

Nixon in Berlin

By Terrence O’Keeffe / 7,600 words

In the summer of 1963 I met Richard Nixon in East Berlin under rather unusual circumstances. The story of this brief encounter is true, qualified by the proviso that I am attempting to recover events as I remember them fifty years after they happened. I am not going to double-check details of the narrative by conversations with other parties involved or by using the usual array of internet information services. Nor will I check the spelling of German words that play a part in the story. That is not to say that the tale is pure and unvarnished, only that I am depending on unaided memory: visual images and conversations as I recollect them, enlivened by an emotional charge that has been dwindling constantly due to lack of refreshment (what seemed exciting then now seems commonplace). Of course the story may be ornamented by later embellishments with which experience modifies memories or cleverly edits out parts of a story for reasons unknown to the conscious self. Like eyewitness testimony in a court case, memories this old may confuse or omit details and temporal and causal linkages among events or suffer from other mild derangements, but the general picture I present here is not bad and is more or less accurate. I express opinions herein that some may find stupid or unacceptable on some other basis. I also grant myself the liberty of letting my mind occasionally wander through old historical precincts elicited by my memories – bear with me on those occasions. If you’re old enough they may spark a visitation of discarded or buried images and ideas; if not, you might learn something about our recent past, which, while now being swallowed up and digested into a kind of neutral mush, really did exist and seemed firm, hard, and often indigestible.

Setting the Stage

In the summer of 1963 I was midway between my eighteenth and nineteenth birthdays and had just completed my first year at Princeton. Through a series of unexpected and sudden opportunities I had a chance to travel abroad and seized it without hesitation. In the fall of 1962, after being tested on the language skills I had picked up in high-school, I had been approved to take two sophomore-level courses in German, one devoted to refinements of grammar and syntax and the other to readings from 18th and 19th century classics, with one or two more modern works thrown in. From the earlier periods we certainly read some Schiller and Goethe, both poetry and prose, and some Tieck and Novalis. We read something by Golo Mann and a chapter from a postwar novel by Max Frisch. As for the rest, I don’t recall.

The University’s German language and literature program placed some of its students in summer jobs in Germany as part of an exchange program; other language departments were involved in the program as well. Princeton had cultivated liaisons with government agencies and private foundations that oversaw this exchange of students. If selected, you became a “summer employee” rather than a conventional exchange student, but the objective was the same -- to better your language skills, so the “job” was merely an opportunity to do that. We would be in situations where we had to plunge into daily use of German and thereby improve our conversational abilities and accents. The same applied to students who were sent to France, Italy, and Spain by the Romance Languages department (though the university had flourishing Russian and Oriental language departments, I don’t think they had worked out any similar arrangements for the undergraduate students enrolled in those programs at the time, though I may be wrong on this point). Soon after learning of the program I applied for one of these summer positions. After a ten or fifteen minute interview by a professor from the department I was found suitable for export.

The jobs available to the six or seven students going to Germany that summer varied from blue-collar to white-collar work. I remember one kid getting assigned to a Volkswagen (“people’s car”) factory in Wolfsburg. (The name of this town founded in the 1930s was a conscious tribute to one of Adolf Hitler’s favorite nicknames, “Wolf”, and the people envisioned to drive the new, cheap car of the late 1930s were his beloved and ultimately scorned deutsches Volk.) The kid wound up sweeping floors – they certainly

weren't going to entrust a valuable piece of stamping or welding machinery to him. Along with another student, Steve Gabbe, a sophomore from the class of 1965, I was assigned to work at the Commerzbank A.G., located on Breitestrasse (Broad Street) in the center of Düsseldorf's stylish commercial and banking district. The headquarters or large branches of several other German commercial banks were in the neighborhood. Breitestrasse was several blocks off and parallel to the city's showpiece boulevard, the Königsallee, a long axial street flanked by expensive shops and restaurants on both its sides. The "Kö", as the locals called it, had a rectangular artificial lake (a slice of old canal) in its wide median strip, flanked by a colonnade of shade trees and beautified by flowers, shrubs, and right-angle street crossings in the form of bridges with ornate baroque and neoclassical stone carvings on their balustrade corner-posts. All in all it was a nice place for a student to sit on a park bench and watch the world, especially the sexy and stylish German women, walk by. You could certainly read a book there, or pretend to, if that was your particular pretense.

