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# When the Wall



# Came Tumbling Down

A look back at the fall of 1989, when a close-knit group of Furman students became eyewitnesses to historic, earth-shaking events.

BY KRISTI YORK WOOTEN

I have no idea where my piece of the Berlin Wall is. For years it sat on my bookshelf in a little glass dome — the kind grandmothers use to protect their crystal unicorns and ceramic Hallmark angels — and made for an easy conversation piece. “Is that part of the Wall?” polite guests would often ask. When I married my husband, Tim, in the mid-1990s, we housed both our chunks of 1961 spray-painted concrete under the dome together, his-and-hers style. Yes, his was real, too.

I laughed aloud the first time someone asked, “Did you guys get pieces of the Berlin Wall off the Internet?” But I knew it was time to retire the display for good when, while I was packing to move to our current home, a visiting neighbor pointed to our beloved red-and-yellow-flecked slivers and said, “What are those rocks for?”

Over time, my relationship with the Berlin Wall has become less about that I actually took a sledgehammer and busted out a piece of it, and more about how no one else — not even with the help of eBay, YouTube and Wikipedia — can replicate the experiences my fellow Furman students and I had in Germany during the tumultuous month of November 1989.

Back then, the headlines and television reports from the United States made it look so simple. To hear Dan Rather tell it, one spontaneous gathering atop a section of the Wall near the Brandenburg Gate on the night of November 9 was all it took to liberate East Germany. Quick — cue the champagne, fireworks and David Hasselhoff singing “Looking for Freedom!”

But in reality, the fall of the Wall wasn't nearly as swift and seamless as most people think. And even the colorful images of the celebrations don't do justice to the exhilaration of participating in such a historic moment.



As we 18 Furman students — some German majors, others more interested in German beer — embarked on our semester abroad in September 1989, we had no idea that we'd not only cap off a calendar year, a decade and another dozen credits toward graduation, but that we'd watch the Cold War melt before our eyes.

Outside Munich, West Germany, where we lived with host families in an exurb/village called Grafing, we spent our days at the local branch of the Goethe Institut learning to speak German, studying art history, and reading historical novels

and plays. Breakfast was provided at the Institut, and, after being dismissed at two o'clock each afternoon, we often combined lunch and dinner into late-afternoon roundtable discussions at the local Kneipe, or pub, over a Wildbräu and order of Spaetzle (noodle dumplings).

We went everywhere on foot or by train and headed into the city for required events, such as Bayerisches Staatsschauspiel's production of *Faust* at the Prinzregententheater, or for our own adventures (10,000 Maniacs live at Theaterfabrik and Paul McCartney at the Olympiahalle). On weekends, we took the train to Paris or Venice.

While the “Revolutions of 1989” were taking place all over Eastern Europe, we were busy studying Albrecht

Dürer's self-portrait at the Alte Pinakothek. Most of us didn't have access to television in our hosts' homes, so we'd walk back to the Institut for glimpses of the evening news (pre-cable) on the old television set in the lounge. We knew the basic facts — that Helmut Kohl was Chancellor of Germany (or BRD, Bundesrepublik Deutschland, as it was called), for instance — but anything having to do with East Germany (the DDR, Deutsche Demokratische Republik) seemed sort of foreboding, despite Gorbachev's recent introduction of *perestroika*.



*“We saw pale concrete building after pale concrete building, with East German Trabants (‘Trabbies’) the only cars parked along the curbs . . . The only succinct way I’ve been able to describe it over the years is this: It was like stepping out of a color movie (‘The Wizard of Oz?’) and into a black and white one (‘Casablanca’).”*

The Eastern Bloc was still just that — a huge group of countries united against everything we as Nike-wearing, gum-chewing, loud-mouthed Americans stood for. So when the October 19 television reports announced that Erich Honecker had suddenly stepped down as the head of East Germany’s Politburo and Central Committee, the news was a bit brow-raising. And when the swells of protestors grew in cities across East Germany after Honecker’s successor, Egon Krenz, allowed restricted border openings to Czechoslovakia on October 27, none of us really understood what was taking place. Yet it seemed frightening — as if the unraveling of the East could cause instability and violence right next door.

As the autumn days grew darker and colder, we took refuge in old-fashioned pleasures. Holed up in our rooms most evenings with bread and Nutella (a sweet spread), we played board games, wrote letters, read books and listened to music. There were no cell phones or iPods yet, but we had our Sony Walkman cassette players, and afternoon shopping sprees at the World of Music in Munich were a favorite pastime. World of Music was an early incarnation of the music

megastore, full of all the new international releases, and I’m sure that today every person on the trip could name at least one album that personifies the mood of that fall for him or her.

