

A NIGHT IN EAST BERLIN

by James Reston, Jr.

I arrived at Checkpoint Charlie at 4:30 p.m., a full hour before my appointment with Barbara Brecht-Schall. Expecting that there would be no more than a few minutes' delay, I tarried at the control point. Its look had not changed much in the twenty-one years since I had been there. The dingy brick backsides of the apartment buildings on both sides still had the look of a backlot in the South Bronx. The temporary shack for the American MPs in the middle of Kochstrasse has become as permanent as the most solid marble museum. Indeed, Checkpoint Charlie has become a museum. For a few marks you enter a drab house across from the MP station and can get a photographic tour of the Communist horrors of the last twenty years: desperate escapes, packed refugee camps, soldiers with submachine guns, tanks squaring off. I did not stay more than a few minutes, for I had been there in 1961 and 1962, when the wall went up, and preferred my own memories.

The border itself is a bit more fortified than I remembered. The wall is higher, topped now by a rounded, white pipe, where before concertina and shards of broken glass constituted the state of the art. The cement block obstacle course on the East Berlin side has become a bit trickier. I delivered my passport to the first People's Policeman (Volkspolizei, or Vopo), got my declaration card--money still interested them mightily--and was directed to the next control point. Past the cement obstacles, the second Vopo repeated the routine questions. What was my purpose in coming over? To see a play at the Berliner Ensemble, I replied. Would I return after the performance? Yes, I said emphatically. He took the documents and handed them through a window to an unseen functionary. Images

rushed back to me. Papers always handed through small windows . . . the hand from the darkness taking them and, hopefully, handing them back soon after . . . I waited. That, too, I remembered. The long waits, the curiosity about who was being called, what questions were being asked, what files consulted. It warmed me to think that perhaps they still had a record of my student escapades, when I would come over two or three times a week and wallow in international crisis, blithely photographing Russian tanks and daring the authorities to arrest me, passing notes to relatives and friends who had been cut off from West Berlin.

This time I felt smug. I had come over to visit the well-known daughter of the state's great literary hero in her apartment just off Bertolt Brecht Platz, and then go to their showcase theater as a guest of the International Theater Group. Back up and park in front of that building over there, the Vopo said gruffly, handing me back my documents.

Perhaps it was the car, borrowed from a friend in West Berlin. Perhaps this was still routine for unofficial American visitors. I was beginning to think I should have asked. I deposited the car in front of a small metal guard house. A younger Vopo emerged, dressed like them all, in a pale green great coat and green felt hat. My eyes fell to the driver's seat. The envelope from Petra Kelly, the Green Party representative to the German Parliament from Nuremberg, lay out of sight under a map of Berlin. It was intended for a dissident priest, and I planned to deliver the hot goods after the play. I had been so clever to remove the material from the official envelope of the Federal Republic Parliament to an unmarked envelope. The guard came to the passenger side, and I rolled down the window. He opened the door anyway. The same questions. Purpose? Return that night? Going over the money declaration. My profession? I waffled. What was I at that moment? Certainly, I could not

situation where I was bound to have trouble. So harassed were the few unofficial dissidents in East Germany, the State would look for any pretext to expel them. It was the new technique. The Western press was reporting gleefully that the border was opening up--evidence once again of the superiority of the Western Way of Life. Years of inactivity, and suddenly the old refugee centers were filling up again. The niece of Erich Honecker was getting the most press, after she had sought asylum in a Western embassy in Prague. The malcontents, the troublemakers, were coming over by the dozen. It was being treated as a hopeful sign in the West, but it was not hopeful. Dissent was getting leached out, drop by drop, and the more interesting refugees were the ones who did not want to come West, or at least they were ambivalent.

Wait here, the Vopo said cryptically, and he swiftly disappeared into the guard shack. Some minutes later he emerged and waved me to follow. Beyond the guard shack I entered a more permanent building and was escorted into a small rectangular room, no larger than 6' x 10'. A small, formica-topped table and two chairs were the only furnishings. Empty your pockets, he demanded. It was not to be a thorough search. He looked for an inside pocket in my overcoat, but he did not feel it or me.

We sat down, and he took up my wallet. He had a scrubbed, ruddy face and earnest clear green eyes to go with his uniform, and he looked at me occasionally as he asked his questions, maintaining his solicitous tone. It was as if we were on a joint search to discover who I was--and how dangerous. Piece by piece, the refuse of my wallet was examined: old business cards, telephone numbers of people I could not remember, an outdated bank card, a two-year-old deposit slip. It was not the sort of thing the CIA lab would have produced, or was it?

