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How to celebrate the fall of the wall

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NCR Today

With all the coverage of the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, I tried to think of a way to commemorate this historic, history-changing event that happened 20 years ago. A generation ago. Anyone 30 years old and younger probably has no emotional link with images of a bunch of young people dancing while they tore down a far away wall covered in graffiti.

I grew up under the Red Menace; like many others reading this blog. I imagine you, too, practiced what to do should the sirens signal an attack. My dad started digging a bomb shelter in the backyard of our house in San Diego but as the Cuban Missile crisis ebbed, he decided to use the five gallon water jugs he bought for storage for home brew instead. How quickly we forget.

Although we eventually ate our way through the Spam and canned ranch-style beans, I can never forget the fear of laying in my bed at night when planes would fly over or cringing every Monday at noon at school when the civil defense sirens went off and we would crouch under our desks. But after a while the sirens became white noise and then faded away. We lived in fear in the early 1960s.

In 1995, while going to school in London, I had the opportunity to go to the Berlin Film Festival. On the last day I made a pilgrimage to former East Berlin. I walked from the Kurfürstendamm (near the Berlin Zoo in the former West Berlin) all the way across what used to be no man's land along the Unter den Linden, about three miles. I walked up to and through the Brandenburg Gate. I bought a piece of the Wall (and later found out it may not have been) from one of the tables selling former Stassi and Soviet uniforms, caps, and other souvenirs. The woman told me she was originally from Cuba, so we communicated in Spanish. She said she had been sent to East Germany to serve in the military during the Cold War and just stayed after the Wall came down. Someone told me that this, too, may not have been true. Everybody was just trying to make a dime.

I returned to Berlin in 2003 as a member of the ecumenical jury for the Berlin Film Festival. Now the festival had moved to the Potsdamer Platz in the former East Berlin; very modern and posh. At the end of festival I was able to visit the museum at the infamous Checkpoint Charlie, filled with artifacts from escapes and attempted escapes from the East to West Berlin (including the actual hand-made hot air balloon depicted in the 1981 film "Night Crossing") . The films at the festival that year were uneven, but the one I liked the best was "Good-Bye Lenin!" directed by Wolfgang Becker.

At the time I called "Good Bye Lenin!" a comedy with "heart humor and humanity" (see my full review in **St. Anthony Messenger**). At the time, it was one of Germany's most commercially successful films ever.

Briefly, a fervent East German single mother sees her son arrested while helping to tear down the wall and has a heart attack. Weeks later, when she is ready to come home, the doctor tells her son, Alex, and daughter Ariane, that their mother needs complete rest; she must not become upset. Realizing their world had changed completely, Alex is determined to recreate their home as his mother expected, including finding her favorite brand of pickles and paying former Communist Youth members to sing old patriotic songs to her. This lovely film that deals with the reunification of the two Germany's through the experience of a family, is hilarious and touching, even with subtitles.

A more recent film, and 2006 Academy Award winner for Best Foreign Language Film, is Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's "The Lives of Others." In 1984 a Stassi agent, Gerd Weisler, is assigned to spy on a playwright and his girlfriend so the minister of culture can have a reason to arrest the playwright and get the girl. As Weisler listens into their daily lives he is transformed by music and the life and integrity of an artist. (You can read my brief review [here](#).)

Both of these films are about the fall of the Berlin Wall and worth the watch. They are the products of the artists' reflection on their German history and what it means.

"The Lives of Others" is one of my top ten favorite films of all time.

For oldsters with a wry -- but wise -- sense of humor, you can revisit the past by watching once again, Stanley Kubrick's 1964 anti-war post-Cuban missile crisis "Dr. Strangelove: or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb." Though not about Berlin, it is about the Cold War.

The Berlin Wall is gone but the bomb and threat of nuclear war are with us still. The map of Europe has been redrawn once again. We are still at war, the world is at war (even if news conglomerates choose not to cover the more than 30 conflicts going on today), and new walls continue to be built. I hope I will be around to see the wall between Israel and Palestine as well as the wall between the United States and Mexico come down. I pray the peace that began with the fall of the wall in Berlin 1989 will continue to be heard around the world. I hope filmmakers will continue to make thoughtful films that can transform not only the protagonists, but citizen audiences as well.

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If you want to celebrate the fall of the wall, see one of these films, remember, and do something to make peace.

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