

I was born in Sochos, near Thessaloniki and I also finished grammar school there. I made an early decision to leave Greece and go to Germany. Why Germany? Well, that's a strange story. In 1943, when I was five years old, my family moved about 20 kilometres further south of Sochos to Lake Volvi. My father worked as a fisherman there and in the evenings we would hang around the lake shore. On the opposite shore there was a German army base where the soldiers sang in the evenings.¹ As children we would listen to them, quietly soaking it all up and this is how the perception of Germany became something mystical to me in my innocence. In the fifties, when I was fourteen, I decided that I would go and study in Germany when I had finished grammar school. In 1964 I came to Germany and applied to study, but there were considerable difficulties. Greek grammar school qualifications were not equivalent to those of German grammar schools and because the universities had reservations about this, my applications were turned down. But then there was a good opportunity to become a social worker – for the family members of Greeks, who had come to Germany as migrant workers. There was a suggestion that I go to West Berlin² which I found appealing and I came to Berlin in July 1966, to work as a social worker for the social welfare organisation of the Evangelical Church in Steglitz. I saw my job as a vocation rather than work and said to myself, “You can do more than that which is expected of you in your eight hour shift.”

In those days West Berlin was a walled “island”, I did not really notice it at the beginning, but I gradually became aware of how constricted things were. At weekends I would sometimes sense that people were behaving like an aggressive, restless swarm of bees. I found it odd at first, but I grew used to it over time. It was difficult to imagine that on the other side of the Wall something else existed. This something else was East Berlin,³ or the German Democratic Republic⁴ and there lay a particular problem for the Greeks, because Greece had always refused to recognise the GDR.⁵ However the Greeks who lived in West Berlin liked to go over the border to East Berlin on weekends. Having fun was cheap over there and they could also make friends. Some Greeks had met women and had children with them there, thus founding “legal-illegal” families, but because there were no diplomatic relations Greece could neither officially intervene in conflict situations, nor concern itself with Greek nationals in East Berlin. We got news sometimes that some relative had not returned from a visit to East Berlin. The GDR authorities never answered any questions about missing persons. Supposedly they did not know where the person had ended up. Then it was me who, through a lawyer in East Berlin, had to shed light on things.

The “island” situation also became a problem for the employers of Greeks in West Berlin whenever a telegram arrived from Greece for a Greek employee, asking that they come to Greece as fast as possible, because a child, a father, a mother was ill. In those days you had to travel through the GDR to get from the “island” of West Berlin to Munich and that was impossible without a transit visa. The Greek in question therefore had to go to the consular department of foreign affairs in East Berlin to apply for a transit visa, but if the person concerned could not speak

¹ The occupation of Greece by German troops began in April 1941:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Axis_occupation_of_Greece

² *Gastarbeiter* – Guest workers: Were actively encouraged to move to West Berlin during the 1960's: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gastarbeiter>

³ East Berlin: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Berlin

⁴ German Democratic Republic :
http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Democratic_Republic

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hallstein_Doctrine

German, much less fill out the necessary forms, it became quite a drama. This created a secondary duty for me. When, shall we say, Telefunken, Siemens or Osram⁶, received a telephone call saying that it is imperative that Mrs. So and So comes to Greece, I would be asked to speak to the lady, take her passport, travel to East Berlin and apply for a transit visa.

I took on these tasks in East Berlin as an addition to what was my "actual" job. I was essentially responsible for advising and offering support to Greek families and their children, or also offering advice to individual Greeks who had any kind of problem. The work in East Berlin was more or less voluntary, but I considered it my duty to also solve such matters, to the advantage of my countrymen.

On May 15th 1970 I travelled to East Berlin yet again, to apply for a transit visa for a married Greek couple, who wanted to travel to Greece that same day. After I had finished in the consular department I was literally assaulted by two gangs who stopped in front of me in two cars. After checking me briefly they took me to Hohenschönhausen,⁷ the famous, notorious remand prison. There the tragedy began. I was accused of being a spy for the western secret services, not a social worker and was supposed to state my position on this. I found it odd, amusing and tragic at first. Then I told myself that these people obviously didn't know what they wanted, or with whom they were dealing. Because they did not want to believe me I was tormented in that notorious remand prison for two years and after those two years I was sentenced to twelve years imprisonment.

Of course everyone will ask themselves how it came to this. In 1967 a Greek who had a common-law wife and a child in East Berlin, but lived and worked in West Berlin came to me. At some point he was involved in a fight there and somebody from the opposing side was badly injured. Court proceedings were initiated against him. Immigration laws clearly stated that a foreigner who broke the law, or committed an offence could be deported or expelled and this was the case with him. The second problem was that his work permit had also been revoked. He had been left hanging in mid-air, and so came to me for counselling. We talked about his situation and then I sought ways of helping him. To start with we went to the relevant job centre in Müllerstrasse and spoke with the management there. They realised that there had been a mistake and gave him back his work permit. Then things continued with the other court proceeding, concerning the residency permit. I could never have imagined however that this pleasant man was an unofficial Stasi informant⁸. It is strange that although I went to Müllerstrasse with him on January 19th '67, he did not give in his first report until January 23rd. The question remains open to me whether he was already a Stasi informer or not and came to me under Stasi orders. In any case, after having had access to my Stasi files, I now know that this first report provided the basic material which started the whole tragedy.

