

I am a Berliner: Walls and Reconciliation

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I.

In his unforgettable speech in West Berlin on June 26, 1963, the American President John F. Kennedy, spoke the famous line “Ich bin ein Berliner” or, in English, “I am a Berliner”. For the people in West Berlin this was a life-saving statement; it meant that the western world would not surrender this “freedom island” but would defend it. This West Berlin was surrounded by East Germany, which was ruled by the communists, and it bordered especially on East Berlin, the nominal capital of the so-called “German Democratic Republic”. This word “democratic” itself was a bold lie, because the elections that were carried out regularly were altered completely every time. The East German people, to whom my family and I belonged, had to live with these lies, because, as happened in 1953, Soviet tanks threatened to destroy every resistance to the East German communists.

This sentence, spoken by John F. Kennedy in June 1963, was also significant in a higher political sense because two years earlier the East German communists had built the Berlin Wall and had thus hermetically sealed the border between East and West Germany. Without risking one’s life, none of us could get out of this sealed-in territory. It was mainly thanks to the United States that, after the end of World War II in 1945, West Germany and West Berlin could become a free world for the Germans living there. Thus the sentence spoken by Kennedy, “I am a Berliner” had a significant political meaning.

II.

“I am a Berliner”: For me this sentence also has a very personal meaning in the context of my family history. I belong to one of the few old Berlin families. My great-grandfather Hermann Krättschell was born in Berlin in 1815, more than 200 years ago, when Berlin was still a small town with only a few thousand inhabitants and a king. Like me, Hermann Krättschell became a leading minister of the Protestant Church. It was only in 1920, a century ago, that Greater Berlin was formed by uniting many surrounding towns and villages. Rather like a miniature USA.

As opposed to West Germany, we in the East lived in a dictatorship. The tragic consequence of this was that many East Germans, under pressure from the state, gave up their freedom values. I will illustrate this with two examples:

1. At the time that communist East Germany was founded in 1949, about 90 percent of the population belonged to a church or other religious institution. When the Berlin Wall came down 40 years later, only about 20 percent belonged to a church. This atheistic way of life so omnipresent in eastern Germany continues to be a major influence even today.

2. In the free part of the country, in western Germany, the military draft was introduced in 1956. The East German communists could not attempt to introduce this as an answer to West Germany, because many young men would have then fled to the West, which at the time was fairly easy because no Wall had yet closed the border to West Germany. This was only possible after the Wall was built and after the inner Germany border had been sealed from the East. Thus the draft was introduced in East Germany only in 1962. I was one of the first to be drafted into this new ideologically atheistic army. I was 21 years old and studying theology in a medieval town with a famous cathedral. Night after night we theology students discussed whether we should refuse the draft for reasons of conscience. Most of us, including me, wanted to refuse. Our parents were horrified. They remembered from the Hitler period, which had ended only 16 years earlier, that draft refusal would be punished with anything up to the death penalty. Thus they advised us against refusal. But we did not follow their advice and, surprisingly enough, we were quite successful against the dictatorship. There were so many draft refusers in East Germany that the state could not afford to put so many young men into prison. After I had explained my reasons for refusal to the official military authority, I experienced — after this war of nerves — a humorous anecdote. The uniformed concierge, surely a soldier during the war, stopped me on the way out of the building with these words: “Why on earth did you refuse? You had the best results of the health tests and could have been in the air force. Just imagine — you in an air force uniform!”

After hearing these two memories of mine, the giving up of church membership by so many people and the refusal to be drafted by so many young men, two chosen from countless other difficulties and hardships in a life in East Germany, you can understand what walls and barbed wire mean for human beings. They divide; they separate; they bring about terrible suffering; they deliver the individual victim to the person in power. But sooner or later the people who build the walls as apparent powers and victors become the losers — beginning with the Chinese Wall, which was originally built to keep out the neighboring warriors and which, even today in China, creates completely new, visible and invisible walls inwardly and outwardly for the country; from guard cameras all the way to electronic and digital watchtower devices; including the Berlin Wall, which separated a people and countless families for 28 years, all the way to today’s walls existing or being built in Europe, for example in Hungary, or in other parts of the world, including the United States. Building walls, regardless of the material used, is always a sign of fear. But fear is one of the worst and often most expensive aspects of our lives. The wall builders obviously never learn the lessons of history. Otherwise they would recognize that the ostensible victors always end up, sooner or later, as the losers.

III.

And now to the second concept of our thematic discussion: walls and reconciliation.

