

# Quest for freedom

*By Jippe Witteveen, June 20, 2024*

Ellen grew up near Dessau in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), also known as East Germany. Growing up at a farm, playing around in nature and with the animals, she had a great childhood. But as she was growing out of childhood, slowly becoming more politically aware, things started to become more complicated. At home she started to feel restricted by her parents, who were strict and conservative. But she also became aware that in her country as a whole there were restrictions on people's free movement and free expression. There was a TV at home - after signing up for a 5-year waiting list the government would grant you one - and it could receive two channels from West Germany. You were not allowed to watch them, but many people did so in the privacy of their homes.



## Trip through the Eastern Bloc

Ellen wanted to get away from home and leave the country for a while to feel free. The idea arose that she would spend the summer holiday travelling with a friend. It was 1980, they were both 18 years old. They managed to obtain a permit to travel out of East Germany, and went into the only possible direction: the Eastern Bloc. They started hitchhiking. First a truck took them to the Czechoslovakian border, and after crossing the border a fuel truck took them to Prague. There they set up their tent. It was made of thick army linnen, and weighed 12 kilograms. They had been taking turns carrying it.

The next stop was Budapest. An elderly couple took them in for a night, but insisted that they take a bath first. Then while the lady cooked dinner, the man went to get some alcohol. They got wasted together. Due to the imperial history, people in Hungary spoke German quite well. From Budapest, Ellen and her friend took a train to the Bulgarian border. It was so full with people that Ellen slept on the luggage rack hanging above the seats. As the train crossed Romania, the wagons were locked down so nobody could get in or out. Ellen reckons it was because of the poverty there. From the train she saw people living in mud shacks with no doors or windows. In Bulgaria the landscape was the most beautiful. Every type of nature was there. From Varna, at the Black Sea coast, they took a hovercraft to the Turkish coast, which was the furthest point of the trip.

The border patrols were very strict, but overall Ellen and her friend didn't really have negative experiences with people during the trip. Everyone was very sweet,

they never felt scared. The communist regimes of the Eastern Bloc were firmly in control. Everyone received the basic means to live, so there wasn't much petty criminality.

### **A crumbling system**

Although everyone had the basic means to live, there was no actual equality. Back home in East Germany it was clear that people who worked for the party bureaucracy had more stuff. Many people started working for the party not because of their communist convictions, but because of opportunism.

More and more Ellen started to feel like a prisoner in her own country. Outside of your own house or with close friends you could never be yourself. You always had to act correctly, and not make yourself suspicious to the many Stasi (secret police) informants. Eventually Ellen and her boyfriend decided that they would flee the country and go to West Germany. Her boyfriend had family in West Germany and had managed to get permission to visit them. He left in February 1988; the idea was that Ellen would follow later.

The Stasi kept a close eye on the people, however, and were quickly aware of the fact that Ellen's boyfriend had not returned. This had repercussions for friends and family. Ellen's brother was being trained to be a truck driver who would be allowed to drive into Western Europe, but this got cancelled. Friends were not allowed to leave the country for their holiday to Hungary. Ellen was now closely observed by the Stasi, and was also interrogated on multiple occasions. At first this was very scary. The interrogation took place in a sound-proof room, and at first

the Stasi-officer would only scream at her. But over time Ellen became more aware of her rights - East Germany had signed a number of international treaties regarding human rights - which gave her confidence.

The experience with the Stasi made Ellen determined that something had to change. She started going to the anti-government protests in Leipzig every Monday. Soldiers with machine guns were blocking the side streets, and water cannons would sweep protesters away like dirt. The situation was tense. Protests in the Eastern Bloc had ended in bloodbaths on multiple occasions in earlier decades. But Ellen didn't feel afraid anymore. In the autumn of 1989 the protests became bigger and bigger, and Ellen felt safe in the mass of people.

Then, on November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall opened. Masses of people started crossing and police officers did nothing to stop it. When Ellen heard the news, she felt ecstatic. But just like many people around her, she thought that it would certainly only be temporary. So, just like many, she decided to leave East Germany as quickly as possible. She did not even tell her parents.

First her brother took her to a refugee camp. At the time Ellen looked quite meagre, and because of this an officer at the camp pitied her and took her into his home. From there, the Red Cross took Ellen to Unna-Massen. After a short stay there, she was transferred to a castle which was temporarily turned into a refugee camp. Many East Germans fled to West Germany that November 1989, so all kinds of places were hastily made into refugee camps. For Christmas, Ellen's mother sent her a tree from their own orchard, as

well as Christmas decorations and a cake. The mailman was so amazed by this that he invited Ellen to celebrate Christmas with him and his wife.

### **Epilogue**

On October 3, 1990, Germany officially became one country again. The GDR ceased to exist. It was the dawn of a new era in global politics. Transitioning from a communist society to a free market society wasn't easy for many people, but people ultimately bore the fruits of liberty and democracy. The 1990s became a time of optimism in the Western world, characterised by the notion of 'the end of history.'

Today, however, I am wondering if we are starting to see cracks in our Western neoliberal system. Has the free market delivered on its promise to benefit everyone? Perhaps to an extent. Corporations have become large and influential. Influential to such an extent, I would argue, that our democracies are becoming less democratic. Financial interests are complicating the necessary transition to a sustainable economy. The largest corporations are paying the least taxes, exploiting the earth's resources and its people. Privacy does not exist anymore.

Populists are taking advantage of a growing sense of discontent. The discontent is justified; the methods used by populists and their proposed solutions are very questionable. A more just system cannot imply the scapegoating of immigrants or the rejection of Europe. History has shown that this can lead to terrible things. The problems of today transcend national boundaries, and

therefore cannot be addressed on a national level.

Let us not go back to a time of fortified borders in Europe, as was the case when Ellen was young. Let us work together to address pressing problems of our time at their core, instead of presenting them as foreign issues that we can cut ourselves off from. Such an attitude will ultimately leave problems unaddressed. This will come back to bite us.

Every period in history has its issues, but for Ellen it is quite straightforward. Today she does not have to watch her every step, as she does not live in a dictatorship. No matter where in Germany she lives (or where in the European Union, for that matter), there are no restrictions on seeing friends and family who live somewhere else. Compared to history, today is a great time to be alive.