DEMYSTIFYING THE NOTION, “THE WEST IS BETTER”: A GERMAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

I began my project in 2004 as an oral history project, involving four German women, with the purpose of finding out what motivated them either to flee East Germany before the construction of the Berlin Wall or stay. Five years later I wished to revive my project and interview all four women again, but with another purpose in mind. What had started out as a desire to understand my own family’s past turned into a desire to gain a better idea of the complexity of the notion, “the West is better,” and, therefore, an even better understanding of what moved a people across dangerous borders.

In this thesis I examine what the idea, “the West is better,” meant to real individuals, who chose a life in the West either before the construction of the Wall on August 13, 1961 or in the 1980s before the fall of the Wall. I examine how this notion applied to their experiences specifically, the GDR-refugees’ contribution to the creation and perpetuation of this idea, and how this concept has affected the German people since 1949.

The notion, “the West is better,” assumed much mythical character during the existence of the GDR, which it largely has not shed. This is apparent in the manner, in which it is still often expressed: as an idea whose origins can be found in nature, not in history, and one that often goes unexplained. Using Roland Barthes’ ideas on myth, I was able to spot mythical elements of the belief, “the West is better.” My interviewees’ narratives challenge many commonly perceived associations with this notion. A primary thread throughout this thesis is a discussion of the complexity of myth as well as the complexity of oral history.
“Any life story, written or oral, more or less dramatically, is in one sense a personal mythology, a self-justification.”

-- Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson
I dedicate this thesis to my German Großeltern for fleeing to West Germany and raising my mother there and to my American grandmother, who consistently encouraged me to finish this project while she was recovering from hip surgery. Two of them are no longer among us and my German Oma has lost her memories to Alzheimer’s. May I never forget the life stories they shared with me while they were still able.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Christina Guenther for seeing potential in the new ideas I had for a former project of mine, for sharing her great insights with me, and for her meticulous and prompt proofreading. I also wish to express my deep gratitude to my interviewees, without whom this project never would have been possible. Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their unwavering support of my education and for encouraging me and my sister to be citizens of the world with fluid national identities.
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INTRODUCTION

In December 1960, just months before the Berlin Wall was constructed, my grandparents told my mother, who was at that time a mere eleven years old, to go with her grandparents to the train station and meet them in a train headed for Berlin. The plan was to fly out of West Berlin to West Germany. Whereas the preparations which had been carried out in the months prior to departure had had to be made secretly, for fleeing East Germany was dangerous and could lead to imprisonment,\(^1\) the journey itself was to any outsider a regular one. However, underneath my family’s stoic facial expressions lay a web of conflicting emotions: fear, hope, suspense and sadness. Just before boarding the train my mother said goodbye to her grandparents; she did not know if she would ever see them again. Not only did my mother and her parents leave all family members, friends, and personal belongings behind, they said goodbye to their entire past and the homeland \((\text{Heimat})\) of their ancestors. This is the story my mother told me as a child.

My first conscious encounter with the subject of a divided Germany was watching the fall of the Berlin Wall on the German news in 1989. This moment was especially powerful because my mother wept tears of joy. The borders opened, and the following year I travelled with my family, including my grandparents, to East Germany to see the places where my grandparents used to live. I remember thinking that this Germany was

\(^1\) “The East German government, mindful of the manpower drain, made ‘fleeing the Republic’ a severe crime; those caught in the act were punished with well-publicized long prison sentences” (Pinson 573).

According to Falco Werkentin: “Two to three-thousand people were arrested on a yearly basis since the latter part of the 1950s for attempting to leave the GDR without permission” [“Allein wegen des Versuchs, ohne Genehmigung die DDR zu verlassen, kamen seit Ende der fünfziger Jahre jährlich zwischen 2.000 und 3.000 Menschen in Haft”] (my translation Mayer 79).
different from the Germany I had grown up in. To me it seemed run down. It was around that time that my mother began to relate to me and my sister her memories of the childhood spent in the German Democratic Republic (referred to henceforth in this study as the GDR) and of the traumatic experience of fleeing her homeland.

I. BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL COMPONENT

It was not until 2004 that I began to research how and why GDR citizens fled to the West before the Berlin Wall was built in 1961. I wanted to hear more first-hand accounts in person, so I decided to conduct interviews with individuals to whom I had ready access. In that year I interviewed four German women, relatives and family friends. Two of these women fled East Germany before the Wall was built, and two of them stayed in the GDR. The two who had stayed in the GDR came to West Germany in the 1980s and have remained there ever since. My initial main goal in conducting the interviews was to find out the reasons why each of these women decided either to stay in the GDR or flee. In the case of those who fled, I wanted to hear the stories of the flight. Moreover, I was interested in what they considered to be the GDR’s positive and negative aspects, their impressions of West Germany at the time, and how each woman felt about her decision in hindsight.

Five years later, my plan to continue with this project and interview all of the women again was motivated by the fact that in 2009 Germany celebrated the twenty-year anniversary of the fall of the Wall, and anything and everything surrounding the GDR, i.e. the fall of the Wall and reunification, was a hot topic in the media for months. In

\[\text{\footnotesize\ref{2}}\]

A year later the 20th anniversary of reunification was similarly treated in the media: “The 20th anniversary of reunification was, as expected, actively and elaborately
many ways the media coverage of this monumental anniversary was as I would have expected it to be: a lot of airtime, weeks in fact, and generally positive. Many documentaries on the GDR aired as well on major public service broadcasters, such as the ARD and the ZDF as well as commercial networks, such as RTL. The topic permeated all the news shows and most of the various talk shows on German television. Many interviews were conducted with German celebrities as well as ordinary citizens famous for a certain act of rebellion against the GDR regime. Ordinary citizens walking the streets were also interviewed in order to achieve a somewhat balanced general assessment of the views today. Coverage was virtually unavoidable if one picked up any newspaper or magazine or turned on the television or radio. At least one table or display window was dedicated to books on the GDR and the fall of the Wall in every bookstore I entered. The final ceremony, organized by the city of Berlin and carried out on the actual anniversary of the fall of the Wall, the ninth of November, was grand and moving despite the rain. Many important Western world leaders attended, which emphasized again how

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3 “Publicly funded broadcasting has always been an independent and reliable Medium for all. It began as an alternative to the propaganda under the National Socialists. The new broadcasting was meant to be independent and support democracy and modern society. ARD and ZDF therefore guarantee all citizens open and unbiased access to all important information. It offers a forum in many of its programs for current political and social debates” [“Der öffentlich-rechtliche Rundfunk in Deutschland ist von Beginn an ein unabhängiges und zuverlässiges Medium für alle Menschen. Er entstand als ein Gegenentwurf zu den Propagandamedien im Nationalsozialismus. Der neue Rundfunk sollte unabhängig sein, die Demokratie und moderne Gesellschaft stützen. ARD und ZDF garantierten deshalb allen Bürgerinnen und Bürgern einen freien, unparteiischen Zugang zu allen wichtigen Informationen. Sie bieten in vielen Sendungen Raum für die politischen und gesellschaftlichen Debatten der Zeit”] (my translation ARD).
much of a change the fall of the Wall represented to the entire world. School children had been asked to decorate large white domino blocks, which were then erected around the city and knocked over in a domino effect to representatively simulate the fall of the Wall twenty years previously. The amount of time and energy put into such a commemoration indicates the political importance of celebrating in such a positive, victorious way: politically important to Germany in the sense of it being a display of self-validation or pride as well as a possible tribute to the Western powers that had supported West Germany for over half of a century, to which the German government might still wish to appear appreciative. In principle, the fall of the Wall is something the majority of Germans feel is worth celebrating, but it is also bittersweet, because the whole country has had to invest a lot of money into rebuilding East Germany and there is still a long way to go. Interestingly, during the MTV Europe Music Awards held in Berlin on the

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4 According to Joachim Ragnitz, representative head of the Ifo Institute for Economic Research in Dresden: “The industry [in the former East] has continued to grow in recent years…Politics have played a significant role in rebuilding the East since the beginning. Besides renovating and expanding the infrastructure (especially in the transport sector) many funds have been allocated towards promoting private investment…In addition, the former Eastern states were immediately equally entitled to social security services. This resulted in large expenditures for unemployment compensation and pensions…Currently, about a fifth of all domestic demand in East Germany (public and private as well as investments) is being funded by West German sources. This shows that the economic development in East Germany is still dependent on external support. [“Die Industrie [in den neuen Bundesländern] hat sich indes auch in den letzten Jahren weiterhin positiv entwickelt…Eine bedeutsame Rolle beim Aufbau Ost spielte von Anfang an die Politik. Neben der Erneuerung und Erweiterung der Infrastruktur (insbesondere im Verkehrsbereich) wurden mit hohem finanziellem Einsatz private Investitionen gefördert…Darüber hinaus waren die neuen Länder von Anfang an gleichberechtigt in die sozialen Sicherungssysteme einbezogen. Dies hatte insbesondere in der Arbeitslosen- und Rentenversicherung hohe Ausgaben zur Folge…Derzeit wird noch immer rund ein Fünftel der inländischen Nachfrage in Ostdeutschland (Öffentlicher und Privater Verbrauch sowie Investitionen) durch Mittel finanziert, die den neuen Ländern aus Westdeutschland zufließen. Dies zeigt, dass die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung
fifth of November, just a few days before the anniversary, American singer and host of
the event Katy Perry gave a “shout out” to the fall of the Wall and found herself
relatively unaccompanied by the crowd in her celebratory praise of this historical event,
which made her repeat it, still without much reaction. In a setting where it does not take
much to excite a crowd, the blatant lack of enthusiasm towards her tribute to the fall of
the Wall was shocking and significant. One might posit a number of conclusions
regarding this lack of response on the part of the post-Wall generation represented at this
concert. It either does not have a great understanding of this important part of recent
history, or it simply does not find it necessary to celebrate the event. It may be that
German young people dislike the current regime or have been swayed by the negative
economic consequences of reunification. Perhaps it simply does not care. It would be
interesting to conduct a study on how contemporary German youth perceives the GDR
and the fall of the Wall, but this moves beyond the parameters of this study.

The 20th anniversary of the fall of the Wall was an optimal time to revive my
project on why people chose to remain in or flee the GDR in the years before the Berlin
Wall was built. I am limiting my study to this event, because after the building of the
Wall, anyone fleeing the GDR risked death by gunshot at the hands of the border guards.
The very real risk of death after August 13, 1961 for illegally leaving the GDR changed
the situation radically for those interested in emigrating west. If the possibility to flee
prior to the building of the Wall was difficult yet feasible, it became almost impossible,

in Ostdeutschland noch längst nicht als ‘selbsttragend’ angesehen werden kann”) (my
translation Ragnitz).
one that necessitated the utmost desperation afterwards. However, retirement aged people were able to legally leave the GDR. They were the only people able to do so until 1975 (Schumann 2368). In the 1980s, many requests to travel to the West were granted by the East German government (Schumann 2372). Of the two participants who had decided before the building of the Wall to stay in the East, one chose to leave the GDR when she reached retirement age and the other decided to use an authorized trip to West Germany as an opportunity to flee.

5 Schumann provides a detailed look at the border situation after the construction of the Berlin Wall: “The construction of the Wall deeply shocked many GDR citizens who had planned and prepared to flee to the West. Hundreds of thousands had to abandon their plans. However, 51,624 refugees in 1961 and 16,741 refugees in 1962 still found a way through the imperfectly secured borders. For example, in Berlin people used tunnels, waterways, train tracks, overpasses, and they took advantage of temporary barriers… It has been estimated that one in ten flight attempts was successful during that time… In October 1961 the People’s Police began to heavily patrol the 5km-wide restricted zone along the front of the border… The 500m-wide protective strip directly in front of the border was patrolled by the National People’s Army. There was a mine belt right along the border as well as anti-personnel mines attached to the border fence” [“Der Bau der Mauer traf viele DDR-Bürger, die eine Flucht in den Westen vorbereitet bzw. eingeleitet hatten, wie ein Schock. Hunderttausende mußten ihren Entschluß aufgeben. Dennoch fanden 51.624 Flüchtlinge noch im Jahr 1961 und 16.741 im Jahr 1962 einen Weg über die damals keineswegs perfekt gesicherte Zonengrenze, nachdem zunächst in Berlin Tunnel und Wasserwege, Bahnlinien und Autostraßenübergänge, aber auch provisorische Absperrungen als Fluchtmöglichkeit genutzt wurden… Etwa jeder zehnte Fluchtversuch soll in jener Zeit gelungen sein… Im Oktober 1961 wurde in der fünf km breiten Sperrzone eine dichte Volkspolizeikontrolle aufgebaut… Der zur Grenze anschließende 500m breite Schutzstreifen wurde durch NVA-Patrouillen gesichert. Direkt an der Grenze waren ein Minengürtel und am Grenzzaun Selbstschußanlagen installiert”] (my translation Schumann 2366-2367).

In my interviews, I was struck by specific set perceptions that seemed to circulate among the interviewees. A key motivation for leaving the GDR for the Federal Republic in all four cases was the general notion that life in the West was better, which of course may seem obvious, given the serious consequences. Interestingly, however, my participants’ perception and portrayal of “the better life in the West” are at variance, even within the same interviews. Some of the positive aspects about the West mentioned in certain contexts of the interview are cast in negative light elsewhere in the interview. Upon examination of the discourse of these women, instances of variance like these seem to call into question the great conviction with which some of my participants tended to describe the West as good and the East as bad. This led me to believe that the general notion of the West being better was perhaps laden with mythical character as defined by Roland Barthes and warranted more careful attention.

In his groundbreaking volume of essays entitled *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes bases his ideas on myth, in his words a “system of communication,” on the principles of semiology (109).

Semiology…aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment; these constitute, if not *languages*, at least systems of signification. (*Elements* 9) Barthes applies ideas from semiology on the linguistic plane to the plane of cultural myth, i.e. also in terms of a system of signification.

According to Barthes, myth is a “second-order semiological system” that builds on the “semiological chain which existed before it” (114). Myth builds on preexisting
semiological associations to endow objects of myth with new meanings, and Barthes focuses primarily on the intention behind the creation of myth with this newly acquired meaning. The essential function of myth is to naturalize this meaning (131); the constructedness of the myth, i.e. that it was created by history, is obfuscated, thereby keeping the “myth consumers” also unaware of the myth’s origins. The myth-consumer, from which no one is exempt, does not see myth as a semiological system, but rather as a factual system (131). Myth’s intention, according to Barthes, is to “naturalize” and thereby “justify” its objects through speech, through the object’s new meanings as these become apparent ultimately through language. To quote Barthes once again: “What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality” (142). But these meanings should not be seen as “natural,” because they are provided by history, not nature. Barthes explains that “Semiology has taught us that myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal” (142).

Naturalization occurs through convention or use on the level of linguistics as well as on the level of myth. One must not forget that history technically does not make an idea natural, although it may seem natural, just as one language’s term for “apple” is not “natural” for all languages. Though Barthes does not say this, I elaborate on Barthes’ ideas with the natural observation that history varies from group to group. Thus, the idea of history’s universality is illusory. The subjectivity embedded in the multitude of perspectives and interpretations of a specific history moves history farther away still from “nature.” History is, objectively speaking, as arbitrary and subjective as it relates to
language as nomenclature (important because it is in language where it ultimately manifests itself if it does not just disappear, since history is by definition finite and in the past and only lives on, so to speak, in language). One might even venture to say that it is as arbitrary as calling an apple “apple.” History cannot be natural or universal. However, because myth forgets that it was created by history, as does the myth-consumer, we almost always see only the naturalized product, forgetting that it too was just as arbitrarily created as the naturalized terms we use every day for the purpose of successful communication.

Just as language unites a people, so do the myths housed within language. Myths are just as fixedly a component of culture as language, Barthes argues: “When a myth reaches the entire community, it is from the latter that the mythologist must become estranged if he wants to liberate the myth” (157). They are the unquestioned beliefs of that people. According to Barthes, “Any myth with some degree of generality is in fact ambiguous, because it represents the very humanity of those who, having nothing, have borrowed it” (156). In other words, myths are part of being human, of having societies, civilizations and cultures, and buying into these myths (which is easy to do because of

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7 “It is true that objects, images and patterns of behavior can signify, and do so on a large scale, but never autonomously; every semiological system has its linguistic admixture” (Elements 10).

8 However, “The mythical signification, [unlike the sign in a language], is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy” (Mythologies 126). But it is arbitrary in the sense that history supplies these analogies (127) and history cannot be equated with the notion of being “natural” (127) or universal.
their nature)\(^9\) is part of belonging to a collective. “To decipher the *Tour de France* or the ‘good French wine’ is to cut oneself off from those who are entertained or warmed up by them” (157)…,” Barthes points out.

Moreover, one must bear in mind that just because a concept has taken on mythical character through speech and other representations, it does not mean that the concept cannot be objectively true. Barthes provides the following example: “Wine is objectively good, and *at the same time*, the goodness of wine is a myth...” (158). “Wine is objectively good,” or more accurately, wine *can* be objectively good. Any idea can be objective when limited to the context of its creation, thereby not losing validity as it begins to stray away from its origins, from its own history. “The mythologist gets out of this as best he can: he deals with the goodness of wine, not with the wine itself…” (158), Barthes observes. Ironically, there is, of course, subjectivity inherent in the term “good” (for not everyone would agree that it is entirely good, or even good at all for that matter), but one cannot deny that that is how many perceive wine, or at least certain aspects of it like taste, making it objectively good, just as it can be objectively bad, as in the idea that it may have negative consequences regarding one’s health. “Better” is also a subjective term. Terms like these lose their subjectivity when they best describe the true experience of an individual or group and are limited to just this experience or just certain aspects, not to other experiences to which they are not relevant, which is when objectivity turns into myth. When I apply this idea to my study I can say that the West could have been objectively better. Interesting to me, however, is also the mythical side to this notion.

\(^9\) “That is why myth is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden – if they were hidden, they could not be efficacious – but because they are naturalized” (*Mythologies* 131).
This consists of the idea extending even to aspects of the West that were and are not objectively “better” when viewed individually, outside of this context. For instance, unemployment in the West is generally seen as a negative aspect of capitalism, but the myth, “the West is better” or “capitalism is better than the alternatives” may dull the severity of its negative reception. It may be seen as a necessary evil for the greater good. And one may therefore turn a blind eye towards it (though one’s indifference towards unemployment may or may not disappear if one suddenly finds oneself unwillingly unemployed).

Myths make the myth-consumer unable and often unwilling to see objectively those things that weaken or contradict them. This is due to the “natural” nature of myth. Myth obstructs a view of the complexity of things. Barthes’ mythologist’s aim is to break down myths and see the individual elements that have fallen prey to the umbrella-effect of myths for what they really are. The point is to maintain objectivity regarding all the elements that the myth extends to, to avoid the hypocrisy that the myths promote, in other words, to stop viewing things as they are not. Often, objective ideas from a time in the past turn out to be no longer relevant, accurate or applicable to another time in the past or to the present or to another set of circumstances altogether, even if they are applied nonetheless. When this is the case, myth is definitely at work, and “history’s lessons” are potentially more harmful than helpful.

The main myth I plan to analyze in my study is the idea that “life in the West is better” and the justifications for this statement (or some variation thereof), for example, what “better” means. Certainly, a “better life” seems to be related to various freedoms: political freedom, religious freedom, and freedom to express oneself without having to
fear persecution and harassment. Indeed, in addition to expecting these freedoms, many who fled to the West before the Wall was built also expected to find a “better” economy, one in which there would be a greater variety of goods, and therefore, the possibility of choices, which would lead to a more fulfilled, richer life. This is what my interviewees who fled the GDR articulate and it reflects the view of the majority of German society.

In the process of forming a post-war identity, West Germany certainly defined itself as “better” in relation to the “Other,” namely the GDR. This was, of course, also the case for the GDR, which simultaneously claimed to be the “better” Germany, but the westward flow of the refugees threatened this claim. The Federal Republic of Germany (henceforth referred to as the FRG) helped GDR refugees find housing and establish themselves in the West, and their success stories, in turn, supported the concept of “life is better in the West.” The sheer numbers of refugees pouring in was also a

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10 “The political ideologies of the two German states had created and been supported by images signifying positive and negative aspects of Self and Other” (Stein 335).

11 Ensikat sums this situation up casually, but well: “The relationship between East and West Germany was miserable. The West German government griped about the GDR: ‘It’s a dictatorship that only does what the Soviet Union wants. It’s about time that they became as democratic as we are!’ The GDR government was, of course, of a different opinion: ‘Our way on the side of the Soviet Union is the right one! The FRG just does what the USA wants! There are rich and poor people and that’s not fair! It’s about time they became more like us!’” [“Die Stimmung zwischen Ost-und West-Deutschland war miserabel. Die Regierung der Bundesrepublik schimpfte auf die DDR: ‘Das ist eine Diktatur, die nur tut, was die Sowjetunion will. Wird Zeit, daß es dort so demokratisch zugeht wie bei uns!’ Die Regierung der DDR war selbstverständlich anderer Meinung: ‘Unser Weg an der Seite der Sowjetunion ist der richtige! Die BRD tut nur, was die USA will! Es gibt dort Reiche und Arme, das ist unrecht! Wird Zeit, daß es im Westen genauso zugeht wie bei uns!’”] (my translation Ensikat 49).
boasting point \(^{12}\) for the FRG. The ultimate and most potent confirmation of this idea was the eventual collapse of the GDR.

Oral accounts obtained in the period 1949-1961 set the tone for the negative perception of the GDR in the West. Most oral testimony about the GDR during its existence was obtained during this period of time, when the largest exodus occurred, by the various refugee centers in the West who mandated that each individual refugee or family of refugees be questioned as to their motives for fleeing.\(^{13}\) It was also collected by various oral historians. The oral testimonies from refugees contributed most definitively in the construction of a FRG identity in relation to the GDR. Arguably, these oral testimonies were possibly a great contributor in creating current conceptions of West Germany as victor over East Germany and as superior to East Germany. These conceptions still seem to influence East and West German identity today. The idea of one

\(^{12}\) In the Bulletin des Presse-und Informationsamtes der Bundesregierung (1961): “The refugees demonstrate on a daily basis that the German people as a whole have clearly chosen the West” [“daß das deutsche Volk insgesamt eine klare innere Entscheidung für den Westen getroffen hat. Die Flüchtlinge bringen das Tag für Tag stellvertretend zum Ausdruck”] (my translation Nahm Entscheidung 202).

\(^{13}\) According to Ackermann, “The West German government, hoping for reunification, had a great interest in the continuing public debate of the situation in the GDR. It expected all immigrants to be honest and open with themselves and the public about their motives” [“Die Bundesregierung hatte im Hinblick auf die Wiedervereinigung ein großes Interesse an der kontinuierlichen öffentlichen Auseinandersetzung mit den Verhältnissen in der DDR und erwartete von jedem Zuwanderer, seine Motive vor sich selbst und der Öffentlichkeit darzulegen”] (my translation 110). Similarly, “The categories of ‘political’ and ‘unpolitical’ were relevant on two occasions: initially at the emergency refugee center, when the refugees were asked about their flight motives, and later when applying for a C-Ausweis. The flight motives they named were necessary for stabilizing the norm of what it meant to be a ‘real’ refugee” [“Die Grenze zwischen ‘politisch’ und ‘unpolitisch’ wurde an zwei Stellen gezogen, beim Notaufnahme-Verfahren und beim C-Ausweis-Verfahren. Das Notaufnahme-Verfahren lag zeitlich früher, und an dieser Stelle wurden erstmals die Fluchtmotive erfragt, die für die Stabilisierung der Norm ‘echter’ Flüchtling entscheidende Bedeutung besaßen”] (my translation Ackermann 125).
nation over the other seems to have transcended to its people: one Volk being better than the other. Many Germans still speak of a “Wall in the head” (“Mauer im Kopf”) and there is a common stereotype in former East Germany of the West Germans as “Besser-Wessis”\textsuperscript{14} (“know-it-all West Germans”) (Corbett).

