



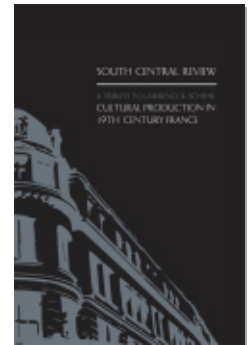
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Hello Willy, Good Bye Lenin! Transitions of an East German Family

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ON THE NIGHT OF August 24, 1974, Peter F. lay close to a pond near the East German “*nasse Grenze*” or wet border at the Baltic coast. He observed every move of the border guards at the wall that closed off the land from the sea. Plans of border structures were kept secret from East German citizens so he could only rely on what he saw and heard: the pattern of patrolling, the rhythm of the light beams, the sounds in the night and of waves breaking on shore. For a while he watched the beams before crawling toward them; it was his luck that he remained on his stomach, as he would otherwise have been caught on a wire lit by the lights, a wire connected to an alarm system set to call guards to the spot. Carefully, he crawled underneath the wire. Now, he had to approach the wall. As he recalled,

there was a fence for the cows, then there was a paved path, then a ploughed strip, (later equipped with an automatic shooting system), then a metal fence with barbed wire, and in this metal fence which was always a double fence—something I didn’t know, of course—there was another fence . . . And I worked myself through that by going underneath the barbed wire . . . And then I was immediately above the beach, about 2–3 meters . . . I slid down and went into the water.¹

That night of August 24—a night remembered as very clear, with a star-filled sky—he swam to the West German peninsula Priwall, a distance of two to three miles. When morning broke on August 25, Peter F. walked into a campground, stole a towel from a clothesline and changed into the shirt and pants he had in the bag around his neck. Then he made his way to a West German police station.

Peter F.’s re-telling of his 1974 escape is one of many—although by no means typical—family narratives that try to reconstruct events and sentiments of the past, a past so different from the present. His story is not one of a political dissident who openly clashed with the communist state but that of a deeply discontented scientist, one with a good position and a satisfying family life. Did he know the difficulties his family

would face after he committed a crime his government considered an act of terrorism?² Was he, in turn, equipped to survive in West German society? How would West Germans react to him at a time when their chancellor Willy Brandt had resigned because a close advisor, Günter Guillaume, turned out to be a GDR spy? One wonders how his narrative compares to those of other escapees.

The reality of living in a state that purposely imprisoned its own people for attempts to travel abroad appears to be far removed when one follows the rise of the *Ostalgie*—nostalgia for the East-wave. Since the mid-nineties of the last century, a growing trend, especially amongst former East Germans but also attracting a number of young Westerners, emerged from the longing for that which had vanished: the popular and material culture of the former German Democratic Republic.³ This wave celebrates the quaintness and—occasionally—comforting provinciality of the former East-German everyday life, complete with bemused remembrances of the East German plastic automobile the *Trabi* and the East German versions of coffee, coke, and pickled cucumbers, some of which had been reproduced in the late 1990s for nostalgia's (and profit's) sake. West German TV stations unearthed and rebroadcast East German TV shows, and they hauled former East German celebrities out of their relative obscurity and reinstated them as consultants in so-called *Ostalgie*-Shows that became all the rage in the fall of 2003. These “symbols, products, slogans, and rituals from East German times became the semantics of a lay discourse,” writes Thomas Ahbe in August 2003 in the East-West magazine *Freitag*,

it served ordinary people to process their former lives in East Germany as well as the state's brisk disassembly [. . .]. In that sense ‘Ostalgie’ is not just nostalgia. It is a form of personal therapy after the shock of reunification as well as an amateurish attempt to regain one's interpretational powers over one's own biography.⁴

How do such conflicting images, that of a police state ready to kill its dissidents and that of a *gemütlich* and unique haven of friends, family, and products fit into Germany's *Erinnerungskultur* or culture of memory? In the following I will discuss fiction—the recent film *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003), a German box office hit—and fact—the memories of one East German family's transition from the German Democratic Republic to the Federal Republic of Germany—to focus on the mothers (the film's and the real family's) and to expose a range of inconsistencies that mark

the public memory work concerning former East Germany. These inconsistencies appear at the intersection of memory-making and historiography because, among others, they underscore recent debates about East Germans' *Ostalgie* as resistance to Western "museumification." They appear at the intersection of public and private memory, an intersection blocked with clashes and silences. They appear also at the intersection of fact and fiction, making the dialogue on how to remember the former East German state and culture one of pivotal importance for understanding the continued split in German culture and identity today. The German public's reception of *Good Bye Lenin!* has mostly focused on the film's rendering of the *Wende*, its expression of *Ostalgie*, and on its fairy tale vision of a unified future within socialist political parameters. As such, the reception runs counter to the film's second story line of a family separated by politics and to the public and private memory work regarding the GDR's (and the FRG's) past that has barely begun. *Good Bye Lenin!*, by presenting two story lines, the second of which most reviews neglected to analyze more closely, delivers what, at first, may seem a mere matter of selection: remembering either the "good" or the "bad" of the former East Germany. By making this selection, however, anyone involved in this massive memory work has already fallen into the film's trap. This trap is, of course, located precisely in the gulf that divides the memory work of East and West. But it is a generational one, as well, depending on whether one adopts the viewpoint of the son or that of the mother. Taken together—not as two sides of a coin but as two of many viewpoints—the cacophony of generational and East-West perspectives prevent the German memory work from being straightforward or from being completed any time soon.

