4.2.2 HANDOUT

INTERVIEWS WITH IRMTRAUD HOLLIZTER AND TOBIAS HOLLIZTER

Interview with Irmtraud Hollitzer, 67 years old

Conducted by Gerrit Book

Can you give me an overview about the most important events in your life?

What did your husband do?

My husband worked for the church, and that was really illustrious. It was a church theatre, the *Leipziger Spielgemeinde*, it was the only professional church-run theatre, and he was an actor. He had actually studied dramaturgy, but without a party membership he couldn't get a job, so he joined together with three other guys and founded this church theatre group. In the beginning they performed very regularly, and not just in Leipzig but also in all of Germany. But some time before the borders were completely closed they were no longer allowed to perform throughout Germany. After the Wall was built, it was of course completely impossible. They still performed within the GDR, but this also became forbidden; they were only allowed to play in Saxony and in the end only in Leipzig ….

This theatre was labeled by the *Stasi*, as you now can see from the files, as a "center of political and ideological diversion." So that was my husband's job. Besides the theatre he also gave lectures about the topic of antisemitism and its roots. He tried to bring this topic to the GDR public, but also gave lectures in the field of German studies. Once again, this was only possible through the church and in so-called house circles,[1] which is where I got to know him. Luckily both of us had the same attitude towards the state and towards the circumstances, so it was easier for us to agree upon exactly how we wanted to educate our kids, which was that they should only collaborate with the state or assimilate in school when really necessary and not to adapt to the state.

You mentioned that you hoped your four children would follow the same path that you did. Did they?

Yes. There was this incident with our youngest daughter which comes to mind. She was 13 and played the piano very, very well. There was a music school competition that was in 1985 and her piano teacher approached us and was very upset. She had just realized that our daughter, Konstanze, was not a member of the *FDJ*. She accused us of destroying the career of our daughter because she wouldn't be judged fairly at the competition if she didn't wear the *FDJ* clothes …, so there was no need for her to even play. I think, in fact her concern was that her student would make her look bad... She asked if Konstanze couldn't just become a member of the *FDJ* really quick to which I replied, "Are you completely crazy? That's totally impossible." So the teacher suggested she borrow the clothes (uniform) from a friend; nobody would realize it. I had no idea what I should do, and I struggled with this question: Do we have the right as parents to make these types of decisions for our children? So I spoke with my daughter and told her about the teacher's suggestion, and she said immediately: "Mom, are you crazy? I'm not going to wear such a rag." I was so relieved. I knew she would play, and she had decided by herself and had taken the possible consequences into account. And she played and there was actually a happy end; she got a silver medal.

…with our older daughter, well I can't really say for sure how she felt, but I still remember that because we hadn't taken part in the *Wehrkundeunterricht* (pre-military class) at school when we were young, our children should not either. It had finally been agreed that they were allowed to "do socially valuable things". You need to keep this expression in mind. Well, we had suggested that she could go to a different class during the *Wehrkundeunterricht* because *Wehrkundeunterricht* meant the 14-year-old boys would begin training with rifles, and the girls would be educated in civil defense which we found too early and didn't want. But she was not allowed to simply attend a different class because then other parents could say, "Oh, you can opt out of it?!" So it wasn't possible. And then we were threatened that it would be anti-social behavior if we didn't send our kids to class, which could mean, in the worst case, that the authorities would take our kids away because we as parents were not able to turn them into good socialists. That was a worst case scenario, but we definitely kept it in the back of our minds. And so, we had finally achieved that they were allowed to do something else, like helping the custodian for instance. So my daughter was paired with a custodian or teacher or with someone who showed her how they deal with people who don't participate. She had to do really icky or gross things at the school, so she came back one day and cried and told me, "Mom I can't do this. I can't do this." In this moment a point was reached, and I questioned myself. How do I behave now? What do I do? Am I causing my child more pain by sending her back and saying, "Do

1 Meetings of different like-minded people at somebody's home.

it"? Finally, I said to her, "There is no work which is too awful or icky that you can't stand to do. This will happen more often in your life." Pretty harsh words, but I was worried about the consequences, which I thought might be much worse if she didn't go back. That was a situation I found pretty precarious.

Regarding the other children, I don't remember it being so difficult; the teachers reacted very differently, especially with the two younger ones. They were allowed to do pretty nice things. Maybe I can summarize and comment on it: Even in a dictatorship it depends on people. There is leeway, and you are allowed to use it and you can use it, if possible.