Oral testimonies from refugees undoubtedly played a political role in both East and West Germany. The construction of the Berlin Wall is perhaps the most obvious symbol for how East German governmental policies were affected by the flight of refugees to West Germany. The Wall and the tightening of the border were not viewed favorably by the East German people or by Western democracies because they restricted the free movement of the East German people, specifically westwards. Though the GDR government explained to its people that these barriers were put up to protect them from “fascists”\textsuperscript{15} coming from the West, it gave many the feeling of imprisonment. The flight motives were another cause for concern for the East German state, because they painted East Germany in a bad light in the eyes of the Western world. The motives for fleeing to the West were obtained in the form of oral testimonies by refugees upon entry into West Germany,\textsuperscript{16} and the testimonies received much media attention in the West. East German

\textsuperscript{14}This is a play on the words, “Besserwisser” (“know-it-all”) and “Wessi,” which is a colloquial term for “West German.” This expression also seems to attack the notion of the West Germans being “better in every way” because it is a derogatory term that literally translates to “better West German.” This stereotype indicates that many East Germans perceive that many West Germans think of themselves as “better.”

\textsuperscript{15}“For years the border was officially referred to as a protective barrier against fascists” [“Jahrelang hieß die Grenze offiziell nur ‘antifaschistischer Schutzwall’”] (my translation Staritz 138).

\textsuperscript{16}“Processing the refugees was a bureaucratic ritual in which various people had to produce reports: the applicants, the report commissioners, the ‘witnesses’ in the GDR, as well as the directors in charge of the process. The reports emerged from an asymmetrical communication situation similar to an ‘interrogation,’ or a ‘hearing.’ However, another
authorities became aware of the flight motives mostly through the publications by the
refugee centers and through Western media.\footnote{The authorities in the GDR received most of their information about the motives for fleeing through indirect means and usually a while after a refugee had left the country” [“Die DDR-Behörden gewannen ihre Informationen über die Fluchtmotive meist auf indirektem Wege und erst eine gewisse Zeit nachdem der Flüchtling das Land verlassen hatte”] (my translation Ackermann 147). “The government agencies in Berlin, Uelzen and Giessen became veritable sources of information for other government agencies, scientific institutes, and economic and political organizations that wished to be informed of the situation in the GDR” [“Die Dienststellen in Berlin, Uelzen und Gießen entwickelten sich zu regelrechten Informationsquellen für Behörden und Ministerien, für wissenschaftliche Institute, Wirtschaftsverbände und politische Organisationen, die sich über die Verhältnisse in der DDR orientieren wollten”] (my translation 148).

West German laws and governmental policies were also adapted in response to
the refugees’ testimonies. Ackermann observes a “ politicization”\footnote{The reports made while processing the refugees showed the result of a role-playing game whose purpose was to determine what constituted ‘political’ and ‘non-political’ motives” [“Allerdings während des Notaufnahmeverfahrens produzierten Texte das Ergebnis eines Rollenspiels, bei dem es um die Entscheidung zwischen ‘politisch’ und ‘unpolitisch’ ging”] (my translation Ackermann 148). “The East-West conflict virtually forced the politicization of the refugee. Moreover, because the individual refugee was identified with the collective fate of all those residing in the GDR, the image of the ‘heroic lone struggler’ constantly conflicted with the image of the mass exodus” [“Der Ost-West-Konflikt erzwang geradezu die Politisierung des Flüchtlings, und weil der individuelle Flüchtling mit dem Kollektivschicksal aller Bewohner der DDR identifiziert wurde, lag das Bild des ‘heroischen Einzelkämpfers’ in ständigem Widerstreit mit dem Bild der Massenfluchtbewegung”] (my translation 13).} of the refugee by the
type of communication situation was also described in the directors’ reports, namely,
West German government (138). However, there were some discrepancies between the “ politicization” of the refugees and the laws that were applied to them. According to Ackermann, “The West German lawmakers claimed that the entire East German population found itself in a terrible situation because it rejected the “totalitarian” system that was the GDR” [“Zwar unterstellte der Gesetzgeber, die gesamte Bevölkerung in der DDR befinde sich in einer Zwangslage, weil die das “totalitäre” System ablehne…”] (my translation 114). The lawmakers generalized the plight of the refugees as the plight of all East Germans. However, the laws for giving a refugee the status of “refugee”, with all the amenities it afforded, did not reflect this general politicization. Though the East German population was viewed to have a “collective fate” (13) and each refugee had fled the same general situation, each refugee was required to prove his or her own case (114) and meet certain requirements to receive a certain status.19 GDR historian Corey Ross observes:

Given the overall context of competing systems between East and West Germany, it is not surprising that official accounts in the West tended to place political

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19 “Anyone who had had to flee the Soviet-occupied zone or the Soviet-occupied sector of Berlin in order to avoid an otherwise unavoidable dilemma created by the political situation was considered a refugee of the Soviet-occupied zone. In addition, he or she must never have violated any basic principles of humanity or of the rule of law. A ‘direct danger to one’s physical being and life or to one’s personal freedom’ constituted an extreme dilemma; economic reasons alone did not warrant the status of ‘refugee of the Soviet-occupied zone’” [“Als ‘SBZ-Flüchtling’ wurde jeder anerkannt, der aus der sowjetischen Besatzungszone’ oder dem ‘sowjetische besetzten Sektor Berlins’ flüchten mußte, um sich einer von ihm nicht zu vertretenden und durch die politischen Verhältnisse bedingten besonderen Zwangslage zu entziehen, und dort nicht durch sein Verhalten gegen die Grundsätze der Menschlichkeit oder Rechtsstaatlichkeit verstoßen hatte. Als besondere Zwangslage galt eine ‘unmittelbare Gefahr für Leib und Leben oder die persönliche Freiheit‘; wirtschaftliche Gründe allein rechtfertigten nicht die Anerkennung als ‘SBZ-Flüchtling’”] (my translation Ackermann 113).
repression in the foreground, despite the fact that only 20 per cent of the immigrants from the GDR were granted the identification-card ‘C’ for political refugees. (468)

Although Ross points out that political refugees were in the minority, one could argue that 20 per cent of approximately 3 million refugees is a large enough figure to indicate a problem in East Germany and warrant attention. Despite the West German government’s awareness of the various motives for fleeing, of which some were considered political and others were not, the entire phenomenon of flight was used in the West for propagating a positive image of West Germany, democracy and capitalism. On the flipside of that coin, it was used to draw attention to and substantiate a negative image of East Germany and communism.20

As a result, oral history contributed to the formation of a strong West German identity after the Second World War. This identity consisted of being a democratic and free nation with a capitalist economy. The response of the refugees toward East Germany confirmed for the West German people that communism, as it was practiced in the GDR, was undesirable.21 It was common in the 1950s and 1960s to read articles about the mass

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20 For example: “According to the 1961 publication of the [Federal Ministry of All-German Affairs], testimonies of the refugees prove that the SED-Regime does not know any restraint when it comes to exhausting opportunities for ‘totalitarian rule’” [“Die ‘Aussagen’ der Flüchtlinge erwiesen, hieß es in der Publikation des BMfG von 1961, daß das SED-Regime keine Hemmungen kenne, alle Möglichkeiten ‘totalitärer Herrschaft’ auszuschöpfen”] (my translation Ackermann 148).

21 Compare with the following: “Kaase points out a development in the social conscience that he attributes to the expellees and which could be analogous to the refugees. Through their experiences, both groups contributed to the anchoring of anticommunism as a general consensus in West German society. In doing so, they have cemented West Germany’s orientation toward the West” [“Kaase macht auf eine Entwicklung des gesellschaftlichen Bewußtseins durch die Vertriebenen aufmerksam, die analog auch für
exodus from the East in West German newspapers and magazines. Some of these authors interpreted deeper meanings in the exodus.\footnote{22} Two examples include: “The refugees demonstrate on a daily basis that the German people as a whole have clearly chosen the West” [“daß das deutsche Volk insgesamt eine klare innere Entscheidung für den Westen getroffen hat. Die Flüchtlinge bringen das Tag für Tag stellvertretend zum Ausdruck”] (my translation Nahm \textit{Entscheidung} 202) and “The refugees have made the unbelievable believable: that Germans love freedom…” [“Die Flüchtlinge, die der Welt das Unglaubhafte glaubhaft machten – daß Deutsche die Freiheit lieben -,...”] (my translation Zacharias 11).

During the period 1949-1961, oral testimony was probably the most informative and available source about the “reality” of the GDR. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer wrote in his memoirs that one could learn from the refugees’ reports what the reality in the Soviet-occupied Zone looked like (Ackermann 148). The GDR did not provide a reliable image of itself in its own media. Fulbrook observes:

A combination of methods were employed to ensure the compliance of the East German populace, including terror as well as attempted ideological indoctrination, as the SED sought both to control the state means of administration, policing and

\footnote{22} Ackermann observes some propagandist elements in official West German publications: “Even official publications...like the… \textit{SBZ-Archiv}… promoted West Germany as the ‘stronger’ [entity]” [“Auch offiziöse Veröffentlichungen...wie etwa die… ‘SBZ-Archiv’...die den Westen als ‘stärker’ empfahl ...”] (126).
justice, and to exert its influence in education, the media and all avenues of opinion formation. (Divided Nation 190)

In terms of oral history in the GDR, according to Hans Joachim Schröder, there exist practically no published, scientifically executed sociological studies of qualitative interviews conducted by East German researchers in the GDR (79). West German publications before 1989, on the other hand, are still considered to be reliable sources of information about life in the GDR: “This [post-1989] trend [of conducting research on the GDR, sparked by access to new resources such as East German archives] revealed that many of the West German studies on the GDR published before 1989 had not lost much validity even though their authors had had very limited access to East German resources” [“Zum anderen ließ gerade dieser Trend erkennen, dass viele der bis 1989 im Westen über die DDR publizierten Arbeiten an Gültigkeit wenig eingebüßt hatten, obwohl ihre Verfasser kaum über östliches Quellenmaterial verfügten”] (my translation Weber 54). On account of the unreliability of East German publications and the media in general as well as the general oppression that hindered true expression, the East Germans had no real voice, other than the one the refugees gave them. Their plight may have been over-generalized and the numbers of refugees exaggerated, but without their reports the breadth of exposure of the cruelties and injustices of the East German State most likely

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23 Ackermann observes an exaggeration in the numbers of refugees provided in official West German publications: “The exaggerated numbers [of refugees] were a common characteristic of all official and semi-official presentations of flight motives” [“Charakteristisches Merkmal aller offiziellen und offiziösen Darstellungen der Fluchtmotive waren die dramatisierten Zahlenangaben”] (my translation 126). According to Ackermann, most researchers put the total between 2.7 and 3.3 million Soviet-occupied Zone/GDR refugees between 1945 and 1961, while official reports from the government claimed there were ‘at least 3.6 to 3.7 million’” (126).
would have been gravely delayed and probably limited as well. Many people’s stories may never have been heard.

Oral testimony provided a human and emotional dimension to the image of the GDR in West Germany. As Erika von Hornstein describes her very subjective response to listening to oral testimonies: “I was no longer dealing with daily statistics in newspapers, I was confronted with suffering humanity: facing me sat a man in tears, a woman who got a heart attack when she began to speak” (xiv). Oral testimony has enhanced in a direct and almost unmediated way our archive of the experience of the GDR, and it continues to do so. But in the case of any oral testimony, one has to analyze its problematic aspects: for example, the individual’s motives when s/he is telling his or her story and what s/he is not telling. In addition, one has to consider the context and questions posed by the interviewer as well as the time that has elapsed and possible subsequent memory gaps or distortion of events.

Researchers, authors, the media, and the government in the FRG used the oral stories from GDR refugees about the horrors experienced in the GDR and the “great”

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24 “Millions of examples of private contact [between West Germans and refugees], individual fates, and the unceasing exodus from the GDR affected the German-German relationships enormously” [“Millionen privater Kontakte und Individuallchicksale sowie die anhaltende Fluchtwelle aus der DDR beeinflussten die deutsch-deutschen Beziehungen in erheblichem Ausmaß”] (my translation Weber 333).

Compare too with Richard Hilmer’s observation: “And there was something else that was also extremely important: the immigrants always made people more sensitive to and critical of the situation in the GDR. Moreover, because of them, relationships between East and West Germans were very active and lively” [“Und eines war vor allen Dingen auch wichtig: Die Übersiedler…trugen immer auch zu einer Sensibilisierung und Schärfung des Blicks für die Situation in der DDR und letztlich dazu bei, daß die Verbindungen zwischen Deutschen in Ost und West sehr aktiv und lebendig wurden”] (my translation Germany 329).
things they expected in the West, to create or confirm myths and to define itself as “better.” The notion of “the West is better” was as self-perpetuating as the notion of the “American Dream.” A common phrase in the GDR that captured this feeling was “the Golden West” (“der goldene Westen”) (Ensikat 134). Although there have been attempts to demystify this notion of “the West is better,” the majority of German society still holds it as a universal truth, and oral testimony has been a key factor in this. After all, winners write history, and success stories reconfirm the myths surrounding the possibility of success. It is not my intention to debate ideologies and political systems, but rather to show that the fact that my participants, among many others, were willing to be imprisoned or even die for a life in the West, was probably what most solidified what the FRG stood for. Oral history projects are vital for gaining new and varied perspectives, but it is important never to lose sight of its inherent problematic aspects. I shall reflect upon these aspects in this study.

Moreover, taking into account that there is a very personal element to my project, especially because of the ideas that have been mediated to me through my mother, I would like to reflect on how family traumas and success stories are passed from one generation to the next and how that affects the perpetuation of myths that underlie our perceptions of reality. I would also like to reflect on how our family memory influenced my participation in these interviews and my interpretation of them.

II. OBJECTIVES

By interviewing the women again five years later I was not only able to fill in any informational gaps from the first interviews, but also to see how their opinions might have changed in those five years; in other words, in this study the role of time in the
creation and/or acceptance of myths will also be examined. One of my goals was to find out which myths were challenged and questioned by my participants over the course of five years and how, and which ones were not. If we consider, for example, the idea that “the West is better:” do my participants simply express that West Germany was better in a way that implies it was so because it was so, stating it as a simple matter of fact to be taken for granted, without explaining why or possibly relating this idea specifically to their own personal experiences? This would be an example of Barthes’ tautology hypothesis that one of the rhetorical forms myth takes in language is through tautology: “defining like by like” (Mythologies 152), being at a loss for explanation, but accepting an idea all the same. If my participants do give reasons or connect the idea to their own experiences, do these explanations seem to support the statement, be irrelevant to it, or even contradict it? Through language, namely word choice, tone of voice, hesitation, etc., (a linguistic dimension), I attempted to discover a possible questioning on their part of myths that arose during the interview.

I wished to understand the decisive myths and notions that made my interviewees flee (or as in the case of two of my participants, petition to visit (and then stay) /relocate to West Germany in the 1980s) and made them have no regrets about their decision. I considered a number of related questions that I would like to list here: What did and does freedom mean to them? What did and do they associate with freedom, based on both interviews? Were preconceived notions of freedom and “a better life” replaced by new ones upon arrival in the West or after living there for a while? Would I be able to discern the evolution of these concepts for my participants throughout their lives? Are there similarities or differences in the way the concept, “life is better in the West,” was
perceived by my participants who came to the West before the Wall was built and my participants who came in the 1980s? Finally, which aspects of life in the East and the West seem to be most prone to mythical description?

It was not my goal to criticize my participants for not questioning a myth or to claim that they made an unjustifiable decision in fleeing or leaving or that it is unjustifiable that they liked what they found once they had made it to the West. It is only human not to be able to recognize all the myths that come our way, much less to question what is behind them. In this study I shall look at the complexity of notions and ideals and to gain a better understanding of the motivations for leaving the GDR without denying that many incredible wrongs and injustices were perpetrated in the East German state. This study should provide a close look at which myths were involved in “pushing” my participants out of the GDR, drawing them to the FRG, influencing their perceptions of the FRG upon arrival until the present, and influencing their reflections on their decision.

By looking specifically at the language and other forms of expression of my participants I was hoping to spot something that they take for granted. The careful listener might find, in fact, discrepancies between what is intentionally being said and what is possibly unintentionally meant. It was my goal to see what lies beyond the spoken words, beyond the myths.

All of my interviewees are women due to reasons of pragmatism, but I will not be carrying out a detailed analysis or comparison of women’s experience in both Germanys. In other words, I will deal with the category of gender in this study only peripherally.

I plan to paint a personalized picture of the internal and external struggle faced by those who played a proactive role in the shaping of their destinies, and relate their
struggle to myths surrounding this critical time in Germany’s recent history. With their stories and a careful cultural analysis thereof I hope to expand the archive of knowledge on the flight experience from the GDR and the motives involved and contribute to the oral history research related to this monumental time in history.

III. METHODOLOGY

In the first chapter of this thesis I will provide a description of the historical context which led to two official German states existing side by side, focusing primarily on the period between the end of World War II and the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. The point of concentration will be the political and social climate that led to the mass exodus from East to West Germany during the 1950s.

In the second part of the first chapter I will discuss previous studies and publications that are relevant to my study. These will include compilations of oral testimonies obtained from refugees who fled from East to West Germany and oral history projects that analyze myths present in oral testimonies. I will point out what distinguishes my study from past publications.

In the second chapter I will discuss the principles that govern my work on oral history: its advantages and its problematic aspects. Then I will elaborate further on the interview process as it was carried out in this study.

The main part of Chapter 2, the core of this project, will be a presentation and discussion of the content of the interviews, the verbal as well as the unspoken, the participants’ reactions and linguistic features that open themselves up to analysis from the point of view of myths and from the perspective of oral history. I will make some comparisons between the original set of interviews that date back to 2004 and the more
recent interviews as well as provide a comparison between my participants on certain topics that caught my attention. I will explore the world of myths that unfolded upon close examination with a critical eye within and beyond the spoken word.

In the conclusion, I will reflect back on the entire process of conducting these interviews with an interim of five years between the two sets of interviews, including my role as investigator, family member or friend of the interviewees, as grandchild and daughter of refugees, and finally as the author of this study. Thus, I will demonstrate the inseparable nature of the personal and scientific value of my study. I will venture some conclusions about what has been gained by conducting/collecting “history from below,” not just from a personal standpoint, but also in terms of our collective knowledge and understanding of a group of people who helped shape and were shaped by the period of time on which present-day Germany is grounded.
CHAPTER ONE

I. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 1940s were, to say the least, a pivotal time in German history. The forties saw the end of one of the worst dictatorships of the 20th century, which culminated with the end of one of the worst wars of modern civilization, the Second World War (1939-1945). Adolph Hitler’s twelve-year dictatorship and attempt at massive expansion of the German Empire, the so-called Third Reich, had turned the world upside down. Germany’s surrender in April and May of 1945, although a great victory for its enemies and victims, brought negative consequences with it as well. For the Germans, as would be expected, it brought many immediate ones, such as being taken over by enemy forces. To the world it eventually brought the Cold War.

The Soviet contingent of the victorious Allied Forces took the opportunity to absorb more Eastern European territories into the Soviet Union as satellite states, including areas which had belonged to the German Empire and were largely inhabited by ethnic Germans. To these areas it brought communism as well as to the Soviet-occupied Zone of the new Germany, whose borders had been greatly reduced through treaties after World War II. The growth of the Soviet Union and the subsequent spread of communism was a major concern of the United States and other Western countries. The resulting tensions and power struggles (military, economic, ideological, and technological) between the Communist World and the Western World defined the Cold War. It was a conflict that both sides believed could turn “hot” at any point. The potential to do so represented a real, imminent threat that would last for decades (1947-1991). East Germany would become the epicenter of this conflict between East and West.
This division of German territory following the defeat of the Germans resulted in the expulsion of ethnic Germans from formerly German lands east of modern day Germany. This expulsion was largely carried out violently and inhumanely, due to the animosity felt by the former victims of the Nazis towards the Nazis, which transcended to the German *Volk*. Many of the latter headed to enemy-occupied Germany, very uncertain as to what they would find in a land ravaged and destroyed by war. Other destinations such as North and South America were also popular, but not feasible alternatives for everyone. The United States, for instance, limited the number of expellees it would accept. The Allies alongside the Germans had a hard task of figuring out how to incorporate these large masses of expellees in a place that had lost much of its infrastructure. The Soviet-occupied Zone ended up taking more expellees than any other occupied zone.

However, in the years following the end of the war, many former expellees and other inhabitants of the Soviet-occupied Zone in the East, which became the German Democratic Republic in 1949, realized that life under Russian occupation and then under the dictatorship of the Socialist Unity Party, the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*), was not what they wanted. Instead they opted for a life in the Federal Republic of Germany. Also known as West Germany, the FRG was a democratic state created in 1949 that comprised the French, British, and American zones.

There were various reasons why millions of people fled East Germany. These included any combination of economic, political, and personal motives.²⁵ East

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²⁵ The examples I will give will not necessarily fall under the categories the West German government put them under, which was inconsistent over time. See Ackermann
Germany’s economic growth in the 1950s paled in comparison with West Germany’s “economic miracle.” Economic motives for leaving included, but were not limited to, an expectation of more available jobs in the West, freedom to change jobs more easily, better pay especially for skilled workers, and the collectivization of private enterprises and farms occurring in the GDR (Ackermann 130-131). Many refugees left because they were not allowed to study what they wanted, if at all (Ackermann 130).

Political motives included, but were not limited to, being forced to spy for the East German secret police known as the Stasi (Staatssicherheit), being spied on, harassed, arrested, or in physical danger for being an opponent of the regime (Ackermann 130-131). Other political motives included the lack of a true democracy (undemocratic elections), and being demoted in the workplace or harassed in some way for not being a member of the SED or for being actively Christian or for belonging to a family above the working class (Ackermann 130-131). In Fulbrook’s words:

People resented the repression, the existence of the security police, the harsh measures imposed on those with differences of political opinion, the constraints on the activities of Christians, the uniform world-view which was being inculcated in the schools and the media, the sense of fear and the pressures towards conformity in every area of life which necessitated the continuous leading of a double life (to which many Germans had become all too accustomed, in different ways, under the Nazi regime). At the same time, there were few

for an in-depth analysis of the evolution of the West German laws on Soviet-occupied Zone/GDR refugees.
material advantages to be enjoyed in the GDR, particularly for skilled people who
could potentially be high earners in the West. (193)

According to Karl Schumann, drastic changes in the political climate of the state often
induced surges in the numbers of people fleeing (2363-2365): “The number of
immigrants in the years 1949/50, 1953, 1955-57 as well as the seven months before the
construction of the Wall in 1961 surpasses 250,000” [“Die Höhe der Zuwandererzahlen
zum Mauerbau über 250.000”] (my translation Schumann 2363). In 1949 the state was
founded. In 1950 the collectivization of businesses began and the SED was declared a
communist party. In 1953 the famous national uprising took place that was violently put
down on June 17th by Soviet troops. 1953 saw the highest figure of refugees. On May
14th, 1955 the Warsaw Pact was signed. In 1956 the Volksarmee was formed and
recruiting began. Fleeing the GDR became a crime in 1957, which might explain a drop
between then and 1961.

Personal motives included, but were not limited to, a desire to be reunited with
friends, lovers, or family members in the West, other reasons related to changes in
relationships with loved ones in the East, religion, or just a general feeling of
dissatisfaction. According to Ackermann, for the young people (including people in their
20s) who fled, it was often not primarily for economic or political reasons that they felt
driven to leave, but simply because they felt “dissatisfied“ in the East or were more
spontaneous than their older counterparts:

It was neither economic nor political flight motives that primarily made young
refugees leave the GDR. Instead, it was the undefined expectation of some sort of
improvement in the situation they were facing. It was also the seductive example set by successful refugees, or being persuaded by friends, even coincidence or a momentary mood; visual media, especially, had a strong effect on their imagination and dictated their often spontaneous decisions. It was not primarily political measures that drove them to flee, but rather a diffuse feeling of dissatisfaction, dodging a conflict, the belief that they could no longer live in the GDR, and the opinion that West Germany was the land of freedom. [Weder primär politische noch wirtschaftliche Fluchtgründe brachten viele Jugendliche dazu, die DDR zu verlassen, sondern die unbestimmte Erwartung irgendeiner Verbesserung der augenblicklichen Lage, das verlockende Beispiel erfolgreicher DDR-Flüchtlinge, die Überredung durch Freunde, selbst der Zufall oder die Stimmung des Moments; besonders die Bildmedien wirkten stark auf ihre Einbildungskraft und bestimmten ihre oft spontanen Entschlüsse. Nicht primär politische Maßnahmen trieben sie zur Flucht, sondern ein diffuses Gefühl der Unzufriedenheit, das Ausweichen vor einem Konflikt, die Vorstellung, in der DDR nicht mehr leben zu können und die Meinung, der Westen sei das Land der Freiheit]. (Ackermann 192)

The construction of the Berlin Wall in August of 1961 and the heavily guarded borders from that point onwards reduced the number of refugees to virtually none.