***OSTALGIE* VERSUS "MUSEUMIFICATION"**

Following the opening of the East German borders in 1989, most East Germans wished to merge their state with West Germany as quickly as feasible. Alongside everyday "institutions" from schools to consumer products, a distinct political system and culture that had defined the existence of about eighteen million people for forty years simply vanished. As Paul Betts put it, "[p]ractically overnight the whole postwar era was summarily shuttled off to the museum, rendering instantly obsolete the woolly political logic long used to explain the historical peculiarities of a divided nation."⁵ In the fifteen years following the end of close to everything that embodied or signified the former communist

state, East Germans began to realize that the right to speak and write uncensored since 1989 also indicated the right to resist the swift disposal of a common history, a common life, and a common identity. Indeed, by returning to their material past, East Germans' renewed search for personal context in a frequently alien Western system points to a version of Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" after the fact. This search makes East Germans' shared experience of the past—be it one of open dissidence, silent endurance, or manifest support of communism—a vehicle for a distinct cultural and political voice, and it underscores the desire for a marked identity. The anthropologist Daphne Berdahl, for example, has shown that the rise of *Ostalgie* provides East Germans with a possibility for "hegemonic memory-making." It opposes both the limited notion of the former GDR as synonymous with the *Stasi* as well as Western control over East Germans' historical knowledge and collective memory. As such,

Ostalgie, in all its various forms, thus does not entail an identification with the former GDR state, but rather an identification with different forms of oppositional solidarity and collective memory. It can evoke feelings of longing, mourning, resentment, anger, relief, redemption, and satisfaction—often within the same individuals.⁶

The context for this "memory-making" is what historians Jörn Rüsen and Friedrich Jaeger, based on the work by Aleida Assmann and others, have called "*Erinnerungskultur*," or a culture of memory. Lutz Niethammer presented one of the earliest collections of East German personal narratives, beginning a culture of East German memory after 1989.⁷ A decade later, Corey Ross showed that, amid all the answers derived from personal narratives, newly disclosed documents, and scholarly investigations, the historiography of East Germany continues to be challenged by questions. These questions (for example, whether the GDR should be classified as a totalitarian or a Stalinist system) occupy a multitude of cultural and political historians, apart from many more scholars representing other disciplines, but it remains to be seen how scholars might bring about "broader syntheses," as Ross put it. For the

huge amounts of documentation produced by the East German regime, the constant uncovering of new archival material, and the current aversion among many historians towards "metanarratives" and overarching structures of interpretation in principle have all gravitated against generalized accounts.⁸

At a time, though, when national newspapers such as *Die Zeit* publish solemn accounts of a nation that has utterly lost interest in the troubled present of the dulled Berlin Republic, favoring rather a return to the times of the Bonn Republic (*Wessis*) and the chronic celebration of *Ostalgie* via the (finally profitable) material icons of the Democratic Republic (*Ossis*), generalized accounts and metanarratives might help to redeliver most Germans onto the threshold of their own future. For now, the pull of the past seems strong as it provides a well-known and welcome shelter for those uncertain of their identity or future, and the reasons could include effects of the 1992 Maastricht treaty, the feeble economy, and ongoing changes in the ethnic and religious make-up of Germany and Europe. “Welcome to the Retro-Republic,” writes Christoph Amend and quotes the sociologist Heinz Bude who

observes in the East a need for catching up—for example, retrospectives on TV assume the function of an ad-financed evening school on *Zeitgeist*. And in the West one dreams about the former times of experiencing affluence. His generation, those around 50, says Bude, are used to things getting better and better somehow. That’s over.⁹

Although Amend’s essay is somewhat tongue in cheek, the Germans’ current interest in their respective pasts verges on the obsessive. Following the loss of both Republics, the Bonn and the German Democratic versions, and following the Berlin Republic’s loss of luster, Germans lacked and continue to lack unifying concepts for their future, concepts that they can internalize and use for determining fixities of a common German identity. Presently, the look back provides at least the possibility of projecting the defining elements of the past into the future.

If one believes Rüsen and Jaeger, this process of projection has long begun, especially given the common past of Nazi Germany, the critical evaluation of which began in the 1960s. However, it is much too early to use the simple past for announcing the formation of a German national identity, especially when, as they state, “*at first*, the history of the GDR *had* [my emphases] to find its place within German history after 1945, so that the common affiliation with the state of the Federal Republic of Germany presents to all a certain grade of identification without which a community cannot exist.”¹⁰ Rüsen and Jaeger do acknowledge “a mental divergence” (*mentale Divergenz*) between East and West and the need for “long-term mediation” (*langfristige Vermittlungsarbeit*), but the memory work of East Germans finds little mention in their as-

assessment and prediction of Germany's culture of memory. How this memory work dominates East Germans' construction of identity, though, is apparent from the quasi-fetishization of former GDR products and the accompanying nostalgia that spans generations—after all, over 40 years, the products were hardly modernized, and they have become cultural icons by sheer stamina. As Paul Betts points out, it is the monotony—or durability, depending on the viewpoint—of life styles in the former GDR that now glues together most of its former citizens, presenting us with a deceptively homogenous picture of everyday life:

Not only was there little variety of goods nor brand-name competition, many of the products introduced in the consumer rush of the 1960s stayed in production until 1989 with little or no change in content or form . . . [T]his aesthetic of sameness was crucial in shaping the GDR's collective memory. That is, the very lack of product innovation and repackaging assured that these objects . . . would function as transgenerational markers of East German culture and identity.¹¹

These products do not only contribute to a continued sensitivity towards being East German and towards distinguishing oneself as such in contrast to the West German life experience. They also signify East Germans' resistance to "museumification," a resistance that is nourished by a perceived triangular connection between the products once created, their elevation from everyday item to cultural icon, and the prevention of disposing both the creators and users that associate themselves with these products.

