

Confronting the Wall: Images of the Berlin Wall in GDR Short Prose

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During the nearly thirty years of its existence, the Berlin Wall conveyed various symbols and images. An August 1988 ZDF program broadcast accorded the Wall the stature of a monument, a memorial to its time of conception, a reminder of the Cold War hegemony which provoked its existence.¹ For the citizens of the divided Berlin, the Wall was an object to be reckoned with; serving not only as a physical barrier, the Wall adopted an everyday quality (*Alltäglichkeit*) that signaled a rapid transition from the initial feelings of horror which greeted the Wall's construction, to a general acceptance of the Wall as a part of everyday life for the citizens on both sides.² Wolfgang Paul likened this physical barrier to what he claimed was indicative of a divisive Berlin mentality: Berliners are dividers, creating two cities from one, two states from one.³ Similarly, Günter Kunert, drawing on the idea of division, characterized the Wall as a metaphor for barriers that people have built inside themselves. Asserting that Berliners were at least able to come to terms with the Wall's physical existence, he argues that they could not so easily overcome these inner barricades.⁴

¹ Barbara Sichtmann, "Happening Mauer," *Die Zeit*, North American edition, 26 August 1988: 19. "Das ist die Mauer heute: [...] kaum noch [ein Denkmal] für die Überzeugungen der Zeit, aus der sie stammt."

² In their book, *Ostberlin: Die andere Seite einer Stadt in Texten und Bildern* published in 1987, Lutz Rathenow and Harald Hauswald touch upon this reification of the Wall: "The border's official name is the 'antifascist protection wall.' No one calls it that; even the officials are starting to talk about 'the Wall.' But therein lies the dilemma that, that which began as a wall, is no longer a wall—the term 'protection wall' encompasses the aura of this meter-wide prison, whose various obstacles and guard towers increase in number and size from year to year. The more perfect the wall becomes, the more fitting the colloquialism. People have to diminish the effects of this threatening symbol, make it invisible in order to somehow come to terms with it. In the East as in the West." Lutz Rathenow und Harald Hauswald, *Ostberlin* (München: Piper, 1987), 152. My translation.

³ Wolfgang Paul, "Der Doppelköpfige aus der Charité," *Hier schreibt Berlin heute*, ed. Rudolf Hartung (München: Paul List, 1963), 33. "Wir [Berliner] sind Spalter, das wissen Sie, wir haben aus dieser Stadt zwei Städte gemacht, aus diesem Land zwei Länder."

⁴ Günter Kunert, "Über Grenzen hinaus," *Verspätete Monologe* (München: Hanser, 1981), 33.

These images of inner and outer barriers pervade the GDR short prose that focuses on the Berlin Wall. The Wall meant different things to different people; its mere existence cast Berlin as a unique city, and generated individual experiences for the citizens on both sides. In this paper I will present six examples of GDR short prose that depict aspects of life with the Berlin Wall. Each of the works presents a different perspective and contains a plethora of images from both sides of the Wall—two of them contain memories of Berlin before August 13, 1961, but all of them provide the reader with profound insight into life with the Berlin Wall. One interesting conclusion that we can draw, however, is that many of the works convey an almost all-consuming tendency to ignore the Wall. This is not unlike the real life experiences of the citizens of Berlin. In their introduction to *Das Mauerbuch* (1981), a documentary of experiences published for the Wall's twentieth anniversary, the book's editors argue, that those forced to live with the Wall, in actuality reified it to such an extent, that its existence was nullified. The following descriptions illustrate this fact:

It has become easy for us to view the Wall only partially, but we extrapolate this microcosm into a whole, just as the official nomenclature, Berlin, capital of the GDR, actually only refers to East Berlin. The Berlin on the other side of the Wall is depicted on all of the Eastern maps as a white nothingness.

To view the Wall from below means to demonstrate how people have experienced and come to terms with the division, their attempts to circumvent, ignore, fight, or forget the Wall.⁵

In the works of Elfriede Brüning, Stefan Heym, Rolf Schneider, Klaus Schlesinger, Helga Schubert, and Wolfgang Müller, I will demonstrate the means which the characters in these short stories used in their attempts to come to terms with the Wall. For some of the protagonists in these narratives, the Wall symbolizes a prison; for others, it signals what is wrong with Cold War politics; for still others, it is merely a fact of life—one which neither positively nor negatively affects them. The stories' narrators convey different perspectives. The protagonists range in age from thirteen to over sixty, and the time of narration spans the day the Wall was built to many years later. The common thread uniting each narrative is the portrayal of an individual confrontation with the Berlin Wall.