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26 The Berlin Wall was far from entirely secure on the 13th of August. Many efforts were made on the part of the GDR government to secure the Wall and the inner German border over the years and deter refugees: “However, 51,624 refugees in 1961 and 16,741 refugees in 1962 still found a way through the imperfectly secured borders. For example, in Berlin people used tunnels, waterways, train tracks, overpasses, and they took advantage of temporary barriers… It has been estimated that one in ten flight attempts was successful during that time… In October 1961 the People’s Police began to heavily
Some escape attempts between the construction and the fall of the Wall ended successfully, others tragically.27 The GDR’s collapse, which began in November of 1989, is mostly attributed to internal problems in the Soviet Union. These same problems led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. German reunification (complete within a year after the fall of the Wall) happened too quickly for many who were worried about potential bloodshed. Fortunately, these enormous political changes occurred peacefully and were ultimately viewed positively by most. However, it was clear that the process of

patrol the 5km-wide restricted zone along the front of the border… The 500m-wide protective strip directly in front of the border was patrolled by the National People’s Army. There was a mine belt right along the border as well as anti-personnel mines attached to the border fence. Due to these extreme measures, the number of so-called blockade runners decreased throughout the 1960s from 5,761 in 1962 to 901 in 1970. The number fluctuated around 1,000 per year until 1975, with the exception of 1972/73 when around 1,000 refugees crossed over to West Berlin via a tunnel. After 1975 the numbers continued to decrease. These numbers also include GDR refugees who crossed over the borders of other Eastern Block states” [“Dennoch fanden 51.624 Flüchtlinge noch im Jahr 1961 und 16.741 im Jahr 1962 einen Weg über die damals keineswegs perfekt gesicherte Zonengrenze, nachdem zunächst in Berlin Tunnel und Wasserwege, Bahlinien und Autostraßenübergänge, aber auch provisorische Absperrungen als Fluchtmöglichkeit genutzt wurden…Etwa jeder zehnte Fluchtversuch soll in jener Zeit gelungen sein…Im Oktober 1961 wurde in der fünf km breiten Sperrzone eine dichte Volkspolizeikontrolle aufgebaut…Der zur Grenze anschließende 500m breite Schutzstreifen wurde durch NVA-Patrouillen gesichert. Direkt an der Grenze waren ein Minengürtel und am Grenzzaun Selbstschußanlagen installiert. Diese hermetische Absicherung der Grenze bewirkte, daß die Zahl der sog. Sperrbrecher in den 60er Jahren von zunächst (1962) 5.761 auf 901 (1970) zurückging, sie schwankte bis 1975 etwa um die Zahl 1000 je Jahr – ausgenommen die Jahre 1972/73, wo etwa 1.000 Flüchtlinge durch einen Tunnel nach West-Berlin kommen konnten – und sank anschließend weiter. In diesen Zahlen sind auch Flüchtlinge über Grenzen anderer Ostblock-Staaten mitenthalten”] (my translation Schumann 2366-2367).

27 There was a very real risk of death in attempting to illegally cross the borders: “According to the latest reports, altogether 994 people died while attempting to illegally cross the GDR borders and another 757 were badly or permanently injured” [“Insgesamt kamen an der innerdeutschen Grenze und an der Berliner Mauer bis zum November 1989 nach jüngsten Ermittlungen 994 Menschen ums Leben, weitere 757 wurden schwer verletzt oder dauerhaft verletzt”] (my translation Kowalczuk 22).
reunification would cost a lot of money, as would rebuilding the East. The fact that Germany is still paying for this today has created some resentment on the part of the (West) Germans.

Although a great deal of work has been accomplished, there is still a lot to undertake. East Germany continues to have a relatively high unemployment rate. It is common knowledge that many older, jobless East Germans look back fondly on the job security they had in the GDR. The GDR has also developed some cult-like status in the past fifteen years or so, also known as “Ostalgie” or “Eastalgia”. Germany is whole again, and that is still highly significant to many people, especially to those who remember a divided nation, divided families, and the threat of a “hot” war between East and West, which in Germany’s case would have meant a war between brothers.

II. PREVIOUS LITERATURE

Two types of studies are relevant to my project about myths in oral testimony from refugees who fled from the GDR to West Germany, namely interview literature dealing with refugees who fled from the GDR to West Germany and oral history studies, not necessarily specific to this group, that include an analysis of myths present in oral testimonies. There are three oral testimony sources that are particularly relevant to my study which I plan to present in the next section.

A. Oral history testimonies from refugees pre-reunification

The first-ever compilation of interviews from GDR refugees who fled to West Germany was Erika von Hornstein’s *Beyond the Berlin Wall* (1962), originally published in German under the title *Die deutsche Not* in 1960. Von Hornstein gathered interviews, many of which were tape recorded between September 1959 and June 1960, from one
hundred and fifty refugees while they were in West German refugee camps. Thirty-six are presented in *Beyond the Berlin Wall* in narrative form, all of which are quite dramatic and most likely chosen from the one hundred and fifty interviews because she wanted to confront the reader with the same “suffering humanity” (xiv) that she was confronted with. The English translation contains an introduction by John Mander, who criticizes those who ask how free the free world is, in other words, those who question or doubt the notion of freedom in a democracy. Clearly in favor of West Germany, he declares that the reports from these refugees “are protests against tyranny and persecution: as such they are propaganda for a free way of life,” and that “they are only the cap of the iceberg,” implying that surely many more wrongs perpetrated in the GDR would come to light over time (viii). In Mander’s opinion, the interviewees have proven with their flight that life under communism is “intolerable” (vii). He ends with a powerful statement that emphasizes the potential usefulness and importance of oral history: “If Erica von Hornstein’s excellent book brings home the insufferable nature of the system which has been imposed on East Germany, and the unlikelihood of the East Germans becoming resigned to their lot, it will have done a human and a political service of great value” (x).

In her foreword von Hornstein briefly explains the context that led to the mass phenomenon of flight to the West and the struggle of the refugees. She also describes the act of narrating as fear-inducing for some of her interviewees and liberating for others, as the East Germans were “unused to freedom of speech” (xv). Although the author provides a brief description of the interview situation, she provides no analysis of the

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28 “I was no longer dealing with daily statistics in newspapers, I was confronted with suffering humanity: facing me sat a man in tears, a woman who got a heart attack when she began to speak” (von Hornstein xiv).
content of the interviews. The author expresses her negative perception of the GDR and communism. She makes it clear where she stands ideologically and praises the role of oral history: that we have the possibility of “directly” hearing the stories of those “ordinary people…who would otherwise remain dumb” (xiv-xv).

For Mander and von Hornstein the situation seems black and white. Certainly, the impact of such dramatic accounts on political views is significant, and one has to take into account that the Berlin Wall had been built only months before the introduction and foreword were written for the English version. Moreover, anti-communist sentiment had been growing steadily in the decade prior to the publication of these interviews, fueled in part by similar reports appearing in Western media. According to Hans Joachim Schröder, who published a survey on GDR interview literature, von Hornstein’s book “can be read as a testament to the Cold War” [“…Die Deutsche Not [kann] als ein Zeugnis des Kalten Kriegs gelesen werden…”] (my translation 85). With or without an obvious political agenda for conducting and publishing these interviews, von Hornstein clearly focuses on the human side of the East-West conflict in her publication, taking up only five pages of her almost three hundred page book with her own voice directly.

However, what do we do with thirty six dramatic and negative accounts of the GDR government, assuming they are all “true,” despite the fact that “as Erika von Hornstein points out, … refugees had an interest in stressing the political, rather than the economic or personal, motives for leaving East Germany” (Mander vii) and the interviews have been molded into flowing narratives? Is von Hornstein purposefully only showing the reader negative, dramatic stories? The last statement in her foreword suggests that she would like to draw attention to the plight of the East Germans remaining in the GDR:
“With this voice the book begins, and the stories of thirty-six individuals among the 3,700,000 refugees who have left 17 million people behind to live and keep silent in the Soviet Zone of Germany” (xvi).

The oral history process is very complex, and we cannot be too careful when it seems that there could be a dominating political purpose at hand. There is always a political perspective, of course, but oral history can be misleading if reality is being skewed for the purpose of a political agenda. Nonetheless, oral testimonies help the historian represent the past, which is reason enough to seek out more oral testimonies and other evidence and enrich the historical archive.

The next noteworthy publication of interviews conducted with refugees who fled from East to West Germany is Barbara Grunert-Bronnen’s *Ich bin Bürger der DDR und lebe in der Bundesrepublik* (1970). This compilation consists of twelve interviews with participants between the ages of 25 and 38 and conducted in 1969. It includes an introduction written by the author and an epilogue by Uwe Johnson. In her introduction Grunert-Bronnen lists some reasons why people left the GDR. She claims her interviews are not representative, but also do not present exclusive cases or rare refugee fates (8). According to her, West German as well as East German concepts of freedom have failed in the eyes of those she interviewed:

For those who speak in this book, the concept of freedom in the middle-class, democratic, capitalistic state has failed. The still as of yet undialectically handled socialist concept of “freedom as the insight into necessity” in the GDR has also failed. [Für sie, die in diesem Buch sprechen, hat, im weitesten Sinne, die Konzeption der Freiheit im formal bürgerlich-demokratischen, inhaltlich
kapitalistischen Staate ebenso wie die in der DDR noch undialektisch
gehandhabte sozialistische Konzeption der „Freiheit als Einsicht in die
Notwendigkeit“ versagt]. (my translation Bronnen 9)

She explains that her interviewees have various vocations and various levels of
education. Before each interview she provides a mini-synopsis of the participant’s life,
including first name, age, place of birth, year he or she fled, marital status, organizations
he or she belonged to, and in some cases the reason for fleeing. The interviews appear in
question and answer format, and according to the author, the interviews have been
minimally edited and only somewhat shortened (9). It is apparent that Grunert-Bronnen
asked each participant different questions. It seems as though she was trying to present
more of a panorama than an easy case for comparison. She does not provide any analysis
of individual interviews.

Uwe Johnson’s epilogue speaks very generally about the interviews. For the most
part he criticizes them and ends his epilogue saying that this is an example of what
“verstoßene Kinder,” essentially children that have been expelled from their home, (129)
sound like, after he had already compared their flight to a break-up of a relationship
(125). Apparently, the refugees simply could not take it anymore and had to get away:

Those who left barely needed one commonplace political provocation, much less
all of them at once: they were done with the GDR, they did not believe a word out
of her mouth anymore, they could not deal with her anymore, they could not stand
her voice anymore, the air had been let out of their balloon of trust, there was no
chance of it working: these were all expressions that one would normally use to
describe the break-up of a personal relationship [Wer nun ging, brauchte dazu
kaum einen einzelnen tagespolitischen Anlaß, und nicht einmal alle zusammen: er war mit der DDR fertig, er glaubte ihr kein Wort mehr, er konnte nicht mehr mit ihr, er mochte ihre Stimme nicht mehr ertragen, ihm war die Luft aus dem Vertrauen gelassen worden, es ging nicht mehr: alles Ausdrücke, mit denen die Auflösung eines persönlichen Verhältnisses kommentiert wird]. (my translation 125)

It is difficult to decide if Johnson is simply trivializing the experiences of these interviewees or giving credible insight into a possibly larger phenomenon of refugees leaving the East with very mixed feelings. It seems as though it is more the former than the latter, but given the nature of these interviews, one can hardly criticize him for his comments. However, he is not being fair towards all of the interviewees. Some of the interviewees do make allusions to the GDR as a police-state and explain the ways in which they felt limited in the GDR, such as not being allowed to study at university or express themselves freely.

However, although some of the interviewees state that West Germany provided more freedoms than East Germany, criticize the GDR for its propaganda about West Germany, and make references to some of the injustices occurring in the East, none of them tells the dramatic stories that von Hornstein’s interviewees told. Some of the interviewees even identify as socialists, though many of them state that they only became socialists after they went to the West; one interviewee explains this by admitting that one wants what one cannot have (85). Yet others cite familial reasons for leaving the GDR. By presenting a majority of interviewees with non-political motives for leaving, it seems as though Grunert-Bronnen was aiming for the opposite end of the spectrum from that of
von Hornstein, whose interviewees painted the GDR in a very negative light by focusing on the political injustices they had suffered there. Grunnert-Bronnen explains at the beginning of her book that her interviewees “were not just geographically, but also politically at home in the GDR” [“daß sie nicht nur geographisch, sondern auch politisch in der DDR ihre Heimat hatten”] (my translation 8). She explains that her participants are not meant to be representative of political refugees from the GDR (8). The disparity between these two volumes reflects the West German government’s need to distinguish between different types of refugees. The fact that the West German government did distinguish between them may have made some refugees emphasize political motives for fleeing.29 This is a point of critique of the data collected from the official interviews with the refugees.

In Grunert-Bronnen’s questions one sees a tendency on her part to appear more negative about the FRG than the GDR:

The interviewees were asked about the following topics: their socialist upbringing, their GDR-citizenship, if they would ever consider returning to the GDR and under which conditions, how they have experienced West Germany and what they criticize about her, how they feel about the New Left, current political topics, etc… [Die Interviewten wurden zu folgenden Themen befragt: zu ihrer sozialistischen Erziehung, zu ihrer Staatsbürgerschaft als DDR-Bürger, ob und unter welchen Bedingungen sie wieder in die DDR zurückkehren würden, wie sie die Bundesrepublik erfahren haben und was sie an ihr kritisieren, wie sie zur

29 “One should bear in mind, as Erika von Hornstein points out, that refugees had an interest in stressing the political, rather than the economic or personal, motives for
neuen Linke stehen, zu aktuellen politischen Themen etc]. (my translation Bronnen 9)

Most importantly, it is not clear if Grunnert-Bronnen directly asked her participants why they left the GDR because she does not include this question in her presentation of the interviews. At the beginning of her book, however, she explains that her interviewees left the GDR because the GDR had let them down: “They left because the GDR had disappointed them, pushed them away, held them down professionally; the GDR, as they say, left them in the lurch, did not keep promises, falsely applied theory in real life” [“Sie verließen sie, weil die DDR sie enttäuschte, sie zurück- und wegstieß, sie beruflich hintansetzte, die DDR sie, wie man sagt, im Stich ließ, Versprechungen nicht einhielt, die Theorie in der Praxis verfälschte”] (my translation 8). It was obviously not her intention to make their reasons for fleeing a focus of her book. What I appreciate about Grunert-Bronnen’s collection of interviews is the variety of opinions it affords. She interviewed people who did not dream of the “Golden West” and did not hesitate to criticize West Germany. Many of these interviewees have very mixed feelings on both Germanys,\textsuperscript{30} and this is extremely apparent in the interviews. Their indecisiveness can appear somewhat annoying, and ironically, it most likely would have been grounds for suspicion in the leaving East Germany. Their accounts are not therefore unreliable: the vast majority are patently, often harrowingly, truthful” (Mander vii).

\textsuperscript{30} “Especially young refugees and immigrants had problems integrating. They were thought of as being ‘caught between two worlds,’ because they came from one social system with certain values into another without knowing how to orient themselves. The West Germans, who were in a kind of host-role in relation to these newcomers, expected them to present a certain set of values” [“Besondere Integrationsprobleme hatten jugendliche Flüchtlinge und Zuwanderer aus der DDR. Sie wurden als ‘Gratwanderer zwischen zwei Welten’ bezeichnet, weil sie aus einem Gesellschafts- und Wertesystem in ein anderes kamen, ohne sich darin auf eine Weise orientieren zu können, wie es die Aufnahmegesellschaft von ihnen erwartete”] (my translation Ackermann 284).
GDR. But this volume demonstrates that not all refugees had the luxury of seeing the West in a dream-like way as the place where most or all of their problems would be solved and life would be great, but simply as another place with a different set of desirable and undesirable aspects. This, of course, does not fit with either of the German states’ political agendas and the media’s efforts to cast themselves and each other into strict binaries, in this case good and bad.

Grunert-Bronnen’s collection of interviews emphasizes to me how important it is to see that everyone who left, left something behind, and for some it was not just leaving their Heimat, but also leaving a system that in their opinion had more of a future, as one interviewee expresses (34). Ultimately, any refugees’ decision to leave and not return, and the sheer number of them as compared with those emigrating from West to East Germany, speaks louder than words, and it speaks loudly in favor of the West. Of course, not everyone who lived in West Germany was satisfied with its political system and way of life, but in a state that allowed freedom of speech, individuals in the West were perhaps more inclined to express their opinions, regardless of which political system these opinions favored. Not only do Grunert-Bronnen’s participants express that they are aware of this new freedom, but they also exercise it through their narrations and their critiques of West Germany.

Uwe Johnson points out that the interviewees were neither satisfied with East or West Germany, comparing them to children who could not be appeased, only moving to

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31 “Opposition [in the GDR] was not just undesirable, it was in fact forbidden. Many measures were undertaken in the 1950s to squelch opposition and severely punish perpetrators” [“Opposition war nicht nur unerwünscht, sondern praktisch verboten und wurde in der DDR in den 1950er-Jahren scharf verfolgt und strengstens geahndet”] (my translation Kowalczuk 74).
West Germany because they had been disappointed by the GDR (125). He obviously sees them as extremely pessimistic or, at the very least, resigned. Some of the interviewees were not going to be satisfied until their socialist dream was realized. Some even admit that they were pessimistic about their socialist dream coming to fruition in either Germany. However, as mentioned above, some admit that at least in West Germany they had the possibility of criticizing the socio-political system without the fear of being punished for it. So, ultimately, even if they did not necessarily appreciate West Germany as much as the majority of refugees did, they had the ability to take advantage of the newly established democracy in West Germany by raising their voices in the hopes of effecting change. They could raise their voices to stand up for certain positive aspects of the GDR, which the West Germans also needed to hear for the purposes of gaining a better understanding of the GDR from people who had personally experienced it. However, the author makes the reader question her political agenda through her apparent lack of objectivity and the favoritism she displays towards the GDR. This may have made the majority of her West German audience inclined to regard her interviews with skepticism as socialist/communist propaganda.

It is not difficult to understand why mixed feelings exist today about refugees who fled East Germany. Despite statistical evidence we will never know for the majority of refugees what truly dominated their decision to leave. The numbers, however, do speak for themselves. Something was obviously wrong. Oral testimony plays an important role in providing us with insight into this phenomenon in German history.

B. Post-reunification oral history testimonies
A post-reunification publication that merits close attention is Jürgen Kleindienst’s compilation of interviews with GDR refugees and people who experienced the growing border between East and West Germany up close and personally between 1945 and 1961 entitled *Von hier nach drüben: Grenzgänge, Fluchten und Reisen Deutschland 1945-1961; 38 Geschichten und Berichte von Zeitzeugen*. (2001). It is a compilation of interviews conducted after the fall of the Wall rewritten in narrative form. To the author it is clear that many people suffered greatly during the period of 1945 to 1989: “It is becoming clearer over time how severe and enduring the emotional damage has been for many who suffered trauma during that time on top of the traumas suffered during the war” [“Immer deutlicher wird, wie schwerwiegend und andauernd die seelischen Verletzungen sind, die viele Menschen in dieser Zeit zusätzlich zu ihren Kriegstraumata erlitten haben”] (my translation 27). He provides some of the reasons for this, such as East German specialists being “pulled out of their beds” (transl. 27) and deported to the Soviet Union in 1946 and students with the *Abitur*, the German high-school diploma that served as a prerequisite for entry into university, from being denied access to a university education because they came from middle-class families (28), for instance. Kleindienst states that almost three million people would not have left their *Heimat* for no reason (28). He also states that this was not only to the detriment of East Germany, but also to the “enrichment” of West Germany: “Even then the damage done to East Germany was obvious: it was the active ones, the defiant ones, who left and in doing so enriched West Germany” [“Schon damals ist übrigens zum Schaden Ostdeutschlands erkennbar: Es waren die Aktiven, die Trotzigen, die gingen und damit den Westen Deutschlands bereicherten”] (my translation 28). *Trotzig* or “defiant” is not always seen
as a positive characteristic, but applied to the East German refugees, Kleindienst sees it as positive, because they were defiant towards a regime he obviously did not agree with. It is also clear that Kleindienst feels for the families and friends of those left behind. This is evident in his recognition of the difficulties they had in maintaining contact and in the fact that he attempts to quantify them:

Family member and friends who stayed behind were also affected by the mass exodus. Only rarely, with difficulty, and often under degrading circumstances was it possible for them to maintain personal contact. That an additional three million people were affected in this way would be a conservative estimate [Betroffen von der riesigen Fluchtbewegung sind aber auch Familienangehörige und Freunde, die zurückblieben. Nur selten, beschwerlich und oft demütigend gelang es ihnen, persönlichen Kontakt zu halten. Vorsichtig geschätzt waren damit zusätzlich drei Millionen Menschen betroffen]. (my translation 28)

In other words, he estimates that six million people or more were separated from friends and family by the border. With the magnitude of people affected and the implications of such a separation, not knowing what the future would hold, one cannot help but find this disturbing. Kleindienst ends his introduction with a powerful statement that clearly shows his negative opinion of the East German government and his compassion for the many people who suffered greatly because of it: “The human tragedies did not interest the ruling officials much, and those affected will suffer from it for the rest of their lives” [“Die menschliche Tragik hat seine Regierenden wenig interessiert, die Betroffenen werden bis zum Lebensende darunter leiden”] (my translation 28). He holds the East German government accountable for the suffering, not
the ordinary East German citizens who stayed, though they were not *trotzig* enough for him, and least of all the refugees whom he praises and whose reasons for fleeing he defends. This has remained a common view for more than half a century.

Kleindienst’s comments are limited to his introduction. He provides no analysis specific to any of the interviews included in the compilation. The narratives deal with various experiences such as train experiences in a police state, being forced to spy for the Stasi, being separated from loved ones, reactions to the building of the Wall, smuggling individuals across the border, everyday life, fleeing via West Berlin, experiences in the emergency refugee centers and more. Most of the accounts are not overly dramatic, but seem rather matter-of-fact, without downplaying the scariness of the situation. It is a varied compilation and it does not seem as though the worst of the worst was selected for a general portrayal, and therefore there does not seem to be a strong political agenda here. The volume seems very genuine and believable and provides very good insight into the experiences of those at the epicenter of German East-West division. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that only refugees and those affected negatively by the border are given a voice here.

C. Schröder: an overview of German oral history studies up to reunification

Literature on interviews conducted in the GDR and in East Germany since reunification goes beyond the bounds of this project. Apart from this literature making up an enormous corpus and the fact that it does not deal with refugees who fled to West Germany, the minimal amount of analysis offered in the majority of these texts is not relevant to my project concerning myths in oral testimony. Hans Joachim Schröder’s
article, “Interviewliteratur zum Leben in der DDR; Das narrative Interview als biographisch-soziales Zeugnis zwischen Wissenschaft und Literatur” (1995), contains a compendium of the German oral history literature published up to 1989 dealing with life in the GDR. This article also discusses oral history in general and defines what an interview is and various ways that one can be conducted, listing some pros and cons associated with each. Moreover, Schröder discusses some of the problematic aspects of transcription and the form that interviews are given for the purposes of publication, such as being modified into narrative form. For instance, he states that only the recording of the interview is authentic in the strictest sense (112) and the authenticity decreases from there to the transcription, with the lowest degree of authenticity residing with the editing of an interview in written form, the most common being in the form of a neat narrative for the purposes of being easier or more pleasurable to read.

Schröder also lists the important refugee interview literature before the fall of the Wall, which, of course, also deals with life in the GDR. It is important to mention here that access to the East German people was denied to Western researchers for the purposes of oral history projects up until 1987 when historian Lutz Niethammer was finally granted access after having submitted applications to the East German government for many years. Refugee literature was therefore the only source of East German voices published by Western authors, which to many meant that it was uncensored.

