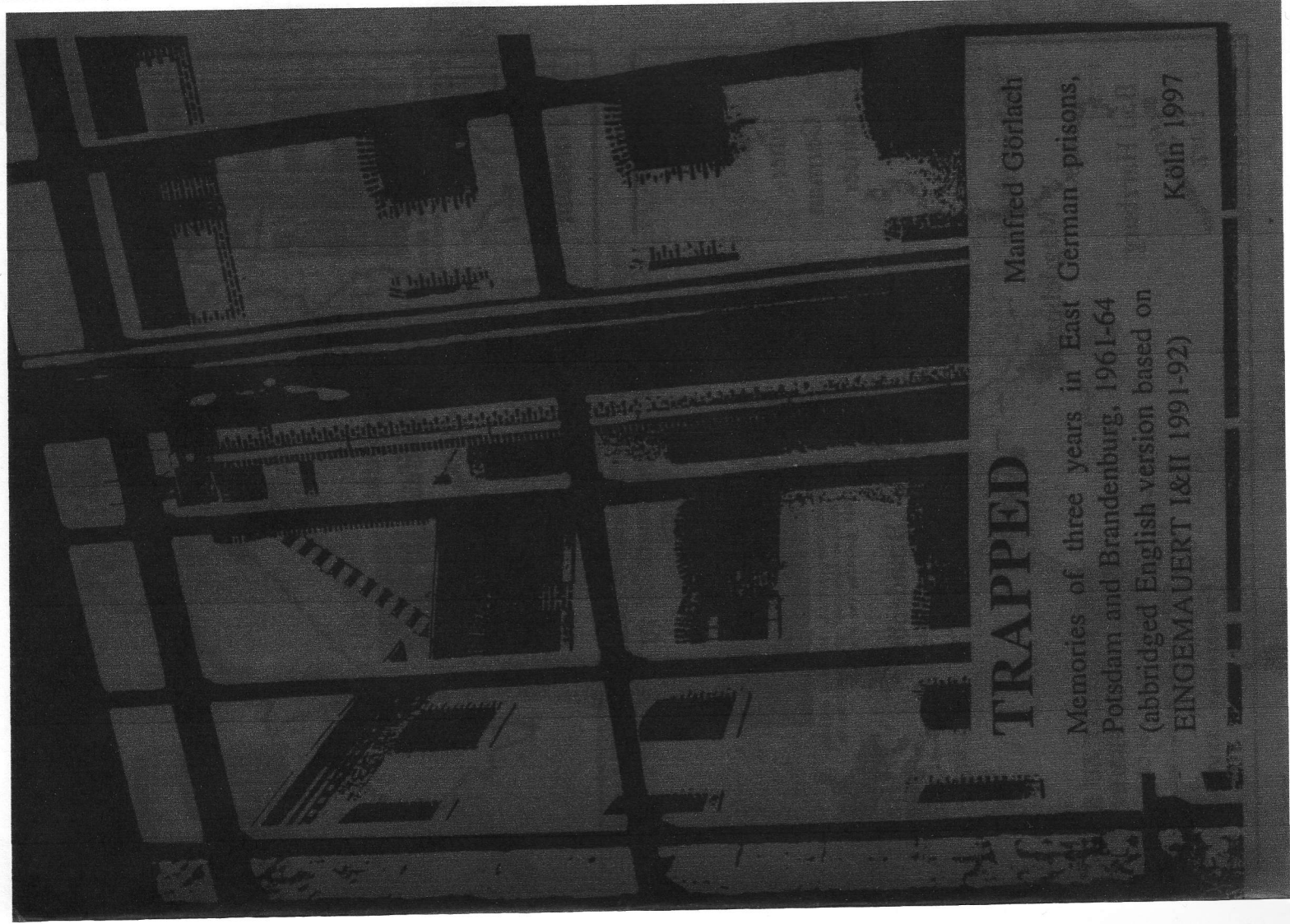


A hole in the wall —
on the former boundary
close to Zicherie/Lower
Saxony in July 1990



TRAPPED

Memories of three years in East German prisons,
Potsdam and Brandenburg, 1961-64
(abridged English version based on
EINGEMAUERT I&II 1991-92)

