Episodes in a Journey to the German Democratic Republic in 1981

In the fall of 1981 on a European trip related to the work of urban-industrial mission, I was aiming for a visit to the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR), or as we said, East Germany. My purpose was to visit Bischofsverda in Sachsen, the hometown of my grandfather Alwin Richard Poethig who had emigrated in 1881, one century earlier. He had left Sachsen and his family as a political émigré because of his Social Democratic leanings. My friend Bruno Schottstaedt, a pastor in East Berlin, had invited me to visit East Germany with the promise that he would get me a five-day visa when I arrived in West Berlin. It was a journey to which I was looking forward. I would be the first person in the Poethig family in the United States, except for my Aunt Helen at four years of age, who had visited the ancestral home of the Poethig family.

On November 2, 1981, I entered East Berlin through Checkpoint Charlie by car with members of the staff of Hendrik Kramer Haus, Limonen Str. 26, West Berlin. Bruno Schottstaedt had made arrangements with Pim Lichtfoet of Hendrik Kramer Haus to take me through the East German Checkpoint and bring me to the Schottstaedt apartment. Pim had been making regular trips from West Berlin to East Berlin for a year and a half. As a member of Hendrik Kramer Haus, he was recognized by the East German border guards. Hendrik Kramer Haus had had good relations with the East Germany authorities since 1949. One of its workers, Bea Ruivs, had established contact with the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR) and developed favorable relations to the DDR even through the tense East-West years of crisis.

I packed my bag for a five-day visit. My visa was to be picked up at the Reise Buro in East Berlin, where I was coming in on a one-day pass. If the large bag containing my belongings were to be discovered, it would have meant much explaining to do with East German customs. There were three procedures to go through at the gate. One procedure was to check the passports and the custom papers and pay a 5 Deutsche Mark fee for the one-day pass. The next was to change 25 Deutsche Mark (West) for 25 Mark der DDR (East), which was to be spent within the day that you had the pass. The next step was to check for any goods you may be bringing into the DDR that were questionable to the authorities.

We waited in a line of two or three cars while people were being questioned. Some were sent through without any further procedures and others were asked to open the trunk of their car and to take out car seats.
A strict young customs officer peered through our open car window to check our passports and customs declaration. He questioned the articles in a package of the Belgian woman travelling with us. She offered that these were for elderly people she visits regularly in East Berlin. She explained each item she was carrying in her bag. The young officer went inside the office to check with his superior. He came out and ushered us through the customs zone.

After going through Checkpoint Charlie and into East Berlin, I realized this was to be a unique journey. Even as I was looking forward to visiting Bischofsverda, being in East Germany under the guidance of Bruno Schottstaedt was to open many doors into the work of urban-industrial mission in Eastern Europe. Bruno was a member of Gossner Mission, a mission program founded in 1836 in Berlin with no direct connection to any church organization. From its beginnings it was related to centers of social and industrial change. In its current presence its was carrying out work in the critical area of urban-industrial mission in East Germany.

It was on this basis that Bruno had a special connection to the Urban-Industrial Mission (UIM) desk of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. The World Council of Churches saw that the work of Gossner Mission provided a special opening into East Germany. It was this opening which gave Bruno the opportunity to be a visitor with us in Chicago at The Institute on the Church in Urban-Industrial Society (ICUIS) earlier in 1981. I had known the reputation of Bruno and we had invited him to Chicago to use as a base in sharing his work within the United States. ICUIS, of which I was the Director, was the information gathering and sharing arm on global urban industrial mission of the World Council of Churches. Since ICUIS was based at McCormick Theological Seminary, Bruno had an opportunity to reach seminary students in special lectures and classes. He was instrumental in providing insight into the church's work in urban-industrial mission in a socialist economy. There were not many examples of such an experiment within the larger urban-industrial mission network. It was in this context Bruno's visit to Chicago that he made the invitation to me to learn from the work going on in East Germany.

The day was gray as we drove through East Berlin to the Schottstaedt residence. Few people were on the streets and there was little traffic. The wide East Berlin boulevards made the few people on the streets even more lonely and solemn. We arrived at 133 Dimitroff Strasse, found the Schottstaedt name on the listing, and climbed one flight of stairs. The dimly lighted halls of the building reminded me of the tenements in which I had grown up on the East Side of New York. We rang the bell to the Schottstaedt apartment. Bruno and Ruth both came to the door and greeted me with great exuberance. It was delightful to see them again. They had just returned the past Friday night from Bern where they had been for six months.

