

Eine Geschichte zur Berliner Mauer und zur Fluchthilfe aus der DDR

Von Karl E. Kleinn, Houston, Texas, USA

Back to my vacation plans! I applied for a visa to enter communist East Germany, the so-called German Democratic Republic, what a sinister joke and supreme insult to the sensibilities of the West: a communist dictatorship calling itself a democratic republic. It was three years after the wall in Berlin had been built, and I had a reason for wanting to go to the East. One of my sisters actually lived behind the Iron Curtain with her husband and children. When the visa was granted I took a Canadian National Railway train from Vancouver to Toronto which took three days, flew to Europe, rented a VW bug at the Amsterdam airport and drove first to my mother's house in Germany, the house in which I grew up as teenager before I fled to Canada. I had plans to visit Berlin where I could stay at an uncle's house, leave the car there and travel by train to my sister's place in East Germany. The Dutch car rental company stated clearly on the rental contract that under no circumstances was the car to be taken behind the Iron Curtain. Hence the plan to take the train from Berlin!

Behind the Wall

My younger brother showed up at my mother's house. He wanted to come to Berlin with me. In the car on the way to Berlin he told me about certain people I would meet in Berlin. He also let me know that one of my cousins in Berlin was on the communists' most wanted list, and to be careful whom I mentioned his name to. At the communist checkpoint at Marienborn on the other side of the border from Helmstedt on the West German side the guard rummaged through the glove compartment of the VW bug. He found a large address-book of mine and started to leaf through it. I protested angrily and told him this was personal information and none of his business. I explained that, where I come from his actions constitute invasion of privacy and was against the law. He threw the address book back into the glove box, took his rifle off his shoulder and motioned at me with the words:

“Out of the car”

and he marched me into the barrack-like building at the checkpoint. Thank god, he had not come to the page that was full of the very unusual and easily recognizable last name of my wanted cousin in Berlin. Behind a large desk sat a young fart of a communist in a smart looking uniform.

He stood up, shook my hand and offered me a seat in a comfortable chair opposite his desk.

He leafed through my Canadian passport and said:

“I understand you had a problem with one of my guards outside.”

I explained the situation and the young commie dickhead admitted that the guard was out of line. He should have asked me for the address-book rather than just pick it up. I was speaking fluent German. He then told me not pretend to not understand what was going on here. Looking at my passport he mentioned my birthplace, which was now in communist Poland and in their camp. Even though I carried a Canadian passport he wanted me to acknowledge that I was really German. He handed me back my passport, stood up to shake my hand, apologized for the guard's conduct, wished me a pleasant trip through their 'country' and said goodbye.

That incident taught me a valuable lesson: Never speak fluent German again with communist officials when in communist East Germany, play the foreigner. You get better treatment that way. The transit route to Berlin through East Germany was to remain open to all Westerners for transit to West Berlin. At the checkpoint we just left our papers were stamped with the departure time. If you exceeded the speed limit in the workers paradise you earned a communist speeding ticket handed to you when checking out of the 'country' into West Berlin. The terms were: Cash on the spot, and western currency only. One way to beat that system was to drive like hell, keep track of the time, and have a picnic at an Autobahn rest stop on the way. Taking an exit into the countryside was not allowed unless you were a resident of the workers paradise. The next few days in Berlin became quite interesting. It included several visits to East Berlin to friends of my brother.

I should mention here that my cousin was part of an effort by West Berlin students called Studentische Fluchhilfe (Student's Escape Assistance). This all began after the infamous Berlin Wall was built in 1961 and the border between East and West Berlin was closed by the communists to stem the ever-increasing flood of 'escapees' who decided to leave the workers paradise for freedom in the West. Their motivations varied. Some sought to be reunited with spouses and other family members, others were genuinely morally outraged at the repressive communist policies of their dictatorial regime, and others simply wanted a better life in the West. The participants in the western escape assistance effort were primarily students of the Freie Universität Berlin (Free University of Berlin). Their activity initially enjoyed the moral support of the West

German government officials, but soon became more of an annoyance to them. This was because it helped to undermine West German efforts to establish a meaningful diplomatic dialogue with the East, especially since the activities of this and similar groups employed methods that were clearly in violation of East German, albeit communist, laws. This included the forging of travel documents, illegal possession of firearms, ignoring the travel restrictions imposed by the communists on their own citizens, etc. They were also accused of adventurism, commercial motivations and profiteering, the desire to become society's heroes, and trafficking in humans. The operation of helping people to escape across the Iron Curtain was not without financial cost. The money had to come from somewhere. As time went by the per-person fee for escape assistance steadily increased. Apart from what the individual motivations of these students might have been, the fact remains that during the nineteen-sixties they helped tenth of thousands of East Germans to escape to freedom in the West. On the other hand many of students and would-be escapees ended up in Stasi prisons. Stasi is short for 'Staatssicherheitsdienst', the infamous East German intelligence service that once had Vladimir Putin as their de facto leader. The efforts of these student groups are chronicled in some detail in a book with the title: 'Ein Loch in der Mauer' (A Hole in the Wall) by Marion Detjen.