⁵ "Vorwort," *Das Mauerbuch. Texte und Bilder aus Deutschland von 1945 bis heute*, hrsg. v. Manfred Hammer, Edelgard Abenstein, Daniel Danisch, Wolf Deinert, Helmut Diehl, Sieghard Pohl (Berlin: Oberbaumverlag, 1981), 9–10. My translation.

In Elfriede Brüning's "Himmel auf Erden" (1974), the construction of the Berlin Wall proves to be a minor stumbling block to the plans of the Grimma family. Werner Grimma is a type of border crosser (*Grenzgänger*). He operates his own television repair service, but purchases necessary materials in West Berlin. At first only privileged citizens were able to purchase televisions, and Werner's business, though successful, was easy to manage. Soon, a flood of television sets reached the stores, everyone was able to obtain one, and Werner was forced to expand his business. Greed served as his motivation. Upon learning that a state supported television service would soon open, Werner was furious. He did not want to share his profits with the State.⁶ As his profit margin declined, Werner saw relocation to the free market of the West as his only recourse. This decision met with some opposition from his mother who did not want to leave her homeland; fears of recriminations if she remained forced her to acquiesce. Werner drew up elaborate plans: the flight was to begin on August 12, 1961:

It was August 12, 1961. They wanted to spend Sunday night at a distant (and cursorily initiated) relative's house in Berlin-Grünau, so that the following morning, refreshed and joyous, they would travel to Bahnhof Zoo to pick up their previously shipped wares...Everyone knows, that this could not transpire. After the borders closed that very night, not a soul could get over the border.⁷

The Wall's construction forced the family to remain in the East, but it did not interfere with Werner's life any further. Shortly thereafter his business began to flourish again, and, within a few years, he was the owner of two cars, a weekend home, and a sailboat. Despite his initial belligerence toward the Party and the State and his wife's dishonest bookkeeping practices, Werner's eventual success elevates him to a positive position. Ironically, this former dissident assumes the stature of a role model of socialist behavior. He serves as an example of someone who made something of himself despite his misfortunes.

The Berlin Wall's role in this story is secondary; following the initial shock after its construction, Werner and his family are able to regroup and achieve

⁶ Werner's wife was in charge of the bookkeeping duties, a task which she administered less than honestly, noting sums which were to remain undeclared in a separate ledger.

⁷ "Es war der 12. August 1961. Die Nacht zum Sonntag wollte man in dem Häuschen einer entfernten (und hastig eingeweihten) Verwandten in Berlin-Grünau verbringen, um am nächsten Morgen, durch ausgiebigen Schlaf gestärkt und entsprechend froh gestimmt, den am Bahnhof Zoo deponierten Ersatzteilen nachzureisen...Jeder weiß, daß es nicht mehr dazu kommen konnte. Nachdem just in dieser Nacht die Grenze dichtgemacht wurde, kam keine Maus mehr hinüber." Elfriede Brüning, "Himmel auf Erden," *Frauen in der DDR. Zwanzig Erzählungen*, ed. Lutz-W. Wolff (München: dtv, 1976), 134. My translation.

success. The Grimma family overcame the Wall's oppression through hard work. Still, as the story concludes, Werner's mother, who remains true to the Party to the very end, reminds the reader of Werner's shortcomings as a socialist.

In Stefan Heym's "Mein Richard" (1982), the Wall takes on a more central role, portrayed from the perspective of two teenage boys who had no concept of life without the Wall. In this story Heym portrays the Wall as a physical obstacle, an object which the boys must circumvent in their quest for adventure. For these two young boys, the Wall has no political connotations. They demonstrate a total lack of understanding of the reasons for the Wall's existence. In defiance of GDR law Richard Zunk and Richard Edelweiß, two East German teenagers, repeatedly jump the Wall in order to go to the movies in West Berlin.⁸

Although the story centers on Richard Zunk, Heym relates the story from the perspective of Richard's mother, a loyal Party member and true Party functionary. Filled with remorse and assuming that Richard's transgressions are her fault, the mother subsequently blames Richard for her own loss of employment, a direct result of the boy's transgressions. Heym describes Richard's mother as a "party member," who "always had a position of responsibility."⁹ Blaming herself for not being more watchful of Richard, she claims his actions did not surprise her.

Although we are not privy to the actual *act* of jumping over the Wall, we gain insight into Richard's state of mind. He is a disenchanting and rebellious youth who lies to his mother, his teachers, and his FDJ leaders. Richard wove a web of intrigue and lies—claiming he was attending FDJ functions when in actuality he was at the cinema in West Berlin. The charges against Richard are very serious—repeated violation of the passport law. In all Richard visited the West fourteen times—28 times over the Wall. In the words of one of the State's witnesses, this proved a fairly easy feat, one which any young, agile person could accomplish successfully.