***GOOD BYE LENIN!* AND THE EAST GERMAN FAMILY**

Television and film have contributed significantly to linking East German products with the memory work of East Germans; in fact, a new category of *Ostalgie* films beckons for closer analysis, following the investigation of *Wende* films.¹² *Good Bye Lenin!* is the most prominent example of *Ostalgie* films so far and also happens to be one of the most successful German films in recent decades as it is often compared to the national and international popularity of *Run, Lola, Run* (1998). Released in February 2003, it immediately attracted over 6 million viewers in Germany alone, was sold to more than 60 countries, and has won prizes, including six awards from the European Film Academy. Generally speaking, the film serves as a perfect conduit for remembering and

reinterpreting the tumultuous events in 1989. *Good Bye Lenin!* also commemorates an East German identity that was closely linked to material signs of the everyday. It showcases interior decoration and household brands that, removed from their original cultural context, appear hip again as retro artifacts, if primarily to younger and more forgiving or perhaps less scarred generations. The film describes the events in East Berlin shortly before the fall of the wall when the people were demonstrating against the regime and its impotent “old men,” and it ends with the re-unification of Germany, spanning a timeline from October 7, 1989—the fortieth anniversary of the GDR—to October 3, 1990, the newly proclaimed day of re-unification.¹³

The political changes are the backdrop to a gripping family story that is at the center of *Good Bye Lenin!*. In fact, for Christiane Kerner, *nothing* whatsoever changes. Before the fall of the wall, she was a dedicated communist, a servant of the state, a believer in the system, and a loving mother of two, a son (Alex) and a daughter (Ariane). On her way to some party function, she sees Alex at one of the October demonstrations, suffers a heart attack, and falls into an eight-month coma. The world around her collapses, capitalism is taking over, and her children are happily leaving the stuffiness of their old lives behind while she lies motionless in her hospital bed. When she wakes, her doctor puts Alex under strict orders not to cause her any excitement whatsoever, and Alex and Ariane, with the help of friends and neighbors, are required to preserve the East German everyday at any cost. Bed-ridden but quite alert, Christiane Kerner thus witnesses the marvelous theatrics of staged communism in her very own room and buys—at first—into the life-as-usual ploy of her son that creates some of the amusing exchanges and scenes in the film.

At this point, viewers who comprehend the implications of what Alex is actually trying to resuscitate can rehash their past and see their own everyday life, including the objects that populated it, out of context. Those viewers are given a choice whether to side with Christiane and revel in the (virtual) reality that was once the GDR or whether to side with Alex and Ariane who have grown to consider their former indispensables outdated, inferior, and even laughable. Notwithstanding the focus on the victorious revivification of GDR material culture, the discrepancies between illusion and reality become so apparent and threaten to burst the bubble Alex tries so hard to maintain for his mother, that he has to push his virtual GDR into the realm of the improbable. In fact, Alex becomes so inventive that he gives rise to the kind of socialism he wished had existed, merging his own childhood dreams with a swansong

for East Germany that delivers not the East Germans onto West German soil but that brings West Germans to East Germany, looking to find a fairer, more livable system. His becomes a fairy-tale socialism that invites almost anyone to begin to dream again and that lends itself to a critique of *both* political systems as they existed in reality. Most importantly, Alex's fairy-tale makes his mother deliriously happy—and it is clear that her happiness and pride are not directed at the state into which she has invested all her life and energy but that they are directed at her son and his astonishing display of ingenuity and love.

It is clear because the film is actually framed by two time lines: October 1989 until October 3, 1990, the year that leads to Germany's reunification (political);¹⁴ and the escape of Alex's father from East Germany in 1978 and his "recovery" in 1990 that leads to the reunification of the family (personal). The personal timeline includes much darker facts and facets of East German history, and it begins with Alex's voiceover at the opening of the film:

On August 26th 1978 we had reached international visibility. Sigmund Jähn, citizen of the GDR, was the first German to fly into space. But on this day our family was going down the tubes. While Sigmund Jähn valiantly represented East Germany in the depth of the cosmos, in the capitalist West my creator was having his brains fucked out by the class enemy. He never returned.¹⁵

For Alex, 1978 and his father's escape to West Germany symbolize the beginning of the two Germanies' division and the division of his own family—and both seem entirely irreversible. As we watch the opening scenes through Alex's eyes, upon his father's escape of the republic, his mother is devastated and inconsolable. She refuses to speak. Then she disappears for about six weeks only to return as the ardent communist and "150%er" who so embraced party ideology that her life would be endangered by the shattering news of East Germany's collapse. Only that this isn't the entire story: as Alex and his sister Ariane find out only in 1990 and later in the movie, their father's escape had been planned by both their parents as the father was no longer able to withstand the petty pressures of communist party politics. At the family retreat their mother tells them what happened:

I lied to you this entire time. [. . .] Your father did not stay in the West because of another woman . . . and it also is not true that he never contacted us again. He wrote letters to me and to you, they are all behind the kitchen cabinets. They made work so

difficult for him, just because he wasn't in the party, it was terrible. He didn't show it, but I knew. [. . .] And then there was this conference in West-Berlin. We only had two days to think: your father wanted to stay in the West and I should follow later with the two of you. Well, I didn't make it. I was horribly afraid. You don't know how it is, applying for permission to leave with two children, they don't let you go immediately, you have to wait, forever, sometimes years. And they could have taken you away from me, do you understand? I didn't go. That was the biggest mistake of my life.¹⁶

Since the main focus in *Good Bye Lenin!* rests on the relationship between Alex and his mother, and the political events have precedence over the personal ones—at least judging by what propels the plot in this film—the family story, the second time line, becomes something of an afterthought (although viewers respond strongly to the reunification with the father). One might be inclined to argue that a film's topics are limited by necessity, but in this case the marginality of, especially, the mother's story undermines the interpretability of the main character, an interpretability that is necessitated by historical circumstances. Indeed, it is rather easy for the viewer to choose to marginalize the second timeline and the mother's motivations, because of the upbeat manner of the film and because of the facts of history: those times are now over and done with. Particularly to Western viewers unfamiliar with the realities of divided families in the East, the personal and political details of this timeline are foreign. With time, fewer and fewer West Germans were knowledgeable about the GDR and its citizens, and most expressed little if any interest in the everyday life of the other Germany. The personal and political realities that Christiane Kerner had to negotiate subsequent to her husband's escape are only fully comprehensible to those who have experienced them either directly or indirectly. Appropriately, Jana Hensel, author of the hugely successful *Zonenkinder* (2002), praises the film as a creative project, but emphasizes that, as a comedy, it delivers questions about history that remain unanswered:

Why does Alex not reflect at least once about what he is doing? Does he rebuild the GDR for himself or for his mother? Why does she not taste the difference between Eastern and Western pickles, coffee, jam or bread? Why was she such a devoted communist while her husband opposed the state?¹⁷

In the following, then, I attempt to answer Hensel's last question by taking as an example the experiences of my own East German family

that was divided in the 1970s to place the fictional Christiane Kerner within the context of a GDR that remains unspecified in *Good Bye Lenin!*. This context painfully marked East German everyday life and identity, for thoughts of escape influenced everyday life almost as much as the products that completed everyone's surroundings.

The Kerners had two days, Peter and Brigitte Finger had two weeks. Their timeline, however, runs only from approximately spring 1974 to March 1975, and my mother's "story," in particular, may give insight into sociopolitical factors that facilitate a more complex interpretation of Christiane Kerner's character in *Good Bye Lenin!*. By 1974, East and West Germany had embarked on a relationship of mutual recognition, thanks to the vision of Willy Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik*. Although 1974 brought the end of Willy Brandt's chancellorship in April because of the Guillaume affair—a close advisor turned out to be an East German spy—it also brought to fruition the basic treaty (*Grundlagenvertrag*) between East and West Germany which had been initiated by Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr. The *Ständige Vertretung* in East Berlin was established in May 1974, and diplomatic relations between the two states commenced; but West Germany never officially recognized East Germany as a state. My parents knew very little, if anything, about all this. Brigitte F., a teacher of English and German languages at the University of Greifswald, was busy with work, her studies, and family, and Peter F., a PhD candidate in geology at the same university, grumbled often—both within and outside the family—but was trying to help his wife make ends meet. Neither of them was a dissident, yet both were critical of the system, and each participated just enough in communist functions and rituals not to come under suspicion. They were the first in their respective families to reach university (they both come from rural and working class backgrounds), and they were raising two children who, in the eyes of the state, would grow up to be valued contributors to the socialist community. Why then would someone with a well-established family life, with a promising position at a university, and with no apparent personal or political difficulties risk his life and the future of his family to leave for a country he had never visited? In the following I will consult excerpts from interviews I conducted with both of them in 2000 and again in 2003 when they revisited Greifswald and its surroundings to retrace the steps of my father's escape and my mother's application to reunify her family.

According to Brigitte F., plans for Peter F.'s escape were vague and little was worked out. By April or May 1974 he had become very frus-

trated, an angry man who was unhappy with the state's and the military's constant demands on his services, and who, as he himself put it "had had it." They fought often, and during one of their disputes Brigitte pointed out to him that if he had to leave then he should do so but that his family had to stay and that it was entirely unclear whether they would ever see each other again. Peter F. was and remained a maverick, and, according to other members of the family, he was fully aware of the dangers he may have had to face and of the difficulties his wife and children would have had to endure, no matter whether or not they would be able to leave as well. Nonetheless, he decided to go. He did not have options like Alex's father, however, simply staying in West-Berlin following a professional obligation. Peter F. remains the only person who managed to escape over what may be called the third wall to reach West Germany via the Baltic Sea.