For the third child, our younger son, it wasn't very dramatic. But because of his experience that he hadn't participated in the pre-military class in school, he wanted to do pre-military education during his apprenticeship. He began his apprenticeship at 16 and pre-military education was a part of it; all apprentices had to go for a one month course. When he told us we were all a bit shocked at first and not very happy but he said that "he wanted to go and he wanted to see for himself; he wanted to make the decision". We thought we would get around it again somehow like we did with our elder son, Tobias, but all of a sudden this one said he wanted to go. Finally, after arguing with him and explaining it further, he said, "Actually I don't want to shoot and I won't do it, but I want to see it for myself." So we let him go and he had some very bitter experiences. He was humiliated quite a bit by the army officer because of his position, because he dared to say, "I don't want to be trained with a weapon. I just want to look." He came back home totally aghast and I wrote a petition to Honecker[2] because I thought it was really awful how they treated him. We received a very nice answer, short and succinct, that said we should contact the local authorities, but for him it was already too late and so we didn't go ahead with any of it.

Later he asked us, "Why didn't you leave? Why did you hold out? Why did you demand that from yourselves and from us kids? How far did you want to go and just watch?" He knew that Tobias had been arrested twice, and, especially after he learned that Tobias was on the list to be imprisoned in one of the isolation camps[3], he asked again, "Why didn't you leave?" Leaving was the only alternative, but it wasn't really a possibility. Because with four kids it's impossible; you can't just get up and leave. When you applied to be allowed to leave the country it was not a guarantee that you could go, instead it could be martyrdom for years and years…

This question has followed me until today and actually I don't have an answer. On the one hand I'm still happy that we sent the kids down the road we did, and I can say I'm happy because everything came to such a happy end. I can also say this because all four children, even Andreas, the third, thanked us in 1989 for having sent them down this road and not a different one, and I found this really, really wonderful as parents. In spite of this, how would it have been if everything had gotten worse, much worse, and if they had imprisoned our eldest in the camp? What would we have done? Would we have just watched it? And then I think of the many, many terrible events where people were experiencing this exact situation… How do you handle such extreme situations? I only hope that we'll never be in such situations and that we'll never again experience a period like this. This is why I always swear to the children and teenagers and whomever to care for the rights we have now in this freedom. Use them for the good and just.

Until 1990, you were, on the one hand, a mother and a housewife and on the other hand, you were singing in the choir. You also said that you were critical about the state and the circumstances, but when did you become really active in the opposition?

I can tell you very clearly, actually because of Tobias, my eldest son. He became involved in the field of environment and just took us with him, especially me… Tobias took us with him; he infected us. I remember, for instance, that Leipzig was so deteriorated, the houses, the buildings, and he walked with me along the streets and pointed out, "Mom, look up at the buildings, at the roofs. Here should be something, and there is something missing too, fallen apart. This was all done by the communists." He gave me a view for things I had not seen before, and he did the same for me in the field of environment.

Of course the bad environment affected and disturbed all of us. In November and December I always rode my bicycle with a cloth in front of my mouth and it always slowly became grey. The snow was grey and the air was terrible. We were suffering and my son started doing something about it, and we joined him. The whole family went to these environmental Sunday services and this was the first time I experienced something like this at all. For example, he came home one day and said we need help with the Pleiße River event[4], and all of a sudden I really participated, as well as the whole family at home in our apartment. This was the first time I can say I was a bit more active than usual, but I was also scared too because the *Stasi* was pretty close and noticeable. Even so I always had a good feeling because of my son, because I knew he wouldn't do anything dangerous. He considered everything in many ways but at the same time he was brave and very decisive ….

2 The head of the GDR government.
3 Prior to the large demonstration that was expected on October 9, 1989, the GDR government had prepared camps outside of Leipzig to imprison large numbers of demonstrators in order to stop the demonstrations.
4 A so called pilgrimage against the pollution of the river and the environment in general. For more details read interview with Tobias Hollitzer.

So I thought: "Yeah, you can take part; it's a good thing."

It was similar with the Monday demonstrations. Sometimes we went together and other times we walked separately. It was also similar with the occupation of the *Stasi* headquarters. I went with the group and simply worked with them. But I was really only a small number within this *Bürgerkomitee* (citizen committee) …. Tobias also made very brave decisions with these other young people… I was more in the background, doing things which had to be done for the whole … and in the end I came to work at the museum. It started with work as a museum docent, holding discussions with visitors, answering questions if there was a guided tour – which we didn't have, so I said I would try to do one. I realized that I could actually talk about something I had previously had inhibitions about … and then there were so many tours that I was completely consumed by it. Basically it was the start of a completely new life and work; this is why I can say that I really had a good time in 1989 and 1990. The country in which I never felt comfortable came to an end, and I was part of bringing it to an end. Suddenly I had a new task, and this task was to tell people what kind of a country this state was. That is a wonderful thing.