Anything bank-related he exclaimed upon, as if it was some further

pornographic discovery. To handle the forbidden plastic of Manufacturers Hanover Trust was a special perquisite of being a border policeman. I did not like it. Feeling soiled was only part of it. I felt irritated as well, and tried to turn my irritation to amusement. How did he see me? I wondered what was going through his mind. I tried to make it a game to see if he could fill out an accurate profile. But it did not work. I ended up only bored. The scene seemed so stock, so familiar somehow, although I had never experienced it before. I thought of Walter Percy. A hundred movies were being certified by this experience. Yet it was so enduring. Had it not been for those two names, I might have enjoyed it more. In the end, I knew he could only inconvenience me, but he had the power to change the lives of the two dissidents forever.

He laid aside two cards with emphasis. The card of Henry Schwarzchild, the director of the ACLU Capital Punishment Project, an old friend whom I had seen a year before, and my Dramatists Guild Membership card. They were, I thought, an odd combination. And then he left me alone.

For a while, I took note of the decor. Behind me on the wall was a wire bookcase, two shelves, no books. Over the table, two crude paintings of the type one might see over the border--not this one, but in Tijuana perhaps, and between them a wire holder for a vase or even an expensive bottle of champagne--with neither. Orangy curtains. Brown flower-print wallpaper, which seemed to have been designed by a thirteen-year-old.

Time passed slowly. It was very hot, and I began to shed layers of clothing. Outside, occasionally, there were heavy footsteps and the jingle of keys. Once, an old woman's voice filtered to me, laughing and thanking someone profusely. I thought of my talk earlier in the afternoon in West Berlin with Thomas Brasch, the expatriate writer who had been expelled to the West after long imprisonments. When you are in jail, he had said, the door becomes an *idée fixe*.

You always speak and think about the door, the door with no handle. It is psychological, not political. Brasch had generalized the notion to the entire Democratic Republic. The whole nation looked at the West through a forbidden window, the window of West German television. Because it was forbidden, and perhaps only because of that, it became desirable. Escape became a compulsion. To him, West Germany was scarcely better, at least so he professed to believe. He had used a Chinese proverb to express his feeling. The husband says to his wife: I will stay with you forever if for ten years you do not jump into that mudhole over there. As it gets closer and closer to the ten years, the woman gets more and more interested in the mudhole, and finally, the day before term, jumps in. Do you regard West Germany as a mudhole? I asked. He smiled, and changed to a softer metaphor. If sleeping with an ugly woman is absolutely forbidden, I would after a while get very interested in that woman, he said. So, he lived in the limbo of Berlin. West Berlin was a little like New York. New York was not America; it was New York. Berlin was Berlin.

I opened the orangy curtain and looked out on the cars being examined, trunks and hoods raised, for I suddenly felt claustrophobic. It was quickly noticed, and a different Vopo stormed in and closed the curtains dramatically. How long is this going to take? I asked. I have an appointment (with a hero of the State, I wanted to add).

"Your case requires a clarification," he snapped.

"Yes, but it has been an hour," I complained.

"When you cross the border, you must allow time," he replied triumphantly.

My thoughts returned to Brasch. He is a Jew, but he does not rest his identity in his Jewishness. Kafka endured as his mentor on both side of the Wall. His problems began in 1968, when he wrote pamphlets against the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia (East German soldiers had been among the first to

invade), and his plays and poems and films were thought to have had an influence on underground youth. Art and politics are very close in the East, he said, and even if one was not so political, problems with the State arise. "I had my problems with the regime," he said, "but every man who can think has problems." In his case, he had invited his own expulsion. His play "Lovely Rita" (the title was taken from the Beatles song) had actually gone into rehearsal at the Berliner Ensemble before Barbara Brecht-Schall and company abruptly cancelled it. It is remarkable that the play ever got as far as rehearsal, for its centerpiece was the scene of a Russian soldier raping an East German girl. (The play was later produced twice off-Broadway in New York.)

But the coup de grace was his book Before the Fathers, the Sons. It was discovered to have an incorrect view of youth and the working class, and its climax was the hero dying on the wall in an escape attempt.

The regime had given him three choices: take the book back (Brasch pronounced this with a sneer) and all would be forgotten; return to jail, since he was on probation for other incorrect portrayals; or go where the book is to be published.

"Didn't you know that writing such a book would force the issue?" I asked him.

"I knew. I wanted it," he conceded flatly.

