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ARTICLE

The Price of Freedom

What Came Down with the Berlin Wall

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The fall of the Berlin Wall, twenty years ago this month, happened on live TV. While fielding questions from journalists on the evening of November 9, 1989, East German Politbüro member Günter Schabowski announced a new law permitting the country's citizens to travel to the West. "When does it go into effect?" asked a West German reporter. In fact, the ruling party, the SED, had decided to begin the new policy the next day, but a confused Schabowski extemporized. "Sofort," he said—"immediately."

And so a Communist official freelancing in an internationally broadcast press conference opened the floodgates and effectively ended the Cold War. Within minutes, as TV cameras rolled, crowds surged upon checkpoints of the Berlin Wall—and, to avoid bloodshed, East German border guards let them through.

The guards' restraint shows how drastically things had changed in the German Democratic Republic, and how quickly. If such crowds had descended upon the border just six weeks earlier, they would have been shot en masse. In truth, they wouldn't have gathered at all, because until shortly before what Germans would come to call *die Wende*—"the Change"—East Germans willing to test the Wall barely existed. Just two months earlier, with the government preparing for a gaudy October celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the GDR's founding, all had seemed quiet. And yet by November, crowds routinely claimed the streets, loudly demonstrating for reform. How had this happened? When did people find the courage to face down police armed and authorized to fire? From where had this East German revolution so suddenly arisen?

I had those questions in mind on the morning of November 10, 1989, as I flew into West Berlin with a Harvard University study group. The city was jubilant and chaotic. Just half a day after Schabowski's slip-up, the streets teemed with sputtering, two-cycle Trabis, a quaint East German vehicle rarely seen before in the West. Crowds in drab clothing converged upon banks to collect the hundred-mark greeting gift doled out by the West German government. Stragglers wandered about, agog, looking like moon explorers. Crowds streamed through Checkpoint Charlie, cheered by rowdy Westerners. It was before noon, and they were drinking beer. Along the wall, the greatest party ever thrown was in full blast.

Berlin is a one-of-a-kind city, with a history of raucous eccentricity, and I was glad when our study trip ended a week later and I could get out into the East German provinces. Here in the socialist hinterlands was where the first demonstrations had taken place, in early October. There had been the massive demonstration of Monday, October 9, in Leipzig, where seventy thousand chanted "We are the people!" while heavily armed police stood by. Two days before that, as the regime had attempted to celebrate the GDR's fortieth birthday, the first demonstrations had broken out: in Dresden, in Karl-Marx-Stadt, in Potsdam. And in a place called Plauen, a medium-sized town on the border of Bavaria. I had passed through Plauen once, years before, on the Warsaw-Munich train, and now I was surprised to learn that it had been the site of a demonstration much larger than those of several other, bigger East German cities

on the same Saturday. “Why Plauen?” I wondered. It occurred to me that in the story of a nondescript, midsized city in the GDR countryside, I might find the answers I’d been looking for. And so I went to investigate.

Situated close to the West German border, in a location authorities were determined to keep underpopulated, Plauen had been neglected under socialism. Its stores were undersupplied, its workers underpaid. Buildings damaged in an American bombing raid of April 1945 were left to crumble. When Plaueners would return from visiting other GDR cities, they were routinely searched and harassed by transport police. Over time, a proud city was reduced to third-class provincial status, and this generated a communal reaction. Plauen became a place where nonconformists enjoyed popular respect. Bosses were known to tolerate critical discussions of the state plan that were unheard of elsewhere. A sense of shared injury translated into self-defense, wherever that was possible.

One such place was St. Mark’s Lutheran Church, where in the spring of 1989 young people who had previously shown interest in little beyond rock music became politically active. The East German constitution guaranteed citizens the right to monitor election results, and a church-based youth group decided to coordinate a “counting action” across the city’s electoral precincts. Traditionally, GDR elections generated 99 percent approval for the regime. But these young people knew that more and more East Germans—inspired by the glasnost of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev—had been rejecting the official list; and despite harassment they were able to verify that the official results were a sham.

