

SIEGBERT SCHEFKE

WHEN FEAR CHANGED SIDES: THE POWER OF FORBIDDEN IMAGES (EXCERPT)

Translated by Luise von Flotow

I WAS BORN IN THE WINTER OF 1959 in the small town of Eberswalde, Brandenburg in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). One year later most of my relatives “went over” to West Germany, heading for the Ruhr area in order to earn money but mainly to have a better life. My father was the only one of four siblings who stayed. His parents, my grandparents, left too. I never knew my father’s father, and my father never saw him again, as we were stuck in the GDR. My mother couldn’t decide. Her family wanted to stay, and my father probably loved my mother more than the supposedly better life in the west. Their marriage lasted until he died, but the decision to stay in the GDR pained him his entire life. How must my parents have felt when the Berlin Wall went up, walling them in and preventing them from ever seeing their siblings or parents? Only sixteen years earlier, at the age of nine, my mother had fled her home in Pomerania, now Poland, in the last days of the war. My father had fled Danzig, now Gdańsk. A decision had come down that his street would be evacuated, but a few streets beyond everybody had to stay put. Many aunts and cousins later became Poles, and now the Wall was dividing our family again. I felt that already as a child through the division between eastern and western aunties and eastern and western grannies.

My eastern granny was Oma Emma, and I saw her every two weeks. It was exciting to travel the few kilometres from Eberswalde to Strehlow in the Uckermark in our Trabant 601 to visit her. I particularly looked forward to the holidays and finding the secret spots in her kitchen cupboard where she hid sticky candies. My cousin Anita and two other cousins, Hartmut and Hubert, also lived in the village. And there were cows, chickens, and other

animals. I especially remember the two white horses that would be hitched to a large sled with our small sled tied on behind. Fun! And I remember getting up early on autumn holidays and waiting at the village pond for the tractor to show up with a trailer behind. We'd head out to the fields, harvest potatoes, and pick corn or tomatoes. . . .

My parents were only a little proud when I finally completed my university diploma and received an engineering degree. After some back and forth, I took a job as a site manager for a state-run construction company, the VEB Wohnungskombinat (Housing Construction Combine), in Berlin. I got an apartment in Prenzlauer Berg and had fulfilled my goals. I quickly got to know a lot of young people who worked as caregivers in old-age homes, gardeners, gravediggers, and even telegram messengers. As a construction site manager, I was a little exotic in these circles. Nobody worked more than four hours a day, as there had to be time to think about politics and art. In the summer of 1985 I got to know Jo. He owned a small farmstead in Stuer, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, and he wanted to reroof his barn. He needed a lot of help and invited us up for a weekend. Rüdiger Rosenthal was one of the participants. And I stood next to Carlo Jordan as we handed the heavy tiles up to the roof. He was quite a relaxed *bon vivant*, a little older than me, with always an ironic grin on his face. He was also a construction engineer, but not working.

We met up back in Berlin two days later, and Carlo took me to meet his people. I joined their peace and environment group in Berlin-Friedrichsfelde, and we held regular meetings and tried out a few little actions. For instance, all the chestnut trees on Kastanienallee (Chestnut Avenue) had died off. We totted up the "dead" trees and reported our findings at the official office. No reaction ever came. Or a larger group would ride their bikes through the city to draw attention to the pollution being caused by the Trabant and Wartburgs. But these activities didn't really make me happy. . . .

On September 2, 1986, nine friends and I co-founded the Umwelt-Bibliothek (Environmental Library) in two basement rooms of the community hall of the Zionskirche (Church of Zion) on Griebenowstrasse in Berlin-Mitte. Unfortunately, I couldn't be there that day, which Carlo still teases me about. Father Simon, a bearded, pipe-smoking clergyman, allowed us to use the rooms. His motto was: "The church cannot just exist for its own sake; its activities need to have a social impact."

We ignored the mould on the walls and were happy to have found a

place to be. A short time later we developed into a serious centre of opposition. Our most urgent goal was to collect information, pass it on, and educate, which included acquiring books, a daily copy of *Die Tageszeitung* (The Daily Paper, a left-wing newspaper from West Berlin commonly known as *taz*), and the weekly German news magazine *Der Spiegel* (The Mirror). We especially wanted to network with the various isolated environmental groups in the country, and we produced a monthly newsletter, the *UB-Blätter* (UB Leaves), which we printed by hand on an old Gestetner. We labelled each copy “internal church information,” which made our publication a legal church newspaper, but we actually focused on catastrophic environmental conditions (such as dying forests, toxic dumpsites, and Chernobyl), the problem of old and new Nazis in the GDR, the division of the country, the citizens who were clamouring to leave, and world peace during the Cold War.

