

German liberation is a cause for celebration

By WILLIAM S. SINGER

On Nov. 9 I watched on television, with the rest of the world, the unexpected opening of the Berlin Wall and the exuberance of East and West Berliners at this sudden, dramatic change in their lives. I knew immediately that I wanted to be there, to share in those feelings of jubilation. I wanted to witness history first hand.

Less than 10 days later, I arrived in West Berlin. That first night I went immediately to the Wall near the Brandenburg Gate. The avenue leading to the Gate is wide. It had been an important boulevard in Berlin, but because the street is bisected by the wall, it has lost its purpose. Instead of a dramatic and imposing avenue, it has become a dead end.

Yet the Brandenburg Gate itself is still impressive. Constructed at the end of the 19th Century, it maintains landmark status. It remains as one of the few significant structures in the city not demolished in the final days of World War II.

With the excitement of the breaching of the Wall still in the air, the populace gathers at this site waiting for an opening in the Wall at this landmark. The opening there will not take place until a few days before Christmas, and it will recharge the excitement in Berlin. Recreating that passageway symbolizes more than any other act the reunification of the city.

Here, on my first night in Berlin, I see throngs of people congregating at this point at the Wall. Some have brought hammers and chisels to make their personal statement in helping to bring down the Wall. These instruments of destruction and liberation get passed hand to hand so that all who want can make their contribution, helping to shatter the famous and hated symbol of repression.

At one point enough of the Wall has been chiseled away so that you can see through to the other side. Looking through the crevice, I see so East German soldier patrolling. Pleasantries are exchanged between the exuberant chiselers and the guard.

Then, the East German guard helps dislodge a large piece of the Wall for the people on the West side — and symbolically for himself. The emo-

PERSONAL TOUCH

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tions run high, tears come to my eyes.

HERE IN BERLIN, I RELIVE VIVIDLY the thrill of watching on television the streaming people moving back and forth over the border which just before had seemed impenetrable, a fixture in our lives.

Young parents bring their children to the Wall to see it, look through it, to share in the excitement. For so many the Wall has been part of our lives for 28 years. Now parents bring children to witness the dismantling of the Wall, to witness an unforgettable time in history when the Wall suddenly becomes an artifact of another age, shattered into hunks of memorabilia to be collected by tourists and sold by enterprising entrepreneurs.

Each day in the city I revisit the Wall, going to different parts of it. West Berlin is an island, totally surrounded by East Germany on all sides and hemmed in by the Wall. Physically, the Wall is over 14 feet high and on the western side it has been spray-painted and decorated by pictures and colorful graffiti.

At the Wall, the air is filled with the clatter of hammer and chisel. Everyone wants their piece of history. People scramble around the people with hammers to pick up shards as they fly off the Wall. The pieces with graffiti are particularly prized.

Plodding my own hammer and chisel in the stores of West Berlin becomes a challenge. Fortunately, I secure the last hammer and chisel in a hardware store. Once at the Wall, my tools are put to immediate use and shared among the other tourists.

After a few days of experiencing the contagious exhilaration in the air, I begin to remember the events which led to the division of the city. I

recall Germany's rapacious attempt to conquer Europe, its subjugation of many people and nations and the wholesale destruction of Jews, homosexuals, political dissidents and others. Those atrocities temper my feelings of joy for the momentous change I am witnessing and chip away at my sympathy for the suffering of the German people.

It is just 50 years since the beginning of World War II. One of the results of that horror is just coming undone. It is time to celebrate a positive turning point for Western civilization tinged with the memories of the awful past. Berlin, probably more than any other place, encapsulates all of that history. The Wall plays a role in symbolizing the penance of the German people.

As a tourist, the contrast between the two parts of Berlin is stark. West Berlin bustles with activity, life, colors, lights and the abundance of what is available in our culture. That abundance obviously includes all the consumer goods, but also includes freedoms of speech, press, assembly and religion which are the cornerstones of Western democracies.

East Berlin's face is grimmer. There are some shops with fancy window displays. But overall the mood is somber and drab. The people do not express contentment in their appearance; there is none of the jocularly one sees in the passers-by in West Berlin.

WHEN I ARRIVE HOME WITH MY suitcase heavily weighed down with fragments of the Wall, I find that everyone wants to share the experience. When I give someone a piece of the Wall, the infectious enthusiasm I felt in Berlin is shared again. There is genuine excitement as my friends look at the pieces of the Wall and my photographs. They speak of feeling that they are participating in the historical moment.

The spirit of freedom and joy felt in Berlin travels easily. The euphoria of the non-violent revolution has made people everywhere smile and feel better about our world. The events of today help replace yesterday's losses with new memories of hope and inspiration.

The writer is an attorney from Montgomery.