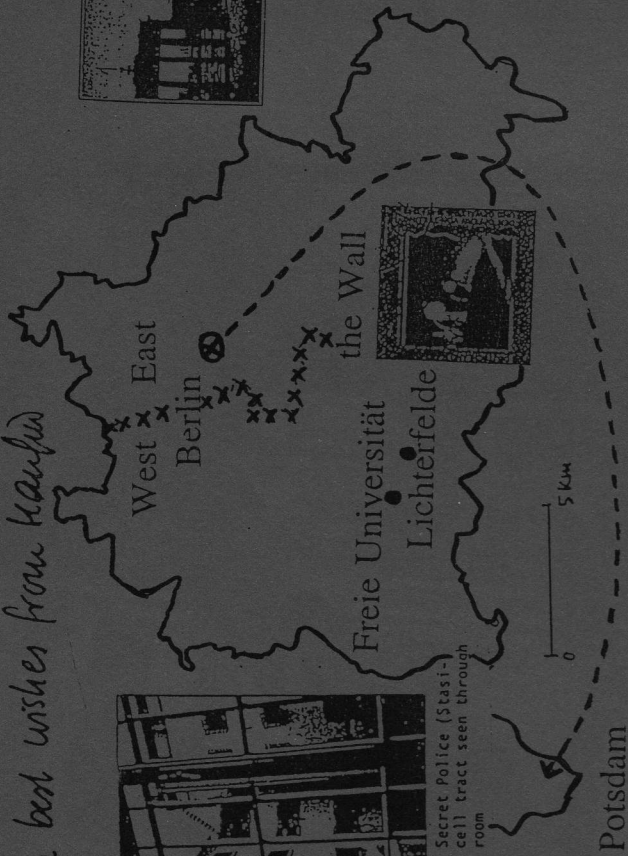
Manfred Görlach

Köln 1997

For with best wishes from Karlsruhe



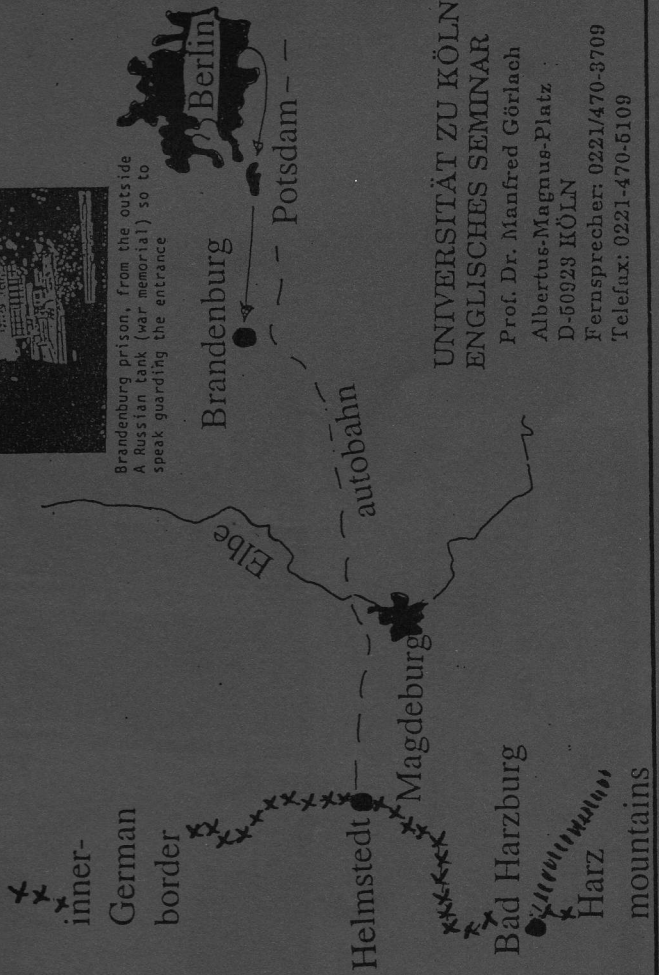
Potsdam: Secret Police (Stasi) prison - cell seen through a police room



Maps: Central East Germany and Berlin/Potsdam (---) indicating the route of my transport 13/12)

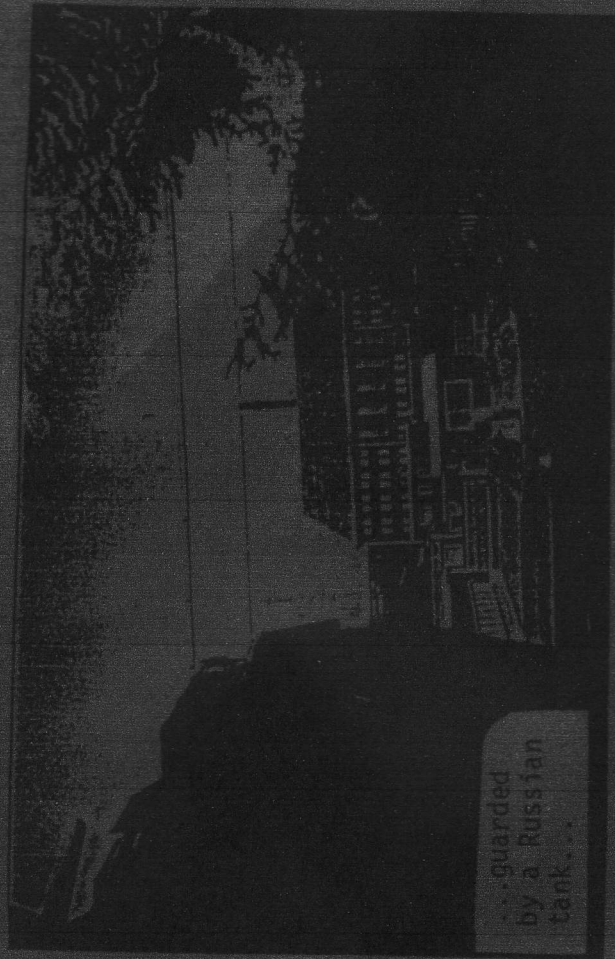


Brandenburg prison, from the outside
A Russian tank (war memorial) so to speak guarding the entrance



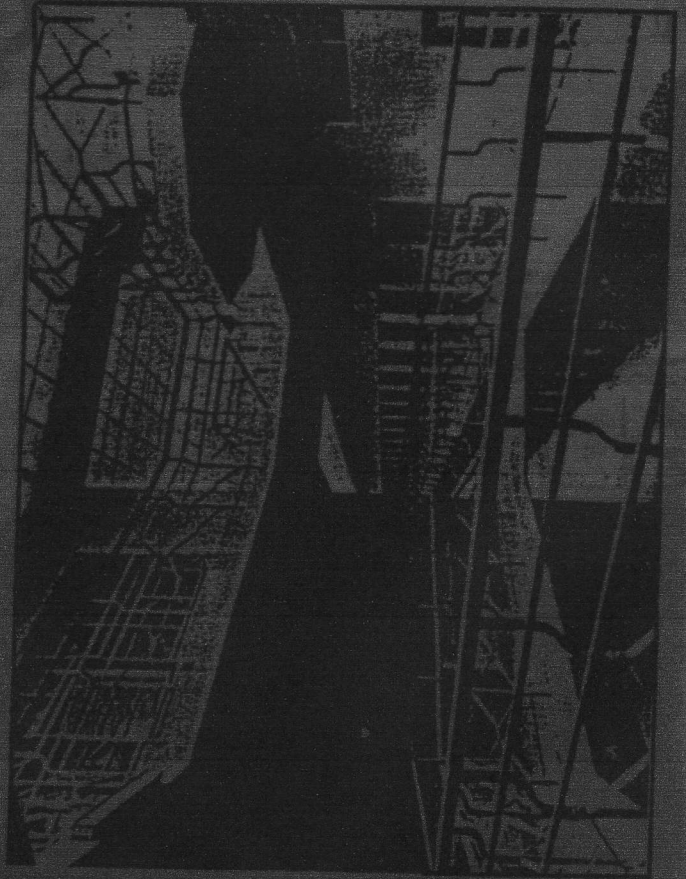
UNIVERSITÄT ZU KÖLN
ENGLISCHES SEMINAR

Prof. Dr. Manfred Görlach
Albertus-Magnus-Platz
D-50923 KÖLN
Fernsprecher: 0221/470-3709
Telefax: 0221-470-5109



Guarded by a Russian tank...

Brandenburg Prison - outside and inside



1.1 Preface

In 1991 the Berlin Wall would have seen its 30th anniversary (a jubilee that appeared likely to happen judging on the situation as late as 1989), and the year also saw the 30th anniversary of my imprisonment on 13 December, 1961. When the regimes in Eastern Europe came to show first indications of the great changeover and my story became more relevant again, I used a holiday in Greece to write up a first draft of my memories which I later complemented by private letters sent from prison (and written to me from my sister) and by official documents such as the accusation, verdict, lawyer's letters and selected newspaper articles. All this is here condensed to provide an abstract for friends whose German is poor or non-existent. Although many details of my 976 days in prison are lost, I trust that what remains is relevant as a document of a time now fortunately past. My story is a very personal (and subjective) account and therefore not to be understood as a book; I hope to have retained some of the immediacy of the German version - which might have been edited away in a published form.

