

Stasiland – September, 2006

Dear All,

We were sitting in the very heart of Stasiland last night for our meeting and I could sense ghosts of the past lurking. Prenzlauer Berg has now become very fashionable and West Berliners are flocking to live there. Property prices are rising and everywhere in the immediate vicinity has had a facelift. How different it all must have been before the wall came down.

When I watched from my sofa in England the dramatic pictures of East Berliners flowing over the wall into the West and celebrating, I had no idea that I would one day be sitting in the centre of the old East. At the time I had no direct connection with anything German. The last thing I would have imagined would have been that I would be living in Berlin myself. Life is such an adventure and full of the unexpected. But we have always had choices in the West and reading "Stasiland" reminded me of how precious freedom is and not to be taken for granted.

We had the freedom last night to share our views openly and without constraint. And we did. And we could have talked for hours on the subject. We were a mixed group of Brits, Japanese and West Germans. My only regret was that we didn't have a former East German to add their direct experiences to the discussion. But we had the voices of the East Germans that Anna Funder had interviewed.

Anna Funder is an Australian journalist who had the advantage of being an outsider and could be relatively objective in her findings. Her interviews were personal and sensitive, especially with the victims of the system. We all found the stories of Miriam, Julia and Sigrid Paul particularly moving. They had all been damaged in some way and we were outraged at how they had been treated.

Yet we all exchanged views of East Germans we'd met who had expressed their nostalgia for the past. It is not uncommon to be told that people were better off in the GDR - there was free health care, childcare, subsidised rents and pensions. No unemployment. Very little crime on the streets. But at what cost? Mothers were not able to be at home with their children. They were forced to send them to the kindergarten (so that the state could gain control over the children from an early age.) One could not trust anybody. Husbands and wives informed on each other. There was one Stasi

informer for sixty four people- a far higher level of surveillance than during the Nazi period.

Why has so little been written on the GDR? So much has been written about the Nazi era and yet the GDR remains rather a mystery. Anna Funder's book goes a long way in uncovering the mystery. Although it is based on fact, it reads rather like a thriller. Anna Funder weaves her own story and experiences into the investigation and we are taken along with her into other people's lives. We sense and smell and taste the past with her.

Apparently 23 publishers rejected the book and she felt quite scared during its launch in East Germany. She was greeted icily and with determined silence at some of her readings. Many East Germans just want to put the past behind them and to not discuss it. Interestingly, West Berliners can be embarrassed at their lack of sympathy or sense of connection with other Germans who were on the other side of the wall. West and East Germany were divided like North and South Korea are now. West Germans felt privileged and would take advantage of the cheaper prices in the East on day visits. Even when the wall came down, East Germans felt very disadvantaged. Suddenly they were made aware of the huge display of material wealth in the West and the majority could not afford to be part of it.

The overall picture of gloom and betrayal , torture and misery is offset by some touches of humour. The lies by the East German authorities about the Berlin airlift are very amusing. The children were told that the evil Americans were dropping beetles to ruin the potato crop with the intention of starving the East German people. Children ran to collect beetles in exchange for sweets and rations of sugar.

Herr von Schnitzler wanted to drop the "von " in front of his name when he became the media face of the regime, airing the "Black Channel" until the very end in October 1989 .He was told "Are you crazy? Everyone should know that all sorts of people are coming over to us." Some of his distaste for western TV I can sympathise with, especially his dislike of the reality TV programme "Big Brother." But there is an irony here; the inspiration for " Big Brother " coming from George Orwell's novel 1984- banned in the GDR- because it is a superb vision of the potential horrors of a totalitarian state. Big Brother is watching your every move. Just like in the GDR.

Anna Funder poses the question of German desire for discipline and order- is that why

so many people were prepared to passively accept the regime and to inform on their friends, families and neighbours? We agreed that it is generally a part of the German character to be quite bureaucratic and obedient to rules. The Brits are more likely to cross a road while the lights are red (if there is no traffic coming). But East Germans who had publicly refused to become informers were usually just left alone. But there was always a perceived risk in taking that stance.

Members of the party were expected to report to their masters on their every move. Some were demoted and humiliated if they appeared to be acting independently in any way. We visited the Stasi File Authority Office in Zirndorf, a village outside Nuremberg. Fifteen thousand sacks of files were found in January 1990 at Normannenstrasse. They sat around untouched until 1995. The workforce, mainly "the puzzle women", are trying to put together the shredded files and to find answers to decisions that were made that changed people's lives - eg. Why had they not been admitted to university? Had their husband been murdered by the Stasi? Who had informed on them? etc etc

We learnt that it would take 40 workers 375 years to reconstruct everything. And there are currently only 31 workers. How important is it to try and piece the truth together? Why have so few Stasi members been held accountable for their actions? Should the united Germany be pouring more resources into unravelling the murky past of the GDR?

These were questions we were still asking ourselves at the end of the meeting. And there are no easy answers. We had all learnt a little about life in East Berlin under the Stasi and it was chilling. Walking out into the former Stasi streets I was reminded that every society has its dangers and fears. The Western Allies' actions currently in the Middle East are having a knock-on effect on the liberty of many people. To be a Muslim in Europe or the States is not easy at the moment and perfectly law-abiding Muslim citizens are constantly under surveillance, just because of the actions of a few extremists. But at least Berlin is not divided by a wall and its people can travel freely and choose how they live their lives. On my way home I didn't even notice at which point I crossed from the old East Berlin to West Berlin. But thankfully I have the choice not to watch "Big Brother."

Next meeting is on Monday October 16th at 7.30pm. We are discussing "State of the Union" by Douglas Kennedy. It's quite a long book but we have six weeks in which to

read it.

Thanks again to everyone for such an enjoyable evening. I'm looking forward very much to the next one.

All the best

Jan