

## A week in Berlin, August 2012

The triumphal Brandenburg Gate, topped with its chariot, horses and goddess of victory is a stirring image of Berlin. In John's slides from the nineteen-seventies it stands grey and sullen behind the grey dividing wall. But on a sunny morning at the end of August, with the tour parties milling around and men with rickshaws zipping themselves into stifling brown bear suits (presumably for photos with tourists), it looked less impressive.

Three other gateways struck us as more stunning symbols of the magnificent but transient power of empire. Entering the first hall of Berlin's Pergamon Museum, a broad flight of steps, twenty metres wide, sweeps dramatically up to the portico of the Pergamon Altar, excavated in the eighteen-seventies and -eighties in Turkey and reconstructed in the specially-designed museum. The sense of awe is enhanced as you climb the stairs, linger at the top, then pass between the columns to the inner court lined with friezes showing the life of Telephus, legendary founder of Pergamon. More splendour follows in the next room as you pass under the Market Gate from Miletus and encounter the blazing blue and golden yellow of the Ishtar Gate and processional way of Babylon; fragments of glazed tiles pieced together to show golden aurochs and dragons marching across the dark blue gateway while golden lions prowl the high blue processional way. The very height of this speculative and partial reconstruction made a more dramatic impact than their fellows, the dusty lions, bulls and dragons of Istanbul's museum.

We had arrived at Berlin's Hauptbahnhof late on Thursday afternoon, after setting out on the single-track railway line from St Dié to Strasbourg, then shuttling with bicycles, children and students on the busy little train which crosses the Rhine every hour to link with the efficient German network at Offenburg, where we picked up the sleek Interlaken-Berlin express. There had been a very good offer on first-class tickets, so we travelled this section in style, plied with free newspapers, small madeleine cakes and refreshing hand-wipes. Berlin station is now a stylish five-storey glass-sided edifice (even the trains run on two different levels) and it took a while to find the tourist office amongst all the shops and cafés; there a very helpful man (who retired from the fray, closing his position with a big sigh after answering all our requests) furnished us with a three-day museum pass, a booklet on museums, a couple of maps, advice on bus and train fares and where to catch the number 142 bus. Our hotel, the Adelante, was a recently-developed small block in a quiet street of flats, large kindergarten, evangelical church and corner bread-shop-cum-café in Mitte, formerly in East Berlin. That evening, as we strolled round the area, we steered by the gilded Moorish dome of the synagogue which glinted in the evening sunshine. It had survived the burning on Kristallnacht, but sadly not the allied bombing and, with a greatly diminished and impoverished Jewish community in East Berlin, was only reconstructed after the fall of the Berlin Wall. We stopped for a great (and cheap) meal at Dada Falafel restaurant, which also does a brisk over the counter trade, and that night had a very good jazz pianist/ singer.

The following day, we ignored the hotel breakfast and ate at the corner café used by workmen in dungarees, regulars with their dogs, and bikers in black leathers, as well as by tourists, where the “small” breakfast included ham, salami, cheese, salad garnish, rolls, butter, jam and a big mug of coffee. Then, armed with our list of fifty-seven museums we could visit over the next three days (it had to be consecutive days), we revelled in the splendours of the Pergamon Museum (finishing in the Islamic Art section), then skirted the baroque cathedral, crossed the river and a park, pausing to greet the sculpted figures of Marx and Engels, and visited the eight-hundred year old Nikolai Church in the restored and quaintified Nikolai Quarter. Back on Museum Island at the Neues Museum, my memories are less of ancient Egypt and the bust of Nefertiti than of the pernickety custodians obsessed with size and position of shoulder bags (correct position is nosebag style), the laments that the glories of Schliemann's Troy excavations are still in the hands of the Russians, and the flaking remains of nineteenth-century décor oddly incorporated into David Chipperfield's renovation. Next door, the temple-like Alte Nationalgalerie had equally fussy custodians (despite the fact it would be difficult to knock the large framed paintings off the wall with a bag slung carelessly over one shoulder) and a suite of rooms of Adolph Menzel paintings. That evening we ate at the Toca Rouge, a Chinese restaurant a few doors from our regular breakfast café.