Their apartment, built in the second decade of the century, had high ceilings, four rooms and a kitchen. The Schottstaedts were in one of the three apartments on their block that was still privately owned. It was owned by Dieter Schulze, another urban-industrial missioner. As a privately owned apartment it needed much work, but there was little money to do it. In East Berlin privately owned apartments paid the same rent as the city owned apartments.

We had our coffee in Bruno's study, which had a *sprach ecke,* or discussion space. There was a six-by-four foot enamel tiled stove in the corner of the room using coal to heat the room. The bedrooms all had similar enamel stoves. The bathroom had an electric water heater that provided hot water for showers and for the sink. Otherwise it was a cold-water apartment. Bruno later told me that the buildings in East Berlin were spared from the destruction that flattened West Berlin. The buildings in his area were pre-World War II, which in itself was amazing.

Five story buildings lined both sides of East Berlin streets for many long blocks. There were small privately owned shops interspersed between long intervals down the long streets. In East Berlin there were no bright neon signs or lights, nor overstocked consumer good windows in the neighborhood. The area that came closest to the feeling of West Berlin was in Alexander Platz. Here there were wider windows with more goods displayed.

One had the feeling of much open space in East Berlin. Especially in the area of Unter den Linden Strasse where the major government buildings still stand. Here we made our visit to the Reise Buro at the Auslaender Amt for my five-day visa. It was a holiday in East Germany so the offices had few people at work. Bruno Schottstaedt spoke to a lone official standing behind a counter. The official took Bruno into

an office behind him. Here I heard Bruno explaining my case to other officials. He came out with my five-day visa. I felt relieved that I had in hand my visa to travel south to Sachsen. I suspect Bruno told them I was there to visit my grandfather Poethig's hometown of Bishchofsverda in Sachsen. He might have also told them that grandfather Poethig had been a political émigré from 19th century Germany.

It was now late in the afternoon. We walked among the buildings that had been the center of the Third Reich. We walked to the Brandenburg Gate. About fifty yards away there was a low barrier and alongside it ran the Wall. Along the Wall we passed to the place of the Aldon Hotel. It was here that Hitler entertained his guests. Close by was the place of the Reich Chancellory, Hitler's seat of power. We moved further down the street and came to the Bureau of Propaganda. It was here Josef Goebbels carried out his anti-Semitic diatribes.

I came back to visit this building the next day. It was now the home of the League of Friendship Between Peoples. It felt strange to climb the wide marble staircase and walk down the long hall with its many anonymous doors. My thoughts centered on the actions happening behind those doors over 40 years ago. This was the heart and mind of the Nazi Propaganda machine and its work at inciting hate against Jews, Gypsies, gays, socialists, trade unionists – anyone who stood in the way of Hitler's plans for Germany and Europe. Across from this building was an empty piece of land, with a parking lot. It was here in an underground bunker they found Hitler's charred body.

In the evening at Bruno and Ruth's apartment I met two of Bruno's friends: Karl Ortnung and Helmut Ophal. Bruno had invited them to provide me a context of the work of UIM in East Germany. Karl, a Methodist layman, worked for the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) where he carried out the program of the Christian Peace Conference. Helmut Ophal was pastor of the historic St. Marien Kirche, which is set in the midst of the Alexander Platz. It was Helmut Ophal that Bruno had delegated to meet me in Dresden to take me to visit Bishofsverda.

St. Marien Kirche, where Helmut was pastor, is an historical monument from the 13th century. The church's status as an historical and prominent presence in Alexander Platz protects it from other governmental uses. St. Marien Kirche is also a tourist attraction, set as it is in the center of other buildings related to the DDR. The church has a magnificent organ with the most pipes (4000!) of any church in the DDR. Its pulpit is baroque with a story sculpted into its structure: the Law sculpted into one side and the Grace of the preached word sculpted into the other.

When I visited the church the next morning I discovered it to be a traditional church with some of its rooms set aside for programs to reach young people. I was to learn later that Helmut Ophal had been a major leader in the Student Christian Movement (SCM) and had travelled Germany engaging in its program. Helmut was a long lanky fellow with a serious countenance, broken by a ready smile when in friendly conversation. It was because of his wide travel experience that Bruno had asked Helmut to drive down from East Berlin to Dresden and take me to visit my grandfather's town of Bischofsverda.

