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## **Churches under Siege in the GDR**

Observations of a British Quaker (Religious Society of Friends) who has worked with the Churches in the GDR since 1969, and since the mid-seventies 6-8 weeks every year. I always had a Church visa and never travelled as a tourist.

### **I. The Reason: Why did I do it?**

I have worked ecumenically ever since the war and have done relief work after the war with Friends. There was a delegation in 1969 by the British Council of Churches to welcome the new GDR Council of Churches (Bund). I was the Quaker member of this delegation and discovered there were German Quakers in the GDR who could do with support. I was on the delegation because I speak German and was a university lecturer in 19th and 20th church history, thus well acquainted with the history of the German Church, the teaching of Bonhoeffer etc.

### **II. What noticeable influences did I, as a British Quaker discover in the Church life of the GDR?**

Why was the Church given space in the GDR and not elsewhere in the areas dominated by the Soviet Union with its oppressive anti-religious stance?

1. The influence of the teaching of Bonhoeffer and the witness of the Confessing Church during the Nazi Period was palpable and paramount. In part this resulted in the unique position of the Church in the GDR compared with Churches in the rest of Eastern Europe dominated by the Soviet Union. Although Marx thought that religious convictions would wither by themselves once the working class ceased to be the oppressed and became the rulers, it is well documented that in the Soviet Union and post-war elsewhere faith and the churches survived even when severely persecuted and often only existing underground or having its activities severely curtailed. In Nazi Germany, however, Communists and Confessing Christians suffered in the same concentration camps and many died or were executed for their faith. Thus many leading German post-war communists



were well aware that these christians were far from being the enemies of the people. Though they disagreed with all religious expressions they respected these who under persecution had remained steadfast. Though they did their level best to curtail church activities and to discriminate against ordinary Christians, there were thus quite different reasons why this was not always carried out consistently.

2. A number of Church Leaders had been taught by Bonhoeffer, had been members of the Confessing Church and had survived. The viewpoints of Schönherr, Werner Krusche, Heino Falcke and others, though not identical, were paramount here. As time progressed some of the teaching of the Church had useful implications.

3. Practically and financially the Church had its uses for the government. Any Christian institution which cared for people who were not productive were therefore allowed to continue to function. The German Church had and still has a flourishing Diakonie.

3.1 Although Church schools with about one exception were closed to prevent the young being indoctrinated as christians, existing Kindergartens remained open and flourished as women almost uniformly worked after childbirth. The length of maternity leave varied, but crèches and Kindergartens were essential for the economy and these institutions were therefore helpful.

3.2 There were and are many Christian hospitals doing excellent work. Often these were helped financially by the West German Church with new equipment for instance. So why close them?

3.3 The many institutions which catered for those with mental or physical disorders were encouraged and flourished. So were retirement homes for the elderly. They may not have had the physical standards of the West, but the care of the inmates was excellent. And again here too western finance was often a help.

4. Politically the emphasis on Peace which was present in the Church's teaching was useful. No doubt the Religious Society of Friends profitted from that since its testimony as a historic Peace Church was well known. In this area too the world ecumenical movement became increasingly a possible tool that might be exploited in the cold war.



5. What theology was present and developed during these years of my service? This is not a paper on German Protestant Theology which was present and developed during the communist era, since it is well documented elsewhere. Hence here only the headings to remind readers.

5.1 The Barment Declaration of 1934 stressed that there are no areas of human life that do not belong to Christ. The consequences visible in the GDR were the stress that faith is not just a matter for the individual but is community based. Christians are the Body of Christ, the individual is a member of His Body which has many members with diverse gifts. Discipleship is costly.

5.2 The Church may not be concerned with its own survival, but must be willing to take risks.

5.3 There is the warning against cheap grace.

5.4 Theology must be contextual. One's faith must be practised in the full secular life.

5.5 There was the whole issue of shalom. (peace)

5.6 These are then the 3 discernable theological themes: The universal relevance of Christ, faith as discipleship and God's promised shalom – wholeness – peace.

