



After The Wall

Jana Hensel, Jefferson Chase (Translator)

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Jana Hensel was thirteen on November 9, 1989, the night the Berlin Wall fell. In all the euphoria over German reunification, no one stopped to think what it would mean for Jana and her generation of East Germans. These were the kids of the seventies, who had grown up in the shadow of Communism with all its hokey comforts: the Young Pioneer youth groups, the cheerful Communist propaganda, and the comforting knowledge that they lived in a Germany unblemished by an ugly Nazi past and a callous capitalist future. Suddenly everything was gone. East Germany disappeared, swallowed up by the West, and in its place was everything Jana and her friends had coveted for so long: designer clothes, pop CDs, Hollywood movies, supermarkets, magazines. They snapped up every possible Western product and mannerism. They changed the way they talked, the way they walked, what they read, where they went. They cut off from their parents. They took English lessons, and opened bank accounts. Fifteen years later, they all have the right haircuts and drive the right cars, but who are they? Where are they going?

In *After the Wall*, Jana Hensel tells the story of her confused generation of East Germans, who were forced to abandon their past and feel their way through a foreign landscape to an uncertain future. Now as they look back, they wonder whether the oppressive, yet comforting life of their childhood wasn't so bad after all.

After The Wall Details

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Pam Rasmussen says

I had an au pair who grew up in East Germany, then moved to the West, and I remember her telling me that she missed how the East took care of its residents. The West, she said, seemed rather cold and uncaring in contrast. That would be a surprise to many people who think Communism was all bad. Jana Hensel's book is indeed unique in focusing on the transition required of that generation. But what I found very sad was the sense of loss, confusion and abandonment felt by her parents' generation. And how distanced she felt from them.

Cheryl says

This is written from one person's experience growing up in the former East Germany, and then being thrust into a new way of life after German reunification. The book isn't large about 166 pages and is more of a collection of thoughts and memories written as the author remembers them. It is more about life after reunification rather than before it.

The author views the former East Germany through the rose tinted glasses of childhood. Since she was young while still under the rule of the socialist state, and obviously wrapped up in her childhood, the thoughts, ideas, politics, repression, economics, etc. escape her. She sees things as probably being more perfect and ideal over what they most likely were.

I read the book Forty Autumns before this, and find it an extremely well researched and comprehensive book about life in East Germany, compared to this book. However, this is more of a collection of memories and feelings, not a history lesson. It is important in its own way because this part of history should be recorded and remembered, and the feelings of those who lived it, no matter how well we like their feelings, are important as well.

Susan Ovans says

Read this right after finishing Petropolis, which was a fictional story of coming of age in the Soviet Union. Jana Hensel, who wrote After the Wall, tells a real-life story of coming of age in the former GDR, known in the U.S. as East Germany, and of feeling adrift when, as a young teenager, the wall fell and her Communist country was reunited with the West.

The problem is that Ms. Hensel tells only her own story, and it's a boring one. It's hard to tell why this book apparently became an instant sensation in Germany because it's devoid of drama, humor, pathos, or even insight. Since Ms. Hensel is a journalist, it's too bad that she didn't reach out to other sources, if not for any other reason than to add a livelier voice to 160 tedious pages.

Stephen Durrant says

This book is an important personal account of cultural dislocation. Jana Hensel was born in East Germany and was in her early teens in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell. In her own words, "It frightens us to think that

we were but brief guests in our native land." While she is not entirely nostalgic about her childhood in the GDR, she does remember a way of life and a set of values that were essentially wiped away at the time of reunification. So began her attempt to adapt to the reality of Western Germany, which in so many ways had become, in the years since the partition, a different country. This book contains no profound political meditations and makes no attempt at "deep anthropology." It is, instead, a modest, straightforward account of one person's experience about what it felt like suddenly to lose one's foundation and then start over with a new set of rules and expectations. I like books that force us to rethink a historical event in a more complex way. Yes, perhaps the fall of the wall and the reunification of Germany as a democratic states was a step in the right direction. But when it comes to the level of individuals, and their actual experience of events, the story is never such a simple one.

Dominick says

Communism, Pink Floyd, the Cold War, Gorbachev – these and other terms come to mind when thinking about the Berlin Wall that once encircled West Berlin. Hensel's book does touch on some of them. However, "After the Wall" is neither a political manifesto nor the attempt of a historian to explain the time from 1945 to 1989. Rather, the book is a very personal walk down memory lane. In eight chapters, the author summons the GDR of her childhood, leading the reader from her classroom to her life as daughter and Young Pioneer to the Wall and its fall.

