

# A MOMENT IN THURINGIA

## CHAPTER 1

So there I sat, happily ensconced in my cabin on one of the modern trains in Germany, mesmerized by the landscape moving past my window on that beautiful June day. It is amazing how hypnotic staring out a window can become.

There was a farm with livestock, chickens, a pig, and then some cows. Then the train would pass a station with passengers standing at the platform. Some of these stations reminded me of images one might see in some old movie about World War II. Some of the old wagons could have even been from the 19th century.

One feels so safe in your steel cocoon, traveling rhythmically to the sounds of clacks on the right track. A half hour goes by and then an hour. Finally the conductor entered my sanctuary to ask "ticket bitte." With great confidence I gave the official my ticket.

A moment later, the conductor, with great authority utters "Dieses Ticket ist nicht, Frankfurt Main. Dieses Ticket ist Frankfurt Oder."

“I don’t understand! Frankfurt Oder Frankfurt Main. What’s that?”

Dieser Zug ist nicht zu Franfurt am Main. Dieser Zug fahrt nach Frankfurt am Oder. Then I rose from my seat and promptly entered the cabin next to me.

I blared out in a nervous tone “does anyone here speak English?!!!” In a prompt reply and in a perfect British accent “Why yes, I speak English. May I help you?” I said “the conductor is telling me something about Frankfurt Main Frankfurt Oder. What is he talking about?”

After an extended conversation with the conductor, the woman, who I would later find out, was an English teacher with a perfect British accent, replied, “well, you see the conductor says you are going to Frankfurt Oder, not Frankfurt Main. You see Frankfurt Oder is east while Frankfurt Main is west. You see you are going toward Moscow?”

Holy s--t, Moscow!

The sense of panic engulfed me as one rarely experiences. This was one of those pregnant pause moments; a sensation like one is lifted of one’s feet into another life. Normally, if a person is going in the wrong direction you just get off at the next station and take a train going in the opposite direction. This

was not so simple. You see I was traveling in East Germany, also known as the DDR [1] in 1984. Remember, at this time the entire country was under the thumb of Russia and deeply intertwined with Communist rule. Put more bluntly, I was traveling in the Iron Curtain going the wrong way! In a country like the DDR one does not just get off a train and go in a different direction. The DDR has rules, lots of rules. The entire country is possessed by rules. Rules where you can go, how long you can stay, how you are getting there, and why you want to go there. And the very idea of going west, toward West Germany was, well, verboten. This was still at the height of the cold war and one most heavily defended areas anywhere.

The question was how was I going to get out of this mess. Compounding this was the fact that in seven hours I would be overstaying my visa. If I didn't get out of the DDR in seven hours, I would be staying beyond my legal stay. This is illegal. Not illegal like in West Germany, but like illegal so that I could be put in prison, or so I thought. You might say I was in deep shit!

I hope the food is good in jail, I thought. After that very long one-hour train, I finally arrived in Leipzig.

1 Most English speakers use the abbreviation: GDR to refer to East Germany during the Cold War. I prefer

to use the German language abbreviation: DDR to denote East Germany.

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## CHAPTER 2

One may ask why anyone from the west would wish to go to East Germany. The DDR was not exactly one of your top 10 tourist destinations. Most people would much rather go to Paris. Just obtaining a visa to get into the country is very expensive and a long, involved process. Then when one entered the country, the contrast could not be more different from West Germany. The first thing that became apparent was that everything looked very gray. There was no color except for an occasional red flag with a pair of compasses that really looked more like a set of calipers, and sickle signifying that this was a Communist State. There were few stores, the people dress as if they were from another century. The cars in the DDR would fart out a plume of black smoke. Some of the cars were actually made of cardboard, believe it or not. The people did not look very happy. There was very little music. The food is terrible. Grey, over cooked vegetables was the norm. Lots of pollution and don't forget the guards and police with high leather boots, all well armed, and of course the Stasi agents, or, in other words the DDR secret police. There was always the sneaky suspicion that you were

being watched all of the time. This was definitely not one of your five top tourist destinations. Even the West Germans would not want to go there for the best of the wurst.

My real quest for travels in the DDR stem from a 1977 catalog I acquired printed by the Museum of Crafts in Frankfurt, West Germany. [1] It was a international survey of contemporary artists and the glass they created. Upon perusing the book, I made a rather curious discovery of a bottle made using the technique of lampworking, also known as flameworked glass. Lampworked glass utilizes a burner fueled by gas, oxygen, and sometimes air. Glass tubing and glass rods are used to fabricate often very delicate objects. The craft probably dates back to the ancient Roman period.

[2] Modern Glas – Museum Fur Kunsthandwerk, 1976, Frankfurt Am Main, p. 67.

The vessel had a beautiful bulbous form leading up to a slender neck. One can almost imagine a genie wafting from the vessel. What particularly engaged me were the fine, near microscopic lines decorating the form. In addition, there were vorticular swirls punctuated by both horizontal and vertical lines. Another curious thing that peaked my interest was its provenance. Artist: Albin Schaedel. Born 1905 DDR. At the time I didn't even know what a DDR was. For

the life of me I couldn't understand how the vessel could be made, especially using the technique of lampworking. Its seemingly impossible execution mesmerized me.

