

BEFORE THE WALL CAME DOWN



**KulturRaum Zwingli-Kirche e.V.
Bezirksmuseum Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg**

THE „WATER BORDER” SPREE

The Oberbaum Bridge was an important connection for traffic between the Soviet and the American Sector, between Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg, between East and West Berlin up until the 13th August 1961.

People and goods were inspected, so that already before the construction of the Wall there were lethal incidents. On the 15th October 1948 the GDR-Border policeman Maquè was fatally injured by a car driver on the Bridge. On the 19th February 1949 the West Berliner Helmut Ryll died under the fire of border police. The Spree between Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg and with it the Oberbaum Bridge became the heavily guarded and impenetrable border on the 13th August 1961.

Some people did not want to come to terms with this border: on the 5th October 1961 Udo Düllik attempted to reach the West Berlin bank from the Osthafen. He was fired upon by sharpshooters. He drowned as he ran out of strength shortly before reaching the Gröben Bank. Udo Düllik was the first victim on this section of the border. Despite the danger Werner Probst stepped into the cold Spree on the 14th October 1961 near the Schilling Bridge intending to swim to Kreuzberg. He was discovered, shot at, injured, managed to reach the ladder on the West Berlin Kai Wall, struggled up and was then struck down fatally by two aimed shots. On the 22nd April 1962 the twenty-year old Philipp Held was pulled dead out of the water near the Schilling Bridge. He had drowned during an attempt to escape, identity papers were found in his clothing wrapped up watertight. In 1963 Hans Räwel and Wolf-Olaf Muszynski paid with their lives for their attempt to escape as did Ulrich Krzemien in 1965. Altogether at least 13 people died at the Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain „water border“ while trying to escape.

Flight by means of the Spree between Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg were also often successful, but there are no more accurate numbers for these. Into the 1970s there were repeated escape actions of whole groups who together dug tunnels from East to West. Escape by border boat succeeded from time to time. Alone in the 80s at least 20 soldiers of the border troops took the opportunity to tie up at the Kreuzberg Bank, to turn their backs on the GDR.

Victims of the border were not exclusively East Berliners. Five children from Kreuzberg lost their lives between 1966 and 1975, because they fell into the water while playing on the badly secured bank of the Spree and could not be saved in time.

ESCAPE BY MEANS OF THE PASSENGER SHIP „FRIEDRICH WOLF”

One of the most spectacular escapes was that with the excursion steamer „Friedrich Wolf“ on the 8th June 1962. The „Friedrich Wolf“ was the most modern ship of the „White Fleet“. After a round trip for the employees of the Hufeland Hospital in Buch it tied up on the 7th June 1962 at the steamer landing stage in Treptow. Overhauling work was planned for the next days, therefore two fitters and an apprentice joined the six crewmembers. Eventually even more people came on board to have a drink, in the course of which the captain and the 1st. machinist lay down to sleep. After some of the passengers had left the ship, the relatives of the escapees came on board. At 5 o'clock in the morning four men pushed their way into the captain's cabin, tied him up, started the ship and set course for the East Harbour. Then it was stopped under the S-Bahn bridge by border patrol boats. However, their crew could be convinced that it was a technical trial-run. So the „Friedrich Wolf“ continued slowly on its way, and only to accelerate suddenly and to turn off at the junction with the Landwehrkanal which belonged to Kreuzberg. 70 shots were fired from a machine gun and 24 shots from a Makarow pistol from the GDR border security boats at the „Friedrich Wolf“. As the ship approached the West Bank, the West Berliner police returned fire. The control station on board the „Friedrich Wolf“ had been reinforced with steel plates by the escapees. Apart from the captain and the 1st machinist, who later returned the ship to East Berlin, all the passengers left the „Friedrich Wolf“. The escape took 15 minutes, 13 people reached the West this way. The ship was later sold to Poland and re-christened the “Thüringen”. The captain was transferred to freighter service as a punishment. The former ship's cook nowadays teaches history at the University of Umea in Sweden, the first steersman is a construction entrepreneur in Spain, the second lives in France. Only one of the refugees, Bodo Kunkel, was sentenced for escaping the Republic. Just three years after the escape he had dared, – within the framework of a safe conduct treaty – to travel to East Berlin.

