

## FOCUS 4 – INTERVIEWS

### *Were you personally affected by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the German reunification?*

**Juliane (39):** Of course, who was not affected by it in Germany? There was my family. My grandma had three siblings and only my grandma stayed in the GDR. The others had already gone to West Germany in 1945 and were living in West Berlin and in Düsseldorf and I didn't know them. So just that my family was there again, was something. I was seventeen and all of a sudden I could buy all the clothes I wanted, I could watch movies like I wanted... in principle, I could do everything.

**Gregor (29) :** Yes, I think so. I think I've had more individual freedom and more possibilities than would have been the case in the GDR. Because even in kindergarten I was told, when you enter school you are going to become a Jungpionier (Young Pioneer, part of the official East German socialist youth organization) and then you do this and then that. Among those, there were things I didn't like as a kid. For example, as a Jungpionier you had to wear a particular shirt - my brother had one. And I hated wearing shirts, so I was not looking forward to being forced to wear such a shirt and then I didn't have to in the end. This reunification actually influenced another part of my childhood because, from a particular time onwards, my brother and I were often alone at home because our parents had to have two jobs to be able to survive. Furthermore, my brother, who is four years older, and I often had the feeling that our parents didn't understand what moved us and that they didn't want to deal with it or could not deal with it. Before everything was relatively regular, both of them had regular jobs with fixed working time, but their companies were closed down, so they became unemployed and had to take jobs in totally different areas. This was connected with different working times; they were longer or started earlier as in the past. Because of this we were often on our own, so often the neighbors were asked to look after us.

**Anna (42):** My whole life changed somehow. In East Germany I studied psychology which was exactly what I wanted to do, but I had a certain picture in mind of what I wanted to do after graduation. With the fall of the Wall this was not possible anymore because of the certain niche I wanted to work in. I never wanted to leave East Germany... I wanted to live there just with a minimum of dependency on the government. I wanted to work with handicapped children and take care of their development because that was something that was very much neglected in East Germany. These children were just kept in certain kinds of homes. They were of course taken care of in terms of being fed and being cleaned, but there was no development program to

teach them how to walk or to teach them how to eat by themselves.... But that was my personal target and that was not necessary anymore with German reunification. In the end I decided to skip that direction completely because I couldn't think of being a psychologist in that new Germany at that time because it was very strange to me. So I went to Asia, spent a year there, just to give myself a bit of time to think of other directions and then I came back and started a completely new subject, Chinese studies and German Language and Literature. My life really completely changed because I would have had another career in East Germany; a completely different career. After I finished it, I worked for a few years in China and after I came back, I went to university again for a year and now I have a job that is not related to any of my subjects, but it's a good job.

**Monika Marie (41):** I wasn't really. Our friends and family in the East were now more available, and there was a certain joy, but I was actually in Freiburg... far away from the Wall.... Of course, now students with this Saxon accent were coming to Freiburg, but it wasn't something that affected me in a positive or a negative way.



**Irmtraud (68):** The first effect was that we could see our friends and family. We had many friends, many family members also in the West and already before the Wall came down we had many encounters, many visits. But not all of these relations became normal; some contacts that had been built across the border got lost after the opening, but we activated others. I had – that's something very personal – I had to go without my brothers very early. My eldest brother left the GDR in 1953 after the Junge Gemeinde (a form of church youth work within the Lutheran church of the GDR) was persecuted very heavily. He was just 16 and had to leave the country very fast in order to escape the claws of the Stasi. So our brother was gone. That was very upsetting, I was just 10 and I liked him a lot. He is living in Switzerland nowadays. And the other brother left in 1961 right before the Wall was built because he didn't see any possibilities here anymore. So these brothers were for me as the little sister always something very special, so I had a lot of concerns when we finally could get together again. And it took a long time to build up a normal relationship. I just speak from my own per-

spective; I can't say how my brothers sensed this. Maybe they wondered about some weird behavior of mine, but it was hard for me to accomplish this. It took a long time, but today after 20 years, after more than 20 years I can say I accomplished it. I have a good relationship with my older brothers. I have found my perspective, I know where they are, I know where I am, and we meet at eye level. Of course, everybody has his own history; everybody has his own life. But these restraints, this fear, this carefulness, this totally unnatural behavior – which was also a result of the Wall – is gone. It took a long time, but everything became normal.

