

Thomas Rosenlöcher

Opening Speaker

an act of resistance, even though it is all over and done with by now. I am too old to learn English, and too civilized to speak Denglish.

Anyhow, in my mind's eye I see myself in Berlin. I was back there again only recently. I see myself with some elderly and seemingly urbane people, with a glass of wine on a high terrace. The latter is on a level with the surrounding modern buildings like the French Embassy or the Hotel Adlon. We are in the heart of Berlin, and thus also in the heart of Germany! Granted, a bit out of touch with the crowd flashing on Pariser Platz below. – I went to a lecture at the academy about the relation between nationalism and national consciousness. – “National consciousness means being aware of a nation's past and its cruelties. It means that someone who will not forget the cruelties is allowed to say the word ‘Germany’ without being a nationalist!” I wrote that down. And then I went out onto the terrace with the rest of the audience and with a glass of wine. But every time I take a sip, I cannot help but to look across at the vanishing colonnaded gate of Spree–Athen,¹⁰ already photographed to death. It is certainly no longer blackened and bricked, but almost clean and pure as Snow White, refurbished to the present day which seems to last forever. Now that I see myself on that terrace in Berlin, I realize how lucky we were to succeed with our convenient peaceful revolution in 1989. It was an exceptional moment in history when several essential and sufficient events coincided. These include the situation in which enough of us in Leipzig and Dresden decided to shout “We are the people!” so that the wall came down in Berlin.

“In former times,” I say. I am pleased to say “in former times,” as I used to live in former times. “In former times,” I say, in order to justify the fact that I have another glass of wine: “In former times, I used to get red wine from Berlin. Carrying a shopping bag, I used to go to the railings which marked the end of my world. I used to stare daggers at the gate, the guards, the wall. Around there!” I say to myself, because all the bystanders have already gone elsewhere. And I bend over the balustrade with a glass of wine in my hand, as if I had seen myself down there; a highly romantic milksop with curly hair who looked very familiar to me immediately. He swings a shopping bag apparently of that time. But his nostalgic eyes still do not recognize me, because I am wearing an awkward Berlin coat. He does not even recognize the famous Brandenburg gate. As it is illuminated by flashlights and pure as Snow White, he probably mistakes it for the gates of heaven. Because people keep passing through. And as I bend down and try to raise my glass to him, he taps his forehead at me and walks on by. Walks through the heavenly gates and goes through the chalk white wall.

Translated by Juliane Schallau

¹⁰ Colloquial for: Berlin.

Berlinangst

I have always been afraid of Berlin. Even at a time when the city was divided and people like me were stuck behind the wall.

Did I just say behind the wall? Have I finally borrowed the Western view after all these years of East–West German reunification? We were stuck in front of the wall. It is bad enough to be in front of the wall if you cannot reach the other side.

Long before there was a wall, “Berlin” had a negative connotation for me. “Boy, why do you keep ringing the Wienholds’ doorbell? The Wienholds have gone to Berlin at the crack of dawn, and they have taken Ulrike with them. They did not even carry a suitcase; Ulrike could barely take her doll. They certainly left for the West. You will never see Ulrike again. You better find someone else to play with you!”

Sometimes, my parents also went to Berlin all of a sudden; then we had to stay with our dramatic aunt: “I hope they don’t stay for good in the ‘Golden West’ so that I will have to take care of you alone. You would eat me out of house and home!”

Eventually, I was woken by my mother’s tear-stained face: “My dear child, how could I be without you?”

Berlin was the hole through which many disappeared. The teachers called it “Republikflucht.”¹ Whenever they talked our common cause, I closed my eyes and imagined the golden roof shingles in the West.

“Those villains,” my father said as they built the wall in Berlin. “Those villains,” he said again. “Now they’re gonna lock us up.” But the teachers argued: “Now, at last we can see our common cause through which will allow a good life for everyone.” Eventually, I went to the World Festival of Youth and Students in Berlin. The cattle cars on the tracks were “dufte”²; “dufte” was THE word back then. Someone had a guitar with them; I had never seen a guitar before, let alone listened to someone plucking it while singing “Oh Baby.”

We went on and on, then a jolt went through the train, and we stood around for a long time in the dark. I had already guessed that Berlin was far away. Upon my arrival in the morning, I counted a myriad of flags. The air was, so to speak, heavy with blueshirts.³ But I had a chronic wry neck. It took an emergency physician to reset my lower jaw. Hence, I do not even have to confess that I shouted out the ‘battle cry’ of the Free German Youth: “Peace! Friendship! Solidarity!” with much enthusiasm.

¹ Republic escape.

² Berlin dialect: “Neat!” or “smashing.”

³ Members of the Free German Youth organization in the GDR.

My debut as an up-and-coming writer on a flat-bottomed boat on the River Spree in Berlin. Berlin's young poets already wrote critically. Soon, critical poems were practically obligatory. But the Saxon spoke about a tree which blossomed behind the house. The young poets of Berlin were shocked. Blossoming trees were a thing of the past. The audience expressed its disapproval until I became silent. Anyone who writes and has experienced something of the kind knows that one will never forget it.