So who was this Schaedel person? How did he make this object? And why in hell did he come from East Germany?

Albin Schaedel was born in 1905 in Neuhaus, Thuringen. He was lampworker by profession. After WWII, he, like most glassblowers in that area made a living making sculptural glass animals. He became particularly interested in a technique developed in the early 1900s. During that period lampworkers would make glass cigarette holders having the same delicate filigree patterns. This was the origin of the fine lines and swirled patterns that so mystified me. The contemporary technique is called "Glass Montage." He copied the technique and then perfected it to a very high level of artistry. Schaedel is really the father of the technique in the post World War II period.

Thuringia has been famous for glass manufacturing for centuries and the center for the craft since the 16<sup>th</sup> century has been Lauscha. Next to Venice, it is the oldest continuous glass-making center in the world. Han Greiner and Christoph Muller originally founded it in 1597. It seems nearly everyone working

in glass in Lauscha was related to either a Greiner or a Muller.

So since 1977, glass montage, Albin Schaedel, Lauscha, and ultimately the DDR obsessed me.

### Chapter 3

Visiting the DDR was not an easy task in 1984. I suspect that the East Germans knew it had a terrible, dysfunctional government. Perhaps they also wondered why anyone would have any desire to visit the country in the first place.. A person would have to be crazy to want to enter the DDR. They probably thought “do we really want crazy people visiting us?”

An even more probable reason has to do with Joseph Stalin. I believe that Joe was unquestionably severely paranoid. I'm sure he must have felt as if a lot of people wanted to assassinate him. You know even paranoids have enemies. Actually I am sure a lot of people did want to assassinate him. So there was some reality to his fear. Living in a paranoid country creates its own paranoia. I have always thought Communism was just a good excuse for repression and had nothing to do with egalitarianism. The unfortunate roulette wheel of history is that the USSR conquered East Germany after World War II.

In the early 1980's, I knew that East Germany was a Communist country. But what the heck; I'm an American, so I can go anywhere I want to go. This, I would later discover was a very naive thought. I was under the impression that you just showed up at the boarder and they let you in. The DDR was not only a paranoid state, but hopelessly bureaucratic. This is what I was up against.

In 1983, I attended a conference in Frauenau, a beautiful village in southern Bavaria. Frauenau is also known as an important glass center in Europe. It has a long tradition of glassmaking that goes back 300 years.

The Eisch Factory is particularly well known for fostering the work of Erwin Eisch. He is well known as a German Abstract Expressionist Painter and the creator of some of the most innovative glass of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Erwin gained notoriety because of his influence on Harvey Littleton when he was just establishing Studio Glass in the United States in the 1960's.

Every four years, Frauenau and the Eisch Factory sponsor a glass art conference. In 1983, visiting Frauenau seemed like a great idea at the time. There was always lots of beer, food, lectures and artists demonstrating their skill to the participants. Low and



be hold, two of the artists demonstrating were from the DDR and from Lauscha. To see the two not only incarnate but also demonstrating was a thrill beyond description. Never had I seen such skill in working with glass, to say nothing for their exquisite sense of form.

The two artists were Walter Baz-Dolle and Albrecht Greiner-Mai, both glass masters and national treasures of the DDR. It became clear to the glass blowing duo that I had more than a passing interest in meeting them. After our first encounter, I mentioned that I would like to visit them in Lauscha. They seemed also very interested in accommodating my request. I was given their business cards. This was my first foot in the door into the DDR. After the conference I then rushed to Frankfurt, with business cards in hand. I figured it was a slam-dunk into the DDR. This was also a very naive idea.

I then visited a travel agency to make arrangements to visit Lauscha and my two newfound friends. The agent informed me with no uncertain terms a visit to the DDR was impossible! She said you must wait at least one month to get a visa. I said, one month, you have to be crazy. Surely there is some way I can get to Lauscha. Diligently, she looked through all of the tourist brochures. Perhaps by going with a tourist group, I could get to Lauscha. Nein, impossible, no tourist groups are going to Lauscha.

This represented a profound disappointment. Many East Germans would and did risk their lives to get out of the DDR and I felt like risking my life to get into the country.

## CHAPTER 4

So there I was feeling quite dejected, unable to travel east, unrequited in my quest. Most sane people would just give up trying to get to East Germany. Can you imagine hanging around Germany for a month solely to get a visa to get into the DDR. I think for me it was a matter of closure, not quite able to reach for the brass ring on a merry-go-round or a drawing of an incomplete circle with out the perimeter meeting.

In just a few short days, I would be traveling west back to the good old USA. Normally this would be the end of my story, except it wasn't. I had to get to Lauscha.

There is a huge gulf between wanting to do something and having to do something. To me, having to do something means as if my life depended on it. Perhaps only an expert in psychopathology could explain this phenomenon because to most rational people, it doesn't make any sense.

