

EXPERIENCE

Ute Tischler looks back on four months of German unity

Staying Power

Since October 3, I've been a citizen of the Federal Republic of Germany. There is no German Democratic Republic (GDR) anymore. My internal debate about whether to leave or to stay is closed, or rather it has been closed for me. It's a difficult situation. The hundreds of thousands who left before went as a result of their own decision. I decided to stay. Now I feel like someone who has been forced into exile.

The new Germany reminds me of the land of unexpected possibilities. Those who have the capital and are prepared to take risks are finding their independence. Everyone seems to be investing in the future and struggling to forget the past. People are desperate to attain the standard of living of the West. There is a boom in small workshops, boutiques, private medical practices, cafes and galleries. Berlin is buzzing as if a second industrial revolution were underway. Even conversations with friends have become a kind of business. The endless exchange of hearty banalities makes me nervous.

My life feels much more public now because I'm always on the look-out for contacts. That's one thing that hasn't changed. Previously we used to call it 'vitamin C'. Contacts were vital if you wanted to find your way around the endless bureaucracy. It's as important now as it ever was. The new society hasn't turned out to be the simple meritocracy that was promised. I am learning fast that the battle for starting positions is essential, long before questions are asked about performance and ability. This is what causes the greatest stress for most people. Those who aren't dynamic now won't get a look in later.

Only recently I had to prove and defend myself as an upright member of society, deserving of a government contract. Shortly before 'unification', the GDR ministry for women and the family decided to commission a number of research projects on GDR history. What money remained was not simply go-

ing to be allowed to flow into the coffers of the Federal Republic. A project to document the lives and achievements of women in the GDR was proposed.

Such a project could never have been carried out under the old regime which believed that all conflicts between women and society had long ago been overcome. I was inspired by the challenge to work against the usual clichés about women in the GDR. The payment on offer appeared astronomical. It didn't take us long to agree to the project and sign the contract. For the first time in my life I had the feeling that I was going to be working on something really meaningful.

The trouble started after unification. From one day to the next our employers changed. At the ministry in Berlin, which had been downgraded to a subsidiary, we now only came across 'experts' from Bonn. They grumbled about our contracts. During meetings with them I could detect their disinterest. In the end they tried to block the whole project with a series of delaying tactics.

Obviously Bonn isn't interested in the idea of former GDR citizens documenting the history of the GDR. They have the idea that we will find it impossible to avoid a 'Stalinist tendency', and were very reluctant to pay so much money to someone who, as far as they were concerned, had dubious qualifications from the GDR academy. The project and its aims were suspect to them. Nevertheless, I have a valid contract and above all the confidence that, as a former GDR citizen, I know what I'm talking about. I know that my colleagues in Bonn don't have that. The challenge and this confidence are important to me now as the GDR dissolves around me.

The official term for what is happening to the former GDR is 'winding up'. The phrase is on everybody's lips and it means making a blank slate, going back to a new zero hour. This indifferent phrase somehow manages to plumb



Puppet show in Berlin: reflections of a divided city

the depths of political vocabulary. 'Winding-up' means nothing less than 'eliminating'. By using this word the whole process is made out to be quite simple, if rather troublesome. I can't help taking it as a personal insult. At the same time I find myself questioning my judgement; maybe I feel like this because I haven't been able to free myself from the 'ideological baggage' of the past.

Suspicious about former GDR citizens abound in Germany and new sets of questionnaires have been designed to establish the details of our political past. It's hard to see who can be passed as 'clean', when you find that even leading figures in the People's Forum are being denounced as agents of the state security system.

They've taken to replacing people in all kinds of jobs with 'experts' from the West. It's strange, I just don't know any eastern experts in anything anymore. I sometimes wonder if the GDR had an authentic elite at all. At any

rate, it is being 'wound up'. The same applies to jobs in arts administration. The community arts officers are now little more than window-dressing. On the whole they have no experience, no real skills, and it's not surprising, because the first condition for taking up a leading position is not having been a member of the former ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED). That's a major problem because most of the competent people were in the SED.

The result is that you now frequently come across 'politically pure' mediocrity. These people really do need a helping hand and they get it in the form of partnerships with officers from twin-regions in west Berlin. Twinning is the big thing these days. But it's got nothing to do with an equal exchange of ideas. It's more about establishing the superiority of the Federal Republic and its citizens. A proper movement has been established to teach the people of eastern Germany 'the way out of their self-imposed



political immaturity'.

Now I'm afraid that I have to swallow new forms of immaturity. Plenty of therapies are on offer to help me deal with all this. A niche will be found for everyone in order to guarantee their ability to participate fully in the new society. Re-training, further education, workshops, self-help groups... a good programme to keep us moving, while everything stays the same for *them*. I find this arrogance difficult to stomach. It suggests that every west German is my superior because they have been living in a 'true' democracy.