The story is fraught with irony. Because Richard's parents were Party loyalists, they received permission to occupy an apartment which directly bordered the Wall. Richard's escape entailed scaling a fence and eluding watch

⁸ The story has striking similarities to an episode in Peter Schneider's *Der Mauerspringer*, a fact to which Jörg Bernhard Bilke also alludes in his review of Heym's work. See Bilke, "Nichts Neues im Osten. Ein DDR-Autor drückt sich vor brisanten Themen," *Deutsche Zeitung/Christ und Welt* 15 Apr. 1977.

⁹ "My Richard," Stefan Heym, *Voices East and West. German Short Stories since 1945*, ed. and trans. Roger C. Norton (New York: Ungar, 1984), 123. Additional references are to this edition and noted parenthetically. Throughout the story Mrs. Zunk remains true to the State. A minor exception occurred because of her distress upon learning of Richard's arrest: laid off from work, and unable to see or talk to her son, she remains at home unable to concentrate and listens to the radio—East or West, it doesn't matter. This appears to be Mrs. Zunk's only transgression.

tower guards. The boys admitted their initial fear, but after their first successful attempt, the task was a piece of cake. West German police noticed the boys' antics. When asked if they wished to remain in West Berlin, the boys responded negatively. The police then contacted a reporter who wrote about their escapades. It was the publication of their story in the West which caught the attention of the GDR authorities.

After the criminal hearing and sentencing of the two boys, their defense attorney implies to the prosecutor that instead of punishment, the boys should receive a medal. The fact that they repeatedly returned to the GDR showed an unflinching loyalty to the State. The story concludes with the two men's laughter. Despite this humorous aspect one must really question the GDR's priorities. Richard's own mother reflects on the seriousness of his actions:

As a longtime party member I knew how the Comrades react to things like repeated violations of border regulations by the son of another Comrade: We have our Workers' State and we demand that our laws and our borders be respected, especially by the children of Comrades; when a sixteen-year-old puts himself above the law, what—and where—will he be when he is twenty-five, and what kind of an example is he for other young people? (132).

The boys' constant return to GDR soil did in actuality represent loyalty and their transgressions represented a normal youthful search for adventure.¹⁰

Heym's story serves to trivialize the Wall's existence. Humor and irony override the seriousness of the boys' transgressions. Their confrontation with the Wall occurs in the form of defiance, depicting an adventure. The Wall assumes the form of some playground obstacle whose sole purpose is to test physical agility and provide an outlet for youthful energy.

In Rolf Schneider's "Grenzgänger" (1974), we encounter a young female character forced to make a decision which would affect the rest of her life. The story portrays a personal and emotional confrontation told from the point of view of 13-year-old Hanna. Because of her youth, Hanna does not fully grasp the tense political situation which exists in the GDR in 1961.¹¹

In this story the Wall plays a symbolic role; Hanna's decision to stay in the East is the central focus. Schneider presents his readers with a family that defiantly challenges its own State. Both Hanna's brother Werner and her father have jobs in West Berlin. Because their official domicile is East Berlin they are

¹⁰ Bilke finds fault with Heym's conclusion, arguing that this would have been an excellent opportunity for Heym to say something productive (i.e. critical) about the justice system in the GDR. See Bilke, "Nichts Neues im Osten."

¹¹ When important political discussions take place between her parents, Hanna is always sent to her room.

labeled border crossers. The family purchases coffee, bananas, and powdered milk in West Berlin with the Western Marks that Hanna's father earns and does not convert.¹² Hanna herself often travels to West Berlin to meet her brother after work. During her excursions, Hanna has the opportunity to read the headlines of the "colorful daily newspapers" of the West which tell of the GDR's political plight: "Numbers rounded off to the thousands and printed in huge type, showed the extent of the flight from the zone."¹³

After a quarrel with their father, Hanna's brother takes up permanent residence in West Berlin. Since the family had no contact with him for quite some time, his mother bakes him a cake and sends Hanna to West Berlin with a gift for her brother, now living in Charlottenburg. This occurs on August 12, 1961.

Hanna spends the night at her brother's. Sunday morning, on their way to an outing at Wannsee, Hanna and Werner hear the news broadcasts reporting the closure of all borders to East Berlin and the initiation of the construction of a wall. They return to Werner's room and watch the scenes on television. Werner exclaims: "It's goddamned lucky, that you're here!" (119). He has many plans for Hanna: "Of course, you're going to stay, said Werner. I don't know, said Hanna. You have to stay, said Werner; after all, you aren't stupid" (120). Clearly, Hanna cannot grasp the implications of the Wall's construction. Her brother therefore takes charge.