Some of the students were assigned to host families in the towns or cities where they were sent. The two of us in Düsseldorf were put up a place called the Ledigenheim or "home for bachelors", a large brick building similar to a big YMCA center in appearance and function. The director was a Catholic priest, seldom seen or heard from. It was about a mile and a half walk from there to the bank, and each day we walked to and from work, catching a tram for one leg of the trip if it was raining. The cost of boarding was 75 marks a month. We were being paid 95 marks a month (about 25 dollars at the time). With this and the two or three hundred dollars we had each brought with us, we had plenty of pin money left over to spend on necessities like food and beer. Our "canteen ticket" for five hot meals in the bank's rooftop cafeteria was two-and-a-half marks (sixty cents) per week, so we were regally subsidized to at least five good meals each week. When purchased in neighborhood bars my own favorite meals on the outside were also very cheap: "half-chicken with French fries" or "fried eggs with browned potatoes and bread". Accompanied by beer these were filling meals; I doubt that I ate a single vegetable or piece of fruit all that summer, and I didn't feel or look any the worse for this starchy diet.

The bank had little use for us, but certain of its administrators treated us with goodwill anyway. The American summertime student-employees were the non-serious foreigners working there, and, for all I know, some American agency might have picked up the tab for our modest salaries. The serious foreign employees came from all over the world – India, Pakistan, various of the new African countries, Greece, Italy, Spain, France, the Scandinavian countries, and even a few from communist Yugoslavia. We gathered that these nervous men from the Eastern Bloc (as it was then called) were learning the secrets of capitalist finance because the Western powers were extending substantial loans to Tito's government in the hope of keeping him from returning to the orthodox pro-Russian fold of the rest of Eastern Europe. The two good friends we made at the bank were a convivial Spaniard who had been living and working in Germany for about five or six years and a dour Norwegian who was a commercial banker in his native country and who had a one- or two-year internship at the Commerzbank.

Pepe, the Spaniard, gave us a running commentary on the various attractions of the bank's female employees and told us how to deal with some of the more difficult bosses. The Norwegian, Od (his name probably has some kind of mark – a slash, stroke or umlaut – modifying the "O"), was about as anti-German a man you could meet in our present environment. He was there strictly for professional reasons, but his personal resentments were deep and broad. From his teenage years he remembered the indignities of the German occupation of Norway during the war, when his father and one of his brothers had been jailed by the occupation authorities. He and his wife were renting a furnished apartment during his tenure at the bank, and when we paid them a visit once, he removed some books from a shelf to show us the concealed (and actually illegal) copy of Mein Kampf that the apartment's owners kept, possibly as a cherished possession. He was skeptical of any German's claims of innocence or ignorance about the affairs of 1933-1945. When Od spoke of Germany and the Germans he usually scowled. One balmy afternoon when Steve and I were taking a break on the rooftop platform next to the cafeteria, a scrawny middle-aged man who had engaged us in conversation circled the horizon with his finger and told us that, "One day we're going to get it all back." By "it" he meant the recovery by Germany of not only its eastern half, but of Austria, the vanished East Prussia, Polish Silesia, and perhaps points farther east. Had Od been present for this boastful fantasy he might have been tempted to throw the man over the rampart.

The bank's administration finally found a department for us where, doing simple routine tasks, we would take up the least time pestering the other workers and where we could do the least damage. We were placed in the Sortungs-Handlungs Hauptkasse Abteilung or "Main Sorting and Counting (Foreign Currency) Department". This was the pre-electronic banking age, and actual shipments of large bundles of the banknotes and currencies of a dozen European nations passed through our hands. Our departmental chief, Herr Schaf, was a gregarious fellow who spoke English very well, spiked with the slang of the 1930s and 40s. The reason for that was that he had spent almost four years in a prisoner of war camp somewhere in west Texas. Schaf had been a Luftwaffe fighter pilot shot down in North Africa in 1942. He claimed to have never been "political" in his beliefs at that time of his life, but one never knows about something like that. He had interesting and humorous tales of POW life to tell us, including how he had been kept on as a civilian employee for almost a year after the war had ended in May of 1945. He fought to stay, he said, because communications from his family, who lived in the Rhineland, indicated that the situation at home in 1945 and 46 was desperate and unpromising – housing, fuel and food shortages were the order of the day. As far as we were concerned his most endearing trait was his mockery of the bank's rigid hierarchy and the behavioral protocols that went along with this. Once a week an old gentleman who was at a higher level and was responsible for "inspecting" all of his assigned departments to see how they were getting on came into our office and workroom suite, whereupon we all had to stand at attention and formally greet him with a handshake and slight bow of the head as he walked down the line of employees. During these inspections Schaf would speak to us in English, attempting to elicit a breakdown in our grave composure by saying things like, "Look at this broken-down old fool Waterman [the man's name was actually Wasserleben, or "Waterlife"], he really is a silly jackass". As we tried not to smile (Wasserleben was smiling, indicating he falsely detected some kind of English compliment) we noticed a slight smirk and eye-roll from Fräulein Regina Engemann, one of our office-mates who never let on that she actually spoke English quite well.