Two weeks before his escape, my parents began preparations. Peter went to visit his uncle in Wismar to explore the coast between Boltenhagen and Lübeck, the stretch of the Baltic coast just east of the West German border. This coast is usually referred to as the *Nasse Grenze*, the wet border, as opposed to the Berlin Wall and the Green Border, the latter separating East and West Germany on land. Little has been written about the wet border, and few people know that, starting at about Pötenitz, there was another wall, 13 kilometers long, that closed off the land from the sea. This concrete wall had watchtowers and border guards, and the marines patrolled the entire coast from the West German border to Poland. The entire area close to West Germany was mined. Attempted escapes were frequent: in total about 6,892 people tried to cross the border between 1961 and 1989, but only 913 were successful; 4,549 were caught and at least 174 died.¹⁸ Lying in the grass and watching the routines of the border guards with his binoculars, Peter F. could see "that the cows were grazing very close to the wall . . . and because the cows were so close, there couldn't be any mines. After all, the distance between the cow pasture and the wall was only a few meters."¹⁹ Since he would automatically come under suspicion for merely watching the border, he told a local policeman that he was collecting data for a geological excursion—and the policeman did not notify the *Stasi*. He told Brigitte F. that he would attempt to flee on August 25. The days before were spent sealing his documents with tape, turning Brigitte's black pantyhose into a mask so that he could hide from the watchtowers' beams outside and inside the water, and collecting just the most necessary items in a small bag that he would wear around his neck. Then he took his old bike, rode the train to the town of Wismar

and waited near a small pond until nightfall. Their children had not been informed about these preparations as it would have been foolish of their parents to share their plans with them.

As complicated and as dangerous as Peter F.'s escape was, following his successful arrival in West Germany, Brigitte F. now faced the kind of struggle that so devastates Christiane Kerner at the beginning of *Good Bye Lenin!*. On August 25, she found out that "he had made it." The telegram read: "I am in Lübeck, I won't return. Peter." She recalls:

That was such a relief. That meant he had arrived, because I had thought he would go Sunday night. He had wanted to spare me, he left already on Saturday. It was a starry night, it was very nice weather in August, very good visibility. I remember, I was lying in bed, the children were already asleep, and I looked into the sky wondering where he was lying and what he was doing. And the next day I went with my children and a friend to the beach, and she [the friend] didn't notice much, just asked "Where is Peter?" and I invented something like he was on an excursion with students or some such thing. I wasn't quite with it, really. . . .²⁰

What was she to do next? What were her options if she wanted to join her husband and reunite the family? The next day, Brigitte F. went to the police to report her husband's *Republikflucht*. They informed her that they—customarily—knew before her (the telegram went to the *Stasi* first, then to the family) and sent her back home. At first, family, friends, and colleagues pitied her and suspected personal troubles. Six weeks later, however, she was summoned by the *Stasi*:

They were asking me how I wanted to continue, and whether I wanted to divorce my husband. And I said that they couldn't really expect that, we'd been married 13 years, that I loved my husband, our marriage was not troubled, and just because he left the republic—OUR republic I must have emphasized—I didn't see any reason why I should file for a divorce. And then one of them said: "Or do you want to follow him?" And I said: "Why? How does one do such a thing?" He said, well, you can apply with the city authorities, but the chances are remote because I had two children, and the state would rather bring them up by itself so that they could become valued citizens. Well, I had no idea to whom I should address such an application, and I knew of no one who had ever done that, either, it was 1974 and nothing like this had ever existed before.

[Brigitte F. continues:] Well, and then I sat down for a long time to think about how I should put together this application, and then I handed it in to the city. They notified my workplace, and from then on the atmosphere was absolutely frigid.²¹

On October 3, 1974, she composed the following letter:

Following my husband's escape of the republic on August 24, 1974, I am facing a most unusual situation that requires a decision. After some long and serious thinking and my husband's assurance that he did not leave because of the family but because of other reasons, I have firmly decided to seek reunification. Although I cannot accept my husband's actions and would myself not have left the republic, I have realized that the connection to my husband—we have been married for 13 years and have had a good marriage—is stronger than that to our republic. Because I am completely convinced that my husband will never return to the GDR, I am applying for resettlement in the FDR to reunify my family; this is also in the interest of my children. The local criminal police pointed out such a possibility to me. I am aware that it is not easy to come to a decision with this application, but I believe that you will eventually decide in the interest of the family; I therefore ask you to grant my application.²²

Brigitte F.'s plan was to send the letter and apply before October 7, 1974—the annual Day of the Republic and the GDR's twenty-fifth anniversary that year—in the hopes of an amnesty or just plain luck. As a result, she was ostracized at the university, deemed incompetent to teach students according to the state and educational ideology, and asked to give up her job. Her supervisor threatened to take away her children. Only two colleagues were willing to support her, the rest were officially obliged—and willing—to distance themselves from her.

Her application of October 3 was rejected, and she responded to this decision with a second plea, written on November 23, 1974, specifying the maltreatment that she had already experienced:

[. . .] Because I had not received any notification about my application by November 19, 1974, I appeared in person at the Department of Interior Affairs and received the following verbal response (written responses, I was told, were against the rules): I belonged to the university cadre [. . .] had enjoyed my education in the GDR and had an important position in the edu-

cation of the students, and, in addition, I had all the possibilities for professional developments in our state [. . .] In general, I cannot deny these arguments, although regarding the possibilities for professional development I have had to experience certain limitations. [. . .] After my husband had left the republic and before I myself had applied for resettlement, I was removed from my job and was given other responsibilities. I was also prevented from taking part in the doctoral seminar. I am also under the impression—and it was corroborated by the annual evaluation in the form of merit, where I received the lowest bonus and, therefore, was to think of myself as the “worst” colleague in the English department—that my work [. . .] finds little recognition. [. . .] Additionally, I see few possibilities for my children to secure an education that corresponds to their abilities, because my son was not delegated to the EOS [advanced high school] simply and solely because of my husband’s escape of the republic.²³

She closed the letter with another appeal to the authorities to support a human being’s right to a happy family and emphasized the GDR’s alleged appreciation of the individual.

