

Memories From Behind the Wall

Former East Berliner Finally Free to Remember

by Allison Seale

Anneliese Cofer started her day like most mothers-of-the-bride the day of their daughter's wedding, hurriedly making last-minute arrangements. Every now and then, she would sneak away from the wedding preparations to watch a few moments of television, her eyes filling with tears.

The approaching wedding was not the only cause for brimming emotions that day — there was also the news from Anneliese's homeland: The Infamous Wall is Gone!

Headlines across the world heralded the news November 9, 1989, that the wall that had separated East and West Germany had been opened, and that East Germans had been given the freedom to travel for the first time in more than 40 years. Anneliese's town was one of the many that found itself on the Russian side after the division of the country by the Allied Powers at the end of World War II. The news was almost too good to be true; she wished that she could be there to see it for herself. Five days later, she would be on her way.

With all of the preparations for the wedding that weekend, the news of the wall being opened seemed almost unreal, too distant to grasp. That is, until Anneliese received a phone call that brought it all within reach.

"I had a call from my friend in Lubbock on Sunday," Anneliese said. "And she said, 'History is in the making. We've got to go to Germany. Can you go with me tomorrow?' All of the sudden the news came to the foreground and I said that nothing could hold me back. I was going."

An expired passport turned out to be a minor obstacle. "I called the passport office in Houston on Monday morning only to learn that I had to be there by 9:00 a.m. to get my passport. Since I couldn't possibly make it in time, I got up at 5:00



(Top) Memorials near the Brandenburg Gate pay tribute to those who lost their lives in fatal flights for freedom during the 27-year history of the Berlin Wall. (Below) A student chisels away at The Wall seeking a souvenir of freedom. Photos by Anneliese Cofer.

a.m. on Tuesday, drove to Houston, received my passport at noon and left Hobby airport at 1:50 p.m. that day."

She met her friend, Sigrid Carter, in the Cincinnati airport. Because Sigrid was a travel agent, she was able to get Anneliese a ticket for Germany only minutes before they boarded the plane. From Cincinnati they flew to Gatwick airport in London, caught a bus for the Heathrow airport, then flew to Berlin. They arrived Wednesday after traveling almost a day and a half.

The opening of the wall had brought hundreds of thousands of East Germans flooding into West Berlin during that first week of freedom. Reporters from around the world filled every hotel room, but this obstacle did not deter Anneliese as she headed for Germany without a hotel reservation or any possibility of getting one. Luck was on her side, however. Anneliese called a friend whom she had not seen since her own wedding in 1953, who had an unoccupied, furnished corner apartment on the Kurfürstendamm, the most elegant shopping street in Berlin.

After resting Wednesday night, the women set out for the wall on Thursday along with hundreds of others who had come to Berlin to witness the historic scene.

"It's just a real festive affair," Anneliese explained. "All of the major television and radio stations were there, and many young people from all over the world who might have been vacationing in England or France, or in another part of the world, changed their plans to come to Berlin just to be a part of what was going on."

"Our first night at the wall was so exciting because we listened to a man from East Germany who had brought a ladder with him. He leaned it against the wall so he could stand above the crowd and give speeches. It was the first time that he could ever remember talking freely to people."

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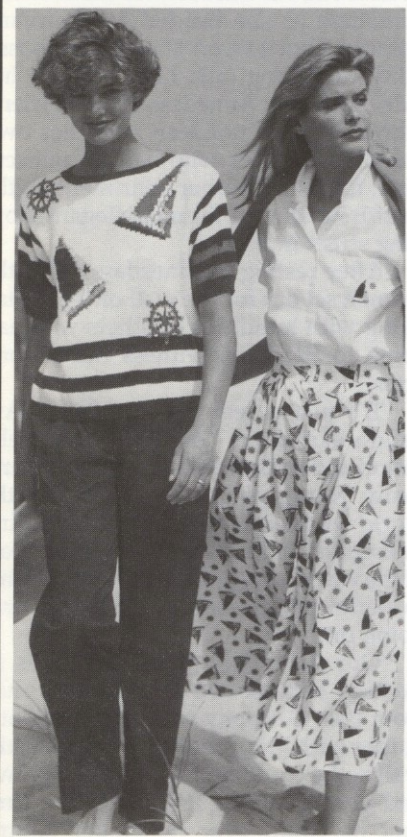
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"He talked until his voice was hoarse. He was just so elated that he could say anything that he wanted to. When he stepped off the ladder, he found out we were from Texas and he said, 'Three cheers to the ladies from Texas,' and the whole crowd cheered for us."

The next morning Anneliese and Sigrid went on a shopping spree for items that East Germans haven't enjoyed in decades and have only dreamed about since. They loaded up with bananas, oranges, pineapples, mandarins, figs, dates, grapes and candy to take to Anneliese's relatives in her hometown of Luckenwalde, about 35 miles south of Berlin. It would take them more than nine hours to travel those 35 miles. It took more than two hours alone to be cleared to enter East Berlin at Checkpoint Charlie, one of only two crossings that would lead them to Luckenwalde. Once they got over, the problem was to find transportation.