The evening at Bruno's was for conversation on the role of urban-industrial mission (UIM) in the DDR and beyond. We concentrated on the work of UIM in Eastern Europe. Helmut Ophal chairs the Uniting Churches Committee on UIM in the DDR. Within the politically oriented DDR, Bruno and Helmut recognize that the UIM has to be careful in its relation to Western European UIM. It cannot be too engaged with Western European efforts in what DDR authorities might consider threats to the ideological

framework of the Soviet sponsored economy of East Germany. East Europeans engaged in UIM would prefer to speak about urban mission. Industrial mission would raise too many political questions. The question of the UIM relationship to trade unions arose in the conversation. Karl Ortnung, the Methodist layman, eagerly sought ways the UIM could relate to the East German trade union movement. Helmut Ophal was more cautious. Helmut saw that any direct connection of the UIM to trade unions within the DDR would create problems for the churches. Helmut suggested that any connection would need to come through individual Christians within the trade unions. Any venture into industrial issues by church-oriented groups or the UIM would be under the watchful eye of officials in the DDR.

On Monday my visit to the League for the Friendship Between Peoples was with the vice-president, Werner Haendler. As a German Jew, Handler had been interned at Sachsenhausen at the age of 18. He was deported to England. Over 500,000 German Jews were deported. He distinguished the different Jewish communities in Europe. It was the Hasidic Jews largely in Poland that were executed. He cited Zaborowski, who reported that the pacifism of the Hasidic Jews was built upon their belief in the return of the Messiah. Their pacifism would not allow them to take up arms against the Nazis. On these grounds they ultimately resigned themselves to death in the extermination camps.

After his experience in Sachsenhausen, Haendler became a Communist. After the war he returned to East Germany. He saw in the East German anti-fascist policies of the DDR that they were rooting out Fascism. The East German goal was to create a productive society built on the basis of German skills. The center of East German trade was in machine tools manufacture. The largest exchange between any two countries was the trade between the East German government and the Soviets. There was even trade with the United States and Leipzig was a large exporter of paper making machinery to the U.S. On the relation of DDR to the Soviet Union, Haendler said it was a misunderstanding to see East German Socialism as a Russian imposition. The East German working class has had Socialism deeply rooted in its history.

After a very busy day in East Berlin, the next morning I boarded a train bound south for Halle and ultimately to Dresden. In Halle I was to visit the work of Bruno Mueller, a pastor working in the midst of a socialist created new city – Halle Neu Stadt. The journey to Halle was quiet. As I viewed the countryside that I was passing, I was impressed by the sweeping range of what were now collective farms. Along the way the towns I passed were a blending of shades of grey, tan, and rust. No red banners, no propaganda posters or slogans broke the monochromatic countryside scene.

An elderly couple was with me in the train compartment. In my hesitant German I told them I was an American visiting their country. They were delighted. They told me, in German, that they were just returning from a two-week vacation to the Black Sea where they had visited Yalta. They were heading home to Chemnitz where Fritz, the husband, was a chemical engineer. They were happy to tell me that they stood in the very spot where President Franklin Roosevelt, Josef Stalin, and Winston Churchill sat in conversation discussing the final days of World War II. The trip to Yalta had cost them one thousand DM.

The train rolled into Halle. I exited the train after bidding farewell to my travelling companions. They had invited me to visit them in Chemnitz. I looked down the platform. A squadron of Russian soldiers came marching down the platform toward me under command of their officer. They marched past and behind them up popped a rusty haired lively five-foot five Bruno Mueller, the pastor of the Halle Neu

Stadt congregation. He greeted me with a bright, slightly German-inflected English. I felt I was in good hands. I was to learn later that he had been instructed to learn English by another urban-industrial missioner, George Ninan of India. George Ninan had spent some time in East Germany on an urban-industrial mission assignment.

There was a more light and open feeling in Halle. Perhaps the spirit of Georg Frideric Handel, the great 18th century composer and his Hallelujah Chorus still fills the air. Bruno drove me to their pastoral residence in Angersdorf, 10 kilometers from Halle. It was a 300-year-old house with thick walls and good-sized rooms. His wife, Sigrid, welcomed me at the door. She was a half-foot shorter than Bruno and just as lively in spirit. Inside the living room were their two children, Matthias (13) and Ute (11). In the evening I met two members of the Halle Neu Stadt congregation, an engineer in refrigeration technology and a civil engineer in restoration of historic sites who had two years of theological training. Both had been members of the congregation since the mid-sixties. When I awoke in the morning and looked out the window, I felt transported to the 19th century. The street with it old stone houses was wrapped in a dusty haze. No one was stirring. Then a lone figure suddenly appeared, dressed in black with a black top hat. In one hand he was carrying a long-handled bristle broom and in the other a bucket: a chimney sweep in the middle of the 20th century.