I have been writing "we" and "us" above, so here is the place to introduce my fellow-American student. His name is Steve Gabbe. He was one year ahead of me in school and, unlike me, had firm ideas about his future. He planned to go to medical school and he did, as I learned much later in life when I met then-middle-aged Doctor Gabbe briefly at a college reunion. Before our assignment to the same summer worksite we had not been friends, even acquaintances, getting together only once before we departed from Idlewild Airport (the original name of JFK Airport) in order to co-ordinate our brief stay in Paris and our train trip from there to Düsseldorf. We shared a room at the bachelors' home but often split up after work hours, each going his own way to explore the city (I gravitated to its cheap bars and fleshpots when I was flush with some cash, otherwise I would idle in the city's attractive parks or walk to the Rhine bridges; I don't really know where Steve went while I was pursuing my own tawdry fantasies). In many ways Steve was more adventurous than I was. He bought a used police motorcycle (a big DKW that he had tuned up) at an auction and, at the end of the summer when we had a two-week break before returning to school, he drove it over the Alps and into Switzerland. (For my vacation I went via Europabus – the migrant worker's choice of transportation – to Spain, hunkering down in the small coastal resort town of Sitges, where Pepe steered me, and taking side trips to Barcelona and Tarragona. It was a two-day bus trip with an overnight flop-house stay in Lyon. I was the only non-Spanish-worker on the bus and also its youngest passenger. In spite of my lack of language my traveling companions were extremely cordial to me and we communicated through German-English pidgin and sign language. Though I was living on a meager budget – something like four dollars a day – I enjoyed my stay in Spain. A loaf of bread, hunk of cheese, and a one-liter bottle of "apple-wine" came to about fifty cents, and my room in a small, well-kept pension was two dollars a day, leaving enough for an omelet and a couple of beers each night. On their own vacation break Od and his wife met me there and drove me around the region for a couple of days. We went to a bullfight in Barcelona, where

Od's wife fainted as soon as the first bull was released into the ring, and went to Tarragona to see its spectacular Roman aqueduct. Under the adolescent influence of Hemingway I enjoyed the bullfight and admired a good performance by a matador nicknamed "El Viti", but my Norwegian friends found the whole ritual brutal and barbaric.)

There were other, deeper reasons why Steve was more adventurous than I was, but I didn't realize that at the time. Steve was Jewish and, I think, was the first member of his family to travel to Germany after World War Two. His family's name had been something like "Gabberwitz" at one time, indicating either a

Polish or Russian connection as well. It's a fair assumption that a goodly portion of that family had been murdered by the Germans during the war. Steve seemed to have undertaken his study of the language and his trip as a kind of uncomfortable exploration of the past and a "test" of some sort (a test of character in which only he could assign a passing or failing grade to himself and to the Germans). I, on the other hand, was there to see the sights, drink beer, and have fun; and, of course, to improve my German speaking skills.

On to Berlin

Those old enough to remember the summer of 1963 will recall it as a time of major civil-rights marches and protest rallies, including a very large one in Washington D.C. That June John F. Kennedy gave his famous "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech. Kennedy had also been in Köln (Cologne) during this trip, and Steve and I contemplated traveling there to see him, but for reasons I cannot remember I didn't undertake that short trip, though Steve might have. Later in the summer – during the last ten days of July -- we were sent on an educational (or propaganda) tour to Berlin, and, there in a public park in East Berlin, we encountered Richard Nixon. The expedition was sponsored by the Wilhelm (not Karl) Marx Gesellschaft, an educational and informational society that, among other activities, sent exchange students and foreign workers to Berlin in order to see the contrast between the ways of life of the new democratic society there and the communist regime on the other side of the recently erected Berlin Wall. Wilhelm Marx was an industrialist from the Rhineland who, during the years of the Weimar Republic, had held several cabinet posts and had briefly been Chancellor in a coalition government sometime during the 1920s. We made our way to Hanover, where the group was assembled from various cities in West Germany, and proceeded into Berlin on a bus via the one official highway allowed for transportation into Berlin from the West (this, or its predecessor, was the road that had been blocked by Stalin in 1948, setting up the famous year-long Berlin Airlift relief effort).