Is it correct to say that the Monday demonstration on October 9, 1989 was the most critical and dangerous one? Can you describe the day and the events around it a little bit?

We were out of town on October 7 and therefore only in the evening saw pictures on TV in the evening of the demonstrations in Berlin against the official military parade for the 40th anniversary of the founding of the GDR. Gorbachev was there etc. and while watching those images we got really scared and thought, "What's going on in this country?" And we projected this on Leipzig, because the *Stasi* and the police were bludgeoning the demonstrators, beating them up, chasing them and it was live on West German TV. All of us had already read the article in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*[5] (Leipzig People's Newspaper) that they would defend the socialist achievements with weapons if necessary, and this was targeted at October 9, so we had a sample of how they would probably react on Monday, not necessarily with weapons, but still very violently.

We had a special meeting on Sunday in the parish council of St. Thomas, which I was a member of, because there was a proposal to hold peace prayers there. I wasn't very happy about this, but it was discussed, and it soon became clear that we would do it. Up until then the peace prayers were only held in St. Nicolai and now for the first time they would be held in St. Thomas, St. Peter and at the reformed church too. I thought the peace prayers were already taunting enough for the government. Why even more? I though it probably wasn't a good idea, but it was decided that they would also be held in St. Thomas…so different jobs were assigned, and I was assigned to stand at one of the side doors of the church.

In talks with friends, family, and neighbors, it was clear almost everybody was feeling uneasy about the upcoming events. You could say the air was burning because of the tautness and uncertainty of not knowing what would happen.

So on Monday October 9 at the end of the peace prayer service, when I opened the door I thought I heard military march music and was really confused. There was an army vehicle opposite the church and immediately in my mind I associated the music with shooting, so it took me a while to realize it came from public loud speakers.

It was a so-called city broadcast. And then suddenly there was the voice of Kurt Masur[6] who said something like, "Dear citizens of Leipzig, concerns about our city have prompted us to search for a solution. We call on everybody for non-violence. We want to make sure that a dialogue about the free exchange of opinions for how to continue socialism in this country is made possible." I was very happy to hear this voice because Masur was a well-known person and if somebody like him finally piped up, someone who they wouldn't beat up right away, it was good and just. I also thought he could have done it sooner, and then maybe everything wouldn't have become so drastic.

But after I heard this, I still didn't turn left towards the city center, but right towards our home. I was just too fainthearted. In hindsight, I think I didn't realize that this would be the day we would cross the threshold. This meant that everybody counted, that everybody went, that they joined because if 70,000 people hadn't been there, then the state would have been able to handle it, to suppress it. We had expected 25,000 people. And therefore I'm a bit sad that I didn't walk with the demonstration, but I'm honest enough to say I was so afraid and I just didn't realize it and I placed my fear above all of this. So I went back home and on the way I saw brigade groups and military everywhere along the road, and in front of the *Stasi* headquarters there were five rows of military standing behind each other with these martial shields and helmets and long bludgeons. At this point I thought it really was best that I go home. This was October 9.

In the end everything stayed peaceful; it didn't come to an intervention of brigade groups, police or military. There was no military or any other intervention because the chief of police of Leipzig saw that there were simply too many coming, many more people than expected.

5 The party newspaper in Leipzig.
6 A world famous music conductor.

He spoke first with the operation controllers of the district, but they didn't want to make the decision either. So they contacted Berlin, but the reply from Berlin regarding how to handle this new situation came too late from the perspective of the government and for the demonstrators. Thank goodness it came too late. By the time the decision came the people had already demonstrated and gone back home. Well, this is what I read afterwards, but up until I arrived home, it had been my own experience. And in the evening West German TV showed how the demonstrators had marched, and I was astonished and very happy.

Interview with Tobias Hollitzer, 45 Years old

Conducted by Gerrit Book

Please give me an overview about the most important events in your life.

I think it was central that I grew up as a Christian in a Lutheran home. So I was specifically brought up to be honest, sincere, truthful, and so on. Inevitably discrepancies developed between my upbringing and the official GDR state policy and educational system. This result, and I have to say this very clearly, was not the educational goal of my parents. In fact it was more the opposite. They tried to model a balancing act by the way they lived their own lives and to educate us in this way. This means, on the one hand, learning to deal with the demands of the state, and on the other hand, to deviate and once in a while say no. But we were not educated to totally reject the system, the country, and the surroundings where I was forced to grow up, born five years after the Wall was built.

And your parents really lived this balancing act for themselves too?