For Brasch, the transition to Western life was handled more gracefully than any other East German literary refugee. The reason was simple. His book sold 60,000 copies when it was published in West Germany, and so his adaptation to capitalism was smooth. Later, Peter Stein, the smouldering, iconoclastic theater director of the Berlin Schauspiel, would call Brasch a "lonely wolf" among the East German writers in the West. In the climate where books are products more than simple fare for thought and reflection, most refugees find

the transition extremely difficult. Deadly earnest, their books and plays tend to address the reality of totalitarian life, and this seldom sells very well any more. Suddenly, the artist is "on the market," and his only wares are his contemptuous anecdotes about his former regime. If his earnestness sells, it will usually be because he has a good eye for the undertext, for the meaning of a "slave language," as Peter Stein called it, for the shadings of words and the importance of subtle body language. But if it does not sell, the writer's only way to live is to become a political spokesman, or a political expert, always the subject of interviews in the press anytime East German repression is the fare of the day. With his financial good fortune, Brasch had been able to escape this. To talk about East Germany bored him now, after seven years in the West. But he maintained his sympathy for the writers less fortunate.

"They end up becoming bitter, and they begin to make the same mistakes they had made in East Germany: they blame their problems on the regime. Before, every problem was created by socialism; now, every problem is caused by capitalism."

These remarks by Brasch paddled through my brain as I waited in that small, hot room on the border. I was getting my glimpse, my quick certification of how precious dissent was in the East. This was my warning not to dismiss too blithely the differences between East and West, as many in the West German peace movement were inclined to do. (The Green personality, Petra Kelly, refers to this mistake as "one-eyed pacifism.") Peter Stein, the director, had talked of how West German writers were often given to romanticizing East German literary protest. Only there, said the wistful, did the real Germany still exist, unspoiled by American influences. Only there was the language still pure German, for East German culture had not been influenced in any way by Russian culture. Stein had scoffed at this. Such romancing exaggerated the importance

of East German art. Most of the good artists had left, he said. And such romance was not good for the artists in the East or in the West.

My wait in the little room was rapidly eliminating any possibility of romance in me. There was nothing pleasant about what I was going through, and yet I knew I was in no real jeopardy. The fragility of Eastern dissent heightened my concern for the names of the two dissidents now in the hands of the authorities. Perhaps their position at that moment was being made more precarious by a Westerner they had never seen.

At last, after an hour and a half, the door opened. Pulling himself up with great significance, the policeman said, "You may visit the lady" But it would cost me \$10, for I was forced to change 25 solid West German marks into the funny money of East Germany. To my astonishment, he handed back to me all my Green "propaganda" without comment.

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I proceeded along the dim thoroughfare of Friedrichstrasse to the central S Bahn station. The East Germans had discovered neon signs in my absence, and they imparted more light, if not life, to the dusty streets. I was struck again by the sameness of the physical landscape to West Berlin, except that here there was no gloss, no style. The hotels that rose along the skyline were large and modern, but few people tarried in their lobbies. The streetcars were of the same design, but while their cream color was of the same hue as in West Berlin, they clanked along as if they were on their last wheels. Was I swiftly becoming a Western romantic, I wondered?

Through the dim foyer of an undistinguished building off Bertolt Brecht Platz, I climbed to the second story and rang the doorbell. It was a quarter to seven. The curtain would rise in fifteen minutes. I was more than an hour late, a terrible enough sin with any German, but with so formidable a figure as

Bertolt Brecht's daughter . . . well, I was prepared to talk quickly. Brecht-Schall is married to Ecke Schall, the foremost actor of the Berliner Ensemble, and Brecht's chief interpreter upon the European stage, and so this was a household which joined art and business with theatrical history. As a good father, Bertolt Brecht had divided the rights to his plays between his two children, willing the American rights to Brecht, who lives in New York, and the European rights to his daughter. In his competitiveness, Peter Stein in West Berlin had dismissed the present Berliner Ensemble as a "theatrical museum." In his bitterness, Thomas Brasch had added that it was a boring museum, and warned me not to mention his name to Ms. Brecht-Schall in my discussions with her, for it would not be good for me.

The door opened, and I was ushered into a world of light and color, theatricality and whimsy. In a high-ceilinged living room, bordered by comfortable couches and lined with a library of books, floor to ceiling, a color television blared the achievements of Katarina Witt, the East German figure skater who at that moment was receiving her gold medal at the Olympics. Strewn about was an assortment of theatrical props, and as I glanced into an adjoining room, I took brief note of a well-dressed gentleman who sat, motionless, upon a couch with his legs crossed. I assumed that this was the distinguished Brecht actor himself, for the man's carriage, even in repose, was upright and correct. But he did not stir to welcome me, and as I was led in the opposite direction by a teenage girl who spoke perfect New York English, I assumed this was because Herr Ecke was under the weather. "My old man is not feeling too good," Ms. Brecht-Schall had told me on the phone, flaunting her familiarity with the American idiom. All this flashed across my mind, before I realized that the figure on the couch was a mannequin.