ANTON WALZER'S ESCAPE FAILS

When the 60 year old Anton Walzer entered the grounds of the VEB salvage yard in the Mühlenstrasse on the afternoon of the 8th October 1962, it was to prepare for his second escape from the GDR. He had left the GDR for the first time in 1955. „His“ company, the paint factory Warnecke & Böhm in Weissensee had been nationalised. Walzer had belonged to staff of the company since the 1930s and worked there as a master paint maker. The State-controlled economy hindered effective work, so he moved with his wife and two children to Offenbach am Main. The new life of the Walzers and could have become one of the thousands of resettlement stories of the time, had not Walzer's mother-in-law, who lived in East Berlin, suddenly needed help in 1958. Walzer's wife wanted to be with her mother so the family returned to the GDR. Anton Walzer even got another job with Warnecke & Böhm, however he now was one of the „returnees“ as GDR lingo expressed it. For the government of the GDR, „border crossers“, „new arrivals“ and „returnees“ were a security risk who were not trusted with any responsibility. He was no longer able carry out his profession because of the restrictions in the company. He felt unfairly treated and sought comfort in alcohol. His wife applied for divorce. Walzer wanted to go back to the west, although entry had been blocked since the 13th August 1961. He got access to the bank of the Spree via the premises of a company, jumped into the water, was discovered and shot at. Some of the bullets fired at Walzer hit the Gröben Bank, onlookers who were following the drama took cover, the West Berlin police returned fire. One of the 18 shots aimed smashed through the back of Walzer's head. Fatally injured, the man sank in the water. Almost 32 years later, in August 1994, the former post commander of the border squad was found guilty of manslaughter. He had admitted that he shot the 60 year old Anton Walzer while he was escaping. The sentence of 18 month's imprisonment was reduced to probation. The grounds for the judgment read:

„The killing of a recognisably defenceless, swimming person, who presented no danger to the shooter, merely in the interests of reasons of state of the GDR, offends so flagrantly against the elementary basic principles of humanity and justice, to which also the GDR had committed itself, at least verbally, that the injustice might be apparent to all and was also recognised as such by the majority.“

FIVE KREUZBERG CHILDREN DROWN IN THE SPREE

Between 1966 and 1975 five boys aged between five and six years drowned in the Spree. They had been playing on the Kreuzberg riverbank: two Germans, two Turkish and one Italian boy.

They died because they could not be rescued in time. The East Berlin authorities were “responsible” for the rescue of the children because the Spree here belonged in its complete width to East Berlin. Because their aid was not given quickly enough and also because they rejected help from West Berlin, the children are counted as victims of the Cold War.

In fact it has not been possible to prove that GDR border institutions actively hindered rescue attempts from the West Berlin side.

It is possible that coincidental passers by failed to offer spontaneous aid at the Gröben riverbank out of fear that the GDR patrols might intervene or even shoot. But here again there is no proof. In fact rescue attempts came too late both from the western and the eastern side. It emerges from interviews with the Chief Fire Officer of the Berlin fire brigade and with the Berlin Senator of the Interior Neubauer that the helpers from the west side would have jumped into the water in every case, if they had arrived on the scene of the accident in time.

Much suggests that the children died because they were not adequately supervised and because the securing of the Kreuzberg Spree riverbank with a barbed wire fence was not carried out until 1975 when the fifth boy drowned. These accidents distressed Berlin at the time and set off enraged demonstrations against the GDR. According to our research they could not be described as victims of the doubtlessly brutal GDR border regime.