It was a mixed group – half a dozen or more Africans from several nations, as many Indians and Pakistanis, a few men and women from Iran, France, Italy, and some of the Scandinavian countries, and Steve and I representing the USA. The Society not only paid for the transportation and room and board in a pension, it also gave us ten marks a day pocket money. We had a West German group leader (styled as a Gruppenleiterin rather than a Gruppenführerin; the latter usage would have raised unpleasant associations with the terminology of the Nazi era). She was a prim, proper, stylish, and very attractive woman in her thirties, a woman who responded to ogling, personal invitations and any general adolescent misbehavior with stern, no-nonsense reprimands, as if she were dealing with young schoolchildren. One of the group members, Sam Aidoo, a black-as-coal Nigerian with immense flashing teeth and a sparkling personality, referred to her in whispers as unser Gruppenmommi. Sam spoke with Steve and me in English, but in the motley mix of the group his German was better than most of ours. He also reinforced our leader's admonishments when "unauthorized talking" took place (as, for instance, when we were listening to some boring presentation from a speaker during a formal educational session or seminar). Then he would declaim "Ruhe!" (Quiet!) in a booming voice. It usually worked, and we would all shut up for a while.

About five or six hours a day consisted of organized activities – the aforementioned seminars and walking tours, including visits to various government agencies. The rest of the day we were free to explore on our own, including dining and drinking. The one outstanding memory I have of the latter was an expedition that Steve and I made with two Indians to a famous restaurant named Resi. The restaurant was arranged in ascending tiers of tables surrounding a large, rectangular dance floor. A network of pneumatic tubes was mounted along each tier's balustrade. Each table had a post with a number next to it and several canisters into which you could insert a written note and then open an adjacent portal, punch in the number of the destination table, and send your message winging its way via a central exchange to another table where you had spotted attractive women (who might simultaneously be sending a message your way, which did not happen in our case). It was, for us forlorn males, an entertaining evening, but one full of unanswered messages and unfulfilled erotic fancies. We all had several of the local specialty, Berliner Weiss mit Kirsche ("Berlin white with cherries"), a large ice-cold, goblet of beer with cherry syrup in it. This was also called "ein Berliner" by the locals, leading to Kennedy's most famous remark being a gaffe that was taken good-naturedly by the city's citizens – the correct expression for what he wished to say is "Ich bin Berliner". However, his Cold War rhetorical flourish came across as "I am a mug of beer"; in some versions of the story it is translated as "I am a jelly doughnut", also nicknamed ein Berliner.

Naturally we were taken on a tour of the Berlin Wall. At the time most of the wall had a hasty, improvised appearance, having been built with whatever materials were handy – bricks, concrete block, pipe-sections, corrugated iron panels, all smeared together with rough mortar. In some sections the side of a tenement building might be incorporated into the line of the wall, and we could see melancholy or envious eyes staring down from the upper apartments of such buildings. The East-West dividing line had segments that ran through the middle of lake- and waterway-filled parks. We went to one of these on one of our daily trips. As we sat on a grassy bank looking across the water into the sun-dappled and equally attractive communist half of the park, a small motor launch cruised back and forth along the imaginary Cold War line, and several East German border guards or policemen studied us through their binoculars. We waved to them, and when they remained impassive and forbidding we refrained from hooting or making any undignified or silly gestures, though some of us felt we should do just that.

Somewhere nearby was the bridge over which the downed U-2 pilot, Gary Powers, had been exchanged the year before for the famous Russian spy of the 1950s, Colonel Rudolf Abel. The city itself was what might be called "the concentrated essence" of Cold War politics and the psychology that accompanied that politics. In 1963, two years after the Wall had gone up and also two years after Kennedy had been browbeaten and outmaneuvered by Khrushchev at a series of meetings in Vienna, Berlin was still considered to be the most likely "flashpoint" for any hypothesized apocalyptic war between the armed forces of the West and the East. The more practical understanding of truly savvy politicians and diplomats that the Berlin Wall was in fact a stabilizing entity was a "dirty secret" that could not be mentioned in public addresses. The pious lie that the US and its NATO allies would actually risk incinerating themselves and their homelands in order to liberate any of the USSR's European satellite states was maintained for the sake of appearances.