At my uncle's house in West Berlin a group of my cousin's friends was assembled one evening when I was visiting. They questioned me extensively about what I had to do to obtain my visa to enter East Germany. They then asked me to borrow my travel papers including my Canadian passport. My cousin guaranteed that everything would be returned to me within two hours. I agreed to lend them my papers, and they kept their promise. Within two hours I had everything back. My brother had already explained to me that my cousin was involved with a secret organization that made it its goal to help people from the East to escape to the West; a dangerous undertaking! I was glad I could help in a small way. It was nothing compared to the risks these idealistic kids were taking. Unfortunately the East German police had caught on to my cousin, and he could never enter East Berlin again and could never travel the transit route to West Germany again except by air. But he continued to be actively involved in the efforts of the organization strictly from the West. Before they caught on to him not even his parents and siblings knew about his activities. What tipped him off was his younger brother's arrest when crossing into the transit zone from West Germany at Marienborn. He was transported to East Berlin for interrogation. After lengthy questioning the commies let him go being convinced that they had the wrong guy. Apparently he was able to fool the Stasi officers with credible lies. In retrospect a fortunate incident!

The friends in the East were also involved in my cousin's efforts, which was even more dangerous for them. When I told them about a young lady whom I had met years earlier on our high school trip to the east, and with whom I had corresponded for a while, the man of the house offered his help finding her. He said traveling by train I would stand out too much, but he could help me get a permit to take my Dutch rental car into East Germany. I knew that all insurance on the car would be void as soon as it crossed into East Germany proper beyond the city limits of East Berlin. I stood in line at some communist government agency in charge of issuing various types of travel permits for their so-called country. The person ahead of me was a Soviet naval officer. Russian was the first required foreign language in all East German schools. When the Soviet officer reached the service window he addressed the young lady on duty in Russian. She turned to the people in her office then to the people waiting in line asking if anyone spoke Russian. No success! The Soviet officer then asked if anyone spoke English. Several people said they could, including the young lady at the service counter. Isn't that interesting and ironic! Lenin and Stalin probably turned over in their graves. I got the permit to take the car into East Germany.

I should mention that for daytrips by Westerners into East Berlin you could not cross Checkpoint Charlie later than 10 p.m., and you had to be out of the East no later than midnight. My brother's friend in the East offered me to stay at their house the night before I was going to drive into East Germany proper so he could lecture me on what to do and not to do, because my travel permit was only good for the most direct route to my sister's house. My plan was to deviate from that route to find my long lost lady friend. The evening I planned to cross Checkpoint Charlie and stay overnight in East Berlin I was invited to dinner at the house of another family that were friends of my brother's; I had never met them before. We had a nice dinner. I showed some home movies of my travels in Canada, and it got later and later. They practically pressured me to have another drink or some more deserts and I began to get nervous. The 10 p.m. deadline got closer. When I mentioned my concern they let me know that the deadline did not apply to me because I had a visa to go beyond East Berlin into their so-called country, and I could cross Checkpoint Charlie anytime of day or night. It was long past 10 p.m. when the doorbell rang at my host's house. It turned out to be a special delivery mailman delivering a letter addressed to me. I was puzzled. What's going on? Who knows I am here? I opened the letter and read: 'Dear Dr. Bötzel' ..., the name of the family I was going to stay with that evening in the East. I understood instantly, closed the letter and put it in my inside pocket. I had unwittingly been recruited for another mission. Suddenly all pressure to stay was gone, and I said my goodbyes.

At Checkpoint Charlie the west side barrier was down and was not manned. I flashed my headlights. An eastern border guard peeked from behind the nearest shack waving his arms to let me know the checkpoint was closed. I took out my travel papers, blew my horn, opened my window, and when the guard peeked around the shack again I waved my travel papers at him. He finally crawled under the barrier and came to the window to let me know again that the checkpoint was closed. I let him know that I had a visa for his 'country'. He said:

“Oh”

He lifted the barrier and let me into the checkpoint. He couldn't afford to linger long enough to inspect my papers. After all, he was a commie border guard who had ventured briefly into western territory. While checking the validity of all my papers inside the checkpoint I was asked where I was going to stay that night. I lied and said:

“Nowhere, I am driving straight through to my sister's place.”