1.2 The prehistory of the Wall

Germany had been divided into four zones after 1945, a division which developed into one of the major boundaries between the Western and the Eastern blocs, especially from 1949 onwards, when the two German states were formed. The 'inner-German' boundary - relatively open immediately after the war - came to be fortified by barbed wire, watch-towers, floodlighting, land mines and various other paraphernalia of the cold war. Since I spent my school-days in Bad Harzburg, some four miles from the border-line, I had firsthand experience of the developments and possibly remained more aware of the consequences of the division than many other Germans living further to the west and south. In 1957 I took up my university studies reading English and Latin at the Free University in my native Berlin, thus becoming English and confronted with the situation in a divided country in a very drastic way. The situation in Berlin was unique: the border was relatively easy to pass by innercity trains and other traffic. East Germans were still able to escape, and in 1961 around a thousand did so every day, by travelling into West Berlin (and on to West Germany by plane); being German citizens their new start in the west was relatively easy. The Eastern paradise of workers and farmers which should have been attractive to 'emigrants' from the west was in fact experiencing a slow and continuous erosion. Many political jokes of the time

'For all the geographic details the map on the inner cover should be consulted.'

Trapped

Foreword

In December 1961 I was caught by the East German Secret Police (*Stasi*) in East Berlin when preparing the flight of a fellow student; thirty years later I sat down and wrote up my experience which I combined with the rich collection of personal documents surviving from the period. This book of 238 pages was privately published in German in December 1991. In June 1992 I had access to my secret files and was able to write up the solution of a few riddles, which had been beyond reconstruction before, and publish the account in a much smaller volume of 67 pages.

There are two reasons for now making my account available in English in a much reduced form: The original set of 100 copies of the full German version has long been given away to friends, and more recently, to research libraries where the collections are intended to provide first-hand data for scholars specializing in modern history. Secondly, the interest I found among audiences on five continents when talking about my experience in English, and the general lack the German language among listeners and potential readers, have convinced me that a shorter version in English is useful. This will omit all of the German documents (summarized where necessary) and concentrate on the 'narrative' elements; also, I will here combine my own reconstruction with the evidence from the files (printed in *italics*) and thus conflate my two books.

I would like to thank the audiences of various lectures I gave on the topic in English, in particular those in Adelaide, Brno, Dublin, Fort Hare, Leeds, Suva/Fiji, Varanasi and Vercelli: listeners have expressed how relevant the topic can be regardless of the political system - although some historical experience in, say, Eastern Europe and South Africa make it appear more relevant than in other parts of the world. It is, I think an encouraging indication that such lectures were now possible in many more countries than was the case ten years ago.

I would welcome critical responses to my account; it is always good to have such an echo in order to see whether the new effort was worth while.

Köln, June 1997

Manfred Gürtelach

Reprinted Nov. 1999 / Feb. 2001

Manfred Gürtelach

grandmother and mother; I was needed as a messenger, which brought me into East Berlin for a dozen times until all three had safely got out - in a car rebuilt for the purpose which left enough space underneath the rear seat for a person to hide for a few hours. I did not know any details - the less known the better in case of complications - and will omit other particulars in this English summary.

In September, I met Brigitte, another fellow student, in East Berlin. My offer to help her with smaller things was again answered by "Get me out!" I had to confess that I did not know of any way, but promised to keep her urgent wish in mind, in the mean time concentrating on my university exam in philosophy and pedagogics. A few weeks later I chanced to come across a student who referred me to an address in the Lutheran Students' Hostel. When I went and explained my purpose the student opened the drawer of his desk and produced some twelve foreign passports. He told me that the safest way for an escape was to get a photograph of the student wanting to flee, select the passport whose photo was most similar and take it to East Berlin so that the escapee could produce it as her own: there were no visa or slips of paper handed out at entry and which you had to return when leaving the country, but the system was going to be changed quite soon (and it was). So I went again, discussed the problems with Brigitte in East Berlin and she decided that it was worth trying. Her photograph was found to match that of a Swedish passport owner well enough, but I was quite scared when thinking of the risk in taking it into the east - it was well known that a detection would mean several years in prison. Klaus, a fellow student was willing to join me - two people feeling safer - and he borrowed the VW of his girl friend in which we hid the Swedish passport and crossed over into the east. The first we did was entering a one-way street the wrong direction, but the policeman who stopped us did not notice our nervousness: he collected DM 20 and let us go. "Won't happen again" we thought, and fingered out the passport in a very quiet narrow street. It was only after turning into the main street that we realized that we had parked the car for the operation by the side of a police-station ... We met Brigitte, handed over the passport hidden in a lunch-box, she disappeared in a toilet and handed back the empty box, saying she'd dare try it. Proper planning for the evening could start. I returned to West Berlin, borrowed a return ticket to Stockholm and some Swedish coins from a student and had myself taught some minimal Swedish to pass on to Brigitte. I also asked Eben, an English friend, to go through the checkpoint three times to see how the respective shift was working. I also phoned my sister Waltraud to join us in East Berlin wearing her best coat and shoes and bringing some make-up to Swedish Brigitte whose eastern outfit

reflect the situation, such as "Will the last one leaving please put out the light" or "Identity cards to tim the East Germanbe abolished for GDR citizens - the few who remain are personally known to the authorities." Still, when the news that East Berlin was sealed off came through the radio on Sunday morning, 13 August 1961, it came as a complete shock, and many did not believe that it was possible to divide a city completely - telephone and sewage, trains and buses, water and electricity - everything. I heard the message in Berlin-Lichterfelde, and in the course of the next week went to have a look at the deplorable events: there was barbed wire along the border (the building of the wall was a matter of the next few months), and there were tanks in the streets pointing their guns into the wrong direction - not to the west from which the alleged aggression was to come and which had made, it was claimed, the self-styled 'Anti-Fascist protective wall' necessary. Since I was in the midst of my final examinations I left Berlin for a fortnight, returning at the end of August 1961. In the mean time, the East German authorities had restricted the access to the east, not permitting it any more to West Berlin citizens; as a consequence, I was one of the few western students still able to cross over into East Berlin.