On Saturday our museum trail led us further afield as we caught the S-bahn and then a bus to rediscover the Peruvian artefacts in the Ethnological Museum. John had visited an earlier museum building in West Berlin back in the seventies and returned home with some interesting pictures. The collection is now in a capacious modern building in the leafy suburb of Dahlen, but the Peruvian artefacts were poorly displayed with sparse information as to dates and provenance. And what had happened to the wonderful textiles? The attendant was not helpful. On the other hand, the Pacific collection and the African artefacts, mainly from the Congo and Cameroon, were dramatically presented (though are black windowless walls for the “dark” continent quite p.c.?). But we left disappointed by the pre-Incas and regretting the paucity of information in translation in such an internationally famous museum. John had to be revived by that Berlin speciality, the currywurst (pork sausage covered with ketchup and curry powder!), from a friendly stall by the bus stop. In comparison with the huge Ethnology building, the Brücke Museum in the woods two short bus rides away, featuring Expressionist artists, was bijoux, which was just as well as the current exhibits are mainly painted postcards.

The bus journey back to the centre took us via the Kurfürstendamm (with all its big shops like Oxford Street), where John remembered having seen the solitary bombed belfry tower of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche next to a new church. We had to search hard to find the old tower among the modern blocks as it is currently being restored and is encased by scaffolding and hoardings, while at ground level the previously deserted traffic island was thronging with shoppers, tourists and a sea of stalls promoting facilities and opportunities for the elderly.

Our attention shifted from issues facing the elderly to those of youth as, after a bus ride from the Zoological Gardens to Alexanderplatz, we got swept up in a noisy march of hundreds of black-shirted, arm-pumping young people along the Torstrasse. There was a carnival atmosphere in the afternoon sunshine and slogans on the lorries about Pussy Riot, the counter-culture and GEMA, the German performance rights organization, which is increasing music fees for clubs and events. Reaching our hotel off the Torstrasse we learned that we had been part of the Fuckparade, the annual techno demonstration against commercialisation and the investment groups who are buying up property where the clubs and cheap accommodation have flourished. With rents and prices rising fast in the former East Berlin as areas gentrify, the inhabitants are being forced out and the tourists are flocking in to the new hotels, cafés, boutiques and restaurants. The places we had enjoyed, not to mention our very presence, were clearly a Bad Thing.

On Sunday Torstrasse was peaceful and the only procession we encountered was a much quieter one of rain-caped cyclists who brought our bus to a halt near the Brandenburg Gate. We later, at traffic lights, saw a splendid double-decker bike (it must have been hazardous stopping where there was no handy resting/dismounting post). We had been to a very good surrealist exhibition in Charlottenburg at the Sammlung Scharf-Gerstenberg and also to see the Art Nouveau, Art Deco and Functional ceramics and furniture at the Bröhan Museum opposite. Disappointingly the Berggruen Museum was still closed for renovations, so we couldn't see the Picassos, Klees, Braques et al, so we went on to the Bauhaus Archive and then the Hamburger Bahnhof, where Andy Warhol's paintings seemed positively classical compared with offerings like Cy Twombly's or the photographs of boring blocks of flats which were dwarfed by the lofty proportions of the converted railway station. We emerged muttering unappreciatively like Grumpy Old Things, but cheered up over a hearty German Sunday dinner at Restauration Tuchlosky on the junction of Torstrasse and Tucholsky Strasse. Round the walls were photocopied newspaper cuttings, cartoons and theatre programmes about the Jewish satirist and critic of the Weimar republic, Kurt Tucholsky, who wrote books, essays, newspaper columns, and lyrics for cabaret songs, - and their calf liver in a rich sauce was the best ever.

On Monday we decided to explore further afield in Berlin in the hope of seeing a bit more of what life in the former east sector might have been like. We strolled north from our hotel to a preserved section of the Wall, in a stretch of no-man's land next to a busy tram route; behind it lay the church graveyard which parishioners from the west with the correct passes were allowed to visit, despite being separated from their church. A fading wall of photographs was a reminder of those who had died trying to cross the wall and there were detailed information panels. But, unexpectedly, my old memories of the news reports, the permanent dread created by the iron curtain, and the spy stories and films were more powerful than the remains themselves.

