

Reflections of East German Teachers on Unification, July 1991

The following excerpts are from travel diaries of a group of American educators who visited Germany in June-July, 1991. They spent most of their time in Saxony-Anhalt, a former east German state that bordered West Germany. They were hosted by German teachers of English (many of whom also taught Russian).

1. Female Halberstadt teacher

"I was not allowed to have contact [travel outside the GDR] with my colleagues in other places.

I'll never forgive them for that – for all the years I lost... I received a magazine from friends in the USA. The Stasi [secret police] found out and came to my house and took it. They told me never to communicate with these people again. I didn't until 'the change' five years later. My friends thought I was dead." There was a sadness in her voice, but also joy as she recounted her story.

2. A woman from Halberstadt

"My husband and I drove to Goslar [a West German town across the border] after the fall of the Wall in November and just prior to Christmas. We stood in the town center. There was a tall Christmas tree; the smell of roasting nuts in the air; snow was falling; and the shop windows were filled with all kinds of marvelous goods – things we had never seen before and never dreamed we could buy. We thought we were in fairyland."

3. A 59-year-old woman teacher, nearing retirement

"Many people [in East Germany] would rather have had two Germanies, but unification was a necessity."

4. Halberstadt teacher, in her fifties

"From the cradle to the grave we were taken care of by the government. Now we don't know how to make decisions for ourselves."

5. A school headmaster from Magdeburg

"The psychological walls are higher than the Wall."

6. A visiting American's summary observation

"In one respect the East Germans traded security for freedom. The change brought political freedom, but the change is painful for many who have lost economic and social security. Unemployment is high and will get higher. Some former East Germans feel their system had some desirable features and they should have been able to retain those, but the West Germans have required that things be done in the former eastern states as they are in the rest of the FRG. Although not all acknowledge it openly, some do express the view that they feel like second-class citizens."

- What emotions and feelings are conveyed? How did the East Germans feel about unification?
- What indications do you find in these excerpts of restrictions placed on personal freedoms under the old regime in the GDR?
- What changes in their daily lives are people in the eastern section of Germany experiencing? Are these "good?" "bad?" On what basis do you make your judgment?

- What do you think the headmaster meant by his statement (#5)?
- What is your reaction to excerpt #6? Compare this statement with excerpt #4.
- How do these comments compare with those offered in the earlier handouts we read ?
- What was Anne's reaction to the fall of the Wall? What do you make of her reaction?