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ARTICLE

Zingster Straße 25

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## **ZINGSTER STRASSE 25: LIFE WITH ALL MOD CONS IN 2017**

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At the Eighth Congress of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or SED) in 1971, Erich Honecker, the General Secretary of the party's Central Committee and the Chairman of the State Council of the GDR, announced the government's intention to raise the people's standard of living both culturally and materially through the unity of economic and social policy.

This included a homebuilding scheme designed to create appropriate living space for every citizen of the GDR by 1990. Industrial technologies such as prefabricated *Plattenbau* construction methods provided improved materials for higher building quality, and the necessary social infrastructure for the newly built neighbourhoods was planned from the very beginning.

The planning process led to the construction of Neu-Hohenschönhausen, now part of the district of Lichtenberg in Berlin. On 9 February 1984, at Barther Straße 3, Honecker laid the cornerstone of the new housing estate. Back then, this neighbourhood—which lay between the northern villages of Falkenberg, Malchow, and Wartenberg and the district of Alt-Hohenschönhausen to the south—was an area of sewage farms that offered plenty of space for the government's promised efforts to tackle the housing shortage. Around 30,000 homes for 90,000 people were built over the next five years.

The tower block at Zingster Straße 25 forms part of the estate and was ready by the summer of 1987 for new residents to move in. The building's architecture corresponds to the high-rise design WHH GT 84/85, which was created in 1984–85 for the estate overlooking the Ernst-Thälmann-Park in Prenzlauer Berg in preparation for Berlin's 750-year jubilee. It has twenty storeys with a total of 144 apartments, and is 61.6 m tall. The design was innovative in that it has a stepped footprint rather than being a straightforward cuboid. Floors one to

Trans. by Jozef van der Voort (GHIL)

eighteen each contain eight residential units with one to four bedrooms. Two of the units on each floor are one-bedroom apartments measuring 34.08 m<sup>2</sup>; four of them are two-bed units, of which two measure 54.80 m<sup>2</sup> and two 62.92 m<sup>2</sup>; and the remaining units are a 67.24 m<sup>2</sup> three-bed apartment and an 83.13 m<sup>2</sup> four-bed apartment. There are two lifts, a stairwell, and a rubbish chute. Bathrooms and kitchens (the latter with service hatches) are windowless and fully internal. All units apart from the one-bed apartments feature triangular balconies, which further break up the building's stepped exterior.

The balustrades were finished with exposed, vertically textured concrete and tiling; however, a refurbishment of the housing stock in Neu-Hohenschönhausen was begun in the mid 1990s, during which the facades received insulated cladding. This also altered their visual appearance from grey concrete to white with pastel colours.

### *Glimpses into a Plattenbau*

An apartment block brings together the people who live inside it through its outer shell. It weaves their stories together, since people live alongside, under, and on top of one another; they influence each other and are influenced in turn, although they do not experience this as a conscious process. In her 1982 book *Berliner Mietshaus*, the journalist and author Irina Liebmann writes, 'What we can learn about a tenement is underwritten by the history of the country, city, and district, and incorporates the life stories of the people who temporarily occupy it. Past, present, public, and private realities—both lived and narrated—constantly interweave.'<sup>1</sup> Liebmann focused on older tenements known as *Altbau* in East Berlin during the early 1980s, and thus on the dreams and experiences of people cohabiting in a different era and in a completely different type of housing; whereas I, as an artist, wanted to explore the lives of people nowadays who had moved out of traditional tenements and into apartments with 'all mod cons' (*Vollkomfort*). Ravaged post-war Berlin offered grey house fronts, outdoor toilets, and coal-burning stoves. Neu-Hohenschönhausen

<sup>1</sup> Irina Liebmann, *Berliner Mietshaus* (Halle, 1982), 5.

was different: ‘hot water on tap, light from the ceiling’, and plenty of green space around it.

In summer 2017, I conducted twenty-five interviews with residents of the high-rise block Zingster Straße 25. The building features a communal gallery, which offered a useful starting point for the collaboration as I could base myself there and approach people by the entrance to the tower. Irina Liebmann simply knocked on the doors of the tenement she studied on Pappelallee in the East Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg and was almost always welcomed inside. Thirty-five years later, this method of establishing contact with people seems unthinkable in unified Berlin, and perhaps in the rest of Germany too. To me, this simple fact reflects the enormous changes of the last three decades, which have profoundly affected each and every one of us. Those residents who eventually agreed to talk to me told me of their past and their present, their hopes and fears. I never took their openness towards me for granted, as I encountered distrust and dismissiveness often enough too.

