

What is missing: A View of the Bright Side of East Germany

An East German minister ponders the appreciation of citizens of the former GDR

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The summer of 1989 – unforgettable. Tens of thousands of mostly young East German citizens escape to the West via Prague, Warsaw, or Budapest. Those who stay behind are protesting increasingly about the crumbling ‘concrete socialism’ in East Germany, the GDR. The tempo grows faster and faster, breathtaking: October 7 – celebration of the 40th anniversary of the GDR. October 9 – The Monday Demonstration in Leipzig with 70,000 participants. October 16 – Overthrow of Erich Honecker; his successor is “crown prince” Egon Krenz. But the people want freedom to travel, free elections, a free country. Now! November 4, 1989 – on Alexanderplatz in Berlin about 1 million of the 1.27 million East Berliners demonstrate. Just weeks earlier completely unthinkable, a sensation in a dictatorship! The forward-thinking head of GDR television offers a broadcast connection to the head of West German television. The sobering answer from the West says No, the ongoing tennis match with Boris Becker should not to be interrupted. And besides this demonstration on Alexanderplatz in East Berlin is only of local interest.

When Werner Krätschell, a tall and handsome man, tells this story today, he smiles. But his gentle smile carries a trace of bitterness. “Has there been much change since then? Basically this is a description of the tragic reality of the East-West relationship.” Krätschell, born in Berlin in 1940, was in 1989 the Superintendent responsible for 24 Protestant congregations in the northern part of East Berlin. For 25 years his parsonage in Berlin-Pankow has been a meeting point for regime critics, people wanting to leave the GDR, people who were under political pressure. He also has been interviewed by many foreign journalists; his English is very good. As a ranking church representative he is allowed to travel to other countries from time to time, to West Germany, to Great Britain, or to the USA. At the same time, in 1989, the Superintendent intimately experienced the events in the GDR and is often called on for help. The real threat of a “Chinese solution” [i.e. Tiananmen Square]. The Monday demonstrations. The excessive violence by the state powers around the Gethsemane Church in Prenzlauer Berg after the 40th anniversary celebration. The huge demonstration on Alexanderplatz. Finally the fall of the Berlin Wall, which makes him happy and amazed. Werner Krätschell becomes one of the three moderators of the East Berlin Round Table in City Hall, always broadcast live on GDR radio. He is considered to be a person who, regardless of all the injustice that he himself experienced, does not “kick back.” In his congregation he brings Stasi [Secret Police] perpetrators and their victims together at one table. Steps toward reconciliation – which will, to be sure, have no chance during the galloping rush toward reunification. In 2019 Werner Krätschell puts together into a book his memories of this period, collected from diary entries from that time, along with later reflections.

On October 3, 1990, the day of national reunification, Krätschell and his wife Annegret are in the USA; they watch the big celebration on television. His feelings are mixed

even to this day. “Of course we felt a tremendous sense of gratitude,” he says, “especially toward God, who gave us this reunification completely undeservedly and completely by surprise. That is the main feeling. My critical feelings relate more to the “how,” since 80% of the top positions in East Germany, in universities, politics, culture, even in the church were taken over by people who had grown up in the West and then came to the East.” They often brought with them mental images of the GDR from the Cold War. Particularly wounding was the word “Buschzulage” [‘bush-allowance,’ a term used in colonialization]. The values felt in the GDR, the “fruits of opposition,” as the British historian Timothy Garton Ash calls them, the bright aspects, which existed precisely because of the harsh pressure from above, were pushed completely aside. “This is a phenomenon that I would like to describe for the GDR,” says Krätschell, “that under this pressure from the state the spirit among the people was animated toward exceptional performance.” He calls it poetically a “levitating existence of astute intellectuals and artists, who, as if in a cloud, floated over this ugly system and its ugly instruments.”

Of course Krätschell knows that this applied only to a small portion of GDR citizens, but this small group was definitive. With this he does not mean the front line of the former human rights activists, who were, in his opinion, too often pushed into the foreground. A certain annoyance appears in the face of this man with the snow-white hair. Even the word itself, “human rights activists”, is a word from the West, totally uncommon in the GDR. No, Krätschell prefers to think about people like Reiner Kunze, who, a former university lecturer on Marxism and Leninism, developed into a gifted poet and regime critic. On the great power of theater, painting, literature, and music. On the sermons in the churches with their perfected art of interpreting between the lines; they were often closer to the Gospels than they are now. Or the many young people who were able to develop in the parsonages. “Even today we meet up with people who were in our youth groups. They tell us that they experienced a spirit in our house that no other family home could give them during the GDR period, the feeling of freedom, of the development of their own personality, discovering their own self with independence from the fears that they had from the instruments of the state in the school, workplace, and every day existence. And then you have to multiply this by the hundreds of parsonages in the GDR.” This quiet opposition was not mainly about political opposition or about anticommunism, but it was about the vastness of spirit. And about “standing upright”. This could be found in every social group, in cities and in rural areas, but neither West Germans nor historians took note of this, perhaps also because for their own protection these groups left behind no written proof.