The first print runs came to about 150 copies, and they were distributed by environmental groups throughout the GDR, so they were soon out of print. We weren’t producing enough, as the demand was greater than we could meet with our ancient technology. Over time we acquired better quality paper, Pelikan ink, and Geha-templates from West Berlin, for which we desperately needed hard currency. I didn’t usually care to find out who organized it or from where; my own experiences were enough.

Some time later the UB Gallery opened, which ran evening discussions, readings, exhibitions, and small concerts. Artists who were not allowed to perform anywhere else in the GDR were welcome. The UB often had to close for these events because of overcrowding. It was normally open three days a week and offered readers materials that were not available in the *Volksbuchhandel* (The People’s Bookstore).

A lot of time-intensive organization was required to locate these things that officially did not exist. Since I had worked as a construction site manager, I had extensive experience in such matters. My Trabant Kombi also made me quite indispensable because of its rather large trunk. As far as I can recall, we only had two vehicles between us, the second being Carlo’s Trabant. Of course, we were observed and followed by the Stasi (secret police), who would issue summons and sometimes even arrest us. They called these arrests “interrogations,” and they were clearly designed to intimidate us by showing that there was no shaking up the power monopoly in the peasant state.

People still ask me today, “Weren’t you afraid?” Yes, of course we were afraid. Only a coward wouldn’t admit that. But we had to overcome our fear. It was a daily task—a process each of us handled differently. We were vaguely aware of many of the activities of the secret police, but we pushed all that aside. I didn’t know any of the details until 1992, when I first gained access to my police file.

The raid on November 24, 1987 marked a turning point. They wanted to find evidence that we were printing something illegal that night rather than just “internal church information,” and seven of us were arrested. We reacted with vigils and prayer services. Anyone who had been unaware of us up to that point found out who we were, as the West German media reported on the incident, and 95% of the GDR population had access to West German TV. News of the arrests soon spread throughout the country, which was a disaster for the secret police. Father Simon, his congregation, and the church management supported us. Those who were arrested were finally let go. It was a victory for all the peace and environment groups in the GDR.

It was during that period that I got to know Roland Jahn. The Zionskirche had provided a telephone since almost none of us had a private one, which was the norm in the shortage economy of the GDR. I was on telephone duty when Roland called, and we started talking. He became the connection between us and the western media that were so important for us, as he knew people working in West German TV. One was Peter Wensierski, who had been reporting on the environmental sins and the “conformist lifestyle” of the GDR since the early 1980s. He also published the book *Null Bock auf DDR: Aussteigerjugend im anderen Deutschland* (No Interest in the GDR: Young Dropouts in the Other Germany, 1984), and two years later he came out with *Von oben nach unten wächst gar nichts: Umweltzerstörung und Proteste in der DDR* (Nothing Grows from the Top Down: Environmental Destruction and Protests in the GDR, 1986). Of course both books were available in the UB.

Roland and I quickly developed a rare closeness. He had been expatriated by force in 1983. As co-founder of an oppositional peace group in Jena, he had been sentenced to 22 months in prison for “publicly debasing the order of the state” and “disrespect for symbols of the state.” His friend, Mathias Domaschk, had also been arrested, and three days later he was found hanged in his cell. It is still not clear whether it was murder or suicide. The secret police were to blame in any case, as Father Walter Schilling said: “The

fact is that if they hadn't arrested Matthias, he would still be alive today."

Roland spent five months in solitary confinement and was then released. On the night of July 7, 1983, the secret police took him to a train station and locked him in a train compartment, attaching him to the heater with manacles. The train travelled to Bavaria, and the conductor could only release him after it crossed the border.

Now he was living in West Berlin, where he worked as a journalist for radio and regional television. He did not want revenge; he wanted justice. We thought about all kinds of actions and about how things should go on. We quickly developed a secret language that only the two of us were meant to understand. All women were men, and vice versa. We referred to Bärbel Bohley, a well-known oppositional figure, as "the Italian."

We wanted to reach more people. But how? Every now and then *taz* would publish an "East Berlin page" with stories written by and about us. The photos I submitted were signed "Sieglinde Scharf" rather than "Siegbert Schefke." I did not dare appear with my real name, and I thought the pseudonym was funny. But how would a regular GDR citizen ever access a copy of *taz*? That's when radio became an option. Dieter Rulff started the private, alternative radio station Radio 100 on Potsdamer Strasse in March 1987, and he gave Roland, Rüdiger, and other exiled GDR people a one-hour time slot each month: "Radio Glasnost, every last Monday of the month, on UKW 100.6, 9pm." . . .