How do people live today in a building that once stood in a different country, and that was built to meet the needs of the past? The equality that this form of housing sought to promote ceased to be relevant just three years after its apartments were first occupied. In other words, there was only a very brief test period of cohabitation under the oversight of a centrally planned system. ‘Mod-con living’ suddenly became a functional concept that was seen as backwards and outdated in the capitalist West. Furthermore, its external conditions – the social and cultural facilities that helped structure everyday life in a society with full employment – were initially rendered obsolete by the upheavals and social fractures that came with the *Wende*. In the immediate aftermath, people had to plan their own survival under the new system, or wait to see what role they would be allowed or obliged to take in the future.

Conversations with people on the ground reveal that they were not left untouched by either the rupture in individual biographies caused by the *Wende* or the invalidation of the morals and values of the GDR era. One conclusion we can draw from the interviews is that people still enjoy living on Zingster Straße, and that they cannot really imagine living anywhere else. Yet when I spoke to residents about

their current fears and concerns, I heard a good deal of criticism of how the living environment has changed. People have grown deeply mistrustful; they do not open their doors unless they are expecting visitors; they know very few of their neighbours and tell horror stories of things that have happened to some of them; and they seem appalled by the arrival of apparently non-German residents. It was also clear that people prefer to look to themselves rather than the common good, and that they do not primarily see themselves as part of the latter. Everything used to be better. Only one interviewee suggested that residents might lack the personal initiative required to develop a positive sense of community inside such a large tower block.

Yet somehow this observation left me at a loss, since at the same time, the interviewees all stressed how good their lives are and that they want for nothing. Perhaps the architecture of Zingster Straße provides a sense of ostensible security. Residents sit in their tower – their castle – and scrutinize their surroundings and the distant city without having to come near them. Throughout the project, I have constantly questioned whether residents' fears and concerns are truly justified.

But how can I really judge, with my outsider's perspective?

### *Postscript*

After some (but not all) of the interviewees read the texts in the finished book, they were overwhelmed by their own openness towards me. They realized that their voices had been taken very seriously in the context of the project, which seemed to surprise them, since they had previously only spoken among themselves – doubtless under a form of general consensus. Now, they began to wonder who might read their story and draw conclusions about them from it. The fact that the texts were anonymized was irrelevant to them, since they could still recognize themselves. I realized that the act of bearing witness often comes with a heavy burden, and that it is essential to become aware of this and to recognize the value of one's own voice in a given context. I fervently hope that the residents whose voices feature in my book will, with time and distance, be able to see the importance of their stories.

## ZINGSTER STRASSE 25



Fig. 1: Zingster Straße 25 soon after completion. © Ulrich Dießner (1987)/  
Christof Zwiener (2017)

Trans. by Emily Richards (GHIL)

*Herr and Frau B. (p. 149)*<sup>1</sup>

FRAU B: My husband was with the police for thirty years, I was with them for twenty.

Well, after the *Wende* . . . yes, they kept my husband on. Go on, you tell them.

HERR B: Of course we already knew something was going to happen. They had those secret meetings at the churches, people would gather there and we were told to keep an eye on them. So we knew things were about to change, no two ways about it. And once the border was open, some of them came to us and some of us went over to join a unit there, so there was contact between us. I went over there sometimes as well. The head of my station phoned me, here at home, because I was on leave at the time, and he said I should get over to the office. When I got there he said to me – there was another bloke there, a West Berliner – he said to me, ‘You can stay on or you can stop work, it’s up to you. When you’re 52 you’re entitled to . . .’ – what did they call it, early retirement? – ‘and a 2,000-mark redundancy payment.’ So I thought to myself, why should I bother learning *their* laws on top of ours? When I’m 52, I can draw my pension. So I said adieu. I didn’t get my full pension until I turned 60, though.

FRAU B: But it was only for eight years. And I was still working.

HERR B: The other ABVs<sup>2</sup> all marched straight over into the West. That was how it was. I said, I’m 52. If I’d been ten years younger, I’d have done the same, why not?

