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Berlin

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berlin.

by erik armitage

Memories are a peculiar thing. Two people, in the same place at the same time, witness the same events. For my mom, she remembers the memorial only because she took a picture of it. For me, the story of the murdered girl was a profound event in my life. I no longer needed to know why my dad was in the Army and why we were in Germany.

We hadn't even left the country and we were already in crisis mode. My dad, Mick, had left for Germany 6 months earlier and had been busted for smuggling. My mom, my brother Jarad and I were at JFK International Airport in New York. We were waiting for our flight that would connect in Shannon, Ireland. In the airport were coin operated televisions called Telemeters. I think it cost around .25 cents for a half an hour of service and I was hoping to find a quarter and catch a Bugs Bunny cartoon. First, I couldn't find the TV's, then I couldn't find my mom. About ten minutes later, they were paging for the mother of Erik Armitage over the intercom. Two G.I.'s had been periodically keeping an eye on my mom. When they found out that I was the lost boy, off they went, one of them shouting over his shoulder, "We're on it!"

"Hey buddy, are you lost?" One of them grabbed me by my arms and flung me up to his shoulders. "Are you looking for your mom? We know right where she is." I knew they must be trustworthy because they wore the same uniform as my dad. They were even Spec/4's (Army rank of E-4; Spec/4 is an abbreviation of Specialist 4) just like my dad! I was saved. But now I had to face my mom. I feared she would be furious with me.

I'll never forget the horror leaving my mom's eyes as the weight of the world left her shoulders. I felt bad for making her worry so, but at the same time, it felt good to be loved and missed. The smiling G.I.'s dropped me off and accepted mom's gratitude as if they would do it

a thousand times over. Men were always eager to help mom if she was in distress. She was 6' tall, blonde haired and blue eyed. She had been offered some modeling jobs after high school while working as a waitress in Sun Valley, Idaho where she served many celebrities, the biggest of them, in her mind, being Jimmy Stewart. She had politely declined all offers, got pregnant, then married.

Mom was happy to see me but to my worthless three-year-old brother I might as well have been a sack of meat. He didn't care at all that I was lost. What a jerk, I thought. I would get even, unintentionally, a few months later.

We had been in Germany for a few months and Jarad and I were arguing over some toys and I wouldn't let him into our bedroom. I shoved him hard out of the doorway and then tried to swing the door shut and latch it before he could charge back in but I hadn't shoved him hard enough. I couldn't believe that he was pushing so hard. He had turned four by now but did turning four give him more strength than an 8-year-old? We were both pushing against each other, he was screaming and crying but his screaming got louder and louder. I knew if he didn't shut up we were both going to get spanked but I kept pushing. Finally, he screamed so loud that I quit and opened the door. He pulled his fingers from between the door and the doorjamb just below the center hinge. I had broken three of his fingers. How was I to know he had his fingers in there? Why would he put them in there in the first place? What an idiot. I was spared punishment surely because mom realized only a moron would have stuck his fingers in there. Or maybe it was because she was so busy tending to his injuries. It wouldn't be the last time she would have to.

Next summer, one of the neighbors had thrown the coals of their barbeque out by a fence. I talked Jarad into walking on them. I

told him that I had seen it on TV. A guy walked over hot coals from one end to the other. The narrator said it was mind over matter. So Jarad did it. I denied all culpability at the hospital. "He just took off and started walking across them. I told him not to but he wouldn't listen," I pleaded. I can still see him with his feet all wrapped up in gauze. Mom rubbing salve on his feet every night.

Although I loved torturing my brother, I would not tolerate anyone else touching him. I was a gangly, scrawny, uncoordinated kid with buck teeth who was a head taller than everyone in his class and the constant victim of bullying. I didn't win a fight in school until the eighth grade. It took me that long to figure out I was bigger than everyone else. However, I was undefeated in altercations that involved my brother. No one could touch my brother without feeling my wrath. Even an intimidating gaze would land the instigator on their back gagging for air.

Schools on a military base were no different than public American schools except that all the parents had the same employer. It didn't matter that there was a concrete wall separating freedom from tyranny, the kids still did the same things that they did in the U.S. There was still a pecking order, a popularity contest, jocks, nerds, in fact, maybe even more so in an effort to preserve our American culture.

Of course, now I feel bad for beating up Jarad all the time. And he probably didn't deserve it-sometimes-but I'm sure it made him a stronger person. I don't want to take all the credit for his college degrees and cushy job at Intel, I'm sure he did a little something on his own. I spent all that time trying to make him a better person, which explains why I'm 51 and a sophomore in college. Family first! We stay in touch and send gifts and cards, although he seems a little unappreciative sometimes. A few years ago, for instance, I spent hours picking out the right card. He read the cover and threw it away! "To a wonderful sister, at Christmas". Maybe it's because he's an atheist and I'm Christian, I don't know. People can be so narrow minded sometimes.

