



Ute Tischler's life in East Berlin is in turmoil

Altered States



"Transition is going on at all times and in all places. To have a clear understanding of the principle of motion, to be a participant in being - this ... is a state of peace. A place." I keep returning to this line from the author Botho Strauss. It sounds vague, I know, but I can't find a clearer description of the changes that are currently taking place here. Things are changing by the hour, leaving no time for you to get your bearings. It isn't something that can be easily assessed by someone in the middle of it all.

Until recently I would not have dreamed that I would ever write an article like this. I would simply have rejected the idea in order to avoid difficulties. I can still feel the influence of years of self-censorship. Suggestion and intimation come more easily than direct statements, I'm still trying to describe things between the lines. For me, the so-called 'turning point' came about three years ago. I had just completed my degree. Until that time I had lived according to a rhythm, which appeared to be taking me closer to my goals. My children and my work at the university gave me a sense of purpose and the feeling that I was in control of my own life.

Encouraged by perestroika in the Soviet Union, I joined the Socialist Unity Party (SED). Like many others I was caught up in Gorbachev-euphoria and believed that a similar process would begin here. This enthusiasm quickly

passed. There was continuity instead of renewal and Honecker's cry: 'Ours is the right course,' was more powerful than inexperienced opposition. The familiar party slogan 'Learn victory from the Soviet brother' was no longer deemed to be valid. Gorbachev-posters were discouraged. Nothing was to be questioned or challenged. Gradually my political will started to freeze up.

But I held on to the hope that things couldn't simply go on and on like this. I clearly remember consoling a friend as we stood on the bridge on Marx-Engels-Platz in East Berlin: 'Stagnation makes the revolution inevitable. But stillness has to be followed by movement.' Even as I said it we both took it as fiction. The feeling that reality had been passing us by for years was more concrete.

As an assistant teacher in the art history department at the university I wasn't likely to find happiness in prosperity, there wasn't even any intellectual freedom. Information from international journals and the media and research trips abroad were only rarely available. My withdrawal from involvement, an estrangement from the desire to work for social 'progress', was assured from the start. I was forced into a world of my own. Living more inside than out, in a delicate balance between illusion and reality. This balancing act was an endless strain but it was the only place where I felt at ease.

My decision to choose personal calm, to build the core of my life independently of the outside world - our sociologists call it 'privatisation' - may not have contributed to the great 'turning point' but it helped to bring on the crisis. It was a decision that was taken on a massive scale. Making allowances instead of taking action, putting up with conflicts instead of facing up to them, these were inevitable strategies of denial which led thousands into cynicism and mass exodus.

October brought the great change. Every section of society came under its in-



Crossing the gulf: A new viewpoint with new uncertainties

fluence. Now everything is unstable, including my own carefully preserved equilibrium. It isn't just the borders that have been opened, but our future - my life. Nothing is certain. I'm amazed at how the children take the situation as matter of course. Max is 10, Paul eight, they just feel sorry for Erich Honecker: he looks so vulnerable and sad, they say.

And at the university, the great seat of learning? In my department and at party meetings there is an unmistakable sense of doom. The strangest decisions are taken, only to be retracted a few hours later. The leading figures are already long gone, some having taken their own lives. The crisis is

everywhere. Few students are to be seen, they have been boycotting their lectures for months. At first it was only the compulsory courses in marxism-leninism, now it's their chosen subjects as well. My lectures are only sparsely attended. Our branch of the party doesn't know what to do because it no longer gets directives from above.

The socialist experiment has failed. I have no illusions about that. The GDR is among the world's worst polluters of the environment and one of its greatest debtor nations. Like a Third-World country. Now the SED's monopoly of power has been broken at last. Do the United Left, New Forum, Demo-



cracy Now!, the SDP or the greens offer a viable alternative? I have grown cautious about making declarations of political belief. All my life, there has been a compulsion to decide, a pressure to be an agent of 'The Class' (what and who is that?), to have a clear image of the enemy, to mistrust the Western media, to practise discipline. In short: to see historical progress as being in the hands of the SED. What a presumption!

Has socialism had its chance in my country? Was it any kind of socialism at all? The last few weeks have uncovered terrible things. The new era begins with shock and fear. We have been living in a socialist absolutism. There is

more than enough proof of that. Hunting lodges, private planes, Swiss bank accounts ...and the slogan was always 'Everything for the good of the people'. The level of disappointment and outrage is unimaginable. Hatred is also there.

I'm leaving the party. Saying goodbye to previously hoped-for alternatives to existing social systems. At the age of 30, I've arrived in reality at last. Crossing the gulf from my own private world. It's like living in no-man's land. But the loss of my illusions doesn't make me sad. On the contrary, it's a liberation. It's more honest this way.

But where are we heading in all this uncertainty? At a

recent congress, the philosophers of the GDR only pointed out the absence of any definite course, economic reforms have yet to be announced. How can we even begin to rethink the foundations of our educational system? Of course, we are free to travel now. At least in theory - there's still a currency problem. My monthly wage is only worth DM100, or £30. With our minimum monthly wage you could buy one meal in the West.

West Berlin is very near, I live just by the wall, round the corner from a border crossing. It used to be very quiet here. Now there's no end to the stream of people passing by. You'd think that half the GDR was heading

for the Kurfurstendamm in West Berlin.

The mood among West Berliners is already less friendly than in the first few days after the wall was opened. Bus drivers can smell the 'East' the minute they pull up at the bus stop. Republicans shout 'Foreigners out!' as we cross the border. I don't like to be recognised as a 'Zoni' - a name they gave us because East Berlin lay in the zone of Soviet occupation after the war. Some of my friends say they feel ashamed. I have even heard people suggest that we should avoid anything that might draw attention to where we come from when we are in the West. It's a perverse situation.

But artistic and intellectual circles in West Berlin aren't so very different from ours. Thank god that I can at least breathe freely among books and art. Discussions are already going on between the universities of East and West Berlin. Different opinions and ideas are developing at last. Next year I am planning to take some of my classes to galleries in West Berlin. I haven't discussed this idea with my head of department yet. But why should he have anything to say about it?

Whatever happens now some things are certain: it's farewell to narrow provincialism, there will be real differences of opinion, disagreements, the chance to see works of art in the original, no more restrictions on what I read, no taboo subjects for research. These are all great gains. An exciting and challenging period is opening up. The only certainty is the complete break with the past - and the chance to overcome the lethargy we've lived with. I want to be a 'participant' in this, to understand the principle of motion.

I'm going to stay here. That certainly isn't the easiest thing to do. The ground is unstable. But there's no going back, for even history, the past, has become uncertain. That's the way it is, there's no avoiding it. I am staying. I have to look for my identity here, here in the place where it has been restricted and constrained.