CETIN MERT, 5 YEARS OLD ACCIDENT ON THE 11TH MAY 1975

The 11th May 1975, a Sunday, should have been a festive day for Cetin Mert. The family was going to celebrate his fifth birthday in the afternoon, but in the morning he met with a neighbour's boy to play ball at the Gröben Bank. When the ball rolled into the water, Cetin tried to reach it with a stick from the narrow quay wall, bent too far over and fell into the water.

His playmate ran screaming down the street, a female passer-by called the police and fire brigade. A fire engine approached from the nearby Reichenberger Strasse, the crew immediately started to look for Cetin with long poles, but this time help also came too late. A Fire Chief of the fire brigade asked the serving officer of the border crossing point Oberbaum Bridge for permission to send in divers. He refused. At this point, however, an alarm boat of the GDR border troops carrying divers was already on its way. Cetin's corpse was retrieved, but not given to the parents, but brought to the forensic institute of the Charité.

Cetin had fallen into the Spree at almost the same point as Guiseppe Savoca. Little had happened since then. Between the former docking point and the Pfuel Strasse the grounds had been secured with barbed wire, but not on the other embankment at the Oberbaum Bridge, where Cetin met with his accident. He could not read the warning signs.

The death of Cetin Mert set off an international press response. The „Tagesspiegel“ wrote on the 13.5.1975: „At the Oberbaum Bridge the political principle – violation of border waters cannot be tolerated – is set higher than humanitarian feeling. Better to recover a dead body with one's own efforts than to allow the West Berlin authorities to attempt to save a human life in border waters.

„Unfortunately it has to be admitted that also in this case the rule has not been put to the test, whether a GDR relief effort, which could call on international law in an emergency, really would prevent these. We have to conclude this for ourselves. Equally the question must naturally be raised whether here as in other parts of Berlin the bank reinforcement has been made childproof – if not also „border secure“, as the GDR wants.“ The negotiations between East and West, which had been dragging, now quickly came to the conclusion that there should be SOS telephones on the west bank and a transborder alarm system should be set up that would be registered when set off on the East Berlin side too.

PROTESTS AGAINST THE PARTITION

There were protests in Friedrichshain and also in Kreuzberg against the partition of the city long before the construction of the Wall. A „frontier city mentality“ developed in West Berlin against the communist threat at the least since the Berlin Blockade in 1948/49. Kreuzberg, with its 10 kilometre long border with East Berlin, took a central role in this. The West Berliners especially gave vent to their dissatisfaction with statements and little provocations, for example with damage to property and the destruction of posters with Socialist slogans. When the Peoples' Police blocked off the roadway at the corner of the Friedrich Strasse and the Zimmer Strasse in July 1950 with the remains of the columns of the city palace, the Kreuzberg mayor Kressmann commissioned unemployed people to simply carry away the barricade.

On the Friedrichshain side the protest was as a rule quieter but not less. It reached its height in the uprising which began in the former Stalin Allee in Friedrichshain on the 17th June 1953.

At this time, the majority of those who were dissatisfied with the system simply left the GDR. While this was about 5,000 people a month in 1948 who set off to West Berlin, their numbers were to reach 15,000 in mid-1952. In 1953 alone 300,000 left.

Immediately after the construction of the Wall the protest on the Kreuzberg side became louder. After the first young people showed their discontent with loud chanting near the Wall, with conflicts with the Peoples' Police and with protest slogans on banners and house walls. There were regular demonstrations on the anniversary of the building of the Wall in the 60s, there many vigils were held and memorial crosses put up.

The aggressively anticommunist, not seldom also fascistoid tone of these protests repulsed the generation of the „68ers“ a few years later. At least since the beginning of the „new Eastern policy“ and the approaches of the Chancellor Willy Brandt, this form of protest against the Wall became that of those who live in the past.

A protest movement of its own had been building up in Friedrichshain since the 70s. In the Blues-Messes in the Samariter Church young people developed their own form of revolt. Under the protection of the Evangelical Church the Peace – and – Opposition Movement also came into being, which did not want in the first line to abolish the division of the city, but rather to reform the system of the GDR, and which became the foundation of the peaceful revolution of 1989.