At this time I became a good friend of Kurt Walstab, a lampwork artist living in Darmstadt, Germany. Before leaving for home, I had to ask him how I could get to Lauscha. He said you cannot get to Lauscha. I said, what do you mean I cannot get to Lauscha! He said you cannot get to Lauscha; it's impossible. I then thought, "What the hell does he know; I'm an American and I can go anywhere I want to go." Little did I know that Kurt came from Neuhaus, a close city to Lauscha. He lived through World War II. He fought against Russia in the Battle of Bulge. He knew first hand not only what it was like to live in the DDR, but also what it was like to live under Russian occupation. He and his wife defected from the DDR to West Germany by the skin of their teeth. He later told me that there was a short period of time when, in East Berlin, one could take a street car directly into West Berlin; get off the tram and into freedom. This was right before the wall was built, separating East from West. This what they did, leaving family and all worldly possessions behind in the DDR. Eventually he moved to Darmstadt to establish a very successful scientific glass blowing studio. Eventually, he developed a world reputation as an artistic lamp worker in West Germany.

I asked him, "Maybe you could go with me to visit Lauscha." He said, "No way; you can't go to Lauscha!" So with that in mind I flew back to the United States of America.

On flight, I thought, "I have to get to Lauscha." When I finally returned to Michigan, I said, "I have to get to Lauscha." One month later I thought "I have to get to Lauscha."

You might ask, "How does a person get to Lauscha?" Americans can go anywhere they want to go. I'm an American, so, logically I can go to Lauscha.

After some investigation, I discovered that there was a travel agency in New York that specialized in travel to the DDR. I contacted the agency and I said "I wished to go to the DDR and go to Lauscha. Was that possible?" Miraculously, the agent said "of course, you can go to the DDR and visit Lauscha. We can arrange for you to get a visa and then get to Lauscha." I'm an American and maybe I can go anywhere I want to go including East Germany. At least there was a chance I could get to my destination.

So for twelve months, I tried to get a visa to enter the DDR. Dealing with a travel agent wasn't that hard. You fill out the forms and send in the money. As I recall you had to pay \$100 for the visa and then \$120 per day for the Hotel Thuringian. I would have to stay there for three days. That calculates into \$460. That particular hotel was the place visitors from the West were required to stay when visiting that area of East

Germany. It was part of a hotel chain built by the East German government.

This was starting to get rather expensive. What the hell, I'm an American and I can go anywhere I want to go. So I filled out the forms and sent my money to the travel agency eagerly anticipating my visa.

Remember, this was the DDR. Everything took a long time to do anything. Lots of bureaucrats and lots of people who wanted to make it very difficult for you to get into the DDR. One does not just hand over \$460 and get a visa. Oh no, you had to wait a very long time for your visa. In the mean time, you had to make plane reservations and plans for leaving the USA on a certain day. Often it is quite difficult and expensive to change reservations right before departure if you can get a ticket at all in high season on the eleventh hour. What went from a few months took nearly a full year to get my visa, just a few weeks before my departure. Further, because the DDR had possession of my passport, about the only place I could travel to was the USA. It was as if the DDR controlled everything. I finally did get my coveted visa, however. [Sigh of relief,]

There it was, right before me; my passport with a beautiful stamped compass and sickle, the official DDR insignia. Soon I was on my way to Deutschland and East Germany.

My visa as it was in 1974.



Now, with the possibility of actually going to the DDR and Lauscha I became very frightened. So much now for I'm an American and I can go anywhere I want to go. Do I now really want to go to Lauscha. I had to go to Lauscha, fear be damned. In reality, I had never been so afraid in my life. I saw John Le Carre' movies and read his novels. I knew how nasty it could become behind the Iron Curtain. Actually, these novels were not just fiction. When the wall was finally torn down, it became quite clear how awful the DDR really was. Perhaps my fears were not just phobias.

## CHAPTER 5

It seemed like going to Germany was becoming a regular activity. I left in the evening from Detroit and arrived eight hours later in the morning in Frankfurt Germany. Then I would take a short commuter train to Darmstadt to stay at my hotel; take a quick nap and then visit Kurt and Henny. Unfortunately, K and H were waiting for me at the airport. Evidently, I had arrived early and they arrived late. Perhaps this was a harbinger for things to come. Finally we were reunited at their home in Darmstadt. It was embarrassing showing up for a dinner after having putting them through all of the trouble. Of course I did have some satisfaction that I had actually obtained a visa to get to Lauscha. Remember he said, "You can't go there. It's not possible!" I guess I showed him!

Not so quick to judge. First. I couldn't read, write, or speak German. Not only did Kurt speak German, but also he spoke Thuringian German, a specific dialect. Second, being an American I had little or no access to people in East Germany. Third, having lived in that part of Germany, he knew just about everyone who was anyone of importance in Lauscha. Fourth, he could arrange my travel so that I could get from Frankfurt to Suhl, East Germany, the closest city I could get to near Lauscha. Fifth, he could arrange

that Walter Baz-Dolle could pick me up at the Hotel Thuringian, the only place I could legally stay in the DDR.