Berlin was awesome and we all have fond memories of the city and the people. Mom wasn't so sure at first. In 1972, 11 Israeli athletes were murdered by Palestinian terrorists at the Summer Olympics in Munich-less than 400 miles from where we were going. Once we were settled in, we all fell in love and never had a second thought about terrorist attacks and such. In fact, there were families who would host American servicemen for dinner and we did this on a couple of occasions. At one home, I was served a small glass of beer with my dinner. "Yah, yah, drink! Sehr gut!" It was awful. Everyone laughed. I loved the Germans and their hearty laughs and warm hospitality.

I kind of wish the taste of beer would have remained terrible for the rest of my life. Maybe I would remember more of my 20's. The first three years my wife and I were together we lived on beer and potatoes. Every fall a friend and I would go to one of the many potato farms at about two in the morning. Farmers always left the keys in their equipment. I would drive the harvester and he would drive my truck. It would take only a couple of minutes to fill up the bed of my truck. Every year I would have two to three thousand pounds of potatoes in my basement and a keg fridge out back. Maybe I should have stayed in Shannon, Ireland instead of going on to Germany.

Germany was a divided country back then; East and West. The countries were divided by fences and in between the fences was a no-man's-land filled with guard towers, land mines, trip wires and sensors that activated automated machine guns. My dad was stationed in Berlin which was in communist East Germany. We lived within the walled city of West Berlin during the Cold War. Americans were permitted to go into East Berlin with proper paperwork. We had to enter through Checkpoint Charlie and had to have a serviceman with us. Westerners weren't allowed to buy anything or bring things out of East Germany. Dad had done that and got caught.

It started off with him and some friends

smuggling smokes and other contraband into East Berlin in the hubcaps of their vehicles. Then, one of them was caught smuggling people. Although they couldn't prove dad's involvement, he was guilty by association and forbidden from entering East Berlin. I asked him a couple of times over the years if he was involved to which he said, "Nohohohoho," with a laugh. A laugh and tone that said "Yehehehehes." On one occasion when asked, he gave a long philosophical answer about communism, freedom, blah, blah, blah, which I interpreted as "Yes". A few months ago, even on his deathbed, he wouldn't give me a convincing answer.

Mom was almost caught. Since dad had been denied entry to East Berlin, we would have to go with one of his friends, usually a master sergeant whose name escapes me. All vehicles must pass through Checkpoint Charlie, an intimidating process. We drove into the city and when we parked, mom turned in her seat and said, "These people are going to stare at you. They are going to look mean. Don't worry. They won't hurt you. They just want to go with you when we leave but you can't take them. They aren't allowed to leave. They aren't free. So, don't be scared." Not one person spoke to us. They would just stare, hundreds of them and there were always guns trained on us from the East Germans in the guard towers along the wall. Mom exuded confidence and seemed almost excited to explore East Berlin but I couldn't help it, I was scared to death.

A woman tried to escape while we lived in Berlin. My parents drove us by the "memorial" after it happened. She had been shot while trying to scale the wall. In later years, I would think it was a suicide because from what I remember, it was impossible to scale the wall and therefore she didn't need to be shot. The memorial was three logs about ten feet long planted in the ground in a triangle formation, wrapped haphazardly with barbed wire and wreath hung on it.

On a military base, when the Star-Spangled Banner is played, everyone stops and shows respect by saluting or placing their hand over

their heart. Even the kids on the playgrounds. It's another peculiar thing, sounds. Like memories, they resound differently in people. After hearing the story and seeing the memorial of the girl who only wanted freedom, the national anthem rang a little differently for me and to this day makes me emotional.

When our anthem is played, I get a tightness in my chest, a welling in my throat. I relive events witnessed in the forty-four states and nine countries that I have visited. Family members who have served come into view as I observe the flag with reverent pride; Two uncles who served in WWII-one a Corsair pilot. My wife's uncle who stepped on a mine in Viet Nam and died fourteen hours later. My dad. My cousin in the DMZ in South Korea. My brother, in Abu Dhabi, the only one in his company who was sent on an assignment and while gone, sixteen of his friends were killed in their barracks by a suicide bomber driving a truck loaded with explosives. My grandfather, who was a civilian airplane mechanic at Mountain Home Airforce base in WWII. My wife's grandfather, who served in the Battle of the Bulge and almost froze to death. He was sent to a medical unit to have his feet amputated. Luckily, they put him in the wrong tent and he later recovered. My stepdads father who was a scout behind German lines. He survived countless enemy incursions only to be ran down and killed by a drunk driver who was never caught. My stepdad was only thirteen years old.

All of these people were humble servants. People who didn't speak often of their experiences. These people, my family, all have different views on politics, religion and the direction of our great country. Yet, every one of them was willing to give their life for the girl behind the wall.

