

AN EAST GERMAN CHILDHOOD

by Uli Hartung as told to Lucy Corry



On 13 August 1961, the East German government began to build a wall. Although the wall went right through the city of Berlin, it was finished in just two days. Suddenly an entire population was trapped. Over the next three decades, soldiers guarded the Berlin Wall so the East German people couldn't escape to the West. Still, thousands tried, and many were killed. When the wall was finally torn down in 1989, Uli Hartung was seventeen. She talks to Lucy Corry about growing up in East Germany.

EYES

I was lucky. I had a nice childhood. For me, living in East Germany was normal. I didn't know any different. It was much harder for my parents' generation. They were teenagers when the wall was built. Suddenly, they were locked away from the rest of the world. Families were cut off from one another. People suffered.

I grew up in a town called Eberswalde, 50 kilometres north-east of Berlin. I lived with my parents and older sister. My dad was a doctor, and my mum was a veterinary researcher. My parents never joined the ruling **Socialist Unity Party**, although the government tried to make them many times. My dad did a lot of home visits to elderly patients. We had an old Russian car that was always breaking down, and party members would try to bribe him. They'd say, "Well, Doctor Hartung, if you joined the party, we could get you a new car." But he wouldn't.

We knew we were watched by the Stasi – the secret police. They were always keen to get inside our flat. They'd pretend they needed to use it to watch people across the street, but really they just wanted to search our place, see the books we had on our shelves ... that kind of thing. The Stasi wanted to control everything. We'd watch West German TV – one thing the Stasi couldn't control – and our parents would say, "You musn't talk about this at school." We stayed away from certain kids because we knew their parents were Stasi.

The History of East Germany

After the Second World War (1939-1945), the countries that won divided Germany into four zones. Three of these zones (including the western half of Berlin) were to be controlled by the United States, Britain, and France. The fourth zone (and the eastern half of Berlin) went to the Soviet Union, which was a **socialist** state with many harsh laws. Although the original plan was for Germany to be reunited, this never happened. In 1949, the three zones, including their part of Berlin, officially combined to form the country of West Germany, and Bonn became the capital. That same year, those living in the fourth zone found themselves citizens of a new East Germany, with East Berlin as their capital.

Many of the East German people didn't want to live under Soviet rule, and they began to escape to freedom in the West. To the rest of the world, they were refugees, but the Soviet Union called them **defectors**. Between 1949 and 1959, over two million people left East Germany. The easiest route was through East Berlin into West Berlin because thousands of people crossed the city's border to shop and work each day. On just one day, in early August 1961, around 2,400 East Germans travelled into West Berlin and never came back. The East German leaders were determined to put a stop to this, and so they built the Berlin Wall.



From 1949–1989, West Berlin was an island of freedom surrounded by Soviet rule.



Uli (far left) and her sister (far right) with friends at the beach

YOUNG PIONEERS

When we started school in East Germany, we had to join the Young Pioneers. This was a kind of youth group that turned six-year-olds into loyal East Germans. After four years, you became a Thälmann Pioneer, named after a well-known German political figure who was executed by the Nazis during the Second World War. We had uniforms: we all wore white shirts with a logo and a coloured scarf. I didn't know anyone who wasn't a Pioneer. Teenagers joined the Free German Youth. We each had a membership book, where we kept our annual membership stamps.

East Germany called itself the country of workers and farmers. Higher education was limited. Finishing the last two years of high school wasn't a free choice – you had to apply. If what you wanted to study fitted with the government's plans, and you had the grades, they'd let you finish school. But only a small percentage of students were ever allowed to do this. If you weren't a member of the Free German Youth, you could forget about the extra study. You had to leave school and do an **apprenticeship**.



Thälmann Pioneers in East Germany



PROPAGANDA

Political propaganda was everywhere. Maths problems in textbooks would say things like “At what angle does the tank have to fire its missile so it will hit the enemy plane?” At school, we had a subject called citizenship. We learnt about the socialist heroes Lenin and Karl Marx and how to be a good East German citizen. A lot of lies were fed to us. We were told that all the Nazis were hiding in West Germany. And all our maps were wrong – always a few kilometres out to make escape difficult.

When I was fifteen, I joined a church youth group. We weren't a religious family, but the group felt so free. We sang only socialist songs at school, but at youth group, we sang other songs and we talked about all sorts of things. We played games and read poems. It was a much kinder environment. I felt so happy. I made many good friends there.

We'd queue for hours for special things like a bunch of bananas ... but we were lucky. We were never short of food. Basic items like butter, milk, and flour were always available, and they were cheap because they were **subsidised**. But there was only ever one sort of anything – one brand of sugar, one brand of milk. My dad's elderly patients had garden allotments, and we were given lots of fruit. I remember buckets of apples, cherries, strawberries, and pears. Old people were allowed to visit family in the West more often, so Dad's patients would buy us treats like coffee and chocolate. One time, a couple brought us back a Mars bar. My dad cut it into four equal pieces.