BLUES-MASSSES AS YOUTH PROTEST

In June 1979 the Blues-musician Günther Holwas (Holly) asked the youth pastor of the Samariter Church, Rainer Eppelmann if he might be allowed to play in his church. With the support of the church parish of Friedrichshain Eppelmann dared the experiment: more than 200 young people came and heard texts from the New Testament set to Blues-music by Holly, for many this was first time they had entered a place of worship. The state showed moderation. However, when far more young people came to the next „Blues-mass“ with the theme „Between Hate and Hope“ the Friedrichshain town council felt provoked and demanded that the messes stop. The authorities found it particularly aggravating that the visitors were not „ordinary young people“, but what they called the „negative-decadent“, who demonstrated their distance to the society already through their appearance. With the help of the church leadership Eppelmann was able, however, to assert that it was a church service and therefore not an event that had to be notified to the authorities

In the coming months the Blues-masses found their characteristic form and ingredients. After a greeting there followed some play acts and sketches which caricatured the announcements in the media. Then there was a threnody, prayers, sermon and blessing and in between several Blues-music titles. The texts thematized subjects that moved the young people, many taboos were addressed.

The organisers managed to withstand the repressions of the authorities, the spying of the Stasi and the complaints of some neighbours – but not the great press of visitors. Soon, young people were arriving from all over the GDR. On some Sundays the Samariter Church and the Auferstehungs Church had to offer a double programme. MfS-Chef [Ministry for State Security – Stasi] Mielke now ordered that from now on all the traffic junctions must be observed before each Blues-mass for possible riotous assemblies. When the number of visitors reached more than 4,000 in 1981, the church leadership decided to move the Blues-masses into the larger Erlöser Church in Lichtenberg. The Blues-masses continued to take place there until summer 1986, albeit in a changed form and with the increasing influence of the church leadership on the contents, so that their attraction for the young people decreased more and more.

What remains is that through the Blues-masses not only were hopes articulated and lived out over the years, but also forms of expression were developed, with which the ideas of freedom made a breakthrough in autumn of 1989.

DIETER BEILIG

Dieter Beilig, born in 1941, was a colourful figure in the West Berlin protest movement against the Wall. Beilig grew up in the Köpenicker Strasse. His father was fallen, his mother worked as a cleaner. He attended school until the seventh class and then began an apprenticeship as baker, which he however broke off after four months. He spent part of his youth in an approved home at the Schlachtensee.

On 7th October 1961 he drew attention to himself for the first time when he together with 15 other young people put up a memorial cross for Udo Düllik, who had been killed. Before this he had already written slogans on the wall of the former steamer dock at the Gröben Bank.

Apparently he soon radicalised himself, because on the 26th July 1962 he ignited a bomb at the Wall at the level of the Niederkirchner Strasse, which however only caused very minor damage. Six further attacks followed. He had built the bombs himself in his own home. When there were further conflicts near the Wall at the Koch Strasse because of the death of Peter Fechter on the 17th August 1962, he was already seen as a central figure of the militant resistance against the Wall with contacts to such organisations as the „Deutsche Freiheitslegion“ [German Freedom Legion] and the „Nationale Initiative“.

In the following months the East-West conflicts intensified. There were ever more fatalities at the Wall, West Berlin police and the border patrols of the GDR shot at each other, the Cuba Crisis brought the World to the edge of an atomic war. In this situation the activities of the Wall opponents were no longer tolerated by the West Berlin authorities. Beilig went into political isolation, lost his job and suddenly disappeared without trace. It was speculated in the West Berlin press that he had been abducted to East Berlin. In fact he had been arrested by the MFS [Ministry for State Security – Stasi], when he requested to speak with an MFS officer at the border crossing in the Friedrich Strasse. He was detained and sentenced to 12 years imprisonment. From documents it can be seen that Beilig had made statements about his contacts to the „Arbeitsgemeinschaft 13. August“ [the Committee of the 13th August] and to escape aid organisations. After long negotiations, the lawyer Wolfgang Vogel was able to buy Beilig free in 1966. Back in West Berlin Beilig found a changed political climate. At the Kranzlereck [a café] there were no more discussions about getting rid of the Wall – as in 1962 – but about the Vietnam War and increasingly often about international recognition for the GDR. Organisations of Wall opponents had disbanded or been absorbed into a right-wing subculture. Beilig organised further actions against the Wall, which however drew little attention.