5.7 In relation to the all pervading communist regime the Church developed its thesis of "not beside, not against but 'Church in Socialism'".

5.8 In the GDR the Church was no longer a privileged "Volkskirche". Thus the end of the Constantinian era was accepted. The threefold mission of Jesus – that of kerygma (proclamation), koinonia (community) and diakonia (service) was stressed and practised. Of these "proclamation" was perhaps the most difficult under a communist regime to carry out since one knew an informer would be present at every service, anything written and published needed to pass a censor and was often rejected. Risk taking was a necessity and some of the subterfuges were brilliant. Lengthy, difficult discussions between Church leaders and the Secretary of State for Church Affairs were inevitable and much bargaining took place at times.

How could the WCC (World Council of Churches) concept of *Missio Dei* – the divine mission be carried out? Could one win new members for the congregations and/or demonstrate and proclaim God's love? *Diakonia* – Service demonstrated the latter, but also the Church and its premises provided opportunity and shelter for all sorts of minority groups who could have had no other place to meet. These groups were not necessarily christian, but nevertheless found shelter and acceptance by the Church, though not always by some congregations.



Christian teaching on Church premisses was permitted, but it was clear to all that being an acknowledged christian or even child of one, had distinct disadvantages both in school and in the choice of career and preferment. Being a conscientious objector to military service or military education in school, not to mention refusing the universal "Youth Initiation" (Jugendweihe) made the situation even worse for the individual. Legally all these were permitted but local officialdom could frustrate many hopes. The minor needed the courageous parents to stand up for him/her and be willing to confront higher authorities. The individual needed to have the stamina and courage to withstand ridicule, mockery, derision humiliation of contemporaries, teachers and superiors.

Mission to the individual and to the community are both biblical and need to be accepted simultaneously, not an easy task when it is actually illegal. Out of all this developed a creative theology of critical solidarity with the accent on "critical". All this endeavour culminated in country wide discussions in preparation for the Conciliar Process of Justice Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) in Basle in 1989.

## 6. The GDR Church and Ecumenism

The reciprocal influence of ecumenism and the church in the GDR increased over the years and was at times amazing. Since Marxist/Leninist socialism stressed "peace" a number of Church Leaders were always allowed to attend ecumenical European and world gatherings. The possibility of portraying communist regimes as good, just and peaceful was welcomed by the government. Certainly German Church Leaders had greater opportunity to speak "Truth to Power" than other East European Church Leaders with whom I for one was very careful in my speech, and aware of informers.

6.1 Briefly, in the late sixties The Prague Christian Peace Conference (CPC) brought an air of openness in the Christian-Marxist dialogue. It was founded by the Czech theologian Hroznáček and the British Quaker Richard Ullmann. Mutual respect, scholarship and endeavour promised a widening of horizons and understanding. The Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia which also forced Germany to participate crushed this vibrant, radical rapprochement. It destroyed the CPC in which Quakers had taken such an active part. They with other European Church Leaders withdrew when the Russians forced the chairman and secretary to resign, and imposed their own puppets as leaders. The CPC, however, continued and was encouraged by the GDR-government as well as their own GDR Peace Movement. Many attempts were made to woo the Quakers back into its fold, both in the GDR



and in Britain. The Quaker Peace witness posed here a dilemma, but I for one am certain that that in all "peace" endeavours one may not be politically naive. How many of the GDR christian members of the CPC were informers I do not know. The Religious Society of Friends in the GDR refused to rejoin as a Church. One individual Friend was a member as she was of the GDR Peace movement as well, but I have no reason to think of her as an informer.

### 6.2 CEC- Conference of European Churches.

These conferences too were an opportunity for GDR as well as Eastern European Church Leaders to participate in ecumenical discussions, to enlarge the understanding of western church people of the problems and opportunities in Eastern Europe, and to contribute some radical thinking. I am sure much went on in private. As far as I myself was concerned these were valuable experiences. In addition I was able to put faces to names, learn their body language and find out whom one might trust and where to be careful.