After Werner leaves to organize help for Hanna, she wanders through West Berlin. After walking, and riding a bus and a subway, she arrives at Brunnenstrasse. In the distance she sees the border:

From far off she could recognize the border; people and vehicles were crowded together, filling the entire street. She went toward the border, walking more and more slowly. People were standing in groups and talking excitedly to each other; policemen with white caps moved among them. Hanna saw she didn't have a chance to get through these groups of people, and then she asked herself also if she even wanted to (121).

¹² Her family's disrespect for the laws of the State creates numerous problems. On two separate occasions Party officials visit her house. Hanna's father must accompany them on the second occasion, returning after one day and informing his family that he is under investigation for currency violations.

¹³ Rolf Schneider, "Border Crossers," *Voices East and West*, 116. Future references will be noted parenthetically. This choice of words—*zone*—illustrates the West's unwillingness to accept the GDR's existence as a separate political entity. The approximation of numbers and the type size signal the propagandistic tendencies of Western media.

Hanna faced decisions which no 13-year-old child should ever have to make. She needed to choose between remaining in West Berlin with her brother and returning to her family in East Berlin. The situation was overwhelming, causing a flood of emotions in Hanna. At one point “[s]he felt like crying, without being able to say exactly why” (121). She deliberated about her situation until evening when she bought a ticket for the *Stadtbahn*.¹⁴ She boarded a train headed for the Zoological Garden:

Hanna saw the skyscrapers with their colorful facades. At the stations there were large advertising posters for ice cream and cigarettes, which she had seen often enough but which she would now be seeing for the last time, if she didn't change her mind...Through the window of the moving train she saw warehouses and apartment houses with white walls. She saw the bank of the Spree River. She saw the bridge over the Spree. Her train roared over it. The sun was low in the sky. Hanna recognized the roofs of the Charité Hospital, before the dark mouth of the station entrance at Friedrichsstrasse swallowed the train. Perhaps she still could have turned back, even now—she didn't know. She also didn't deliberate. At the station she saw a lot of men in uniform; most of them were carrying weapons. The train stopped. Hanna pushed the door open. She climbed out, a thin girl of thirteen years, with shoulder-length hair and near-sighted eyes behind her glasses. Some of the uniformed men stared at her, surprised or smiling. She herself went up to the nearest man in uniform, she noticed he had a perspiring and fleshy face, and she told him she wanted to go home (122).

During this tram ride, Hanna's indecision is still evident. Upon reaching GDR soil, however, she realizes that she wants to go home.¹⁵

¹⁴ Fritz J. Raddatz sees Schneider's story as a take-off of Christa Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel*; Cf. "Keine Auskunft: Prosa aus der DDR," *Die Zeit* 7 Feb. 1975: 22. Raddatz is referring to Rita's trip to West Berlin to visit Manfred. Although Manfred wanted Rita to remain with him in the West, she was unable to make up her mind. Uncertain which decision she will make, Rita purchases a return ticket.

¹⁵ The characters in the stories by Heym and Schneider are too immature to comprehend the situation which preceded the construction of the Berlin Wall. But the fact that children find the division of Germany difficult to comprehend should not surprise us. Lutz Rathenow's son formulated his own childlike interpretation of the Wall. The boy's only recourse is to relate the reality to a fairy tale, wondering if Sleeping Beauty lives behind a wall. Rathenow und Hauswald, 152. At four years of age the narrator's son already recognizes the incongruity of Berlin's status with that of other cities. But interestingly enough this little boy sees the Wall as something to be conquered—an amazing foresight for such a young boy. For other children, the Wall represented something else. In one account, a GDR citizen notes that children born after the Wall's construction cannot conceive of a

We as readers never learn what kind of a life Hanna lived on the other side of the Wall, nor what happened to her brother Werner. We are not even sure of the reasons for Hanna's return. One must speculate that Hanna was simply not mature enough to understand the ramifications of the GDR government's decision.

As readers, we can perceive this story as representative of the tragedy of the Berlin Wall, forcing families to live exiled from each other. We cannot, however, judge the outcomes because they remain unknown to us. Unlike the unassuming roles which the Wall attained in the stories by Brüning and Heym, Schneider introduces a personal element to his narrative, making it all the more poignant through the characterization of the protagonist as a young teenage girl.