This indeed was a humbling experience. Perhaps, Americans can not go anywhere they want to go after all. Another thing that should be mentioned is that Kurt, Henny, and their daughter could calm my nerves and assure me that I was in no danger in East Germany.

So everything was set. I had a train reservation to Saul. I had, enough West German Marks to buy lamp worked glass from the artists in Lauscha, and, finally, the arrangements to meet Walter Baz-Dolle at the Hotel. So, I left the train station in Frankfurt bound for Suhl.

Finally arriving in Saul in the morning, having no sleep, I went to the Hotel Thüringen and waited in my room for Walter's arrival. Sure enough, an hour later, WBD arrived and then we left the hotel and he then proceeded to drive to Lauscha.

The forests in Thuringia are increasable beautiful, especially in the summer. Tall white pines, rolling hills, spring water flowing through the forests and from village to village. Was I really in the DDR? This was as close to heaven as one can get.



Americans almost never visited the DDR let alone Lauscha. I know of only two other Americans who have ever visited Lauscha. You can imagine my anticipation. Finally, looking over a steep hill, there it was, the Village of Lauscha with its entire fairytale splendor. It was right out of some Grimm's story you would experience as a child; unbelievably beautiful. It is wonderful to hark to an earlier century to imagine what the village must have looked back then. One of the truly wonderful aspects of Lauscha is its distinctive architecture. One can wander aimlessly through the streets and observe the beautiful 19-century slate houses and then think back to how one person described the town in 1870. "As the small flames of the glassblowers shimmered throughout the village, it appeared as if glowworms had been scattered over the whole town." 3

3 G. Nicola, "The Glassblowers' Village Lauscha/GDR," *Neues Glas* [February 1983], p.56.

Walter immediately took me to his home. One would expect some pretty Spartan accommodations in East Germany. Nothing could be further from the truth. Walter's home though not huge was quite opulent. There was fine woodworked interiors and furniture, having only the most modern appliances in the kitchen and fine books in the wonderful library. He had a well equipped glassblowing studio and one of the

finest built in backyard barbeque grills sheltered by its own structure. There were hand made slate shingles both on roof and on the side of his home, typical of the architecture in that area off Thüringen. The guest bedroom had wonderful clean sheets, something I really needed since I had no sleep from my night train ride. If this is not living, I don't what is.

After having a shower in Walter's ultra modern bathroom, I took a well-deserved two-hour nap.

When I finally arose from my slumber, evening was approaching. Guests started to arrive. Griener Mia, Hubert Koch, Volkart Preck, all of their wives and Walter's son. Wonderful beer and wine was served. Then came dinner; steak for everyone done on Walter backyard Grill. This is the DDR? Everyone welcomed me. All were incredibly friendly even though they could not speak English and I could not speak German.

After our meal, evening discussions occurred. With my pocket book dictionary, lots gestures, and pig English/German, we were able to communicate, though at a rather simple level. Walter and Albrecht were strangely silent, while everyone else seems quite happy to speak their minds. Though it seemed as if I was living in utopia, I detected the presence of dissatisfaction living in East Germany. Discussed

was the omnipresent dreaded grenza or border between East and West Germany. In Berlin it was the Wall while in the rest of East Germany, it was barbed wire, land mines and numerous guarded checkpoints. At the time, Lauscha literally was in walking distance from the grenza.

Lauscha is situated along the Rein Steig, which, for hundreds of years was a walking trail used to connect the different villages in the area. It was decided, before the end of WWII, by the Allied powers, to use the Rein Steig as the demarcation line between the Western powers and the Soviet Union.

That entire area was in a kind of no mans land. It was also one of the most heavily guarded places on earth. Surrounding this area was a huge army supposedly "protecting" East Germany from "foreign enemies," in other words, western, capitalist countries.

At the time it was difficult even for East Germans to visit Lauscha because the DDR was in constant fear that their citizenry would defect to the west. No one other than the military and high government officials were permitted anywhere near the boarder.

If World War III was going to happen, it is quite likely that it would begin in this area of Germany. Basically, I was living in largest prison in the world! It seemed

as if I was living in a strange sort of Alice in Wonderland. And to think in five short years, this entire house of cards would come tumbling down.

I also detected at our gathering, complaints about their lack of freedom and inability to travel. There was also dissatisfaction with the presence of jack booted guards and, I'm certain, the ever present Stasi, or secret agency used to spy on anybody and everybody in the DDR.

To paint another point of view, I had to mention that things in America were not necessarily as good as you might think. For instance not everyone had money. In fact there was a lot of poverty there. The Laushians seem to sincerely doubt this, almost scornfully. Perhaps they thought, "You think you have poverty, try living here." This was just a guess on my part.

Everyone in East Germany had to get permission to go anywhere. If you wanted to travel you had plan your travel way in advance, if you were fortunate to get there at all. They then asked me were I would be traveling next. I said "I don't know; North, South, East. I did not have any plans." They said, "You must have plans. You cannot travel without plans." They seem amazed that I could travel with such freedom.