During this period, by sheer coincidence, another Greek, who had been imprisoned in the GDR, then released and deported to West Berlin, came to me. He ended up in the Marienfelder Allee refugee centre⁹. Because he was in difficulties he came to counselling with us and we gave him financial support. He had a life companion, who had originally come from East Berlin, and we got to know her. By "we" I mean my wife too, as a friendly relationship developed between the Greek, his partner and us.

⁶ Telefunken, Siemens, Osram: West Berlin industries.

⁷ Hohenschönhausen: Notorious State Security remand prison in East Berlin: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin-Hohensch%C3%B6nhausen_Memorial

⁸ STASI: East Germany's State Security Service: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stasi>

⁹ Marienfelde Refugee Centre: <http://www.notaufnahmelager-berlin.de/en/>

One evening the Greek's partner asked me if it would be possible - as I travel to East Berlin anyway - to visit her daughter there sometime. That is to say she had two daughters who lived in East Berlin. I said "actually, why not". We did indeed agree to visit the daughter who lived at 13 Göhrener Strasse¹⁰. That was to become a significant address. I was there for the first time in August '67 and the daughter was pleased to hear news of her mother. An acquaintanceship developed and the daughter invited us to her fiancée's birthday in December '67. On this occasion I was there with my wife. I never imagined that we were already under Stasi surveillance at the time. They had set up an observation post from 18:30, when we entered the building at 13 Göhrener Strasse, until 2 am. However, whoever had been given this task be it knowingly or unknowingly, got the flat and the people mixed up. The family we knew lived on the ground floor of the block in Göhrener Strasse 13 and their apartment was at the back of the building, only accessible by going through the building's courtyard. The person who appeared in these surveillance reports – and this is where the second part of the story begins – lived with her husband at the front of the building. They were both Stasi employees. The wife was a corporal and the husband was an officer. Incidentally, I did not know that the entire quarter was the property of the Ministry of State Security. In all the surveillance reports covering my subsequent visits to the daughter, the name of the woman at the front of the house appears instead of hers. In the end this Stasi employee was arrested as a suspected spy and allegedly I had recruited her.

That was the problem in my interrogation and that is why they tormented me cruelly. Nobody wanted to believe that I had never seen this woman in my life. Nobody believed me. Why? Because under interrogation this woman broke down relatively quickly and confessed that I supposedly visited her with my family and that she had been involved with me and so forth. I saw this woman for the first time at an identity parade. I tried to make people aware that something was wrong with her. It was futile. She insisted that she knew me. She was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment and I to 12 years. Then in 1982 she wrote to Mielke,¹¹ her head boss and explained that everything she had previously alleged had been a lie, because she could not withstand the pressure that had been put on her and had only agreed with everything for that reason. Mielke subsequently called a special commission into being to examine the case again; it reached the conclusion that all those who had dealt with the case were, to put it lightly, idiots. Some of them were suspended from duty. The woman was rehabilitated, promoted to lieutenant and received compensation of 80,000 GDR marks. Neither the GDR government, the Ministry of State Security, the State Attorney or the lawyer ever had the decency to apologise to me for their mistake however – this they never did. I was not released until May 26th 1976. I was bought free by the West after 6 years¹². During those years the social welfare organisation did everything possible to win me my freedom, but the Stasi was a law unto itself. Nobody could get to them. Nobody. Until the bitter end.

In 2000, long after the Wall had fallen, the department of public prosecution in Berlin instituted legal proceedings against the military judges and the military prosecutor accusing them of perverting the course of justice. In his statement the military prosecutor said that he had not known that the woman had been rehabilitated and

¹⁰ Göhrener Strasse: Street in the East Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg

¹¹ Erich Mielke: Head of the Ministry of State Security in the GDR from 1957 until 1989: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erich_Mielke

¹² The freedom of political prisoners in East Germany was regularly "bought" by the West German government: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inner_German_border

that had he known this he would have insisted that I should also be officially absolved. He also said that the Stasi apparatus had been “a thing unto itself”... This was confirmed by the final reports of '82 which I read. It said that everything should be kept secret, because it was ultimately all about provocation by western intelligence services and to speak of this would be strictly forbidden.