On November 28, she was called to a hearing at the university with her chair and other colleagues to explain her recent actions and to justify her continued employment in the area of education. At issue was her considerable lack of *Vorbildwirkung* or suitability as a role model. Her chair, upon suggesting that she should have doubts of conscience (*Gewissenskonflikte*) regarding her pedagogical work, proposed that she give up her current position and work in the language lab, starting in February 1975. Repeatedly, Brigitte F. stated that she saw no conflicts between her duties as a teacher and her application for resettlement in West Germany. Eventually, one of her colleagues asked: “It makes no difference to you whether your children are raised in the GDR or the FDR. How then can you properly take on the education of the students?”²⁴ Another colleague contradicted her response that the education of her children was a private matter by insisting, based on East German socialist ideology, that education was the obligation of society. Brigitte F. correctly detected a threat: “Are you implying that I will be denied the right to raise my children?” Ultimately, the hearing did not produce a compromise or agreement, and Brigitte F. was given until December 15, 1974, to hand in a written justification for her continued work as a teacher and educator, in which she was to emphasize her commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideology.

That fall, one of her colleagues advised her to go to East-Berlin to the *Ständige Vertretung* and request assistance. That she did in December—by necessity in secret—and described her case. They took her information and likely sent her case on to the West German ministry for East–West relations (*Ministerium für Innerdeutsche Beziehungen*). In January 1975, still unsure about how her case was being handled, and following yet another unanswered letter written December 24, 1974, she went to the East German Interior Ministry (*Ministerium für Inneres*) because her father-in-law assured her that she had the right to an answer. However, they did not grant her entrance: The concierge must have announced her to the authorities, because on the way up the stairs an official stopped her and she was informed that her “release from East German citizenship” and her travel documents would be available at her hometown’s (Greifswald) Department of Interior Affairs. Not a word to anyone, she was told. The time between January and March was then spent arranging for the departure, selling furniture and saying good-bye to friends—those that were left—and family. She quit her job in March, after she had been demoted to serve in the language lab, a demotion that was essentially comparable to a job ban, and she told her stunned chair that she was leaving for West Germany. On March 29, 1975, she, my brother, and I took the train via Berlin–Friedrichstrasse to Mainz where my father picked us up at the station.²⁵

Peter and Brigitte F.’s ordeal is by no means unique but it is certainly unusual. It is still unclear, for example, why we could leave so quickly. For now, and for this purpose, however, Brigitte F.’s story goes against readings of Christiane Kerner—who was a teacher as well—in *Good Bye Lenin!* that, as David Denby has done in the *New Yorker* review of March 8, 2004, describe her as a “dim celebrant of Communist kitsch.”²⁶ If Denby sees her as “the unwitting heroine of a national fable,” he has understood little about the film and knows less about East German history. Evelyn Finger [no relation, A.F.], in her review in *Die Zeit*, also displays a rather limited understanding of (or interest in) Christiane Kerner: “It does not bother the viewer that the almost neurotically conformist figure of the mother is somewhat far-fetched.”²⁷ Likewise, the scholarly readings are no more sophisticated and fail to answer Jana Hensel’s question as well. Nick Hodgin, for example, writes that

Frau Kerner’s experience with the Stasi results in her breakdown and, following her recovery, her (rather perplexing) commitment to the socialist cause. . . . Apparently oblivious to the realities of *real existierender Sozialismus* (*real existing socialism*), she criticizes her son’s apathy and disenchantment.²⁸

Such readings of the character ignore pivotal elements that belong to a most specific historical context: Christiane Kerner's only method for securing the future of her children—not to speak of her own—was to become as loyal to the system as possible, at least on the surface; otherwise, she, Alex, and Ariane would have had to suffer the constant stigmatization of having contact with the West and of having produced a traitor within the family. At that point in time looking into the future, had Brigitte F. decided to stay in East Germany, my brother and my own prospects for a good education, for example, would have been minute as my brother's rejection by the EOS already indicated. With a family member in the West, the entire family, including friends, would always have stayed under the scrutiny of the *Stasi*. Christiane Kerner saves her family by "selling" herself to the state and removing the "blemishes" from her remaining family's biographies; any criticism, including her son's, would have been held against all of them.