For me, it was Tears for Fears’ bombastic and brilliant “Sowing the Seeds of Love,” with music and lyrics so indicative of the political mood of the times. The November 2, 1989, issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine gave the album four stars, hailing it as “a remarkable collision of sound and idea.” The song “Famous Last Words,” a billowing, cinematic ballad with a melancholic flugelhorn solo and one of singer Roland Orzabal’s best vocal performances, became the soundtrack to my life during those autumn months in Germany. That the song’s lyrics imagined the fearful embrace of lovers during a nuclear explosion seems outdated now, but at the time they felt so relevant to the still looming possibility of a showdown between the United States and the United Soviet Socialist Republic: “When the light from above burns a hole straight through our love, we will laugh, we will sing, when the saints go marching in, and we will carry war no more.”



*“We emerged on the east side of the Wall to total cloud cover, with a light coat of snow on everything and more falling. Almost no one was out in the streets.”*

In an overnight chartered bus trip from Munich to Berlin the third week of November, we hunkered down to our favorite sounds with our headphones on, snuggling under our heaviest winter coats and gazing out the window at snowflakes glowing in the occasional streetlight. One of my fellow travelers, Edwin Beckham '90, has described the drive:

“I remember our tour bus being waved to the side of the road by the East German border guards, in what seemed like the dead of night, as we passed under the barrier arm and through the iconic border gate complex on the inbound trip from Munich. Soon a couple of the armed guards had stepped up into the bus. What did they want?”

“Quickly the whispers traveled to the back. They wanted our passports. The one thing our professors had warned us ‘never’ to part with while in Europe was now being demanded, and by a bunch of Communist-bloc border guards, no less.

“Were we really going to hand over our only identification papers to the Evil Empire?”

“We were reassured by those same professors that this was routine at a border with the East. And besides, did we really have any choice than to follow their procedures if we wanted to get to Berlin?”

“The passports were returned after a long wait. Was it 30 minutes or 90? Our leaders handed our passports back to us as the bus gained speed on the Autobahn.

“But something was different. We’d been counted. That familiar yet ever strange ‘black box’ of the modern nation-state, the bureaucracy, had done its bounden duty. The clerks at the border had counted us. Each passport had been affixed with a small, white sticker on which a number had been handwritten carefully in ballpoint pen, beginning with ‘1’ and ending where, around ‘20’? To this day I am, to the now-defunct East German bureaucracy, ‘Number 16.’”

In the wake of the November 4 protests — in which virtually all of the DDR took to the streets for rallies and speeches by the likes of author Christa Wolf, who declared that “East Germany has changed more in the past four weeks than in all the previous four decades” — and the resignation of the East German government November 7-8, the events of November 9 and thereafter, when the East German government announced that the Wall was officially “open” and East Berliners began to cross to the West, were bound to happen. Freedom was imminent, but even though our bus arrived more than a week after the first party at the Wall, Berlin was technically still divided.

Many Americans thought, and may still think, that Berlin lay at the center of Germany, and that the Wall divided the city into two perfect halves, becoming the border for the two Germanys. But Berlin was deeply in the East geographically, and when we pulled into the city on the Western side, it was as if we had never left Munich. We were appalled by the remnants of the damage done during World War II and yet

Harry Trantham and Kristi York Wooten take their turns at the Wall. Photos courtesy Stacy James Payne except as noted.



#### Germany Study Abroad Fall 1989

Barbara Anderson '91  
Edwin Beckham '90  
Evan Brooks '91  
Brad Crawford '92  
J.D. Crowe '92  
Michael Eatmon '91  
Pamela Grams Eatmon '90  
Jeffrey Eckert '92  
Michael Ilseher '91  
Stacy James Payne '91  
Cynthia Lewis Dee '92  
Casey Mullen '92  
Robert Page '91  
Kris Rust '92  
Annamarie Wilkinson  
Sampley '91  
Janet Schnauss Sweat '91  
Harry Trantham  
Kristi York Wooten '91

#### Professors:

Jane Chew  
Norman Whisnant

amazed at the cosmopolitan flair. There was a terrific energy and an in-your-face defiance about a city so vibrant, yet surrounded by such political oppression.

