

'Ossis' and 'Wessis': Eastern and Western Germans 12 years after unification

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Graphic designer Ralf Henning: In mid-studies off to East Berlin

Brunswick, summer 1990. Graphic design student Ralf Henning has passed his first-part finals. From now on he has to work only on projects and doesn't have to attend university fulltime. He's long thought of moving to Cologne, on the Rhine. But then the Berlin Wall falls and his choice of his next location is clear. It's Berlin.

It is the time when life in East Berlin, in the Mitte (Central) district, is pulsating. Young artists from



Ralf Henning, 37, Berlin

around the world live in the quarter. Its focal point is the Tacheles, a decayed former great Berlin department store built at the turn of the 19th-20th century, in which artists have squatted and opened studios. Almost from one day to the next, art galleries and 'scene' pubs and bars emerge, and nightlife flourishes.

Ralf lives here and there until he and his girlfriend and friends squat in an empty house in the district. As was usual in the GDR, the flat-sharing community thrown together from East and West tried to legalise their squatting by rental agreements.

"I wanted to go to East Berlin especially," Ralf says now, "because the atmosphere at that time was so interesting. And I was curious to see to what extent the mentality of the East Berlin's was actually different from ours. I could never fully understand the distance between East and West Germans. I mean, we speak the same language and come from the same culture." Relating his initial experiences, he says: "I had the impression that the East Germans of my generation were not yet able to handle their new freedom." He was also astounded to find that his girlfriend in East Berlin wanted to know his opinion about a boring mail order catalogue.

During the next few months he noted how a "mix of a drive for

consumption and curiosity" changed first of all the street scene and then also the mood of the people. "At first, the cars in the streets were mostly Trabis" (the small, noisy and smelly East German two-stroke Trabant model with a plastic body). Then suddenly came Mercedes and BMWs, bought secondhand, with spoilers around them. I remember the panels because many of them were torn off when the drivers drove off high kerbs. I can still hear that sound of tearing metal."

Ralf's first experience of East-West monetary union, when the hard D-mark replaced the East German "Ostmark," was on his way home from an auction of GDR 'devotional articles' in a 'scene' cinema. Long queues formed outside the savings banks, and windows of the Deutsche Bank on Alexanderplatz were broken by the crush of people impatient to change their money. "The East Berlin shop windows filled up overnight," he said. "Covers were removed to reveal western goods. It was like a stage presentation. It was the same picture everywhere." Then came the reality of everyday life. The mad bout of consumption was followed by "financial disaster, the fear for one's job, and among the older people the fear for their pensions."

Twelve years after German unification, Ralf sees hardly any differences between East and West in Berlin's daily life. "Despite that, one can't say that life in Berlin has normalised. Berlin is still a building site. And whether in the West or east, Berlin was never a quite normal city."

Scriptwriter Wolf Vogel: An 'Ossi' swims back

Wolfen, spring 1995. Scriptwriter Wolf Vogel is loading his car with 10,000 metres of ORWO film. He's bought it from the old-established East German film material producer in Saxony-Anhalt for half-price with the argument: "Think about it, it could be your last film." The reply: "All right, open the boot." Wolf takes the film to Berlin. After getting his tenth rejection of a screenplay that's been in his head since the political change in the GDR, he's absolutely determined to produce the film himself. The plot: An 'Ossi' who once escaped to West Berlin by swimming the city's River Spree and is making his living in the advertising industry finally swims back across the river to East Berlin. But his effort is all for nothing. The people there are at that very moment celebrating the opening of the Berlin Wall.

Wolf also had bad luck. For the comedy of his script 'Sunny Point' or 'Whoever wants to, can go' meant

something only to those who were familiar with the situation in East and West. And there were very few of those around in the first years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and unification in 1990. At any rate, there was no such person on the boards of the western German film promotion bodies to which Wolf turned. The critical-ironic view of an 'Ossi' on his identity and his life in East and West was simply not understood. During those years western Germany was focused on transferring its structures to the East. And the East was busy in adopting them. The time did not appear to be ripe for digesting the events connected with the big change.

Nevertheless, Wolf pressed on. As co-producer he secured Konrad Wolf, of the Television and Film College in Potsdam-Babelsberg. It was a rewarding task for the graduates. Wolf also spoke to actors and actresses, including Jenny Schily, the daughter of the Federal Interior Minister. "I told them I couldn't pay



Wolf Vogel, 48, Berlin

them, but they all came," he said.