Six months later, two events provided further combustible material for the aggrieved border town. In early October, a twenty-two-year-old toolmaker named Jörg Schneider produced an anonymous leaflet calling for a demonstration on the first Saturday of the month, urging people to fight for reform, especially freedom of speech and travel. Schneider banged out 160 copies on a manual typewriter (while his parents slept, unaware), and together with three friends distributed them in the still of night on October 2, targeting telephone booths, bulletin boards, and doorways across the city. It was an act of courage and cunning undertaken by four young men at considerable personal risk.

The second incident, two nights later, revealed the self-destructive hubris of the GDR regime. Since late September, several thousand disaffected East Germans seeking expatriation in the West had been sheltering in the West German embassy in Prague. The West Germans had promised to accept them, and to avoid embarrassment on their national anniversary, East Berlin’s leaders agreed to let them go—but only on the condition that the trains carrying them pass through East German territory, in order for the refugees to be formally “released” from GDR citizenship. So instead of taking the direct route westward to Nuremberg, the trains went north to Dresden, then west through Karl-Marx-Stadt to cross the Bavarian border at Hof. The route took them right through Plauen. On the night of October 4, thousands crowded the platforms at Plauen’s station, eager to wave to the escapees. Police cleared the station, but hundreds spent the entire night near the train lines, and took their desperate excitement to their workplaces the following day.

The desire of the East German government for a last moment of intimidation over their departing exiles had backfired badly. Three days later, on Saturday, October 7, despite a steady rain, the citizens of Plauen answered Jörg Schneider’s call for a demonstration. The turnout was immense; snapshots of the day show thousands of people milling about under umbrellas. The situation made for unique ironies. The Communist Party leaders of Plauen had scheduled the city’s celebration of the GDR’s anniversary for the same hour; thus, people went to the town center knowing something would happen, but not knowing exactly what. Celebration or demonstration?

What happened next remains something of a mystery. Some recollect that a child galvanized the gathering by chanting “Gorbi! Gorbi!”—invoking Gorbachev, who was in East Berlin that day, delivering a stern message to the governing party, urging liberalization and warning famously that delay could mean

disaster. Meanwhile, in Plauen, a plumber named Siegmund Wolf became perhaps the first East German to raise a protest banner, unfurling a bed sheet bearing the message "For Reforms and Freedom to Travel, Free Elections and Above All: Peace." In a smaller gathering, Stasi officials would have spirited him away. But Wolf was cushioned by a mass of human beings. At some point the crowd moved off the central square to march through the old city. Not since June 1953, when a construction workers' strike ignited a mass uprising against the government, had so many East Germans taken to the streets to inveigh against their rulers. In the much larger cities of Leipzig, East Berlin, and Potsdam, perhaps a thousand people demonstrated that day. But in Plauen, fifteen thousand people—fully one in four citizens—turned out, despite driving rain, harassment by undercover Stasi agents, and the intimidations of water cannon and a buzzing helicopter.

The demonstration in Plauen was notable not just for its numbers but for its completely peaceful outcome. Such an ending was by no means predetermined. When the crowd completed its circular route around the old city, marching on a city hall guarded by police and heavily armed militia, a single hostile action—a thrown bottle, say—could have sparked a bloody confrontation. And yet no such confrontation occurred. At six o'clock, the bells of Luther Church, directly across from city hall, began to ring, and people dispersed, heading home for dinner. They did so in part under the guidance of a man who had emerged as mediator: Plauen's Protestant Superintendent, Pastor Thomas Küttler.

Küttler, whose father and uncles belonged to the Confessing Church, had served in Plauen since the 1970s, a man of the cloth and of his adopted city. So when the demonstrators demanded that someone from the city address their demands, and the mayor refused, Küttler stepped forward. Shuttling back and forth between the protesters and Plauen's nervous, chain-smoking officials, he helped forestall escalation and end the standoff. In the crowd's name, he demanded an end to harassment from the air—and soon the helicopter disappeared. Next, the heavily armed militias had to go. Finally, Küttler requested something that struck at the core of state power: that officials receive representatives of the citizenry to discuss reforms. The mayor said yes. (A delegation formed later that week and eventually became the "Group of Twenty" that helped govern Plauen until free elections the following spring.)