In Schröder’s opinion, Erika von Hornstein’s Die deutsche Not is the most significant text in the whole scheme of German interview literature, and has to be seen as the earliest one to be based on tape-recorded interviews (80). This book established the genre in Germany (81). According to Schröder, the fact that the interviews, or at least
most of them, were tape-recorded was important because it meant that the public could expect a high degree of authenticity. The unmediated quality and great detail of the narrated interviews makes them plausible and convincing (84). However, I believe he also recognizes the political quality of von Hornstein’s book when he states that “it can be read as a testament to the Cold War,” but to that he adds that one would thereby, in some respects, not be doing the author justice (85). In other words, the interviews themselves are so valuable and primarily truthful in his eyes that giving the political side of the book too much weight would detract from the valid and powerful messages mediated through the narratives.

Schröder also discusses Barbara Grunert-Bronnen’s book, but he brushes it off as belonging to literature of the student movement (88), because he says that she interviewed leftist refugees about how they feel about the New Left in the West (88). However, he does allude to the possibly larger phenomenon of the brittleness of identity resulting from the move from East to West that is evident in Grunert-Bronnen’s interviews (88). This may be because her participants speak about both Germanys critically.

D. Myth in a GDR oral history study

Although GDR oral history studies lie beyond the bounds of my project, one such study, namely Beth Linklater’s “‘Die werden nicht mehr nach der DDR fragen’ – Narratives of the GDR: What Parents tell their Children” (2000) is particularly relevant, because it deals in part with myths in oral history. Moreover, unlike the majority of literature dealing with interviews conducted in East Germany before and after reunification, Linklater’s study is not a compilation of interviews, but rather a helpful,
even refreshing, presentation of her analysis thereof. I do not mean to discredit the idea of interviews speaking for themselves. However, the reader ought to be able to take into account the degree of subjectivity on the part of the compiler or editor of the interviews in the process of paraphrasing interview responses into narrative form and in the choice of interviews included in the collection. The reader can better interpret the author’s decisions if the author positions him or herself by way of an analysis of the interviews and of the interview process. Moreover, it is very useful and interesting to have an analysis from the person who actually conducted the interviews because that person is also affected by much more than just the words of his or her participants. The interviewer sees their emotions firsthand through their facial expressions and their body language.

Linklater’s study is in some ways quite similar to my own. Some of her interview questions resemble mine, but she has as few as 12 as opposed to my 30 to 50. According to Linklater, the starting point of her study was a consideration of the questions children born after reunification might ask their parents and the answers they might receive. Her analysis focuses on the “main issues raised in the interviews”, namely, “material security, physical safety, education, the specific situation of women, Ossi/Wessi stereotypes and the loss of a sense of community” (125). She considers two possible explanations for these results: storytelling, which includes myths to varying degrees, and the phenomenon of nostalgia for the GDR (125).

Linklater interviewed eight women and ten men, between the ages of 20 and 62, in Halle/Saale in Sachsen Anhalt in December 1997. According to the author, the background of the interviewees varied in terms of age, gender, social status and employment. She explains that her interview questions “were in no way intended as
limiting. The anticipated outcome was a dialogue, such as would take place between child and parent, grandparent or other relative” (126). This is largely what I also tried to achieve with my interview questions. After all, part of my project consists of analyzing the narration of traumatic events from an older generation to a younger one within a family. Linklater, however, found that “the most striking fact about [her] narratives” was “the positive impressions of the GDR that they present” (127). This was not the case for my study, but I will reserve this for discussion Chapter Two. For example, according to Linklater, almost every person interviewed brought up the topic of safety and expressed that they felt safer during GDR times, including physical safety and job security, etc. For her “this is certainly one of the strongest emotions which will be communicated to the children” (127). The issues she expected to be raised most often, namely “issues of democracy, freedom of speech, or the freedom to travel – those subjects which are often portrayed as the influential factors behind the Wende – were mentioned comparatively rarely” (133). In general, Linklater makes it clear that the interviewees sometimes contradicted themselves, which is an indication of what she calls an “intoxication” of the narratives “by all forms of myth” and the “self-justification” that often molds a life story (137-138). She explains that “idealization, like demonization, is a classic coping strategy” (138). Although Linklater discusses the effects of myth on narratives and collective memory, she gives only one example of a “possible ‘myth’” in the narratives of her study, namely that “the GDR stylises… the more general characteristics of friendliness, safety, and security” (138) without great explanation or discussion. She essentially offers a hypothesis for others to explore more in depth. She sounds somewhat unsure of her interpretation, which seems unnecessary, seeing that most of her interviewees expressed
in one way or another a belief in the security of one or more aspects of GDR life. This particular myth indicates that her participants do not believe that the GDR was entirely bad. The oral historian not only tries to determine what their participants believe, but also why. A belief might be the result of a coping strategy. It might be a self-justification. It might contradict other beliefs and it might contradict their actual experiences. When there is any indication of this type of contradiction we can safely identify the presence of myth. It is my goal to offer a deep analysis of the myths found in my interviews.

E. Myth in oral history studies not relating to Germany

I am including a discussion of *The Myths We Live By* (1990), edited by Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, because it is a compilation of articles by seventeen oral historians from around the world, who deal with myth in oral history. These authors explain why oral history is ideal for understanding the myths of the past, because understanding these myths is crucial for a better understanding of the past. Oral history is also ideal for understanding the impact of myth on personal and collective consciousness and memory. The definition of myth and types of myths analyzed vary greatly from author to author, from a traditional definition to more modern ones like Barthes’:32 for example, myth as the imaginary or fantasy, supernatural, non-fact, classical mythology, legends, etc.

Some of the articles deal only loosely with myth as it relates to oral history. Clearly, the connection between myth and oral history still requires a great deal of exploration. The process and science of analyzing myth in oral history still seems very

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32 One article in this compilation is Luisa Passerini’s “Mythbiography in oral history.” It includes a discussion of her application of Barthes’ ideas on myth in her oral history study involving car workers in Coventry and Turin.
fluid to me and for the conclusions that are drawn from such a process to be convincing it would be very beneficial for oral historians to provide very clear explanations of their process of discovering and analyzing myth in specific examples of oral history. This is one of the main reasons I intend to discuss in great detail the myths present in the interviews in my study. I intend to state my examples clearly and explain sufficiently how I think they are functioning. I believe this to be vital, not just because Barthes’ ideas on myth are very complicated, but also because I want my analysis to be accessible to a broad audience. In general, an analysis of myths in oral testimonies will always be somewhat subjective and therefore there will always be a place for discussion, which should be welcomed because it further perpetuates these life stories and interest in their historical context.
CHAPTER TWO

I. ORAL HISTORY: THE PRINCIPLES THAT GOVERN ITS USE

Oral history, or “history from below,” is used to complement “history from above,” or the official historical record. It is an opportunity to gain perspectives from ordinary citizens, which includes people whose side is not presented in the official historical record. It is often said that winners write history and non-winners, the oppressed in a certain situation, often do not have a voice. For example, George Orwell is quoted as saying: “Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past” (Silber 63). Oral history seeks to give everyone a voice. It also adds a personal dimension to the official historical record. However, it also has problematic aspects.

Because oral history is based on the testimonies of individuals, it is colored and limited by those individuals. It is limited to their experiences, memories, and perceptions. It is also colored by their motives in telling their stories. Subjectivity is therefore deeply embedded in their accounts. According to Samuel and Thompson, “Any life story, written or oral, more or less dramatically, is in one sense a personal mythology, a self-justification” (10). Oral history, especially in the Third World, is often used to bring attention to the plight of the oppressed, who would otherwise not be heard. In such cases, there are usually strong political motives in publishing such testimonies.

Memory and its problematic aspects must also be taken into account when conducting oral history projects. Memory plays many tricks on the mind and therefore on the past:
What we remember is in part what we imagine; imagination is necessary in order to give meaning to experience. Imagination and memory commingle, for each is necessary to the fulfillment of the other. Imagination is also needed to experience the future as the future, for we cannot remember the future, nor can we experience it directly. But through memory and imagination we can extend the present backward and forward beyond that specious now to achieve duration, the continuity of experience that enables us to hold in conscious suspension the past, the present, and the future. And in imagination we put ourselves in the place and point of view of others, an essential step in assessing the rightness or wrongness of our acts. (Silber 55-56)

Oral historical accounts can only be obtained as long as a person is alive and mentally fit. As Silber points out, even the mentally fit suffer memory loss:

But with each passing year the deposit of memory in witnesses diminishes; witnesses die or suffer the normal infirmities of recollection, in which recollection and imagination commingle to leave something less than accurate recall of events as they occurred. The difference in kind between what is only imagined and what is remembered is eroded if not entirely erased by many factors…[one of which is] the simple elapse of time and the natural erosion of memory as we age, an erosion that may terminate in senility. (Silber 57)

Not only can our memories of past experiences change over time in the sense of loss, but how we narrate our memories can also change them or alter our interpretation of them: “Schlomo Breznitz notes that talking or writing about memory can cause its erosion, for what is then remembered is supplanted by what was said or written” (Silber
The ever-changing nature of memory is one of many factors that impede a complete and accurate account of personal experiences.

Taking oral history’s problematic aspects into account, one can then use it for its advantages:

Oral testimony is not just a source of information, it is also ‘an event in itself’, a highly constructed performance which ‘might better be understood in relation to narrativity than to some empiricist notion of truth’. Story telling may, then, ‘take us closer to past meanings and certainly to subjectivity than […] the painstaking accumulation of fact’. (Linklater 137)

This was a significant objective of my research: to see how the GDR and West Germany were perceived by real individuals who experienced them. Oral history is ideal for determining human response to an historical event. The subjective response of my participants to life in the GDR and life in West Germany would indicate to me what the notion, “the West is better,” meant to real people, which would complement the more restrictive way “history from above” has explained and defined this notion.

II. THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

A. The participants

I began doing research on the phenomenon of fleeing to the West in 2004, and an integral part of that research was carrying out interviews with family members and family friends who had had to make a decision: should I stay in East Germany or should I try to get out? I had originally planned to include my grandmother in the project, but I realized early on that she was no longer mentally fit enough to be interviewed for the purposes of this project. She has Alzheimers. This demonstrates how limited oral testimony is as a
resource, in that it can only be obtained while someone is still alive and mentally fit. After that it is lost forever. That is why it is so important to question and listen to our parents and grandparents while we have the opportunity and for society to conduct oral history projects. Of the four women I interviewed for this project, two of them, Gretchen and Ursula (a pseudonym of her choice) made it out before the Wall was built and the other two (Tante Gitti and Lydia) waited until the next feasible opportunity, namely the 1980s, when the GDR regime became more willing to authorize trips to West Germany for its ordinary citizens and even approve petitions to leave permanently. In this study I am going to refer to my participants with the names that I used when I spoke to them, except in the case of Ursula. She requested that I use a pseudonym. I also always had to call her Frau … (Mrs. …) when I spoke to her and use the formal form of address. It is more natural for me to refer to them in this way in this study and in my opinion it gives an indication of our relationship. I will describe these individuals and their lives more in depth when I begin to analyze their interviews.

I would also like to comment on how the personal nature of my relationships with these participants has affected me and my study. This interview began as an attempt to understand my grandparents’ motives in fleeing the GDR. By interviewing people who were close to them and who had had similar experiences, I hoped to gain a good understanding of my family’s past. As a friend or relative of my participants I am concerned about being too critical of them. It is not my intention to put myself above them. One cannot help but feel obligations toward participants and be mindful of how they are presented in one’s work, especially when it involves people with whom one has a personal relationship. All of my participants have done me a great favor in letting me
interview them, twice. I know that in the past my Tante Gitti and Lydia have turned down requests to be officially interviewed about their lives in the GDR. I owe their participation in my project to our personal relationship.

B. The interview questions

In 2004 I created the first two sets of interview questions, one for the two women who left before the construction of the Wall and one for the two who remained in East Germany until after the Wall was built. I intended to understand their motives for fleeing or staying with an added gender dimension from the position of feminist theory. In 2009 I adapted those two sets of interview questions to accommodate my new intention of analyzing the role of myth in their oral testimonies, (see Appendices 1, 2, 3, and 4), giving me a total of four sets. I removed some of the original questions and added new ones. I removed questions for one of three reasons: I already knew the answer to a concrete question about the individual’s background from the first set of interviews, the question was no longer relevant, or the question did not elicit much of a response or seemed strange to them during the first round of interviews. Of the latter, one example is the question: “Did you know of any crimes against humanity?” In the case of Lydia and Tante Gitti, I removed the question: “What was your opinion about the strict borders and the lack of freedom of movement?” I did this because I wanted to avoid specific questions, in the hopes that my interviewees would bring up specific concerns of their own accord. That would indicate to me that those concerns play a role in their perception of the past.

Owing to the fact that I knew I would be analyzing the notion, “the West is better,” and concepts of freedom, I purposefully did not mention either of these ideas
directly. I added many questions about West Germany to both new sets of interviews that I hoped would elicit responses related to these concepts, but I was concerned that mentioning them directly might make any responses on their part possibly more forced and less natural. I added questions dealing with my participants’ experiences in the past talking about the GDR in West Germany. I hoped to gain an understanding of the role of oral history regarding the GDR in their lives. I wanted to see if there were any ways in which they felt restricted in their narrations. These questions and other questions specifically about their relationship to the West Germans were also meant to give me an indication of my participants’ views on their integration into West German society.

In general, I attempted to include many subjective and open-ended questions in order to hear their individual thoughts and opinions and also find out new things I had not even considered. Other questions were purposefully specific and were meant to fulfill a dual function: to elicit a response about something specific, and simply, to reveal a prior knowledge on my part, in the hopes that it would be apparent to my interviewees that I was not only interested in this topic, but also in carrying out a scholarly project.

The questions were intended to be subjective on their end and objective on mine. For the most part, I tried to include questions that did not presuppose their answer or show any bias on my part. I made some improvements in this area for the purposes of the second set of interviews. For instance, I removed the question to Gretchen and Ursula, “Why didn’t you want to be a member of the SED?” This question was presumptuous. I based most of my questions on what I had read about the GDR. However, some questions, no doubt, were inspired by stories my family told me. In the first interviews I asked about the Russian soldiers in the 1950s, because I remembered my grandmother
telling me about how they terrorized the German people after the end of the war. Similarly, I asked my participants if there was something they wanted, but could not have in the East, with my mother’s stories in mind about there not being any bananas. When creating my interview questions, I was undoubtedly operating with certain ideas from stories shared within my family.

C. Carrying out the interviews

It is important to mention that none of the original interviews were tape recorded because I did not want my participants to feel intimidated by a tape recorder and have that affect their answers. I felt they would be more open with me if I just took notes. The original interviews turned out to be what one could refer to as a “foot through the door.” Two of my participants were substantially more eager to do the second interview with me than they had been to do the first. On the downside, this lack of tape recordings to refer to proved to be somewhat problematic for a direct comparison between the original interviews carried out in August of 2004 and the second set carried out in January of 2010. Not only did I tape record the second set, but, as already mentioned, I also had variance among the questions between the two sets.

One of the original interviews, Ursula’s, had to be spread over two days, because it took longer than planned. That particular interviewee gave me a history lesson, one could say, before I was even able to really start asking my interview questions. I did not try to dissuade her from doing that because it was interesting to hear her perspective on the times and her version of history.

My plan for the second set of interviews was to keep the interviews as close to an hour in length as possible for logistical reasons. That meant that, depending on how each
participant answered the questions and how much I became confused or curious and asked for extra explanation and clarification, not each participant ended up answering every question. However, I preferred to let them speak freely with minimal steering on my part because how things were talked about, regardless of where they arose in the interviews, was often more interesting to me for the purposes of this study than receiving a short, concrete answer to each question. Most of the interviews ended up being a little over an hour. It turned out that my participants had a lot to say.

All but one of the interviews were carried out in the participants’ homes. Gretchen’s first interview took place in a café in Heidelberg. That could help explain why she was not as forthcoming in that interview. Gretchen and Ursula’s interviews all took place in the Heidelberg area. Tante Gitti and Lydia’s interviews all took place in their shared home in Bad Säckingen, on the border of Switzerland.

D. Transcribing the interviews

Transcribing the interviews proved to be a very complex endeavor. I took notes during the first interviews, mostly focusing on concrete answers, but also making some comments on my participants’ reactions. I wrote down some direct quotes if I found them to be useful. When I did not quote them verbatim, I still largely adhered to the language they used. I figured this method of collecting direct quotations or using their language would be the closest I could get to capturing their voice without a tape recorder.

The transcription of the second interviews was an arduous process, more time-consuming than originally anticipated. For the first interview I transcribed, Tante Gitti’s, I included most of the filler sounds like “em,” “eh,” etc., but then I realized I could not go on doing that for all the interviews. Those filler sounds were much more prevalent in that
first interview, therefore I decided that it was inappropriate to include them for all of the interviews. I included some filler sounds in the transcriptions of the other interviews if they seemed noteworthy or if there was a lot of emotion in the participant’s voice as these sounds were being uttered. In other words, I kept these sounds in the transcripts for the other three participants if I felt that they had meaning attached to them. I thought it might be distracting to the reader to include all of them. The interviews are the primary source for and the focus of this project, and I will refer to them extensively in my analysis.

For the purposes of this thesis I have translated the excerpts I used from the interviews into English. I follow every English translation with the original excerpt. I believe German-speaking readers of my thesis will appreciate their presence and the greater authenticity they provide.

III. ANALYSIS OF MY INTERVIEWS

A. Gretchen and Ursula: Fleeing before the construction of the Berlin Wall

i. Gretchen

a. Short biography

Gretchen was born in West Berlin in 1931. When she was twelve years old, she and her family went to Thüringen during the Second World War after her father died in combat. They went to live with her mother’s mother. In Thüringen Gretchen learned hairdressing and met her husband, who came from a middle-class family. The two of them eventually moved to Potsdam. In November 1958 they fled with their three-year old son to West Berlin on the S-Bahn. Gretchen’s parents lived there. Their primary motive for fleeing was that her husband was being pushed to spy on friends of theirs in West
Berlin, including Gretchen’s parents. Two years later they went to West Germany so that her husband could find more suitable work. They chose the Heidelberg area, because her husband had some relatives there.

b. The interview situation

My first interview with Gretchen took place at a coffee shop in downtown Heidelberg. Her husband had passed away only months beforehand. Her manner was very serious and her answers were curt.

The second interview took place at her new home, a type of assisted-living apartment, in a town near Heidelberg. She laughed and joked frequently during this interview, and she was much more eager to talk than she had been during the first interview. However, her demeanor changed when sad, personal topics arose. This time, she decided to tell me specifically why she and her husband had fled East Germany. During the first interview she only alluded to things that the state had asked of her husband, but which he was not willing to do. It was in the second interview that I found out that her husband had been asked to spy on friends in West Berlin, including Gretchen’s parents. After our interview she expressed to me that she had been worried about giving these people any reason to wonder if he had spied on them, although she claims again in the second interview that he never would have done that. Her decision to confide in me was very heart-warming because it showed me that she trusted me enough to be open with me.

c. Analysis of Gretchen’s interviews

The descriptions Gretchen gives in both interviews and her reactions often evoke images, many of which have mythical character, because they are not concrete. For
instance, in her first interview she explains that she receives goose bumps every time she hears the word “Genosse” (comrade) which is how members of the dictatorial political party in the GDR referred to each other. She describes the GDR as smelling like a “Scheuertuch”, or cleaning rag. In the second interview she paints a mythical picture of the West. She uses words like “Schlaraffenland,” (land of milk and honey) “Sekt” (sparkling wine) and “Glitzerwelt” (world of glitz) to describe West Germany. Earlier in the same interview she had expressed that it seemed like “the sun shone brighter” in the West [“Und das war auch so, als wenn hier [im Westen] die Sonne heller scheint“] and “the grass was greener” [“oder der Hafen\footnote{“Hafen” here most likely means “home.”} grüner ist“] (my translation Q16 I2). She followed that by saying that “everything was brighter” [“Es war alles heller!”] (my translation Q16 I2). I asked her why she thought it was brighter, and she answered: “Well, that is the impression one got. In the East they weren’t able to do much, and here in the West everything, the houses are in good condition and brightly painted” [“Na ja, das kommt einem so vor. Weil dort die Häuser, die haben nicht viel machen können, hier ist alles, die Häuser in Ordnung, schön hell gestrichen und so…”] (my translation Q16 I2). Though Gretchen does provide a concrete explanation for why the West seemed like a brighter place, it is clear that the external appearance of West Germany when she arrived there was particularly prone to acquiring mythical character and for coloring her general perception and description of the West.

Other mythical elements in Gretchen’s interviews include that she often speaks in absolutes. For instance, she says that there was “nothing” to buy in East German shops (Q2 I1). She is often very emotional, adamant and defensive with regard to various topics.
that arise. When describing a feeling she had, she often explains that she was not the only person who felt that way, or she asserts that “it really was that way! And I’m not the only person who saw it like that. I’ve even heard it from others” [“Es ist wirklich so! Und da steh ich gar nicht alleine da! Das habe ich auch von anderen gehört”] (my translation Q16 I2). This demonstrates that she often feels the need to justify her statements, as if I might not believe them on their own. Statements like these remind me of Barthes’ tautology hypothesis (defining like by like: it is because it is), but I find them much more complicated than tautology. She attempts to give these descriptions, which are almost completely void of explanation, credibility through asserting their veracity instead of explaining them. However, it is possible that I consciously or subconsciously made facial expressions at these times in the interview that she interpreted as disbelief or surprise on my part. It is also possible that she is in some way surprised by her own narrations. With all the time that has passed since her life in the GDR, these experiences might seem stranger to her now than they did to her then, when the memories of them were fresher and the experiences more appropriate to their historical context than to the more recent past and the present. She ends the interview with a profession of the veracity of her entire narration: “[My narration] is that which I know to be true. This wasn’t fiction; it’s the truth” [“Also, es ist das, was ich weiß, was wahr ist. Das war keine Dichtung. Es ist Wahrheit”] (my translation Q51 I2). A statement like this could have the opposite of the desired effect and make someone skeptical of her narration.

I also found contradictions among Gretchen’s statements. For example, when I asked her what she liked best about the GDR, she responded defensively with the rhetorical question, “What should somebody have liked best about it?” [“Was soll einem
da am besten gefallen haben?”] (my translation Q1 I2), but then follows with an example of something she liked about the GDR. In other parts of the interview I then found other aspects of the GDR that she found positive, such as the fact that now many of the East German women receive their own pensions, whereas she only receives sixty percent of her husband’s pension because she never worked in the West (Q15 I2). However, she often justifies her past as a homemaker by saying comments like, “Mothers didn’t all work back then” [“Mütter haben nicht alle gearbeitet”] (my translation Q12 I1) and “I got married young. I wasn’t even 21. And so I had to stop working” [“ich hab dann auch jung geheiratet, mit nicht mal 21 und da musste ich aufhören zu arbeiten”] (my translation Q2 I2).

In general, I found a strong bias against the GDR and for the FRG, which dictated most of her responses. This bias was also present in her first interview, but back then she did not describe the West excitedly in an elaborate, mythical way, but instead she adhered to very concrete answers. For example, when I asked her how she had imagined the West in the 1950s, she answered: “freedom” and “freedom of speech”. She then went on to say that from her visits to West Berlin she knew that the money in the West was heavier and the people were more open (Q23 I1). The differences in her descriptions of the West could have to do with the fact that I asked many more questions about the West in the second interview. It could also have to do with her serious and sad disposition during the first interview, which may have prevented her from seeing anything as “milk and honey.”