Actually, yes, at least I perceived it as a balancing act. Central for me, especially in my early childhood and youth, was a basic pacifistic attitude. This was instilled in me by my parents, but at the same time it was also a very strong concern of my own. This was the important point in my relationship to the GDR education system. There was this militarization of which I had no desire to be a part. I still remember during my early years of school that very often before I fell asleep I thought about what would happen when I came of age and got drafted. How would I be able to stand being imprisoned or something like this? [7] So this question was, right from the beginning, also an argument of whether or not to participate in the *Junge Pioniere* (Young Pioneers) and in the *FDJ* (*Freie Deutsche Jugend* = Free German Youth).[8] Well, actually my parents said, "*Pioniere*, this is something we decide for you." (I did not participate.) "The *FDJ* you can decide for yourself." So it was somehow a given decision, but I never perceived it as an enforced decision. I always viewed it as the right decision for me. I never had the feeling I want to be one of the *Junge Pioniere*. I was actually happy not to be one of them, but at the same time of course it was a huge problem for me to be an outsider, to not be one of them. I think this was probably a problem for every kid or teenager …. In elementary school I had a pretty fair and nice teacher in the sense that she made this a topic of discussion, and the fact was that my parents wanted it to be a topic of discussion. So it became part of the discussion during teacher-parent class conferences. This means the other parents knew that I was not member of the *Junge Pioniere*. This resulted unavoidably in a debate among the other parents. Why are our kids part of it? Because the argument that you had to be a member was not valid anymore in my class because I was the living example that you did not have to be …. Things like this also have totally apolitical dimensions. For example, there was Shrovetide, a carnival. This was not a class thing. It was a pioneer thing. And every year my teacher again said in class, "We are going to celebrate carnival, and I assume that we are going to invite Tobias too." Well, so I as a non-pioneer got invited to the pioneer carnival. This was okay; it made the situation manageable for the class and me. You can imagine it also would have been possible to deal with it in a totally different extreme way ….

Well, not to participate in the *FDJ* was really my own decision; I was 14 and would never have decided differently. As an alternative and I just call it an alternative in the sense of having the possibility to interact with others, kids of the same age, the same education and interests, I participated in the *Junge Gemeinde*.[9] Confirmation class, Sunday school, those things became very, very important to me. I learned a lot there also in the field of social competencies, civic education, etc. But I still played a special role in our confirmation class because we were, all in all, only three kids and I was the only one who went only to confirmation. All of the others went to confirmation and *Jugendweihe*[10] (youth inauguration).

The real break came in 8th grade with introduction of the subject *Wehrkundeunterricht* (pre-military class). It was in 1978, and my year was

7 There was no possibility in the GDR to refuse military service as a conscientious objector.
8 Both of them were state youth organizations.
9 A form of church youth work within the Lutheran church of the GDR.
10 A secular coming of age ceremony promoted during GDR-times by the government as a replacement for confirmation.

the first year when it became a compulsory subject in school and of course they looked very carefully at the deviators and deniers. And, as I could later see from the files, really hard action was anticipated …. It was a point when they reacted really extreme. So I got called in and had a two-hour discussion with the principal, school inspector, the party secretary of the school and others. I mean I was a 13-year-old boy during that time …. Right afterwards my dad went to the school and also had a discussion with them, so I was actually not alone with these issues. Interestingly in the end I had to sweep the yard and scrub the toilets and similar things during the time of the *Wehrkundeunterricht* …. As the final result I was not allowed to make my *Abitur* (high school degree). So I did an apprenticeship as a cabinetmaker, in a private workshop. This was a real niche I have to say. And then till 1989 I worked for a private wood and furniture restorer. All attempts to make an apprenticeship in this field were not only impossible because of the limited number of places but also because of the political preconditions.

Talking about niches, we need to always be clear. Niche meant you already left or got kicked out of those areas which were normal in this country and which were supposed to be accessible for everybody. So finding a niche is nice in a certain way, but it really had meant that I was not allowed to obtain my *Abitur* or study at university. Another dimension of niche you always have to keep in mind too is the fear of prison in case you don't find a niche where you can arrange yourself ….

Therefore my life inevitably got a political approach. And as a result I found myself in the position to be in conflict with my parents because I had the opinion, "You have to reject the whole country; communism is really endmost." And my parents answered, "You cannot say so, … " I really have to say my parents didn't educate us to be in opposition with the system, but to care about honesty, truthfulness and other moral categories, and this led necessarily to the point that I eventually opposed the system. And in those moments when I used concrete issues to point that out very clearly it also partly came to big arguments. My parents often said, "You can't go so far because you still have to live here." ….

When and how did you become really active in the opposition?

At the very beginning, at the end of the 1970s, at 14-years-old, I got engaged in a church-based third-world group … and we started collecting money for a hospital in Tanzania ….

