

BERLIN AND THE WALL

GMØHZM

The mention of RAF Gutersloh in a recent article in “*MERCURY*” brought memories flooding back of my days in the 1970’s and 1980’s serving in this part of Germany with the Territorial Army. Celle, Bielefeld, Paderborn, Hildesheim and Hohne (formerly Bergen-Belsen) all immediately came to mind. There was little time for sightseeing in those days, but one lasting impression I have was of an organised visit to the then boundary between East and West Germany.

It stretched as far as the eye could see North and South. Heavily fortified with guard towers every half a mile and with cultivated areas would show every footprint, mined and booby trapped, stretching back a half a mile towards the East from the fence making the line of demarcation a very formidable obstacle and with the presence of the patrolling East German border guards virtually eliminated all routes of escape.

Berlin, though, attracted most of the publicity about the division of Germany following the physical erection by the East German government of the concrete boundary wall to seal off East Berlin from the part of the city occupied by the three main western powers – Britain, US and France – to prevent mass illegal immigration westwards. Construction commenced on 13th August 1961 and *die Berliner Mauer* (the Berlin Wall as it became known) remained in place until 9th November 1989 when the Communist regime collapsed. During that time, in spite of it being a formidable

barrier there were 5,075 successful escapes, although 200 persons lost their lives in attempts.



It was not until October 2001 that a visit to Berlin by me and my wife was possible. By then, of course, most of the Wall in the central area of Berlin had been removed (a task involving some 1million tons of rubble) and free access was possible between all parts of the city.

We set off from Edinburgh Airport for Berlin, travelling via Frankfurt, for our four day sojourn in the city - a fortieth wedding anniversary present to us. We landed at Tegel airport and got a taxi to the 5-star Berlin Hilton Hotel. To our surprise we found it was situated in the former East German area. It was immediately adjacent to the well-known Gendarmenmarkt and a short distance from Friedrichstrasse, Unter den Linden (the tree-lined avenue once the city’s focal point), the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag (the former parliament building) and was within walking distance of Checkpoint Charlie the famous crossing area between East and West Berlin. The Hotel, though in the former “East” Berlin, was of course very central indeed and the recent re-erection of this most modern and palatial accommodation was typical of what one found in this part of the city. The environs of Berlin include the Gr nwald forest and Wannsee lake (the locus of the infamous 20 January 1942 secret conference – recently detailed in Mark Roseman’s book “*The Villa, the Lake, the*

Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution” 152pp Allen Lane, £9.99 – and its awesome consequences.)

There was much development spreading from the former line of “the Wall” eastwards but you only had to walk a few hundred metres towards the East to find the dereliction and neglect left by the former DDR (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik* – German Democratic Republic – East Germany). A typical example was the one time “new” building of its own Parliament. When we visited, this was in the course of demolition because of the deterioration in the structure and also because asbestos had been used in the construction of the building. The day following our arrival in the city was a Friday, so as we normally do when visiting ‘foreign parts’, we took the coach tour arranged by the hotel concierge. With the benefit of a guide speaking both German and English our tour of central Berlin consisted of a three hour trip incorporating the highlights of the capital, both East and West. It took in the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Memorial Church, Europe-Centre, Bauhaus Museum, New National Gallery, Philharmonic Hall, Potsdam Square/Sony-Centre, Gendarmenmarkt, Alexander Square, St-Nikolai-Vertel, City Hall of Berlin, TV-Tower, the Berlin Cathedral, Zeigaus, State Opera, Boulevard Unter den Linden, Brandenburg Gate, Reichstag, Haus der Kulturen (the former Congress Hall), Tiergarten, Bellevue Palace, Seigessaulle. Charlottenburg Palace, Olympic Stadium (built in 1936), Grünewald Forest, Radio Tower, ICC, Kurfurstendamm. This was great value at DM42 (£14) per person.