When I arrived at our friend's place it was after midnight. The house was dark without a light showing anywhere. We had an agreement that legitimate visitors would always ring the doorbell at the back door of the house. I went to the back door and rang the bell. Nothing! I rang the bell several more times when finally a small light went on in the rear foyer of the house. The door opened a crack and caught on the security chain. The lady of the house in a bathrobe uttered an audible sigh of relief:

“Thank god, it's you! Do you know what it normally means when the doorbell rings at this hour of night?”

She let me in, found her husband and we all had a little laugh as I handed him the letter. No explanation was necessary. Her husband led me upstairs to a bedroom with two twin beds. The house had lightproof shutters. We both went to bed each taking one of the twin beds and turned out the lights. And there, in the dark, I received the very necessary lecture and the instructions on what to do and not to do the next day. Before I left the following morning he put a five-gallon military canister of spare gasoline into the front trunk of the VW bug. He advised the evening before to avoid filling up at a commie gas station because that would send up a red flag to the local authorities. East Germany is not large enough for a Westerner to have to refuel before reaching his/her destination. To refuel at your legitimate destination was no problem since your presence was registered with the local police. Also, in the small town where my sister lived everyone in town knew that her family had a visitor from the West.

In the morning I set out in search of my long lost lady friend. The Autobahn route I took out of Berlin was the same I would have taken to my sister's place. My plan was to first stop at the town of Lübben where we met years earlier. Lübben is only about five miles from the nearest Autobahn exit. I stopped at the parsonage of a Lutheran church. The pastor was home and invited me in. Almost immediately he was able to tell me that the young lady's mother worked at a daycare center in town. The communist daycare centers were government operated, as almost everything else in the workers paradise. This service was free to the parents to the greater glory of Marx and Lenin. That way both mom and dad could work and contribute to the 'collective wealth' of the state, while their children were being indoctrinated in the teachings of communism, again, to the greater glory of Marx and Lenin. What a loving arrangement. A loyal communist worker who excelled at his job in terms of state dictated production quotas might even be rewarded with a brand new pair of shoes at the end of the year. No kidding! I have personally witnessed the presentation of such a reward.

Back to the story! The kind old pastor had given me the address of the daycare center complete with detailed directions. When I arrived there, rang the doorbell and asked for the young lady's mother I hit pay dirt. She was the one that opened the door for me. I had never met her, but she had heard a lot about me. She greeted me warmly, but also with a touch of embarrassment. After all, in her job she had to pretend to be a loyal communist and teach the children a bunch of hogwash. And here was a foreign visitor from the evil, but much envied, capitalist and imperialist world standing at her door. She let me know that her daughter was a teacher at the nearby town of Lübbenau and how much she would enjoy seeing me. So after a friendly chat I set out to drive to Lübbenau about eight miles away. The young lady must have been forewarned by a telephone call from her mother. When a western car with a Dutch license number entered the schoolyard a bunch of people came to the windows to gawk. My lady friend came outside to greet me, and told me she would get off duty shortly and to please wait for her.

She had a lovely little daughter. She lived in a quite modern apartment that was heated by the waste heat from a nearby industrial plant, one the few projects that seem to actually work well in this collective society. We drove to a nearby town that had a photo shop where we rented an eight and super-eight millimeter movie projector. She contacted a friend who was a dentist. He had access to medical alcohol and had all kinds of tricks up his sleeve for making palatable drinks using nearly pure medical alcohol. We then had quite a party at her house, and I showed them the same movies I had shown in Berlin the night before. I could hardly

believe that was only yesterday since I now felt like I was in a completely different world. I slept on a couch in a near drunken stupor and woke up in the morning with a mild hangover. But the night before was indeed memorable. I talked to her about leaving the East and offered my help by hooking her up with the appropriate contacts. She had thought about it often but felt that she had no right to endanger her innocent daughter. She said if she did not have a child she would have taken the risk long ago. She had a friend who was an engineer who was frequently sent to Egypt from where he could easily get to the West. He had offered to take her along on one of his trips. Egypt had friendly relations with both, the East and the West. I gave her some contact numbers and code phrases anyway in case she changed her mind. The code phrases I had previously agreed on with the persons the phone numbers belonged to.