### 6.3 The GDR Church, JPIC and the Basle Conference of 1989.

"The Protestant Church in the GDR participated in the radicalisation of the WCC that was produced by the impact of the Third World Liberation Theologies, the international peace and disarmament movement, and the growing environmental concern in the developed nations of the West" (Baum, p. 129). "Towards the end of the eighties, the Conciliar Process in the GDR, in which all churches were involved, including at the end even the Catholic Church, succeeded in mobilising local congregations and critical groups in the name of God's shalom. The cooperative effort produced a remarkable theological document in the early part of 1989 and made a major contribution to the peaceful revolution in the fall of the same year" (Baum, p. 131). There were extensive discussions of the topic over a 2 year period in local congregations and groups. These were followed by three plenary sessions attended by elected or appointed delegates – at Dresden February 1988, at Magdeburg October 1988 and again at Dresden April 1989. This resulted in a major document solemnly promulgated on April 30th 1989 in a worship service at Dresden's Kreuz Kirche ( *Ökumenische Versammlung für Gerechtigkeit, Frieden und Bewahrung der Schöpfung, Dresden-Magdeburg-Dresden, eine Dokumentation*; Berlin: Aktion Sühnezeichen/Friedensdienste 1990).

The report is unique in its frank and yet loyal critique of the existing socialism and its urgent call to conversion for which there was no precedent in the GDR. The government urged the bishops not to publish it. "But since



the document was the result of a cooperative effort involving masses of people at the base over a period of 3 years, the government decided not to intervene.” (Baum, p. 133) I well remember the excitement both before and during the Basle Conference for which an astonishingly large delegation had been given exit visas. Let Baum have the last words on the document (p. 134) “The report was a theological document. The theology of God’s shalom both provided the vision for society and generated the critique of present conditions. Moreover the report reveals the impact of the ecumenical movement on the Protestant Theology in the GDR.” Read the report. It is still worth while reading. Much of the critique is applicable to Capitalist countries as well.

### III. Quaker Input and Experience

1. The religious Society of Friends is one of the three historic Peace Churches. Refusal of military service, trying to prevent outbreaks of violence, relief work were and are part of our testimonies. We train others and are ourselves always in training. We run conferences and are involved in international Peace Organisations too numerous to mention here. I have already written about our involvement with the PCPC. I myself starting with relief work after the war have been involved with the CPC, KEK, the Puidoux Conversations (Between the Lutheran and Reformed Churches on the one side and the I.F.o.R. and historic Peace Churches on the other) and various European Peace Education conferences.

2. The Religious Society of Friends is a small church but nevertheless an international one. Yearly Meetings exist on all continents. We are an N.G.O. and have centres in Geneva and New York working with the United Nations, and in Brussels working with the EU. Our main emphases are on Peace issues, human rights, economic and ecological affairs, though these include many other topics. On the other hand as we are a small church we pose no threat to governments as some of the larger churches may do. One of the notable achievements of Friends in cooperation with the larger churches in the GDR was the possibility of conscientious objectors to military Service to serve as noncombatents in a kind of pioneer core (Bausoldaten) without weapon training, though a few months longer. The GDR was the only communist country where this was possible.



3. I have worked mainly behind the iron curtain – unpaid of course. My greatest endeavour was in the GDR as I speak German. I chose deliberately to work low-key, at grass roots level and behind the scenes. This enabled me to arrange small scale learning experiences in 3 areas: with the GDR Quakers, with the GDR churches, church groups and “alternative” groups, and in conversations with government officials which enabled East/West exchanges to take place as well as exchanging information.

## 4. Working with GDR Friends

Having discovered in 1969 that there were Quakers in the GDR cut off from the West like every other GDR citizen I became concerned to “travel in the ministry” in the GDR. This meant visiting all groups and most isolated Friends and attend their Yearly Meetings and occasional General Meetings. The young people then ask me to do to work with them too, so I did the youth work as well, referred to below. My main aims were to help them to become a cohesive, courageous group, whose members could support each other without fear in their Christian witness and Peace witness at school, in Higher Education, in training, at work and in society at large. They wanted to learn about worship, bible study, Quaker and Church History. They also received “Peace Education” which includes teaching group dynamics, role play, drama and art, conflict resolution and mediation. With the older ones I trained trainers and practised Quaker Business Methods.

