

# Walls fall and families build

big on little



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EXACTLY 25 years to the day — on November 9, 1989 — the world's single most significant divider tore down — the Berlin Wall. Earlier in summer that same year, I was privy to a moving encounter there. With a little old lady, a war widow, sharing lessons of love and longing in a post-blitz world. I was

spending a few months as a journalism student in what was West Berlin. With frequent forays into the enigmatic Ost (East) that lay beyond the patrolled-to-paranoia Checkpoint Charlie border.

We met by chance on a May evening, six months before the West we were both in united poignantly with the sundered East. I was waiting my turn to call home in a phone queue on Rhine Strasse. A mild thud later, I saw a bent frame collapse. The wizened woman had tripped with her walker, weighed down by a wriggly dachshund pup and bags spilling groceries. The dog danced around her gnarled ankles yelping as I helped retrieve the parcels. "Thanks dear," she gasped in a tremulous American accent. Then pointing to the telephone booth she drawled, "Back in line now,

don't risk losing your place." Touching a flyaway stray strand of my dark hair, she asked, "New here? Speaking to folks home?"

I nodded to the questions. Loath to move on, she smiled when I suggested she sit on a bench beside till I joined her minutes after making my call. Her anguish could typify the loneliness of age anywhere. But brash, booming Berlin was strangely sexier and sadder in a country still coming to terms with its heavy conscience. The city housed Germany's largest cluster of war widows for reasons obviously stemming from its unique history.

"Time doesn't heal all wounds," this one said. So softly, I strained to hear her next words. Soon I was treated to a torrent of quiet insights. A compulsive ritual made my new friend walk here daily, content to simply watch the

phone space. Her glance would dart first to the amount lit up by the receiver at one end of the channel of communication — 30 pfennigs for a local call, more meant overseas conversations. "I think of brothers and sisters hanging on to words heard long-distance over the wire. I imagine them happy together!"

Once married to a French soldier who died along with their two young sons in the War, she had learnt to go solo with grace. Left with just the pampered pooch I saw, her surrogate kid of sorts. Few people know that between 1945 and 1950 when the Four-Power "Allied Kommandatura" administration dismantled, two memorials came up at Teufelsberg and Insulaner. Erected by women who'd lost their men in action, they actually sprang from the sea of rubble repeat bomb-

ings had piled up, bit by painful bit.

Half hidden by grassy slopes dotted with kissing couples and children picking blackberries from lakeside bushes, those grim relics were easy to miss. Hard to miss though were her words — "There's news everywhere that the Wall will fall. But there are bigger barriers more dangerous than this Wall. And we build them at home. Never stop talking to your children. Those cold wars are the worst. Be the first to break it if such a wall forms in your family."

I try. With my own nearest and dearest, pledging that we don't go to bed on a quarrel or leave the house with one unresolved. It doesn't always happen. Yet a stab of bittersweet memory nudges. The last of that 155-km stretch of history continues to carry meaning for me, a reminder of an amazing encounter a quarter century ago.

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