



VOICES OF PROMINENT FIGURES

„The Contemporary Witness Office plays an important role in ensuring that the memory of the SED dictatorship and the suffering of its victims remains alive and is passed on to the next generation. In this way we strengthen the motivation to stand up for the values of our liberal democracy.“

German Federal Chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel

„Those who experienced firsthand what it means to live under a dictatorship can convey a more credible, much more impressive picture than any history book. This is why the federal government is funding the work of the Contemporary Witness Office: because it helps counter the trivialization of the SED dictatorship.“

State Minister of Cultural Affairs, Prof. Monika Grütters

THE CONTEMPORARY WITNESS OFFICE

DDR ZEITZEUGE

CONTEMPORARY WITNESSES – A SELECTION

„My future was over at 22.“

Anne Hahn (born in 1966 in Magdeburg) had organised several punk concerts, which is how she became a target of the State Security. She began planning her escape and was arrested in May 1989 while trying to reach the West via the Soviet-Iranian border. She was sentenced to a year and ten months in prison for “attempted escape from the Republic.” She experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall in prison where she remained until late November 1989.

„I was used to living freely; in the GDR I was told how to live.“

Thomas Mahler (born in 1956 in Wiesbaden) visited East Berlin with a group of West German Boy Scouts in May in 1987. He met a man his age there who wanted to get to the West. Mahler helped him flee by letting him use his passport. When Mahler reached the border and reported his passport missing, he was arrested. He was sentenced to two years and three months in prison for “human trafficking.” Through an amnesty he was able to return to the Federal Republic in November 1987.

„Freedom was a foreign word to me in the GDR.“

Andreas Thieme (born in 1952 in Thalheim) grew up in a religious Christian family and was denied the right to pursue a secondary school degree (Abitur). He played in a rock band and wrote lyrics and poems that expressed criticism of the GDR. In December 1972 he was arrested for “anti-state agitation” and sentenced to two years and eight months in prison. As part of an agreement to release prisoners for money, he was allowed to go to the Federal Republic in May 1975.

CONTEMPORARY WITNESS OFFICE

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BUNDESSTIFTUNG
AUFARBEITUNG



Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung
für Kultur und Medien

STIFTUNG BERLINER MAUER

Funded by the Federal Government's Commissioner for Culture and Media

LEARNING HISTORY FIRSTHAND



CONTEMPORARY WITNESS OFFICE

Forty years of SED rule continues to fade from memory. Schoolchildren, in particular, no longer have an impression of the GDR. They have difficulty imagining life in a communist dictatorship. Contemporary witnesses can make this history come alive again. The Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media established the Contemporary Witness Office as an additional political education resource offered jointly by the Federal Foundation for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Eastern Germany, the Berlin Wall Foundation and the Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial Foundation. The office provides contact to contemporary witnesses all over Germany who speak to classes about topics such as political resistance, state persecution and their own personal experience of imprisonment in the GDR. Through these encounters people learn what it meant to lead a non-conformist life in the SED dictatorship; they grasp the difference between democracy and dictatorship. At the online portal www.ddr-zeitzeuge.de you can look up contemporary witnesses in your area, learn about their biographies and contact us about arranging a meeting.

The Contemporary Witness Office supports all schools and educational institutions, helping them arrange, organise and finance an interview with a contemporary witness. The project is sponsored by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media.

VOICES OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

„This will hopefully be offered for a long time because democracy is such a given for our students that they can't even imagine any other system.“

Dominikus-Zimmermann-Realschule Günzburg

„A compelling event about injustice in the GDR that should be repeated as much as possible. There is no better history lesson. Many thanks!“

Franciscum Zerbst

„The students were so touched by the personal stories that they continued to research and deal with the topic on their own.“

Gymnasium Herkenrath

THE COOPERATION PARTNERS

BERLIN-HOHENSCHÖNHAUSEN MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

The Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial is located on the grounds of the former central remand prison of the Ministry for State Security. Former prisoners and historians guide visitors through the grounds, the former prison cell wings and interrogation rooms. The Educational Department offers seminars and project days to school classes on different topics. Permanent and temporary exhibitions inform about the system of political persecution and repression in the GDR.

FEDERAL FOUNDATION FOR THE STUDY OF THE COMMUNIST DICTATORSHIP IN EASTERN GERMANY

The Internet portal www.zeitzeugenbuero.de provides contact to contemporary witnesses who speak at schools and other educational institutions. These people personally experienced the SED dictatorship and Germany's division and helped overcome and shape this period in various areas of society. Some of the witnesses are able to report on their experiences in English. To prepare interviews and conduct follow-up discussions, teaching modules, individualized contemporary witness material and subject-specific resources on contemporary history are provided by the portal free of charge.

BERLIN WALL FOUNDATION

The Berlin Wall Foundation offers moderated discussions with contemporary witnesses on various subjects at the historical sites of the Berlin Wall Memorial and the Marienfelde Refugee Center Museum. These events can be combined with guided tours, seminars and exhibition visits. The Berlin Wall Memorial uses the history of the site to show the larger impact of the closed border and German division. The Marienfelde Refugee Center shows why people fled or emigrated from the GDR and how they started a new life in the Federal Republic. The East Side Gallery and the Günter Litfin Memorial, both part of the Foundation, also offer guided tours.