In 1981, after martial law had already been announced in Poland, we supported a monastery there. I thought this was somehow better. It was the tendency to say, let's not get so far away with countries like Tanzania, but let's face the issues closer to us. This was a pretty fast development. But already at ages 15 and 16, I started caring about environmental questions, really in the sense of the surroundings. Because I had decided for myself that if I actually stay, I don't live in the GDR; I live in Leipzig. This is very important to say that this relationship and closeness with this city was in many regards a central element. I was very interested in city history, but also for the rediscovery of the city. What was actually behind the rundown and dirty facades? Why was this city once an important place? What was this city once able to do? Who and what did it nurture? If you tried hard you could still see these things everywhere. I did not get depressed, but actually felt in a positive mode. It was a motivation for me to become active, to care about my surrounding, my environment. My attitude became, "If I actually stay here, I want to be involved; I want to participate actively." So the topic of environmental pollution became really important for me. And again it started with practical work, which became political very fast …. In the field of the environment, everything was secret. There was no data available. It was totally absurd. Officially everything was nice, but it was dirty everywhere. The huge discrepancy between the experienced reality and the things you could read in the press or what you heard at official occasions was just unimaginable ….

In the beginning of 1984, I joined the Christian environmental seminar in Rötha, a suburb of Leipzig, with a huge coking plant, other brown coal plants, open cast coal mining, etc. This was again very interesting. The people who were active in this group were all much older than I was. It was more the generation of my parents …. We were two or three of the younger generation. There were actually very interesting debates about the goals and especially about the instruments and methods to use ….

To talk about 1989, I became very much involved in organizing the Pleiße-march[11]. This event had taken place in 1988, but I had the impression it had not made a big impact. I thought there was much more behind this topic …. It was already the time when the Monday demonstrations had started and some people wanted to do it directly on "Environmental Day", which was a Monday that year, after the peace prayer, so it would become a public protest event with police operations etc. But I didn't want this. If it would be like this in the end, okay, but the actual content of the work had the priority. I didn't want to create unrest by any means necessary; it was about reaching out to the people. If we would do it on Sunday, not on Monday we could reach out to the families with kids. And this is how we actually did it. We arranged an environmental Sunday service in Connewitz, a neighborhood of Leipzig, where the river still runs open, and then we went on a pilgrimage

11 The Pleiße is a small river in Leipzig.

along and on top of the piped river into the city center to the reformed church with another final service and a closing event. This was of course a demonstration. This was clear to me too, but we registered it purposely as a pilgrimage. That was June 4, 1989. When we started planning in December 1988 and January 1989, it was not foreseeable what kind of dynamics the developments would reach. But this is how it was with many events in the year 1989.

Well, with this approach of content-related work, I wanted to spread good researched information. I wanted to convince the people with content-related arguments, and this approach became my dictum thenceforth until today. And then it can also become real protest, of course.

So we created 40 pages of information on the history and current situation of the Pleiße River, but we also listed all kinds of laws and regulations related to the topic to show the people there is much more in there than they actually allow. So our approach was, let's look at what's officially written in the law. Let's get informed and afterwards try to claim these rights and see if we actually have to act outside the law …. And then we'll see and in some cases we may move further, of course. But moving step-by-step actually had an impact. So many, many people said, in regard to the Pleiße-march, that it can't be true. The organizers of the march said totally logical, clear and true things, and then they get loaded on trucks just because they want to walk along the river? How can that be? They don't want to leave for West Germany, nor demonstrate against anything, nor are they enemies of the state, they just say the river is dirty, which can be seen by everybody, and want it cleaned. Well, this was probably one reason why in Leipzig many of those really apolitical people said three, four, five weeks earlier as in other cities: "This (the behavior of the state regarding the Pleiße-march) is somehow one step too far, that's not acceptable anymore." So these people were probably willing to come out and take action earlier as in other places.

You just mentioned that they were loaded on trucks. What does it actually mean?

This means people got arrested. During the year 1989 this was actually almost always the case, every Monday. To give an example, in January there was a demonstration to remember Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, two famous German communists. People spontaneously got flyers by a group of oppositionists inviting them, and they all got arrested. But still 300 to 500 people came together on the main market square in Leipzig. After a short speech they walked to the former residence of Karl Liebknecht. The purpose was to demand basic democratic rights and therefore to use the communist's own ideology, namely, *"Freiheit ist immer Freiheit der Andersdenkenden"* (freedom is always the freedom of dissenters), which is a famous quote by Rosa Luxemburg. So it was basically a demonstration for basic rights, freedom of choice, freedom of opinion, freedom to demonstrate and others. Well, in the end 50 of the demonstrators got arrested by the police. But something very important in regards to the further development happened. Different media in West Germany reported about this event. But more important the American and the West German foreign ministers criticized the arrests during the third OSCE Follow-Up Conference in Vienna that took place at the same time, which was reported in the Western media again. As a result, within hours all of the arrested got released at the personal order of Erich Honecker. So 10 days after the flyer activity, they had printed 10,000 flyers, distributed 5,000 of them, and after a successful demonstration all of the arrested were released without any juridical consequences because of the international public protest. This was a completely new experience! Only a year before in Berlin oppositionists like Bärbel Bohley, Freya Klier, Wolfgang Templin, and Stephan Krawczyk were arrested and had to leave the country. Some of them were actually forced to officially apply to be allowed to leave the country. Some of them like Bohley and Templin returned in the summer of 1989. And all of this happened because they had participated in the official demonstration to commemorate Luxemburg and Liebknecht, but with their own banners and posters. So this new constellation in Leipzig was of really great importance for the mobilization of the Leipzig opposition. Because we said, it seems that if we can create publicity, we can get away with much more than before.