In my life there have been many and sometimes completely unexpected reconciliation experiences. I’d like to tell you about one of these, especially because it happened in the United States, specifically in Syracuse, New York. I belong to the worldwide Community of the Cross of Nails, originating in the Cathedral of Coventry in the United Kingdom. The concept of reconciliation stands at the center of this intellectual and theological group, especially the reconciliation among states or ideologies that are opposed to

each other. There are also a number of the Cross of Nails members in the USA, especially in the Episcopal Church. Thus I visited the cathedral in Syracuse some years ago. The dean took me to visit a church member. This man was dying and could only speak a few words with mechanical assistance. Suddenly it turned out that this man had been one of the bomber pilots over Berlin in 1944. At that time American and British bombers were continually attacking the big cities of Hitler's Germany. And I was a four-year-old boy below the bombers in Berlin. At night many children were taken to the cellars of Hitler's office building for protection. One evening I had to watch as another bus with children was hit by a bomb and exploded into flames. From that experience I still have a deep childhood trauma. And now here I was, an adult and healthy former Berlin child, at the bed of a dying bomber pilot. It was an overwhelming experience of reconciliation, and we all had tears in our eyes. Together we recited the reconciliation prayer of Coventry Cathedral, in which one sentence is repeated over and over again, "Father, forgive!"

With a second reconciliation experience I will close the discussion about this concept.

In 1997 I took on the difficult assignment of introducing military chaplaincy into the formerly communist army, ruled by atheism. This was, in the end, very successful. After the unification of both German states, all of the leaders of the army were West German officers. But the soldiers of the East German army, who had obeyed orders and acted as they were expected to act, were all included into the army, which was now a unified German army. At the end of my service I risked an unusual project. I invited the generals of the West German and of the former East German armies to a round table conversation. These were the men who, before and after the Berlin Wall fell, had had the military command, and it was thanks to these men that no blood was shed at the time. They had never met their counterparts before, because the leading East German military people had all been discharged. There followed four highly charged nightly discussions. The western generals could all speak English; the eastern generals Russian.

The leader of the East German delegation, Admiral Hoffmann, said something to me that also has something to do with reconciliation: "Reverend Krätschell, I am surprised that my colleagues would follow a man of the church. But you should know that they have come only for your sake. They heard the radio broadcasts after the fall of the Berlin Wall that you moderated in City Hall, where you managed to bring together the old and very new parties to govern Berlin. There were communists at the round table discussion there, but you treated them the same way you treated everyone else. That's the reason why we accepted your invitation today."

During our last meeting I asked the military leaders from East and West to write down answers to these three questions: (1) What was my military responsibility before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall? (2) How do I see today, 15 years later, my behavior at the time? (3) According to your western or eastern life style and experience, write a letter as a legacy to your grandchild. One general then said, "You know, if a clergyman asks a soldier for something, it's like a command." Thus a book resulted with the letters written by the participants. I have brought two copies along, one for your university library and one for my old friend Don Lineback.

IV.

Dear Friends, now I have come around to your questions. While preparing this lecture I received some excellent questions that, out of my personal and historical experience, I will try to answer.

IV.1.

What role did religion play for you and other religious persons before the building of the Berlin Wall, during that period, and after the fall of the Wall?

1.1. The role of religion in East Germany before the building of the Wall

In East Germany, ruled over by communism from 1949 to 1989, the pressure on religion-oriented persons increased year by year. These persons were officially considered to be reactionary and devoted to old-fashioned ideas. "Church" was seen as being influenced by the enemy in the West and was thus fought against. Their members were strongly disadvantaged, especially in all kinds of education areas. The path to higher professional responsibility was very difficult and was often connected to membership in the atheistically directed communist party. In addition, people were often pressured to leave the church officially. And we as church leaders had to watch as the majority of the people under pressure, unexpectedly enough, quickly gave up all of their religious connections. After this, it was enough to have one generation of no-longer-religious persons to lose this connection completely. As a result the church and its loyal members found themselves in an almost non-Christian missionary situation, in which, for example, the number of adult christenings rose sharply.

1.2. The role of religion in East Germany during the 28 years of the Berlin Wall

The meaning of "church" and "Christian beliefs" can be described as a paradox. On the one hand, the church lost, due to pressure from the state, countless members, so that only 20% of the population remained in a church, and, in the huge so-called "socialist" newly built satellite towns only about 6% remained church-oriented. Most people in East Germany did not want any disadvantages for themselves and especially not for their children. The loss of religious traditions was no longer important for them.

But then the paradox: Like the original Christians of the first centuries, this minority of Christians in East Germany accepted the disadvantages ordered by the state, and a quiet elite group gathered under the roofs of clerical buildings. In an atmosphere of freedom, the values of intellect, culture, and spirituality were celebrated. About two years before the opening of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, our freedom-loving church-oriented world unexpectedly attracted more and more non-Christians. Although some ministers were afraid of state reprisals, many of us kept the doors of the churches open. And this is how the movement of tens of thousands began, who worked in the spirit of Christ, of non-violence, and of love for one's enemy — all the way to the fall of the Wall and the end of the Cold War.