Although Gretchen was generally livelier and in a better mood during our second interview, I still found indications of a somewhat pessimistic attitude towards the present. For instance, she says the phrase, “That’s not the case anymore” [“Heute auch nicht
mehr”], or some variation thereof at least four times when speaking about certain things she found very positive about the West earlier in her life. She says it in reference to freedom of speech in the West, for example: “I knew that people could speak their mind. That’s how it was. That’s not the case anymore (last part whispered)” [ich wusste, wie es jetzt so geht, dass man sagen kann, was man denkt. So war es. Heute auch nicht mehr”] (my translation Q16 I2). It could simply be an example of a type of paranoia or nostalgia that comes with old age or it could be an indication that the mythical world of the West has crumbled around her, though she still clings to the mythical West of the past.

ii. Ursula

a. Short biography

Ursula was born in Potsdam in 1927. She was a trained kindergarten teacher, but never worked in this profession. She and her husband were self-proclaimed capitalists who decided to move from the country (in Brandenburg) to a big city (Potsdam) because they were being spied on and were under political pressure. In Potsdam, her husband was being pushed into going back to the country to recruit farmers into the GDR’s political party, the SED. He and his wife were against this, so they decided to flee on May 29th, 1960. On the day before, they had sent their two young children on the train to West Berlin, accompanied by relatives. Ursula and her husband wanted to take some belongings with them, so her husband used their boat to get to West Berlin, while she waited till he had safely crossed the river before crossing on the bridge. He wore a dark blue shirt that evening instead of his usual white, because a dark color is a harder target for border guards.

b. The interview situation
Both interviews with Ursula took place in her home in Sandhausen, near Heidelberg. My first interview with Ursula started out more like a history lesson and less of an interview. She spoke generally about the history of the GDR for roughly forty-five minutes before I was even able to ask the first question. In the interest of time we broke off the interview after two questions and resumed the following day. What struck me about Ursula was how self-assured she was and how authoritatively she spoke about the GDR. This was also the case in the second interview five years later. That time, however, we were able to get through all the questions in a little under an hour. Ursula also remained quite stoic throughout the interviews and, for the most part, would only smile or let out a small laugh if I laughed. After the second interview ended, she changed the topic to war, specifically the Iraq war, and expressed to me her view that war is always senseless and only leads to destruction. She then got out a picture for me of her late father, who had fallen in World War II, and asked me if this good-looking, young man deserved to die like that. Needless to say, we did not end on a very cheerful note that day.

c. Analysis of Ursula’s interviews

Ursula’s interviews seem void of specific myths. In fact, her answers seem very thought-out, almost to the point of sounding rehearsed. Unlike the other participants, she is quick to say she does not know the answer to a question and does not seem to take any time to think about it. It is in her lack of ability to let down her guard that one can spot myth, but myth more in the sense of something that is false.

It is clear to me that Ursula goes to great lengths to appear only in a positive light, specifically, as self-sacrificing, go-getting, clever, practical, insightful, wise and brave. She presents herself as self-sacrificing in most of the anecdotes she provides. By
“anecdote” I do not just mean examples or short references. She even begins one by saying: “I’m going to tell a little story” [“Ich erzähle jetzt mal eine kleine Geschichte”] (my translation Q25 I2). These are instances where she goes into detail and really tells a story. I could not help but get the impression that she has told these stories before. In fact, some of them were repeats from our first interview. Before our interview she told me that her granddaughter had interviewed her too for a project on the GDR in the year before our second interview. Her anecdotes often involve her trying to provide for her family. One anecdote deals with Ursula going to West Berlin to buy shoes for her daughter’s confirmation. Another deals with her in the East, offering the butcher coffee so that there would be liver available to her for purchase when she got off work. Another anecdote deals with her visit to the employment office in the West for the purposes of finding work. One could argue, though, that her attempt to portray herself in such a way, as being all the characteristics listed above, creates a mythical image of the women that fled the GDR, a type of super woman.

Such a solid self-justification seems too good to be true. I asked myself: what information has been sacrificed in the process of creating such a positive self-portrayal? It is in the rare instances where she loses her composure that one can see that she might be trying to hide something. For example, at one point, where she lets her guard down temporarily and lets herself potentially look bad, she gets flustered, defensive, and stops making sense. This occurred right after she described her first bad experience in the West, which involved going to the employment office and hearing one woman working there say to the other, “She can’t do much” [[Sie kann] nicht viel] (my translation Q33 I2). It is my belief that she is ashamed of her lack of education. When I asked her why
she thought the woman said this about her she became very defensive and responded in a smart, yet slightly belittling way: “I can’t answer why other people think that about me” [“Das kann ich nicht beantworten, warum andere Leute so was über mich sagen”] (my translation Q33 I2) She then begins to make it seem like it was a misunderstanding due to language differences between East and West, though this makes absolutely no sense in this case. It seemed like a desperate attempt to save face. The fact is, kindergarten teachers were not as in demand in the West as they were in the East because married women tended to be homemakers in the West and they could watch their own children. Ursula says at one point: “My children went to school, and I would have liked to work, but I didn’t know where they would then stay” [“Meine Kinder gingen zur Schule und ich hätte gerne gearbeitet, aber ich wusste nicht, wo sie dann bleiben würden”] (my translation Q34 I2).

I believe it is also this fear of looking bad in any way that prevents Ursula from being more critical of the job situation for women in the West, when, in fact, many other aspects of the interviews make me think that she would have received great validation from finding employment in the West. She speaks very positively about the job situation for women in the East, but seems reluctant to speak very negatively about the same in the West. It is this reluctance to allow herself to look bad and the resulting elisions, which make one long for a more complete, and possibly more genuine, narration, but this case demonstrates effectively one of the challenging sides of oral history. Not only do her interviews seem somewhat disingenuous, at various points in the second interview she also comes across as slightly condescending. This trait in any speaker is often a turn-off for the listener. For example, she more than once presents herself as smarter than other
people. She often describes herself as “clever” and she says at one point that she would not have allowed her children to stay at their first, communal apartment (shared with other families) alone in the afternoons, because “the people, who aren’t that clever, let’s say, stay living there, and that wouldn’t have been a good place for my children to be alone in the afternoons” [“die, die eher nicht so clever sind, sag ich jetzt mal, dass die dann da wohnen bleiben, und das wäre kein so gutes Milieu gewesen, in dem wir unsere Kinder hätten am Nachmittag alleine lassen wollen”] (my translation Q34 I2). Her attempt to appear like a critical thinker and very rarely mention or show emotions, detracted somewhat from the human dimension that I would expect from ordinary people telling their life stories.

Ursula dwells a great deal on the negative aspects of the GDR, but she does not speak nearly as much about the positive aspects of West Germany. She is adamant, however, that their decision to flee was the right one. In Ursula’s case, the notion that the West is better is simply that: that it was better when compared with all the negative aspects of the GDR, though she does explicitly mention much about West Germany that was indeed positive. In a way, one has to assume that it was the lack of these particular negative aspects that made West Germany “better.” In other words, what the idea, “the West is better,” seems to mean in Ursula’s case is not that the West was “great,” but rather simply a means to an end. The “end” that I am referring to is the “end” of a life in the GDR. The neighboring presence of West Germany represented a viable alternative to life in the GDR. When I asked her what she was hoping to attain or prevent by fleeing, she answered that she wanted to be able to “live more freely” [“freier leben zu können”] (my translation), prevent her husband from having to go back to the country to recruit
farmers into the SED, and to make it possible for their children to be confirmed in the Christian faith without having negative consequences in regards to their education (Q4 I2). This is actually her only explicit reference to freedom as it refers to West Germany. Freedoms in the West are only implied in her interviews in the sense that one has to assume that the lack of freedoms she extensively describes in the case of the GDR did not exist in the FRG. Had they existed there, too, it seems likely that she would have brought them to my attention. It is also possible that she assumed that I know that it is commonly accepted that West Germany was a democracy and that the freedoms that one associates with a democracy were indeed in place. Yet again, though, she does not pay these freedoms much lip service, just as she only gives very few explicit examples of what made the West “better” in general. When I asked her what was better than expected in the West, she says: “A lot, a lot!” [“Vieles! Vieles!”] (my translation Q35 I2). However, the only example she provides here is: “One could cook fine things for relatively little money” [“Dass man, also, für verhältnismäßig wenig Geld, feine Sachen kochen konnte”] (my translation Q35 I2). She does not dwell on the positive aspects of the West that one commonly associates with that time. She neither praises the freedoms in the West nor the economic situation. In general, Ursula seems ambivalent towards the economic prosperity of the West and seems to emphasize her and her husband’s own hand in starting a new life, though she does describe the various ways they received help from the West German government:

And then we stayed in a transition camp and we were actually, well not extremely excited, but we thought it was pretty ok actually. They had divided off spaces in huge barracks rooms with two bunk beds and a wardrobe and a table and we got a
bit of money and we had to take care of ourselves. And we thought that was, well, a good thing because it was somehow after all a new beginning and you don’t get anywhere if someone else always gives you your noodles and goulash, and we wanted to make it on our own. And then we came to St. Ilgen where we had temporary accommodations in a three-room apartment, in which one sixteen square meter room was ours. We had bunk beds as before, a table, a wardrobe, four chairs, and a cooking range in the kitchen…And this was meant to allow us to start a new life and we had to make sure we could make do with our money and everything else. And we saw that as something very positive, actually. Of course, it wasn’t a very fun situation, the four of us living in one room and having the other families there too, but back then it didn’t seem as bad as it might sound now. And then after eleven months we found our own apartment and had to start over yet again by buying new furniture and all these kinds of things. And that worked out as well. Of course, you can’t just sit idly and wait for your life to begin. [Did you and your husband find work easily?] My husband found work, but the eight weeks of unemployment seemed very, very long to him [und dann sind wir in Übergangslager…hier gebracht worden und wir waren da eigentlich, nicht hocherfreut, aber eigentlich fanden wir es ganz gut. Wir hatten in riesigen Kasernen-Räumen, einen abgeteilten Raum mit zwei Doppelstockbetten und einem Schrank und einem Tisch und wir kriegen ein bisschen Geld und mussten uns selbst versorgen. Und das fanden wir, also, positiv, weil es irgendwie ja doch ein neuer Anfang war, denn wenn man denn immer bloß seine Nudeln und Gulasch kriegt, dann bleibt man ja auf dem Stand stehen und wir wollten ja

It is difficult to determine if Ursula genuinely viewed the “positive” elements described in this excerpt as positive aspects of their new life in the West or if these statements serve to justify what she may have perceived as too little help from the West German government. These statements could also be another attempt to appear self-sacrificial. Starting a new life can be simultaneously frightening and rewarding in terms of meeting a challenge and that along with her disappointing visit to the employment office and her inability to work in West Germany while her children were young could explain the ambivalence she demonstrates toward the economic prosperity of the West.
I stated at the beginning of this analysis that Ursula’s interviews are void of myth, but that is not entirely true. Common myths about the West arise, but she brings them up as examples of how others perceived or experienced the West. She is aware of their existence, but she seems critical of these ideas, which means they do not arise entirely “innocently” (*Mythologies* 131) in her own speech. At one point she makes a reference to the prosperity of the West in the 1950s and 1960s, but it seems understated, almost like an afterthought, and it is not entirely clear to which extent she uses it to describe her own experience: “but, actually, the quality of life was improving back then, for many people, and that was pleasing” [“aber es ging damals eigentlich sehr bergauf, für sehr viele Leute, und das nimmt man dann erfreut hin”] (Q37 I2). When I asked her what she thought when others say that Germany never should have been reunified, she answered: “I think it’s those people [who are dissatisfied with reunification] who really thought grilled doves fly around in the West, and that you just have to open your mouth” [“Ich denke dann… [das sind die,] die wirklich gedacht haben, im Westen fliegen gebratene Täubchen in die Gegend rum, dass man bloß den Mund aufzumachen hat”] (my translation Q49 I2).

B. Lydia and Tante Gitti: Leaving for the West in the 1980s before the fall of the Wall

i. Lydia

a. Short biography

Lydia has been a friend of my great-aunt, Tante Gitti, for most of their lives. She was born in 1937 in Dessau. She attained a degree known as the *mittlere Reife* (successful completion of 10th grade), and during those school years she also did a one-year
apprenticeship in chemistry. From there she went on to attend a chemical engineering school (Ingenieurschule), where she became a chemical engineer. She worked in this field for various companies in East and West Germany. She never married and she never had children. In 1988 her petition to the East German government for permission to relocate to West Germany was granted. In that same year she moved in with her step-sister (a judge who had left the GDR in the 1960s for political reasons) and my aunt in Bad Säckingen, which is in southern Germany on the border with Switzerland. Within six weeks she found work at a Swiss company as a laboratory technician. Lydia left the GDR for personal reasons, not for political ones. She went to West Germany to be near her step-sister and my aunt.

b. The interview situation

Both interviews with Lydia took place at the home she shares with my aunt in Bad Säckingen. In both instances, I conducted my interviews with both women on the same two days five years apart. During Lydia’s interviews Tante Gitti was in another room, where she could not hear us, and vice versa. In both interviews Lydia was concise but thorough in her answers. She expressed to me that she wanted to get through the questions in a timely fashion. Like all my interviewees she was personable.

c. Analysis of Lydia’s interviews

Lydia’s set of interviews was the hardest for me to analyze, particularly her second interview. Many things just did not seem to add up, which makes her interviews lend themselves to an analysis of myth, but also shows the complexity involved in humans narrating their stories. Anyone searching for clear-cut answers would be largely at a loss if he or she were relying on interviews like Lydia’s. This is a clear case of
needing to piece confusing elements of a narration together to achieve a good understanding of someone’s experiences. That having been said, a great deal of speculation has gone into my analysis of her interviews because I have had to do this. Although on the surface it appears that she is extremely against the GDR (despite never showing any pleasure at the thought of its demise), and although she is adamant about never having been a believer in socialism, I believe that upon close inspection one can see that she is a person with socialist leanings.

One thing that I noticed right away as I was interviewing Lydia the second time, was her many negative statements about capitalism. In her first interview, when I asked her if she believed in socialism and communism, she said that she was a “firm believer in materialism [as opposed to ideology], because [she] was a scientist” [“Ich war vom Materialismus überzeugt, weil ich naturwissenschaftlich orientiert war”] (my translation Q12 I1). This led me to believe that she possibly had more faith in capitalism. Unfortunately, I did not ask her enough questions about the West to acquire a good idea of where she stood on capitalism. In the second interview she says that “[capitalism] is not the ideal either that one would wish for, even that isn’t it” [“[der Kapitalismus] ist auch nicht das Ideal, was man sich wünschte, es ist auch das nicht…”] (my translation Q24 I2). This alongside many other negative references towards capitalism puzzled me for a time. At first, I thought that her views on capitalism had simply changed over the last five years, if I had been right in assuming that she had had a more positive outlook on capitalism back then. However, that did not sufficiently explain the many other confusing elements about Lydia’s second interview. What perplexed me the most was how much she spoke about the economy of the GDR and how often she had wished it would have
flourished and how much she still seemed to wish that it had flourished. She made many references to a hope of socialism functioning as well, even though she claims that she was “never convinced of socialist or communist ideology” [“die Ideologie war die des Sozialismus und später des Kommunismus und eigentlich war ich nie davon überzeugt”] (my translation Q13 I2) and in the first interview she had said, “Ideology was transformed into law of nature, and I didn’t think that was good” [“Ideologie wurde zum Naturgesetz gehoben und das fand ich nicht gut”] (my translation Q12 I1). I asked myself: why would Lydia care so much about the success of the economy of a “dictatorship” (Q2 I2) where “the freedom to make personal choices was missing and [where] so much crap was done” [“[wo] die Freiheit der persönlichen Entscheidung fehlte und [wo] so viel Mist gemacht worden ist…”] (my translation Q11 I2)? She even says at one point in her second interview that that if anyone asked her where she was from (I assume in the West) that she was “embarrassed to be a citizen of the GDR!” [“mir war es einfach peinlich, DDR-Bürger zu sein!”] (my translation) and told people instead that she was from Potsdam (Q11 I2). I believe that the reason that she cared so deeply about the success of the GDR’s economy, despite claiming not to be very interested in money herself (Q39 I2), is because she did and does have socialist tenets, but many doubts at the same time. I also believe that it is because she worked so hard for the sake of socialism functioning that she did not and does not want to believe it was all in vain. In the first interview she had described her attitude towards socialism as: “We are working for socialism. We all want the best” [“Wir arbeiten für den Sozialismus. Wir wollen alle das Beste”] (my translation Q8 I1). The quotes from her second interview that make me believe she is a proponent of socialism are the following:
Of socialism, that one could somehow, that it was maybe an ideal that one could realize, that was something that one still believed in somehow at that time [in the 1950s] \(^{34}\) [Vom Sozialismus, dass man den Sozialismus irgendwie, dass das vielleicht ein Ideal wäre, mal zu realisieren, das glaubte man in der Zeit [in den 50er Jahren] schon noch irgendwie]. (Q13 I2)

Earlier, in 1968, at the time when Dubcek wanted reform in Czechoslovakia. We sat by the radio at work and cheered. We said, Mensch, finally someone who wants to reform something, wants to improve something in socialism and such. Then socialism would still have a purpose and meaning. We were young … and we always gushed about a convergence theory. We said, a socialist state with methods like here [in the West], but the economy needs to be self-sufficient, but also under certain conditions. We said, an economic branch for communal services like electrical power supply, and post office banks, they belong under the control of the state, but everything else, that belongs to private enterprise. That was always our idea. (laughter). And we were of the opinion, nothing can go wrong that way. Such crises can’t get out of hand, but maybe it’s just wishful thinking. Whether or not it’s realizable, that’s actually how I still think today, when I see now what has come from the bank crisis and

\(^{34}\) It is not clear if Lydia is speaking here about her own school years and herself specifically or about the 1950s and people in general. Lydia and Tante Gitti, especially, use the German indefinite or generic pronoun, “man” (“one”), in a somewhat vague manner either to refer to themselves individually, to themselves as part of a group, or to people in general. Gretchen and Ursula’s use of “man” was generally clearer to me.
such, and what was done, then I also doubt this system [Wir haben früher, also in 1968, als in der Tschechei der Dubcek Reform wollte, da haben wir im Betrieb am Radio gesessen und haben gejubelt, haben gesagt, Mensch, endlich mal einer, der was reformieren will, was verbessern will im Sozialismus und so. Dann hat der Sozialismus noch einen Sinn und eine Bedeutung, wir waren jung und haben gesagt, wir haben immer für eine Konvergenztheorie geschwärmt. Haben gesagt, ein sozialer Staat, der so ist, wie mit seinen Methoden wie hier [im Westen], aber die Wirtschaft muss selbstständig sein können, aber auch unter bestimmten Bedingungen. Wir haben gesagt, also, so gemeinnützige Wirtschaftszweige wie Energieversorgung, Postbanken, die gehören in staatlicher Hand und alles andere, das gehört privat. Das war immer so unsere Idee. (laughter). Und da waren wir der Meinung, so kann sich nichts ausufern. Solche Krisen können nicht so ausufern, aber es ist vielleicht nur ein Wunschdenken. Ob es realisierbar ist, so denk ich eigentlich heute noch, wenn ich jetzt sehe, was durch die Bankenkrise und so was, was da so gemacht worden ist, dann zweifele ich an diesem System]. (my translation Q39 I2)

She blames the failing economy in the East on the leaders of the SED party: There were so many smart, expert economists, but they could never achieve their ideas, because the party executive committee always stood above the economic management of a company. The party executive committee decided everything in the end. They could put all of their energy into making good suggestions and such, but if it didn’t fit into the framework, then it simply wouldn’t do. That’s
why the economy never was able to take off, like how it had taken off in the West
[Es gab so viel kluge Wirtschaftsexperten, aber die konnten nicht ihre Ideen
durchsetzen, weil über der Wirtschaftsführung eines Betriebes immer noch die
Parteileitung stand. Die Parteileitung hat am letzten Moment alles entschieden.
Und da konnten die sich auf Kopf stellen und gute Vorschläge machen und sonst
was, aber wenn das nicht in den Rahmen reinpasste, dann ging das eben nicht.
Deshalb konnte die Wirtschaft auch nie so vorankommen, wie sie
vorangekommen ist im Westen]. (my translation Q12 I2)

I believe Lydia is bitter towards the leadership of the GDR for all that it did to get in the
way of a thriving economy. I believe that that is one of the main reasons she speaks so
negatively about the GDR: “There was especially a lot that one criticized [about the
GDR]” [“da [in der DDR] gab’s eben besonders viel, was man kritisiert hat”] (my
translation Q14 I2) and “there wasn’t a whole heck of a lot [that was positive about the
GDR] [“Gab’s nicht allzu viel [Positives an der DDR]”] (my translation Q47 I2). Her
apparent socialist ideals, together with her blatant disappointment with many aspects of
the GDR, make her portrayal of the GDR vague. It only becomes clear to me when I see
her as an individual with certain socialist ideals who is bitter towards a state leadership
that prevented her socialist dream from being realized. I believe we see here a lack of
ability on Lydia’s part to reconcile her socialist idealism with the reality of the GDR: a
sort of love/hate relationship.

I wonder too if Lydia’s seemingly growing distrust of capitalism has not
encouraged her to embrace her socialist tenets, the extent of which has possibly been
changeable over the years. This would make sense in the above scenario and it would
make sense in the next two possible scenarios that I am going to propose. Lydia admits early in her second interview, question 13, that, in her youth, when they (I assume she means herself and her peers) would speak with people who were against socialism, they would use what they had learned in school to try to dissuade them and tell them that “socialism [was] good for people” [“der Sozialismus ist gut für die Menschen…”] (my translation). Similarly, when people praised socialism, they would “all say, the way it is, we don’t want it, we want it in a different way”35 [“so wie es ist, so wollen wir den nicht haben, wir wollen den anders haben”] (my translation Q13 I2). I wonder if she still uses a similar tactic. If she does, that makes it difficult to trust her answers. However, it could also be an indication that she does not really know where she stands with regard to the two systems or that she does not know where she wants to appear to stand. Lydia’s interviews demonstrate that people are not static entities and that opinions do not always fit into clearly defined categories.

Lydia criticizes many aspects of capitalism. She criticizes the lack of job security in the West (Q24 I2), the vast range in salaries (Q32 I2), the overabundance in the variety of products in stores (Q33 I2), and the growing rate of unemployment (Q39 I2). One interesting point is that one of the few instances where she refers to emotions is when she describes being in a West German grocery store, soon after arriving in the West, having

35 Lydia is admitting that she has essentially played “Devil’s advocate” in the past on the topic of socialism: varying her answers in response to the opinion of the other person for the sake of argument. To which extent can we trust that her expressed opinions are her true ones? Are instances where someone has already expressed his or her opinion the only instances in which Lydia expresses views that might not actually reflect her real opinions? I wondered if this was an example of Barthes’ idea of “inoculation”: admitting a small evil to disguise a larger one (Mythologies 150), the larger “evil” being that she possibly does not have any firm opinions on certain topics, but that she wishes to appear in control of the situation, nonetheless, by playing “Devil’s advocate”.
to choose a cheese among “1000” cheese varieties, and “being closer to tears than anything else” [“dem Heulen näher als allem andern”] (my translation Q33 I2). She expresses in her interview that “in hindsight, three or four cheese varieties were sufficient” [“im Nachhinein war ich der Meinung, das genügt doch auch, das reicht”] (my translation Q33 I2). Although she found work in her field very early on in West Germany, she describes this as “having a lot of luck” [“Mit der Arbeit, da hatte ich Glück, großes Glück gehabt”] (my translation Q32 I2). In addition, she blames West German businesses for purposefully “trying to make as many East German companies bankrupt as possible” [“da haben die [w]estlichen [Betriebe] dann natürlich versucht, möglichst viele [östliche] Betriebe platt zu machen”] (my translation) after reunification, because, as she explains, they did not want those companies to be able to compete with them (Q49 I2).

I found a very ambivalent mentality on her part towards the lack of freedom of speech in the GDR, even though she says that that is what bothered her most of all (Q2 I2). She says she had “the freedom to express [her] opinions despite this and [she] didn’t hold back” [“In der Zeit hab ich trotzdem die Freiheit gehabt, meine Meinung zu sagen und da war kein Hehl zu machen”] (my translation Q2 I2) but then she admits that her colleagues told her: “Watch your mouth, don’t be so hasty and so cheeky; no good will come of it” [“du, nimm mal dein Mund nicht so, sei nicht so voreilig mit der (laughter) mit deinem Mund und so vorwitzig. Das tut dir nicht gut”] (my translation Q2 I2). She then admits that one had to be careful not to “exaggerate” [“übertreiben”], because that could be dangerous:
because then you ran the risk of well, yeah, being spied on. Or if you really didn’t
watch yourself, then you could be deemed politically, I guess, inappropriate and
then things could get really bad and you could be imprisoned or something, but,
well, the danger of that happening never existed for me. I always had the feeling
(laughter) that I could find the right balance [weil man dann in die Gefahr lief,
eben dann doch irgendwie, na ja, beobachtet zu werden oder, oder wenn man´s
noch schlimmer trieb, dann eben als politisch, was weiß ich, unangemessen galt
und dann ganz schlimm dran war und vielleicht auch eingesperrt wurde oder so,
aber, also, die Gefahr bestand für mich nie. Ich hab immer das Gefühl (laughter),
dass ich da irgendwie so, so das Gleichgewicht finden konnte]. (my translation Q2
I2)

Here we have a vague description of the freedom of speech or lack thereof in the GDR. I
also see a sense of pride on her part in her ability to navigate effectively around this
infringement upon their freedom. I cannot help but feel that she is in some way belittling
the lack of freedom of speech. Although she claims that she never experienced negative
consequences because of something she had said, she seems to have been aware of the
real possibility of these negative consequences. It is enlightening to hear a new
perspective on the lack of freedom of speech in the GDR.