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FRAU B: I just carried on as usual. At first I was doing the checks on foreigners. They stopped that later on. I registered the foreigners who came over when they arrived and when they had to leave the country. I was responsible for anything to do with foreign workers. We had a

<sup>1</sup> The following interviews are translated from Sonya Schönberger, *Zingster Straße 25* (Berlin, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> *Abschnittsbevollmächtigte* – community police officers in the GDR who carried out conventional policing duties, but also played a part in state surveillance.

lot of them here, from fifty-three different countries, there was always something that had to be done. Or the Germans who were leaving the country or coming back from abroad. Anything to do with that.

Once, my husband said to me, 'I'm going out for dinner with a couple of colleagues. You can come and join us when you get off work.' So I went along. I get to the restaurant, sit down, and before I know it everything goes black. The restaurant was full of Mozambicans; they all knew me from work. They all came over to say hello and sat down next to me while I was having my dinner. And everyone in the restaurant was staring at me, I felt really strange. They were like children. None of them had ever been abroad before. They were looking to make a connection with someone, they wanted contact with other people, someone to talk to. I understood that, but a lot of the population didn't. Most of the Mozambicans worked in the slaughterhouse on Landsberger Allee. They would tell me that they wanted to go to South Africa; there are really big slaughterhouses there where you can earn good money. Sometimes it was hilarious – they were so ignorant. They would stand in front of the toilet and not know what to do with it. They'd try and drink out of it. Well, it's understandable. I always used to say that they come from 'Bush 7'. They'd never been anywhere and then they were suddenly here.

HERR B: But there was never any trouble. They even wanted to keep them on at the slaughterhouse.

FRAU B: No, there was never any trouble. They'd have liked to keep a lot of them on because they were such good workers. But they had to go back after five years. They weren't allowed to mix, they had to stay with their own kind. And I don't think they really wanted to mix, they wanted to go home. Nowadays it would be different, but back then they were happy to go home, even if they were doing well here. Nowadays it would be different, they'd look for a German woman to marry so they could stay. But back then, they had to go back after five years and they all knew that, they knew there was no getting out of it. I couldn't change it and neither could anyone else, we had no say in it. We were just little cogs in a big machine.

*Frau P. (p. 118)*

We moved into this flat when it had just been built, in September 1987—nearly thirty years ago now. But there aren't many of the original tenants left; young people are moving in to replace them. That's the way of the world. We've got 140 flats here, so naturally you don't have much contact with your neighbours. You might bump into each other in the lift and that's it. Otherwise, we still know the old-timers here, we look out for each other, we help each other out.

In the old days there were what we called 'house books'. You knew who lived on each floor. But that changed after the *Wende*. There's no record of who lives here anymore. The books had the details of all the tenants and their families, how many children they had, and so on. You knew exactly who lived in each flat. One person on each floor kept the book up to date, but everyone was allowed to see it. Whoever looked after the book would keep an eye on things to make sure the details were still correct. They would ask, 'Do your children still live with you, or have they moved out?' Today it's different. If there was a fire somewhere and they found a body, no one would have any idea who it was. Back then, things were properly taken care of. I thought it was a good idea. These days, new tenants don't introduce themselves when they move in.

When I was younger, I used to live in one of those old tenements, but otherwise I've always lived on these 'nasty' high rise estates. People say these tower blocks are nasty, but I'm very happy with them. They got a bad reputation because in the Federal Republic—I mean the old Federal Republic, West Germany, I should say—they built estates for the Turks and the Greeks that came to work there after the war, and those were as shoddy as anything. I heard that from my nephew, he saw it in his daughter's flat in Buxtehude. He says the corners aren't squared off properly and the windows leak. Those tower blocks are bad, and so people assume it's the same here. But these blocks are better.