Midway through the week came the big jaunt, the "contrast and compare" exercise of a bus and walking trip into East Berlin, obviously one of the major points of the whole educational venture in which we were involved. And in fact the contrast between the two halves of the city was stark – soon after crossing into East Berlin the traveler was confronted by ruins of the bombed- and shelled-out city of 1945. There were whole blocks of propped up masonry facades that still remained standing and useless, and on the first one we encountered there hung a large white banner proclaiming that "Electricity is the Future of the DDR!" (The name of the East German state was Deutsche Demokratische Republik, or German Democratic Republic; its western counterpart, our ally, was the DBR, for Deutsche Bundesrepublik, or German Federal Republic. At the time West Berlin had a real, but undefined relationship with the DBR.) The rubble on the surrounding streets had been cleaned up, but large swaths of such gutted buildings, once made iconic by the aerial camera views of 1945, remained. Near-total desolation and misery had in fact been the final fruit of that exciting experiment known as the Thousand-Year Reich. In West Berlin (and West Germany in general) these remnants of the war had been knocked down and replaced, save for a few ruins that had been incorporated into memorials or shrines, including the damaged tower of the famous Gedächtniskirche (Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church), which stood on an island in the middle of the now glossy, even brassy, and prosperous Kurfürstendamm boulevard, one of West Berlin's formidable showplaces of reconstruction and capitalist prosperity. In East Berlin the dire end-results of Hitler's dream empire were still very evident, and perhaps some of the architectural skeletons had been left there deliberately by the regime in order to remind the locals what fate their nationalistic frenzy had led them to.

Later that afternoon our group was taking a walking tour through a "memorial park". There was a problem, however, with the statuary and plaques; all such exhibits were temporarily covered by wooden crates. This was, we discovered, not due to an effort to clean up, restore, polish, or protect the statues from work taking place elsewhere in the park, but a typical East German exercise in revising history according to current whims and ideological pressures, derived directly from its Soviet model in such cases. It seemed that the leadership of the East German Communist Party (which, at the time, had a nonce name indicating some specious coalition of the all of the older left-wing parties) was in a quandary about whose countenances, names and deeds were still acceptable during the late years of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization program. The head of state, Walter Ulbricht, was considered to be an "unreconstructed" Stalinist who managed to hang on to power during the ideological crises generated by Khrushchev's "secret" anti-Stalin speech at the Party's Twentieth Congress in 1956. But Ulbricht was poised for a fall, or at least for replacement, when he might be put out to pasture. Whoever else was jockeying for power at the time had made a collective

decision to shroud the World War Two memorials in the park until the situation had been clarified to the extent that some statues might stay while others would be removed or plaques with more suitable (politically corrected) text put in place. The whole business was a visible, three-dimensional example of communist practices in the discipline of revisionist history, the kind that had been made famous by several well-known instances of figures such as Trotsky, Yagoda, and Yezhov (the latter two were the infamous Lavrenty Berias's predecessors, secret-police bosses who ran the 1930s purges according to Stalin's scripts and were then conveniently executed) having been airbrushed out of photographs of public occasions in which they had appeared together with Stalin himself. (One of the local versions of this in Germany was a photograph showing leaders of the Weimar Republic's communist party, the old KPD, sharing a podium in Berlin with Goebbels in a joint NSDAP-KPD action directed against the Weimar Republic's government; after 1933 both sides had pressing reasons to airbrush its opponents out of the picture and then had to restore the original during the brief German-Russian alliance of 1939-41, to be followed by a second airbrushing with the commencement of Operation Barbarossa.) So we foreign travelers wandered through a statuary park in which neither a single statue nor a stone pedestal with an engraved name was visible to us.