Both the table of contents and the timeline at the beginning of the book reveal much about "After the Wall": This is not a novel but a documentary of a life from past Germany. Chapter one is titled "On Growing Up in the GDR," and chapters five and seven educate the reader about the educational system during the communist years. "On Searching for Home," "On Dealing with Our Parents," and "On Our Battles with Bad Taste" teach the reader about the struggles that followed the fall of the GDR. So, a quick overview of the topics being discussed in the book help to understand the overall theme of it: What were the events and experiences that burned themselves into the memory of a girl who grew up in East Germany?

The book is promoted as being a bestseller in Germany, but the claim would have to be researched. Is "After the Wall" a bestseller because it is required reading for every high school student in Germany? The topic is certainly an important one and fits any world history course. However, the author's style is a bit exhausting. There is some rambling going on, and one does not necessarily develop a personal "connection" to the protagonist. "After the Wall" is certainly not mawkish like other autobiographies. In fact, the opposite is true. The writings style is very matter-of-fact, maybe even a bit antiseptic. Still, this book is worth the time it takes to read it because it provides a much-needed personal perspective about life under an oppressive communist regime.

Kathy Halsan says

Nathan gave me this book for Christmas. Having visited both East and West Berlin this summer and hearing stories from some of our tour guides about the end of the GDR, this book was especially interesting. For these young people, they can "never go home again".

Jan-Maat says

Reread this in translation, it seems far less interesting now. A brief book, I came across it, either as a review or excerpts, or both in some news magazine or other way back towards the beginning of the century.

The author was then a young woman looking on entering into puberty just as the DDR/GDR came to an end. It was written I think as Ostalgie was trending after the abandonment of everything associated with the DDR in the immediate post Wende period. Hensel recalls the particularities of her youth before 1989. It seems to me to be Leipzig-centric and I don't imagine it was entirely typical, but still very readable and sympathetic. On the reread her sense of alienation from her own past, but also from her peers and family merges into a sense of colonialism, her experience of the end of one way of life was of being colonialised by West Germany, which is interesting, because formally one might look at it or expect to have seen elements of decolonisation too, but such as they might have been they were washed away by the flood from the West.

The voice is a slight problem as it is both a personal account but also aspires to being representative, a book about 'we' and 'us', but this is a young woman who was writing for serious news magazines in her 20s and had this book published while she was still young - so an unusual person in her generation, quite apart from how typical or particular her suburban Leipzig upbringing was.

There was an instant in which she becomes aware of the Nazi past of a west-German boyfriend's grandfather that her experience of an abruptly lost past which can't be defended and maybe can't even be spoken about is not unique but has parallels in recent German history. But she doesn't explore it.

Funnily the translation works against the sense of alienation and a particular way of life that was lost because everything is homogenised into conventional US-English so there are: Grade schools, High Schools, sneakers and cookies, so even the word choice represents colonisation by a dominant culture ! Utterly bizarrely there is the technically correct machine translation of Sanssouci *castle!* which is a bit shocking as a display of cultural ignorance from a translator(allegedly) based in Berlin (view spoiler). Presumably the translator is or was so trendy as not to be interested in anything more than five minutes old...The translator felt the need to add a note explaining that Communism was bad and that there are lots of BAD things not mentioned in the book that the reader has to be reminded of because they happened more than five minutes ago and there is a risk that the typical American reader might have forgotten that Communism is VERY BAD.

Anyhow. A Zeitgeisty gust of Zeitgeist.

Mindy says

This is a pretty interesting book. Jana Hensel is of the last generation of the GDR. The Berlin Wall came down when she was 13. Her perspective was interesting for me, mostly because we're about the same age. My perspective of East German and Soviet Union kids were equally as foreign as Hensel's description of Western kids.

While I think she paints in very broad strokes - saying things like "we" and "they" or "western people" a lot - it is a fairly well written exploration of what it was like on her side of our generation split by the Iron Curtain.

Some points are repeated too often - especially the issues surrounding the differences between East German parent/child relationships and those she perceived between her Western friends.

It's a worthwhile read. Gaining such an intimate perspective from someone who lived (at least in my World during that time) in such a secretive place was very interesting.

Also, the cover is fantastic. : D I must give the publishers props for excellent cover appeal.

Andrea says

Only gave this one a single star. My faculty partner assigned our students to read this text this term and thus I, of course, read it along with them as well. During the reading of this text my students and I had several discussions about the text and our issues with it. One issue is that there is not narrative to the story-- it is all just a collection of memories written in no particular order. Mostly explanations of the GDR. Some of my students mentioned that it just seemed like the author was complaining the whole time or that she was victimizing herself. Many of my students as well as myself identify with various marginalized culture groups and have grown up with these sorts of issues, but we have grown accustom to them. We do not complain, if anything we take action. I discussed with my students that for Hensel she had grown up in the majority culture until she turned 13 when suddenly the Wall came down and she became part of the marginalized culture. I talked with my students that this may be why she appears to be making such a big deal about the change in her life-- not only was she going through puberty, which is already a hard time in life, but she also became a minority at the same time. All this aside, I still gave the book a single star. Had the course readings been up to me I would have picked a different non-fiction text, or even a fictional text, for our students to read.

