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The Day the Berlin Wall Came Down and Changed History

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Twenty years ago Monday, they danced atop the Berlin Wall, feet thudding on the cold concrete, arms raised in victory, hands clasped in friendship and giddy hope. On that cold night, years of separation and anxiety melted into the unbelievable reality of freedom and a future without border guards, secret police, informers and rigid communist control.

This weekend, Germans celebrated with concerts boasting Beethoven and Bon Jovi; a memorial service for the 136 people killed trying to cross over from 1961 to 1989; candle lightings and 1,000 towering plastic foam dominoes placed along the wall's route to be tipped over.

On Nov. 9, 1989, East Germans came in droves, riding their sputtering Trabants, motorcycles and rickety bicycles. Hundreds, then thousands, then hundreds of thousands crossed over the following days.

Stores in West Berlin stayed open late and banks gave out 100 Deutschemarks in "welcome money," then worth about \$50, to each East German visitor.

The party lasted four days and by Nov. 12 more than 3 million of East Germany's 16.6 million people had visited, nearly a third of them to West Berlin, the rest through gates opening up along the rest of the fenced, mined frontier that cut their country in two.

Sections of the nearly 155 kilometers of wall were pulled down and knocked over. Tourists chiseled off chunks to keep as souvenirs. Tearful families reunited. Bars gave out free drinks. Strangers kissed and toasted each other with champagne.

Klaus-Hubert Fugger, a student at the Free University in West Berlin, was having drinks at a pub when people began coming “who looked a bit different.”

Customers bought the visitors round after round. By midnight, instead of going home, Fugger and three others took a taxi to the Brandenburg Gate, long a no man’s land, and scaled the nearly four-meter wall with hundreds of others.

“There were really like a lot of scenes, like people crying, because they couldn’t get the situation,” said Fugger, now 43. “A lot of people came with bottles” of champagne and sweet German sparkling wine.

Fugger spent the next night on the wall, too. A newsmagazine photo shows him wrapped in a scarf.

“Then the wall was crowded all over, thousands of people, and you couldn’t move ... you had to push through the masses of the people,” he said.

Angela Merkel, Germany’s first chancellor from the former communist East, recalled the euphoria in an address last week to the U.S. Congress.

“Where there was once only a dark wall, a door suddenly opened and we all walked through it: onto the streets, into the churches, across the borders,” Merkel said. “Everyone was given the chance to build something new, to make a difference, to venture a new beginning.”

The wall that the communists built at the height of the Cold War and which stood for 28 years is mostly gone. Some parts still stand, at an outdoor art gallery or as part of an open-air museum. Its route through the city is now streets, shopping centers, apartment houses. The only reminder of it is a series of inlaid bricks that traces its path.

Checkpoint Charlie, the prefab that was long the symbol of the Allied presence and of Cold War tension, has been moved to a museum in western Berlin.

Potsdamer Platz, the vibrant square that was destroyed during World War II and became a no man’s land during the Cold War, is full of upscale shops selling everything from iPods to grilled bratwursts.

At a ceremony in Berlin on Oct. 31, Helmut Kohl, the German chancellor who presided over the opening of the wall, stood side by side with the superpower presidents of the time, George H.W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev.

After the decades of shame that followed the Nazi era, Kohl suggested, the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of their country 11 months later gave Germans pride.

“We don’t have many reasons in our history to be proud,” said Kohl, now 79. But as chancellor, “I have nothing better, nothing to be more proud of, than German reunification.”

In an interview in Moscow, Gorbachev said it was a catalyst for peace. “No matter how hard it was, we worked, we found mutual understanding and we moved forward. We started

cutting down nuclear weapons, scaling down the armed forces in Europe and resolving other issues,” he said.

It all began with a routine late afternoon news conference.

On Nov. 9, 1989, Guenter Schabowski, a member of East Germany’s ruling Politburo, casually declared that East Germans would be free to travel to the West immediately.

Later, he tried to clarify his comments and said the new rules would take hold at midnight, but events moved faster as the word spread.

At a remote crossing in Berlin’s south, Annemarie Reffert and her 15-year-old daughter made history by becoming the first East Germans to cross the border.

Reffert, now 66, remembers the East German soldiers being at a loss when she tried to cross the border.

“I argued that Schabowski said we were allowed to go over,” she said. The border soldiers relented. A customs official was astonished that she had no luggage.

“All we wanted was to see if we really could travel,” Reffert said.

Years later, Schabowski told a TV interviewer that he had gotten mixed up. It was not a decision but a bill that the Politburo was set to discuss. He thought it was a decision that had already been approved.

That night, around midnight, border guards swung open the gates. Through Checkpoint Charlie, down the Invalidenstrasse, across the Glienicke Bridge, scores of people streamed into West Berlin, unabated, unfettered, eyes agog.