I can tell you, until 1989 Leipzig was never my home. I mean I don't come from Leipzig, I came here at 17, but I never really felt comfortable. ...but since 1989/1990 it became home. It's wonderful. I live in this city.... I feel comfortable. I really arrived, and this is connected to 1989. Maybe it's because we could participate; we did participate and because of this I found my spot.... That's something very beautiful. Somehow '89, it sounds very pathetic, somehow it's like a newly given life. Even if a lot of things are difficult, that doesn't matter at all. It's this overall new attitude to life. And I'm going to keep it and I won't let this go because of problems or people who always say: "But, but, but ..."

Maybe to illustrate this a bit, look at this city, the houses got beautiful again. The things my son tried to show me somehow, which were only imagination, they became real all of a sudden. That's wonderful. The Pleiße River, which my son advocated for and where we were able to help a little bit, this river is clean again, it runs open again. This is a great thing; that these actions really had an impact and were not for nothing.... I can choose from all these many, many offers and possibilities. It became such an unbelievable diversity. I can freely decide and choose whatever fits me. That's just beautiful. To not always fear that somebody looks over your shoulders and says that's not possible, that's not allowed. No, you can do everything....

**Tobias (45):** Yes, in principle in two areas. First something very fundamental, to be able to live further on in a democracy, in a society – this is what I state – where you have the maximum possibilities of participation.... Participation means to play a part, to invest time and possibly not be able to do some other things. This doesn't work here by pressing one button. Democracy is exhausting and takes time, but it works. I perceived the time between the first free parliamentary elections in the GDR and the reunification as a time which hadn't happened in the last one hundred years and won't come again for the next one hundred years; the possibilities we had, just the possibility to participate, to set the course, to take decisions.... Second, for me personally, the Peaceful Revolution, the fall of the Wall, German reunification, etc. brought a general reorientation. So I neither restore furniture now nor do I deal with environmental

issues anymore, but I deal with coming to terms with the past, with the Stasi, and the GDR dictatorship in general ... over time it became my job. So these are the two fundamental changes this historic development brought with it.

**Christa (60):** I was affected, because I could never understand that there was a closed border in the middle of a country that belonged together for a long time. I visited the Wall when I went to Berlin, I went to the eastern part and I was really afraid going from the western to the eastern part, so I was very glad that the Wall came down.

**Natalija (28):** Of course, because only because of the fall of the Wall and falling apart of the Soviet Union my mother was able to get a job in Germany. Before, the borders were closed, and she would never have gotten a job in the West. But we were also affected because the Soviet Union fell apart and it was a very hard time for all the Russians and Ukrainians and all the Soviet Union citizens because they had no money, everything was not working anymore. This is why we were as well affected. My mother had to go abroad and look for a job because we did not have enough to eat at home. This was a normal thing to, go abroad to get a job. I think it was very, very common, in the nineties, I think it was about one fourth of the population that went away to work abroad. This was in the end the effect of the fall of the Wall. So it was huge.



**Daniel S (44):** No, very little. I mean I could have lived on like before. I think many people did on both sides. Of course, I was affected due to the simple fact that I was living in the city where the core of everything that happened was. So I remember that, for example, the days and weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was basically impossible to do anything with your bank account. I mean there was no internet, and there was no telephone banking as far as I remember, but you couldn't just enter a bank because there were queues, endless, endless queues, thousands of people queuing in front of the banks because everybody with an East German passport could walk into a random bank and receive 100 Deutsch Marks welcome money. So, I was affected in these more funny ways, I would say. I was affected in a sense that my horizon was broadened – I mean there was a new part of the city to explore and I did. I went over to East Berlin and I went to all these new clubs and squat houses. Yeah, that was fun.