When I think of the amount of money they invested in this nonsense – they set up a delegation which went to Bulgaria three times to speak to colleagues there. Somebody, who was in contact with my compatriots, was then sent from Bulgaria to Sochos and then with their help he got into my parent's house and found my commission paper, which was then copied and used as incriminating evidence against me in the GDR. You see, only those who were anti-communists could become officers in the Greek army. I was anti-communist, because as a child in Sochos I had lived through the civil war which was instigated by the communists.¹³ This civil war was terrible. After every battle they placed the heads of unlucky ones in a kiosk. It was horrendous. You cannot imagine anything more horrendous. Corpses were thrown under a plane tree, on show to the townsfolk who passed by. That is why I hated communism in those days. They knew that, I made no secret of it. Thanks to the tireless efforts of the Evangelical Church's social welfare organisation however I was released at last in 1976. All efforts to free me before 1974 had failed, because there were no diplomatic relations between Greece and the GDR everything was seen as interference in internal affairs. Official diplomatic relations between Greece and the DDR only became possible in 1974, when the military dictatorship¹⁴ in Greece was wiped out and Greece had officially recognised the GDR¹⁵ The commencement of diplomatic relations also heralded the arrival of an official Greek representative in East Berlin and this representative visited me. For six long years nobody had visited me.

In spite of everything I love Berlin. That is not exaggerated. That puzzles not only many a person in Greece, but even my wife. My wife was convinced that after my release I would say that we should pack and go somewhere else. Even the evangelical social welfare organisation was taken aback when I said I wanted to start again, there where I had left off; working with Greeks. Anyway in 1976 I started counselling Greeks again. Maybe it was good psychotherapy for me. That is how I explain it to myself these days. I got over it all relatively well. When you have experienced something like that many fears remain and you develop a kind of persecution complex. It is not very easy, but as I said, being occupied with the Greeks was good for me. The Evangelical welfare organisation ran a facility in Steglitz,¹⁶ known as the Greek leisure centre. I took over its management which caused problems with my fellow Greeks, because I insisted on making this facility attractive to non-Greeks as well, particularly Germans. At first there were protests and there was fear, but from 1980 it began to develop into a meeting point for Greeks and Germans.

How do you find a direction in life? I think primarily everyone should take a serious look at themselves and determine to what extent they are open to demagoguery and

¹³ Greek Civil War 1946-1949: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/244553/Greek-Civil-War>

¹⁴ Greece was ruled by a military dictatorship from 1967 until 1974: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_military_junta_of_1967%E2%80%9374

¹⁵ The 1972 Basic Treaty (*Grundlagenvertrag*) regulated the mutual recognition of the two German States, FRG and GDR. http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=172

¹⁶ Steglitz: A borough of West Berlin

ascertain to what extent they are capable of seeing the difference between demagoguery and shall we say honesty and objectivity. I am convinced that if you are capable of forming an independent opinion you will not fall into any demagogues' trap. Demagoguery is to me the most dangerous thing that can happen to a person, society or a people. If you look back today and ask yourself how it came to the Second World War then you will realise that it could only happen because demagoguery was booming. And to my mind because the masses were too lazy to exert themselves a bit, analyse the available information and get to grips with it. They were too idle to build their own independent and perhaps uncomfortable opinions.

I come now to the concept of Greek democracy¹⁷. The term democracy really did originate there, but what did this democracy in ancient Athens allow itself? It was supported by informers, it sentenced a man to death who neither wanted to bring down, nor change the system, but merely because he had certain ideas which he wanted to impart to the young – we are speaking of Sokrates. Is this a feature of democracy? That democracy generated an apparatus in which anyone could inform on and then denounce anyone else. Without much examination they consciously encouraged denunciation and it worked well. What came out of this democracy? A thirty year war between Athens and Sparta and as if that wasn't enough they then even sought help from the Roman Legions, so that Greece ceased to exist in the second century BC – taking its democracy to the grave with it.

As democrats we must ensure that nobody is able to seize enough power to rule over us. That means we must stay aware and critical, so that we cannot be caught by a demagogues web or slogans. And we must never forget that life is something unique and that it is worth experiencing it fully, without outside influences! I will now quote Goethe. I think he said it in Faust: "Of freedom and of life, he only is deserving who everyday must conquer them anew." Life is indeed a permanent fight, but it is worth it. Life itself has many more interesting things to offer than anything a consumer society wants to sell us.

Changes in society are basically dependant on individual changes. If a human being, this cell of society, is not prepared to change, how can this body, known as society, be changed? As far as I can see if the cell is diseased then the body is also diseased. If an individual, if the members of a society do not function properly, then the society cannot function properly either. That is to me an interaction. You cannot say: "It's the state's fault. The state should..." No, each of us, young or old must make sure that he does something himself. That he changes something within himself first.

The era of individualism is over for our society. We are living in an age that requires collective effort. The individual must ask himself what his purpose is in society. If you ask yourself this question seriously a process of contemplation begins and a new attitude emerges; then at some point you can say: "I feel that I am a part of the society that I live in and because of that I take on a portion of the responsibility for this society."

¹⁷ Athenian Democracy: http://www.ancient.eu/Athenian_Democracy/