Kelly says

I really thought there would be a lot of interesting anecdotes about East Germany, but I only found one or two things interesting and the rest of it came off as whiny.

Katniss says

This book was a pain in my neck. If it wasn't for my class, I would not have finished it. Jana Hensel totally annoyed me! Maybe it's my lacking ability to identify with the *Eastern-Germany-I-lost-my-home-Theme* ... but I doubt that. I'm usually quite interested in history and the event itself is fascinating, also the time and people. But Hensel is just one annoying Ossi.

I hoped to learn something about the *German Democratic Republic* and the way of life perceived by a mere child and the consequences these took on the up-growing... but that book totally lacks of information, due to constant whining.

If you wanna know something about the *German Democratic Republic* and it's way of life: **Don't read that book.** Don't read that book, no matter what. It's not worth the trouble.

anieva says

The voice of the author is often irritating, particularly because of the generalizations about groups of people which she makes quite firmly.

Nonetheless, I haven't seen a lot of books on this fascinating topic, so it was interesting. And, it's a really easy, quick read.

Was this young adult non-fiction does anyone know? For some reason, it seemed so, perhaps because of the age of the author during the time period in question.

She has another book in German, I think. Wonder if it was translated....

GONZA says

What will you do if your country chase to exist and everything that was known to you from one day to another is not there anymore? What would you feel if your new country is full of people that despise you or try to help you and you do not want to be helped? Life after the fall of the wall is different for whom was behind the wall. GDR life described by a girl that was thirteen when "her world" comes to an end and from her parents on, no adults are able to teach her how to live or survive in the "new" world. Fascinating and well written.

Cosa faresti se il tuo paese cessasse di esistere da un momento all'altro e tutto quello che conosci scompare? Come ti sentiresti se il tuo nuovo paese fosse pieno di gente che non ti calcola o ritiene di doverti aiutare anche contro la tua volontà? La vita dopo la caduta del muro in quella che era la GDR è completamente diversa da quella che conosceva questa ragazza che a 13 anni vede cadere il muro, e da quel momento in poi nessun adulto è in grado di aiutarla a vivere o a sopravvivere nel nuovo mondo che la ingloba. Affascinante e ben scritto.

Karschtl says

Ein Mädel, kaum älter als ich, berichtet über ihre Kindheit die sie in der damaligen DDR verbracht hat. Das ganze ist kein Roman sondern mehr eine Ansammlung von kleinen Essay-ähnlichen Kapiteln.

Da wir beide wie gesagt fast gleichaltrig sind, sind ihre Erlebnisse fast auch meine Erlebnisse und wirklich hab ich mir auf fast jeder Seite gedacht: genau so war es.

Ich stimme nicht ganz mit ihrer Ansicht überein, wie wir uns damals und nach der Wende selbst gesehen haben. Sowas ist immer subjektiv, da kann man kaum übereinstimmen.

Aber die Dinge die sie aufzählt, die wir damals hatten, die uns wichtig waren, unsere Vorbilder, unsere Rituale, unsere Festtage - all das hat sie genau so beschrieben, wie ich es in Erinnerung habe. Franz war unser Vorbild (zwar erst nach der Wende, aber immerhin), genauso wie die FDJler, die wir total cool fanden wenn sie beim Fahnenappell "Freundschaft" grummelten. Ich hab Trommel + Frösi gelesen, war Gruppenratsvorsitzende, hab Altpapier zur SERO gebracht. Am 13. Dezember war auch in unserer Schule eine große Party, ich hab 'Alfons Zitterbacke', 'Ottokar Domma' und 'Ich bin die Nele' mehr als einmal

gelesen. Trotzdem - nicht unbedingt heimlich - auch Westfernsehen geschaut und war neidisch auf die, die mit Tintenkiller und neonpink-farbenem Radiergummi zur Schule kamen. Ein schönes Sammelsarium voller DDR-Details.

Ich kann dieses Buch empfehlen für alle, die ebenfalls in der DDR aufgewachsen sind und sich auf nostalgische Weise zurückerinnern wollen und auch allen anderen, die einen kleinen Einblick in die Alltagswelt der DDR haben möchten.

Daisy says

Every generation's experience of the GDR is different, from those who were alive before WWII, to their children who were born when East Germany was a "given," to those of different ages who lived through the Fall of the Wall. Hensel makes a point of stressing that she and kids of her generation often need to act as translators for their parents, even though their parents speak the language. Interesting.