We find another perspective on the day the Wall went up in Klaus Schlesinger's "Am Ende der Jugend" (1977). As the story begins, the protagonist, Gottfried, is awakened by his colleague Rosenberg knocking at the door. Although it is almost midday, Gottfried and his wife are still sleeping. Rosenberg delivers the news that the borders have been closed. Rosenberg wonders about Gottfried's friend Martin. As Gottfried assures him that Martin would be at home, Rosenberg replies cynically: "Hopefully!"¹⁶

As Gottfried wanders through Berlin searching for Martin, he notices that there is something distinctly different about the city, a mood which pervades the outwardly ordinary day:

I don't know if I ever saw the city again as on that day. But I couldn't tell you, what caused it; nothing was changed, the long gray street, the silent imposing houses with their crumbling facades—everything was the same but yet in some indescribable way different, not only because, except for state holidays, I had never seen so many people in the streets running mostly in groups toward the border...but something was in their faces—whether it was anger or triumph—something unifying, common to everyone, it was of course the disbelief in the faces of the people who ran passed me toward the border (158-159).¹⁷

life without the Wall. Horst Wenderoth, "Ungeordnete Gedanken zwanzig Jahre danach," *Das Mauerbuch*, 246–247.

¹⁶ "Na...hoffentlich!" Klaus Schlesinger, "Am Ende der Jugend," *Berliner Traum. Fünf Geschichten* (Frankfurt/M: Fischer, 1977), 158. Further references will be included parenthetically. My translation.

¹⁷ "Ich weiß nicht, ob ich die Stadt jemals wieder so gesehen habe wie an diesem Tag. Dabei hätte ich nicht sagen können, woran es lag; es war alles unverändert, diese graue, lange Straße, die stummen, mächtigen Häuser mit ihren bröckligen Fassaden—alles unverändert und doch auf eine schwer faßbare Weise anders, nicht nur weil ich, außer an Staatsfeiertagen, noch nie so viele Menschen auf den Straßen gesehen habe, die so eilig und meist in Gruppen in Richtung der Grenze liefen...in den Gesichtern—ob sie nun Zorn oder Triumph zeigten—etwas Einendes, allen Gemeinsames, ja es war die gleiche Ungläubigkeit in den Gesichtern der Menschen, die an mir vorbei zur

On his way home Gottfried encounters Martin and together they go to the institute, a clinic situated directly on the border. From his laboratory window Gottfried can see the events unfolding at the border:

Along the way a group of soldiers trudged toward the S-Bahn that sealed off the clinic from the West and served as border. The soldiers were completely outfitted, machine guns were slung over their shoulders (166).¹⁸

Not all of the people at the institute seemed shocked by the events. Rosenberg for example proposes a toast: "He raised his glass and said: I believe this is the most important day since the founding of our State, yes it is the real hour of birth of the German socialist state (167).¹⁹ Gottfried and his colleagues discuss the panic which seemed to overwhelm the citizens of the city, and debate the events. Some argue that the State had no choice but to take action against the flight of its citizens. But the reactions of the people indicate that many were taken by surprise. Some, such as a person in the Bernauerstrasse who jumped out of a fourth floor window, made their decision when it was already too late. During the discussion Rosenberg in particular adhered to Party dogma. When one of the laboratory assistants asserts that every person has particular rights, Rosenberg counters with the argument that the West systematically tried to break the spirit of the GDR. Martin, however, refuses to take sides, suggesting that there are certain choices, which no person should be forced to make. Such a proposal clearly indicates that Martin is not in agreement with his government. This statement also foreshadows Martin's actions in the following scene.²⁰

The colleagues proceed to another building, one which lay directly on the border. While waiting for another colleague to arrive, Gottfried walks to a door at the end of the hall:

I pressed down on the hard, cold handle. To this day I don't know what prompted me to do this. Everyone knew the door was locked. Just as everyone knew that the border was only a few steps away. I

Grenze zogen." My translation.

¹⁸ "Auf dem Weg stapfte eine Kolonne Grenzsoldaten in Richtung des S-Bahn-Traktes, der das Klinikgelände westlich abschloß und auch Grenzlinie war. Die Soldaten hatten Marschgepäck, Maschinenpistolen hingen über ihre Schultern." My translation.

¹⁹ "Er hob sein Glas und sagte: Ich glaube, dieser Tag ist der wichtigste, seit dieser Staat gegründet wurde, ja vielleicht ist er sogar die wirkliche Geburtsstunde des deutschen sozialistischen Staates." My translation.