Küttler then fulfilled his part of the bargain. Through a megaphone he told the crowd that their wishes had been heard: their city and state needed change, and the mayor would talk to them about implementing it; but for now they should go home. The bells of Luther Church tolled—they always tolled at six o'clock, but this time the pastor let them ring a bit longer—and the crowd dispersed in good spirits. For the first time they had entered the public space and spoken freely. For the first time, the state had responded to their demands. And so Plauen became the first place, in the words of Berlin historian Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, where the people in East Germany scored a victory over the power of the state.

When I met Pastor Küttler that fall, just one month later, we discussed that miraculous October 7, trading thoughts on the tensions and hopes that had caused people to gather, and on his own role in bringing about a peaceful resolution. We did not dwell on the role of the church. Yet without his and other churches, there would have been no fall of 1989 in Plauen—or anywhere else in East Germany. For decades, pastors had preserved and nurtured civil society in the GDR, turning church meeting rooms into incubators of free thought. Since the 1960s, young people in Plauen had been gathering at St. Mark's (known as the "beat church") to play and hear music, but also to discuss questions of peace and ecology. When the election-monitoring group wanted to continue with new initiatives, Küttler's church was where they went. Out of their number grew Plauen's New Forum, the first new political entity recognized in the town after October 7, and part of a national human-rights movement that sprang up to play a decisive role in the undoing of the East German state.

The church was a place not only to discuss politics, but also to pray for peace. Two days before the demonstration, when many Plaueners were smarting from all-night confrontations around the train station,

Küttler opened the city's churches for peace services. St. Mark's was so crowded that services were held back to back. Loud applause followed a prayer that "for once in our lives we be taken seriously." This was the "we" of people living under a regime that had never trusted them with control over their own lives, including the decision to vote; it was also the "we" of a city that had spent four undignified decades sinking into socialist ruin.

Pastor Küttler recalled this prayer during a homily delivered exactly two decades later—just last month, on October 5, 2009. Returning to St. Mark's on a visit from his present home in Leipzig, Küttler sat before a congregation that filled the domed space with Lutheran hymns. I was there as a guest of the city, and I listened as Küttler began preaching from Job 42:10, noting that before Job's life was transformed, he had been praying for his friends. Could one not say the same of the prayers of 1989, Küttler asked. Was not the change in the individual lives of Plauen's citizens—*die Wende*—the answer to prayers for change in their community and government? And hadn't the congregation departed the church twenty years earlier with a bounty of grace, fueling confidence in what they had to do in the days ahead? It had been a time when prayer and action were one.

Küttler described 1989 as a time when people spoke excitedly of "prayers and candles." Across East Germany, protesters had emerged from churches carrying candles symbolizing peace; photos taken in Plauen on October 7 show candles burning in front of the police on guard at city hall. In light of such widespread church-related protests, some have called the events of 1989 a Protestant Revolution. This description is only partly accurate. Yes, the shelter provided by churches in the weeks and years before the revolution helped foster an alternative to the regime. But the agenda of the protesters was not explicitly Christian, nor were most of the protesters practicing Christians. Still, the church was a place—rare in the authoritarian GDR—where people could attempt to speak truth.

This tradition of truth-speaking has continued. During my recent visit to Plauen, a dozen members of the now-defunct New Forum came by my hotel to talk about the challenges of living in the new, reunified Germany. I was taken aback to learn that they had nothing good to say about the world their revolution had ushered in. Several had tried out Western-style politics in city parliaments during the early 1990s, only to discover that real decisions were made behind closed doors by the powerful parties from the West, and by banks and businesses. The veterans of revolution felt powerless. "This is not real democracy," complained Siegfried Schaller, an engineer active in the new politics of 1989. No one in the group disagreed.