Our integration into the system of the West is supposed to happen without delay. Already there is little to distinguish east and west Berlin. The seams between the different parts of the city can hardly be distinguished any more, having long since been built over. There are plans to demolish two of the landmarks of east Berlin, the television tower on Alexanderplatz and the old government building.

The city's cleansing department has a real battle on its hands to keep the streets clean because everybody is throwing away the things that are uncomfortable reminders of the recent past. It's all part of the search for a new identity, a break with the past. In most people's homes, at least, this has happened already. But my flat seems to be in permanent chaos. I just can't go through with that decision to become a citizen of the Federal Republic.

But, of course, there is nothing else to be. I am one already. That long debate about whether to go or to stay, that went on inside my head for years, is no longer meaningful. My decision to stay here was the affirmation of my identity. Now I feel as if I'm being asked to let it go and start again. I don't think that I'm ready to do that.

The society that I grew up in is being reduced to a pile of stinking rubbish that is about to be wrapped up in old newspapers and thrown into the bin. Our dreams of mutual acceptance and the blending of the best parts of two cultures have been shattered. If I'm honest, I suppose I never had much optimism that they would come true in the first place. I've had to feed on Utopias for too many years already.

I have an incredible and disturbing sense of history, personally experiencing the end of 'actually existing socialism', something that maybe never really existed at all. Whatever it was, it's certainly dying very quickly. The only things that are still twitching are the fantasies of left-wing intellectuals. On the night of October 3 they declared the birth of the 'Utopian Republic' in Prenzlauerberg, the area of Berlin where the artists and intellectuals hang out.

There is a certain nostalgia in my own thoughts and emotions. Ought I to hide it? Should I take my place on the side of history and cross over to the 'winning side'? In order to fit in and feel comfortable in my new home, I'll have to shake off the old bur-

den of the past. For those of us who still have our doubts, the crossing is being made really easy. Just wanting to change is half the battle, or so they reckon. On the other hand everyone knows that changing the 'Ossis', the people from the east, is going to be difficult. All too often you hear people saying that we don't know how to do an honest day's work.

I am trying to protect myself against the strangeness around me. It's demanding, because you come across it

everywhere you go. The familiar things are being exchanged for those in the West. It's only a question of time before 'what belongs together is brought together', as Kohl put it. In a situation like this, who wants to look nostalgically back to the past? I don't want to be sentimental, but at a time when the whole basis of your life is being stripped away, nostalgic attempts to orientate yourself are perhaps only natural, human. I can't say that I'm free from nostalgia.

Heart Beat Score

- 1.a 1b. 2c.4d.0
- 2.a 4b. 1c.0d.3
- 3.a 2b. 3c 4d.0e.0
- 4.a 4b. 3c 1d.0
- 5.a 4b. 2c 0d. 1
- 6.a 3b.0c. -Id. 4
- 7.a 1b. 4c 1d. 3e. 0
- 8.a 3b. 4c 0d. 3
- 9.a 1b. 2c -1d. 1e. -
- 10.a 4b. 3c 0d.2e.-]
- 11.a 2b. 1c 0d. 4
- 12.a 4b. 3c 0d.-1
- 13.a 4b. 1c 0d. 3
- 14.a 4b. 1c 0d. 3
- 15 a 4b. 3c -Id. 3

55 - 65 Dreamboat

Pull yourself together and come back to earth for a while. Valentine's Day was made for you, but you might have been happier living in the 19th century. You probably have an extended family of cuddly toys and cupboards full of souvenirs from your past. Your idea of success at work is embarking on another office romance. You find it difficult to spend time alone and constantly seek an object for your desire. On the brighter side, ever generous and caring, you are likely to single-handedly save the seals.

35-54 All Heart

Valentine's Day won't go unnoticed. You will send a card or two and eagerly check the post on the 14th. Romance is integrated into your life in a balanced way. Candle-lit dinners are an institution in your house. You have a lively imagination and can spend time happily exploring the recesses of your own mind.

You are generous with your loved ones and a conscientious colleague. But you don't let work or money rule your life and you have no desire to rule the world.

16 - 34 Safe And Sound

You are vaguely aware of Valentine's Day but you feel rather ambivalent about it all. You did send cards a couple of times but that was some time ago. For you, relationships consist of many elements, most of which are practical. Walking hand-in-hand along the beach is an occasional pleasure but stability is your goal. You need a secure home-base from which to go out into the world of work. This may lead you to avoid the ups and downs of romance altogether or to underestimate the importance of sensual pleasure and sometimes take your lovers for granted.

0 - 15 Money Talks

Loosen up and take a look at the world around you! You have a rigid work schedule with little time for leisure. You have probably never thought of sending a Valentine's card recently, though some of you might send bogus ones to unsettle vulnerable colleagues. The world of the imagination is a distant planet that you have no wish to visit. Money and status are the forces that drive you. You tend to model relationships on business partnerships, keeping accounts of what you put in and what you get out.*