Beilig paid for his last action with his life. On the 2nd October 1971 he climbed from the west over the so-called Foreground Wall and walked along it to the square in front of the Brandenburg Gate, where he jumped down into East Berlin territory and was arrested. When he tried to escape from police custody after his arrest, he was killed by a guard by a shot in the back as he tried to jump out a window. The circumstances of his death were covered up elaborately by the MFS. They could only be explained by documents found in 2003.

SEPARATED BY THE WALL

Until the Wall was built on the 13th August 1961 neighbours in Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg were citizens of different states and lived under different political systems, but the border between the east and west was open. Alone at the Oberbaum Bridge 25,000 to 30,000 people crossed the border daily, because they lived on one side and worked on the other.

Suddenly there now ran a Wall directly across the old traffic connections. Streets which had developed historically became dead ends, the connections between the Underground stations Schlesisches Tor and Warschauer Strasse no longer existed. On the eastern side of the Wall a so-called „Death Strip“ was gradually constructed and behind it a 500 meter deep „Protective Strip“, where all the people who were rated as „unreliable“ were resettled. Some of the historic building stock was lost through demolition and levelling work.

The consequence of the building of the Wall was the tearing down of developed structures. Working people could no longer reach their places of employment, businesses lost their workforces, hospitals lost doctors and nurses, believers could no longer access their churches, friends and relatives could not visit each other. The districts of Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain changed overnight from inner-city districts to outskirts. The Wall was called the „Antifascist Protective Wall“ by the GDR which should prevent trafficking in human beings, labour piracy and sabotage. For most of those affected, the 13th August 1961 can be described as the most drastic experience after the end of the Second World War.

- + Film with views of the Wall and sermon from the Thomas Church 1962
- + Photos of the Wall with explanatory picture titles

THE 17TH JUNE 1953

The uprising of the 17th June 1953 is now seen as the first revolt by working people against the ruling powers of the former Eastern Block. At the time, the ruling powers of the GDR called it a counter revolutionary attempted Putsch orchestrated by the west. The events, that were to have far-reaching consequences, began already on the 16th June 1953 as building workers in the Stalin Allee in Friedrichshain laid down their tools and arranged to meet for a strike the following day. What triggered the protests was the increase in labour norms.

When two thousand workers gathered at the Strausbergerplatz on the morning of the 17th June 1953, in order to march in the direction of the Alexanderplatz, those in responsible political positions in the western sectors were just as surprised as the Party- and State leadership of the GDR. When the demonstrators reached the House of Ministries at the corner of the Leipziger Strasse and the Wilhelm Strasse at about 9.00 o'clock, their numbers had grown by several thousand. Chanting, they demanded „Away with increase in the labour norms“, „Reduce HO prices“, „The government must resign“ „Freedom for political prisoners“ and „Free and secret votes“. At the Alexanderplatz there were already 25,000 demonstrators at about two o'clock. Soviet troops and the Peoples' Police cleared the square using firearms and invoked the state of emergency. About four o'clock riots started at the Potsdamer Platz, the Columbia House burned and tanks moved in. Some of the demonstrators went in the direction of the Oberbaum Bridge, where many citizens of West Berlin were already gathered.