Looking back, we were right, especially because all of those who distributed flyers, participated in official demonstrations with their own posters, or protested against voter fraud on their own were still arrested and sentenced to one or two years in prison. Most of them were only released because of the amnesty in October 1989. So it was not a general liberalization of the system. No, it was only a concession to the circumstances. In Leipzig on March 13, 1989, there was a large demonstration of people who had applied to be allowed to leave the country. The police didn't interfere. It was filmed and later on broadcasted by West German main TV news. This meant that almost every GDR citizen saw it[12]. This again contributed massively to the further mobilization of the people.

Well, the peace prayers took place every Monday beginning in September 1981, and they became a very important breeding and information ground for the opposition. And, returning to your question, since May 1, 1989, after the end of every peace prayer there was sometimes a smaller, sometimes a bigger police operation with arrests on the square in front of St. Nicholas.

12 Almost everywhere in the GDR West German TV could be received. Officially it was not allowed to watch it, but people still did.

Is it correct to say that the Monday demonstration on October 9 was the most critical and dangerous one? Can you describe the day and the events around it a little bit?

Yes, this is my strong belief and not only my personal belief, but it really was like this. According to research it's a matter of fact. On this date the SED-regime (*SED* = *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* = Socialist Unity Party of Germany) wanted "to dispose of this spook once and for all" – a quote of Erich Honecker, the leader of the East German government. And the famous article in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*[13] (Leipzig People's Newspaper), written by the commander of the brigade groups, stated, "We are prepared and willing to defend what we created with our hands, if necessary with the use of weapons." By GDR standards that was a very clear announcement …. And the preparations had even gone so far that they had already planned a special edition of the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* with reports about the successful abolition of the counterrevolutionary uprising ….

Interestingly, that newspaper article was published one day before October 7, so it was not a reaction to anything, but it was clear that they definitely wanted to pull through the 40th anniversary of the founding of the GDR. But there were public protests including police operations during this day, October 7, in Magdeburg, in Potsdam, in Berlin, in Dresden, in Karl-Marx-Stadt, and this was not foreseeable beforehand. All of this became part of the further dynamics, but this general decision that they are not going to tolerate these things in Leipzig on October 9 anymore, this general decision was already taken before. This was so clear, and it was communicated so clearly by the *SED*, that everybody knew October 9 is going to be the day we cross the Rubicon. It was not for anything that thousands of people went to Leipzig, from Nordhausen, from Potsdam, from Rostock, from wherever; they took the train, the car and said, "This is the day, the decisive day, I am going to participate now or never …."

Is it correct that the reason why October 9 became the decisive day was that they wanted to finish the celebrations for the 40th anniversary of the founding of the GDR in a positive light?

Yes, Honecker didn't want anybody to destroy the 40th anniversary of the founding of the GDR. Additionally, there are always these coincidences …. If we look at the overall development, we had June 4 in China and the reaction of the GDR government which was definite, clear, and disastrous.[14] Since then the expression of the "Chinese solution" was present, and it was clear on October 9 that a Chinese solution was on the horizon. But coming back to June, a few days later was the meeting of the Warsaw Pact members in Bucharest, with THE hardliner, Mr. Ceauşescu, as the host. But Gorbachev declares the Brezhnev Doctrine to be abolished. This means, to say it in a very sloppy way, everybody builds Socialism in its own way, and we don't interfere with one another. Honecker suffered from renal colic and left early and was not seen in his office again until September 22. So he was away from June until September! In between he was in office for one or two days or worked from his bed in the hospital. He also edited an article in the *Neues Deutschland*[15] (New Germany), by himself and added the sentence: "We won't shed a tear for them." Until that time the ones who wanted to leave were the ones who had to explain themselves because they were the betrayers who just wanted to have a comfortable life. But all of a sudden the number of those who left because of Hungary[16] was so huge that the ones who stayed in the country had to question themselves. Why am I actually staying here? This changes the motivation pressure completely.