From the kitchen Brecht-Schall swept in, wiping her hands upon her apron,

looking somewhat loaded for bear. She is a middle-aged woman with a very short crew cut which comes to a point in the middle of her forehead.

"Hello and goodbye," she said curtly, extending her hand, and before I could explain she allowed that she had been out on her porch for the last hour looking up and down Friedrichstrasse for a wayward American. When I got my chance to explain, she changed her tone abruptly. "Why didn't they call me?" she said with irritation. It was a question I could not answer. "Oh, I do apologize for my people," she said.

I followed her into a commodious kitchen, where at that moment her daughter was removing two fat hens from a microwave oven. "I wish we had time to talk," she said, "but if you wish to see art, you must leave in a minute." There was time, at least, for her to deliver her complaints about Arthur Kantor, the Broadway producer, who was on-again, off-again about bringing Ecke Schall's one-man play about Bertolt Brecht to Broadway.

"He's not sure he can fill the theater with it," Brecht-Schall said. "He may not make a fortune, but no one's ever lost money on us yet."

I found this amusing, given the setting, which was something like a one-apartment grand duchy within the proletarian expanse, and so in the minutes that were left I promoted the theme of theatrical big bucks, wondering if the walls listened. Minutes later, as I was helped on with my coat in the living room, a short athletic man breezed in, looking very fit indeed. He had a very short haircut, just like hers, and looked distinctly on the mend. I was introduced to the leading man himself. As he made his way toward the hens in the kitchen, she told him quickly in German about my delay at the border and the Green literature. At the kitchen door, as if it were a miniature proscenium, he paused, extended his arms palms up, raised his shoulders, and made an expression which said, "What can I say? The dolts are hopeless."

And then he exited, stage right.

At the theater I was greeted as a celebrity, placed in an orchestra seat, a few rows back from the stage, and settled in for a surprisingly delightful performance. The play was the Italian farce by Dario Fo, entitled "Who Can Pay?" Set in the inflation crisis of 1974, its performance, far from amateurish or boring, was charming throughout. The museum came alive hilariously with slapstick scenes of eating dog food, and hiding stolen groceries under the bed and in the loose sweater of a woman as if she were pregnant. There were wonderful interchanges between a working family and an overstuffed policeman who looked for the purloined goods, doffed a hat with a greatly exaggerated peak, and wore a holster which extended from his waist to below his kneecap.

In case one happened to miss the point of the piece, the program contained several handouts. One had a brief article entitled "Theater and Reality," which gave the facts about the inflation crisis and implied the situation continued unabated in Italy today. The class struggle continued against the Fascist regime, the flyer proclaimed. Over a picture of families with small children being evicted from their homes by policemen (implying it was of recent vintage) was the headline, "To call capitalism to reason, we invite you to read through its account books."

During the intermission, I wandered amid the theater crowd. It was noteworthy for its sturdy attractive dress, for its fair number of young soldiers in uniform, and for its distinct absence of Russians (although my powers of identification on this score are suspect). In the lobby, there was an extensive exhibition of Nazi photographs, including old Life Magazine pages on devastated German cities, on Auschwitz survivors, and a number of unflattering pictures of Hitler, Goebbels, and Göring. I took this for confirmation of the

continuing denazification in East Germany, which by all accounts remains far more persistent and pervasive in East Germany than in West Germany. But in East Germany, the process of denazification is turned upon the world of capitalism. The second handout in the program was a statement by Bertolt Brecht, dated 1950, about the "sworn formulas" of the capitalist regimes.

Plunder but not too much. Pursue war, but not against the civilian population. With cannons, but not with gas. I hear that the American Congress restricts its armament superiority to 10% over the Communist world. It could just so restrict its casualties in war to 10% more.

Down Friedrichstrasse, at the modern Hotel Unter den Linden, the pay phone was out of order, so, with some trepidation, I asked the desk clerk to place my call to Rev. Rainer Eppelmann. Eppelmann presides over a Lutheran Church far out of the city's center, off Karl Marx Allee, and had garnered considerable attention for being the force behind a genuinely spontaneous demonstration of 70 East Germans who on September 1, 1983, went with candles before the American Embassy in East Berlin and then before the Soviet Embassy, to plead for nuclear disarmament. The demonstration had lasted no more than five minutes in either place, as the tiny group was moved along quickly by the People's Police. But it was something of a watershed event, even finding its way onto the television screens of national news broadcasts in America.