With every move I learned what I knew already: that Berliners were superior beings. They were cooler, more self-assured, savvier. I wanted to be near them, but I felt inferior all the more. The defeats of the Saxons continued endlessly from the Seven Year's War to the Building Up of Socialism. There was a cabaret song in the East, the so-called "Sachsenhymne."⁴ "Sing mei Sachse, sing / es is e eischen Ding"⁵ was the chorus of the song. In those days, the lyrics were famous: "Und kommt der Sachse nach Berlin / da könn se ihn nisch leidn / da wollns ihm eine überziehn / da wolln se mit ihm streidn";⁶ the song's resigned melancholy was indicative of the Saxon's soul. However, the Saxon knows how to make a humorous profit out of self-deprecation. It was not without reason that the Berlin publishing house Aufbau Verlag rejected my first poetry collection because of its "Saxon humor."

Nevertheless, I went to Berlin every once in a while, especially around Christmas time. By express train, the so-called "Sachsenschleuder."⁷ Opposite Berlin-Lichtenberg station was a store where they sold red wine which was not available in Dresden, especially not around Christmas time. I put seven bottles into my shopping bag. I did not dare to take more than that from the capital. Next to the store was the "Kaufhalle"⁸ – please note the truthful name – they even had bananas there; well, Berliners were lucky. At times, I took the train back right away. In most cases, I took a stroll around the street "Unter den Linden" until I reached those railings which marked the end of my world. And I asked myself the same question which probably everyone up there was asking him- or herself: The question of how far one could run until lying dead on the cobbles. And I stared daggers at the guards, the Brandenburg gate black with war, the chalk white wall behind it, which separated us from ourselves. Although there was nothing more than a wooded park behind it, hoarfrost and the cawing of a crow. I probably also missed the Berlin Victory Column, which was hidden behind the high trees. Its gilding would surely have reminded me of the 'Golden West' from childhood days. But in my head, the West coalesced with magical, poetic, romantic places like Tuebingen, Heidelberg or Stuttgart, because in the language of the poets of that time, Germany remained undivided. Thus, carrying a shopping bag, I had some quite patriotic thoughts. Yet still, I cannot remember ever having said "Germany" loud

4 Hymn of the Saxons.

5 Saxon dialect, loosely translated: "Sing, my Saxon, sing / it [a Saxon] is a peculiar thing."

6 Saxon dialect; loosely translated: "When a Saxon gets to Berlin, the people there dislike him. They want to punch him. They want to quarrel with him."

7 Colloquial for: "Saxon slingshot."

8 Supermarket.

and clear in my three-letter country. I believed that I was not worthy of the word. It had been wasted long ago, since Germany committed all those acts of violence against others. "Germany attacks!" it was announced over the West German radio during games of the national team. "Germany attacks!" – and, even worse, the "Todesschrei!"⁹ But I was the one who startled by the radio, because once again, I did not know whether they meant the Germany over there or over here. Behind or before the gate, in front of which I had just stood. The blackened colonnaded gate of the irreversible; crowned by the motionless chariot of victory. But – clashing bottles – I had to hurry to catch the train. After all, I had to bring back precious Berlin red wine to Dresden.

Shopping Bag

By the time the border was opened in Berlin, I thought "Now I am only forty years old and thus still young enough to see the world."

Well, I have not come very far. That's because I cannot see the apple tree behind my house if I ride around the world too often. And if I see it again, it does not promise a different life as it used to do. So now I spent most of my time waiting for it to speak to me again.

But I still go to Berlin, because it is unhealthy to only ever linger in Dresden. And because the world itself is now coming to Berlin, I am now all over the world. Although I am still afraid of Berlin. And yet the Berliner is not the same anymore. The ancient conflict between Saxony and Prussia has subtly disappeared into thin air during the unification process. One reason for this could be that we were too busy abandoning the old Easterner within us in order to cope with the new era. Another reason might be that we lack the former cramped conditions which forced us to tread on each other's toes. But above all, there were new people who, regardless of whether they were from Paderborn or from Hamburg, had more means anyway, and not always to our detriment. Those people were the top dogs from the start, in other words, they took the place of the Berliner.

Hence, the Berliner is not the same anymore. And neither is my fear. "Put on your coat," I used to hear after I said: "I am going to Berlin." "Which coat?" – "The one you always wear when you deign to go to Berlin!" – The very fact that I actually put it on indicates that as a Saxon, I still have something to make up for. – Long-distance trains from Bucharest, Budapest, Prague. Momentary, puzzled lingering about the railroad track of the former Eastern bloc. Indeed, the track we arrive on is the lowest one there is. In a manner of speaking, we arrive in the capital's basement. And still, I cannot speak a word of English, although it is said that Germans order their breakfast in English in Berlin these days. – Some time ago, I attended a symposium in Berlin. Due to the diversity of the audience, it was held in English. Of course, people realized that I constantly laughed at the wrong time, and they said: "So it is true that you cannot speak English." I told them about my East German origin. "Well, so you learned Russian!" – "I cannot even speak Russian," I said. "I did not want to learn Russian!" – What

9 Death scream.