There is one restriction in the GDR, however, of which she is consistently critical,
namely, the freedom to travel. In the first interview, she explains that “one had the feeling
of being imprisoned” [“Man hatte das Gefühl, eingesperrt zu sein”] (my translation Q5).
In the second interview, she explains that she felt very “limited” by the lack of freedom
to travel (Q12). When I asked her in the second interview about what was better in the
West than expected, she answered first with “actually everything” [“eigentlich alles”], which seems to contradict many of her other comments about the West, but then she followed with: “Well, the fact alone that one could travel” [“Ja, schon allein, dass man reisen konnte”] (my translation Q34 I2). Her strongest statement against the Wall was: “Then after the construction of the Wall, I was a bit older. That was just terrible. I would have preferred to leave above all else, but I no longer had the guts to do that, because the danger of losing my life in the process was too big” [“dann nach dem Mauerbau war man dann auch ein bisschen älter. Da war das nur furchtbar. Da wäre ich auch am liebsten abgehauen. Aber da hatte ich dann nicht mehr den Schneid dazu, das zu tun, weil einfach die Gefahr, dass man ums Leben kommt dabei zu groß war”] (my translation Q29 I2).

She had also expressed in the first interview that the construction of the Wall had made her wish she had fled (Q5 I1).

Apart from the assumption that traveling is a necessary part of leading a fulfilling life, myth as it relates to the idea “the West is better” creeped into Lydia’s interviews in other ways as well. We see a small example of it slip into her speech, but mostly we see that she is aware of it and critical of it, just as in Ursula’s case. The small example of it stealing into her speech is seen in her description of her only trip to West Berlin during the life of the GDR. When I asked her if she had noticed anything in particular during this trip, she replied: “Just that everything was much nicer, and more colorful, and, I don’t know, livelier. That’s the truth” [“Nur, dass alles viel schöner und bunter und, was weiß ich, lebendiger war. Das ist schon war”] (my translation Q22 I2). She did not proceed to give examples or to explain in any manner what made her describe West Berlin in this way. I can imagine her talking about this trip with her friends and family and using some
of the common myths of the day to describe her experience, making her remember it today as such. As Silber observes, “Some things that never happened nevertheless are true” (65). They become true through being remembered and probably narrated in a certain way over and over again. Even if she did experience it in the way that she describes, I believe the speed and bluntness of her answer and the vague, yet powerful adjectives indicate the presence of myth. For the most part, however, Lydia seems to be aware and critical of myths like “the golden West”: “Actually, I came without the illusion that I would find a land of milk and honey here” [“Ich bin eigentlich ohne die Illusion, dass ich nun hier einen Schlaraffen finden würde, die Illusion hatte ich nicht”] (my translation Q32 I2). Similarly, she criticizes the East Germans for calling for the Deutschmark so soon after the fall of the Wall: “Menschenskind, you should know how capitalism works and that it won’t get you any farther. You suddenly wanting the D-Mark is simply wrong” [“Menschenskind, ihr müsstet doch eigentlich wissen, wie der Kapitalismus funktioniert und das bringt euch nicht weiter, wenn hier jetzt auf einmal die D-Mark wollt, dann ist das falsch einfach”] (my translation Q49 I2).

One can really only speculate as to what the idea, “the West is better,” has meant and means to Lydia. I believe she demonstrates too much variation in her perspectives and too much ambivalence for this idea to have a stable meaning for her. It seems to mean greater individual freedom. She expresses an appreciation for democracy a couple times in her second interview, but she only speaks about it in a theoretical way. I believe that, depending on what suits her at a given moment, this idea can grow and weaken considerably, but often, one simply will be left with an ambiguous picture. It is then the listener’s choice either to select some things and ignore others for the purpose of clarity,
or to draw his or her own conclusion in other ways. Clarity and certainty may never be found, and that is another reason why oral testimonies create as many new questions as they answer. This demonstrates how oral testimonies force us to question our assumptions. They encourage us to appreciate that opinions are not fixed or static.

In Lydia’s case I expected her knowledge of me as the granddaughter, daughter, and great niece of GDR refugees and as the daughter of an American army officer to influence her answers more than it has appeared to have done. Her many remarks about the failure of capitalism and about her hope at various times of her life of socialism succeeding, make me believe that she was not worried about offending me. I believe she felt comfortable in the interview situation and that her views were not influenced by any perceived loyalties on my part toward GDR refugees and toward capitalism.

ii. Tante Gitti

a. Short biography

My Tante Gitti, whose given name is Brigitte, is my grandmother’s sister. She was born in 1937 in Berlin, Spandau. She attended a chemical engineering school (Ingenieurschule), but, unlike Lydia, she graduated with a qualification below that of chemical engineer. Tante Gitti went on to work in the pharmaceutical industry (Pharmazeuten-/Apotheken-gesellschaft) in the GDR for many years, but she felt bullied in the workplace. She explains that she simply did not fit in there and that she could not adapt. Her friend, Lydia, asked around at her work to see if there could be a position available for Tante Gitti. She was able to switch jobs. At her new job she tested the water and the sewage water around Berlin. She was not satisfied with this job either for various reasons. According to Tante Gitti, the place was “crawling with Stasi” [“Das wimmelte
nur von Stasi”] (my translation Q21 I2). In addition, she did not like that the scientists there were forbidden to speak about the results they found. Finally, she found it too different from her previous work. All this, she says, made her contemplate staying in the West if she were allowed to cross over for a visit. Like Lydia, she was not married and she did not have any children. She considers her main motives for fleeing to be personal ones, though she says that “the political question” [“diese politische Frage”] also played a role (my translation Q21 I2). In 1985, Tante Gitti requested permission from the East German state to visit my grandmother near Heidelberg to celebrate her 60th birthday. She was granted this request for a visit and she never returned to her life in the East as was required in the official authorization of her trip.

b. The interview situation

In our family, Tante Gitti is known as a talker, which turned out to be no different in the interviews. For this reason, and in the interest of time, I had to skip twenty-three of the fifty questions in the second interview. As it was, Tante Gitti’s second interview lasted longer than any other participant’s second interview, with a duration of one hour and twenty-four minutes. In addition to being a talker, she also uses many filler sounds and filler words, which also took up a great deal of time. In general, Tante Gitti was a very animated participant, more animated in the second interview than she had been in the first. Her reactions were usually fairly dramatic. Her tone would change a great deal, as would her facial expressions and her gestures. Tante Gitti was anything but stoical: in fact, she seemed to wear her heart on her sleeve, as they say, which gave the interview a lot of character and made it livelier. In my opinion, her blatant expression of her feelings allowed for a seemingly more genuine narrative. Her changing expressions as she spoke
also gave me the impression that I was watching someone take a stroll down memory lane. It was thrilling to me to see my Tante Gitti excited about her own life, the good and the bad.

c. Analysis of Tante Gitti’s interviews

The first thing that struck me about Tante Gitti’s interviews was how consistent her answers were between the two sets. However, unlike Ursula’s, her answers did not seem rehearsed. She talked about many of the same topics and experiences, but in a fresh way. Her answers did not seem structured or organized in a way that would make me think she had talked about these things often in the past, even if that is not the case. She spoke about some of them almost as if she were remembering them for the first time in a long time, though I know that not to be the case because many of her answers were the same as in the first interview five years before. For instance, when I asked her in the second interview if there was anything she felt she could not or should not mention about the GDR when speaking with West Germans, she begins her answer by saying that she was “lucky never to have had a dramatic experi-” [“zum Glück hatte ich nie einschneidende Erleb-”] and before she can finish the sentence she says, “Yes! Something bad did happen once” [“Ja! Ich hatte mal eine schlimme Sache”] (my translation Q42 I2). She then brings up an experience she told me about in the first interview: that she forgot to vote while she was on vacation, which made her coworkers extremely cross with her, even to the point of bringing it to the boss’s attention. The boss then confronted her and said that “This is the kind of thing one simply does not forget!” [“So was kann man nicht vergessen!”] (my translation Q42 I2). As Tante Gitti explains: “I was relatively politically active at that company, and I of all people did not vote” [“Ich
war in dem Betrieb relativ engagiert und habe dort gesellschaftliche Arbeit geleistet und
dann war ich ausgerechnet nicht bei der Wahl’’] (my translation Q42 I2). Tante Gitti said
this was an instance where she was truly afraid in the GDR (Q42 I2).

Two things that remained consistent between the two interviews was Tante Gitti’s
reasons for staying in the East when she could have fled before the construction of the
Wall, and how she felt about that decision for the rest of her life. In both interviews, she
states that she felt she was too young in the fifties and early sixties to contemplate
fleeing. In the first interview she adds that “although everything was better over there (in
the West), one didn’t give up one’s Heimat for that” [“Drüben (im Westen) ist alles viel
besser, aber man hätte nicht seine Heimat aufgegeben dafür’’] (my translation Q3 I1). She
adds in the second interview that she was “afraid of leaving everything behind, losing
everything, and building a new life” [“Ich hatte ein Mal Angst, alles stehen und liegen zu
lassen, alles zu verlieren, und einfach ein neues Leben aufzubauen’’] (my translation Q4
I2). Another reason she gives for originally staying in the GDR in both interviews was
her fear of unemployment and having to compete for jobs, which she attributes in the first
interview to East German propaganda (Q4 I1) (Q8 I2). However, in her first interview
she also says that she would have left before the construction of the Wall if she had
known what she knew later (Q5 I1). In both interviews she also says that the building of
the Wall did not make her regret at the time not having fled while it was still feasible.
One thing that was different in the second interview, however, was her reaction to the
building of the Wall. In the first interview she says that it in itself did not scare her (Q5
I1), but in the second interview she describes that day in detail and says how sad it was
(Q7 I2).
Tante Gitti’s employment situation colored much of her perception of both Germanys. Her dissatisfaction with her jobs in the East was the driving force in deciding to illegally relocate to West Germany in 1985. The combination of her thoughts on the employment situation in general in the West and her thoughts on her own employment situation in the West presents itself as a complex topic. She captures the complexity, with its appeal and its dangers in describing a capitalistic economy. She seems to have very mixed feelings on the job situation in West Germany, which one sees in that she vacillates between opposing views. For instance, in the first interview, Tante Gitti said that “it was one-hundred percent nicer to work in the West than in the East, because in the West one could choose” [“Es war hundert prozentig schöner im Westen zu arbeiten als in der DDR. [Im Westen] konnte man auswählen”] (Q3 I1). She repeats this in the second interview, but she says it in an almost sarcastic way, as if it were a hard task to choose. She begins her answer to the question, “What were the hardest moments in the West in the beginning?” by saying, “Here (in the West) I had the big situation again, the nice situation, in the beginning, of having a choice” [“Ich hab ja hier wieder die große Situation, die schöne Situation, gehabt, dass ich als ich hier ankam jetzt die Wahl hatte”] (my translation Q33 I2). She then goes on to describe the hardship of finding a job in her field due to her lack of experience with more sophisticated technology, which seems to contradict her statement that it was entirely better to work in the West because of freedom of choice in the work arena. However, her inability to find a job in her field right away supports another view she presented both times I interviewed her. In both interviews she said she was really worried about the problem of high unemployment rates in the West and she described the “struggle to live” (*Lebenskampf*) or struggle to earn
one’s keep as much harder in the West than in the East. However, the fact that she did 
find work should make these fears seem exaggerated to her in hindsight, but they do not. 
She maintains that the “struggle to live” is one of the worst aspects of life in the West 
(Q36 I2). When she arrived in the West friends helped her get a job at the city hall. 
According to Tante Gitti, had she waited for the official employment center to find her 
work, she never would have found a job (Q32 I2). Over a period of five to six months she 
was turned down for many jobs with pharmaceutical companies, but at the end of this 
period, she found a position as a laboratory assistant at one of them. Just as in Lydia’s 
case, Tante Gitti was hired for a job beneath her qualifications, but her salary made up for 
this in Tante Gitti’s view (Q32 I2), which brings me to a discussion of her largely 
mythical description of money when talking about her life in the West. 

Tante Gitti never mentioned money in the West in her first interview, which is 
probably due to the fact that I never asked her any direct questions about her life in the 
West. She did, however, say that everyone could speak freely about money in the East 
because everyone, except those in power, earned the same. In the second interview she 
speaks a great deal about money in the West. She begins her discussion of money by 
justifying a job below her qualifications with a salary that was “miles above that, which 
we earned in the East … it was definitely an amount with which one could live” [“denn 
auch Laborantengelder waren hier, also, himmelweit überlegen, gegen das, was wir 
drüben hatten … Also, das war schon ein Geld mit dem man leben konnte”] (my 
translation Q32 I2). Two interview questions later, the topic of money in the West came 
up again. It was in response to question 34, “what was better than expected in the West?” 
This is where I saw an almost fantastical or mythical description of money in the West.
One thing that was better than expected in the West was “finally having money in my hand” [“endlich mal Geld in der Hand zu haben”]:

I had the sensation right away from the beginning that we had money here. The first thing that I was supposed to do was open a savings account. I said, “why should I open a savings account? I don’t have any money!” “Oh, it will come.” And it really was like that. I opened my savings account. First came unemployment compensation. After all, I was unemployed for a certain amount of time in the beginning until I started at my job. Then I noticed that I’m getting a bit of money from the state. It had transferred some money into my account, a type of start-up help, you know? Then I got a tax refund after I had been working for a year and had had to file a tax adjustment. You know? I had worked and I had had to buy furniture and this and that and this was all considered acquisition. And then I got a tax refund. It was two-thousand Deutschmarks. Yet again, I had money! And it was always like this: money always came from somewhere. [And that was a new experience for you.] It was a wonderful experience! My money, whatever I earned, went straight into my bank account. Money always came and one kept spending, but then came the next lot of money. It was a wonderful experience. It was here that I finally felt [Ich hab von Anfang an gespürt, dass wir hier Geld hatten. Das erste, was ich sollte, war, ich sollte ein Giro Konto eröffnen. Ich hab gesagt, “wieso soll ich denn ein Giro Konto öffnen, ich hab doch gar kein Geld!” “Ach, das kommt schon.” Und tatsächlich so war das. Ich habe mein Giro Konto eröffnet. Als erstes

Unfortunately, I accidentally interrupted her at this point to ask her how the money situation was in the East, and her tone changed dramatically. Her excitement disappeared. She describes a situation in which she earned enough money in the East to live, but not enough to be able to save any. Although Tante Gitti often mentions the source of her money in the West in this excerpt, she also frequently describes the money
as having unknown origin, giving it mythical character. We see this when she quotes an unnamed third party as saying “oh, it [money] will come,” and we see it again when she says, “and it was always like this: money always came from somewhere.” Tante Gitti’s description of money in the West creates a relationship of cause and effect in my mind of: “if you open a bank account, money will come.” In terms of content, it is also very similar to the metaphorical image evoked by Ursula of grilled doves flying into people’s mouths if they’re open, but one that she expresses is a common, but false depiction of the West. It is not difficult to understand why this was a common perception. After all, Tante Gitti describes her experience as one of money always coming from somewhere and always being there. Although she says that she never expected this, could awareness of existing myths of “the golden West” have influenced her perception of money in the West, or at least her description thereof? We do know that she is aware of the myth. She said in her first interview about the time before the construction of the Wall: “everything in the West is better” (Q3). Did this “knowledge” influence her to speak mythically about money in the West, or was she truly and entirely surprised by her money situation in the West? I believe that one can only speculate.

Tante Gitti is not consistent in describing money in the West in a mythical way. Just a couple of minutes later, she describes it in a much more realistic, yet still positive, way. When I asked her if there was anything she wanted, but could not have in the West she answered: “The West has everything, Jenny. You can have everything, but you have to have the necessary change to afford it, and you don’t have that here either…But for everything you need…the money is there”
[Es gibt ja nichts, Jenny, was es nicht gibt [im Westen]. Man kann alles haben, nicht? Aber man muss auch das nötige Kleingeld haben, um das zu erreichen.

Und das hat man hier auch nicht…Aber alles, was der Mensch braucht…es ist eben für alle Bedürfnisse was da] (my translation Q38 I2).

Tante Gitti’s first answer to the question, “What was better than expected in the West,” was that she felt at home right away and that no one could tell that she was from the East because of how well she fit in (Q34 I2). That emphasized to her how out of place she had felt in the East (Q34 I2). She had not understood what freedom was until she got to the West and she had not realized how “unfree” she had been in the East until she left (Q34 I2). In this section she explains what freedom meant to her:

At my job [in the West] I didn’t have to watch what I said, which I had never been able to do before…I first understood the meaning of the word freedom here, what it is: that one doesn’t always have to just, oh for Heaven’s sake, just don’t say too much and not too loudly. It wasn’t until I got here that I noticed how heavy a burden that was and how unaware I had been of being unfree. Yeah. I was free here right away. And the people were all so open, free, and confident, which one couldn’t say at all about the people in the East [Ich hab da an meiner Arbeitsstelle [im Westen] lauthals Reden geführt, was ich früher nie getan habe. Ja? Also, ich war hier wie, als wär ich nach Hause gekommen. Ich hab das Wort Freiheit erst in seiner Bedeutung hier verstanden, was Freiheit ist. Das man nicht immer bloß, ah um Himmelswillen bloß nicht zu viel sagen und nicht so laut sagen und das hab ich erst hier gemerkt, wie schwer man das
empfunden hat und nicht einem bewusst war, dass man so unfrei war. Ja. Und hier war ich sofort frei. Das war also eine sehr schöne Erfahrung, die ich hier gemacht habe. Auch, dass die Menschen alle so offen, frei und selbstbewusst waren, was man im Osten überhaupt nicht sagen kann]. (my translation Q34 I2)

The meaning of freedom, as Tante Gitti seems to have felt it most intimately in the West, or that best describes her experience of “freedom” in the West, is freedom of speech. Apart from freedom of speech, Tante Gitti does not explicitly refer to other freedoms such as freedom to travel in the West. However, it is not just freedom of speech, but also everything associated with it. It is implied that in the West she did not have to fear being spied on, being turned in, or being put in jail for something she said. Similarly, she no longer had to dread the many responsibilities required of her by the East German state and the SED, such as being required to vote. In the first interview she describes her membership in the SED as a “never-ending chain” [“unendliche Kette”] of responsibilities, and “getting out was extremely difficult” [“Raustreten war sehr schwer”] (my translation Q32 I1). She also says in the first interview in response to the question about the women’s situation in the GDR that she “could have gone far [in her career as a woman] in the East, but there were always hidden responsibilities [to the SED behind promotions]” [“Ich hätte sehr viel [als Frau] erreichen können, aber da steckte immer eine Verpflichtung dahinter”] (my translation Q24 I1). Freedom of speech, good salaries, and the idea of money always coming from somewhere best describe what the idea, “the West is better,” meant and means to Tante Gitti.
C. Comparison between all four participants

In this section I will bring to discussion some comparisons I made between my participants on certain topics that caught my attention and arose in at least three of the interviewees’ narratives. The topics include my participants’ views on goods and products in East and West Germany, Heimat, West German politics and politicians in the past and now, and comparisons they make between the GDR and the Third Reich.

i. Specific and noteworthy recurring topics

a. Goods and products in East and West Germany

All four participants expressed directly or indirectly that West Germany had everything that one needed. Ursula, Tante Gitti, and Lydia explicitly express this. Ursula says of her situation, “Our wishes weren’t so exaggerated that there could have been anything we would have wanted that wasn’t available in the West” [“Unsere Wünsche waren nicht so übersteigert, dass wir irgendetwas hätten haben wollen, was es im Westen nicht zu kaufen gab”] (Q18 I2). According to Tante Gitti, one could afford everything one needed and West Germany had everything one needed (my translation Q38 I2). Similarly, Lydia says that “if you wanted something and you earned your money, you could buy it, and that was impressive” [“Wenn man sich was leisten wollte und sein Geld verdient hat, dass man sich das ohne Probleme leisten konnte und, das war schon beeindruckend”] (my translation Q34 I2). Gretchen’s answers imply that the West had everything one wanted to buy. Unlike in the East where “you couldn’t buy anything” [“Es gab nichts zu kaufen”] (my translation Q17 I2), what limited her in the beginning in West Germany was that “money was scarce, but that didn’t bother [her]” [“das Geld fehlte anfangs, nicht? Aber, das hat mich nicht gestört”] (my translation Q18 I2).
All four participants agree that many things were missing in the East. Lydia, Tante Gitti, and Gretchen explain that luxury items were hard to come by in the East. Lydia believes that “it was harder to fulfill wishes in the East than in the West” [“das war im Osten, glaub ich, schlimmer, sich Wünsche zu erfüllen, als hier”] (my translation Q38 I2). Similarly, Tante Gitti says, “no special wishes could be fulfilled” [“[Man] konnte keine besonderen Wünsche erfüllen’”] (my translation Q2 I1). Gretchen mentions that there was no variety in the clothes and the fabrics, and nice jewelry was hard to come by (Q14 I1). Ursula, on the other hand, emphasizes that “one could not even get many necessities, like children’s shoes” [“man [konnte] sehr viele Dinge nicht kaufen, selbst notwendige Dinge wie Kinderschuhe”] (my translation Q2 I2). She also mentions that they could not get parts for their boat (Q14 I1). Although Gretchen mentions luxury items when thinking of her own situation, she remembers during the second interview that people in rural areas were often denied food items, because they were expected to produce their own (Q17 I2). Tante Gitti brings up the famous bananas when talking about her frequent trips to West Berlin: “We were excited when we could buy a banana because our aunt had given us 50 Pfennig” [“wir freuten uns, wenn wir mal eine Banane kaufen konnten, weil die Tante uns 50 Pfennig gegeben hat”] (my translation Q7 I2). She is the only participant to do so. My mother brings up bananas every time she speaks about the GDR.

b. Heimat

36 “Concurrent with the dismantling of official state and party symbols in the GDR was the emergence of unofficial symbols of East and West Germanness in popular culture. Two symbols, which were both symbolic-conceptual as well as political-economic markers of otherness, predominated: the banana and the Trabant” (Stein 337).
Particularly Gretchen’s and Tante Gitti’s second interviews made me pay close attention to the concept of Heimat as seen by my participants. Lydia’s and Ursula’s notions of Heimat, on the other hand, seem rather straightforward. Both seem to view the GDR or at least a city in former East Germany as their Heimat. Ursula even says she sometimes feels nostalgia for her Heimat (Q50 I2). Gretchen’s and Tante Gitti’s concepts of Heimat are more complicated.

