

TALE OF TWO CITIES

Travel
Going off track

There the summer just before its famed Wall came down, **Meher Marfatia** recalls pre-unified Berlin, exactly 20 years after

I was there. In Germany, twenty years ago - among the last few to see the Berlin Wall stand grim vigil over the world's most charismatic East-West city split.

Two decades since the historic fall of that Wall on November 9, I'm flooded with uncommon nostalgia. For three months spent as a journalism student in what was then decidedly West Berlin. With frequent forays into the enigmatic Ost (East) that lay beyond the patrolled Checkpoint Charlie border.

Three of us from India - The Indian Post's Smita Gupta, Business Standard's Sucheta Dalal and me of The Illustrated Weekly - worked there that magical summer of '89. With invitees from brilliantly diverse China, Egypt, Colombia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and the Philippines, let's say we learnt to live and love together. In equal boy-girl ratio, some happy pairs hooked off to dance and dine mere moments after meeting course director Peter Prufert at the Internationales Institut fur Journalismus. I stayed solo, the object of my affection already stationed deeper south on Bavarian soil!

We arrived armed with iconic images 1960s kids grew up with. JFK's stirring "Ich bin ein Berliner"



View of Schultheiss brewery across the street from the students' hostel

speech. Brandenburg Gate protest marches. The Lili Marlene song, remembered on sighting lovely Unter den Linden Boulevard lamp-posts. Nazi-controlled Radio Belgrade once blared that tune every evening. Passion over politics, it became an anthem for Axis and Allied armies alike, soldiers stopping as one to hear the lyric sear their souls.

I'd landed at Tegel airport fresh from reading Christopher Isherwood. His book *Goodbye to Berlin* was actually *Hello to Berlin* for me. Its pre-Blitz vignettes formed fantastic early impressions of a city two cataclysmic wars changed the landscape of

forever. Their horrors replay in brutal bullet marks still embedded in imposing buildings.

How the heady optimism of youth blots out tragic pop-ups from the past. We enjoyed great friendships with energising daily doses of vibrancy, the institute located bang on ritzy Ku Dam. Our staple highs were eating, shopping, movies and museum browsing - when we weren't writing, proof-



Where countries meet : Meher (in black) in the Journalism Institute library at coffee break

ing and editing text.

Nights got sassier, with fifteen of us thronging playhouses and pubs, jazz clubs and beer bars, for ultimately entertaining theatre performances, rock gigs and concerts in the park. Brash but beautiful, Berlin was in full boom and bloom, at once sexier yet sadder in a country coming to terms with its heavy conscience. Poignant reminders are memorials at Teufelsberg and Insulaner. Piled from bomb rubble, they were built after 1945 dismantled the four-power "Kommandatura" administration, by war widows who lost lovers and sons in action. The relics easy to miss today, grass cloaks these hillocks dotted with kissing couples beside children picking blackberries from lakeside bushes.

Bathed in the soft light of a setting sun, the East exuded architectural richness. Its cafes and public spaces posed a frugal contrast to those on affluent West avenues. But Ost Berlin's wonderful churches, libraries and opera houses boasted rare cultural grace. Matt Frei notes in the latest Newsweek, 'West Germany's takeover of the East German state was like a python eating a poodle: the result was agonizing indigestion.'

An eerie encounter from those days of divide chills me even now. I'd bought stacks of classical music for my father from a shop near Zeughaus, legendary Unter den Linden's oldest 17th-century building. Waking him up in Bombay to excitedly describe the gifts, I lost track of time and a cardinal rule: no Westside visitor could remain East beyond midnight. It was 11.45, too close to that witching hour when Checkpoint Charlie guards strictly whistled everyone back where they belonged. "Move, Meher, move!" shouted my Caribbean colleagues, hammering hard against the phone booth I dialled dad from.

Like Lola, on her native turf, I ran. Leaving behind the music cassettes in my panic of those pulse-pounding minutes... Though not without a final glance at the magnificent state cathedral, silhouetted in an immense orb of silver moon.



The remains of the wall today: The former Eastern section of the Berlin Wall has been painted by many unknown graffiti artists