

■ Famed writer says West Berlin has no monopoly of laughter and self-mockery.

LETTER TO A WEST GERMAN FRIEND

GRAHAM GREENE

What a relief it is sometimes to find oneself on a material frontier, a frontier visible to the eyes, tangible — even when in Berlin it is a wall. For most of us have all our lives in this unhappy century carried an invisible frontier around with us, political, religious, moral . . . Nearly 40 years ago I stepped across such frontier when I became a Catholic, but the frontier did not cease to exist for me because I had crossed it. Often I have returned and looked over it with nostalgia, like the little groups on either side of the Brandenburg Gate who on holidays stare across at each other trying to recognize a friend.

I was reminded of my invisible frontier when I stayed with you in West Berlin. Up at night in the roof-garden of the Hilton Hotel — a garden where vari-co-

loured bottles take the place of flowers — you pointed out to me the great arc of lights around the west, and the deep space of darkness beyond, broken only by occasional short chains of yellow beads. 'You can see,' you said, 'where the east lies'; yet it is the mark of frontiers — the evil of frontiers perhaps — that things look quite different when you pass them. Four days later, driving into East Berlin from Dresden and Potsdam, I was not particularly aware of darkness — not at any rate a greater darkness than you will find in the industrial quarter of any large city at 10 o'clock at night. It was true there was no Kurfestendam, though that name conveys now none of the gay haggard associations of the Twenties. The big new restaurant in the Unter Den Linden was still bright with lights; the shop

windows too were lit and there was an elegance in the window-dressing which you do not find in Moscow. Alone of communist cities Moscow seems to frown on the allure of consumer-goods — she makes the worst of what she has, while in East Berlin and Bucharest and Warsaw they make the most.

We left the Hilton bar, you remember, and drove to Bernauerstrasse, where the wall shows itself, especially at night, in its most uncompromising form: shoddily built, the colour of mud and rust, protected on the eastern side by a depth of wire-entanglement, it is all the uglier for its pettiness; it stands little higher-than man's head between the blind houses on one side of the street. The eastern windows have been bricked up, and at night the houses near the wall bear obvious dark sign of evacuation. Here and there a light shines from 50 yards behind. A church has lost its only entrance, the wall running slap across the doorway. Upon the western side the dark crosses, and perpetual wreaths are like the memo-

rials on alpine roads where a man has plunged to death.

This wall, and the checkpoints where foreigners and West Germans can visit East Berlin for the day, represent the great difficulty of communism. For a possible convert they stand there more impassably than any dogma of proletarian democracy, and what happened in Budapest, after all, happened less than half a century ago in Dublin. Official atheism I am able, perhaps mistakenly, to regard as passing phase (I prefer in any case atheism to agnosticism under the guise of official Christianity), and the comparison of living standards is an unreliable and unpleasing argument. What of the standards of living in rich Venezuela? Do we have a better car than the man next door? I remember a young West German friend saying, 'How glad I shall be when butter and meat cost the same on both sides of the wall. Then we can argue about things that matter.' You would think from the photographs of daily visitors that it rained only in East Berlin, and that the rain fell on nothing but

ruins in the East — missing the new apartment-buildings and the new stores.

There is a wall neurosis: the visitor is more aware of it in the west than in the east because there the wall is geographically inescapable. Take a drive in the evening as we did in the little patch of country still belonging to West Berlin: the road is packed with cars, driven by people seeking the illusion of space and air, until suddenly there the wall again, not of brick or cement this time, but of wire and water divided by buoys and patrolled by eastern police boats.

Belief, like it or not, is a magnet. Even what seem the extravagant claims of a belief are magnetic. In a commercial world of profit and loss man is hungry often for the irrational. I do not believe that the little knots of people who gather near Check-point Charlie are there to demonstrate repugnance, as do the bus loads at the Brandenburg Gate. Part of Berlin has become a foreign land and they are staring into the strangeness, some with enmity, others with apprehension, but all

with a certain fascination. Behind them lies the new city, the smart hotels, the laden stores; but capitalism is not a belief, and so it is not a magnet. It is only a way of life to which one has grown accustomed.

To take the few steps beyond Check-point Charlie can be compared with the acceptance of the last difficult dogma — say the infallibility of the Pope. There are moments when the possible convert is in a state of rebellion; he can see the wall and nothing but the wall. There are moments when he will gladly stretch his faith to the furthest limits. Perhaps there is always one moment when he shuts his eyes and walks into the wide ruined spaces beyond the check-point. He looks back over his shoulder and the dogma has suddenly changed. What had been a threat can even appear like a protection.