So Honecker is gone for several months. The little he's doing is stupid, but there is no deputy. He had disposed of Mr. Krenz, because he didn't trust him anymore, and had appointed Mr. Mittag, the economy guy, but he and the other leading figures didn't make any decisions. All of this has to be kept in mind. On September 22 Honecker gets back and already a day later everything was tightened. The next day the first telex is already sent out talking about counterrevolution before any of the others had dared to talk about counterrevolution. So Honecker is back in office and writes, "The counterrevolutionary unrests are to be nipped in the bud." …. And right away, on September 22 and 23, the planning in the different districts started to deal with the situation. No general decision gets taken, but the tendency is clear. In addition, they didn't have the forces and the time to do anything because all forces were concentrated in Berlin to protect the anniversary celebrations on October 7. So the Monday demonstration on October 2 went by undisturbed, but they didn't want to let Leipzig get away with October 9.

On October 9th not only were the police mobilized, but there was also the military, correct?

Well, in principle the *NVA* (*Nationale Volksarmee* = National People's Army) had been deployed since October 3. They had already prepared them for the 40th anniversary to build up the so-called groups of hundreds of draftees to support the police. Actually, it was forbidden to deploy the army within the country. So they said we will build these groups of a hundred and put them under the control of the police …. It

13 The party paper of Leipzig.
14 The GDR government had welcomed the violent suppression of the uprising in China.
15 The nationwide party newspaper.
16 Hungary opened its border to Austria in June.

was a totally absurd idea; the draftees were not clear about it. For them it was basically a deployment under oath of allegiance. And in Leipzig, October 9, there were also 3000 of them on standby and also brigade groups, *Stasi*, police, etc.

When, why and who occupied the headquarters here in Leipzig?

We had a peculiar situation here in Leipzig; the *Stasi* headquarters was directly located on the ring road.[17] This meant that the Monday demonstrations had to pass by the headquarters. It was probably the case that the demonstrators said, "Oh, straight ahead is the *Stasi* headquarters. Do we really want to go that far?!" This is my interpretation, but how do you explain the fact for instance that on September 25 the demonstrators suddenly turned around and walked back to the railway station? In many other cities the demonstrations had to be directed purposely to these locations. Here it just happened.

The round corner[18] was right from the beginning always the critical point where the question arose, "Do we stay non-violent or not?" Therefore by mid-October people of those newly founded opposition groups like *Neues Forum* (New Forum) and others had already positioned themselves in front of the building with "*Neues Forum*" banners and "No Violence" banners, in order to stay in between the *Stasi* and the demonstrators. The *Stasi* liked that a lot of course, and they invited these people for talks under the motto: "Great that you are doing this." But they told the *Stasi*, "Well, we are doing this because we want to know what you are doing here, and we want you to reform." The *Stasi* of course didn't like that. So there was a fundamental conflict about the aims of this action between the *Stasi* and these opposition people.

On the morning of December 4, the *Stasi* office in Erfurt[19], located on a hill in the outskirts of the city, was occupied by the local women's group. This news made it to Leipzig through the channels of the *Neues Forum* and other new groups and parties that organized the rallies before the Monday demonstrations. Since mid-October there were always speeches before the demonstrations. So those people said, "If this news gets out to the people today, we won't be able to handle the situation anymore. It'll explode."

I have to add and explain this because there's always the question again, why this particular day, wasn't it driven and arranged by the *Stasi* itself? In order to understand the situation you have to keep in mind that on Friday[20] the newly founded malpractice and anti-corruption commission had presented their first intermediate report in the *Volkskammer*[21] (People's Chamber). Saturday the weapon storage in Kabelsdorf, in the harbor of Rostock[22] had been discovered. So people got to know that the GDR was a weapons dealer. On December 1 and 2, the first wave of arrests of leading *SED*-cadres[23] had taken place. Bum, bum, bum, so only things like this; it really called for action – this just as a side note to give you a better understanding of the circumstances.

So on December 4, some people actually went over to the *Stasi* office here in Leipzig and said, "Good afternoon, we are from the *Neues Forum*. We are here to suggest something. We are going to stand in front of your building again tonight to protect it, but only if you let 30 people in, so we can prevent you from destroying any more files." That had been the reason for the occupation of the Erfurt *Stasi* office because in the morning a member of a guard in Berlin had said in a radio interview that the *Stasi* had already been destroying files for days. So these rumors were on the air.