Since almost the entire GDR could access West German TV, we decided to use video to film important events. I was responsible for recording the videos and getting the material to the West, while Roland and Peter would edit and broadcast the footage. But how could we get our hands on a camera, microphones, a tripod, and videotapes, all of which we had to procure from West Berlin? Walls may serve to keep people apart, but goods can be smuggled, so we had to get to know people—journalists and diplomats—who could bypass the border controls. And they couldn't demand payment; they had to be sympathizers. . . .

And then, very importantly, I met Aram Radomski in the UB. He was a photographer, had a dark room, and made posters for UB events. The secret police had already tried to turn him into an informant when he was fifteen, as they wanted him to report on his father, Gert Neumann, who was an author critical of the GDR, but he refused. In February 1983, when he was twenty years old, Aram was beaten up. He didn't know it then, but the

attackers were members of the secret police. He was then sentenced to thirteen months in prison for a smear campaign against the state, although his sentence was later reduced to six months following an appeal. This was all part of the plan to attack his father. In the prison at Zeithain he met a lot of young people who thought like him and were also political prisoners, and he decided to fight the Communist regime. When I asked if he wanted to join the video project, he said, "That is just my thing."

We shared the same goal, which was to reveal the injustices of the state, change it, and get rid of it. The secret police had a different goal, which was to "break" and destroy us. In the end, they achieved the exact opposite. . . .

The days preceding October 7, 1989, the fortieth anniversary of the GDR, were marked by protests in Berlin. The main response centres were at the Gethsemane Church and on Schönhauser Allee, which was near my place. Water cannons, bulletproof bulldozers, and snowploughs were lined up in the streets. The demonstrators kept shouting, "No violence." The state television announced the exact opposite.

The constant surveillance I was under was having an effect. I was completely unnerved, and I would often leave the video camera at home. In the evening, the secret police would be waiting at the entrance to my building. One of them muttered in the dark, "Herr Schefke, we have other methods, too." I sat upstairs in my apartment, alone and without a telephone, while they stood around below in the courtyard.

That was the situation on October 7 as well. That day some friends were planning to get together in the presbytery in Schwante near Berlin to create the Social Democratic Party in the GDR. Aram and I were supposed to document the event with our video camera, but I couldn't get out of my apartment without meeting the secret police head-on, so he dealt with this tricky assignment on his own. Ibrahim Böhme triggered unease and hecticness, and the twenty people founding the party let that affect them, but we got enough material to prove that a political party could be established in the GDR without official permission.

On October 9, Aram and I wanted to return to Leipzig. As usual, the secret police were standing in my courtyard, staring up at my windows on the fourth floor. I knew they would follow me if I left through the front door, so Aram and I installed a timing device on the table lamp in my apartment. After looking down to make sure that they were still in the courtyard, I climbed through a trap door to the roof and ran along the adjoining build-

ings, following Bornholmer Strasse as far as Schönhauser Allee. Once there, I climbed into another building through a trap door that led to a central staircase. Aram was waiting for me in the street.

At some point we felt we were being followed, so we drove down Oderberger Strasse and left Aram's car there. Then we hurried through a number of courtyards to come out on Kastanienallee. The secret police were running after us, but we lost them by getting on a streetcar heading toward Friedrichshain. We were chuffed and rode out to see Stephan Bickardt, who loaned us his Trabant. (He worked for the church, which provided him with a car.) After fuelling up in Köckern, as usual, we sped down the highway toward Leipzig at 110km/h until suddenly there was a huge line-up ahead of us with maybe thirty vehicles laden with soldiers or police. Aram said, "Siggi, they're not on a joyride to Leipzig. They have a plan." We tried exiting the highway, but there was a traffic jam on the country road to Leipzig as well. Police were even stopping certain cars for inspection. We were scared, but we were in a rather nondescript Trabant, and they let us through.

Once in Leipzig, we had to look for a good place to shoot the video. We knew we didn't want to join the demonstration, as we wanted to film it from above, and the tallest apartment building in the GDR stood about two hundred metres from the central train station in Leipzig with a view of the inner city ring in the direction of the Nikolai Church. It was an ideal spot, and we found a balcony on the tenth floor that offered an excellent view. It was around 2pm, so we still had lots of time until 6pm. We had just settled in when the balcony door opened and a beefy, somewhat older man stood there in blue overalls. We looked at each other in stunned silence.

"What are you guys doing here," he snarled. "I'm the caretaker."
"We're students at the Potsdam-Babelsberg film institute," I stammered.
"We have an assignment to film here." I couldn't think of anything else to say.

The man in blue overalls replied, "Listen, you know that's nonsense. This entire building is full of secret police. They'll be here in a few minutes, and they won't believe a word of your story. It makes no difference what I think, but I strongly suggest you get out of here and find somewhere else to make that film for your institute."