You were unable to accompany me for obvious reasons beyond the check-point, but you have asked me to tell you what I noticed there. You reminded me how my character Fowler in *The Quiet American* claimed

proudly to be a reporter and not a leader-writer and you recommended me to be the same. But for a reportage one requires more than the two-and-a-half days I had in the East, and one requires to speak the language however roughly. The reporter deal in this case only with himself; he can report only this own evanescent impressions. Of course, I could write you about the magnificent Leda of Rubens at Dresden, at Pilnitz the magnificent Gauguin and the Toulouse-Lautrec brothel scene, curiously described in the catalogue as a scene in the artist's atelier (puritanism or innocence?); I could describe the ruins left by the great blitz, war crime worse than that of Hiroshima; I could note the big changes since three years ago in East Berlin, the new apartments on either side of the Karl Marx Allee where I remembered desolation, a shop of new designs in furniture and ceramics which would do credit to our English Heal's, in the poorer older streets which have survived bombardment not too bad a selection of consumer-goods —

at least they are purchasable in a variety of small shops: one is not subjected to the crowds and ennui of the gigantic GUM.

The more expensive clothes-shops have style — they were also full of clients with enough money to spend. Wine is chiefly Bulgarian. Food is simpler and less varied than in West Berlin, but it is not expensive. I judge not from the big restaurants, but the small country inn where I lunched, well off the autobahn, on the way to Dresden and the people's restaurant where I dined in Potsdam. The hotel in Dresden was a luxury hotel with show-cases of champagne, perfume, and women's clothes (well-designed). I have a feeling that these are not the details you want.

I have spoken of the wall as a protection. Naturally this was the way it was presented to me by the young officer at the Brandenburg Gate in a speech too long, too prepared and too innocently propagandist: a protection from spies, saboteurs and black marketeers. His stories of deaths along the wall almost too carefully

duplicated the circumstances of deaths on the western side. Crosses and wreaths are a popular expression, and though they may be as misleading as photographs, they are a great deal more convincing. It was not from this officer that one gained the sense of the wall as protection, nor from the booklet purporting to give the names, addresses and telephone numbers of the CIA staff in West Berlin beginning with a Mr. Harry Grant of 15 Taylorstrasse and ending with a Miss Jane Rowley of 17 Stuartstrasse (telephone 76-49-87). There were private tragedies of divided families before the wall was built as well as after — families divided by the temptations of the West.

The West is too inclined to attach heroic motives to all those who escape across or through the wall. Courage they certainly have, but how many are 'choosing freedom' for romantic motives, love way of life, and how many of a girl, of a family, of a are merely tempted by a standard which includes transistor radio-sets, American blue jeans and leather

jackets? As long as living standards differ, there'll always be motives less than noble.

You may think I was conditioned by the friends I made on the other side of the wall, for true it is, when I passed Check-point Charlie returning west, I felt as if I were leaving something simple behind me and coming out again into the complex world of Bonn. In a few more minutes I would be talking again with my western friends about the case of *Der Spiegel*, about the wiles of the old Chancellor, about Doenitz's school speech in defence of the Nazis and the headmaster's suicide; I would be asking about the record of General Spiedel and the latest Nazi scandal in the government of Bonn.

There have been scandals, of course, on the other side, but they have been ruthlessly cured: the sore does not continue to run there indefinitely. In West Germany one hesitates to probe the past of any man in his fifties or sixties. I felt no such hesitation in the east. Of four friends I made there two were old communists who had spent

the war in a refugee camp in Shanghai; one had served in the British Army, landing with a Scottish regiment in Normandy; one, having fought with the International Brigade in Spain, saw the war out in South America. Perhaps the old Catholic convert has something in common with the old communist convert which makes it easy for the two to get on terms — he has lived through the period of enthusiasm and now recognizes the differing regions of acceptance and doubt. One communist, who had been an orthodox Jew, said to me, 'I gave up my faith when I was 18 and joined the party. Now at 50 one realizes that everything is not known.' There's a funny story — told in the

East. Khrushchev has been asked by the Central Committee to visit the Pope and try to reduce the tension of the Cold War. He reports to the Committee when he returns: 'I have reached a compromise with the Pope.' (The members express uneasiness at the very idea of compromise.) 'I have agreed that the world was made in seven days.' (A tumult follows.) 'Yes, but listen to what the Pope has agreed — that it was made under the leadership of the Communist Party.'

On this side of the wall we are apt to believe that we have a monopoly of laughter and self-mockery. Brigitte Bardot is playing in the east. — *New Statesman*, May 31, 1963.

RELIGION

Religion will not regain its old power until it can face change in the same spirit as does science. Its principles may be eternal, but the expression of those principles requires continual development. This evolution of religion is in the main a disengagement of its own ideas in terms of the imaginative picture of the world entertained in previous ages. — Alfred North Whitehead.