And yet Plauen reeks of prosperity. The old GDR of rusty factories, gray house fronts, dingy cafés, and two-cycle automobile engines is nowhere to be seen, heard, or smelled. Public places, including buildings long on the verge of collapse, have been lovingly restored; I could hardly find a house or apartment building without a fresh coat of paint. The city that once had a few dreary so-called restaurants now boasts dozens of real eateries.

Plauen is returning to identities long buried beneath drab façades. You can drive deep into the former socialist suburbs and see nothing of the old prefab apartment houses: all have received a smart, attractive exterior, some with glass and steel. People's lives have been similarly refurbished. Plaueners are well dressed and seem to lack for nothing. When I met with high-school students, some came late because they could not find parking spaces—this, in a country where one used to wait years to buy the glorified lawnmower of a Trabi. No one in this society is without health insurance, and the unemployed are provided for. From a U.S. perspective, the residents of Plauen don't seem to understand how good they have it.

Yet my hotel visitors insisted that prosperity is not what they went into the streets for. Perhaps revolutionaries are impossible to please. The Swiss historian Christoph Lüthy argues that the hopes of 1989 cannot be satisfied by any "real" political order: is there not a "literally utopian element in each

revolution,” he writes, one involving a hope for general redemption that is bound to be disappointed? One of the New Forum veterans, a journeyman artist named Dietrich Kelterer, took me to the rebuilt city center. Where Plaueners once risked their safety for civic rights, they can now shop on four stories of what Kelterer called the “shopping temple,” a mall crammed with boutiques. Everything in the town’s center—churches, a theater, even city hall—revolves around this new structure. People who worship here are not the kind of people who would call for a demonstration against a regime of political tyranny.

I had first come to Plauen seeking history, and found it in angry confrontations of the crowd with officers of the Stasi and other public officials. Back then, in November 1989, the revolution was in full force. Twenty years later, what I found among the veterans of that revolution was a powerful desire to tell their story. In unified Germany, virtually no one noticed Plauen’s role in bringing down the old regime; attention focused instead on nearby Leipzig. A brief chronicle I wrote in 1990, identifying Plauen as the place where the revolution had first gained a “mass” character, has been cited repeatedly over the years; and when I visited in October, one Plauen newspaper announced my arrival in the same sentence in which it informed readers that the president of Germany, Horst Köhler, would also be on hand. (My wife, reading this, could not suppress a giggle; but I took it as a sign of how badly the Plaueners want their history to be recognized.)

On October 7, the twentieth anniversary of the demonstration, President Köhler met with Plauen’s high-school seniors. Asked what the government might do to stop the brain drain westward, a problem that has plagued eastern German towns since 1989, Köhler rambled, offering desultory anecdotes. I sensed restlessness among New Forum activists in the seats behind me. “If someone had spoken that way to us in 1989, we would have said, ‘Get to the point,’” Dietrich Kelterer whispered. To the students’ question about how to combat the prejudices about East Germans common in the West, the president recommended that both sides “should talk to each other more.” Outside, Jörg Schneider—who as a young man had risked his safety to bring freedom of speech to this town—complained about Köhler’s platitudes, dismissing them as “speech with no content.” All in all, it was not a day designed to satisfy the members of the old New Forum. Evening featured a podium discussion at city hall, with panel members (including myself) holding forth. Not a single former member of the group was invited to speak.

Of course, New Forum veterans can speak as much as they like in public. They are also free to demonstrate. But what would they write on their banners today, and who would take notice? In his sermon at St. Mark’s, Pastor Küttler recalled that Plaueners back in 1989 had wanted to be taken seriously. But being taken seriously depends on being listened to. New Forum activists were taken seriously for a few weeks during that fall of 1989. But after the opening of the Berlin Wall, when people began traveling to the West for shopping opportunities unavailable in Plauen, attendance at demonstrations flagged. Soon people began looking to West German politicians for salvation. When Plaueners and other East Germans voted for Helmut Kohl in March 1990, they also voted for West German hard currency, offered to them as part of the deal at extremely favorable rates in exchange for their own East German money. Was it any surprise, in this context, that their own New Forum got just 3 percent of the vote?