CHANGE

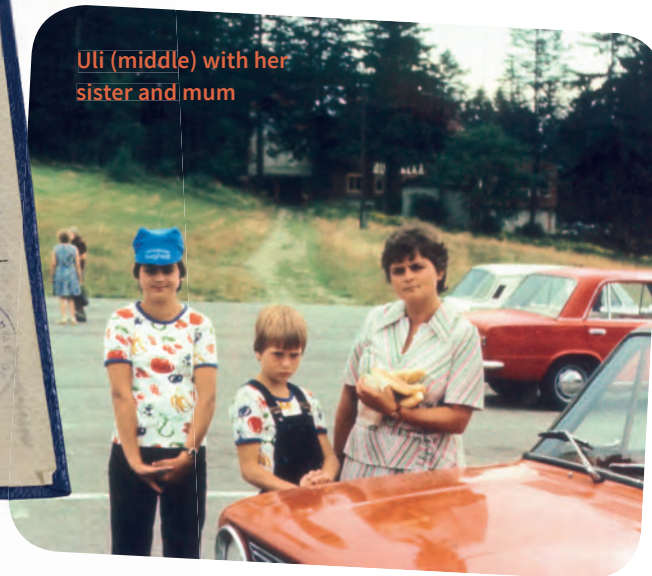
By the time I was seventeen, change was in the air. New political parties formed; everyone knew that something was happening. In some towns, there were peaceful protests and public meetings with mayors so people could ask questions.

In early October 1989, there was a huge demonstration in Berlin. Protesters wanted the laws and political system to change – they wanted freedom. I was at a friend's birthday party. We could hear lots of noise. I was scared. We turned out the lights and sat there with candles, listening to the radio. Three members of our youth group who went to the demonstration were taken to prison, including a fourteen-year-old girl.

The following month, I went to a public meeting in Eberswalde. There were so many people there we couldn't get in. It was the ninth of November, a Thursday. Someone came out and said, “The wall is open!” It was astonishing. My dad had to work that weekend, so the next day, my parents and sister drove to Berlin and crossed the border. I went on the Saturday morning with friends, even though we had school. My mum said, “I'm not going to ring the principal and give him an excuse!” Missing school was a big deal in East Germany.



Uli's Free German Youth membership booklet



Uli (middle) with her sister and mum

RULES

Life in East Germany could be frustrating. You could never be an individual. We often got boxes of second-hand clothes from our cousins in the West. For once, you could look different! Our relatives in West Germany did visit, but it wasn't easy. We had to apply for permission on their behalf. We'd get all the paperwork stamped, then send it to West Germany. Everything had to be planned months in advance. One time, our relatives couldn't come because the paperwork didn't arrive. We never knew if it got lost in the mail or was taken by the Stasi.



THE OTHER SIDE

It was surreal to be let through the wall. We went early, about 6 a.m., and we just walked around because people were still asleep. Our money was worthless in West Germany, but everyone coming from the East was given one hundred Deutschmarks. They called it “greeting money”. We had to go to a bank and show our ID. We queued for hours! It was so nice, though. A woman and her daughter handed out coffee and pastries. We were all so happy.

I really wanted to take something home to my family, so we went to a supermarket. There was so much choice, I was overwhelmed. I bought a bag of mandarins, then left. My friends decided they were going to stay in West Berlin, which meant I had to travel home alone. It was late – I was so tired – and the trains were full. I managed to call my mum to let her know I was safe. She’d been worried. Had they closed the border again? Was I in trouble? The border had only been open for three days. No one was sure how the situation would work out. We didn’t know then that the wall was gone for good.

GLOSSARY

apprenticeship: a job where a person is trained as they work

defector: a person who escapes their country to start a new life in another

socialist: a system where all resources are controlled by the government and
(in theory) shared among the people

Socialist Unity Party: the political party that controlled East Germany

subsidised: when part of the cost of something is paid for by the government

People celebrating the fall of the
Berlin Wall, November 1989



An East German Childhood

by Uli Hartung as told to Lucy Corry

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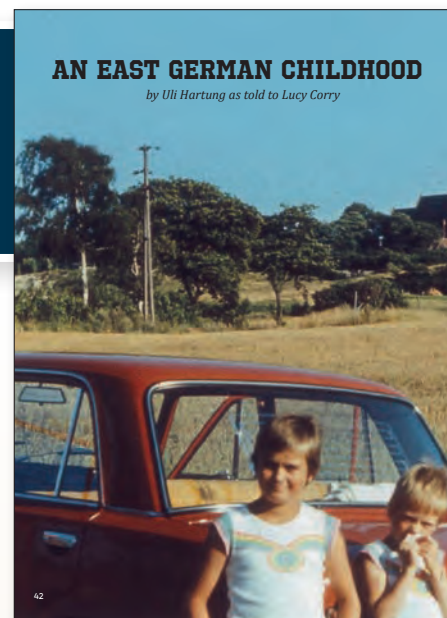
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