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Otherwise, the GDR is over and done with. When I see people here still getting all het up about it, yelling '*Rotfront*'<sup>3</sup> and what have you, I find it unnatural. All right, so there wasn't much choice when it came to fruit and vegetables. Apples and red cabbage, that was it. But there were lots of things we didn't miss. We had a good life. And people were – well, these days they're even fatter, but we weren't lacking in fat people either. So we had a good life. It was cheap, so nobody really worried about money; people cut a lot of corners. My mother always said, 'What goes up must come down,' and that describes the GDR in a nutshell. When you think of the low rents – how could anyone afford to renovate the housing if no rent was coming in? They couldn't. Even when the new private owners came in later, they couldn't do anything with the houses because people were still paying pre-war rents. And it just wasn't sustainable – that was how the state destroyed itself. Like the way food was subsidized. It was cheaper to buy bread than wheat, and so people bought bread and fed it to their rabbits and pigs. Everyone knew what was going on, but it was a problem, no state could carry on in that way. And a lot of people tried to stop it. But they were obsessed with this idea, 'We're creating a Socialist state,' even though it wasn't really a Socialist state. The people with sense, the ordinary people, could see it wasn't working. No state can afford that kind of economy. Lots of things were far too subsidized. They wanted to keep the people quiet and happy. And some people didn't pay their rent – even in newbuilds – but they still weren't evicted. The class enemy might have said, 'Look at the East Germans, they throw people out of their homes.' And so people just brushed it under the carpet and lived with the consequences.

One thing you have to say for the Stasi. They might have written everything down by hand, but they knew everything. Not like German intelligence today with its amazing technology where no one actually knows what's going on. It's only six months after an attack that they find out how many passports the terrorist had. The Stasi knew everything. I mean, there was a lot of nonsense going on. But

<sup>3</sup> This word, in combination with a raised fist, was the greeting used by members of the Roter Frontkämpferbund (RFB), a paramilitary organization founded in 1924 and affiliated with the Communist Party of Germany during the Weimar Republic.

they had eyes everywhere. And today you have that huge intelligence headquarters, which still isn't finished, and the building site gets flooded despite all the security. It beggars belief. Things like that weren't allowed to happen. Or you have someone who might get up to no good, but you can't deport him because he has no papers. Why doesn't he have any papers? They should have followed the American example from back when all the German emigrants turned up there. Everyone had to have a passport, people were put in quarantine, and sick people were put on the next boat back. Things were done properly. People with no papers weren't allowed in. All these unaccompanied children—what kind of parents send their children off into the unknown? It's all planned in advance. They save up enough money for one child to go, and then once he's here, his parents, and, I don't know, his six brothers and sisters, they're on the next plane, because the first one can't be here without his parents. I say sometimes, the Green party and all these other charities, they're mad. The way they think, it's not normal.

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And then there are lots of Russians, Polish people, German Russians. You get one old granny arriving, then suddenly thirty people come to join her who perhaps have nothing to do with her. When they started letting the German Russians in, they didn't really check properly if they had any German relatives. Some of them maybe only had a German shepherd, is what we always say. Well, never mind, I'd better shut up now.

*Herr D. (p. 22)*

Socially speaking, in this kind of area, in this kind of house, it used to be a mix. Today things are different. Having a mix is to some extent about income, after all. Income and property. And the guiding principle in a capitalist society is property. That's the main thing. But for one class of people, it's about survival, and for another, it's about getting richer or having a nice lifestyle. That's just a fact. But in the GDR, income was pretty much the same across the board. So when you first started out as an architect or an engineer, you earned less than a builder on a building site. Because a builder works hard, from dawn till dusk, and so on and so forth. As a research assistant at engineering college I only earned 550 East German marks—and you have to remember that I got a First in my studies, otherwise they would never have employed me as an assistant at another college. My salary went up a step each year. I was there for five years, which is the time you were given to do your Ph.D., and eventually I was getting 650 marks. And even when I got a big pay rise after I finished my Ph.D. in 1968, it was only 750 marks. So it really wasn't that much considering a builder on a construction site got 1,000 marks or more a month. So it wasn't great. But even so, we didn't really worry about it. I was stupid enough to get married in my second year at university. It's probably more accurate to say that someone married me. I'm not proud of it. I was brought up in a very traditional way, and I thought that if you slept with a woman, you had to marry her. I was 22. We were on the tram, and suddenly, she says, 'Don't you want to marry me?' It was a girl I knew from university. But in those days, in the GDR, you got married young. Food was cheap, rents were cheap, so why not have a family as soon as you can? That's how it was.