1.3 The escape of Karin and Brigitte

Thousands of East Berliners had worked or studied in the west before August 13 and I knew quite a few such students. Many had previously applied to the Humboldt University, but were turned down because their parents were too bourgeois. When asking about their fate among fellow students in the west, I learnt that nobody knew. A friend asked me to go and see Karin, a joint acquaintance, so I went and met her at her provisional workplace (former students were forced to take up a job to prove they were worthy members of the society, but were of course barred from continuing their studies). When we went outside and strolled along Unter den Linden I naively asked her whether I could do her a favour; her instantaneous reply was "Help to get me out of here." The critical moment had come: say 'yes', and live with the consequences, or say 'no' and have a bad conscience for the rest of your life. There was no alternative in between. The fact that people of my generation had been brought up asking questions on why Germans did not help neighbours in the 1930s, or did not do anything against the Nazis when there was still a possibility for doing so certainly contributed to the fact that I felt I could not say no in a situation where I saw injustice done to individuals. In the case in question, my help was comparatively easy - go to West Berlin and see Karin's relatives (who were no longer able to cross over and wisely refrained from writing letters) and discuss details on how they might arrange the flight of Karin and her

would not do. We all met in East Berlin close to the home of a fellow student who had escaped herself - but her parents who had promised to let us have their flat for the redressing had disappeared, apparently scared that somebody might notice the arrival of the group of westerners. The only solution left was to use the services of an elderly couple who we had initially not wanted to involve. The redressing and the Swedish lesson were effected within thirty minutes, and Eben brought the welcome news that the border police at the checkpoint did not take their duty too diligently. Brigitte's original East German identity card was carefully hidden in a place where it might easily be retrieved if we had to break off the escape attempt. We then split into three groups: Eben and Klaus forming the vanguard and Waltraud and I the rear, thus framing Brigitte - an arrangement which we thought would provide some psychological support. The three groups were joined in the tram by a suspicious-looking man - who changed with us into the same underground compartment. We were getting very worried, but then he left the train just before the border ...

Since I formed part of the rear party, I was able to watch Brigitte's passing through the border control as in a film. She was remarkably cool, acting with almost professional composure. When she went up to the passport control she produced her document quite calmly. The officer's glance went from the passport to her face and back to the passport - and she was waved through. Eben had been right. She did not even use her one Swedish sentence "This is an old photograph", memorized in case the dissimilarity was noticed. On to money control. "Do you have any money of the GDR on you?", in German, which Brigitte pretended not to understand producing her second newly-learned sentence: "Jag förstå ingenting" (I don't understand anything). The policeman made the international money-counting gesture. "Nej" (No) - and she was waved on: he even followed her to point out the correct staircase for trains to the west. Since city trains in West Berlin were controlled by eastern police we did not 'recognize' each other until we had left the railway station of Lichterfelde-West.

My activities in helping students out should have ended here, any new attempt becoming more risky - but there was the feeling that others were in the same desperate situation as Brigitte had been. So Klaus and I went to see a few other East Berlin students, who fortunately wanted to stay and thus did not need any help. However, a student who lived just outside Berlin in Potsdam was reported to be in a difficult position, and so we asked Helga, one of the East Berlin students, to go and see her - Klaus and I were not allowed to go outside Berlin. Never write a letter even if the content was not suspicious - all eastern students were said to be screened. The mousetrap was set, and our personal

tragedy started, when Helga found she had not got the time for travel - and wrote a letter. A week later she had a positive reply to her invitation from Potsdam and met a girl with her mother, to talk over possibilities of an escape and to arrange a date with a West German student who would bring further details. Waltraud brought the news of the proposed meeting a day before it was due; it was Klaus' turn to go, but since he had an important commitment for the night of Wednesday, 13 December, I volunteered to go.

1.4 Trapped

After a busy day at the university I went to the checkpoint at Friedrichstraße where I met the student whom I identified by her blue coat and a newspaper carried under her arm. She introduced me to her mother who, she said, was greatly concerned about the risk involved, suggesting we might talk the plan over at leisure. Since it was bitterly cold, and people might overhear our conversation, it would be much better to take a taxi and go to a friend's flat. All this seemed very sensible and I did not see any reason to object. We went to the friend's home, were placed in her best room and they started questioning me - without my ever sensing I was trapped. Were there any successful escapes? Did I know any details on how it was to be done? Would her daughter receive any help in the west, etc.? The landlady reappeared and offered coffee. I suggested she should drink the little coffee she had herself, but she insisted. When she brought it in, it did not come in a pot, but in well-filled cups. I was not suspicious, but later found an explanation why I had become so terribly tired after having my coffee... The interrogation continued until the landlady asked whether we wanted any cigarettes. The student did, and the landlady offered to get some from a slot-machine. She came back with the cancer-sticks - and three minutes later two gentlemen in black leather coats stood in the doorway - without the door of the flat having been opened: they must, then, have come up from the street together with her. They had guns in their hands, asked me to 'stick em up', stand against a wall, and one came to handcuff me. The two ladies on the sofa played their nasty roles to the very end, crying "All is lost," hugging each other in apparent despair - while I remained blissfully unaware of the game played. I was led down to the street, forced into a car, where two other gentlemen bellowed at me when I asked them what all this was about: "You better shut up - it is us asking questions". Soon after I was driven cross-country and without any orientation until the car was swallowed by a big gate - I had arrived at the Stasi prison at Potsdam as I was to learn the next morning.

1.5 Insights from the Stasi files

Although I had my suspicions about what had gone wrong, certainty came only when I was able to look at my secret files in June 1992. The coincidences that led to my capture are so silly that they would seem constructed and in bad taste if recounted in a whodunnit story. I was caught on the 13th of December because the letter sent to Potsdam carried the address "Frau Meinhardt, Ossietzki Str. 13, Potsdam". "No 3" would have been correct - there was one "1" too many. As it happened there was a young lady called Meinhardt (not a common name) in No. 3. She opened the letter, found it was addressed (obviously) to the student almost next door, but instead of handing it on, showed it to her husband. Both came, as it happened, from workers' families and were faithful believers. Finding something suspicious in the invitation to East Berlin they took the letter to the party secretary who in turn handed them on to the Stasi representative. They asked the 'wrong' Meinhardt whether she was willing to go to the date suggested; Lt. Abramzik, an experienced Stasi officer, would accompany her and act as her mother. Thus, Helga met two Stasi informants, and so did I when I addressed the 'student' at Friedrichstraße. I have tortured myself with the admission how silly it was to go into a flat - a thing 007 would never do. However, I did not know before I saw the files that the game was lost the moment I had addressed the girl - four gentlemen were standing around us with guns in their pockets, and I would not have had a chance of extracting myself from the snare.

It does not speak for the efficiency of the Stasi that their trap was based on the expectation that neither Helga nor I knew Frau Meinhardt. If we had done (or if Klaus had gone that same night), we would have turned round on our heels, and weeks of preparations would have been lost for the Stasi. (They mistakenly also prepared her not for English, but for German studies to make her pass as a student of the Free University).