"Sigrid stopped four cars on the street asking them if they could just take us to the next train station, but nobody would take us," she said. "Everybody in East Germany is very distrustful because of the Communist regime. We finally got on a bus where we found a nice man who said, 'Yes, I can tell you how to get to Luckenwalde because I am going the same way.'"

The man, who turned out to be an employee of the East German railroad, took them from the bus to the subway, and from the subway to the big train station where he managed to come up with first class tickets for a private compartment with reserved seats. The people, who were going home from their excursions into West Berlin, were packed in the train like sardines. "When we got close to my hometown, he said, 'I'll tell you when to leave the train.' We couldn't get out with our luggage because the people were squeezed so close together that the train doors could hardly be opened. He said, 'You just try to squeeze through and I'll hand you your luggage through the train window.' And that's what he did."

When they got into Luckenwalde, Anneliese tried to call her cousin Eva once again. Anneliese had been trying to reach her since Sunday before she left, but the line had always been busy. Since they were unable to reach her, they decided to walk to her house and hope to find her home.

"When Eva opened the gate," Anneliese said, "she just couldn't believe it when she saw us there, all the way from Texas." During their visit, she found out why she hadn't been able to contact her

cousin. The government had disconnected their phone without notice when Eva's husband had to retire, and they were later told that it would take 17 years for them to receive a private phone line.

Originally, they had planned to stay a day in Luckenwalde, but several factors caused them to change their plans. With the weekend coming, a big influx of East Germans into West Berlin was expected. Also, 25 marks had to be exchanged at a highly inflated and unfavorable exchange rate for each day a person spent in East Germany. Finally, with no pollution control on cars and factories, the pollution was unbearable. Anneliese's family accompanied them on their return trip, crossing the border into West Berlin for the first time in 28 years.

The trip back brought Anneliese into contact with many friends, some of whom she had not seen since the end of the war. The trip also brought her into contact with many memories and feelings that she had pushed far back into her mind, maybe hoping to forget.

The friend who had loaned them the apartment arranged a coffee for Anneliese and Sigrid during their visit, inviting some of her friends who had escaped to West Berlin after the war. Among them was a man who had been arrested in Luckenwalde and sentenced to 25 years in prison for bringing in care packages full of food for his friends. He was in his 20's then.

"When I left, he was in prison," Anneliese said. "And when I saw him again, he was a good-looking, 70-year-old man and had grey hair." Anneliese said that she never remembers her hometown as being a happy place. She was born Anneliese Tietze in Luckenwalde, February 17, 1933, less than three weeks after Adolf Hitler was named chancellor of Germany. Her first day of school was the first day of the war.

"All of our teachers were immediately drafted," Anneliese remembered. "For the next six years, most of the time we spent in air raid shelters. Actually, we were scared stiff. When we got through the air raids, then we had the occupation and the rapes. That was in '45."

She remembers with tears the terrible stories of friends who were raped by Russian soldiers during the occupation. She also remembers vividly how her father used to hide Anneliese and her

mother in their attic while he would meet the Russian soldiers downstairs with liquor to get them so drunk that no harm would come to her family. She also remembers the day her father did not come home from work, and he was not seen again for many months.

He had been picked up off the streets of her town by soldiers and driven towards Russia to be made a worker there. One night, he buried himself in hay in a barn in Czechoslovakia, where they had stopped to let the prisoners sleep. He stayed there until he was sure that they had not missed him and wouldn't come back for him; he then spent the next several months walking back to Lucken-

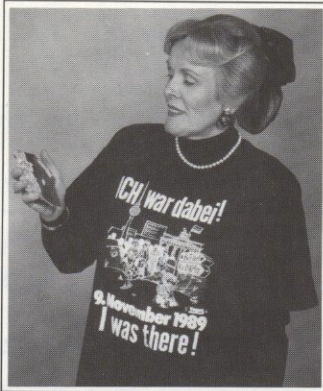
walde. When he arrived home, he found that his wife and daughter had been thrown out of their house by the Russians.

In the early years after the war there was a rule that permitted a student to study in the west if they took courses that were not offered in the east. Anneliese, having seen enough of communism by the age of 16, selected dress designing (a course not offered in the east). She studied in West Berlin for three years. It was during this time that she met her husband, Brooks Cofer, who was an officer in military intelligence.

She met Brooks at a party in 1951 and by 1953, they decided to get married. At the time, military personnel could not marry Germans until they left the service and until the German was checked and cleared by the American military. Brooks finished his tour-of-duty, and Anneliese was cleared and given West German citizenship. They married in West Berlin July 3, 1953, and came to Bryan shortly after.

Anneliese and Brooks did not go back to Germany until their 20-year wedding anniversary and then again in 1982, when Anneliese's mother died. This time when she went back, she was able to share the joy that the millions of East Germans feel as they take those first steps into freedom. The tears that come to her eyes now are the tears of understanding, remembrance and rejoicing.

Anneliese Cofer has lived in Bryan for 36 years. She received her United States citizenship May 31, 1957, and in 1972 was awarded the Americanism medal by the Daughters of The American Revolution, La Villita Chapter.



Anneliese Cofer's T-shirt and piece of The Wall attest to her presence at history in the making.



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