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## View from the East

Jens G. Reich

In November 1989, the inhabitants of East Berlin rushed to the huge concrete wall that for 28 years had separated East from West in Berlin. The border guards let the people peacefully pass in a triumphant march into West Berlin. The opening of the Berlin Wall—symbol of the chasm between the Eastern and Western political superstructures worldwide—triggered the toppling of communist rule. After the first free election since 1932, the new government led East Germany into accession to the Federal Republic of (West) Germany.

Today, 10 years later, one may reflect on what these events brought for the science community of East Germany. At first, the societal and political decay of the country caused the complete dissolution of its scientific structure. The initial fundamental and difficult transition deeply affected the professional biographies of several hundred thousand people in the universities and research centers. Nearly all applied scientific and engineering research was halted for economic reasons, and the Academy of Sciences (responsible for about two-thirds of the fundamental research) was formally dissolved by the unification treaty. The universities were evaluated and restructured according to scientific, administrative, and political criteria. Many scientists, particularly those in a more advanced stage of their career, had to reapply for their own positions. A considerable number, some very talented, left the country. Others went into other professions or into unemployment and early retirement. It is difficult to be precise, but my estimate is that more than 50% of my former colleagues have left science. As a rule, applicants were not unfairly treated, at least according to Western standards of competition. However, they often could not overcome the hurdles that faced a scientist from the former Eastern Block countries. Insufficient fluency in the English language was a major obstacle for people whose first foreign language at school and university had been Russian. Lack of personal communication had precluded the chance to establish oneself internationally and to present one's ideas and results to the worldwide community. Outmoded equipment often restricted scientists to less advanced research projects. Hard work under unfavorable conditions had produced much solid scientific work, but it could not pretend to be first class by worldwide standards. Applicants from the West competing for a position could usually produce the decisive assets: publications in the top English-language journals, reputation and personal acquaintance in the network of top names in the discipline, and experience in fields in vogue in the West but not necessarily so in the East. Although I was lucky because my field of bioinformatics was just starting to become important, the hardship of many of my colleagues was the bitterest part of the story.

There is a brighter chapter. Several institutes with high standards were maintained or have been reopened. The Gatersleben Institute of Plant Genetics and Crop Plant Research, with its precious collection of seeds and the pertinent database and expertise, is a case in point; likewise the Max Delbrück Center, of Kaiser Wilhelm tradition reaching back into the 1920s and a gem of the Academy of Sciences of the German Democratic Republic. It was reopened as a center of molecular medicine and clinical research. Other big institutes were newly founded by research bodies of the Federal Republic: the Helmholtz Community, Max Planck Society, and Leibniz Foundation. These institutes and the scientific faculties of the universities received enormous financial support from the Bonn government. Modern equipment and infrastructure were installed, and it is now possible to do world-class research in East Germany. The first generation of leaders came from outside; mainly, but not exclusively, from West Germany. Now, however, the younger cohorts of postgraduates and postdoctoral fellows speak a chaotic mix of German dialects, and a growing number of very bright women and men from other countries have arrived. My dream is that the scientific communities of the countries of the former socialist block, which were so heavily hit by the global transformation since 1989, may soon join us again, this time in the European Union, and contribute strongly to our common endeavor.

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