²⁰ It is probably because of Martin's statements that the GDR prohibited publication of the volume. See for example Wilfried F. Schoeller, "Gesplante Stadt, zerrissene Menschen. Klaus Schlesingers Geschichtenband *Berliner Traum*," *Die Weltwoche* 31 May, 1978.

often asked myself today if I would have tried the door had I known what was to follow (169).²¹

Ironically, the door was not locked. Gottfried, accompanied by Martin, walked through the door; they found themselves outside of the clinic and directly facing the border. An indescribable feeling overcame Gottfried:

We stood [...] directly between the steel gray uniforms of the troops on this side and the grass green police uniforms of the other side! It was a place or better, a situation which I instinctively knew was so crucial for me, that I could not rise to the challenge, indeed I experienced a sensation of smallness, and it hit me with such intensity that for a few seconds I couldn't move (170).²²

Border guards ordered them to retreat. Gottfried, rooted in place as if paralyzed, patiently waited for the feeling of paralysis to pass. Meanwhile, Martin continued moving forward. Gottfried's first instinct was to follow Martin; after all he had followed him to Berlin several years before.²³ But thinking of his responsibility to his wife, he slowly retraced his steps to the clinic. When he reached the clinic door, he looked one last time at Martin, who had just successfully crossed the bridge and arrived on Western soil.²⁴

The story ends abruptly, leaving the reader with no insight as to the next series of events. Gottfried's paralysis relates the horror of the moment—it conveys feelings of shock, frustration, and confusion, and completely grasps the reader. The reader must conclude that Gottfried continued his life in East Berlin, while Martin began a new life in West Berlin.

²¹ "Ich drückte auf die Klinke, die hart war und kühl. Ich weiß bis heute nicht, was mich dazu veranlaßte. Jeder wußte doch, die Tür war versperrt. So wie jeder wußte, daß es von dort nur wenige Schritte bis zur Grenze waren. Heute frage ich mich oft, ob ich die Klinke heruntergedrückt hätte, wenn mir klar gewesen wäre, was dann folgte." My translation.

²² "Wir standen [...] genau zwischen den stahlgrauen Uniformen der Kampfgruppen auf dieser und den grasgrünen Uniformen der Polizisten auf der andern Seite! Es war ein Platz oder besser: eine Situation, bei der ich instinktiv wußte, sie war so gewaltig für mich, daß ich ihr nicht in gleicher Größe gegenübertreten konnte, ja ich empfand ein körperliches Gefühl der Kleinheit, und es traf mich mit solcher Heftigkeit, daß ich mich sekundenlang nicht bewegen konnte." My translation.

²³ Karl Corino asserts that Gottfried's character may be autobiographical. Karl Corino, "Die Augen zumachen und fliegen. Geschichten aus der DDR—Klaus Schlesingers *Berliner Traum*," *Stuttgarter Zeitung* 29 Mar. 1978. Wolfgang Werth, on the other hand, maintains that the Gottfried character is not autobiographical. See Werth, "Berliner Alpträume. Geschichten von Klaus Schlesinger," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2 May 1978.

²⁴ Wolfgang Werth asserts that neither Martin nor Gottfried made the correct decision. See Werth, "Berliner Alpträume. Geschichten von Klaus Schlesinger." W. Martin Lüdke argues that Martin crosses the border out of spite. See Lüdke, "Nicht nur ein (Ost)Berliner (Alp)Traum. Die neuen Erzählungen von Klaus Schlesinger," *Frankfurter Rundschau* 10 June 1978.

Schlesinger deftly describes Gottfried's emotions throughout the narrative. Like Schneider's Hanna, Gottfried also faced the decision to choose either East or West. Gottfried, too, faced the loss of a close companion. But as the title indicates, inherent in Gottfried's decision was a forsaking of youth. As readers we can only extrapolate the meaning of the narrative's conclusion. On the one hand, Martin acted as a free spirit for Gottfried, urging him to make radical changes in his life. Martin's departure signalled an end to his guidance. On the other hand, Gottfried's confrontation with the border symbolizes the transition from youth to adulthood. In a GDR context, Gottfried made the correct, adult decision. But it was a decision which would have a lasting impact on his life.

Helga Schubert's "Das verbotene Zimmer" (1978) presents a confrontation with the Berlin Wall years after its construction. The political magnitude of the Wall's existence is readily apparent. The narrator, an inhabitant of East Berlin, ponders the realities of life in West Berlin. Fear and paranoia (she refers to herself as the one who is "walled in")²⁵ prevent her from naming West Berlin directly; she chooses instead to refer to the other half of the city as "the forbidden room."²⁶ The narrator has memories of West Berlin before the Wall—she was actually born in the Western part of the city, but after opting for a life in the East, never ventured onto Western soil again. Her curiosity is natural and her position as a GDR writer earns her the privilege of obtaining a visa for travel to West Berlin.