Werner Krätschell is the son of a Berlin minister and a German-Baltic noblewoman. He is a polite man with a wonderful smile. At moments there is a certain resignation, even a quiet rage. During the period of East Germany most West Germans couldn’t have cared less about the division of Germany; their interests were oriented toward western Europe and the United States. “This was a totally different collection of values from those of East Germans, who basically had never experienced the end of World War II, but had had to live under these conditions. Thus one never expected from the West that any kind of empathy would develop.” But after all, says Krätschell, the interest has increased noticeably in the past 30 years. He sees this not only with films such as “The

Life of Others” and its East German answer, “Gundermann”, made by Andreas Dresen (Krätschell’s nephew, by the way), but also during his book-reading travels with young people, who have no preconceptions about the subject and ask questions with curiosity.

Of course there were also dark sides of the GDR. There were six spies of the secret police, including his deputy superintendent, assigned to watch just Krätschell and his family. And after the fall of the Berlin Wall Krätschell was able to prove his suspicion, that his entire parsonage was completely wiretapped. Members of his congregation and people seeking shelter were pressured, and countless times the superintendent had to negotiate with the state powers; barriers were placed in the way for even his own children. But as opposed to many other regime critics and victims of GDR justice, Krätschell never felt rage toward his fellow countrymen, as he says, neither toward the many fellow travelers, who at the end kept the regime alive, nor toward the obvious perpetrators. Human beings are simply frightened beings. And thus one enters into bad compromises. There are only about five percent of any group of people with bravery and civil courage. “Under pressure,” Krätschell maintains, “every people, and the Germans are apparently especially liable to this, will obey and do everything that the powerful demand.”

After unification Werner Krätschell built up the military chaplaincy in the former GDR, in a program now called the New Provinces. For his lifelong achievements he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Birmingham and from Furman University in South Carolina. Today, at the age of 80, Krätschell is still active, traveling all over Germany to introduce his book. And giving lectures at “his” university in South Carolina. In addition, he carefully follows the developments in united Germany, for example, the Thuringian provincial election in October, 2019. More than half of the voters vote for either the AfD (the far-right Alternative for Germany) or the Leftist Party, much to the wonderment of many West Germans. Krätschell adds his explanation to all the others. “We should have looked more precisely at those people in the GDR who could have been kept in leadership positions even in a joint German ship. But we simply said, if there was GDR party membership or relationship to the GDR state, then out with them. Here we did not differentiate enough and just wounded and sorted people out, who would have been worth keeping in important positions in their work in a united Germany. If you stamp people with a relationship to the GDR, you can easily push them out of the way.”

Krätschell, the theologian, has no problem with leftist opinions. Today he lives in a single-family house settlement that was once built for the communist big wigs of the GDR. Even today the minister is surrounded by “party comrades”, at first a difficult neighborhood. But today he is also often asked to bury one or another of the “comrades”. The “ideological anticommunism” of many human rights activists annoy Krätschell. He himself has often had something to do with leftist regime critics, even within the SED, the Communist party of the GDR. These persons, he says, were often closer to Christianity than many church-goers. He knows that by far not all former opposition activists agree with him. The GDR dissidents in united Germany often find themselves in opposing camps, from national-conservative through liberal to leftists or far leftists.

The Reverend Krätschell does not deny that East Germans often continue to have prejudices about West Germans, that they sometimes love their stereotypes and oppose “Wessi’s” across the board. Thus he hopes for the future from West and East Germans “that we talk about each other with more understanding and, before we judge the other side, inform ourselves about the background for a western or eastern biography”. For this we need to speak and listen well, especially in protected corners, without media accompaniment and media performance. And not only for his four adult children and his grandchildren Krätschell hopes very directly, “That you do not commit your soul to any political system, not even today’s system. You will maintain your inner freedom, independence, and real individuality only if you do not let these precious values depend on a specific system but rather if you feed them from sources independent of any system. From the world of the spirit, art, spirituality, or social and political responsibility.”

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Translated by Jane Helmchen