Why then is *Good Bye Lenin!* celebrated for burying the GDR and—paradoxically—for its *Ostalgie*? Surely, the film seeks to trigger people's emotions, either by identifying with the products and rituals or by acknowledging the separation of so many families so many years ago. But despite the West German director's mostly convincing research into East German history, some facts fell victim to the general idea: It would have been highly unlikely, for example, for Alex's father to be allowed to travel to West-Berlin once, let alone three times, without being a member of the party. Yet, who cares? As one consultant to the *Ostalgie*-Shows points out, "the problem is: either you make fun of the East and entertain the West or you entertain the East and the West doesn't have a clue."²⁹ The insufficiency of intercultural communication, the lack of understanding between East and West, and the reluctance to acknowledge the inevitability of confronting these problems for years to come takes us to the center of the inconsistencies and discrepancies I mentioned at the beginning. According to Thomas Groh, the "camp" of East Germany predominated West Germans' reception of life in the East, preventing any serious investigation on how the "camp" corresponds to "communism" and "coercion."³⁰ Matthias Dell criticizes the film's "GDR-theater" as well: "The abrupt transition from the limping comedy to Alex's tragic search for the father is not credible." Yet, he does glimpse a possibility for future generations in the rewriting of East German history, crediting director Becker's product with a potential "filmic assurance of national identity."³¹

Certainly, the critical reception of films like *Good Bye Lenin!*, despite all their commercially infused flaws and their arguable confor-

mity (*Biederkeit*)³² could help to address what an East German director, Leander Haußmann, has called the “collective desire for banality” (*kollektiven Banalitätswahn*) regarding East German history. Just as Alex envisions a fairy tale East Germany, asking both East and West Germans to ponder the imperfections of their respective systems, the need to continue to uncover and discuss the facts and realities that shaped the multi-faceted history of both states and cultures during those 40 years is pressing. The need continues especially for those generations who are in charge of remembering and re-writing. It remains pressing because of an ongoing uncertainty about how to debate the inconsistencies between memory and experience, between the West German power status and the East German second-class citizenship status, between public and private memory work, and between the generations. In *Good Bye Lenin!* a West German director attempts to address the comforting memory of everyday consumer goods and the painful memory of the loss of a father and husband—memories the film fails to communicate as concrete experiences because these experiences are most evidently a fact of the past and subject to at least some degree of ridicule in a film that is more comedy than tragedy. More significantly, the family story, as most analyses of *Good Bye Lenin!* show, becomes an afterthought, a memory thoroughly integrated into the story of *Ostalgie* and GDR consumer products, because it is neither “trendy” the way *Ostalgie* is nor does it help to bring an end to the memory of the GDR. *Ostalgie*, at this point of East German memory work, guarantees most East Germans the right to a common identity with a positive undercurrent, much more so than individual families’ experiences of painful separations and political chicaneries. How can one identify with escape, something that was on almost everyone’s mind but that, when it was actually accomplished—as an act of desperation, possibly ending in prison or in death—was precisely the opposite of the everyday? Obviously, an identity commonly reconstructed by East Germans better enables a more or less unified front against West Germans’ “museumification,” and, by default, it enables West Germans to return to their Bonn identity and a much less complicated and challenging political, social, and cultural landscape. Both sides will have to allow for generational slippages in this memory work, and both sides will have to address the inconsistencies that become apparent from the polarizing juxtaposition of *Ostalgie* and *Republikflucht*. A fairy tale socialist state that embraces East and West Germans alike may be out of reach, but uncovering and acknowledging the necessary nuances of memory work resulting in discussions about German identities are not.

NOTES

I am most grateful for the critical advice from numerous readings, including Brigitte Finger, Anne-Katrin Gramberg, Gregory Lewis, Deborah Volck, and Richard J. Golsan.

1. Oral interview, recorded August 4, 2000. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. I conducted oral interviews with Peter and Brigitte F. in the summer of 2000 and again in 2003.

2. According to the 1985 *DDR-Handbuch*, until 1961, *Republikflucht* or escape from the Republic was the official term for fleeing the country. After August 13, 1961, the date that marks the construction of the Wall, the term fades away, although not among the general population; the preparation of an escape is thereafter considered an act against the state, that is, an act of terrorism, and thereby punishable by death:

Failed undertakings to escape are penologically subsumed under the state crime "terrorism" as an attempted penetration of the border. Only this kind of a legal valuation and a qualification of the escapee as "enemy and traitor" render it possible to explain to the border guards of the NVA (National People's Army) the necessity as well as the appropriateness of the order to shoot. . . . The penetration of the border by force continues to be punishable not according to §213, but as "terror" according to §101 StGB. (*DDR-Handbuch*, ed. Hartmut Zimmermann [Köln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1985], 1124).

3. Ina Merkel observes the beginnings of *Ostalgie* already in 1992 with East German brands luring former East Germans back to the tastes of the East with beer and cigarette ads, for example: "[the little words *us* and *we*] express a pride in being different, having another history, other experiences, different behavior." Ina Merkel, "From a Socialist Society of Labor into a Consumer Society? The Transformation of East German Identities and Systems," in *Envisioning Eastern Europe: Postcommunist Cultural Studies*, ed. Michael D. Kennedy (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 62. See also Jonathan Bach, "'The Taste Remains': Consumption, (n)ostalgia, and the Production of East Germany," *Public Culture* 14, no. 3 (2002), 545–56.

4. Thomas Ahbe, "*Der Dambruch: Anschlag auf den Einheitsgeschmack*," *Freitag*, 29 August 2003, online edition (www.freitag.de).

5. Paul Betts, "Remembrance of Things Past: Nostalgia in West and East Germany, 1980–2000," in *Pain and Prosperity: Reconsidering Twentieth-Century German History*, ed. Paul Betts and Greg Eghigian (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 178.

6. Daphne Berdahl, "'(N)Ostalgie' for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things," *Ethnos* 64, no. 2 (1999), 203.

7. Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plate, and Dorothee Wierling, eds. *Die Volkseigene Erfahrung. Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR*, (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991).

8. Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretations of the GDR* (London: Arnold, 2002), 5. See also Alf Lütke, "*Die DDR als Geschichte. Zur Geschichtsschreibung über die DDR*," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 36 (1998), 3–16.

9. Christoph Amend, "*Willkommen in der Retro-Republik: Oskar Lafontaine und Montagsdemos, 'Schwarzwaldklinik' und Palast der Republik, die alte Rechtschreibung und Helmut Kohl – sie alle sind wieder da* (Welcome to the Retro-Republic: Oskar Lafontaine and Monday demonstrations, 'Schwarzwaldklinik' and Palace of the Re-

public, the old spelling and Helmut Kohl—they are all back again),” *Die Zeit* (Leben), 38 (2004). Online edition (www.zeit.de). The return to a past perceived to be better and happier is occurring at a time, of course, when news in the East—and the West—is not encouraging. Even the *New York Times* reported in 2004 that, despite having used mountains of money (some \$1.5 trillion),

many roads lead nowhere . . . Traveling through eastern Germany with a camera 15 years later offers a chance to document how tragically short a grand renovation project has fallen . . . Germans, worried that the languishing East threatens to hobble the entire country, have begun a national debate over what went wrong. The answer supplied recently by a blue-ribbon commission is stark: too much money spent on bricks and mortar, not enough on people. (Mark Landler, “In Germany’s East, a Harvest of Silence,” *The New York Sunday Times* 22 August 2004, Week in Review, 10.)

Similarly, one September 2004 cover of the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* shows the otherwise up-beat and “can-do” image of an East German *Ampelmännchen* slowly sinking and disappearing into water. The title reads *Jammertal Ost*, or the valley of misery in the East, *Der Spiegel*, 20 September 2004.

10. Jörn Rüsen/Friedrich Jaeger, “Erinnerungskultur,” in *Deutschland-Trendbuch*, ed. Karl-Rudolf Korte and Werner Weidenfeld (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 2001), 419.

11. Betts, “Remembrance of Things Past,” 201.

12. Although the criteria for *Ostalgie* films will vary, I would count among them *Sonnenallee* (1999), by Leander Haußmann, *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen* (2001), by Peter Timm, based on the novel by Jens Sparschuh, and—the latest addition—*Kleinruppin* (2004), by Carsten Fiebler.

13. Detailed accounts and interpretations of these historical events are too numerous to list here, both in fiction and non-fiction; one of the most recent fictional accounts of 1989–90 is Thomas Brussig’s *Wie es leuchtet* (S. Fischer: Frankfurt, 2004).

14. I prefer to use the hyphenated “re-unification” for the same reasons Berdahl provides in her article:

Although I am aware of the arguments that point to the teleological and ideological implications of the term *reunification*, as well as the fact that the territories united in 1990 do not represent Germany in an earlier state, I am also concerned that the omission of any allusion to a previous union (as in the term *unification*) silences critical elements of Germany’s past as well. My use of the hyphen is thus a compromise, an effort to avoid the naturalizing connotations of *reunification* while reflecting a sensitivity to certain histories of divisions and recent restorations. (Berdahl, ““(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present,” 207.)

15. Wolfgang Becker, dir. *Good Bye Lenin!* (X-filme Creative Pool and Westdeutscher Rundfunk, 2003).

16. *Ibid.*

17. Jana Hensel, “*Die DDR wird Spekulationsobjekt*,” *Welt am Sonntag*, 9 February 2003, online edition, www.welt.de.

18. Information taken from www.ostseefluchten.de, the website of an organization that seeks to make public the history of escapes from the GDR via the Baltic. For more general information see Bernd Eisenfeld, “*Gründe und Motive von Flüchtlingen und Ausreiseantragstellern aus der DDR*,” *Deutschlandarchiv* 37, no. 1 (2004), 89–105.

19. Interview conducted August 6, 2000.

20. Interview conducted August 8, 2000.
21. Interview conducted August 8, 2000.
22. From the private papers of Peter and Brigitte F.
23. Private papers.
24. Excerpts taken from the minutes of this meeting.
25. Following the dissolution of the GDR state, numerous committees were formed to investigate the work of scholars and administrators at East German universities. Brigitte F. was informed about one such committee at the University of Greifswald, and she sent a letter providing the details of her discrimination after Peter F.'s escape.
26. David Denby, "Women and the System," *New Yorker* 8 March 2004, 92.
27. Evelyn Finger, "Die unsinkbare Republik," *Die Zeit* 07 (2003), online edition, www.zeit.de.
28. Nick Hodgkin, "Berlin is in Germany and Good Bye Lenin! Taking leave of the GDR?" *Debatte* 12, no. 1 (2004), 37.
29. Klaus-Dieter Kimmel in Alexander Osang, "Zu Gast im Party-Staat," *Der Spiegel* 37, (2003), 216.
30. Thomas Groh in www.filmtagebuch.de, 9 December 2003.
31. Matthias Dell, "Sandmann, lieber Sandmann: Ost-Retro mit nachgetragenen Pop-Slang." *Freitag*, 28 February 2003. Online edition, www.freitag.de.
32. Daniel Haufler, "Die DDR ist eine Baustelle," *die tageszeitung*, 2 February 2003. Online edition, www.taz.de.