In contrast to this scene I was to be introduced in the day ahead to a new high-rise city of 100,000 people planned and built by a Socialist government. The congregation that Bruno served was composed of residents of this high-rise new city named Halle Neu Stadt. I had been informed in the night before by the two laymen of the congregation's first work among the occupants of Halle Neu Stadt. They had visited apartments and invited the new residents to become members of the congregation. The first members were young couples. The average age in the new city was 27 years. There also were some older folk. Out of the 100,000 people in the new city about 7,000 people had some relation to the new congregation. The young couples soon had children and as their families grew many of the members took time away from Halle Neu Stadt.

The congregation began the building of a one story semi-circular building on the back of its property. It began with one unit. The local government said nothing. Then the congregation built another unit. Then another unit. In its semi-circular building units the congregation carried out its many programs. There was a concentration on music programs since many members having skills with both string and wind instruments. Then there are the youth. One of the team members of the congregation, Dieter Breitkopf, works with youth between 14 and 16 years of age. With great energy and steady work Bruno Mueller had brought together and built an engaging congregation.

On Tuesday Bruno took me to the information center of Halle Neu Stadt, where we met with a government official who gave a step-by-step history of the development of the new city. There were eight sections of the new city and each was an integrated unit that had all the necessary services for the residents' needs. We visited the first section of the new city, which had the services in a central place. The area itself had a less cluttered, more human community feel. On the wall of the first section high-rise there was an expansive colorful tile mural depicting people from different regions and countries. The mural provided a warmth to an open area. Beside this section was a large Olympic size swimming pool. I sensed that this must have been the place where the competitive East German swimming teams did their training. The cost of this first section of the new city limited the possibility of continuing this type development in the other sections.

Many of the services were for young children: child care, kindergarten, play areas, and medical care. I noticed mothers with very elegant baby carriages visiting the medical center. I visited what was supposedly the supermarket for the area. Its shelves were sparsely stocked with cans of vegetables and other goods mostly from countries within the Soviet bloc.
In our visit to the post office, there was one clerk providing all the postal services. Eight people were standing in line. In Angersdorf, people had to go to the post office to collect their mail. Since there is a shortage of labor, no postman was available for delivery. But Bruno Mueller said there was probably not enough funds to run a full-scale postal service.

One of the demands of the residents of the new city was that land be set aside for Schrebergartens. Schrebergartens were first developed in the mid-1800s by Dr. Daniel Schreber for people in crowded cities to have places outside the city to raise vegetable gardens to feed their families. The first gardens were set aside in Leipzig and grew as a movement across Germany. Each Schrebergarten developed its own set of rules as to size of the parcel and the size of the cottage if one was built on the parcel. The Halle Neu Stadt government provided areas for Schrebergartens of 350 square meters. They were to be developed to raise food for human need.

One of the startling sites that caught my eye in Halle was a place where stood a whole set of Native American tepees. Where did these come from? I asked Bruno Mueller. Bruno explained that one of the 19th century German writers who had great influence upon young people was Karl May. Karl May was a writer fascinated by the stories of the American West and he developed a series of novels about the ventures of Native Americans with the names of Winnetou and Old Shatterhand. They became characters that fascinated not only young people, but also those in the adult literary world. So tepees are not strange sites in Germany, nor are children in Native headdress and with bows and arrows in hand.

Before we left our time at Halle Neu Stadt, Bruno brought me to visit one of his congregation's families living in the high rise. The wife was at home with two of the children, a girl and a boy in their early teens. The apartment was moderate size, comfortable and well appointed. Bruno's congregation has many skilled musicians and the young people in this family were both violinists. They eagerly told me that they had aspirations to play in the Leipzig Gewandhausorchester. Out of the blue the young daughter suddenly asked me: " Do you know Joe Hill?" Her question completely floored me. I replied: "Sure I know Joe Hill." She was delighted. Only in a Socialist Germany would I have been asked such a question. I thrilled her with my vocal rendition of the ballad of the labor organizer Joe Hill. "I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night, alive as you or me. But Joe, you're ten years dead," I said. "I never died," said he. "I never died," said he. "The copper bosses shot you Joe, they shot you Joe," said I. "Takes more than guns to kill a man." Says Joe, "I never died….What they forgot to kill went on to organize."

"How do you know Joe Hill? " I asked the youngster. She went to her room and brought me a book. It was a text book through which she was learning the English language. The book told the labor history of the United States. Only in East Germany would young people be learning English studying the labor history of the United States. And along with the history, the labor ballads that grew out of that history. So it was that I had my introduction to Halle Neu Stadt.