What East Germans did not know was that they were also voting for noncompetitive wages and a staggering level of unemployment: in the years that followed, the former East Germany lost 9.5 million jobs. There are other grounds for arguing that Günter Schabowski’s surprise announcement that November evening has proved counterrevolutionary. No one regrets the fall of the Wall—that was a demand of Siegmur Wolf’s banner and Jörg Scheider’s leaflet, after all—but many wish it had been associated with a civil-rights movement; that it had come about as the fulfillment of a demand of the citizens, not as a fluke at a press conference. The revolutionary Steffen Kretzschmar has called the Wall’s opening “an ingenious move by the state functionaries,” a means of dissipating the populist energies built up in the GDR “pressure cooker.” Steffen Kollwitz, a leader in the group that investigated

the electoral fraud of April 1989, has voiced a widespread wish that reunification had happened differently. “The two states should have come together at eye level and then grown together,” he writes. “Much was destroyed by the accession as it happened.” Not only jobs, but for many a sense of self-worth—of having something to contribute to the new Germany.

Pastor Küttler reminded the congregation at St. Mark’s that in many ways the GDR was a prison, and that their revolution had liberated them. But the question for today, he continued, concerns what people are making of the chances given them in this liberated time. “Are we not inmates of new prisons?” he asked. “I believe that egoism, the striving for opportunities to assert oneself, and to exploit life itself—these are new prisons.” Greed in a “free” economy leads to sorrow and distress; freedoms of speech and travel dissolve in frivolity and purposelessness. “We cannot be deaf to the question of what the purpose of our freedom is,” he concluded. “Freedom without standing up for other people is destructive.”

Küttler was raising a perpetually vexing question for citizens of liberal societies: what to do with freedom? His quotation from Job, with its emphasis on concern for others, poses a challenge as relevant to democracy as to dictatorship. In my view, the revolutionaries of Plauen have lived up to the challenge. They are not egotists. As individuals, every one of them has done well, founding firms, maintaining positions, directing institutions, continuing family work, garnering contracts. They are success stories. Yet what concerns them, now as then, is “other people”—especially young people, who in general are turned off to public life. Those who carried the banners two decades ago want to make sure that coming generations know what it means to risk one’s safety for others, and to stand up for truth.

What happened in the streets of Plauen that October Saturday twenty years ago is a story that does not grow old, in part because historians will never fully account for it. But there is also the wonder of an answered prayer, of people emerging from peace services and then enacting peace, of a congregation speaking the truth in churches and then speaking truth to power. There is the vision of a community that is not an assembly of individuals but a unity of shared hopes and trust. In Plauen in 1989, I noticed that strangers routinely spoke to each other in trains and other public places. They had a lot to say. Perhaps my favorite story from that visit concerned a man caught in the middle of the march, chanting with the crowd, and then suddenly turning to a neighbor and saying, “Do you know what? We are demonstrating!”

We know that such transcendent, “revolutionary” communities do not last. In Plauen, as elsewhere in the former East Germany, the harmony engendered by the transition to freedom could not survive freedom itself. Nor could the unity of politics and faith: Thomas Küttler tells me that church attendance has continued its steady, decades-long decline, unaffected by the events of 1989. Still, there is no doubt that many atheists, including a fair number of Communist Party members, prayed for peace on that long-ago October day.

In Plauen last month I heard a number of young people, including a very bright journalist who was a small child in 1989, express the wish that they could have experienced those times personally. Communities are built upon legacies such as this, and in Central Europe there are many worse things to aspire to than the miraculous comity of 1989, when a crowd carrying candles and preaching nonviolence overturned a brutal regime that had proclaimed itself the verdict and victor of history; when a child chanting “Gorbi! Gorbi!” could inspire people to courage, while opening them to other words they had long thought but dared not speak.

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