Evi Eppelmann, the minister's wife, answered the phone. I had materials from her friend Petra, I said in my best undercover voice. Afraid that the police had already been out to them from the border, I added that if this was not a good time She cut me off. Bring them out, she said.

Along the wide thoroughfares of Unter den Linden and Karl Marx Allee there was only an occasional car, as I proceeded through the showcase. Vast

empty plazas, bordered by heavily ornate classic buildings, a towering futuristic needle, more massive than any of a World's Fair--all this was set against a lone human figure far in the distance across a vacant plaza. This was a future of some sort, but not one I particularly cared to be a part of. It felt as if I was driving across the cover of Omni Magazine or through Truffaut's Alphaville. Miles ticked off as I drove down Karl Marx Allee, bordered unrelieved by six-story apartment buildings.

The Reverend Eppelmann had not returned home when his wife ushered me into their pleasant spare apartment, sat me down on a converted church pew around their dining table, and gave me tea. She glanced at Petra Kelly's forbidden materials, thumbing through them occasionally, but there was no need to devour them instantly. There was a quiet resignation about her, as she talked almost perfunctorily about their peace work and the peace crisis of the last year, the year of the "defeat" of the missile deployment. Now was a time for thought, she said. "What else can we do?"

Close to eleven o'clock, the minister arrived. A small, balding man of perhaps forty years, with a pronounced goatee, he too projected a quiet strength. It had not been a good month for him. In January, the authorities had presented him with the awful choice: jail or deportation. He did not want to leave. His ministry was here, but the matter was not closed. The authorities had charged him with nothing concrete--nothing was ever concrete--how concrete did it ever have to be, when mere "anti-state" behavior was sufficient to exact the punishment of deportation? He had agreed, during this probationary period, to report to his Bishop all his activity, particularly anything so unimaginably dangerous as an unauthorized chat with an American journalist. I expressed my concern that my visit could aggravate his difficulties. He shook his head vigorously.

"Without these interchanges, we are dead," he replied.

With intensity, he spoke of the spontaneous September 1 demonstration as a "premiere" event, for nothing remotely like it had ever happened in East Germany. There was, after all, an official peace movement. The official peaceniks were known as the Friedenkampfer (peace fighters), just as the Russian SS-20s were known as "peace instruments." Those who opposed the peace instruments were considered "contrary to the philosophy of Karl Marx." The central proposition of the official peace movement was that 17 million people thought precisely as did the leader, Erich Honecker. By contrast, Eppelmann's clique was an independent group--hardly deserving the grandiose title of a movement. "We have no methods to imitate, no tradition of protest, and so we have to find our own methods," said Reverend Eppelmann.

Seventy people, holding candles for four minutes in front of the American Embassy on the anniversary of the opening of World War II, and being dispersed before they could engage in a like action in front of the Soviet Embassy--to Eppelmann this was a premiere event. Upon American television, the event had been reported as a curiosity, and later, the New York Times had reported on it, replete with a picture of Reverend Eppelmann standing next to a portly, obviously uncomfortable People's policeman, under the headline: "In Militaristic East Germany, Pacifists Mobilize." Even Reverend Eppelmann was ready to apologize for the police behavior on September 1. "Of course, from the West, we have different images of what peace protests are like, images of water throwers." Perhaps it was a premiere event, but in a moral rather than historical sense. It was an act of personal witness by brave men and women, whose lives were likely to become distinctly less pleasant as a result.

As I rose to leave--for, Cinderella-like, my visa to East Berlin expired at midnight--Reverend Eppelmann made a request. He asked me to write my name and the name of my publisher on a piece of paper, for in the morning he would pay a

call on his Bishop to report all this. That had been part of his agreement with the State, and he meant to abide by it. Fresh in his mind was the seven-week jailing of two women, Baerbel Bohley and Ulricke Poppe, founders of a tiny group called "Women for Peace" for the crime of having talked to visitors from the British anti-missile group. The charge? Passing information detrimental to East Germany to foreign visitors. Had Eppelmann just done the same? It was a matter of interpretation, but it would ultimately be the Bishop's and the State's interpretation that counted.

When you write this, put it in narrative form and do not call it an interview, Reverend Eppelmann requested. I promised I would.

Half an hour later, I passed back through Checkpoint Charlie without incident.