feel a real connection to. I can’t wait to see what else you can do.”

Giddy with boyish enthusiasm he declared, “Yes, I can do many things. But with which one am I going to do something great one day; make my name East and West?”

I found this eruption of megalomania surprising and very seductive. There was no doubt he had the looks and personal charisma to attract supporters. It was just a matter of luck and timing.

“Well go home and sleep on it,” I teased. “I’m sure you’ll have it in the morning.”

“OK, whatever the Ami orders: one good night’s sleep coming up. Perhaps you’d like to tuck me in,”

“As a matter of fact I would,” I shot back.

He blushed.

“One day I’ll be collecting photo archives on you,” I teased.

“Maybe you will!” he shot back confidently, flashing the most devilish grin.

“So when will we see us again?” he asked.

Did I detect a note of longing?

“Not sure—but soon. Next time I come over let me bring you something special?” I was ready to get whatever he wanted.

“That is very dear of you,” he acknowledged. “How about bringing more wonderful chocolate? I adore Western chocolate. When you eat enough it’s like a drug.”

“Then a big infusion of pralines and bonbons just for you it is! And maybe I’ll throw in a surprise or two.”

“I love surprises,” he said, casually throwing his arms around me in spontaneous embrace.

This piece of chocolate started melting.



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