West Berlin Social Democrats organised a solidarity rally for 6 o'clock at the Oranienplatz, in which 10,000 people took part. With difficulty the angry crowds were calmed down, but the uprising spread. In more than 560 towns and communities in the GDR there were revolts, which were violently broken up by Soviet troops. The balance was over 50 dead. Soviet summary courts gave out 18 death sentences, 1,600 sentences of imprisonment were pronounced by GDR courts. The numbers of injuries were not counted. 12 people with shooting injuries were brought to the Bethanien Hospital alone, the Urban Hospital reported 30 injured.

BORDER CROSSERS

Until the construction of the Wall most inhabitants experienced Berlin as a whole, despite its division into four sectors. Thousands went over the border daily to shop, pay visits or simply to go to work – especially as long as there were two political economic systems, but one mutual currency. In 1948 this changed at a blow:

In order to create a stable currency, West zones and West Berlin carried out a currency reform, with which every inhabitant received 40 DM on the 20th June 1948. The Soviet occupying powers reacted on the 24th June with a blockade of the access roads to cut off West Berlin from the federal republic. What now followed was a competition between the systems: in July 1948 the Soviet occupation zone (SBZ) also introduced a new currency, which was also called „Deutsche Mark“ and was called the East-Mark in everyday life as distinct from the West-Mark. In the west the first bureaux de change went into business as early as August 1948, which set the exchange rates according to supply and demand.

This affected not only trade but also the labour market. Suddenly there were about 76,000 „Border crossers“ in the east who were earning west money and in the west 122,000 who were paid in East-Marks. That was a problem particularly for West Berliners, who because of the exchange rates were no longer able to make a living. The West Berlin authorities therefore introduced a wages compensation fund in 1949, so that every West Berlin who regularly worked in the east would be able to change 60 % of their earnings 1:1 into DM, from 1954 it was even 90 %. However, those West Berliners who worked for the Socialist Unity Party (SED), the Free Federation of German Trade Unions (FDGB), GDR radio, State stages, museums, academies or for the „Trading Organisation“ (HO), which was a national retail business owned by the GDR state. The city was now divided into people who possessed West money and those who had none.

The border crossers soon met with hostility: while West Berliners working in the east were insulted as „Communists' friends“ and „5th column Ulbrichts“, East Berliners working in the west were seen by the GDR authorities as politically unreliable. Neighbours not infrequently looked with envy on the border crossers with their west money. Added to the great numbers of those officially registered were also casual workers and the illegally employed – including many workmen and household help. .

The number of border crossers decreased steadily in the 1950s. In March 1961 it was officially only 57,000 who lived in the east and 13,000 in the west.

Shortly before the Wall was built the GDR leadership made a massive campaign against border crossers. Propaganda made them into racketeers who were responsible for the significant difficulties in supply. However, the worse problem was that ever more well trained specialists with workplaces in the west decided to turn their backs on the GDR.

BORDER CINEMAS

A thorn in the flesh of the GDR leadership of the 1950s was several small cinemas along the sector borders. Oscar Marty, the officer of the American military government responsible for the film department, provided not only for the reanimation of the cinema in West Berlin within the framework of the Marshall Plans but also for the importation of western thinking. Drawn by bargain prices, the citizens of East Berlin were to be introduced to the „film products of the free World“. Before the – often American – feature film there was a newsreel, in which World events were explained from a western point of view. Until 1961 there existed – with the permission of the Americans - in West Berlin 30 such Border- or East Money Cinemas, in Kreuzberg there were ten. Entrance cost -on production of identity documents - 1.50 East Marks for East Berliners, while West Berliners paid 25 Pfennig (West). The attraction for the operator was relief from entertainment tax and the great number of visitors, so that several showings a day were worthwhile. In many cinemas the programme began at 9 o'clock in the morning; from 1.15pm there were presentations “for youth”. A statistic states that for 1956 there were over 5,000 visitors a day just in the five cinemas in the Schlesische Strasse directly at the border. An annual income of about 1,6 million East Marks went to West Berlin from the cinemas.