The next morning Bruno Mueller took me to the train station and on to Dresden. At the station we met one of Bruno's parishioners, the engineer I had met at Bruno's home. He was the refrigeration technician

on his way to work on an ice rink near Dresden. I would have company on my trip to Dresden. I bought my ticket to Dresden and bid farewell to Bruno. The train was crowded. The engineer and I stood in the front of the car, near the door. The train was West German travelling through East Germany. On the wall of the car was a map of Germany, undivided. The train rumbled along to Leipzig where my friend and I detrained to wait for a train to Dresden. There was to be a wait of at least an hour.

My engineer friend suggested we use the hour to stroll through Leipzig. Besides being an engineer he was an instrumentalist and wanted to take me to the Gewandhausorchester, one of the historic sites in Leipzig. Leipzig was known for its symphony hall and especially its conductor, Kurt Masur, whose reputation was international. As we moved through the city he pointed out places of historic importance. Passing a wide and prominent red wall painting showing workers with their fists upraised, he commented: "We also have Communist kitsch." When we reached the symphony hall we began to circle it. When we got to the building's front door, suddenly a cab pulled up and a figure jumped out and quickly entered the hall. My friend broke out in great excitement. "That was him, that was him. That was Kurt Masur." It made his day. What a story he would have to tell when he got back to Halle Neu Stadt. (As an addenda to this episode, in 2000-2001 Kurt Masur was called to be the conductor of the New York Philharmonic. He also gained global recognition in the role he played in Leipzig in the peaceful demonstrations in 1989 that led to the Fall of the Wall and German reunification.)

After this great excitement, which had enlivened my friend, we made our way back to the station. Our Dresden bound train was on time. We arrived in Dresden in mid-afternoon where we parted company. Dresden was a city related to the Poethig family. My grandmother, Pauline Roch Poethig, had grown up in Dresden as a young person. She was born in Schoenbrunn outside Dresden. After her father had lost the family farm gambling, the family moved to Dresden. Her siblings had settled here and it was from Dresden that she left for the United States in 1882.

I waited at the Dresden station. Helmut Ophal arrived, having driven down from Berlin to meet me. He had agreed to take me to visit Bischofsverda about 30 kilometers outside Dresden. Helmut knew my grandfather's hometown. In his student days and in his work with the Student Christian Movement he had been there. But first, he would take me to Der Zwinger the famous Dresden art museum that had housed much of the old porcelain and pottery produced in such places as Meissen, Saxony. It also held one of the finer art collections in Germany.

The scars of the fire bombing of Dresden, which had been declared an open city, were still evident. The bottom of the outer walls of Der Zwinger were still blackened from the fires which had taken 135,000 lives in Dresden on February 13 through the 15, 1945. It was the most destructive bombing of a city during World War II, including the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Kurt Vonnegut, who had been a U.S. prisoner of war in Dresden, recalled the horrors of that night in his novel, *Slaughterhouse Five*. I remember visiting my grandmother after the news of the firebombing of Dresden had reached her. I can still hear her words of German despair and sadness. "O mein schoenster Dresden ist nichts mehr. Mein Schoenster Dresden ist nichts mehr." "O my beautiful Dresden is no more. My beautiful Dresden is no more."

Our walk through Der Zwinger made me realize that, beside the human lives lost, much antiquity had been destroyed. The porcelain collection, some of it restored, was but a remnant of the variety that existed before the bombing. Fortunately, the art collection had been evacuated and restored during the

Soviet occupation. As I viewed the Old Masters Gallery I was fascinated by the collection of European art rivaling many of the collections we have in U.S. museum and art galleries.

After a night in Dresden, Helmut drove me out to Bishofsverda in the morning. We arrived at noon prepared to take our lunch at the Bertolt Brecht Haus. It was the right place to dine considering that Brecht held a prominent place in the radical literary traditions of 20th century Germany. My introduction to Bishofsverda, short as it was, brought me back to a sense of connection with my grandfather's and my own history. There were genetic ties here. I was reviewing his beginnings in this place, his work life and ultimately his break from a Germany being shaped under the policies of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. It was also a recapturing of my own history and of an acceptance of the road I had taken in working for a just society in a changing urban-industrial world.

I had come to East Germany to find the roots where some of my family history had begun. Along the way, I had met with people working in current society for a world where justice and peace might be workable in every day life. I was now on my way home to return to that work and become a part of that story in the United States.

Richard P. Poethig
Remembered and Recorded
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