Kafkaesque sequences convey the narrator's fear and anxiety of West Berlin: she constantly checks to be certain that she has her passport; she refuses to give out her address; she imagines that she has failed to return to East Berlin before the midnight expiration of her visa. These anxieties most likely stem from a fear of the unknown, a logical association with anything considered forbidden. They serve as a stark contrast to Stefan Heym's fearless wall jumpers. For them, the Wall is not an object which instills fear. But when Schubert's narrator finally obtains a visa and prepares for her trip, she experiences feelings of anxiety which she likens to those one feels before undergoing an operation.²⁷

When Schubert's narrator relates the details of her trip to West Berlin,²⁸ she describes the border: "The border guards on the tracks...the bare field that leads to the river...the watch towers. The soldiers. The barbed wire...The Wall is painted white on our side" (87).²⁹ Once on the other side of the border, the

²⁵ Helga Schubert, "Das verbotene Zimmer," *Das verbotene Zimmer. Geschichten* (Darmstadt; Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1982), 85. Further references are included in the text.

²⁶ My translation.

²⁷ Schubert, 86.

²⁸ Norbert Schachtsiek-Freitag describes Schubert's narrative as autobiographical, relating it to her own trip to West Berlin in 1978. Schachtsiek-Freitag, "Kritische Subjektivität," *Deutschland Archiv* 16 (1983): 1325.

²⁹ "Die Grenzsoldaten an den Gleisen....Die unbebaute Fläche bis zum Fluß...Die Beobachtungstürme. Die Soldaten. Die Stacheldrähte...Die Mauer ist von uns aus weiß gestrichen." My

narrator realizes that West Berlin is really not that unfamiliar—from news reports she knows about the drug problem and prostitution. Even the billboard advertisements are familiar. But the visit to her birthplace does cause her to ponder what would have been: “If we had stayed here, or better yet there, where would I be? Also on our side?”(94).³⁰ Upon her return to East Berlin, however, she learns from her mother that she visited the wrong house—her trip was for nought.

Schubert narrates in the first person, a technique which draws the reader into the events.³¹ The reader is privy to the fear and the wonder regarding the foreign, forbidden part of Berlin. The reader too, experiences the feelings of imprisonment, and those from the West who know more than the narrator, still feel the boundaries and experience the desire to break from the shackles.

This story contrasts sharply with the others in that it depicts a situation years after the Wall's construction. Because of the narrator's age (38) and experiences, the Wall takes on the form of something to be feared. The trip to West Berlin allowed the narrator to confront her fear of the unknown. Ironically, however, she never fulfilled her dream of visiting the house in which she was born.

The narrator in Wolfgang Müller's “Gibts denn Gesundbrunnen noch?” (1981) also sits in East Berlin and wonders about West Berlin. As a resident of Prenzlauer Berg, the protagonist compares his community of the present with Gesundbrunnen in West Berlin some fifteen years ago. This makes an immediate statement about what type of social progress the GDR has made in its quest to surpass the West. The narrator was familiar with West Berlin before the Wall and this fact brings about his musings regarding that city today. But his lack of information hints at the prisonlike atmosphere of East Berlin after the wall: “One knows so little.”³²

In the narrator's Prenzlauer Berg many remnants of World War II remain, particularly the damage caused by allied bombings which had never been repaired. But behind all of this lies the Berlin that once was, remnants of the old united city. Product names are only memories for the narrator—all materials which are no longer available in the GDR. But Müller counters this with some positive impressions of the GDR:

translation.

³⁰ “Wenn wir hier geblieben wären oder vielmehr dort geblieben wären, wo wäre ich jetzt? Auch bei uns?” My translation.

³¹ Konrad Franke asserts that Schubert chose the first person in order to avoid the distance which a third person narrator imparts. She wanted to tell her story from her point of view as it was real for her. See Franke, “DDR-Bürger, Jahrgang 1940,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 5/6 Feb. 1983: 116.

³² Wolfgang Müller, “Gibts denn Gesundbrunnen noch?,” *Auskunft 2. Neue Prosa aus der DDR*, ed. Stefan Heym (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1981), 111. Additional references are included parenthetically. “Man weiß ja so wenig.” My translation.