Actually, the glassblowers of Lauscha had it quite good, relatively speaking. They were a prized group, often considered living national treasures. Many of them became quite wealthy. Their work was highly sought after by their citizenry because their work was non-threatening to the East German government and since everything was so gray there, glass at least provided some color in their lives.

More importantly, at the time, the lampworked glass of Lauscha was highly sought after by the collectors in West Germany. Having been made in Communist East Germany, the work was considered exotic and rare. And because it was paid for in West German Marks, the Glassblowers were very well remunerated indeed. East German Marks were essentially worthless. However, if you had West Marks you could buy nearly anything you wanted. Their buying power was tremendous.

To this day, I don't understand how their economy worked or, rather, didn't work. I could not figure out how they could make so much money in such an impoverished country, relative to the rest of Europe. Because of the language barrier, there remained so many questions left unanswered.

The next day was the day I could visit the famed glassblowers of Lauscha. In addition to visiting

Walters's studio, I was also taken to Griener Mai home and workplace. I also visited Hubert Koch and Volkart Precht's in his basement furnace studio.

Volkart has been given credit for starting Studio Glass not just in East Germany but all of Europe. Literally, just two years after Harvey Littleton started Studio Glass in 1962, Volkart built the first private glassblowing studio in Europe. Prior to this virtually all hot glass was made in large factories. At the time there was a strict demarcation between designer and craftsman. Both Harvey and Volkart changed that. Finally it was possible for artist and craftsman to be the same person.

Having several hundred dollars in West German Marks, I could purchase the highly coveted glass from the artists of Lauscha. Everything seemed to cost \$50, a trivial expense compared to glass sold in the west.

As my visit to Lauscha was coming to a close, I met one other person of particular interest to me. Almost no one in Lauscha could speak, understand, or write in English. Perhaps, if I were fluent in Russian I could have found more people who could understand me. Other than German, Russian was the preferred language taught in their school system. The teaching of English was discouraged. Finally, I did meet a person who could speak English and therefore answer

all of my questions. Not only could he speak perfect English, but perfect American English. I think he had better command of English than I. This seemed very strange. I wonder where here the Hell did he come from? Since I never learned his name and for the sake of brevity let's call him "Mr. Eloquent" because he spoke so well. He seemed like a very friendly person who only wanted to help me. We had a good conversation with each other, each asking and answering questions. I really liked the guy.

One question he asked me was what I thought of East Germany and of Lauscha. I replied that I really loved Lauscha and the people living there. I also commented that I thought their government was extremely stupid. I said I that it was crazy that it was so difficult to obtain the wonderful glass produced in East Germany. At the very least, if for no other reason, just to make more money, Lauscha and its glass should be available to the rest of the world. Why make it so difficult to visit this wonderful place. He also asked me was there anything he could do for me. I replied that I would really like to hear some of the local music from the area. Perhaps hear a performance of the music of Thüringen. He said, "of course: we can arrange that. It's too bad you have to leave so soon. Perhaps next time you visit Lauscha."

## CHAPTER 6

Although the glassblowers that were officially sanctioned by the East German Government had a rather nice life style, possessing many of the amenities from the west, most of the other citizens of the DDR were not so fortunate. Unless a person became a Communist or at least strongly supported the government, that person faced if not poverty then a life of hardship.

A more typical example of a person who lived in Lauscha at that time was Michael Gunersch. He lived and worked in Lauscha the same time I visited the village. He was an auto mechanic by trade. He also had a particular affinity for everything from the west.

People living in Lauscha were both very fortunate and unfortunate to live so close to the West German border.

They were fortunate because they had easy access to radio and television from a non-Communist country. They could hear western music and news from a politically free country. I'm sure it was wonderful to be able to receive such information, but it was also a tease to realize that they were within walking distance to freedom and the amenities associated with the west, yet they could not have access to those luxuries.



When was living in Lauscha, he had access to all of this information. He had a particular affinity for the music and trivia of the Beatles. Upon listening to a radio broadcast, he correctly answered a question on the rock group. He began a long [and short] distance relationship with the announcer. I think he was developing an obsession to get out of the DDR, as I was to get into the DDR. He contacted the government asking to visit West Germany. He was promptly refused. Repeatedly, he tried to get permission to leave East Germany only to be repeatedly refused. He got so desperate to leave the DDR that he planned to travel to Czechoslovakia and then defect to the west. Some how the secret police discovered his plan and he was arrested. Subsequently he had to spend the next three years in prison in Suhl. Eventually, because of an arrangement with the West German Government, he was allowed to leave East Germany. The DDR required West Germany to buy, really bribe, the release of their citizens' freedom to the west. Technically, according to international law, this was illegal. West Germany did it anyway. This is how George obtained his freedom. Later, he became a highly accomplished scientific glassblower after receiving an education in West Germany. Not a bad profession considering his surname. Today, he currently lives in Hawaii.