There was a lot of information to assimilate, but undaunted, we then took a taxi to join one of the many boat trips

along the Spree and other Canals from Schlonbrucke. Again this was a three hour trip and though the commentary was only in German, we managed to follow the route using the map and identified many of the sights we had seen during the morning coach tour such as Charlottenburg Palace, the Reichstag, Museum Island and Berlin Dom. However on this occasion the view was from the Spree Canal and gave a different aspect, especially in the Eastern part of the city where we saw much of the other parts of the Wall which still existed.

The following day, and with the sun shining brightly, temperature in the mid-60’s F, we decided on a walking tour from the Hotel using the first class Dorling Kindersley Travel Guide book on Berlin.

The Hotel is situated in Gendarmenmarkt. This is one of Berlin’s most beautiful squares, created at the end of the 17th Century as a market square for the newly established Friedrichstadt. It is named after the Regiment Gens d’Armes who had their stables here. In 1950 it was named Platz der Akademie; and after reunification the square reverted to its original name. The three most important buildings on the square are:-

Französischer Dom

This is one of two churches standing at the opposite sides of the square and they appear identical but in fact differ considerably. The only common feature is the identical front towers. This French cathedral was built by the Huguenot community, who found refuge in protestant Berlin following their expulsion from France after the revolution of the Edict of Nantes.

Deutscher Dom

This cathedral at the other end of the square from Französischer Dom and opposite the Hilton Hotel is an old German Protestant church. It was designed by Martin Grunberg and built in 1708 by Giovanni Simonetti. In 1785 it acquired a dome-covered tower identical to the French Cathedral. Burned down in 1945, the church was rebuilt in 1993.

Konzerthaus

Home of the Berlin Symphony Orchestra, this is a late neo-classical jewel. This magnificent building recently known as the Schauspielhaus, is one of the greatest achievements of Berlin's best known architect, Karl Friedrich Schinkel. It was built between 1818 and 1821. Following bomb damage in World War II it was reconstructed as a concert hall with a different interior layout. The exterior was restored to its former glory.

Just a short distance from Gendarmenmarkt is Unter Den Linden and Bebelplatz. Unter den Linden is one of the most famous streets in Berlin. It starts at Schlossplatz and runs down to Pariser Platz and the Brandenburg Gate. It was once the route to the royal hunting grounds that were later transformed into the Tiergarten. In the 17th century the street was planted with lime trees, to which the street owes its name. Although removed around 1658, they were replanted in four rows in 1820.

During the 18th century, Unter den Linden became the main street of the westward-expanding city. It was gradually filled with prestigious buildings which were restored after World War II. Following the reunification of Germany, Unter den Linden has acquired several cafés and restaurants, as well as many new smart

shops. Within the last two years, sponsored by local shops hotels and offices, a number of highly coloured bears have been erected over its whole length which adds much interest and colour for the tourist.

Situated off Unter den Linden are Humboldt Universität, Staatsbibliothek, Reiterdenkmal Friedrichs des Grossen (a statue depicting Frederick the Great created between 1839 and 1851), the Altes Palais, Alte Bibliothek (outside which the Jewish books were burnt in the mid 1930's), Bebelplatz, St. Hedwig's Kathedrale, Staatsoper Unter den Linden (the State Opera House) and Crown Prince's Palace. We spent most of the morning in this locality before moving on to Museum Island.

Saturday afternoon was spent on Museum Island and the surrounding area. On this island are the pretty Lustgarten and Berliner Dom (Berlin Cathedral). It is also where you will find some of the most important museums in the east of the city. These include the Bodemuseum, the Altes Museum, the Alte Nationalgalerie and the splendid Pergamonmuseum - famous for its collection of antiquities and visited by crowds of art-lovers from around the world.

The Pergamonmuseum was built between 1912 and 1930. It houses one of the most famous collections of antiquities of Europe, and owes its name to the famous Pergamon Alter which takes pride of place in the main hall. The three independent collections - the Museum of Antiquities (Greek and Roman), the Museum of Near Eastern Antiquities and the Museum of Islamic Art - are the result of intensive archaeological excavations by German expeditions to the Near and Middle East at the end of

the 19th and 20th century. What makes this museum particularly fascinating for the visitor is the first class audio CD-ROM which is available to all on entering the building and which is carried over the shoulder during the visit allowing easy access to all the information.