No one suffers. No one freezes or starves. No one may sleep on a park bench. No one wins or loses. Everything is peaceful here. The right to work is secure, as well as the obligation, and both of these are realized (113).³³

It is interesting how Müller constantly relates the present-day GDR with West Berlin of fifteen years ago:

A few hundred meters away, five or seven city blocks to the West, there was a similar scene fifteen years ago. One doesn't know if it's still the same there, because since 1961 no one is allowed to travel to Gesundbrunnen in Wedding. One S-Bahn station. They ripped out the tracks, only the bridges remain. Sparrows still fly there. Pigeons and crows in winter. Not even dogs are allowed over (113).³⁴

The narrator's descriptions and comparisons emphasize the similarities between Prenzlauer Berg and Wedding. But the narrator also stresses the advantages of the East:

It's more peaceful here, everything transpires without any rush. There aren't any book kiosks here, there is not as much noise, not as much conversation back and forth. Order reigns here. There are no beggars, no junk collectors, and the unsanitary basement shops are empty. There is no basement trade. Junk, paper and bottles are not collected but seized. Cars are driven aggressively, there are no prostitutes on the streets, there are no private detectives, they don't try to be discrete and they don't wear blue glasses (120).³⁵

³³ "Keiner leidet Not. Es wird nicht gefroren und nicht gehungert. Niemand darf auf einer Parkbank schlafen. Es wird nicht verloren und nicht gesiegt. Hier geht alles friedlich zu. Das Recht auf Arbeit ist gesichert, die Pflicht dazu auch, und beides wird realisiert." My translation.

³⁴ "Ein paar hundert Meter weiter, fünf oder sieben Straßenblöcke westlich, hat es vor fünfzehn Jahren ähnlich ausgesehen. Man weiß nicht, ob das immer noch so ist, denn nach Gesundbrunnen, in den Wedding, kann man seit Neunzehnhunderteinundsechzig nicht mehr fahren. Die eine S-Bahnstation. Gleise hat man rausgerissen, nur die Brücken liegen noch auf den Widerlagen. Spatzen fliegen noch dorthin. Tauben, und die Krähen im Winter. Hunde dürfen auch nicht." My translation.

³⁵ "Hier herrscht viel mehr Ruhe, hier geht alles ohne Hektik voran, geht seinen Gang. Hier gibt es keine Bücherbuden, es gibt nicht soviel Geschrei, es wird nicht soviel hin und her geredet. Hier herrscht Ordnung. Es gibt keine Bettler, keine Lumpensammler, und die ungesunden Kellerläden stehen verfallend leer. Im Keller wird hier nicht gehandelt. Lumpen, Altpapier und Flaschen werden nicht aufgesammelt, sondern erfaßt. Die Lizenzbauautos werden aggressiv gefahren, Nutten stehen nicht auf der Straße, und Detektive sind nicht privat, behaupten nicht diskret zu sein, und tragen keine blauen Brillen." My translation.

But I note a hint of wistfulness as he constantly remarks that one does not know what it is like in Gesundbrunnen now. His final question: "Does Gesundbrunnen still exist?" (121) indicates that he is not even sure that this community still exists.

The narrator is a person who was obviously well-acquainted with the Wedding community of Gesundbrunnen, indicating that he was probably a border crosser. He wistfully reminisces about the activity of Gesundbrunnen and compares life there before the Wall with life in Prenzlauer Berg after the Wall. In doing so he praises the advantages of the East, but he is merely trying to convince himself that it is better in the East than in the West. Each positive rationalization of the East is accompanied by a comment about the West and the statement that one doesn't know what Gesundbrunnen is like today.

This narrator's confrontation with the Wall occurs only in his mind. As in Schubert's narrative, West Berlin is now an unknown. But Müller's narrator does not have any feelings of fear or anxiety. He has come to terms with the Wall's existence, accepted it as a fact of life. But he cannot erase his memories of the other Berlin. This provides an interesting commentary on the efficacy of the GDR's decision to build a Wall. The Wall's purpose was to separate the West from the East. But for older citizens, memories of West Berlin remained alive. We can note an interesting parallel here—for Heym's Richard, the West was an unknown which needed to be explored, the Wall an obstacle to conquer. For this old man, however, his memories of the West satisfy his thirst for knowledge.

Despite the differing viewpoints in these stories, all depict an individual in conflict with the Berlin Wall. These authors counter the political and historical enormity of the Wall's construction with elements of the personal. Infusing their stories with emotions, these authors illustrate that the Berlin Wall was more than a metaphor for the Iron Curtain, the physical barricade synonymous with the East-West polarity of Cold War politics. For the citizens of East Berlin the Wall was a constant reminder of the division of Germany, a barrier which all had to confront and overcome. Each narrative details the way in which the Berlin Wall affected the lives of the protagonists. The narratives reflect the difficult decisions which the citizens were forced to make. For some, such as Hanna and Gottfried, it meant deciding between East and West. For others it meant sacrificing memories (the narrators in Schubert's and Müller's stories), a lifestyle (Werner Grimma), friends (Gottfried), or family (Hanna). Each of the stories demonstrates, from different perspectives, an individual's personal confrontation with the reality of the Berlin Wall. All of the stories show that the construction of the Berlin Wall touched many people's lives in many different ways, forcing each of them to find a way to live with its reality.