Edeltraud, the 'correct' Meinhardt, never learnt about the letter, nor indeed that anything was planned for her in 1961. The Stasi 'explored' her, but never mentioned our activities; she was not informed about our trial, either, which took place in her home town in March, 1992.

1.6 Interrogations

I was pushed into a cell in the Potsdam Stasi prison² but there was little time

²The photograph on the front cover shows the block of prisoners' cells seen through the barred window of a police-room. I took it when strolling through Potsdam in January, 1990.

to reflect, because I was forced to undress and was given prisoner's clothes, and immediately sent down for interrogations. Protest and insist to retain my clothes? Have the food that I wanted? See a lawyer before I make any statement? Inform my relatives about my whereabouts? Insist on free information reading newspapers and books of my choice, and having free access to radio and TV? The laughter of Stasi officers would have been endless. The moment they put somebody in they were certain to show he was guilty, somehow; they never made a mistake, and all these bourgeois individual rights were a heritage of former times, no longer needed when the ultimate victory of the workers was at stake.

I told my interrogator fairy tales from 21^h until at least 3^h in the morning. This did not make him happy - I did not know that he knew more about me than I was aware of. He then started quoting sentences which I recognized as what I had said in the flat, and it was only then that I realized what the game was. A few seconds were left for me to decide, and I believe I did the only sensible thing playing a nervous breakdown and saying "I'll confess it all" - on the expectation that they would be prepared to believe me in this apparent crisis. Therefore, I confessed all the facts they already knew, carefully also reflecting on what Helga might 'confess' - who, I was certain, was imprisoned as well. My chance was to supply the missing links, attempting to reduce my activity in the acquisition of the passport to a minimum. The extreme situation must have fuelled my creativity enormously - I came up with stories much better than reality. The greatest difficulty was to memorize these 'facts' carefully so as not to contradict myself. Of course I did not know which of my statements they might wish to check, and I found much later that they apparently did not care, as long as they had enough material to hold against me - they were certainly not after historical truth.

Life in prison was a terrible shock. Confined to a cell of 2m x 5m, in isolation or sharing with another person, with no window (light coming in through glass bricks), no toilet (but a pail), stifling hot in summer and very cold in winter, no exercise except for 20 minutes alone in the courtyard, and the paralysing uncertainty about my future - all this was not easy to bear. To be alone was bad; to have a room-mate was worse - some of these were apparently stool pigeons who were sent to report on me. I might come back from an

just after the Wall had come down, and found a notice put up against the prison door offering guided tours through the jail on the same afternoon. Parts of the building are now a museum - I have since given public lectures about my experience in the prison on two occasions.

interview downstairs proud to have misled the Stasi officer - and then tell the fellow prisoner who would go and tell every detail to the Stasi. The isolation was complete; only during interviews was it possible to look through a window catching glimpses of the life outside. The bells of the nearby church rang the hours - links to normal reality going on without me. One letter per month - the first I was allowed to write to Waltraud was only after eight days of imprisonment, just before Christmas.

Having gone into the flat proved to be a great advantage. The fact that I gave away so many details about my activities without knowing made it easy to confess. If they had taken me right in the street, I would have denied every accusation - and they would have got confessions out of me applying their special measures. Physical torture was no longer in use, at least not as a regular feature - but they might have not allowed me to sleep, a torture which is much more effective and does not leave any visible traces.

1.7 The trial

I was going to be tried for *Abwerbung*; the paragraph ruled that the Capitalist forces were trying to undermine Socialist society and economy by luring away people, offering them heaps of money - would a worker leave the paradise without any such temptation? The unrest among the population after the building of the wall was felt to require strict measures against all who opposed it, and helping easterners escape was considered especially dangerous. Thus the legend of 'man-trade' was born, which was topped by the accusation that I (and many others) had taken an active part in preparing a Third World War: just as Hitler in 1939, thus the argument, had organized a so-called stream of refugees of ethnic Germans from Poland to create a pretense for intervention, the Bonn government, it was alleged, were trying to organize a stream of GDR refugees to take as an excuse for marching the Bundeswehr across the border. Additional paragraphs would have been possible to apply to my case but were not (possibly because I had 'confessed'): Eben's checking the border controls might have been interpreted as my organizing an act of espionage.

I saw my two defence lawyers one day before the trial, i.e. when the Stasi had extorted all the information they wanted. My sister had appointed them after extensive consultations among friends as to who might be helpful in my case.³ They had to be from East Germany, so were bound to national laws

³One of them was Clemens de Maizière, a pacifist and member of the (GDR) Christian democrats - father to the first free elected prime minister of the GDR, March to October 1991.

and expected behaviour, I did not know them (and was uncertain how far I could trust them) - and the conversation with them took place in a room of the Stasi prison which was no doubt bugged so that every single word might be recorded. Their assistance was accordingly minimal. Two details were, however, worth recording. I learnt that a letter written in my support by Heinrich Böll was to be read out in court; Böll claimed to be a good friend of my father's (a blatant lie) and to know me well enough to say that I had acted on (possibly misguided) humanitarian principles, but was not guided by political motivation. However futile such interventions might be, it showed to me that my friends were trying their best to help me in an intelligent way. (It took a great deal of energy to reconstruct the pre-history of how the letter came to be written and revised, when I put tiny pieces together in 1991, all the major participants of the action being dead). The other point was that I asked my lawyer whether I should not quote in my defence the article from the GDR Constitution that guaranteed free movement *inside Germany* for its citizens. The argument was a fascinating one - it implied that the state had broken the constitution by erecting the wall, and that I, Manfred Görlach, had tried to help at least a few citizens to their constitutional rights. My lawyers' advice was, however, beautifully clear: "Please don't mention this. If you do, you'll get a few years more." I still feel this as a telling instance highlighting the infinite hypocrisy of the GDR society that I was not permitted to quote the constitution in court. (In later years, it was not allowed to sing the text of the national anthem, because it contained the words "Germany, unified fatherland" - so the anthem had to be hummed).

I passed an unquiet night. The trial was 'public' but nobody had been informed about it except for my aunt who lived many miles away - the authorities obviously did not want any larger audiences who might have been eager to learn how to escape. However, my aunt was able to phone my cousin, a student in East Berlin (who escaped in 1963), so that she by herself constituted the 'public' in a public trial. I also saw Helga who had indeed been imprisoned the same night as myself.