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There was absolutely no differentiation in terms of class. There were no classes as such. There was competition—people competed at work, within their particular department—but not socially. You weren't trying to prove that you were better than anyone else. You had friends who were workers, too, because you worked closely together. It really

was a balanced society, an equal society. Sometimes too equal, because, as I said, your pay had nothing to do with your performance. That also meant there was no incentive to do better – though there was a moral incentive, in that people wanted to achieve more. So that’s how things were, but today it’s different. Today society is becoming more unequal, like in America. You can see that here if you look at how for the last twenty years people have had to rely on benefits in the suburbs – in Spandau for example or even here on the outer edges of Lichtenberg . . . There was a big article last year in the *Berliner Zeitung* about a study that showed how in the last few years, the proportion of people who can only survive with support from the state has gone up to nearly 25 per cent here in Hohenschönhausen. That means certain sections of our population are being excluded from society. That’s wrong. And you can see it happening here. It’s not as if it isn’t a political issue, that there’s a huge problem with poverty. Including here, lately. And poor people get channelled towards areas where living conditions aren’t so good and where rents are cheap precisely because the conditions aren’t good. Things have changed here because the original tenants were all on the same level in terms of wealth, but those people are literally dying out now. It’s been twenty-seven years since the *Wende*, and even back then, some of the residents here were older people. There are only a few left like me, or there are a few other families still here too, but they’re all over 70. And when flats become available, they’re given to younger people, families, who can’t afford to rent anywhere else.

I’d have liked to stay in the city centre, I have to say. Though I’ve always liked this area too. The Linden-Center is a really nice, big shopping centre, with all the big high-street shops, boutiques, department stores, a supermarket – they’re all in the Linden-Center now. And then we have Lidl here too and another little shopping centre down the road. So food-wise we are fully self-sufficient.

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The one problem here is the lack of social contact. Sometimes I try to get to know people, say hello and so on. But you don’t always get a reply.

*Frau W. (p. 12)*

I'm a German teacher. Berlin was looking for teachers, Berlin needed teachers. But I didn't choose what school to work in, I was assigned to one. It was in Berlin Mitte, the Heine School—it's still called that—next to the Wall. I mean right next to it; the border check-point was on Heinrich-Heine-Straße. When I first went there in 1972, there were border guards standing at the door to our gym. Whenever I looked out of the classroom window—all the windows faced west—we could see the guards patrolling up and down with their dogs, until they built the inner wall later on.

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The children who went to school there were mainly from the residential area around Sebastianstraße. They'd never known any different, they'd grown up with the Wall. Most of the people who lived there were part of the state machinery. Not necessarily part of the State Security, though we wouldn't have known if they were. You were never told exactly where people worked. The school generally just had the parents down as 'employees'. That was the usual way of describing it.

Overall, you can't compare how children were brought up, how they were taught, or even how they spent their free time, with how things are today. People brought up their children properly.

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I was made headteacher at the 15th EOS<sup>4</sup> in Fürstenberg. That meant people thought I was a good teacher, that I was good at my job.

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I was a class teacher for ten years. Then from 1979 to 1985, so for six years, I was the head of school inspections. Then I was on the school board. And then the *Wende* put an end to everything.

<sup>4</sup> *Erweiterte Oberschule*—East German secondary school where students could eventually take the exams that would permit them to enter higher education.

They said I couldn't work in the public sector any more. I was dismissed. Just like that, no beating around the bush. It was one of the terms of the unification treaty. There were certain senior cadres, they were dismissed, just like that. Their deputies were generally kept on if they weren't directly linked to the Stasi, just so the wheels could keep turning. For me personally, it was terrible.

Up until the first elections in 1990 I was on the school board. But then I realized that was all over for me. Because the 1990 elections meant you were basically voted out. But East German law was still in force at the time, so they offered me a job at a school. Of course I knew how the schools in Hohenschönhausen were staffed. That was my job. So during the interview, I said, 'I'll go to the school, but I'm not going to take another German teacher's job.' I wouldn't have made another teacher redundant just so I could get in. It was against my morals. And at that point, they needed people to supervise the after-school club. So I said, 'I've never done it before, but I'm a qualified teacher, so put me in the after-school club.' That worked out until 3 October. They gave me another employment contract straightaway – well, an amended contract, of course. That was always considered important in Germany – I only left the school board because I'd been voted off. So I had a contract with the education ministry to work in an after-school club. Then came unification day on 3 October, and on 5 October I was summoned and dismissed on the spot – put on gardening leave. I could see perfectly well what was coming. I wasn't a fool. But when people call you in and dismiss you just like that, when people you used to respect turn around and stab you in the back – that did upset me, but it didn't take away my pride.

