



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.

„Now I knew that nothing would ever be the same again.“

Rainer Schneider (born in 1954 in Erfurt) spent his childhood with his grandmother in Thuringia. His mother lived in the West. Numerous applications for family reunification were rejected. At the age of 17 he planned his escape. He was betrayed and arrested in February 1972. Sentenced to ten months for “attempted escape from the Republic” he was released back into the GDR in October 1972 under probation conditions. He submitted several applications to leave the country. It was not until 1974 that he was allowed to go to the Federal Republic.

„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



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für Kultur und Medien

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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.