



On the Fall of the Berlin Wall

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I was only eleven when the Berlin Wall came down. I knew that was important—I knew it mattered and I can thank my education for that. And by that I don't mean school. I mean my parents. As a family, we watched the news every night, and I could always ask my parents about anything I didn't understand.

My Dad drove my sister and I to school, and at that time he always had the radio tuned to 774. In 1989, we always heard the latest updates from Monica Attard reporting from Moscow. In the lead up to the fall of the Wall, I knew something important was happening: my parents made sure of it.

With my parents, any topic was up for discussion. The best time for these discussions was our Sunday morning breakfasts where our talks were often hours-long affairs. Dad would make scrambled eggs, my sister and I divvied up the other tasks and Mum got the morning off. And once the food was served, we would spend the best part of the morning just talking. Of course, at that time the news was full of Berlin and Moscow. Mum and Dad would start talking it over and then— well—my sister and I invariably had questions: why was it so important?



My parents had come to Australia in their late teens. My Dad arrived in Australia with roughly twenty dollars—his life savings at that time. Within a week of arriving, he had a choice between three jobs. One day my uncle drove my mother and my aunt into town, dropped them off and told them to go and find a job—which they did. We'd often hear these stories growing up, and my Mum would say things like: 'it could only happen in countries like Australia'. 'We're lucky to be Australians'. 'Why?' I'd ask. And it was in this way that our lessons began—our Sunday lessons.

So it was from my parents that I learnt about the Wall. My mother, a devotee of history, would pull out the atlas and show us the map of Europe—including Germany with the division. She would tell us the stories of people trying to flee from East Germany to West Germany and of people being killed trying to escape. Why? So hard to understand when you're only eleven-years-old. But my father summed it up in one word: freedom. One side had it, the other side didn't. And he also said this to me: 'It's hard for us to understand this, because our freedom has never been taken from us.'

The Wall was a massive construct that physically divided a city into two separate and diametrically opposed world views. On one side the government controlled all, and on the other side people had the freedom to choose their own path. Those locked behind the Wall in East Berlin were cut off not only from their former countrymen, but from their fundamental human rights, and were made entirely beholden and subject to the State.

The government controlled all means of production, resulting ultimately in limited goods and very long queues. Travel was limited, and any attempt to leave the country without official permission—something that was very difficult to obtain as it was subject to many restrictions—was illegal. Even contact with Westerners could be interpreted as espionage.

In East Germany, the police protected the State and society at the expense of individual rights, the rationale being that achieving a socialist society was the best protection of said human rights.

Many harmless activities could be defined as a crime against the State. The secret police, the Stasi, had their own separate phone system which they used to monitor the conversations of their citizens. Many people were coerced into becoming informants and others lived their entire lives under constant surveillance, especially scientists. No one knew who worked for the Stasi, and trust was a rare commodity.

Is it any surprise that many East Germans risked their lives trying to cross the Wall? Those who fled East Germany understood why—their side didn't have freedom and just over the Wall, the other side did. Freedom: to be yourself, to choose for yourself, to be able to get work, to say what you thought without wondering who else was listening, to write your opinion and not worry whether you'd be hauled in for questioning, to disagree with your political leaders and not be thrown in prison, to be sure that your children were educated and not indoctrinated.

In 1846, American abolitionist and journalist Gamaliel Bailey wrote that 'the natural state of man is freedom.' In countries like ours, it is easy to take freedom for granted. We can protest the actions



of our government, we can mock our leaders, and even burn them in effigy. We are free to do so.

Sadly, this is not the case all around the world where the struggle for freedom and the right to self determination continues.

Freedom is fragile. It can only exist for as long as we are prepared to defend and protect it.