We walked around East Berlin and went in shops. There were bombed out buildings left over from WWII that we would look at. Everyone wore gray clothes, the buildings were gray, the roads, the lots, the sky. Did the sun ever shine on this side of the wall? Not by the looks on the people's faces. They were all pale,

sullen. The sorrow was palpable.

There were times when I felt as if some of the East Germans held an animosity, even hatred for us and especially for the uniform of our escort. I've always wanted to know what they felt when they saw that uniform. Was it a symbol of freedom or defeat? I suppose it would depend on whether you supported the Allies or the Nazis. The East Germans' oppression was the result of occupation by the communist Soviet Union and would be that way until 1989. WWII had ended 28 years earlier. Many of the Germans and Soviets who served in the war were still serving and some were only in their forties. The war was so recent, in fact, that we were only allowed to play in designated sandboxes and swing sets. Digging anywhere else ran the risk of hitting an unexploded bomb. Two were discovered in our apartment complex while we lived there.

We went into a shop and I got the feeling that the shop owner didn't want us in there. But he didn't turn down our money when mom bought a tea set. The master sergeant had a Karmann Ghia that had a small backseat and the backrest could be removed to reveal a hidden compartment. This is where mom put her tea set for the trip through Checkpoint Charlie.

The guards at the checkpoint were Americans. The guards in the towers were East German. The American guards knew the sergeant and had visited with him on our way in. On our way out, they were jovial and talkative while tending to their duties which included walking around the car while looking at the undercarriage with extended mirrors. We all had to get out of the car and one of the guards gave a quick glance to the front and back of the interior while another set a machine on top of the car. The light-hearted conversation continued until an alarm sounded on the machine that was sitting on top of the car.

Everyone went silent and the mood changed. We were no longer friends with the guards. I looked at each guard; one was looking at the machine, the two that had mirrors stopped and were staring at the machine. Two guards

behind us by the guard shack placed the hands on their sidearms. I looked at the sergeant. He was as cool as a cucumber. The look on his face gave me confidence that we wouldn't be caught. In fact, the look on his face hadn't changed one bit since we started this little trip and everything had gone fine. If we got caught, I had a feeling this guy was going to get us out of trouble.

I looked up at the towers. The East Germans could tell something was going on and they slowly started standing up and looking at us with binoculars.

The machine that had been placed on top of the car could detect the heartbeat of someone in the car. The guards now believed that someone was hiding in the car and they began dismantling it. They opened the trunk and the hood and pulled out the seats, except for the rear seat back. After about 20 minutes one of the guards walked over to the machine and slapped it on the side, "This thing must be on the fritz." He pulled it off the car and took it back to the shack while shaking and studying it. Another guard apologized and told us they would get the car back together as quickly as possible and we could be on our way.

The tea set is our dining room with the story, handwritten by mom stuffed inside of the tea pot.

During a different trip into East Berlin, we were with a friend of my parents who was a cook. Although he did cook for the military, mom never believed that was his true endeavor in Germany. He spoke fluent German and commanded respect wherever he went. He seemed to know everyone. During a routine inspection while exiting Checkpoint Charlie, a guard opened the trunk of the car to reveal a compartment loaded so full that it took several attempts to latch it shut. Upon seeing the contraband, the guard said while smiling, "Yep, nothing here. Looks good." I wondered what would have happened if the heart beat machine had gone off when we were with *the cook*.

We lived in a three-story apartment complex. On our end of the building, were six apartments; three on either side of the stairwell. We were on the second floor on the left. In

the basement of the building was the laundry room and also studio apartments that housed babysitters who were German. Our babysitter was Gudren (pronounced goot-wren). We had a phone and every now and then a babysitter would come up and use it. There was a little dish that sat next to an ashtray where they could put coins to pay for the use of the phone.

On the back side of our apartment complex was the busy street of our address, Argentinische Allee, while in the front of the complex was our nameless residential drive and parking area. There was a small lawn around the complex and across from the drive was a small lawn area and swingset. The grassy area across the drive extended through the whole neighborhood which consisted of several of the identical three story buildings. Along that lawn was a six foot high fence that separated the complex from the U Bahn (pronounced oo-bon), Berlin's commuter train.

There was a picnic table by the fence directly across from our apartment and one day there was a defeated looking man sitting there with his arms on the table and his head hung low. He had a thick mustache and hadn't shaved for a couple weeks. His hair wasn't quite to his shoulders but I thought it was very long at the time compared to all the Army guys that I was used to seeing. I walked up and asked him if he was ok. I had startled him and he jumped which in turn, made me jump. He apologized and asked if I could do him a favor.

"Sure," I said.

