

23 January 2020

## Crisis Management in East Berlin



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Until 13 August 1961, East Germans could escape real existing socialism by crossing from the Soviet sector of Berlin, claimed by the GDR as its capital, to West Berlin. The train from Friedrichstrasse (East Berlin) to Bahnhof Zoo in the British sector was popular. Between 1945 and 1961, 3.5 million people left East Germany, 20% of the population. In 1973, the UK and other NATO countries opened embassies in East Berlin. The British Embassy was on Unter Den Linden, the main thoroughfare that links the Brandenburg Gate with Alexander Platz, in the centre of historic Berlin.

One tactic favoured by East Germans desperate to escape, was to stage a sit in at a western mission, mainly the West German Permanent Representation (PR) - not an embassy because the GDR was not a foreign country for the Federal Republic (FRG). The West Germans had even built an annexe for these people while they waited to learn their fate. Such would be emigrants, provided they were not holders of state secrets, would usually be bought out through the (good) offices of Wolfgang Vogel, a lawyer employed by East German State Security - the Stasi - originally to facilitate spy and dissident swaps - Powers and Scharansky for example - and then, after Wall went up, the release of political prisoners and ordinary citizens who wanted to emigrate, in exchange for money. We reckoned that the FRG would have paid about GBP10bn to liberate 250,000 would be emigrants and 34,000 political prisoners during the 28 years of the Wall's existence. Vogel was a wealthy man, and a controversial personality. He was our Honorary Legal Adviser.

The GDR police (Volkspolizei, VoPo) and plain clothes Stasi hoodlums, kept western missions under close surveillance, especially the PR. By the late 1980s the authorities were threatening to block all access to the PR. Access to the PR was indeed difficult. Would be emigrants started trying their luck at other embassies. On Unter de Linden, the main drag, the British Embassy was not the sort of place where the VoPos would want a fight outside our front door.

On the ground floor we had set up a quite spacious reading room and information centre with material about the UK. The glass frontage was not transparent. We wanted to encourage people to visit our embassy and learn about the UK, in relative privacy. Our receptionists, German speaking Brits, and security guards, had, instructions not to obstruct people who wanted to visit our reading room.

**Access. Engagement. Resolution.**

In August 1988, when I was in charge during Ambassador Broomfield's summer leave, 16 people - three families and two dogs - gained entry to our mission. Not least because of the dogs, I suspected a provocation, and gave instructions that our visitors should not be allowed to settle in comfortably. But of course, refusing to allow children to use the toilet was not really an option. Nor was preventing dogs doing their business in our backyard. Soon they were settling in.

After Ralph Morton, Second Secretary, internal affairs expert, had taken names, addresses, and occupations, I set out for the PR. The DHM (Franz Jürgen Staab, from the Inner German Ministry) reviewed the list and pulled a long face. This will cost us a lot of money, if they are let out, he said. Next stop Vogel, who said his first task would be to find out if there were any bearers of secrets. He added that my next task would be to warn our guests that under no circumstances would they be allowed to leave the embassy and head straight for freedom via Check Point Charlie which was less than a mile away. A day later Vogel gave me the all clear - no bearers of secrets. Staab confirmed that the FRG would pay.

Now the difficult bit began. Our guests did not believe that our offer was sincere: return home, we shall stay on your case, you will get out. Get Vogel to come and speak to us, was their line. Vogel said that this would be absolutely the last resort. If he did it once, he would have to do it every time. More negotiations. Eventually a split began to appear. The majority was for accepting the offer. Finally, we won the day. Ralph Morton accompanied them to the station, kept in touch with them in Thuringia, until they left for West Germany in June 1989.

This was the best briefing on what life was really like in the GDR that we ever had. One disappointment however: we lost touch after they got to West Germany. They made no attempt to let us know how they were getting on.

Three weeks later, across the road, the Danish embassy was preparing for a visit by the Danish Prime Minister, Poul Schlüter. So, they got visitors too, 18, but, as far as I remember, no dogs. The Ambassador (Erik Krog Meyer; EKM), a lawyer, was having none of it. Contrary to the entreaties of his staff, he invited the VoPos to clear his embassy. EKM was well aware of what we had done. EU (EEC in those days) and NATO missions had been briefed in detail. We had agreed guidelines on sit ins. The VoPos were incredulous. Did he really want them to do that? Of course, like many crises, this one blew up at a weekend in mid-summer, when the Danish MFA was at less than peak operational efficiency. EKM confirmed his request to the VoPos, who entered the embassy in the middle of the night, and arrested the lot. Schlüter, incredibly, was not briefed, when he arrived shortly afterwards, for his visit. But then, the shit hit the fan in Copenhagen, and in Bonn. Schlüter made release of the 18 a condition for Honecker being allowed to visit (scheduled for October 1989 when he was deposed) Copenhagen. They got out in March 1989. The Ambassador, his staff (unfairly) and the MFA were roundly criticised by a parliamentary committee of enquiry. EKM was taken out of the firing line, posted to Helsinki, a humiliated and broken man. He died soon afterwards.

### Comment

EKM's DHM had a much better line. Warn Honecker that unless these people get out, Schlüter's visit is off. But EKM ignored him. He had support from neither Vogel, nor the FRG, nor his staff,

for his action, which was contrary to agreed western policy at the time. I was lucky with excellent support from the West Germans, Vogel, and embassy staff.

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