The trial was a farce. There were no witnesses - the court did not wish to produce the other Meinhardt and her 'mother'. Instead, our 'confessions' were read out, and so was the Böll letter. Judge Wohlgethan (what an appropriate name! meaning 'well-done', with biblical connotations) was fierce - *he is still known as the 'Red Freister'*⁴ and living *unharmred in the centre of Potsdam in*

⁴Roland Freisler, the much-feared chief of the Nazi Supreme Court, made it a personal sport to sentence liberals, cruelly making fun of the accused and degrading them in court.

1997 - faithful service to the state in the legal system counting more than specialist knowledge. I was given four years of hard labour (Zuchthaus), Helga only one year - since she was the poor Easterner who was misled by a western tempter. My lawyers advised me to appeal, but after another eight weeks in Potsdam prison, my appeal was found to be not substantiated - and so I was moved to...

2 Brandenburg

2.1 The setting ~~Brandenburg~~

The prison at ~~Berlin~~-Görden had been in use in Nazi times; in fact, the then prime minister, Erich Honecker, had spent twelve years inside. In 1962, it was the one of the centres of long-term prisoners, many of them 'lifers' - criminals and political prisoners neatly mixed. The system was a copy of Nazi methods who found that putting murderers in charge of political prisoners (corporal punishment allowed if necessary) saved the police a lot of trouble, and since all the 150 murderers caught and sentenced in the GDR had been concentrated in Brandenburg in 1959, there was plenty of cooperation from this side to be expected - 'good conduct' might, so the hope, get you out after 15 years.

Prisoners were kept in large cells of up to fourteen inmates; authorities saw to it that there were no concentrations of politicals. There were three-story beds, chairs and tables, and no toilet (but a pail instead). The system was obviously meant to break you rather than re-educate you. In fact, I never had any political education offered, and was, difficult to believe, not permitted to read the classic treatises of Marx and Lenin.⁵

2.2 Work

We were forced to work; the decision where we were sent was taken on grounds opaque to prisoners - producing furniture, army uniforms or (as in my case) parts of tractors; there were three shifts, and work was hard and was meant to be, as a punitive measure. To refuse to work would send you to solitary confinement in the basement, to be fed on water and bread. I was not trained to do any of the jobs expected of me, and it happened within the first fortnight that I had a small accident cutting a finger of my left hand. This

Wohlgeihan was infamous for going beyond the severe sentences suggested by the Stasi interrogators.

⁵The only explanation possible for this strange fact was that the police did not like to have quotations from these classics hurled in their faces - without sufficient schooling among the police officers to respond in an appropriate fashion.

should have disqualified me for the job, working in oil, but despite my protests they forced me to continue. A very painful inflammation followed - and, against all expectation, I was allowed to see the doctor (see 2.5). When I returned, my finger was half stiff and I declared myself unable for hard work having not sufficient power left in my hand - from now on I managed to play the role of Soldier Svejik pretending to do my best but succeeding quite badly. I was born with two left hands and ten thumbs on them, I told them, and would they please give me a job more adequate to my qualifications. They did not, but put me to work at a lathe. Pretending to be unable to properly fix the bolt I was working on, the revolving thing shot out the moment I touched it. A second attempt was unsuccessful, too, and the result was that I was considered unqualified for the job - which was very hard work and which I was determined to avoid because I did not wish to wear myself out.⁶ After a few non-permanent jobs I was then put to boring holes in engine blocks. Since the machinery was quite aged, many items predating World War II, holes tended to be somewhat oval, and it was quite clear that I had to avoid the job for a different reason: I imagined myself, after a nightshift, having produced inadequate holes in half of the one hundred engine blocks expected per shift. The damage done would have been considerable, and the reaction foreseeable: "Who has done this?" - "Görlach" - "Where is he from?" "West Berlin" - "What is he?" - "A student in for anti-state activities" - "So, a clear case of sabotage." Since a second trial was at least possible for offenses allegedly done in prison,⁷ it was obvious that I had to avoid the job. "We will show you how to do it - plenty of water, gentle and steady pressure, and never jerk." After some demonstration it was now my turn. When I was almost through the metal an imperceptible jerk, and the drill was stuck. "What have I done? I have tried to follow your instructions carefully." - "We will show you again." Another try, and the same jerk produced the identical result. I was in apparent despair - but disqualified for the job. It was never offered again.

After a few weeks I got the job I had dreamed of. Producing cogwheels

⁶The efficiency of work was unbelievably low; there was a huge waste of manpower (which cost nothing) and of energy (cheap - but with dreadful consequences for the ecology). Raising the quota for workers by 10 or 20% was a ridiculous measure where the introduction of modern technology might have raised productivity by several hundred percent - but no money was available for that.

⁷The other possible allegation was 'slander'. How can you avoid a situation in which two criminals swear they heard you saying: "All Communists ought to be killed" (which may give you another three years).

for bread-slicers meant that you could sit beside the machine, watch the cogs being cut, every now and then take a measurement, remove the cogs to wash them and start again. There was a speed gear which permitted me to do the expected 100% in five hours (of the 7.5 of a shift); the steel was a bit like puff pastry, and the speed produced even worse quality ripping the cuts out of the steel. I wonder how long these cogs may have lasted (and I was perfectly sure they could not be used for tanks - we were never quite sure of this when producing spare parts for 'tractors').

The time thus gained could be put to good use. I was always on my way to the toilet, stopping here and there to have a chat. There was no danger of being overheard - the noise was such that you were unable to understand anything even if a few feet away. And the police did not make many appearances - certainly not at night time: this was a metal-processing plant, with steel bars lying around ... but they had their collaborators doing the spying for them. So you had to be cautious not to pick the wrong mates to talk to, and choose your topics carefully. However, I felt that these talks meant a great deal to my fellow prisoners, whether it was on art, history, economics or even politics. And I felt called upon to advise some not to work too hard, not overdo it but think of their physical well-being and the time after - activities which would of course have been impossible if I had refused to work.

2.3 Survival

Important decisions are implicit in the above description and it will be useful to insert a chapter here on the vital question how one survives situations like Brandenburg; the topic will recur in many details below. I was in a very fortunate position compared to fellow prisoners: I was young (24 when caught), healthy, unmarried, without parents, a student - and a westerner, sure to be handed back to the west. And I had nothing to repent, not having done any wrong even when in conflict with East German laws.