"Can you get me some food? I'll give you a candy bar if you can get me some food." The man produced a candy bar from his back pocket and showed it to me. The sight of the candy bar made my eyes drool. In those days, sweets were few and far between; a delicacy to be enjoyed only a few times a year. "You'll rot your teeth," or "It's unhealthy, you'll die young," parents would say. Oh yeah, but that cigarette smoke is great. Especially on a long car ride with the windows rolled up.

"What do you want to eat? I don't think we have very much," I said.

"Just a sandwich," he said.

"Peanut butter and jelly?" I said excitedly.

"Yes, fine. That would be fine," he said with a thick German accent.

I didn't wait around to ask him why he didn't just eat the candy bar. To bring up the question was running the risk of him eating it so I kept my mouth shut and ran upstairs to my mom as fast as I could, burst in the door and begged my mom to make me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"Alright, just a minute," she said from her bedroom.

"Ok, but hurry. I'm really hungry."

She just looked at me like I was some little weirdo. She knew I was acting out of character. I followed her to the kitchen like a puppy waiting impatiently for a treat. While mom was making my sandwich, I heard a commotion. I walked over to our big picture window that overlooked the complex and U Bahn. There was a police car by the picnic table and two officers were talking to the man. The man was very animated, like he was trying to convince them of something. He began to back away and the cops tackled him. He tried to fight them but even though he was larger than them, he was weak and couldn't put up much of a fight.

Mom came over, "Here's your sandwich."

I felt sick to my stomach. The sight of the sandwich made me ill. I didn't even want the candy bar. I had lost my appetite. "I'm not hungry anymore." Mom didn't even complain. In those days you didn't waste food. If I would have done that at any other time, mom would have told dad and I wouldn't have gotten dinner. But mom knew. She may not have known everything, but she knew.

A week later we were evacuated because someone had put a bomb on the U Bahn tracks right in front of our complex. The conductor saw something on the tracks, locked up the brakes, inspected the tracks and called the police. The bomb was safely removed.

We also got out of school for a day or two because of a bomb that was discovered by a construction crew that was building a new PX, the Post Exchange, next to the school. There were two stores on military bases. The

commissary, where you got your groceries, and the PX, where you got your clothes. The workers found the 500-pound German bomb when they hit it with a backhoe bucket. A bomb squad was dispatched but when they got to the fuse, it was Russian so then a Russian bomb squad had to be summoned. They were able to safely disarm it. In fact, I don't think a bomb exploded in the entire three years we lived there.

We left Germany before I turned ten-years-old but many memories are still fresh in my mind. Wannsee Lake is a brilliant blue. The trees and grass in the nearby park are bright green. I can smell the gummi (pronounced goomy) candy in the wooden kiosk by the park that my brother and I would frequent whenever we got .25 pfennigs. I can hear the kind German man's voice and his thick German accent in the chocolate stand that was just inside of the entrance to the U Bahn down the street. I can hear the car tires rolling over the cobblestone streets and hear the European siren of emergency vehicles. I can see the centuries old buildings, including ones that were still in rubble from the war. All of these sights, sounds and smells along with others combine in my memory to give me a presence of Germany even in its absence.

Four years after leaving Germany, in Montana, I would see the story of two families who built a hot air balloon and floated out of East Germany and into West Germany on a moonless night. I knew the story had a happy ending because of the headline but as I read my heart raced faster and faster. I was overcome with emotion before the balloon even got off the ground. I envisioned the families, shaking with fear, praying for a miracle. There was color in my vision. Every memory of East Germany was in black and white, but in my mind, the balloon looked like Dolly Parton's Coat of Many Colors; it had every color imaginable. And all the people in both families had glowing, rosy red cheeks as they worked in the dark night, the slightest sound exploding in their ears and making them freeze with dread. Once they had assembled the balloon and filled it with hot air

came the realization that they were embarking on the slowest escape possible and they would be defenseless if spotted. The promise of freedom was a reward that outweighed the risk.

When I finished the article, I looked up from under the tree that I was sitting against outside of our house at Fort Missoula and saw the flag, the folds gently rolling with the barely moving air. I didn't realize I was crying until I saw someone walking across a street a couple of hundred yards away. I gave quick glances to the right and left to make sure no one saw me and quickly wiped away my tears.

I wondered if one of the families in the balloon had a girl just like the one who was murdered and buried under log fenceposts. Murdered because she was hungry. Murdered because she wanted to be with her family. Murdered because she had the audacity to be free. I decided that they did. And I decided that she was strong and beautiful and confident and funny and full of life and when she got out of the balloon, I saw her wrapped in an American flag, hugging all of her family members while hundreds of people stood around clapping and cheering. In my mind, the murdered girl had been freed. She was hungry no more.

The true ending was a little less dramatic than what I envisioned. The balloon landed in a field after running out of propane. The families had no idea where they were or if they had made it. A police car patrolling the area came upon them and one of the men noticed the car was an Audi. He knew they had made it.

The girl lived!