

JO EAGER

Ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall

WHEN YOU'RE 21, you think nothing can stop you from reaching your goals — not even a 12-foot-high, 103-mile-long wall. But for Chris Gueffroy, the wall not only shattered his dreams, it ended his life.

In the spring of 1989, the East German youth was the last person killed attempting to cross the Berlin Wall. If only he had waited.

On Nov. 9 of that year, 28 years after the Berlin Wall was erected, the East German government announced that its citizens would be allowed to freely cross to the West.

The borders were jammed as East Germans made their way into West Berlin. I took my daughter, then 6, to Checkpoint Charlie. As with any checkpoint, the East Germans had to stop and go through paperwork before crossing into West Berlin. And then, jubilant yelling and pounding on their little Trabant cars, horns and whistles blowing. I watched one man drive across the border, stop, lay his forehead into his hand and cry.

As the East Germans stormed West Berlin to experience their first weekend of freedom, it was wall-to-wall people. No cars or public transportation could travel the downtown streets crammed with pedestrians.

It was a long process to physically take down the Berlin Wall. The first slab was removed at Potsdamer Platz that Sunday. One young woman was overwhelmed as

she walked across the border, her first trip to West Berlin. Tears streamed down her face as she held a handful of fruit and champagne that the West Berliners had handed her upon crossing. One man I met had long ago worked in the West and lived in the East. He went home from work one night in August 1961 and didn't see West Berlin again for 28 years.

The two Germanys reunited in October 1990. This created a new set of problems.

JoAnn Gaffron, an American who lived in Berlin for 31 years, returned to the United States in July 1998. She said, "Though the country is unified, its people are not. There is still a West-East dichotomy. The differences in economy, infrastructure, education, independence have not been evened out."

Michaela Emami, a German in Berlin, agreed.

"There's still a distance between East and West Germans," she said. "I grew up in a society that was totally West-oriented, not only politically, but also culturally."

She said West Germans have more in common with the British or Italians, for example, than with East Germans.

Violence toward foreigners is another big problem, said Gaffron.

"In the East particularly, foreigners do not feel safe," she said. "There are violent groups that live on hatred and target the foreigner."

Emami said, "There are communities in Brandenburg (surrounding Berlin) where it is not safe to walk if you don't look German. So they have their own fascism going on."

She added that before the wall went down, there weren't many foreigners in the East, and now unemployed East Germans blame outsiders.

"Unemployment is high," said Gaffron. "In many big firms, jobs have been cut to reduce operating costs and avoid going under. The result is that the remaining employees often have double the work, but not double the pay. There's a lot of grumbling. Alcoholism and drug abuse are on the rise."

Higher taxes, fewer benefits, and less coverage for medical expenses are a few of the other problems to be dealt with, said Gaffron.

Emami said the general feeling in the East is "a kind of socialistic nostalgia."

She said, "People now think times weren't as bad as they thought, especially when they're unemployed and still not able to buy anything they want. And the East Germans all thought while the Wall was up that the West was paradise. They really didn't know that we have to work pretty hard to enjoy all the good things they saw us buying."

The West *was* paradise. I lived in West Berlin for 10 years. Most of that time I was surrounded by the Berlin Wall and 101 miles behind the Iron Curtain. To me, West Berlin meant freedom.

Employed or not, rich or poor, in a Communist country, you can't buy freedom.

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