In the course of a „All-Berliner Cultural Plan“ the tax advantage was abolished again on 1st January 1957, probably at the instigation of the competitors in West Berlin.. For films with the label “especially worthwhile” citizens from East Berlin could now pay the entrance 1:1 in GDR Marks, the Senate compensated the cinema operators for the financial loss.

The majority of the presentation could hardly have been especially worthwhile and the décor and equipment of the cinemas could not compare with big filmhouses of the West Berlin inner city. Film such as “Frankenstein” and “Sündige Liebe” (Sinful Love) were very popular, especially with apprentices, schoolchildren and the groups of „teenage troublemakers“ which were just coming into existence. Even border soldiers occasionally attended after work.

The East Berlin Magistrate saw a danger for corrupting youth in the border cinemas. The „ideological influence“ of the West Berlin cultural institutions was also invoked in 1961 in the mass media of the GDR as one of the reasons for the construction of the Wall, with explicit reference to the border cinemas.

Soon after the Wall went up almost all these cinemas had to close, only the „Filmbühne Naunynstrasse“ carried on until 1973.

GOODS TRAFFIC ACROSS THE BORDER

What especially characterised the economic situation throughout Berlin directly after the war were shortages: basic foodstuffs, heating materials, clothing, furniture and petrol – everything that people needed to live was rationed and legally could only be obtained by ration book. The common currency – with which one could not buy anything – was the Reichsmark in east and west. The consequence was lively trade by bartering and a flourishing black-market. The centre for black-market goods were the Schlesische Railway Station (from 1960 the East Railway Station) in Friedrichshain and the Schlesische Tor in Kreuzberg.

The first shopping possibilities without ration book were soon created to act against the black-market. The first HO shop, where one could buy rationed goods without coupons was opened as the Berlin-Blockade was still going ahead on the 15th November 1948 in Friedrichshain at 39 Frankfurter Allee, there soon followed other nationally owned stores and catering places. In Kreuzberg small shops and market stalls sprang up, which – supported by the authorities – offered rationed goods at less than the black-market price.

The HO-shops were also intended to attract citizens of the western part of the city, to convince them of the superiority of the system. The West Berliners, who up to now were only supplied by the airlift, had the chance to get goods in the east, if they let themselves be registered. To ensure a suitable choice of goods, foodstuffs were brought from the whole SBZ [Soviet occupation zone] to Berlin and extra shifts were worked in the coal-mines. However the calculation did not pay off: it soon became clear that the West Mark, introduced in June 1948 with an exchange rate of up to 1:6 made shopping in the east more than lucrative for the West Berliners. For racketeers and speculators, too, who sold on goods bought in the east for high prices in the west. Alone in the week between the 27.9. and the 3.10.1948, 420,000 people were picked up crossing the border by urban train, and a total of 7,000 tons of illegally purchased foodstuffs were confiscated.

In the western sectors too, shopping in the east was not welcomed, because the supply of products from the east reduced the demand and thereby became a threatening competition for many merchants and businesses. With posters such as „Western money for western goods only „, disapproval was soon created against „Mr Disgrace and Mrs Shame “ who went shopping in the east. On the other hand, East Berliners were welcome customers in the west, because the western economy made great profits from them. For „luxury goods“ like real coffee, exotic fruit and chocolate or shoes and clothing, which were seen as „smarter “ than those from the east, the East Berliners were quite willing to pay higher prices. This was also possible to do in East Marks near the Underground station Schlesische Tor. There were occasionally special offers for East Berliners, particularly in Kreuzberg, in order to make propaganda for the western system. For example the Mayor of Kreuzberg, Kressmann brought the „Neighbourly Aid of Kreuzberg“ into being after the 17th June, by which West Goods could be bought for eastern prices after showing identity papers.

Besides the exchange of goods, the inhabitants soon developed a differentiated price-system in the service sector. Some East Berlin tradesmen were soon demanding West Marks or „half and half“ and thereby made their work unaffordable for the East Berliners.

Rationing and ration books were finally abolished in West Berlin in 1952, in East Berlin they still existed until 1958. The problem of the unequal traffic in goods, however, was only ended by the building of the Wall.