The film was shot in 20 days. With a 120-minute rough cut he received an invitation to the opening celebrations of the cultural capital of Luxembourg. "Sunny Point" was chosen from among more than 100 films. The selection panel praised its direct, genuine and understandable view of the events. The film reviewers saw it differently. The West found the criticism of the West as impertinent. They reacted angrily.

Wolf Vogel laughs. He's a man with a great sense of humour. And the now 48-year-old, who was born in a one-horse town in Thuringia, has also always needed it.

In GDR days his way to filmmaking was blocked. So he studied law in Leipzig. After making 155 applications within 19 weeks for a permit to leave East Germany he was finally released to go to West

Berlin in 1975. His argument was skilful. He didn't say: "I want to go to the West." He told the authorities that he ran the risk of committing a criminal offence in the GDR if he said what he thought, that that had to be prevented, therefore he should be allowed to go.

His film 'Sunny Point', of course, contains autobiographical, personal experiences. They include that people who prefer to think in very differentiated terms are regarded as somewhat awkward, in both the East and the West.

"In the historical plan view, everything which at first appears to be great is seen to be a farce," Wolf muses 12 years after German unification. His 'plan view,' captured on what was then thought to be the last ORWO film (the famous ORWO product range is back on the market, made by FilmoTech, in Wolfen) is now in a film library.

Catering adviser Kai Körting, sailing instructor Hans Petrowski: "It will take two more generations"

Warnemünde, spring 2002: Two holidaymakers from Bavaria enter the traditional pub on the Alten Strom (Old River) of the Baltic sea-side resort near Rostock. They tell the barman: "Now we'll spend our 'welcoming money' on drink." This is an allusion to the 100 D-marks that every East German once received on their first visit to the West after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The publican and the other customers don't find that at all funny. A short while later the two visitors are back on the street.

Even 12 years after German unification, incidents of this kind are not rare in eastern holiday resorts. A certain naivety often goes with the lack of tact. Like the visitor in another pub on Warnemünde's waterfront who turned to his companion and said: "Look, we helped to finance all that." The publican retorted: "Sure, and when we're back on top again we'll have another go at socialism. Without the collapse of the GDR we could never have got hold of all those billions."

Warnemünde was already a special place back in GDR days. Located only a few miles North of Rostock city harbour, East Germany's 'door to the world,' the former fishing town always had an international flair. The crews and passengers of incoming ships, regatta yachtsmen and holidaymakers enjoyed themselves in its many waterfront pubs and restaurants. Many local people also went to sea and knew the ports of the world. But still only a few people in western Germany know that, just as in the West as a whole they still know



Hans Petrowski, 52, Warnemünde very little about the East.

"Growing together" is out of the question, believes Hans Petrowski as well. "The thinking patterns of 'trained Ossi' and those of the 'Wessis' are totally different, notes the Warnemünde-born sailing instructor. He's spent more than 20 years training youngsters in serious sailing. He says that among other things the different socialisation of "Ossi" and "Wessis" is one of the reasons why people in the East approach others in a much more unreserved and open way. Entirely without thinking whether the contact can do something for them such as financially or with regard to useful connections. "Friendships here are cultivated in a very different way," he says. "The family is important."

He often finds people from the West to be shallow. "In the West it's money that counts, in the East it's character," he sums up. But he also finds 'Wessis' definitely capable of learning. He had just spent more than a week familiarising two Rhinelanders with their new boat. "At first, I was the 'doer' whose work they paid for. After one week I was the friend who, they knew, meant what he said. That's a development that I experience time and again."

"Ossi, Wessis -- I always thought that was rubbish," says Kai Körting, also of Warnemünde. "We're all German." He's a former professional soccer player with the Hansa Rostock club whose career in the GDR ended abruptly when his sister applied for a permit to leave East Germany. As an adviser to a western German Wholesale beverages firm which has opened a branch in the East, he services about 80 per cent of the catering businesses in Warnemünde. Most of them are still in local hands, even though the holiday resort after unification was also of great interest to investors in the West. "Ninety per cent of the people from the West failed. Western German breweries, also, overesti-

mated their prospects here," he said. "To be successful here you have to be able to handle the people, you must know how they think and what their needs are."

Kai Körting said that back in GDR days he often thought about fleeing to the West. After taking up an invita-

tion to the West his wife stayed there. Their plan for him to follow her with their small son via the family reunion system went wrong. The couple's separation was soon final. When the Berlin Wall fell he remained in his hometown. "I told myself to wait for a while. Here you

have more opportunities, and the family is here. You can always go at any time. "Now, the thought of saying goodbye to the coast for ever is history."

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