Of course there had been a political decision on the world stage that had encouraged all of this. Michail Gorbachov, who had taken over the leadership of the communist party in the Soviet Union in 1985, had decided to change the doctrine, still valid at that time,

that stated that any uprisings in any country within the area of power of the Soviet Union were to be put down immediately by the use of Soviet tanks. With this change in doctrine Gorbachov changed the course of world history. This history-altering decision reached East Germany through various channels and caused much unrest among the communist leaders of East Germany. However, the end of the tank doctrine encouraged resistance among large parts of the population. In a word, one could say that Gorbachov was the first to act in the spirit of Jesus and non-violence. Some of the East German population reacted very positively when, in October 1989 Gorbachov arrived in East Berlin to celebrate the 40th anniversary of communist East Germany. An interview that I gave to the journalist Robert Siegel on National Public Radio in the United States mentions this visit in October 1989.

Indeed, even during Gorbachov's visit in East Berlin the first demonstrations against the East German government began, and they were put down brutally by the East German communists. But the Soviet tanks no longer went into action and thus holding on to power was no longer guaranteed for communists in East Germany and the other eastern European Soviet satellite countries. Thus it was only a matter of time before the Berlin Wall came down one month later. The Cold War was at an end, and for East Germans World War II finally came to an end after 44 years.

1.3. The role of religion in East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall

The effects of communism continue to fester in eastern Germany. Only a few people find their way to a consciously Christian life. It does help that many West Germans, who have grown up in a church environment, have moved for professional or other reasons to East Germany. This is especially apparent in our Berlin congregations, because after the federal government of united Germany and the Parliament moved to Berlin, thousands of new workplaces have arisen. But that quiet elite church group from East Germany is still important for unified Germany. Here I will mention just two names: (1) [German Chancellor] Angela Merkel, who grew up in an East German parsonage. I have been close to her and her family since East German times. Last year I conducted the funeral service for her mother. (2) Joachim Gauck, a minister from East Germany, my age, who, after the fall of the Wall, was the first head of the new authority charged with organizing and making available the files of the communist secret service. Later he became the federal President of Germany.

IV.2.

The next question: We in the West saw only positive things resulting from reunification. Were there also negative ones?

Yes, there were and still are negative results. Even today East Germans feel like "second class Germans". I'll name only one of many reasons. More than 80 (!!) percent of leadership positions in politics, the economy, science, and culture are held by West Germans, thus with persons who never lived in East Germany under communism. Thus a feeling of western colonialism has arisen, especially because often East Germans are no less qualified for such leadership functions than their West German neighbors are. From this clear disadvantage a mood has arisen in East Germany, even thirty years after the fall of the Wall and the national reunification, which, for example presents itself during elections. For this reason in recent elections many in East Germany have voted

for the extremely dangerous right-wing party called the “AfD” (“Alternative for Germany”). Many of us are thus reminded of the dark Nazi periods of German history during the 20th century.

In other words, next to all of the really positive experiences after German reunification, such as freedom and prosperity, there are also negative experiences that need to be resolved thirty years after the reunification of both German states in 1990.

IV.3.

The final question: Where does the worldwide trend toward nationalistic and antidemocratic tendencies come from?

Let me remind you of the beginning of my lecture about the meaning of walls, which are always expressions of fear. A similar reaction is the trend toward nationalistic and anti-democratic tendencies. Under the surface we realize, more or less consciously, that our lifestyle of the past 50 years, especially in the western world, has led to a threatening endangering of human life on our planet. Climate change is only one warning signal of this. Thus the fear arises on the part of those who have a great deal that they will have to give up some of this to those who have little or nothing on our planet. This results in the tendency to close the gates or borders to all outsiders and the rise of strong men or perhaps also strong women who no longer need or want parliaments and will manipulate democratic decision processes. The main thing for them: the walls.

For me there is another more religious explanation. When such egoistic tendencies become stronger and stronger, this is often because we try consciously to ignore the fact that we must understand this world as a creation of God, which has been entrusted to us and which we can only care for with respect for other people, especially for weaker people. In this basic respect for others that is necessary for the survival of mankind, we will find the necessary feeling of thankfulness for that which we have received, or in terms of belief, gratitude toward God.

Oh, how this inner sense of gratitude has disappeared from world and national politics and often even from our own hearts! Only when thankfulness once again develops a definite power in our world, then the tendency toward nationalistic and antidemocratic leanings can slowly be reduced. Every one of us can contribute toward this, whether this be through volunteer activities for any kind of socially positive organization or whether this be through voting against the people who propagate walls and divisions and hatred of any kind.

Thank you.