After we had been in the park for half-an-hour or so, breaking up into pods as we roamed around, one of the African men with the group came trotting toward us, excited and yelling "Gromyko, Gromyko!" as he pointed over his shoulder toward a small crowd that was moving along one of the park's main sidewalks. We all walked over to the scene, hoping to get a glimpse of the USSR's Foreign Minister, who was presumably visiting his East German colleagues and imparting some friendly advice to them. However, it wasn't Gromyko, but none other than Richard Nixon who was at the center of the strolling group. The African had been confused by the physical similarity between the two men, especially the tight-wavy black hair that each of them had. Nixon was flanked by a few escorts and walked amid a bevy of East German newsmen, television reporters, and cameramen who were recording what was meant to be a "spontaneous" encounter between the agent of Capitalist Imperialism and representative workers of the local Socialist Paradise. And here the comedy was unfolding as we watched and listened (the East Germans were not known for their sense of humor, so the farce they were creating may not have been apparent to them; just as their hiding the questionable monuments was understood by most citizens to be a demonstration of their fear and anxiety, these "spontaneous" events were also understood to be staged for didactic purposes, in other words, sheer naked propaganda, and not very subtle at that).

Two "workers", allegedly a married couple, were grilling Nixon in very good English. They paid special attention to the "internal contradictions of Capitalism" and to the discrepancies between America's purported love of freedom, democracy, and equality and the obvious subordination of American's Negro citizens (at the time "black" was hardly used, and "Negro" was the term preferred in both polite private conversation and public discourse – "colored people" was its colloquial counterpart). This was especially apparent during the present summer, with the large civil-rights demonstrations and various events signaling racial turbulence taking place in the US (and being televised world-wide). The two "workers" (I will explain my skepticism about their status below) were much better informed on the details of current political life in America than either Steve or I, US citizens, were. Each question they set was a trap. Nixon handled himself reasonably well, sliding off verbal sallies like a good boxer, giving ambiguous answers, conceding injustice while noting heroic efforts to correct flaws in the system, and generally beating the drum that while not perfect, the American system and way of life were far superior to those created by competing philosophies. In other words he handled himself like a professional politician who knows how to minimize damage and maximize advantage. Because he was not making one of his appeals to the American public, but engaging in a fairly aggressive verbal exchange, he did not resort to the unctuous manner that he (and, to be fair, other American political leaders) often used in addressing his fellow citizens; he was sharper in his language and made no effort to be "likable", since he knew that the eventual television product would be edited and shaped for its own purposes by the East German authorities. Nixon had done this kind of thing before in the 1950s, when he was representing the US at a trade fair in Moscow and had engaged in a well-publicized and truly spontaneous exchange with Khrushchev; they really got into it and Nixon barked and wagged his forefinger in the Premier's face (this was the so-called "kitchen debate"). Perhaps Khrushchev's podium-banging with his shoe at the UN years later was a return gesture.

For those who remember 1963 the question "What was Richard Nixon doing in East Germany?" arises naturally. This was during the lowest trough of the man's political career. He had lost to Kennedy in a very

close presidential race in 1960. Then he had been beaten in California's 1962 gubernatorial race by Pat Brown, a Democratic Party fixture in that state and the father of the later "Zen" governor, Jerry Brown. After that defeat Nixon had given one of his petulant speeches to the assembled newspaper and television journalists, noting that they would no longer have "Dick Nixon to kick around", hinting at a conspiracy of the biased liberal press to gang up on him; this also hinted at a final retirement into private life, where he might make millions as a politically connected attorney in California, New York or Washington D.C. This was a false hint, even a feint, because after nursing his bruised ego for several months Nixon plunged right back into a whirlwind of political activity. He evaded any strong or lasting commitments to the Goldwater campaign of 1964 while he rebuilt his power bases within the Republican Party, which was chastened by Lyndon Johnson's unusually large margin of victory over Goldwater and therefore once again receptive to a possible Nixon candidacy in the future. In the summer of 1963 Nixon was apparently polishing his foreign policy credentials, and the trip to Berlin was part of a larger tour where he conversed with all those leaders of both the Western and Eastern Blocs whom he had encountered as Vice President during the 1950s. He was both feeling out the international situation (foreign policy was his addiction and his strong preference over dabbling in domestic matters) while showing the Republican Party his network of powerful international connections. When he was back in the US he spent these years attending party fund-raisers, slapping the backs of local and state Republican officials and organizers, oiling the machine, as it were.