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On a personal level, I wasn't a failure at my job. I set up twenty-five schools in Hohenschönhausen alone – all the preschools, I was responsible for both schools and preschools. The schools were built from scratch and then everything had to be put in place so they could actually work, from the caretaker to the teachers, then the teachers needed somewhere to live and so on . . . They also needed the right teachers, they needed maths and German teachers. So I wasn't a failure.

The district school board was elected too – this was my constituency. People knew who I was, whether I wanted them to or not. There were no remarks, not to my face and not behind my back. People went on saying hello to me when they met me here in the building. That's how it was. On 3 October they put me on leave and then – this was a concession, I had a right to it under German law – they suspended me for six months and then dismissed me without notice. I was 48. And then, like everyone else, I went to court and tried to sue them. The first court decided in my favour. The magistrate said they can't do that. Then of course the employer, the district council, appealed and I had to go to the regional court. And the regional court allowed the appeal and said the dismissal was lawful. They were kind enough to tell me I was an intelligent person, I should have been able to see through the system and the state and there was no need for me to go and work for it. Well, I read what they had to say and then I never looked at it again. That was that.

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Then I went back to school for three years until I qualified as a geriatric carer. There were a lot of Osis in my class. Mostly women, as you would expect, including middle-aged women from all sorts of backgrounds. There were legal advisers, there were archaeologists, lots of women with university degrees. That was great for the school, because of course all these women were highly motivated. Most of them had men at home who'd lost their jobs or who were about to lose their jobs. And they all knew how to read and write. And because of that, if there was any competition in terms of East and West, it was more when the exam results came out. People would take a peek to see who'd done better, the Osis or the Wessis, but that was all.

*Herr and Frau B. (p. 73)*

HERR B.: This is a passion flower, isn't it magnificent? It smells wonderful. It's got buds all over it. It's a fascinating plant. They don't grow wild here, only indoors. But they grow on our balcony because it's glazed. Same goes for this bird of paradise flower. When we lived in Wernigerode, before we came to Berlin, we had our own garden.

I was with the *Kriminalpolizei*<sup>5</sup> in Wernigerode, but I'm actually a Berliner. I was born here, in Charlottenburg, in 1941. I come from an old Berlin family. My grandfather had a job at the Castle under the Kaiser. He was First Trumpeter. Whenever the Kaiser rode out, the way they used to back then, the bloke out front playing the fanfare was my grandfather. We had to leave Berlin because of the war. My mother fled and took me with her, but my father stayed. He was exempted from military service by the Führer as he was needed at Siemens.

Then I joined the police as an apprentice. Though before that, I was with the border troops and I became a proper soldier. But that wasn't here. It was in the Harz Mountains. We called it the green border. It was much better there. You could go off and pick mushrooms while you were at work. You couldn't do that here.

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FRAU B.: I started off working at the Intershop<sup>6</sup> in Wernigerode, and later on, when we moved to Berlin, I was transferred to the Friedrichstraße branch. I wasn't in the Stasi though. You didn't have to be in the Stasi to work there, you could get a job there without that.

But it was difficult for us. Me working at Intershop and him with the police, that didn't add up somehow. They didn't like it. My husband did his twenty-five years with the police, like he'd signed up for, and then we said, 'That's it, we've had enough,' and so we moved to Berlin. No one bothered us here. I worked in the shop on Friedrichstraße, as I said, and he looked around for another job.

<sup>5</sup> Investigative police force, similar to the British C.I.D.

<sup>6</sup> Retail chain operated by the GDR which also sold goods imported from the West; it did not accept GDR currency, but accepted numerous other currencies that could be converted into East German marks.

Hardly anyone said anything to our faces, but you knew what they were thinking. Let's be clear about one thing though: we were paid in our own currency, not with Western money.

HERR B.: Except tips.

FRAU B.: Tips, yes. All the tips went into one big pot and then we divided them up at the end. And of course then you save up a bit of money and other people see what you've been buying—'Aha, so she's got those glasses,' or what have you. You could see where it had all come from, let's not beat about the bush. We were dealing with other currencies, but we accepted them all. You have to remember that. Otherwise, I would say, it was a shop like any other.