## 5. Working with Church peace groups and alternative groups

5.1 The more pastors I got to know, the more I was asked to take workshops varying from 1 day to whole weekends or even for a whole week at church conference centres. These took place mainly in Berlin, Halle, Erfurt, Bischofrod, Herrnhut, Dresden and Görlitz. I only once was asked by an unknown person to do a workshop and declined as noone seemed to know this person or group, and I was afraid the Stasi might be behind them.

5.2 I took part in the Peace March that went through Lutherstadt-Wittenberg.

5.3 I participated in two Erfurter Kirchentage and ran peace education workshops there. I came the previous Easter to train trainers as the numbers would be too large for one person. I also took part in Podium Gespräche.

6. I had annual conversations with Members of the Ministry for Church Affairs in Berlin usually with a GDR Quaker present. I also invited local Ministry officials to my Workshops. “That of God in everyone” is a good



basis to establish relationships with those one does not necessarily agree with. Whatever “new thing” I wanted to do took 3 years to set up. First time of asking was “NO”, the second year “we’ll think about it”, 3rd year was usually “yes”.

7. Apart from participating in some small conferences in which I helped but which I did not set up myself, there were three events during the eighties when I managed to persuade the Secretariat for Church Affairs to let me organise them. I had pointed out that if they were so concerned for a rapprochement between East and West and a peaceable Europe then they must allow people from East and West to meet, and in particular the younger generation. If they really accepted that the intention of Quakers was to help to create a peaceful world then the younger generation must learn about each other, and Quaker Youth must get to know its heritage.

7.1 The first endeavour was to allow a group of British Young Friends to travel officially in the GDR. As tourists they would have had to exchange western money daily and that we could not afford. In the event we were generously supported. They supplied a minibus with driver and tourist guide/interpreter. We stayed in the large Berlin Youth Hostel and in the smaller very well appointed one in Dresden. I had chosen these 2 cities as I had most contacts there. We could also name what institutions we would like to see. I knew “education” was really off limits. The government did not really want to expose the all too obvious ideological education and its methods. However, they learnt more about that by meeting the Young than by visiting institutions. But we visited cooperative farms and a fascinating hospital in Dresden whose director practised acupuncture and incidently cured one of my sick Young Friends. He had been a GDR ship’s doctor and learnt acupuncture in China. With exceptions alternative medicine was frowned upon in the GDR. Conversations with him were most informative. We visited museums and all sorts of places in which the young were interested. We had daily Meetings for Worship, sometimes even in the minibus. Towards the end our young guide/interpreter took part.

I had pleaded with my British Young Friends to be careful in what they said, especially indoors, which they were not always very willing to take seriously. But I was astonished when our guide in the minibus to Dresden warned us that the Youth Hostel there “had ears”. She was an interesting person whose job was quite officially to be a guide/interpreter. She had been to Cuba and had a boyfriend there. She hoped one day to be allowed to live



there and marry him. We had a successful GDR debriefing, as well as our own.

7.2 The reciprocal visit of GDR Young Friends to visit Britain took equally long to set up. I had given two reasons for this visit. The cradle of the Religious Society of Friends is the north of England, so they ought to be allowed to learn something of their heritage. As Young Friends they ought to learn about conflict resolution and peace making where they could actually observe Friends at work. Therefore a visit to Northern Ireland based on Belfast was planned. Quakers have several projects there. I think we achieved exit permits for 6 Young Friends. I enlisted a British Young Friend to help. She drove a hire car and I drove my own in England. In Northern Ireland we had the help of Ulster Friends and slept in the Meeting House, as we also did in one in the Lake District.