The final part of the afternoon was spent shopping in Friedrichstrasse .

Our next day was Sunday, and since the shops were closed, the morning was spent on a visit to Checkpoint Charlie which was the most well-known border crossing between East and West Berlin. There is a wonderful museum (the Haus am Checkpoint Charlie) in Friedrichstrasse adjoining the crossing point which is well worth a visit to view the many exhibits concerning its history and to see the many excellent photographs.

Our final trip in the afternoon was a coach tour to Potsdam. Here we saw the bridge which was used to exchange spies during the Cold War and we also passed the former KGB (Soviet secret police – *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*) headquarters. Potsdam is only now recovering from the neglect of the Cold War era and the heavy bombing it received at the hands of the Allies during April 1945 at the end of World War II.

Our final visit that afternoon was to the Park Sanssouci and a guided tour round the Schloss Sanssouci.

On Monday (our last day) we only had time to do a further bit of last-minute shopping before moving out to Tegel Airport again for our return trip via Frankfurt to Scotland. This was Monday 8 October 2001 and was the day after the bombing had started in Afghanistan. The security at Frankfurt Airport was, I

am pleased to say, very tight indeed and we eventually got on our aircraft for a safe return to Edinburgh.

The difference between the eastern part of Berlin and the western part is very distinct indeed at the moment. How long this will last is difficult to say but you only have to look at the skyline and see the amount of tower cranes and associated building works to realise how quickly the changes are taking place and how evident has been the spirit of change sweeping through Berlin ever since reunification. We found very few tourists in the area from outside Germany - most were Germans who hadn't seen the eastern part of Berlin for over 40 years. Facilities are being upgraded on a daily basis and a visit is well worthwhile before those changes are complete. Such a visit would be especially interesting for any "ex D Association" members or, indeed, for any RSARS members who served in BAOR post-war and during the cold war years. It certainly was for me.

There are so many references to the Berlin Wall on the Internet – mainly from historical, political or student sources, and including a short video by the BBC, and the number of books available on the subject, that present-day students and others wishing to further their knowledge of every conceivable detail will find the result of a simple search more than ample for their requirements. Indeed this article, together with an extended gallery of my colour photographs is due to be published contemporaneously with this issue of "MERCURY" on the Society's website in modern electronic format.

A 70m length of the original Wall remains (in Bernauer Strasse) and is preserved as a site of remembrance.

Here are some of the statistics of the Wall:-

Total length of "Ring round Berlin" (West) 155.0 km - of this - between Berlin (West) and Berlin (East) 43.1 km and between Berlin (West) and the GDR. 111.9 km

Constructed of concrete plate wall with tubular top-cladding or inserted tubes 106km

Metal Fencing 66.5km Watch towers 302

Bunkers 57 Dog-runs 259

Motor vehicle trenches 105.5 km

Electric contact or signal fencing 127.5km

Military roadway 124.3km

Measurement of a wall segment:

Height 3.60m

Width 1.20m

Breadth at base 2.1m

Wall thickness 0.2m below; 0.1m on top

Material - thick reinforced concrete

BORDERS and WALLS GALLERY

East Germany border near Celle, Grepos watching the watchers, the Border itself and a Guard Tower



1



2



3

Checkpoint Charlie



4



5



6

Maj. Aitken near the Reichstag, Olympia-Stadion, Brandenburg Gate, Alte Bibliothek, Potsdamer Platz



7



8



9



10



11

*Major J. T. Aitken, TD., FRICS – GMØHZM
the author in Berlin*



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EAST GERMAN BORDER near CELLE



Grepos watching the watchers



The Border itself



A Guard Tower

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BERLIN - Olympic Stadium (built in 1936)



BERLIN - Brandenburg Gate

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CHECKPOINT CHARLIE



Leaving the American Sector

TURN TO MORE VIEWS OF CHECKPOINT CHARLIE

CHECKPOINT CHARLIE



EAST



and WEST

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BERLIN - Alte Bibliothek
(outside of which the Jewish books were burnt in the mid 1930's)



THE LAST WORD

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