So we watched, and Steve and I were favorably impressed by Nixon's performance (I myself had no particular political commitments at the time and was hardly interested in the subject; I don't know if Steve thought or felt the same way). And we, as well as Sam Aidoo, who was standing with us, enjoyed the comedy of pretense created by the two "workers". The dead give-away about their real identities was the perfection of their attire: workers' boots (but scuffless and polished), leather jackets, and workers' caps (of the totemic "Lenin bargeman's cap" variety); the man had a neatly-trimmed, professorial goatee and the woman a chic, short hair-cut. Their hands were smooth and clean, not smudged and horny. In other words they looked as if they had just left the stage after performing in a play by Bertolt Brecht (in a way the man looked like a "cleaned-up" Brecht; the playwright, while also goateed and given to wearing such workingman costumes, was known for his lack of personal hygiene and gave the impression of an alley cat who had recently lost a few fights). The duo were "noble workers" but thrice as articulate as their real-life prototypes (who had risen against the regime in a workers' riot in 1953 and been squashed without mercy) and infinitely better informed about American and international politics than most workers, including the white-collar variety. Their creators and stage-managers wished the world to believe that East German factory workers spent their spare time not only engaged in building socialism through community enterprises (which were in reality boring and often pointless mandatory activities) but also spent their evenings honing their foreign language skills and mastery of dialectical materialism. The pretense was preposterous and laughable. Real East German workers, like those from almost any other industrialized nation in the world at the time, preferred to drink beer, engage in inevitable family arguments over money and defective personalities, ogle and chase women (or vice-versa), watch sports or some other mindless form of entertainment, and generally grouse about the conditions of their lives. The performance of the faux workers who had been trained and prepped by some government ministry or agency was manifestly silly, but the seriousness with which such routine performances were cultivated by various governments at the time (and still – think of China's 2008 Olympic efforts in this respect) shows the low opinion of said governments about the mental capabilities of the ruled. The USA is not much different in this respect.

Meeting Nixon

When the media event dissolved Nixon was whisked away by his escorts to a waiting car, an expensive black Western sedan, not a flimsy product of the local automotive industry, which pumped out two-stroke Trabants with their skins of plied and creosote-soaked cardboard, rickety, noisy, smelly contraptions (today they are objects of "Ostalgia"). Steve and I decided to see if we might be able to speak with him, so we moved in the direction of the car. To tag ourselves as roving Americans we yelled something innocuous and hale-fellow-well-met, like "Hey, Mr. Nixon, good job!" That did the trick, and the circle of his protectors opened up and allowed us in. After shaking hands, Nixon started off with "It's really wonderful to run into fellow Americans in a place like this, especially after that ordeal with the press. By the way, boys, what are you doing here in East Berlin?" (This is not verbatim, but the gist of what he said.) We told him about the

exchange-student program that had sent us to Germany for the summer. “And which university is that?” he asked. “Princeton,” we answered. And then the man was off and running, doing what in retrospect I can only call a typical Nixon stunt, or perhaps feat is the better word in this case. I don’t know what his real opinion of our school was (he was often described as being contemptuous of those Ivy-League products who dominated the East-Coast wing of the old Republican establishment), but he proceeded to outline for us the history of our college and the signal role that many of its graduates had played in American political life – I remember that he mentioned James Madison and Woodrow Wilson, and that he didn’t mention Aaron Burr. Then he described the beauties of the campus and wound up with a brief set of comments about the school’s major athletic accomplishments over the years, citing the most recent year when it had won the lacrosse national championship. Just as the East German model workers knew more about American politics than Steve and I did at the time, Mr. Nixon knew more about our university than we did. His monologue, inflected by the nervous grimace-smile he never learned to transform into something less anxiety-ridden and more affable, comprised the “conversation”. We had just been given a version of the “Nixon treatment”, which was so valuable to him at Republican Party gatherings where he would recall details of meeting so-and-so at a fundraiser ten or twelve years before, perhaps remembering the name of the man’s wife and that he had two children. It always flattered the locals and bowled them over. And then, with an abrupt, “Nice meeting you, boys, and good luck” he was gone, ducking into the back seat of the car and moving on to the next engagement in his struggle to recapture a presidential aura. Steve and I, a little dazzled and with a freshly minted memory with which we might impress our families, friends, and acquaintances back home, rejoined our group. I am sure that at the time we both thought of Nixon as a man whose height of achievement had been in the recent past when he was a contentious and controversial Vice-President, not even beloved by many in his own party. The thought that he would ever rise again politically and actually attain the presidency did not pass through our minds, and in this we were not at all unusual; most had similarly misjudged the persistence of Dick Nixon.