7.3 I thought that if the GDR was serious about their peaceful desires and proud of their many achievements in the GDR, then they should welcome a study tour of members of the British Conservative Party who were more likely to be hostile towards a communist regime than other British parties. This eventually took place hosted by the GDR-CDU. We were put up in the Berlin CDU guest house, royally entertained, had cars and chauffeurs at our disposal and interesting visits and conversations. True, they saw little of the daily drabness of life of the ordinary citizen. I had never lived in such a style in the GDR either, but the conversations were open, and problems honestly discussed. Ironically, my greatest difficulty was to find 6 British members of the Conservative party to make up the group. I am myself not a member of that party.

7.4 It is worth mentioning, though only I in a personal capacity was involved, that 2 young christian GDR nurses were allowed to leave the country to be missionaries in West Africa. Their sponsoring body was the Baptist Church though they themselves were Lutherans. They felt certain to be called by God to be missionaries. All missionary activities in the GDR were actually prohibited and exit visas for such work were not issued. As they were to work in West Africa they needed to learn English and to know something about tropical medicine. The British Baptists arranged for their stay in a London Language School, but I looked after them in their vacations and helped in other ways. One of them I had known since she was a child, the daughter of the couple who ran the large Diakonische Anstalt in Rothenburg. The father later became the bishop of Görlitz.



## IV. Reflections

### 1. Quaker background which helped the work.

1.1 My youthful experiences in relief work which had often been frustrating and not necessarily “peaceful” had taught me a lot for instance how to understand and cope with different cultures.

1.2 The Quaker discipline of both Meeting for Worship and Quaker business methods teach you to listen not only to words spoken but also to discern what is actually meant, even if the words don’t fit. One learns to observe body language, to be patient, to be aware that one is not always right, not to argue but to discuss.

1.3 “That of God in everyone” is one of the basic theological tenets of Quakerism going back to the passage in St. John’s Gospel 1’9 “The true Light that gives light to everyone who comes into the world”. We are taught to search for and to recognise this Light in everyone whether we like them or not, agree with them or not, are afraid of them or not etc. So one seeks to understand the other however difficult, and tries to get them to realise one is not an “enemy” or wants to get the better of them. Each one of us may have different ways of establishing relationships – I found the giving of flowers was at first disarming but later seen as a genuine gift. After all it can’t be seen as a bribe. There needs to be transparency and integrity. On the other hand this faith does not allow one to be politically naive. As we share in the light, so we share in sin. Here but for the grace of God go I. However pleasant and friendly I was, I made it quite clear I would not be manipulated or compromised. For instance I refused to have anything to do with the CPC after 1968 however hard they tried and pleaded. Politically I would class myself as a Christian Socialist and not as a capitalist.

1.4 From prewar Nazi experience I was familiar with the danger of being listened to whether by telephone, letter or built in devices. I assumed that an informer would be present at our Quaker Yearly Meetings, at the Kirchentage and workshops. Some of course were visibly recognisable. They were not always clever people. It is not difficult to learn to be circumspect and to think before one speaks. On the other hand I never lied, though I would not always answer questions.

My main concern was not to compromise any of my GDR friends or acquaintances, not to endanger others. After all the worst that could happen to me was to be thrown out and never get a visa again. However that did not happen.



## 2. Difficulties

2.1 In theory as an “official” traveller my luggage was not to be searched. This to begin with was ignored. I took care not to bring Western newspapers or journals but had masses of photocopied worksheets, as no photocopying was possible. However, they were never confiscated and by the mid-eighties nothing much was searched.

Physically for me the worst was waiting, sometimes hours, to cross the Friedrichstrasse crossing (Berlin). There was no possibility to sit. I carried a rucksack weighing often more than 26 kilos, and dared not to appear to have difficulties. They might want to know what was in it! I could not take the rucksack off as then I would not have got it on again.

2.2 Apart from the Berlin office Friends have no premisses of their own. To find places to do the Quaker Youth work was very difficult. I needed over a fortnight each time, as I worked with 12-16 years old one week and 16-30 years old the 2nd one, having discovered the first time the difficulty of working with 10-33 years old all in one group! Mainly we camped in people's gardens or used parish rooms (Gemeinderäume) which belonged to parishes whose pastors knew me well. We always did our own cooking etc. to train Young Friends to work as a team and to teach group solidarity. This prevented me from being able to use church conference centres which would have wanted to do the catering and cost money. Wherever we were we spent the afternoons doing voluntary work for our host.