We really benefited that day from the freedom of day travel tickets. We caught

a tram from the wall, then the U-bahn overhead enticed us to follow its line as far north as our tickets permitted to Blankenburg. It ran at first between grim blocks of flats, but then everything got greener and we passed small plots like allotments with summer-houses; though the houses and gardens were so small, they looked a pleasant contrast to anonymous apartment life. After that we selected a line running south-west, passing a number of deserted railway roundhouses, till we reached Grünau, the last stop in zone B. Through the trees we could see the sparkle of the large lake which rejoices in the Harry Potterish name of Müggelsee. We hopped on a tram heading for the lakeside town of Köpenick at the confluence of the rivers Dahme and Spree, one (or both) of which the tram crossed to reach the old town centre and its attractive, tall, Baltic-gabled, brick houses. That mine of useless as well as useful information, Google, reveals that William Voigt, a jobless and previously convicted shoemaker, popularised Köpenick when, disguised as an officer of the imperial army, he occupied the city hall on October 16, 1906, arrested the mayor, took the city treasury and "*accidentally exposed the German subservience of this time*". Apparently theatre plays and films were made about this coup. Unaware of this, we failed to spot his statue as the tram rattled through. To complete the picture, here is another snippet from the same website: *As Berlin's washhouse, Köpenick casted its feathers together with other established industrial companies with more than 50,000 inhabitants before World War I and became the "Headquarter of Berlin's East"*.

Leaving Berlin's washhouse, our tram headed for Friedrichshagen and we continued for two stops on the S bahn to the lakeside resort of Wilhelmshagen. The town had probably been bustling with day-trippers in holiday mood over the hot, sunny weekend, but on a Monday it felt as desolate as Margate in winter. We just missed the afternoon boat trip round the lake, which was setting off from a jetty behind the brewery, so we headed back on the S bahn towards central Berlin and walked through the Neukoln area, along Karl Marx Strasse and over the Oberbaumbrücke with John pausing to photograph striking painted walls and the ornate brickwork of the bridge where even the bosses in the gothic cross-vaulting looked like illustrations of fables or folk-tales. We returned to our hotel by tram and in the evening, still having a transport ticket, ventured a little further afield (but only two bus stops) to a shared trestle table outside the popular Monsieur Vouong for his Vietnamese cooking.

It wasn't until our last day, Tuesday, that we made our way to the foot of the Brandenburg Gate. Of course the other great change for John in that area was the domination of the skyline by the new glass dome of the Reichstag. More sobering were the undulating alleys of plain slabs of the Holocaust Memorial, whose anonymity was a contrast to the small brass plaques in the pavements of Mitte which recalled by name the people who had lived there before their removal to the camps.

From Potsdammer Platz, possibly tantalised by the abandoned railway roundhouses glimpsed the previous day, we took the U-bahn down to Gleisdreieck, where huge brick factories once served by rail, canal boats, and

road now house the Technology Museum. We were keen to see their steam engines, carriages and railway architecture (and even furniture and crockery) in two bomb-damaged reconstructed semi-circular engine sheds, with a restored turntable outside. It included powerful sections on 'Railways and the swastika', 'Armaments', 'War and the railways', and 'By train to the death camps'. It was also interesting, as our hotel was on Borsigstrasse, to see the earlier section on August Borsig and his locomotives. Although the road transport collection and the brewery were closed, there were so many other aspects of technology to explore. In the factory and office building once used by a pioneering refrigeration equipment company (and complete with spiral staircase for horses and stables for sick horses) we examined pre WWII mechanical and post-WWII electromechanical and electronic Zuse computers and telecommunications, radios, and gramophones; behind the engine sheds there was a photographic equipment display; and in a high modern extension, we cast a look over the shipping, aviation and space exhibits (including some battered rusting fighter planes which looked as if they had only just been pulled out of the river). And if you have ever wondered about the best method of converting your hard cardboard into 1920s style suitcases, this museum provides the answer with its historical machinery and demonstrations of punching, crimping and bending, pressing, nailing, riveting and finishing. And there was still much that we did not see - pharmaceuticals, paper-making, film-making.....

That last evening we walked up to the top of our road intending to eat at the recommended Honigmond hotel, once a meeting place for political opponents of the East German regime (including pastors from the Calvary Church opposite whose rousing bells we heard every day at 4 o'clock) and frequently closed by the Stasi. However, having seen the plates of food already being eaten by customers, we decided to return to the Tucholsky. This time we sat outside, looking down Tucholsky Strasse to the dome of the synagogue, and it seemed very appropriate, given how much railways had featured during the week, that right below our feet the S1, S2 and S25 trains continued to rumble.

It had been a stimulating week, we agreed the following morning, as we sat in the sunshine outside the Hauptbahnhof glass palace waiting for our train back to Entre-deux-Eaux.