Because of the murky nature of dealing with a closed society, I wish to emphasize that the hypothetical

answers to my questions may not be accurate. With the help of Michael Gunersch I think I have at least a partial, though highly speculative, answer to the many questions I still have concerning the DDR. First. He assures me I have a Stasi file in Suhl concerning my visit to East Germany. Perhaps someone may wish to investigate this file. I would be very curious as to its contents. Visiting these files may provide a more accurate account of what really happen during my stay. After the fall of the wall, anyone one now can view these “super secret” Stassi files. For instance, I still have questions concerning the mysterious man in Lauscha who spoke such great English. And if the area was such a secure place, why was I allowed to visit at all? Why were Greiner Mai and Baz Dole so eager for me to visit Lauscha , possibly endangering the relationship they had with the East German Government? And why were the two so silent during my initial meeting with all of the invited guests at Baz-Dolle’s house? Everything seemed so odd, as if things didn’t quite add up in first place.

Here is what I surmised happened during my stay. Mr. Eloquent undoubtedly was an East German official with probable direct connection to the Stassi, and quite possibly a Stasi agent. Since the study of English was so discouraged and since he spoke so well, he probably had experience living either in Canada or the United States. He may have even been

a citizen of one of those countries and later defected to East Germany. I'm sure he had a lot to write in my Stasi file. Though quite friendly, after I said that I thought the East German Government was very stupid and should open more to the west, he must have thought "this yahoo from America is totally useless to us. But for a little guy, he could cause us a lot of trouble! He'll never make a decent Communist. Get the SOB out of this country ASAP."

Greiner-Mai and Walter Baz-Dolle had to have something to do with the East German Government or they could not have been allowed to visit Frauenau in the first place. Anyone who had anything to do with the DDR had to obey what the government required of him or her. Quite possibly both Albrecht and Walter may have even been members of the East German Communist Party. They probably had close contact with the East German government in order for me to get a visa and to arrange our meeting with Mr. Loquacious. I think the reason the DDR would allow an American into East Germany and Lauscha is the possibility that I could provide the country with information about the west. Probably it would start out as highly innocuous facts eventually leading to more confidential information that could get me in big trouble with my own government. I think both Greiner Mi and Baz-Dolle genuinely wanted me to visit them. After all it was very exceptional for anyone visiting from the west let alone from the United

States. Still it would not hurt their standing if they could find someone who could basically spy on the west.

I know all of my conclusions are a bit bizarre. Perhaps I have read way too many John Le Carre' novels. Still it makes a great deal of sense. At the very least, it makes great material for a spy novel.

And if my conclusions are correct, I think it highly important not to judge anyone for being a communist supporting a stupid government. For that matter it is also important not to judge those who were trying to defect to the west in search of a better life and in the process abandoning their family and homeland. Also, from the perspective of the DDR, is it all that different for a corporate groupie touting the latest product that probably never should have been made in the first place? I think the fundamental difference between the two societies is that the DDR was "one stop shopping." A person in the DDR had only one choice, either deal with government or live in virtual poverty. While in the west, because of our capitalistic system, there is a cornucopia of choices.

## CHAPTER 7

I must admit I could have spent at least several more days in Lauscha except my visa was about to expire. I had completed everything I intended except there were so many more things I wanted to explore. So many questions remained unanswered.

It was my final day in Lauscha and presumably returning to Frankfurt and then Darmstadt. I had a final meeting with Griener Mai at his home. He cautioned me to declare all of the money I had on leaving the country. I found it curious that the DDR was so concerned about money entering into the country and leaving the country.

We then left the village and I was driven to a small railroad station with the intension of taking a train back to West Germany and to Frankfurt. He left me there with the intention that the train would arrive shortly. Sure enough, there was the Frankfurt train stopping to pick up passengers. I boarded the train and found a comfortable cabin. Then the train left the station, thinking I was would arrive in the next few hours in West Germany.

By now you've probably figured out that I was traveling in the wrong direction, traveling even more deeply into the country I had to leave very shortly. Time flies when having fun and I had no idea how long it was taking to get back to West Germany. That was

when the conductor interrupted me telling me I was going in the wrong direction.

So there I was after several hours of train travel, departing from the wrong train traveling in the wrong direction in a city I was not supposed to be.

## CHAPTER 8

Leipzig is located in the State of Saxony. The city fought Napoleon in 1813, and ended Napoleon's conquest of Europe. The city was heavily damaged during World War II, by Allied bombing. It was then turned over to the Red Army.

From my perspective, Leipzig, in 1983 seemed as if not a lot had changed since World War II. The train station was not up to the standards of modern facilities one became accustomed to in the west. The interior was very dark due to the lack of adequate illumination. There was only one restaurant in the station, packed with people and very few staff to wait on customers. I was becoming very thirsty and I could not even get any drinkable water without East German Marks. Without German language skills no one could direct me anywhere. The one thing I did know is it was early in the evening and my visa was about to expire in just a few hours. I could not forget

what the conductor said, “ DO NOT FORGET TO LEAVE ON THE NEXT TRAIN THAT DEPARTS FROM DRESDEN TOMORROW MORNING AT 7:00, OR ELSE!”

What does one do when that person is in a foreign land, unable to speak the language with no place to rest, no water or food, and essentially penniless or rather east  
“phennigerless.”

