

David A. Bell

Unleavable Berlin



Born April 24, 1947 in London. B.A. in Mental and Moral Science, Trinity College Dublin, 1970. Ph.D. in Philosophy, McMaster University, Canada, 1975. Lecturer, then Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, Sheffield University, 1976-1990. Visiting Professor of Philosophy in the University of Leuven, 1987, the University of Keele, 1993-1996, and the University of Munich, 1994. Radcliffe Research Fellow, 1986-87; Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellow, Berlin, 1988. British Academy Research Reader, 1993-94. Presently Professor of Philosophy, Sheffield University. Books: *Frege's Theory of Judgement* (Clarendon Press, 1979). *Edmund Husserl* (Routledge, 1990). *The Analytic Tradition: Meaning, Thought, and Knowledge* (edited with N. Cooper: Blackwell, 1990). *Wissenschaft und Subjektivität: Der Wiener Kreis und die Philosophie des 20. Jahrhunderts* (edited with W. Vossenkuhl: Akademie Verlag, 1993). — Address: Department of Philosophy, Sheffield University, GB-Sheffield S10 2TN.

The running head under which the present words appear is '*Arbeitsberichte*' – which is unfortunate, or at least in this case, inaccurate. For, although I'm quite as susceptible as the next person to the illusion that my work is of immense and lasting importance, and although I'm usually more than happy to report on it, at length, and to absolutely anyone who'll listen, it nevertheless strikes me that to indulge these tendencies here would be inappropriate. Thinking back over the last ten months at the Wissenschaftskolleg and, even more, trying to predict what memories and impressions will remain with me months and years from now, one thing is clear: my time here has been dominated by one personality, with whom I have formed an intimate and (I predict) life-long relation, and whom I shall find it very hard to leave, when I eventually return home to my wife and family in England. My research went well; the facilities provided by the Wissenschaftskolleg were breath-taking; the other fellows were a constant source of intellectual stimulation, personal support, and extremely enjoyable company — but it is Berlin itself that has got under my skin. Berlin, I now find, comes dangerously close to being unleavable.

This is surprising. On any objective evaluation, and certainly compared with other great European cities like Florence, Venice, Paris, or Prague, Berlin must surely be judged to be a sprawling, centreless, often ugly conurbation, too cold in winter, too hot and humid in summer, and too unfriendly all year round. At the moment, moreover, it seems intent on turning itself into the world's largest building site. And yet, as I sit in a café in Prenzlauer Berg, say, or visit one of the tiny independent cinemas in Friedrichshain, explore the Gemäldegalerie in Dahlem, take the S-Bahn out to Potsdam, or mostly just sit in my office and work, I'm acutely aware that *this is Berlin*, and that there's nowhere I'd rather be.

I first set foot in Berlin in 1964, when at the impressionable age of seventeen I spent a month roaming what was still, in large parts, a ruined city. This was the Berlin of Len Deighton and John le Carré; Checkpoint Charlie and the Tränenpalast were genuinely frightening places; and I was not alone in feeling that, if there was going to be a third world war, this was probably where it would ignite. West Berlin was febrile, and utterly addictive. East Berlin, as I remember it now, was the stuff of nightmares — though not for that reason any less addictive. Emerging from the Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse at night, and walking in almost pitch blackness through deserted streets, past the Dom and Unter den Linden to the Platz der Akademie (now the Gendarmenmarkt) was a threatening and disturbing experience. In those days, the Deutscher Dom, the French Cathedral, and the buildings round the Gendarmenmarkt were burned-out shells, with surprisingly mature trees growing in the rubble. Spiritual desolation and political oppression seemed to take palpable shape in that ruined landscape.

How different things are now. I revisited the Tränenpalast — the Palace of Tears, the notorious checkpoint where visitors from the West could, but East Berliners could never, cross over into another world. It's now a jazz club, and rather a good one. Prenzlauer Berg has turned into a young, lively, even sophisticated district: the remaining signs of decay and neglect (and they won't remain for long) now strike one, not as nightmarish and hopeless, but as charming evidence of a faded glory. And these days one is free to leave West Berlin and visit the surrounding countryside and towns. Some of my happiest times have been spent exploring previously inaccessible places like Potsdam, Neuruppin, and Wittenberg.

The Wissenschaftskolleg itself has provided an almost ideal environment in which to work, and during my stay I have accumulated substantial debts of gratitude. In particular I would like to thank Andrea Friedrich, Barbara Sanders, and Christine von Arnim for making my stay, and that of my family, not only trouble-free, but positively enjoyable. The

staff of the Library were marvellous, and obtained whatever materials I requested — no matter how obscure — virtually immediately. My thanks go also to Herr Riedel, for greatly appreciated advice about, and practical help with, dysfunctional cars, boats, bicycles, plumbing, and the like.

I have had an extraordinarily enjoyable, productive, and valuable time in Berlin. And I shall be sorry to leave — if, indeed, I ever manage to drag myself away.