We lost no time and took his advice. Not far from the building, at the corner of Tröndlinring and Goedelerring, was a house with a gable window that offered a good view of the upcoming demonstration. The front door was

not locked, and a door on the third floor bore stickers that read, “Atomic Power: No Thanks,” “Church from Below,” and “Make Peace without Weapons.” That was proof enough that someone who sympathized with our cause lived there. We rang the bell and were let in. We spared ourselves and the family our story about the Potsdam-Babelsberg film institute and told the truth. Our host’s eyes lit up, but our eyes were on the little children. It was clear that the secret police would eventually find our filming location, and then they would come to arrest the father. Aram and I looked at each other and agreed that we could not take this responsibility, so we returned to the street. By then it was half past three. We encountered Uwe Schwabe and two or three other local Leipzig people. One of them was a friend who had already put us up in September. He suggested we try the Reformed Church.

The street was packed with people. Peace vigils were planned for that evening in the Nikolai Church and four other Leipzig churches. One of our Leipzig contacts figured a hundred thousand people would show up. I thought he was exaggerating. Another one said fifty thousand. That, I thought, was too few. We agreed that seventy thousand demonstrators would be in the streets that evening.

Time was flying. We rang at the door of the Reformed Church, and Father Hans-Jürgen Sievers came to the door. We told him what we were planning and then stood there in silence. What if he said no? It took ten seconds. Then he said, “Of course, we can do that.”

The custodian led us up a very narrow, metal ladder and pushed aside a heavy trap door. We’d arrived at the uppermost platform in the church tower. We lay down on the floor, which was not so pleasant since it was covered in pigeon droppings. Down below, the street was still empty and dark. There were no cars, no streetcars, no streetlights, and hardly any people. We could only hear them in the distance. Would there be shooting? The state newspapers had advised citizens to stay home.

We waited. We could hear chanting. And then they came. An indescribably huge crowd was approaching. Within a few minutes, they were directly below us. We could feel the tension and excitement. We only had a small viewfinder, and we later heard our voices whispering on tape, “Can you actually see anything?” We just let the camera run while Aram took photographs, and we listened to the chanting below us: “We are the people,” “Allow the New Forum,” “Gorbi, Gorbi,” and “So comrades, come rally. And the last fight let us face. The Internationale unites the human race!”

Five hundred metres beyond our church steeple the demonstrators' route led past the Runde Ecke. That was the critical point—the centre of the secret police in Leipzig. If no shots came from there, then everyone would know it was peaceful. Across the way, snipers positioned on high-rise rooftops were watching the action in the street. I figured that if we could see them, then they could see us too, and they would be sure to intercept us at the church entrance later on. But for the moment, we took a few deep breaths, happy that no shots had been fired. Later, Father Sievers and his wife provided sandwiches. Before we left, their sixteen-year-old son checked outside to see if the coast was clear. It was, and we said goodbye.

We had arranged to meet with Ulli Schwarz, a *Spiegel* correspondent who was not legally present in Leipzig, as any western journalist travelling outside East Berlin was supposed to have special permission from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and in the fall of 1989 no permits were available for travel to Leipzig. Ulli had driven his Mercedes to Berlin-Schönefeld and taken a train from there to Leipzig. He was probably the only western journalist in the city that day. He is still perplexed today at his colleagues and the cowardice they displayed. When we met in the revolving door of one of the big hotels, I handed him our videotape with about twenty minutes of footage, and it disappeared into his coat. Then we sat down in the lobby and talked about how best to proceed. He had to get back to Berlin-Schönefeld, but there were no more trains to Berlin that night, so we decided to take him in our car. Just before we reached Köckern, the Trabant began to stutter. It wouldn't go more than 50km/h. One of the attendants at the service station said, "Hey, guys, your Trabi is running on only one cylinder. Just keep going and take care." Two hours later, Ulli left Schönefeld for the west, and I chugged up to Schönhauser Allee, climbed the stairs to the trap door in the roof, and ran across the rooftops in the dark to the trap door that led to my building. When I was finally back in my apartment, I went to the window and looked down at the courtyard. The secret police were over in a corner, having a smoke. My plan had worked.

The next day they accompanied me to the bakery and then suddenly left. Aram came over that evening, and the nine o'clock ARD political magazine program *Report* with Franz Alt showed two minutes of our footage without much introduction. News anchor Hanns Joachim Friedrichs also began ARD's daily news program with the following announcement: "You are about to see unbelievable images from Leipzig. An Italian camera team

managed to make this video yesterday in Leipzig.” We were disappointed at first, although we were happy that there would be better images than our shaky ones. Then, seconds later, we couldn’t believe our eyes. Those were our images flickering across the screen. We were so happy—so gratified!

I visited Friedrichs in Hamburg years later and asked how he came up with the idea of crediting an Italian camera team. He said, “It all had to happen fast. And basically, I wanted to protect you.”