I am convinced that the best decision I took in prison was not to believe all the rumours (some launched by the police) that 'good conduct' and repentance would contribute to an early release. I was sure that they would make me stay to the very last day of my sentence. If this was so, then there was no point in compromising, and it was very good that I came to this conclusion in the course of the very first weeks - it gave me a great freedom to act irrespective of what fellow prisoners and police officers might think or say. Accordingly, I repeated ever so often that I was a political prisoner (a term that did not exist with reference to inmates of eastern jails and which the authorities intensely disliked). I added that I had not done any wrong: it was the 'Socialist'

authorities that wronged me by putting me among murderers for helping a few people to their rights. While I carefully avoided slander I stated that I had never been a Communist and the practices in Brandenburg did not contribute to my changing my opinion. Thus, in the course of time I must have appeared a hopeless case to the police - but one worthy of contact for the few fellow prisoners that could really be trusted. In daily life, it gave me a great deal of freedom since I did not have to reflect on consequences of minor cases of 'misbehaviour'. It can even be, though I have no evidence for this, that some policemen may have admitted that my attitude while slightly strange was consistent and to be respected. If anything contributed to my getting through the experience psychically unharmed it was this policy.

2.4 Food

The chapter can be summarized in a few lines. There was enough to eat and drink as quantity was concerned, but it was (intentional?) misnourishment, with hardly any vitamins and proteins offered (I have seen three eggs in three years). We were permitted to shop, spending the M15 allowed per month - but there was hardly anything to buy apart from sugar and margarine (perhaps not surprising at a time when food supplies for the population outside the prison were insufficient). Christmas and birthdays were feastdays when we were allowed a small parcel - with the items that were not permitted strictly regulated.

2.5 Health

Health was *the* great concern, especially since there was a doubt whether proper treatment was possible under given conditions - and whether it was intended. The malnourishment, overwork and other stress gave rise to a great number of smaller problems. If the worst happened, the ashes would be sent home with a stereotypical 'heart failure' given as the reason for it.

My first accident (2.2) proved to be a blessing in disguise. When I reported ill, I saw the aide-de-camp Fioh-Paule (who had started his career as a flea-exterminator and had no medical training whatsoever). To my surprise, he granted me to see the doctor. He was the head of the local polyclinic who came into prison on Wednesday and Saturday mornings to see his 'patients', the routine jobs on the other days being done, for 1500 prisoners, by the medical student Peter, in for alleged espionage. Dr Krafft touched my finger and I went up in pain. Turning to Peter he said: "Let us wait until tomorrow. If there is no improvement, then *incidere*." I smiled; he turned to me asking: "What are you?" - "A student." - "What of?" - "Latin." Now it was his turn to smile. There was

an instant recognition that I was not an ordinary criminal and I sensed his obvious willingness to help. He had me taken out to his hospital on the next Thursday and Friday, and on Saturday decreed that I was a very interesting case and all conservative measures must be tried on me. He kept me in the prison hospital for almost two months(!) well knowing that better food, much sleep and no work would do me good - and the police (at that time) were willing to accept his authority.⁵

The next crisis came more than a year later. In bed after night shift, I felt a very bad pain in the loins. Since the pail did not bring any relief, I knocked at the door. A policeman came to complain about the noise. I told him that I very urgently needed to see the doctor who was in prison on a Saturday. The policeman returned with Floh-Paule who offered two pills, "What are these?" - "They are for your pains." - "I do not want them; I want a diagnosis; I wish to see the doctor." - "You take these; you can see the doctor on Monday." - "You are lying; the doctor won't be here on a Monday, and if this is appendicitis, I won't need a doctor on Monday, but an undertaker." When he disappeared with his aide I shouted after him: "I will give you ten minutes to decide that I can see the doctor. If nothing happens by then, I will start smashing up the furniture." Nothing did happen. In consequence I took one of the massive wooden stools and banged it against the steel-coated door, making a hellish noise. So they came, some six policemen, bellowing at me: "You must be mad." - "I am, mad with pain, and I told you I'd run riot unless I was allowed to see the doctor." I knew I was playing at high risk, but there were only two options for the police - either send me to the detention cell in the basement or let me see the doctor. Although they knew by that time that I was not an easy prisoner, they also knew that I was not given to using brutal force, and my abnormal behaviour must have convinced them to comply with my request. Five minutes later two men came with a stretcher to carry me across to the hospital. The diagnosis was a kidney stone, confirmed by X-ray, so I was admitted to hospital - and it so happened that Dr Krafft went away on his summer holiday. Since the police did not know what to do with me, they kept me in hospital until he returned - to find that the stone had long disappeared and that I had to be sent back to work.

⁵When I saw Dr Krafft in 1991 to thank him for his help he told me that he was replaced by an army doctor in 1972 because he was too lenient and therefore no longer acceptable as a prison doctor.

2.6 Culture

I was not allowed any personal books which I urgently requested to keep up my competence in English and Latin - but then foreign languages were not allowed anyway, nor was the use of paper and pencil (!). The little spare time we had we might spend playing chess or reading the books from the prison library, a very mixed lot - and you did not normally get the books you ordered. This may again partly have been because a murderer was the head librarian, and he would first serve his friends. At least I had access to a two-volume art history only because the murderer in our cell got the set - and I was able to look at it because there happened to be no work for me at the time.

A film was shown every fortnight. I went once: a very primitive propaganda film from Russia, badly translated. It wasn't worth the time. On the other hand, cinema counted as a privilege which could be taken away in case of misbehaviour. When the policeman came to guide the prisoners to the 'cinema' two weeks later and opened the door, I remained sitting. "Stand up! What about you? Are you not allowed to go?" - "No, I just don't want to." "But you must." - "No, you cannot force me to accept a privilege." The logic of this was too much for him, so our discussion continued without end. He decided I had to see my 'educator', in charge of the spiritual welfare of eighty or so prisoners (nicknamed Trouser's Crease for his rigid manners). Crease gave up after a while, deciding I had to sweep the passage. When my room-mates returned they laughed at me; I smiled back - and a fortnight later told the policeman opening the door that he ought to have realized by now that I never went. He slammed the door and left me to two precious hours of solitary quietude, a gift the value of which is difficult to describe in a normal life.

2.7 Connections to outside

One letter of twenty lines was allowed per month - one from my sister, and one to her. Censorship meant that not all got through, but they constituted the major link to the outside. Since Waltraud had helped with the 'criminal activities' it was impossible for her to come for the thirty-minute visit allowed every six months. (My aunt came to see me, but she had of course little information to share, having no direct connection with my friends in the west). The letter had to be returned when a new one came - and the same applied to photographs: Since only one was allowed, Waltraud had to combine two photographs of herself and my girlfriend with that of my dead mother.