When speaking about the time before the construction of the Wall, Tante Gitti makes it clear that East Germany was her Heimat: “You don’t give up your Heimat just because everything is better in the West” (my translation37 Q3 I1) and “I didn’t want to leave my Heimat” [“[Ich] wollte meine Heimat … nicht verlassen”] (my translation Q3 I2). She states that she becomes defensive when she is around people who cannot or do not want to understand that the GDR also had good sides (Q42 I2). When I asked her what the GDR meant to her, she answered, “The GDR was first and foremost the state I lived in” [“[Die DDR] war in erster Linie der Staat in dem ich gelebt habe”] (my translation Q11 I2), in either a defensive or an apologetic tone. This is where the confusion began for me. Later, she describes the experience of feeling right away at home in the West and realizing for the first time that she had not felt like she had belonged in the East (Q34 I2). She also says in a proud way, “Everybody in my building said: you can’t tell at all that Gitti is from the East” [“jeder auch im Hause damals…die haben gesagt, also, bei Gitti merkt man überhaupt nicht, dass sie aus dem Osten kommt”] (my translation Q34 I2). I asked her what they meant, and she answered that they were commenting on the observation that she fit in so well (Q34 I2). Tante Gitti sees this very

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37 German quotation provided earlier in my analysis of Tante Gitti’s interviews.
positively, but one could also interpret it negatively. Another excerpt which made me question her sense of identifying with East Germans was near the end of her second interview. She is speaking here of reunification: “One cannot just speak of the West German victims who had to share a lot from that point onwards because the others were the ones who had almost nothing” [“Man darf ja auch nicht nur von den Opfern der westdeutschen Bürger reden, die auch vieles teilen mussten ab diesem Moment, weil ja die Anderen fast die Besitzlosen waren”] (my translation Q48 I2). It is her use of the word “others” that caught my attention. I realize that fleeing the GDR five years before reunification and starting a new life keeps her from being a member of a group that “had almost nothing” or were “without assets/resources/wealth.” However, the word “others” seems somewhat distancing, considering she had just been one of them five years prior. It could be symptomatic of the “othering” that has been happening between East and West Germany since the Second World War. When Tante Gitti views East and West Germans as two separate entities, it is very difficult to tell which one she identifies with. Her enthusiasm toward the positive aspects of Germany’s reunification leads me to believe she possibly views herself as simply German:

I was also excited about the fact that Germany would be whole again. I found that to be humane, and right, and one really couldn’t believe it. One simply couldn’t believe it! It was so tremendous and awesome, that all we could do was see it as a fairy tale for a while [ich [hab] mich auch gefreut über die Tatsache, dass Deutschland wieder ein Ganzes ist, also, das fand ich, also, human, und richtig, und das hat Einen wirklich, also, das hat man nicht glauben können. Das hat man
einfach nicht glauben können! Das war so enorm und so toll, dass man das zunächst nur wie ein Märchen angesehen hat]. (my translation Q48 I2)

Gretchen also shows indications of some form of identity crisis. She expresses at one point in the middle of her second interview that she is fed up with the “bad blood” between East and West Germans and how they pejoratively refer to each other as “die” (they/them) (Q36 I2). She specifically says it hurt her when the East Germans did that (Q36 I2). For most of the interview she is very strict about her Heimat being West Berlin, because she was born there. She mentions this on three separate occasions as if she is saying it for the first time each time. On one of these occasions, she says it in response to a question in which I assume that East Germany is her Heimat (Q50 I2). We even find out that her husband was born in West Berlin too, making it his Heimat as well.

Furthermore, when I asked what she thought about Chancellor Merkel coming from East Germany, she jokingly answers: “They’re all people. (laughter). Even if they come from East Germany” [“Das sind alles Menschen. (laughter). Auch wenn sie aus dem Osten kommen”] (my translation Q39 I2). This joke distances her greatly from her own past, which included spending her “formative years” in Thüringen, where she also met her husband (Q50 I2).

Very near the end of her interview, Gretchen’s notion of Heimat becomes flexible and it begins to include East Germany. Gretchen only thinks to do this when I outright ask her: “So you wouldn’t consider Thüringen your Heimat?” She then goes on to define her various Heimate, as all the places where she has lived, in chronological order. This completely turns her definition of Heimat on its head, and this new definition no longer clearly demonstrates whether or not she identifies more as a West German or as
an East German. I wonder if Gretchen’s insistence on her Heimat being West Berlin throughout most of the interview is due more to geography or to politics. She spent her “formative years” under allied rule and socialism, her childhood before that in a Berlin that was not divided into two completely separate parts, and she is geographically from East Germany, yet she does not seem to consider herself as having been an East German at any point in her life. I believe politics since World War II have made her cling to West Berlin as her Heimat, because it has afforded her a credible West German identity. My other participants do not claim or demonstrate true West German self-identity anywhere in their interviews, no matter how long each has lived in West Germany. Lydia was embarrassed by her GDR citizenship. Maybe something similar is happening in Gretchen’s case.

c. West German politics and politicians, past and present

I noticed in three of my participants’ interviews that they feel differently about politics and politicians in West Germany these days than they did earlier during the sixties and seventies. Tante Gitti is the only exception here. She gives no indication that her trust in the West German government has dwindled. The other three express great trust in the West German politicians and government only in the past. When I asked Gretchen if she trusted the West German government, she answered: “Yes! Yes, back then, yes!” [“Ja! Ja, damals, ja!”] (my translation Q39 I2). Two of my participants show a fondness for Willy Brandt. Lydia said “they knew the western politicians better” [“da hat man auch die [West-]Politiker eben besser gekannt”] because they “oriented [them]selves toward the West” [“Wir haben uns ausschließlich am Westen orientiert”]; “Some were good characters, like Brandt and Schmidt” [“die Westpolitiker, die teilweise
auch doch gute Persönlichkeiten waren, wenn man an Schmidt und Brandt... denkt] (my translation Q21 I2). According to Ursula, “Those were times when politicians were in power that one trusted, like Brandt. One had the feeling he meant what he said and would personally do whatever it took to improve the lives of others”

[Es waren auch Zeiten, in denen Politiker an der Macht waren, denen wir vertrauten, z.B., Willy Brandt. Das war, also, ein Politiker, bei dem man das Gefühl hatte, das was er sagt, meint er auch. Und, dass er sich auch persönlich einsetzen würde, um den Menschen ein besseres Leben zu verschaffen]. (my translation Q37 I2)

Ursula’s answer implies that it is no longer the case that trustworthy politicians are in power. Gretchen and Lydia also express dissatisfaction with recent politicians and politics. Lydia states that she has missed strong figures in recent years (Q39 I2). Lydia continues her response to the question “Do you trust the West German government?” with “Capitalism can’t be the correct social order of the future either” [“für die Zukunft der Menschheit kann [der Kapitalismus] auch nicht die richtige Gesellschaftsordnung sein”] (my translation Q39 I2). Gretchen demonstrates a very negative view of the current West German government. For instance, she is dismayed by the idea that some GDR leaders are still in power today (Q4 I2). She also said, “The current party isn’t anything worth writing home about either” [“[die heutige] Partei, also, das im Moment ist ja auch nichts”] (my translation Q21 I2). Her most interesting and confusing statement is: “I knew that people could speak their mind [back then in the West]. That’s how it was. That’s not the case anymore (last part whispered)” (my translation Q16 I2). I cannot tell
if she is referring to freedom of speech or fear of being criticized for one’s views. It is hard to say whether or not these interviewees are glamorizing the politicians and politics of the past for reasons of nostalgia and remembering them as better than they truly may have been. The association between these politicians/politics and critical times in German history also potentially may be inspiring my participants to idealize them.

d. Comparisons between the GDR and the Third Reich/Nazis

Comparative remarks between the GDR and the Third Reich appeared in all of my participants’ interviews except in Lydia’s. Although she explicitly says the GDR was a dictatorship, she makes no references to the Nazis. The other three, on the other hand, do. Older generations of Germans do not tend to speak lightly about the Nazis. Usually, I find that they are very careful about what they say about them because it is such a taboo topic in Germany. For these reasons I paid a great deal of attention to the references to National Socialism that they made because I knew that they most likely were not willy-nilly.

Two participants’ comparisons did not surprise me. For instance, Ursula’s reference to the Third Reich consists of her explaining that the East Germans “had gone from one dictatorship to the next” [“[Die DDR bedeutete für mich] eine Diktatur nach der anderen”] (my translation Q12 I2). She then explains:

My husband and I knew to be against the [GDR] regime because we had experienced the Nazi time in a conscious manner and had seen that we had been lied to over and over again about the war ending and [Germany] winning the war and the exact opposite turned out to be true” [[Wir hatten] das Bewusstsein
dagegen zu sein. [laughter]. Denn wir hatten ja beide, mein Mann und ich, die Nazizeit bewusst erlebt. Und wir hatten gesehen, wie wir immer wieder belogen wurden, dass der Krieg nun bald zu Ende und gewonnen sein würde und das pure Gegenteil war der Fall]. (my translation Q21 I2)

She also brings up a set phrase that she explains was used a lot in the East and was fairly valid: “Just make sure they [the politicians] don’t do exactly as the Nazis” [“Sie müssen sich bloß vorsehen, dass sie (die Politiker) es nicht genau so machen wie bei den Nazis”] (my translation Q21 I2). Many people feared another dictatorship because of all the destruction the last one had reaped. Ursula saw signs of a dictatorship, having already survived one, and they seem to have unnerved her and her husband enough to flee the state. History has decreed the GDR a dictatorship, which allows for a more objective comparison between the GDR and the Third Reich to be generally less taboo than it would otherwise be. Any comparisons involving the Nazis are always at least somewhat problematic.

Tante Gitti makes one reference to the Nazis as it relates to her experience in the GDR. She describes the last deployment that she participated in, and she begins by saying, “I still know how much that disgusted me” [“Ich weiß noch, wie mich das angewidert hat”] (my translation Q42 I2), and then she says what “that” is referring to: the deployment. She follows that by setting the scene:

and then they all marched past the tribune, with pomp and circumstance, with hoorah, and waving the flags, and it was very terrible, and then I kept thinking, my God, and it was in the dark, with flames, and there was a smell of smoke in the air from these flames… [und dann sind die da alle vorbei defiliert an der
Tribüne mit ein Aufwand und mit Hoorah und geschwenkt die Fahnen und also es war ganz schlimm und dann habe ich immer gedacht, mein Gott und das war im Dunkeln mit Fackeln und das war ein Rauchgeruch in der Luft von diesen Fackeln…]. (my translation Q42 I2)

Then come the fateful words: “I said to myself, Mensch, I feel as if I were in a film with Hitler, as if I were in the Nazi time. It was that bad” [“da hab ich gesagt, Mensch, ich komm mir vor als wär ich bei Hitler im Film, also, als wenn ich in der Nazizeit war. So schlimm war das…”] (my translation Q42 I2). This seems to have been a somewhat traumatic experience for Tante Gitti. She got a lot quieter and slowed down when she said the part about feeling like she was in a movie with Hitler. It seems like she changes her volume and generally shows more caution for this particular statement, because she wants to make it clear that she is aware of the heaviness of the reference, and it also seems like she is showing dismay at having to make this reference: as if it is not her fault or she is only doing it unhappily. The negative excitement in her voice as she is describing the scene makes me think that she was genuinely reminded of the Nazi time, most likely of what she had seen of Nazi footage. If she had not been genuinely reminded of the Nazis, I do not believe she would have been quite so affected by this experience. However, memory plays many tricks on the mind, and one cannot say for certain.

Gretchen’s comparison between the GDR and the Third Reich was the most surprising of all three. Like Ursula, Gretchen explains that they “slid from one dictatorship into another” [“Wir sind von einer Diktatur in die andere geschlittert”] (my translation Q12 I2). The problematic nature of her reference to the Nazis is found in the
fact that she considers the GDR to have been a worse dictatorship than the Third Reich. I asked her why. She answered:

Well, how the people were led around on strings! It was, one can’t describe it! They were put into prison for small things, and what happened to them there, I only know about that from what I’ve heard and read, but I myself was never, thank God, in prison! [Ja, wie die Leute gegängelt wurden! Das ist, man kann das gar nicht beschreiben! Die sind wegen Kleinigkeiten, sind sie ins Gefängnis gekommen und was man da getrieben hat, das weiß ich allerdings auch nur von was ich gehört und gelesen hab, aber selber war ich, Gottseidank, nicht im Gefängnis!]. (my translation Q12 l2)

She then goes on to say that people wanted to leave, but they could not because of the Wall, and before the Wall people could walk across the border, but they had to leave their belongings behind. Clearly, the commonality between the two regimes lies in the fact that they were both dictatorships. It is interesting that Gretchen’s perception of the Third Reich does not include the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis. I think we can assume that she was not personally mistreated by the Nazis. Otherwise, I believe she would have said something much different here. It seems like she is thinking specifically about her own negative experiences in the GDR, even though she, and nobody she loved, was imprisoned there. It is somewhat sad to me that she mentions the great disappointment of losing her belongings in almost the same breath that she expresses that the GDR was worse than the Third Reich. It might be that she simply got caught up in the moment and did not think of possible greater ramifications of what she was saying. On a positive note,
I believe this excerpt shows me again that Gretchen trusted me enough to be open with me.

These three participants’ comparisons between the GDR and Third Reich demonstrate how negatively they view the political side of the GDR. Ursula’s comparison seems to be the most pragmatic. According to her, she saw similarities in the methods of the two regimes, which made her wary of the GDR. She is trying to approach the topic in a logical and critical way. I believe that Gretchen and Tante Gitti were somewhat traumatized by their experiences in the GDR, which colors their references.

Oral history seeks real people’s, hopefully genuine, perspectives. I think my interviewees shared many of those with me.
CHAPTER THREE: CONCLUSION

Half a century has passed since the construction of the Berlin Wall. This meant that any interviewees in this study would be at a station in life where they no longer have any of the normally considered monumental life choices left. Their careers are behind them and their children are grown. Hindsight has therefore played a substantial role in their narrations. Any time these women speak of their past experiences, they are making sense of their lives. It is only human to desire that one’s most definitive choices and experiences be justifiable. People tend to present their lives in such a way that justifies their choices, and this is achieved through narrating their experiences.

By interviewing each participant twice, five years apart, I was able to look for changes in opinions or attitudes and differences in their descriptions. Differences in descriptions could be indicators of a change in attitude, possibly even subconsciously. I saw many small contradictions between the two sets and within the same interview. There were more than I could treat in this thesis. I mentioned many of them in my analyses of the interviews and most of the ones that related to the idea, “the West is better.” I will mention here what my participants positively associated with the West.

My participants associated various freedoms, economic benefits, and other positive elements with West Germany. Freedoms associated with the West that arose in the interviews as personal experiences of the interviewees include (and some have been inferred): speech, travel, personal decisions, not being pressured into obligations to the state or to a secret police specifically or being denied a certain benefit like job promotion if one refuses such obligations, being able to attend university despite being middle or upper middle class or Christian, and not having your business taken from you to be given
to the state. Two of my interviewees explicitly say they felt freer in the West; freedom is articulated here in terms of a sensation. Economic benefits in the West that were mentioned in the interviews as personal experiences include: higher salaries, monetary aid from the government, and more personal choice in selecting a job. Other positive aspects that were mentioned about the West include: a greater selection of goods, availability of goods, a government one trusted, great politicians in the 1960s and 1970s, a more confident and more open Volk, and livelier, brighter, and more colorful cities.

I found contradictions in regards to some of these ideas, sometimes in the same interview, sometimes in the same set of interviews for an individual interviewee, and sometimes between the participants. Lydia, for example, believes her freedom of speech was not hindered in the GDR, even though she says she could have gone to prison for “exaggerating”. Freedom of speech was a defining factor in Tante Gitti’s experience in the West, and she noticed an enormous difference between the two states in regards to freedom of speech. Another example of a contradiction is that Tante Gitti said there was more personal choice in searching for a job in the West, but she was turned down many times and eventually accepted a job beneath her qualifications. Whereas Tante Gitti found herself seemingly “rolling in dough” in the West, Gretchen and Ursula commented that they had to live very thriftily for a while in the beginning because of a lack of money. These contradictions force us to question our assumptions about life in West Germany in the second half of the 20th century.

How each participant treats the notion of “freedom” varies. For instance, Gretchen spoke a great deal in both interviews about how people in the West “lived freer” and “could say whatever they wanted.” Tante Gitti, similarly, expressed that she
did not know what freedom was until she illegally relocated to the West. There she felt like a free person. Ursula, on the other hand, mentioned freedom in the West only once. Lydia only praises the Western freedom to travel. In general, I expected more explicit and elaborate discussions on freedom in the West from my participants.

The notion that “the West is better” meant and means something different to each of my participants. It not only varies in content, but also in the extent to which each has believed it. For instance, in Ursula’s case, it seems that the statement, “the East was worse,” would be more applicable. It seems that escaping the GDR was a greater motivation for fleeing than the desire to live in West Germany, specifically. She expresses that she did not have high expectations of the West, and unlike Gretchen she displays only minimal pleasure when describing her life in the West.

The extent to which the notion of “the West is better” has mythical character varies among my participants as well. Gretchen used typical mythical expressions to describe her perception of her various trips to West Berlin and upon arrival in the West after fleeing, and she never indicated that she was aware that they might be considered mythical. Instead she used them as if they were her own original observations. In other words, she did not say anything resembling, “I know this gets used a lot, but it really was like that for me.” That is one of the dangers of myth. It is not clear if she really felt like that at the time or if she had heard other people describe their experiences in a similar way and she felt limited to their language. It is also possible that their language described her experience better than she otherwise would have been able to describe it, or that she saw it as a popular way to describe the experience of arriving in the West and wanted to conform to it. Similarly, Lydia describes her only trip to West Berlin in a mythical way.
She, on the other hand, is aware of the common myth of a “land of milk and honey”, expressing that she did not come to the West under this illusion. Ursula also expressed awareness of this myth, when she described the false perception that many East Germans were under, using the metaphor of grilled doves flying into open mouths in the West. Ursula seemed very careful to avoid myth in her own language, consciously or not. Her answers were consistently factual and critical.

I noticed something very interesting when I separated my participants into two groups based on friendships or intimacy between them. Lydia and Tante Gitti make up one group. They have had an intimate friendship for most of their lives and they have lived together since 1988. Gretchen and Ursula make up the second group. They began their long friendship in the East. The common link between all four participants is my grandmother. Through her, all of these women have met each other on various occasions over the past thirty years. However, for the purpose of this discussion, I will treat them as two distinct groups, because geography has prevented them from forming any close attachments. In each group, one participant revealed descriptions of West Germany that had a lot of mythical character commonly associated with the idea, “the West is better,” and one participant’s interviews was almost completely void of this mythical imagery. Whereas Lydia was aware of the myth of the West being a “land of milk and honey” and she spoke critically of it, Tante Gitti described her experience in the West in such a way that created an image similar to that of money growing on trees. Tante Gitti gave no indication that she was aware of the myth-like quality of her description of money in the West. In fact, in her first interview, Tante Gitti says in a factual way that the West was better. She accepted this as a truthful statement.
I saw a similar situation in the case of Ursula and Gretchen. Ursula’s description of the West revealed that she is aware of common mythical perceptions thereof. She does not use them, however, to describe her own perception of the West. Gretchen, on the other hand, like Tante Gitti, used mythical imagery to describe her perception of the West. This led me to believe that mythical notions of the West being better do not necessarily spread from one friend to another close friend, as I would have expected. I would have expected these notions to be very contagious, and they still may be, just not in the case of my four participants. Larger studies would have to be conducted to see if mythical notions of the West being better tend to be shared more commonly between friends, family, or between generations in families. I believe myths in general pass very easily from one generation to the next. My mother’s very emotional, almost tearful, descriptions of bananas in the West, among other images, greatly affected me as a child and my perception of the GDR and communism. A bias on my part towards them was formed based on emotion rather than on great understanding. I used this project as an opportunity to gain a better understanding of my family’s history and also Germany’s history.

An area for further study would be a comparison between the role of myth in the narrations of the adult generation of GDR refugees and the role of myth in the narrations of their children. It would also be interesting to compare children who were old enough to remember life in the GDR and the act of fleeing with children who were only familiar with West Germany. Based on my mother’s emotional accounts of the GDR, I would postulate that the myth, “the West is better,” may have taken a firmer hold on the second generation because they may not have been old enough to understand the two systems
and the problems their parents faced, but they were likely heavily burdened with emotional associations, nonetheless. It would be interesting to explore the role of trauma in the narrations of both generations as well: to see if the problems the parents faced in the GDR and the act of fleeing were more traumatic for the first or second generation. I have touched on the effect of household oral histories on the third generation in this study, but a more in-depth exploration would be a constructive point of departure. This could take the form of conducting interviews with three generations in the same family.

The lasting effects of the “mythification” of the idea of “the West is better” are indisputable. The GDR is an example that still today is frequently used to prove that communism, “by nature”, fails, and often, people cannot explain why communism fails. My study demonstrates that the idea of “the West is better” or “capitalistic democracy is better” is not a simple truth. In fact, many assumptions commonly associated with this notion have proven to be ambiguous. To view it as a simple truth is to do a great disservice to the pursuit of a deeper understanding of the two Germanys that existed side by side for forty years and the potential lessons to be learned from that time in history. A clearer understanding of the past allows for a better understanding of the present and the current myths that pervade our language. It can also allow us to make better decisions for the future.

The notion, “the West is better,” was in part created by the actions as well as the testimonies of the GDR refugees. The West German government used the refugees’ “feet” and words in its efforts to create a strong West German identity based on freedom, democracy, and prosperity. The idea of the West being better became the predominant view among West Germans and even contributed to a sense of inferiority among many
East Germans. On one level, reunification can be seen as the success story of all Germans. On another level, however, one nation lost to another. Despite the GDR’s dictatorial regime, to many of its inhabitants this nation represented *Heimat* and ideals worth striving for. Reunification united brothers and sisters, but perceived superiority and inferiority still divide them. One single, predominant image of East and West was forged from the GDR-refugees’ hope for a better life in the West, but little consideration was given for the much more ambiguous nature of reality. My interviews clearly demonstrate that the refugees’ perceptions of East and West did not allow these entities to fit neatly into categories of good and bad. My analysis of the interviews with my participants demonstrates the complexity of myth and the complexity of real individuals’ testimonies. A clearly defined view of the FRG as better than the GDR may have served a noble political purpose during the Cold War and it is understandable when viewed in its own context, but the persistence of this black and white view on East and West fuels the continued division and resentment among a not entirely (re)unified Volk.
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APPENDIX 1: SET 1 QUESTIONS FLED

2004 Interview Questions: Fled to West Germany before 1961

1) What did you like best about the GDR in the 1950s?
2) What did you like least about the GDR in the 1950s?
3) On which date did you flee? Why did you choose this day? Did something tip the bucket?
   With whom did you flee? Were you married at the time? Did you flee because someone wanted you to go with him or her? How did you flee?
4) What did you hope to achieve or prevent by fleeing?
5) Were the Russian soldiers a problem in the 1950s? Did they do any terrible things? Any personal experiences?
6) Were the Stasi a problem in the 1950s? Did they do any terrible things? Any personal experiences?
7) Were you ever harassed by government officials or other citizens? For instance, because you were Christian, or rich, or because you believed in a different ideology?
8) What did the GDR mean to you?
9) Did the GDR ever meet your expectations? Until when?
10) What schools did you attend and what was your education?
11) Did you have problems as a woman in the GDR or was there a positive atmosphere for women?
12) Did you think that life would be easier or harder as a woman in West Germany?
13) Which ideology was taught at school? Did you believe in it?
14) Was there something you wanted, but couldn’t have?
15) What was your job and did you like it?
16) Did you hope for better job options and a higher salary in the West?
17) Were you afraid of being caught?
18) Were you politically aware in the East?
19) Did you make the choice yourself or did someone try to persuade you?
20) Did your parents try to influence your decision?
21) What was the general mood in the 1950s in the East? For example, optimistic, cynical, depressed, hopeful?
22) How would you describe your mood in the 1950s?
23) How did you imagine the West was? What did you base this on?
24) If you could do everything again, would you do anything differently?
25) Where and when were you born?
26) Where all have you lived, before and after fleeing?
27) Did you anyone who had fled?
28) Were you a member of any political organizations? For example, FDJ or SED?
29) Why didn’t you want to be in the SED?
30) Did you hear rumors that the Wall was going to be built?
31) Did you know of any crimes against humanity?
32) Have you read any novels by Christa Wolf, Brigitte Reimann, or Anna Seghers?
33) Were you able to watch West German television?
34) Did you sometimes travel to West Berlin?
35) Did you register at the refugee center Marienfelden?
1) Was für Sachen gefielen dir am besten in der DDR in den 50er Jahren?
2) Was für Sachen gefielen dir am wenigsten in der DDR in den 50er Jahren?
3) An welchem Datum bist du geflohen? Warum hast du dich für diesen Tag entschieden?
   Hat irgendein Ereignis das Fass zum überlaufen gebracht? Mit wem bist du geflohen?
   Warst du zu der Zeit verheiratet? Bist du geflohen weil jemand es wollte, dass du mit
   ihr/ihm gehst? Hattest du Kinder? Wie hat sich die Flucht abgespielt?
4) Warum hast du die Flucht überhaupt in Erwägung gezogen? Was wolltest du damit
   erreichen oder verhindern?
5) Waren die russischen Soldaten ein Problem in den 50er Jahren? Was haben sie
       Schlimmes gemacht? Persönliche Erlebnisse?
6) War die Stasi ein Problem in den 50er Jahren? Was haben sie Schlimmes gemacht?
       Persönliche Erlebnisse?
7) Wurdest du jemals von den Regierungsbeamten oder Mitbürgern schikaniert? Weil du
       zum Beispiel Christ warst, oder reich, oder weil du eine andersgerichtete Ideologie
       verfolgtest?
8) Was bedeutete die DDR für dich?
9) Hatte sie jemals deinen Erwartungen entsprochen? Und wann nicht mehr?
10) Welche Schulen hast du besucht und welche Berufsausbildung hast du gemacht?
11) Hattest du Probleme als Frau in der DDR oder bestand eine positive Atmosphäre für
       Frauen?
12) Glaubtest du, dass das Leben leichter oder schwerer sein würde als Frau in
       Westdeutschland?
13) Welche Ideologie wurde in der Schule gelehrt? Warst du davon überzeugt?
14) Gab es etwas, was du wolltest aber nicht haben konntest?
15) Was war dein Beruf und hat dir die Arbeit gefallen?
16) Erhofftest du dir bessere Arbeitsmöglichkeiten und ein höheres Gehalt im Westen?
17) Hattest du große Angst, dass man dich fangen würde?
18) Hattest du ein politisches Bewusstsein im Osten?
19) Hast du dich selber entschieden oder hat jemand versucht dich zu beeinflussen? Mit welchen Argumenten haben sie versucht dich zu überreden?
20) Haben deine Eltern jemals in deine Entscheidung eingemischt?
21) Wie war die allgemeine Stimmung in den 50er Jahren im Osten? z.B, optimistisch, zynisch, deprimiert, hoffnungsvoll?
22) Wie würdest du deine Stimmung in den 50er Jahren beschreiben?
23) Welche Vorstellungen hattest du vom Westen. Worauf gründeten sie sich?
24) Wenn du alles noch einmal machen könntest, würdest du etwas anders machen?
25) Wo und wann bist du geboren?
26) Wo hast du überall gelebt vor und nach deiner Flucht?
27) Kanntest du jemanden der geflohen war?
28) Hast du an irgendwelchen politischen Organisationen teilgenommen z.B. FDJ oder SED?
29) Warum wolltest du nicht in der SED sein?
30) Hast du Gerüchte über den bevorstehenden Mauerbau gehört?
31) Wusstest du von irgendwelchen Missbrauch mit Menschen (SED)?
32) Hast du Romane von Christa Wolf oder Brigitte Reimann oder Anna Seghers gelesen?
33) Konntest du Westsendungen gut empfangen?
34) Bist du manchmal nach West Berlin gefahren?