So, that afternoon, here in Leipzig they negotiated for three hours, but the *Stasi* refused to let them in. So, in the end, the people said, "If you don't agree, we will go back now to *Augustusplatz*[24] and you can see how you are going to deal with 150,000 to 200,000 people tonight by yourself." This led to a final phone call to Berlin[25] and they were allowed to get into the building. Only a short time later the demonstrators came along the road and about 30 people were chosen from the demonstrators to be let in. They went out onto the balcony and announced to the people that the *Stasi* was now controlled by the people. They debated the whole night long in sealed rooms, etc. This control, which was first meant to be a tool to de-escalate the situation, developed very quickly into a real occupation.

I entered the building sometime during the night. Later on I was with other people, and we occupied another *Stasi* office in the outskirts. And I think it was the same for me and many others, I thought, "How can you go back home after seeing so many things? This has to be addressed!" For instance we found big bags with original letters and asked ourselves, "Are we at the post office, or what is it?"[26]

17 Typically after the Monday peace prayer at St. Nicholas in the center of the old town, the demonstrators started walking out to the ring road. This road follows the old city walls around the city center. They would march once around the ring road.
18 The *Stasi* offices; one of the buildings of the *Stasi* had a half round corner entrance.
19 A city in Thuringia.
20 December 1, 1989.
21 The so called parliament of the GDR.
22 The largest port city of the GDR on the Baltic Sea.
23 *SED =Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, Socialist Unity Party of Germany.
24 Augustus Square, one major square in Leipzig.
25 With the Ministry for State Security in Berlin.
26 The *Stasi* collected, opened, copied and kept or resent thousands of letters every year everywhere in the GDR in order to keep control.

So our intended control developed into an occupation and developed further into a so-called "security partnership"[27]. This was important because the demonstrators asked very soon who those people were who were "sitting" on their *Stasi* files. So there was huge pressure for legitimization, on the one hand by the people and on the other hand by the *Stasi*. So we formed the *Bürgerkomitee* (Citizen's Committee). It was a permanent process of debate and finding compromises.

Who was and is the Bürgerkomitee?

It was formed by those who were there. The *Bürgerkomitee* were those who were there.

So, it was more or less by accident?

Yes. That's very interesting; looking back from today's perspective I'm almost the only one who was involved in opposition work for the long-term and ended up in the *Bürgerforum*. This means that those who were politically active in these times stepped out of this sphere again very quickly. They saw it only as an intermediate step – most of the members had been ordinary demonstrators, of course with some oppositional background, in lots of cases with a church background, but not only. It was a very interesting mix of people who had not been really active in the opposition before. And in the end the core stayed, till today.

So Tuesday morning[28] I asked myself if I would go to work or if I would stay. So I called my workplace and told them, "I'm at the *Stasi*. I'm going to take vacation for a while." That was crazy, completely crazy. We said, "Dear *Stasi*, we are not going back home. We are staying. You are occupied, but you have to ensure that we are paid for it." That was one of the first things we demanded. There was this paragraph in the GDR working law that workers could get on paid leave because of "important work for the society" … and the employers could get financially compensated. So we didn't just leave unexcused. This was the character of this revolution ….

And then we were involved in securing the files, the opening of files, and in developing the (file-law), is that correct? Are you still involved in administrating the files today?

You can say that we, as the *Bürgerforum*, legitimized ourselves, but we always tried to do it with a connection to parliament. Actually we knew very well what we wanted. We were not an official administration … but right from the beginning we always tried to produce fundamental decisions and resolutions in regard to the *Stasi* files by the *Runder Tisch*[29] (Round Table) which we carried out …. So, at least here in Leipzig, we had the responsibility for the files until October 3, 1990. And always together with the police, so nobody was allowed in alone at any time.

On October 3, 1990 the *Stasiunterlagenbehörde* (Federal Government Agency for the *Stasi* Archives) was founded. Here in Leipzig a lot of people from the *Bürgerkomitee*, including myself, moved into this office. I worked there until 2007. I was mostly responsible for dealing with a *Stasi* branch office and for many years I worked as the vice-director responsible for this branch office. The *Bürgerkomitee* of Leipzig focused then on the museum and the exhibition.

The exhibition itself was opened in June 1990 as a temporary exhibition and on August 31 it was opened permanently here in the building. This is probably a major reason why we still exist as the *Bürgerkomitee*. There are still several more around today in different cities, but not all of them anymore. The last major common action of all the GDR *Bürgerkomitees* was a draft for a *Stasiunterlagengesetz* in February 1991. So there was a huge consensus among all of the *Bürgerkomitees* to find a regulated and legitimized approach to the opening and handling of the files ….

27 This meant that one was not allowed to be without the other – representatives from the opposition, *Stasi* people, and the police controlled the *Stasi* building together, in order to prevent one group from destroying or manipulating files or other things.
28 December 5, 1989.
29 A discussion forum between the government and the different opposition groups.