I drove on toward my sister's place. She lived with her husband and two children in a small village near the city of Glauchau. I next left the Autobahn at Dresden, once one of the most beautiful cities of Germany. What I saw was appalling. Very little rebuilding had been done, and the ruins of war were still all too visible. You may recall: Dresden was carpet-bombed late in the war where fifty thousand civilians died in a single night. And now, nine years after the end of the worst war in history when West Germany was essentially completely rebuilt and was prospering, what I saw before my eyes was a sad sight indeed. Evidence of the success of the communist system! I snapped a few photos and drove on.

It was a lousy wet and cold late winter day. Wet snow and slush was falling. The road was being 'sanded', but the sand was more like coarse gravel with fair sized stones intermixed. A big Russian car, probably a Lada, passed me at illegally high speed. It was probably a highly placed communist party functionary immune from prosecution in this classless society, either East German or Russian. A stone was tossed up, hit my windshield and shattered it into a thousand pieces. I stopped beside the road, cleaned the glass from the front seats and the driver's side floor, put on my big Canadian parka, pulled the warm hood over my head, continued on and successfully reached my sister's house.

She and her husband looked at the mess and shook their heads. They helped me cover the gaping hole with a tarp to keep more snow and slush out of the car. Inside the house we sat down for something warm to drink, and I explained my twofold dilemma. One: the insurance on the rental car was null and void behind the iron curtain; two: windshields for a West German car were simply not available in East Germany. My sister and her husband had their thinking hats on and came up with an idea. With the help of a telephone book they found a glass shop in the

nearby city of Glauchau. It was a private business. If the number of employees did not exceed five, a private business was allowed. One advantage I had was that the VW bug had a flat windshield; so just maybe, someone could cut a windshield and fit it into the frame. We went to the glass shop. Low and behold, they had cardboard templates of every VW bug model that was ever made. They also had automotive safety glass, although the commie safety standards were not by far as advanced as those of the West. While our Western windshields simply shattered into small pieces that fell away thereby leaving the driver a clear though unprotected view of the road, the commie windshield also shattered but stayed in place being held together by some kind of transparent plastic sheet between the two layers of glass. This completely obscured the driver's view.

The lady owner of the shop let us know that they could replace the windshield and would charge me fifty marks, worthless east-marks, that is. Considering how I had illegally exchanged my Canadian dollars through my brother's connections in East Berlin that amounted to four Canadian dollars. With the primitive tools at their disposal it took the very skilled people in the shop a whole day to accomplish the task. The bug now sported an illegal communist windshield. The Dutch agents of AutoEurope would never know the difference; they didn't when I returned the car.

Back at my sister's house she and her husband suggested that I should try to get reimbursed by the government owned insurance company. This was hardly worth it for the small amount involved. Also, I did not get the license number of the car that tossed the rock. My sister and husband told me that it normally takes two years for their own citizens to get any payments owed them for accident damage, and they wanted to see how they would treat a foreigner. So I went to the local insurance office in nearby Glauchau. At the reception window I stated my case. The lady at the window made a phone call, and a few moments later I was led to the office of the local manager of that office. He was all smiles, offered me a chair, and engaged me in a conversation about Canada. He offered me a cigarette. I said:

“Thank you but I only smoke cigars.”

He buzzed his secretary and in a low voice instructed her to quickly get a cigar. I enjoyed the cigar, probably Cuban, and we had a pleasant conversation. He was very interested in my stories. After a while his secretary stuck her head in his office and asked whom she should issue the check to. Her boss said:

“Don’t bother with a check, just bring me the cash.”

Soon she returned with the cash. The polite gentleman behind the desk explained to me that I didn’t really have a legal claim since I failed to get the other car’s license number; however, since I was a visitor to their country he was happy to make an exception. He handed me the cash, stood up, shook my hand, wished me a pleasant stay in their country and said goodbye. When I told the story back at my sister’s place both she and her husband cracked up.

We went to visit my sister’s in-laws who lived in the city that every good German knows as Chemnitz but the commies had renamed to ‘Karl Marx Stadt’ (Karl Marx City). Fortunately, after the collapse of the iron curtain it was immediately renamed to Chemnitz. The following day I drove back to Berlin and returned the gasoline canister. Before I left East Berlin my brother’s friend implored me not to tell anyone what I had heard and experienced there for at least seven years, not even in Canada or the United States. He said that if you had ever been present at any of the political trials in East Germany you wouldn’t believe where all the information came from. The East German intelligence service (Stasi) literally had informers planted all over the world. For much longer than seven years I kept my mouth shut. I left and drove back across the transit route to West Germany.