As good Western capitalists do, we quickly headed straight for the shops along the popular Kurfürstendamm and then to the top of the old Daimler-Benz building for drinks and an unparalleled view of the city. In the distance we saw great unlit swaths that we determined to be the “no man’s land” between sections of the Wall. We’d wanted to head to the Wall straight away, touch it, climb it, destroy it, but it wasn’t that easy, especially with those aforementioned U.S. passports in hand. No, we would go at an appointed time, with a guide, through the proper channels.

I’ll never forget how cold we were, waiting in line to go to the East. It was about 19 degrees, even in the sun. And as Edwin Beckham recalls, we weren’t prepared for the juxtaposition we found when we finally made it to the other side:

“I remember coming up out of the subway tunnel in the East to a bizarre, yet strangely comforting scene: Communist, Cold War-era Eastern Europe apparently looked *exactly* like we’d been taught in school. It looked as gray, plain, dingy and lifeless as the photos in our textbooks — and *exactly* the way the stories built into the anti-Communist American culture in which we’d grown up had depicted it.

“It was a cool, crisp mid-morning on a Friday or Saturday. We’d left West Berlin with a mostly sunny sky overhead, crowds of brightly dressed people bustling around in the streets, cars buzzing, streetlights blinking . . . and after what could only have been a sort of magic carpet ride into the past, or into another dimension altogether, we emerged on the east side of Die Mauer [the Wall] to total cloud cover, with a light coat of snow on everything and more falling. Almost no one — and I mean no one — was out in the streets. We saw pale concrete building after pale concrete building, with East German Trabants (“Trabbies”) the only cars parked along the curbs or occasionally sputtering by. Coal for long outmoded heating systems was piled up on the sidewalks, waiting to be shoveled down the chutes.



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

“The only succinct way I’ve been able to describe it over the years is this: It was like stepping out of a color movie (*The Wizard of Oz?*) and into a black and white one (*Casablanca*). Very strange.

“I remember our German teacher from the Goethe Institut pointing out to us, as we strolled around East Berlin that morning, how many of the buildings had pretty, classic architectural facades, but in the back were exposed to be made of ugly, bare concrete. For her, from the West, this was confirmation of the hollow, corrupt state of the totalitarian East, but I wonder if it also had something to do with the utter devastation of Berlin at the end of World War II and how impossible it would have been to reconstruct everything with the same historical integrity?”

When we finally got to the Wall itself, we couldn’t believe that a thin concrete block could have divided these two parts of Germany for so long, armed guards or not. There was a sense of anti-climax about chopping into it, but only because we felt a bit like imposters. Why not let those who lived behind the Wall for so long be the ones to tear it down? Later they would, but for a few more days at least, East Germany would continue to hide behind its own façade, as the “Autumn of Nations” waged on in the fight for freedom.

Just days after our Furman group flew back to the United States, the Brandenburg Gate was opened on December 22, 1989, for the first time in decades. On January 22, 1990, Gorbachev kowtowed to the idea of a unified Germany, and on May 18 of that year, the reunification treaty between the two Germanys was signed. The remaining sections of the Wall became art installations — reminders of a Europe forever changed.

“Just days after we flew back to the States, the Brandenburg Gate was opened for the first time in decades.”

I returned to Berlin with my mother in the summer of 1995 to participate in the Christo and Jeanne-Claude art project, the “Wrapping of the Reichstag.” We stayed in a hotel in the former East. Looking out over the skyline littered with cranes, I felt that same energy that I felt when we first arrived in November 1989 — only this time I had the satisfaction of knowing that there would be no checkpoints or lines, no stamping of the passport by stoic guards.

I still think about my travels with my Furman friends and professors Jane Chew and Norman Whisnant. Furman’s study away program (or as we called it, “foreign study”) has offered some noteworthy trips over the years, and I’m not saying ours was the most remarkable. But I do know that it was one of a kind in many ways.

Not only was it the only program ever held in Grafing, but at the time it was the only Furman program to place students in the homes of families in Germany. And, of course, it was the only Furman program to visit Berlin in 1989.

Twenty years later, I consider my semester in Germany one of the highlights of my life — a taste of independence and exposure to a world that no longer exists. The good friends I made in 1989 are still my friends today.

We just never realized that living through the revolutions that tore Communism apart would bring us so close together.

*The author graduated in 1991 with a double major in German and art. She lives in Atlanta where she is a free-lance writer and creative consultant. Visit [www.kristiyorkwooten.com](http://www.kristiyorkwooten.com).*