Later one Young Friend and his wife bought a derelict farmhouse hoping to make this into a youth centre. We used it several times and the Young Friends also at other times helped to make it habitable. But this was not ideal either and the hygienic circumstances were perilous.

For the first time we were lent a “hunting hut” (Jagdhütte) which had some land with it on which we camped, and an icecold little lake fed by a spring. One of the youngster's father was a member of a hunting association (Jagdkollektiv). This was in Thüringen near the frontier, where I discovered, I had no right to be. So when the police investigated I had to be hidden.

To my astonishment I had to teach them to cook on an open wood fire, the calorgas stove being so weak that it took too long to prepare a meal.

There also was no sanitation. So the advance group and I built an earth closet which had a lovely view but no door. After all the men mostly could use the nearby wood. That remained as a permanent memorial of our stay and a gift to the hunters.

2.3 I travelled everywhere by public transport. This was useful as I could listen in to all sorts of conversations. The drawback was that often trains



were very full and to get a seat difficult. After all I was no longer that young, but travelled clad in shorts or jeans and ankle socks with a huge rucksack. This did not always encourage fellow travellers to let me have a seat even if it was only on the floor. When possible I booked a seat of course.

2.4 I always had hospitality and have never stayed in a hotel. Apart from the innumerable workshops I visited almost all isolated Friends as well as the Quaker groups which existed in Berlin, Frankfurt/O, Dresden, Leipzig, Chemnitz (Karl-Marx Stadt), Erfurt, Lutherstadt-Wittenberg and Magdeburg.

### 3. What did I learn?

3.1 "The blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of the Church". Much of the critical solidarity has gone. The churches in West Germany successfully "took over" and obliterated most of the exciting new experiments. Apart from the Quakers there is now little evidence of "shalom" being on the churches' agenda. There are military chaplains. Compulsory religious education does not foster Faith. Capitalism and Individualism flourish. Whether the churches can minimise racism and anti-semitism is questionable, though they do try. The compulsory imposition of material western standards in the Diakonie has not improved pastoral care but made for financial shortages and therefore often staffshortages.

3.2 Most of this does not apply to Friends since we have few salaried posts and only one rented flat and no institutions. Our loss of members is mainly due to old age and death, but we lack new Young Friends apart from the Berlin group. Because Friends in the former GDR were never plentiful they now lack the energy for outreach. They continue to work ecumenically on peace issues but their radical voice is too subdued to be heard by many. There are now innumerable alternative critical groups. Neither the mainline churches nor the Religious Society of Friends are any longer the only ones who care about the dispossessed, the asylum seekers, the refugees, rearmament, global and ecological exploitation etc.

Is the false freedom of capitalism the terminal illness of the Church?

### 4. The Stasi Files

The little I have seen of my Stasi files revealed nothing I did not know. The more interesting bits were no doubt in other people's files such as Heino Falcke's which had been destroyed before anyone saw them. Opening these files for some did more harm than good. Knowing oneself betrayed by loved ones or those one trusted needs a generous dose of forgiveness. An inability



to forgive hurts oneself far more than those who betrayed. The Nazi period taught me that long ago.

The Church, whether the small Religious Society of Friends or the big churches, has the far more difficult task of distinguishing between unprotesting compromise, hard and therefore often ineffective critique and walking the delicate path of “give and take”, praise what was good, offer informed critique and be adamant in not compromising with evil. “Judge not that ye be not judged”. On the whole I think the churches managed this delicate task, even if every individual did not.

5. What is left for this Quaker is the pastoral care of those who lived through these difficult years; not judging but loving. Some now feel themselves betrayed, because the West assumes as the Easterners are now able to travel, relationships need not continue. This is not so, because it gives the impression that Westerners really only helped because it made them feel good, not because they really cared. The “physical” wall has gone, but an intellectual, political and spiritual wall remains. It will take many years for this to disappear.