THE VISA TREATY

At Christmas 1963, the West Berliners were allowed for several days to visit their friends and relatives in East Berlin for the first time since the Wall was built. This was made possible by a visa treaty, which marked the beginning of a thaw in East-West relations. On the 5th December 1963 the deputy prime minister of the GDR, Alexander Abusch, offered West Berliners the chance of a visit for the coming Christmas days. Willy Brandt, the ruling mayor responded and asked the permission of the Federal Government to negotiate with the GDR. When the Bonn Ministry of Foreign Affairs categorically rejected this, Brandt found an ally in Erich Mende, the minister of All-German Affairs. In the absence of Federal Chancellor Ehrhard, Mende agreed to start talks. Meetings were held in the „House of Ministries“ in the Leipziger Strasse and in the „Berlin Tourist Office“ in the Fasanen Strasse in Charlottenburg. As a result, West Berliners could visit their relatives in the east from the 18th December 1963 to the 5th January 1964.

The rush exceeded expectations. Many hundreds of people were already waiting in the night before the 18.12.1963 at the Oberbaum Bridge crossing-point. 30,000 visitors to East Berlin had been reckoned on, but in fact it was almost 200,000.

In the next years there followed three further visa treaties at Christmastime. A total of 1,2 mio. visits were counted. The negotiations for 1967 failed, however, probably because the GDR leadership saw no movement in the rigid rejection of international recognition of the GDR by the BRD. All that remained was the possibility to apply for a visa in family emergencies. The Four Power Agreement on Berlin gave the inhabitants of West Berlin the chance of visiting the eastern parts of the city for the first time in 1971. East Berliners were only allowed to visit the western parts after they reached retirement age.

SMUGGLING FROM EAST TO WEST

During the War and in the post-war period all goods needed for daily life were rationed. An underground economy soon sprang up. Cigarettes became the unofficial means of payment. The Soviet Military Administration of Germany (SMAD) also made use of this and caused huge amounts of cigarettes to be produced in East German factories for the black-market. Marketing was carried out by the „Rasno Export Society“, which was under the control of the Soviet Ministry of Finance.

The Rasno Company mostly employed so-called displaced persons, among them Jews who had survived the Ghettos and the concentration camps. Some of these employees built up contacts to cigarette dealers – for example to the „Engros Bapnik“ company in the Eldenaer Strasse 36 in Friedrichshain. The borders between state trading and illegal racketeering thus became blurred, and not a few people were involved in both types of business. Pavnik Luschanewski, the business manager of Rasno, developed special skills, and was at the same time a member of a consortium which imported raw Brazilian tobacco.

In the early 50s, the GDR supplied porcelain to Sweden, which paid for it in coffee from Brazil. The coffee went from Rostock to Berlin and from there to Party leaders and to the HO-headquarters, but for the most part illegally over the border to West Berlin via a system of wholesalers and middlemen. In this way, foreign currency could be raised for the GDR.

The string puller behind some of these deals was the consortium around Pavnik Luschanewski. There was one of their interim storage facilities at 118 Gneisenau Strasse in Kreuzberg. The police once discovered 10 million cigarettes during an inspection there. During the investigation the police first became aware of Herschl Libermann, who later, under the name of Michael Wischnewski, became the business manager of C. F. Gerlach, an East Berlin export company which had belonged to the GDR Ministry for State Security since 1954. Together with Alexander Schalk-Golodkowski, Libermann later developed „KoKo,” the Commercial Coordination, which was a huge concern that in the last years of the GDR was active in foreign currency business. The export company „Imex” at 8 Warschauer Strasse in Friedrichshain, which was involved in the weapons trade, also belonged - among others - to KoKo.

In 1989 Libermann transferred SED [Socialist Unity Party] funds to front companies of KoKo in Austria and after the Wende (political turning-point) from there into further channels. Some of these monies could only be traced as recently as 2004 and 2006.