The Intershop branch I worked at was in the West. We had to go through the checkpoint. We had direct contact with West Germans. They came to us to do their shopping.

HERR B.: You might say that the train station at Friedrichstraße was cut in half.

FRAU B.: When you went in to work, you had to show your ID. Every single day. The same when you came out. You were always being checked, always. As for the work itself, it was just like working in a normal shop.

HERR B.: But they kept an eye on us anyway. They had to because of my work, in the service. They only let people do that job when they were 100 per cent sure they would stay in this part of Germany.

FRAU B.: It was the same for me. That's why they only ever took on married people to work there. Although some of them made a break for it anyway, married or not. You could just pick up the till and off you went.

HERR B.: They'd put all the cash in their pockets, all the West German money, and off they'd go. No one could stop them.

FRAU B.: You didn't see it as a special privilege. I didn't, anyway; I didn't kid myself. I had to work hard like everyone else. Nothing was handed to me on a plate. Okay, the pay was a bit better, but it was really the tips that made the difference.

From our point of view, there was no need for the Wall to come down, not at all. We've gained nothing from it, not a bean. The only

thing I've liked about it is getting my car more quickly. My God, how long did it take us to get our car?

HERR B.: How long? Fifteen, sixteen years we had to wait. After twenty-five years I simply stopped working. After twenty-five years you had a right to a pension. The time with the border guards counted towards the pension. And then we'd been married twenty-five years as well. She had to cope with everything on her own, I was always on duty. Wherever we were, whether it was on the border or . . . When did I use to come home? Once every two weeks. We had to spend the nights in barracks, it was the rule. You couldn't just go home and then later find out someone tried to escape to West Germany or something. You had to be there. You might say she spent twenty-five years more or less on her own.

FRAU B.: I always had to take care of everything. Work, if one of the children got ill, everything.

HERR B.: Because we were always on duty. You were on duty sometimes twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It was tougher than it is today. Absolute meticulousness was required. I'd never known anything different, I grew up with it, with the parade-ground uniform. The tie and everything, it all had to be perfect. It was the same in the GDR, there was the Guards' Battalion and so on stationed at the war memorial. And when I look at the German army today or the police, who you can see aren't as spick and span with their uniforms, I say to myself: what a shambles. Order is important, order and discipline. The two things belong together. You can't separate them. We were drilled constantly to make sure everything was correct. Nowadays things are just fudged together, people cut corners wherever they can.

FRAU B.: Nothing is done properly. People just let things slide.

HERR B.: Certain people just think it's got nothing to do with them, it's not their responsibility. But oh well. I'm a pensioner now, we're happy with our pension, and that's that. Why should we get ourselves all worked up at our time of life?

FRAU B.: If it was up to me, the border could have stayed where it was. Just stayed there. And I can tell you straight out, we weren't the

ones out on the streets complaining. You hear people today, moaning and groaning, saying they're out of money, out of work . . .

HERR B.: Unemployed, on benefits . . .

FRAU B.: We always say, well it's your own fault. We didn't ask for it to happen.

HERR B.: Back then, if you look at what a worker really had in his pocket, it was more than it is today. Of course, now people say, 'If I go to work I want a decent wage for it.' But what do they mean by a decent wage? If they earn 1,000, 1,500 or even 2,000 euros but then end up with . . . well, if you stop and think about taxes and what have you . . .

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FRAU B.: Perhaps the GDR couldn't have gone on as it was. But we sold ourselves short. We were good at manufacturing, but we gave it all away to the West. I saw in the shop what we could make. We had tights, we had Meissen porcelain, we had all sorts of things, meat . . .

When I think about what happened up in Schwerin. They had a new carpet factory, brand new, and then it was gone. Just like that.

HERR B.: They shut it down straight away. To get rid of the competition.

FRAU B.: All our lovely big companies, all shut down. That didn't work out well. They picked us apart, took over our lives, or to be more accurate, they trampled all over us.

HERR B.: You can't just forget something like that.

FRAU B.: You can't get it out of your system. It just stays sitting inside you. But the most upsetting thing is *how* they did it. They loved it, they were having a ball.

