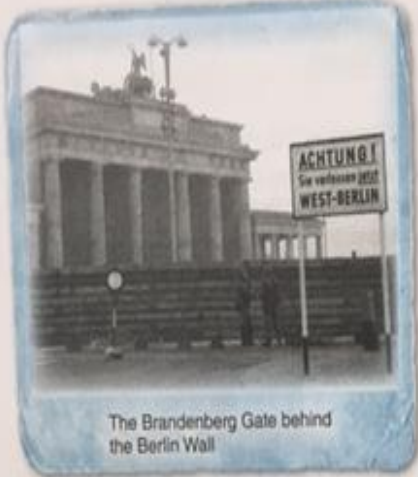


When the Wall Came Tumbling Down

< Oral History >



The Brandenburg Gate behind the Berlin Wall

My grandparents' generation came of age in a divided country. In 1961, East Germany's Communist government built the Berlin Wall, which divided the city in two. The construction of this wall was a **premeditated** act, planned by a vengeful regime determined to **brandish** its power in the decades following the Allied victory over Hitler's Germany. My grandmother said isolating West Berlin from the rest of Soviet-controlled East Germany was a way for the regime to thumb its nose at Western democracies. In a **deft** statement of double-speak, East Germany's leaders claimed that the wall would shelter its people from "the ravages of capitalism." Even if the wall's real purpose had not been made **explicit** already, the truth was soon obvious to all: It prevented East Germans like my grandparents from fleeing to West Germany in search of freedom and a better life.

By the time I was born, that ugly concrete wall, with its **ominous** watchtowers, was a daily reminder of East German control and

repression. Rather than protect us, the Berlin Wall was a cruel blockade that cost nearly 300 people their lives. Some tried to climb or fly over it, and others tried to dig under or around it, but most failed in their attempts to breach that barrier. They were all trying to escape a country in which everyday life was marked by our political leaders' **officious** rules. Every law was rigidly enforced by the **venal** secret police. We both despised and feared them.

Despite our fears, despite the guards, it was regular people like me who finally brought down the wall simply by walking through its checkpoints. **Ironic**, isn't it? What happened was this. During the late 1980s, the East German government gradually became less rigid. Bit by bit, it began offering its people more freedoms. Then in 1989, its leaders declared that on November 9, anyone who had a proper visa could visit West Germany. I did not have a visa, but I went to the wall anyway with some friends. Within hours, the crowd had become huge, and it was clear that the guards were overwhelmed. They could no longer keep back the thousands and thousands of people who wanted to pass through the checkpoints.

I'm not sure if it was that the guards were outnumbered and scared, or that they, too, wanted freedom. But suddenly, the barricades were open, and when people began to walk through, the guards let them. That's really when the wall came down. We did not physically tear it apart, brick by brick. But it was clear the wall no longer served as a threat or a barricade. In our minds, it was already gone.



Above: The scene as the wall fell in November 1989



I will never forget what it was like to be in Berlin that November. Everywhere in the streets people were dancing and laughing. You could hear horns and music from one end of the city to the other. I saw people spray-painting democratic slogans on the wall and even hammering off chunks to keep as souvenirs. Everyone was smiling and laughing—it was an amazing contrast to the gloom I used to feel when walking past the wall as a kid.

On November 10, my friend Anja and I went to the **stately** Brandenburg Gate, the centuries-old symbol of Berlin that had been cut in two by the wall. People were still gathering in the streets, still dancing, still laughing. We were all celebrating freedom, something most of us probably never thought we would experience. Suddenly, as Anja and I were dancing, an armed soldier left his post by the wall and walked toward us. That made Anja and me nervous. He reached out to shake our hands. Then he and I swapped caps. We each had a huge smile on our face—I swear, it was the **pinnacle** of our lives, the happiest day ever! Imagine the **solace** that comes from realizing that in just 24 hours, we had gone from being enemies to being friends.

Although joy was **rampant** and evident in everyone's eyes, within days, our delight was muted by concerns about what was ahead for our country. We were no longer trapped behind the wall, but we had lived for generations under a harsh regime. To get by, East Germans had learned to **suppress** their hopes and dreams. Citizens had to **accede** to the rules of the communist system, or face prison—or worse. Now that the wall was down and our government was weakened, how would we **extirpate** the fears and anxieties that had plagued our lives? These were the questions people asked in the days and weeks after the Berlin Wall fell. But during those glorious first days, all we knew was that we were making history—and that soon, the two Germanys would be reunited as a single nation.

Words



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