35) Hast du dich beim Marienfeldenotaufnahmelager angemeldet?
APPENDIX 2: SET 1 QUESTIONS STAYED

2004 Interview Questions: Stayed in East Germany until the 1980s

1) What did you like best about the GDR in the 1950s?

2) What did you like least about the GDR in the 1950s?

3) Did you ever contemplate fleeing before the construction of the Wall. If yes, how seriously?

4) Did you decide yourself or did someone try to persuade you? Which arguments did they use?

5) When the Wall was built, did you instantly regret not having fled? Was it simply bad timing? Or do you believe you would have fled if you had been older?

6) Were the Russian soldiers a problem in the 1950s? Did they do any terrible things? Any personal experiences?

7) Were the Stasi a problem in the 1950s? Did they do any terrible things? Any personal experiences?

8) Were you ever harassed by government officials or other citizens? For instance, because you were Christian, or rich, or because you believed in a different ideology?

9) What did the GDR mean to you?

10) What did you expect from the government?

11) What schools did you attend and what was your education?

12) Which ideology was taught at school? Did you believe in it?

13) What was the general mood in the 1950s in the East? For example, optimistic, cynical, depressed, hopeful?

14) How would you describe your mood in the 1950s?
15) Was there something you wanted, but couldn’t have?

16) What was your job and did you like it?

17) Were you afraid of a life in the West?

18) Were you afraid of being caught?

19) Were you politically aware in the East?

20) Did you have faith in the East German government?

21) Did your parents try to influence your decision?

22) Did anyone try to persuade you to flee with him or her to the West? Why didn’t you go?

23) How did you imagine the West was? What did you base this on?

24) Did you have problems as a woman in the GDR or was there a positive atmosphere for women?

25) Did you think that life would be easier or harder as a woman in West Germany?

26) Did a friend or relative of yours flee?

27) How did that make you feel?

28) Where and when were you born?

29) Where all have you lived?

30) Was there anyone you were interested in for whom you stayed? You can simply say yes or no.

31) Were any gender role clichés taught in the classroom?

32) Were you a member of any political organizations? For example, FDJ, SED, Sowjetischen-Frauenbund?

33) Did you know of any crimes against humanity?

34) Did you help anyone flee?
35) Have you read any novels by Christa Wolf, Brigitte Reimann, or Anna Seghers?
36) Did you have an inkling in 1961 that 2.6 Million people had fled the GDR since it was founded?
37) Were you able to watch West German television?
38) Did you sometimes travel to West Berlin?
39) What was your opinion about the strict borders and the lack of freedom of movement?
40) Were you punished at all because your sister had fled?
41) Did fleeing mean betraying the “worker and farmer state” in your eyes?
42) Did you hear rumors that the Wall was going to be built?

**Same questions in German**

1) Was für Sachen gefielen dir am besten in der DDR in den 50er Jahren?
2) Was für Sachen gefielen dir am wenigsten in der DDR in den 50er Jahren?
3) Hast du jemals vor dem Mauerbau die Republikflucht erwogen? Wenn ja, wie ernsthaft?
4) Hast du dich selber entschieden oder hat jemand versucht dich zu beeinflussen? Mit welchen Argumenten haben sie versucht dich zu überreden?
5) Hat es dir gleich nach dem Mauerbau leid getan, dass du nicht geflohen warst? War es nur ein schlechter Zeitpunkt. Oder glaubst du, dass du geflohen wärst wenn du älter gewesen wärst?
6) Waren die russischen Soldaten ein Problem in den 50er Jahren? Was haben sie Schlimmes gemacht? Persönliche Erlebnisse?
7) War die Stasi ein Problem in den 50er Jahren? Was haben sie Schlimmes gemacht? Persönliche Erlebnisse?
8) Wurdest du jemals von den Regierungsbeamten oder Mitbürgern schikaniert? Weil du zum Beispiel Christ warst, oder reich, oder weil du eine andersgerichtete Ideologie verfolgtest?

9) Was bedeutete die DDR für dich?

10) Was erwartetest du von der Regierung?

11) Welche Schulen hast du besucht und welche Berufsausbildung hast du gemacht?

12) Welche Ideologie wurde in der Schule gelehrt? Warst du davon überzeugt?

13) Wie war die allgemeine Stimmung in den 50er Jahren im Osten? z.B, optimistisch, zynisch, deprimiert, hoffnungsvoll?

14) Wie würdest du deine Stimmung in den 50er Jahren beschreiben?

15) Gab es etwas, was du wolltest aber nicht haben konntest?

16) Was war dein Beruf und hat dir die Arbeit gefallen?

17) Hattest du Angst vor einem Leben im Westen?

18) Hattest du große Angst, dass man dich fangen würde?

19) Hattest du ein politisches Bewusstsein im Osten?

20) Hattest du Vertrauen in die Regierung?

21) Haben deine Eltern jemals in deine Entscheidung eingemischt?

22) Hat dich jemals irgendjemand zur Flucht in den Westen überreden wollen? Warum bist du nicht mitgegangen?

23) Welche Vorstellungen hattest du vom Westen. Worauf gründeten sie sich?

24) Hattest du Probleme als Frau in der DDR oder bestand eine positive Atmosphäre für Frauen?
25) Glaubtest du, dass das Leben leichter oder schwerer sein würde als Frau in Westdeutschland?

26) Ist ein Freund/in von dir oder ein Familienmitglied abgehauen?

27) Wie fühltest du dich deswegen?

28) Wo und wann bist du geboren?

29) Wo hast du überall gelebt.


31) Rollenklischees im Schulunterricht?

32) Hast du an irgendwelchen politischen Organisationen teilgenommen? Z.B. FDJ oder SED, Sowjetischen-Frauenbund?

33) Wusstest du von irgendwelchen Missbrauch mit Menschen (SED)?

34) Hast du jemandem bei einer Flucht geholfen?

35) Hast du Romane von Christa Wolf oder Brigitte Reimann oder Anna Seghers gelesen?

36) Hattest du eine Ahnung in 1961, dass schon 2,6 Millionen Menschen die DDR verlassen hatten seit ihrer Gründung?

37) Konntest du Westsendungen gut empfangen?

38) Bist du manchmal nach West Berlin gefahren?

39) Was war deine Meinung über die „Staatsgrenze West“ und die Reiseverbot im Allgemeinen?

40) An Tante Gitti: Wurdest du irgendwie bestraft für die Flucht deiner Schwester?

41) Hieß Republikflucht Verrat an dem Arbeiter-und-Bauernstaat für dich?

42) Hast du Gerüchte über den bevorstehenden Mauerbau gehört?
APPENDIX 3: SET 2 QUESTIONS FLED

2010 Interview Questions: Fled to West Germany before 1961

1) What did you like best about living in the GDR in the 1950s?
2) What did you like least about living in the GDR in the 1950s?
3) Was there a specific event that tipped the bucket?
4) Why did you consider fleeing? What were you hoping to gain or prevent?
5) How did you flee?
6) Did you know anybody who had already fled?
7) With whom did you speak about the West in the GDR?
8) Did you hear any rumors that a wall would be built around West Berlin?
9) Was there any strong fear about being caught fleeing?
10) Was the Stasi a problem in the 1950s? What kinds of things did they do?
11) Were you ever harassed by government officials or your fellow peers? For example, for being Christian, or well-off, or having a contradictory ideology?
12) What did the GDR stand for to you?
13) Did it ever live up to your expectations? If so, did it ever stop living up to your expectations and when?
14) Did you have problems as a woman in the GDR or was there a positive atmosphere for women?
15) Did you think that life would be easier or harder for you as a woman in the West?
16) How did you imagine life in the West? What did you base this on?
17) Was there anything you wanted, but couldn’t have in the East?
18) Was there anything you wanted, but couldn’t have in the West?
19) What was your job, and did you like it?

20) Were you hoping for better job opportunities or better pay in the West?

21) Were you politically aware while you were still in the East?

22) Did you trust the East German government?

23) Did you participate in any political organizations?

24) What was your opinion of the SED?

25) What was the general mood in the 1950s in the East? For example, one of optimism, cynicism, depression, or hope?

26) How would you describe your mood in the 1950s?

27) How would you describe your mood during your first few years in the West?

28) If you had it over again to do, would you do anything differently?

29) Could you receive West German TV programs? How did they influence your view of West Germany?

30) Did you ever travel to West Berlin back then? What was your impression of West Berlin?

31) What reason for fleeing did you give to the Marienfelde Refugee Center?

32) What was the most decisive reason for fleeing?

33) Did West Germany live up to your expectations? How so and how not?

34) What were the hardest experiences you had to live through in the first few years in the West?

35) What was better than expected?

36) What surprised you in the West?

37) What were the worst aspects of life in the West in the 1950s and 1960s?

38) The best aspects?
39) Did you have faith in the West German government?

40) Did you feel welcome and desired? How would you describe your relationship to the West Germans?

41) Did you ever have any doubt at the time about whether or not you had made the right decision by fleeing the GDR?

42) Were the West Germans interested in your story?

43) Whom did you tell?

44) What were the reactions?

45) What did and didn’t you tell them?

46) How would you describe the situation of telling your story?

47) Did you get the impression that the West Germans already knew a lot about life in the East?

48) How did people generally talk about the GDR in the public sphere? Did those reports/stories match up with your own experiences?

49) How do you react when you hear someone say that Germany should have never been reunited?

50) Are you at all nostalgic about the GDR?

51) As you know Germany just celebrated the 20-year anniversary of the fall of the Wall. How do you feel about how the media treated the subject? Did anything make you particularly happy? Did anything make you particularly sad? Did anything shock you?
Same questions in German

1) Was für Sachen gefielen dir am besten in der DDR in den 50er Jahren?

2) Was für Sachen gefielen dir am wenigsten in der DDR in den 50er Jahren?

3) Hat irgendein Ereignis das Fass zum überlaufen gebracht?

4) Warum hast du die Flucht überhaupt in Erwägung gezogen? Was wolltest du damit erreichen oder verhindern?

5) Wie hat sich die Flucht abgespielt?

6) Kanntest du jemanden der geflohen war?

7) Mit wem hast du über den Westen gesprochen?

8) Hattest du Gerüchte über den bevorstehenden Mauerbau gehört?

9) Hattest du große Angst, dass man dich fangen würde?

10) War die Stasi ein Problem in den 50er Jahren? Was haben sie Schlimmes gemacht?

   Persönliche Erlebnisse?

11) Wurdest du jemals von den Regierungsbeamten oder Mitbürgern schikaniert? Wenn ja, warum wurdest du schikaniert?

12) Was bedeutete die DDR für dich?

13) Hatte sie jemals deinen Erwartungen entsprochen? Und wann nicht mehr?

14) Hattest du Probleme als Frau in der DDR oder bestand eine positive Atmosphäre für Frauen?

15) Glaubtest du, dass das Leben leichter oder schwerer sein würde als Frau in Westdeutschland?

16) Welche Vorstellungen hattest du vom Westen. Worauf gründeten sie sich?

17) Gab es etwas, was du wolltest aber nicht haben konntest im Osten?
18) Gab es etwas, was du wolltest aber nicht haben konntest im Westen?
19) Was war dein Beruf und hat dir die Arbeit gefallen?
20) Erhofftest du dir bessere Arbeitsmöglichkeiten und ein höheres Gehalt im Westen?
21) Hattest du ein politisches Bewusstsein im Osten?
22) Hattest du Vertrauen in die Regierung?
23) Hast du an irgendwelchen politischen Organisationen teilgenommen z.B. FDJ oder SED?
24) Was war deine Meinung über die SED?
25) Wie war die allgemeine Stimmung in den 50er Jahren im Osten? z.B, optimistisch, zynisch, deprimiert, hoffnungsvoll?
26) Wie würdest du deine Stimmung in den 50er Jahren beschreiben?
27) Wie würdest du deine Stimmung in den ersten Jahren im Westen beschreiben?
28) Wenn du alles noch einmal machen könntest, würdest du etwas anders machen?
29) Konntest du Westsendungen gut empfangen? Wie haben diese deinen Eindruck vom Westen beeinflusst?
30) Bist du manchmal nach West Berlin gefahren? Was war dein Eindruck von West Berlin?
31) Welchen Fluchtgrund hast du beim Marienfeldenotaufnahmelager angegeben?
32) Was war der entscheidende Grund deiner Flucht?
33) Hat der Westen deinen Erwartungen entsprochen? Inwiefern ja, inwiefern nicht?
34) Was waren die schwierigsten Momente im Westen am Anfang?
35) Was war besser als erwartet?
36) Was hat dich überrascht im Westen?
37) Was waren die schlimmsten Aspekte des Lebens im Westen in den 60er Jahren?
38) Die besten?
39) Hattest du Vertrauen in die westdeutsche Regierung?

40) Fühltest du dich willkommen und erwünscht? Wie würdest du dein Verhältnis zu den Wessis beschreiben?

41) Hast du in der Zeit Zweifel gehabt, ob deine Entscheidung die richtige war?

42) Haben sich die Wessis für deine Geschichte interessiert?

43) Wem hast du sie erzählt?

44) Die Reaktionen?

45) Was hast du erzählt, was nicht?

46) Wie würdest du die ganze Situation des Erzählens beschreiben?

47) Hast du den Eindruck bekommen, dass die Wessis schon eine gute Vorstellung vom Leben im Osten hatten?

48) Wie wurde allgemein darüber berichtet oder erzählt? Entsprech es deinen Erfahrungen?

49) Wie reagierst du wenn jemand sagt, dass es keine Wiedervereinigung hätte geben sollen?

50) Hast du eine gewisse Ostalgie?

51) Wie du schon weißt, wurde das Mauerfalljubiläum gerade gefeiert. Wie haben die Medien deiner Meinung nach das Thema behandelt? Gab es etwas, was dich besonders gefreut hat? Dich besonders traurig gemacht hat? Dich schockiert hat?
APPENDIX 4: SET 2 QUESTIONS STAYED

2010 Interview Questions: Stayed in East Germany until the 1980s

1) What did you like best about living in the GDR in the 1950s?

2) What did you like least about living in the GDR in the 1950s?

3) Did you ever consider fleeing East Germany before the Wall was built? If so, how seriously?

4) Were you scared that you would get caught?

5) Did anyone ever persuade you to flee to the West? If so, why did you not go with that person?

6) Whom did you speak to about the West in general?

7) Did you hear any rumors that a wall would be built around West Berlin?

8) After the wall was put up, did you regret not having left while you still had the opportunity? Was it just bad timing? Do you think you would have been more likely to leave had you been older?

9) Was the Stasi a problem in the 1950s? What kinds of things did they do? Any personal experiences?

10) Were you ever harassed by government officials or your fellow peers? If so, why?

11) What did the DDR stand for to you?

12) What were your expectations for the government? For a life in the GDR?

13) What kind of ideology were you taught in school? How strongly did you feel about that ideology?

14) How would you describe the general atmosphere or mood in East Germany in the 1950s?

15) How would you describe your disposition or outlook on life in the 1950s?
16) Was there something you wanted, but couldn’t have in the East?
17) Were you a politically conscious person?
18) Were you a member of any political organizations?
19) Were you at all scared of a life in the West?
20) Did you trust the government?
21) What was your impression of West Germany? What was it based on?
22) Did you ever travel to West Berlin in the 1950s? If so, what was your opinion of the city?
23) Could you receive West German TV programs? How did they influence your view of West Germany?
24) Did your impression of West Germany change over time?
25) Did you have problems as a woman in the GDR or was there a positive atmosphere for women?
26) Did you think that life would be easier or harder for you as a woman in the West?
27) Did a friend or family member of yours flee?
28) How did that make you feel?
29) Did you know in 1961 that 2.6 million people had already fled East Germany? If so, what did you think about that?
30) Did you feel that these people had betrayed the “worker and farmer state”?
31) In retrospect, how do you feel about your decision to stay in the East?
32) When you came to the West in the 1980s, did you feel that West Germany lived up to your expectations? How so and how not?
33) What were the hardest experiences you had to live through in the first few years in the West?
34) What was better than expected?
35) What surprised you in the West?
36) What were the worst aspects of life in the West in the 1950s and 1960s?
37) The best aspects?
38) Was there something you wanted, but couldn’t have in the West?
39) Did you have faith in the West German government?
40) How would you describe your relationship to the West Germans?
41) Were the West Germans interested in your story?
42) Whom did you tell?
43) What were the reactions?
44) What did and didn’t you tell them?
45) How would you describe the situation of telling your story?
46) Did you get the impression that the West Germans already knew a lot about life in the East?
47) How did people generally talk about the GDR in the public sphere? Did those reports/stories match up with your own experiences?
48) How do you react when you hear someone say that Germany should have never been reunited?
49) Are you at all nostalgic about the GDR?
50) As you know Germany just celebrated the 20-year anniversary of the fall of the Wall. How do you feel about how the media treated the subject? Did anything make you particularly happy? Did anything make you particularly sad? Did anything shock you?

Same questions in German
1) Was für Sachen gefielen dir am besten in der DDR in den 50er Jahren?
2) Was für Sachen gefielen dir am wenigsten in der DDR in den 50er Jahren?
3) Hast du jemals vor dem Mauerbau die Republikflucht erwogen? Wenn ja, wie ernsthaft?
4) Hattest du große Angst, dass man dich fangen würde?
5) Hat dich jemals irgendjemand zur Flucht in den Westen überreden wollen? Warum bist du nicht mitgegangen?
6) Mit wem hast du überhaupt über den Westen gesprochen?
7) Hast du Gerüchte über den bevorstehenden Mauerbau gehört?
8) Hat es dir gleich nach dem Mauerbau leid getan, dass du nicht geflohen warst? War es nur ein schlechter Zeitpunkt. Oder glaubst du, dass du geflohen wärst wenn du älter gewesen wärst?
9) War die Stasi ein Problem in den 50er Jahren? Was haben sie Schlimmes gemacht? Persönliche Erlebnisse?
10) Wurdest du jemals von den Regierungsbeamten oder Mitbürgern schikaniert? Wenn ja, warum?
11) Was bedeutete die DDR für dich?
12) Was erwartetest du von der Regierung? Von einem Leben in der DDR?
13) Welche Ideologie wurde in der Schule gelehrt? Warst du davon überzeugt?
14) Wie war die allgemeine Stimmung in den 50er Jahren im Osten? z.B, optimistisch, zynisch, deprimiert, hoffnungsvoll?
15) Wie würdest du deine Stimmung in den 50er Jahren beschreiben?
16) Gab es etwas, was du wolltest aber nicht haben konntest im Osten?
17) Hattest du ein politisches Bewusstsein im Osten?
18) Hast du an irgendwelchen politischen Organisationen teilgenommen, z.B. die SED?
19) Hattest du Angst vor einem Leben im Westen?
20) Hattest du Vertrauen in die Regierung?
21) Welche Vorstellungen hattest du vom Westen. Worauf gründeten sie sich?
22) Bist du manchmal in den 50er Jahren nach Westberlin gefahren und was war deine Meinung von Westberlin?
23) Konntest du Westsendungen gut empfangen? Wie haben diese deinen Eindruck vom Westen beeinflusst?
24) Änderten sich mit der Zeit deine Vorstellungen vom Westen?
25) Hattest du Probleme als Frau in der DDR oder bestand eine positive Atmosphäre für Frauen?
26) Glaubtest du, dass das Leben leichter oder schwerer sein würde als Frau in Westdeutschland?
27) Ist ein Freund/in von dir oder ein Familienmitglied abgehauen?
28) Wie fühltest du dich deswegen?
29) Hattest du eine Ahnung in 1961, dass schon 2,6 Millionen Menschen die DDR verlassen hatten seit ihrer Gründung? Was dachtest du davon?
30) Hieß Republikflucht Verrat an dem Arbeiter-und-Bauernstaat für dich?
31) Rückblickend wie denkst du über deine Entscheidung, in der DDR zu bleiben?
32) Als du nach dem Westen kamst: Hat der Westen deinen Erwartungen entsprochen?
   Inwiefern ja, inwiefern nicht?
33) Was waren die schwierigsten Momente im Westen am Anfang?
34) Was war besser als erwartet?
35) Was hat dich überrascht im Westen?
36) Was waren die schlimmsten Aspekte des Lebens im Westen?
37) Die besten?
38) Gab es etwas, was du wolltest aber nicht haben konntest im Westen?
39) Hattest du Vertrauen in die westdeutsche Regierung?
40) Wie würdest du dein Verhältnis zu den Wessis beschreiben?
41) Haben sich die Wessis für deine Geschichte interessiert?
42) Wem hast du sie erzählt?
43) Die Reaktionen?
44) Was hast du erzählt, was nicht?
45) Wie würdest du die ganze Situation des Erzählens beschreiben?
46) Hast du den Eindruck bekommen, dass die Wessis schon eine gute Vorstellung vom Leben im Osten hatten?
47) Wie wurde allgemein darüber berichtet oder erzählt? Entsprach es deinen Erfahrungen?
48) Wie reagierst du wenn jemand sagt, dass es keine Wiedervereinigung hätte geben sollen?
49) Hast du eine gewisse Ostalgie?
50) Wie du schon weißt, wurde das Mauerfalljubiläum gerade gefeiert. Wie haben die Medien deiner Meinung nach das Thema behandelt? Gab es etwas, was dich besonders gefreut hat? Dich besonders traurig gemacht hat? Dich schockiert hat?
Einverständniserklärung—Bowling Green State University, Ohio

Forscherin: Jennifer Stanek


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