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HERR B.: I knew the lay of this area from before it was a building site, there was nothing here back then. By then I'd been posted to Berlin for a while, because I was posted more or less everywhere at some point. And when there was anything big coming up—nowadays it would

be something like the G8 meeting they had in Hamburg, but just look at how that went. We handled that sort of thing differently in our state. Things would never have been allowed to get to that point. All the criminal elements, we would have locked them all up in advance. That's how we did it back then. It kept things quiet.

FRAU B.: Let's be clear, the sort of thing you see going on nowadays, that would never have happened in our state.

HERR B.: The way things are, it's not normal. For us it's not normal.

FRAU B.: Riots, we never had riots.

HERR B.: Back then we also had the big youth meetings and all sorts of things in Berlin, but even so, that kind of shameful behaviour was out of the question for us. But that hostile elements were active in our state at that time—that was completely normal. And the fact that in those days there were others who got involved in order to cause a disturbance at political events or what have you—that was normal as well. Because when German unification was going on, hundreds of buses came here with people from West Berlin or West Germany. None of us were out protesting on the streets, so they must have all been Wessis. They all got given fake IDs and the police didn't have a chance, they were all out on the streets so fast.

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FRAU B.: Intershop wasn't closed down until 1990.

HERR B.: They kept it until reunification. Then it wasn't needed any more.

FRAU B.: Everything fell apart after that. My whole team was scattered to the four winds. Like birds. Up to that point we all stuck together, we went through everything together. It was hard to figure out what was true afterwards. Who can you believe after all that? Then living through unification in the way we lived through it—first there's all the excitement, and then . . .

When it happened, I started working for Wertheim straight away, the big department store in the West. It was easy for me because I understood the money.

HERR B.: How many applicants did they get? About seventy. And she was the only one they took on. She understood the sales procedures, the tills, the currency, everything.

FRAU B.: That was a real advantage. And there I stayed, right to the end.

HERR B.: And when she went there to apply for the job, she got up early and left the house at four o'clock in the morning to travel over to West Berlin. The Ossis back then would never have done that. They said to her, 'You must be mad, getting up at four and then travelling all that way.' You got that even from people living on our floor. Some of them just went on and on about how hard everything was. Perhaps they were hoping their new boss would send round a limousine with a chauffeur to pick them up and drive them to work every morning. No, you have to get on with it if you want to get anywhere. And she did, every day.

FRAU B.: But no matter what you did you were always an Ossi. They could treat you like dirt. Let's be clear. The attitude was, 'We're the Wessis, you come to us, you do the dirty work down there, we'll stay up here and keep our hands clean.' And I'll bet you anything that hasn't changed in a lot of places today. That attitude sticks. I had colleagues from our own side who started at the same time as me, that was okay. But you never really got on with the Wessis. You were always seen differently.

HERR B.: So now they're free, they can finally take a holiday wherever they like. So I'll ask the man on benefits if he's likely to be off to Florida this year or maybe to Canada. No, he's not. Of course not. It's all rubbish. People talk utter rubbish. And everything is *multikulti* nowadays, as we say in Germany. I've nothing against other people. As long as everyone does their job, it's all normal.

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FRAU B.: And now the Hottentots are moving in. All us older people who live here, that's what we say, we all see it the same way. In the past things were better. You knew everyone, you chatted to people, you got to know them. You still get that with the older people who

live here. But the new ones, you haven't a clue what they are, you don't know them anymore.

HERR B.: We go into our apartment and shut the door. We aren't interested in what's going on outside our own four walls anymore.

We get on with everyone all right, with all of them, and that's all you need really.

FRAU B.: We respect everyone, and they respect us, at least we think so. But we don't really want anyone creeping about in our home.

HERR B.: What's that saying again? We're happy to see our friends arrive, but we're even happier when they leave.

SONYA SCHÖNBERGER is an artist who draws on anthropological approaches in her work. She is particularly interested in historical subjects, in conjunction with individual memories that are marked by ruptures. Many of her projects have developed from archives that Sonya has either found or created herself, such as an archive of interviews conducted over the last decade with eyewitnesses of the Second World War. She is currently working with the Stadtmuseum Berlin to produce a 100-year video archive in which Berliners talk about their connections with the city in their own words. Sonya works in diverse media, including photography, theatre, film, installation, and audio. See [[www.sonyaschoenberger.de](http://www.sonyaschoenberger.de)] and [[www.berliner-zimmer.net](http://www.berliner-zimmer.net)].