The first thing I noticed was a small park across the street with park benches. It looked as this was as good a place to stay as any for the next 12 hours. At least there was a park bench to sit. I went to the park and tried to get as comfortable as possible on a bench. It wasn't all that uncomfortable. I sat down on my new temporary home. After an hour that comfortable bench started to become hard and difficult to sit on. My next attempt was to try reclining on the bench. I found this to be even more uncomfortable than sitting. I even tried sleeping on the bench, to no avail. I was beginning to have the unique sensation of being a homeless person.

After 3 hours of this experience, I became rather bored and I had the brilliant idea to start exploring the city of Leipzig. I departed from my temporary home and started walking. It was now 10:00 in the evening, still having 9 hours to kill. So I walked, and

walked, and walked. Everything looked quite dark and gray, much like the rest of the DDR.

It was 11:00 and now only 8 hours to kill. I thought I was really making progress now. Then, all of a sudden, as if a mirage in a desert I saw a bright glow of light. I hadn't seen anything like this strange phenomenon since I left Frankfurt. As I walked closer I noticed a tall building completely encased in glass. Normally I don't like Mies van der Rohe's international style of architecture, however after being in East Germany for three days, this was truly a breath of fresh air. As I walked closer, I saw a brilliant sign at the top of the building with huge letters, HOTEL MERKUR. I could hardly believe my eyes. Was I having a dream? No, it really was a hotel as beautiful as any I have ever seen in Europe or for matter in the good old USA.

I walked up to the Merkur and entered the hotel. Sitting in front of me was a beautiful young lady sitting at a desk greeting me with great enthusiasm. I asked her in English, could I go into the bar I see to my right? In perfect English she replied, do you have any West German Marks? I replied, "Yes, I do". She then said, "of course. Stay here as long as you wish."

Once again I had to remind myself that this was not a dream. I entered the bar and sat on the stool and



promptly ordered a vodka martini on the rocks with a twist. Within a few minutes, in front of me was a delicious libation. I asked, "Do you have a menu?"

He replied "of coarse. Here, what can I get you?" I asked for the hotel special sandwich. Within 15 minutes I was presented with my delicious meal.

It was 12:00 midnight and just another 7 more hours to kill. As you can well imagine I had found a new home for the rest of the evening.

There I was, happy as a clam, plenty of food to eat and lots to drink, and I don't mean just water. The cocktails were as good as any I have ever consumed anywhere. It was difficult to find, even in West Germany, to find a decent martini. Beer and schnapps are the intoxicant of choice. It was strange to have to go the DDR to score a good drink.

I believe that the hotel was built specifically for tourists visiting from West Germany. As long as one had plenty of West German Marks, a person could live quit comfortably at the Hotel Merkur. Upon careful observation, I noticed that some of the patrons might not have been from the West. I suspect because of their dress and their hushed conversation that many were from East Germany. I also think many of the people there were individual's in high places in the DDR government. Perhaps some of them were Stasi agents.

Another curious observation I had were the beautiful women sitting next to me at the bar. In the west I would rarely, if ever encounter such lovelies sitting so close. I wondered, perhaps they were not your average kindergarten variety West German tourist.

Again, accuse me of sitting through too many spy movies, but I think they were prostitutes working directly for the East German Government. It was not uncommon for women of the night to entice some unsuspecting visitor into having sex and then having the whole episode video taped and then later used to blackmail the hotel guest at some opportune time later,

Was I tempted? No way my “freund”! The last thing I needed was to be entangled in some illicit affair with only a few hours left to catch my ride out of the DDR.

Remember what the man said, “MAKE SURE YOU GET ON THE NEXT TRAIN OUT OF LEIPZIG AT 7:00.”

## CHAPTER 8

Ahhhhhhh, 6:00 in the morning! No sleep, plenty of refreshments, and dawn starting to appear. One hour left toward the west. I made sure I got to the train station early. So there I was sitting close to the track that I hoped would take me back to West Germany.

The anticipation was relentless. They say the German trains always arrive on time and so there it was, the 7:00 train to Frankfurt. This time I made sure it was the Frankfurt Main train and not the Frankfurt Oder train. I did want to go west and not east. Sure enough, the sign on the train clearly stated Frankfurt Main.

I then proceeded to board the train. This time it seemed as if the cars were unusually busy. I guess the westbound trains are more popular for some reason than the east bound. I found a cabin with four passengers. At least there was one seat for me. With in 5 minuets the train finally left the station.

In the cabin there was no conversation except for the two men in uniform very quietly whispering to each other. Too bad I couldn't hear them. I bet they were talking about something very secret. They were probably speaking either German or Russian so it would have been impossible to understand them anyway. Now that I think about it a lot of folks in East Germany would whisper as if they were trying to hide something. I suppose it is the nature of all very closed

societies as in the DDR. The two other passengers were older women that were also totally silent.

So there I was traveling west as if seeing everything in reverse from the previous day. With no one to speak with, the journey seemed to take longer than before.