However, the police apparently had no regulations about the admissibility of postcards. So I told Waltraud in a letter (which was fortunately not intercepted) to ask friends to send postcards with modern art for every

conceivable holiday. Most of these cards were never handed out to me - but I received as many as 17 on a special occasion. Another function of these cards was that they told the police that my case was not forgotten - the most spectacular instance was when some six postcards were sent to me from Fiji; although I never received them, they must have sent the police to their atlases!⁹

Postcards are also connected with a memorable episode over Christmas 1963. A policeman came to bring two new cards and wanted to collect the five of the previous day. Three of these were well hidden since I wanted to show them to others, so I returned two. "You got more than two," he rightly claimed. "No, I got two which I herewith return." The bickering went on so that I was transferred to Mr Crease. I requested the two to be sent to my valuables, an idea that he evidently disliked. So he questioned whether my cards were indeed valuables. "Of course they are; they are art reproductions" - which made him take up the topic of 'art', much to his risk. After a few minutes he made the fatal mistake: "These paintings (by Kandinsky, Klee, Nolde etc.) are indeed not art - they are, at most, depraved art" (*entartete Kunst*). I became cool as a university lecturer asking in apparent surprise: "I cannot believe my ears. Did you really use this Nazi expression with reference to the same artists and their paintings? A term which the Nazis used to drive painters into exile, remove their paintings from galleries and cheaply sell abroad - a behaviour which has disgraced the name of Germany ever since the 1930s? How could you, with all the political education you have received, use this same expression? Can you explain?" Of course he couldn't - he could not even appeal to his superiors: I would have loved to repeat our conversation. So, the only childish reaction left to him was to say, after a silence during which he had turned red, then white and then red again: "In order not to have any such discussions in the future, you won't get any more postcards." It was worth my triumph (and I *did* get more postcards after I was transferred to another job).

2.8 Further protest

I did not smoke, so they could not take away any cigarettes; I had voluntarily rejected to see their films. They did exclude me from volleyball - but that was organized by criminals, and therefore not pure fun. They did not dare to forbid

⁹The scheme worked in my favour because the GDR in the 1960s was intent on international recognition and wanted to look 'respectable'. A former prisoner of the apartheid regime once told me that such an international effort would have misfired in South Africa, provoking even more torture and repression.

me to write letters, or to let me go to Sunday services every four weeks.¹⁰ There were two occasions which became fully interpretable only after I had seen my secret files. One day one of my lawyers wrote that a plea for clemency¹¹ had been rejected because of bad conduct.¹² Since I had not been punished for any instance of bad behaviour, and had produced my 100% of cogwheels, I staged a protest demanding to see the head of the jail. I was, surprise!, handed on to one of his deputies from whom I demanded to know what my offenses were on which the rejection of the plea was based. He had no satisfactory answer - all the data in my files concerned trivialities. Only the Stasi files made clear that there were objections to my political beliefs and utterances, reasons which the deputy head was unwilling to disclose.

Another 'interview' of 1 August 1963 was completely enigmatic at the time. I was presented to two gentlemen who asked how I felt and whether I had anything to complain about. I did not stop talking for twenty minutes complaining about food, work, health, the lack of scholarly books - and the company of murderers. A lady scribe took down what I said in shorthand. Then the interview was over and I was returned to my cell.

When I was able to look at my files the apparent mystery was solved: *The preface explained that the Stasi had planned to offer an early release if I consented to be an informant, my international connections apparently making the attempt worth while. Then came the interview more or less faithfully recorded as far as I can remember. Finally, an evaluation in which it was stated that I was intelligent, self-confident and negligent as to my behaviour which I tried to hush over with cheap arguments. They also stated that I would not keep secret, and that to ask me might be counterproductive; unless there was a radical change in my political persuasions they did not see any point in repeating the experiment.*

¹⁰The services have paled in my memory: I did not get much out of them. In 1991 it was found that the parson had been an informant of the Stasi - the worst a man in his position could have done.

¹¹I had encouraged friends and relatives to send such pleas to the authorities; I knew that I could not expect any result, but the police would at least learn from these activities that I was not forgotten. One of the pleas, dictated to my grandmother (then 92) and addressed to the Communist head of state Ulbricht ended with the words "May God the Lord bless you."

¹²His advice was little helpful indeed. Since my policy was not to give in and to compromise myself by accommodating to the police, he advised that unless I improved my behaviour he would not be able to help me in any way - a misunderstanding that I also found among some of my friends.

Why did they ask me in the first place? They must have seen that it would be no use - but they may have been bound to conduct a certain number of interviews every week and may have run out of more suitable candidates.

At any rate, the text is a nice document of the fact that you could decline the wooing of the Stasi and say "no" (at least 10% of the people they asked did say no) - and you could do this even under the extreme conditions of imprisonment.

2.9 The release

There were rumours that some release of western prisoners was imminent in July 1964 - and the news came, as far as I could make out, from trustworthy sources. I had been transferred to an 'old-age pensioners' brigade' (day shift only, doing electric armatures) because the intensity of my work had declined even further. When the police came to call my name I answered: "I am ready to go to West Germany." They hurried to explain that there was nothing like it, but I confirmed my statement and took a lengthy leave from my mates shaking all their hands and wishing them well. A fortnight later I was back to West Germany.

The background of the release came to be known through German papers a few weeks later. The West German government had decided to give some money or goods to the east hoping that an improvement in the living conditions might help to liberalize the system - a bit. After the credit had been agreed upon, the question arose whether the west could get anything in exchange for such generosity. Shortly before, the Americans had bought back the PWs of the abortive invasion of the Bay of Pigs from the Cubans, and taking this as a model, someone suggested to ask for political prisoners in exchange. The miracle happened - the Communists agreed, and thus for each of us goods valued DM 40,000 were sent across the border (oranges and bananas in my case, later on the Communists demanded hard cash). Until their state came to an end in 1989, the East German authorities sold some 33,500 prisoners.

Note: Man-trade is not what it seems if it is transacted by the state.

3 Conclusion

Was it worth it? Did I learn from the experience? Firstly, there was no choice. I could not say no to the first request for help - or I would have felt ashamed for the rest of my life. Secondly, the 976 days were much too long - if I wanted to test how much I could take a few months would have done: I have always considered the time more or less lost. But, then, I had been fortunate in many ways although I did not always recognize the blessings in disguise when they

first happened (the flat; the accident, etc.) And my case and personal experience is nothing in comparison to what happened to others in Germany or other eastern states, or the brutality and suffering that happened before 1945. Still, I believe that my experience is worth recording (including this greatly condensed form) because it reflects not only unique historical conditions in Germany in the 1960s, but has some relevance for problems of a more general *condition humaine*.

There was one consolation in all this - nobody had betrayed me (as became apparent to so many East Germans when they looked at their files). Some of my friends had made mistakes, had been uncautious or in a hurry, or too confident. But so had I. It is easy to be wise after - but reflecting on the situation in 1961 I think all were right who helped spontaneously when there was till an opportunity for doing so. Some have payed for it.