A couple of days after this Steve and I went back into East Berlin on our own. We walked along the ruins of the Lindenallee, where we stopped at an historical museum exhibiting photographs, posters, and documentary materials about the "liberation" of Germany by the Russian army and the subsequent blossoming of the socialist society. Built around a kernel of truth (i.e., the Red Army had been the main vanquisher of the Third Reich, and the Russian people had made far more sacrifices than anyone else in combating the Nazis) the propaganda display was crude and flew in the face of Berliners’ experience of the Russian occupation not as a liberation but as an act of vengeance turned into an oppressive presence – an ugly fact of life -- although I am sure that there were still, in 1963, many old German socialists and communists who viewed events in a more positive light. A good part of the working-class population of Berlin had never been enthusiastic about Hitler but had been bullied into co-operation or at least political quiescence – for those people as well as for the war-weary former Hitler enthusiasts riding out the storm in a derelict city, the Russian takeover had to seem like being flipped from the frying pan into the fire. If you happened to have the wrong address in this part of the world, the period from 1933 to 1989 was toxic to even minimal notions of individual rights. That’s fifty-six years of oppression, the lifetime of many a man and woman.

Our laughter and bantering over the crudity of some of the propaganda irritated a middle-aged female attendant who wore a gray uniform with military shoulder-boards and scolded us for our impropriety. She seemed almost on the verge of tears (in her eyes we must have seemed ignorant, pampered youths, unaware of the suffering she and her co-religionists had endured in the name of building a better society, which was true enough; on the other hand, she might have been a Party functionary and hack of the rigid, punitive variety – we had no way of knowing). Upon leaving this exhibition we looked for Hitler’s bunker, but found it a no-trespassing zone in the middle of unrepaired streets that had become a sump for rainwater run-off. We went to the Pergamon Museum for an hour or two, awed by its spectacular reconstructed Hellenistic stairways, altars, and temples housed in a large neo-classical building. And, going in and out through Checkpoint Charlie we dealt with surly and suspicious border guards who fleeced us in a monetary exchange – we had to exchange West German marks (solid respectable coins) for East German marks (flimsy aluminum coins) at the exiguous and phony official rate as we entered and re-exchange our communist money at the (negatively) whopping black-market rate when leaving. While in East Berlin we ate a meal and had a beer or two, but people were reluctant to speak with us, probably assuming that they were under surveillance and might be reported for fraternizing with enemy agents of Capitalism. Together

our capitalist resources on that day amounted to about twenty dollars. Within five or six weeks we were back in school.

Afterthoughts

I may or may not ever see Steve again — I don't know what the future holds in that regard. But if I do run into him I will discuss our little Berlin adventure to see if his recollections square with mine. Years later in life I became what can be called a "Nixon-hater", not so much over the "Pentagon Papers" fiasco or the Watergate burglary, as over his continuing dishonesty about these matters and his attempt to royalize the Presidency, leaving a legacy that still bodes ill for our country as I see it. Under Nixon royalization consisted not only of attempts to expand and redefine accepted notions of "executive privilege", but was even extended to the outfitting of the White House's ceremonial military detachment with uniforms suitable for a Viennese operetta's cast, garb that was pretentious (and unwittingly comical) in a would-be democracy. Of course I don't hate him any more (if I ever did, since real hatred, the kind that motivates specific actions, seems to depend on a certain degree of intimacy). What would be the point? And I've read three or four Nixon biographies over the years and learned that he actually did have some good traits as a national leader in very specific cases and circumstances. I even sympathize with his churlish side, which was a reaction to being perceived as an outsider and as a man without style or cachet, uncomfortable in his own skin, the anti-Kennedy of his era in this respect. Nixon obviously carried many psychological burdens resulting from this perception, a perception that he sometimes shared gloomily with the public. The presidency itself was his revenge for a lifetime of perceived slights, and he lost it in a way almost suitable for a character in a Greek tragedy.

Historians are always re-evaluating our former presidents in the light of present predicaments and obsessions. In this age of cascading foreign-policy blunders and of a kind of adolescent national chest-thumping and solipsism based on a totally self-edifying but factually impoverished and irrational response to the events of September 11th, 2001, it will be very interesting to see how the historical reputation of our last Republican practitioner of good old-fashioned Realpolitik fares (at present the blandly mysterious Ronald Reagan seems to be the all-purpose icon of that party's several factions; perhaps Nixon will have his day again). This is probably the only light in which Nixon can be made even minimally attractive for many of us, although, if you think about his self-directed rebirth at the bottom of his sinusoidal career (that is, of "Nixon in Berlin in 1963", in the very shadow of Kennedy's oratorical triumph) you will find other qualities to admire. He may not have used them to his or our best advantage, but they were evident at the time.