It was very curious, after several hours travel, right before the boarder, the two men in uniform departed from the train. I surmised that they were soldiers either from East Germany or from Russia having to report for duty. Remember, this area was some of the most heavily fortified areas in the world. Though I couldn't see it from the train, I'm sure there were a whole slew of military bases, hardware, and of East German troops very near by.

As soon as the troopers left, I asked. "Do you speak any English?" One of the woman said in a strong German accent "ya, I speak English." Great, someone I can actually speak to. I asked, "Where are you going?" "I'm going to Montreal" I then said, "I thought no one was allowed to leave East Germany." She said, "That isn't true. If you are 65 years old, you can leave the DayDayR at any time." I asked "why?" She then said, "Well you see the DayDayR wants all of the retired folks to leave so that they don't have to pay retirement benefits. They would rather have West

Germany pay to keep old folks living. They really don't want us here. . It saves the DayDayR lots of money." I said, "Gee, it sure is good you can travel in the west." She then said, "I'm very lucky, if I didn't have family in Canada, I wouldn't be traveling at all. It's too expensive for most people in the DayDayR to travel in the west. You know in the DayDayR you can't even get a banana. And bananas are so good for children. In West Germany you can get as many bananas as you want. None are available in the DayDayR."

We now were approaching the border crossing. The women seem quite agitated. There always seems to be some tension when crossing the border from one country into another. In crossing the boarder from East Germany into West Germany, that tension was magnified about 100 times. I think unless you actually experience the crossing of a border from a highly repressive country into a free country, you probably don't understand the experience. The only way I can describe the tension is as if you were sitting in a chair with a 40-pound weight on your shoulders. The air inside the cabin seems to become extremely thin, almost like you couldn't breath. Looking out of the window you could see all kinds of armed guards with police dogs checking everything in sight. Then a man would place a very large mirror underneath the train to see if anyone was trying hide and escape to the West. Many East Germans were either imprisoned

for a very long time or were shot trying to escape over the border. I think the tension was real, not imagined.

The border guard then entered the cabin asking for passports, further identification, visas, and often many questions. Having the correct papers and answering the questions correctly would determine not only whether you could cross the boarder, but also whether you would be held over for more interrogation. Always in the back of my mind was the fact that I had stayed beyond my visa and therefore I was technically in the DDR illegally. This alone was enough reason for me to be held over for further questioning. Fortunately, I had the foresight to have the woman I met the previous day on the train going in the wrong direction, the one who spoke such perfect English, write a letter explaining my stupidity as to why I had stayed beyond my visa. Perhaps, at least, it helped me get out of the country. A copy of that letter is as follows:

Der Herr wünscht nach  
Frankfurt/Main  
Hilf

zu kommen.

Er stieg in Suhl  
in den falschen Zug  
in entgegengesetzter  
Richtung

Das Trümmer endet  
im Nitternacht  
Es tut ihm leid,  
daß er sich irrt.

Freunden. Sei ihm  
bitte helfen

I don't know what the letter says, however, it seemed to work. The guard took the letter and showed it to his supervisor, and nothing else was said. There was a sigh of relief.

Actually everything went fine. There was no more trouble than if I had been crossing the border of any country. Maybe I was just lucky, or perhaps they just wanted me out of their country. To this day I don't know.

So after a half hour at the border, the train finally left for Frankfurt Main. What a relief. Immediately the 40-pound weight left and the air in the cabin returned to normal.

It still would take another 2 hours to reach Frankfurt. Now there was plenty of time to talk with the two women in the cabin of the train. I think I learned as much talking with those women as from anyone about how truly crazy the DDR really was. To someone from the west, the place seemed to have an Alice in Wonderland. Perhaps everything seemed normal from the point of view of someone living in the DDR at the time. From the point of view of a person from a capitalistic society, right seemed left, up seemed down, true seemed false, black seemed white. Constantly, they talked about how stupid the government was and how a person had to get permission to do anything. There were all kinds of



crazy rules; rules that make absolutely no sense. Rules where you can go, what you can think, who you can see, what you can say, where you can live, what you can buy. In all fairness one can argue that, at times, life in the west also may seem equally incongruous. The fundamental difference between the two societies is at least in free enterprise societies we all have, relatively speaking, freedom to choose. We have many more opportunities to succeed or fail or in other words to chart our own course, less impeded by what our government says we can do or say.

## CHAPTER 9

Finally, we arrived in Frankfurt Main Railway Terminal. I bid my newfound friends a fond farewell and I gave my regards to all of her family in Canada. I then found a bus that I could take to Darmstadt so that I could meet with Kurt Walstab.

The Bus ride would take almost an hour to get to my destination. There was plenty of time to reflect on the past four days. With all of the problems I encountered getting to Lauscha and back, was it all worth the endeavor? Considering all of the complications, the profound fear I felt, the extreme degree of pleasure to disappointments, I would definitely say, "yes!" Would I go back? Again, I would say, "absolutely." In the DDR's own crazy way, this

was one of the most rewarding and enjoyable experiences I have ever had.

The bus made its way. The day was a beautiful, sunny, summer day. As all of the buildings and parks move past of me, I looked out of the window and I cried.











