

Episode 78: Berlin, 1989

Summary

Our guest, Nick's brother Tim, talks about being in Germany as a teenager when the Berlin Wall came down in November 1989 and visiting Berlin shortly afterwards.

Transcript

Nick: Today I'm talking to a very special guest, who's my brother Tim. Thank you very much for talking to us.

Tim: Hi Nick!

Nick: Umm, and what I wanted to talk to you about in the first of your many appearances on our podcast, is that you were a kind of witness to a pretty amazing event, uhh, which was the fall of the Berlin Wall. And you were in Germany at the age of sixteen when this happened in 1989. And so how did it come to be that you were in Germany at that time?

Tim: OK, so I did a ... an exchange, student exchange program. Umm, I was staying in a fairly small town in the very north of Germany, in Schleswig-Holstein. And, umm, we had a couple of visits to Berlin while I was there.

Nick: And so the place where you were staying was in the former West Germany, right?

Tim: That's right. Umm, I mean in 1989, uhh, officially, at least, there were still two separate countries, West Germany and East Germany and, uhh, I was, uhh, just north of a small town called Husum, umm, which is, umm, very far north in Germany, not far from Denmark actually, umm, which was, yes, definitely West Germany at the time.

Nick: And so during 1989 and, you know, a couple of years leading up to that, but in 1989 throughout the old eastern bloc¹, you had these changes that were starting to take place, in Czechoslovakia and Poland and these other countries. And so everybody was kind of watching Germany to see what would happen because Germany was really the focal point of the Cold War and the east-west divide. And so did you feel, when you arrived there, it must have been - what? - October or

¹ eastern bloc: The communist countries in Eastern Europe in the second half of the twentieth century

something like that, of 1989, did you feel that there was tension or excitement or anything like that?

Tim: It was, umm, as a sixteen-year-old, largely lost on me². I look back now and wonder how I missed it. Umm, I wasn't, I just wasn't aware of these truly significant historical issues at the time. So, umm, I have to say while I was there I wouldn't have noticed, umm, as much as probably I should have, looking back now.

Nick: Well I guess the other thing is that obviously in East Germany this would have been a monumental change - the reunification of Germany, the fall of the Berlin Wall. And I suppose in West Germany, while an amazing event, it would have been perhaps less important to the West Germans than to the East Germans.

Tim: I guess that's a good question. Umm, certainly the East Germans would have experienced a greater change, umm, in terms of, well, their government, uhh, and the general, I guess, concept of how their society would function. Umm, you know, capitalism for them had been a dirty word, and, uhh, then they had to sort of embrace it. But I think on the whole, the Germans in general would have been very keen to see the reunification. That was my experience at the time, umm, purely from observation.

Nick: Yeah, I think if you look back on it, yeah, as you said, so for the East Germans it was about a complete change of their lives, of the political system and everything, but for the West Germans it was probably more just about unification rather than changes, necessarily, to their daily lives, because essentially their system had kind of won out. Umm, and so, do you ... the ninth of November 1989, is this famous date when the Wall came down, so to speak, which is that when people began to cross from one to the other. And so do you remember, were you watching that on television in the town where you were?

Tim: It was certainly, umm, on the news. Umm, but again I feel a little embarrassed to admit this. At the time, as a sixteen-year-old, it wasn't the most important thing to me, and I probably missed, uhh, a lot of what was going on around me at the time. Umm, I did, however, umm, manage to chip away³ my very own piece of the Berlin Wall, so that was, apart from being extremely exciting, umm, I suppose that's a little bit of history that I've got to take with me.

Nick: And do you still have those pieces of wall?

Tim: You know what? I don't know where they are now. I haven't thrown them away, but, uhh, as I now live in London I suspect they're probably back in Australia somewhere.

² largely lost on me: mostly unappreciated or not understood by me

³ to chip away: to remove, take away or withdraw gradually

Nick: I remember when you came back from Germany and you had all these little pieces of the Wall, and as you say, you were sixteen, but I was only nine, so, you know, I didn't really understand exactly what had happened. I mean, we'd followed the events, especially because we knew that you were there and you were nearby. But you came back and gave me this rock or this stone, this piece of Wall, and I said, 'Oh, gee⁴, that's a great present, isn't it?' But, umm, you know, but as we look back on it now, this is probably one of the two or three most significant events of our lifetimes.

Tim: Definitely, umm, and I've spent a little bit of time in Germany recently and, umm, in Berlin in particular. And there's no escaping⁵ this fact. It's one of the reasons people, umm, tourists flock⁶ to Berlin. The, umm, museums and the general sightseeing is full of this recent, this modern history, this recent, umm, development. And, uhh, it's interesting to note that the Wall has almost been done as long as it was ever up. Uhh, not quite, but, uhh, yet, I think it will be of such significance for decades, if not centuries to come.

Nick: Yeah, I think it just holds this fascination that, especially, you know, to think that even in our lifetimes, you know, in Western Germany or in Germany you had a divided city and a divided country. And it's just remarkable to think of the differences at that time. One thing I remember, I don't know if you remember this or were ever really aware of it, is that when you left and went to Germany, our father bought a computer for us. This was in 1989, it was the first computer that we had in our house. And we wrote a letter to you to send by mail to you in Germany where you were staying, and we said that we'd bought a typewriter⁷. And so it was feas(ible), it was believable at that time, that it could have been a typewriter that we'd purchased and not a computer. Because a computer was, sort of, very new and, uhh, and so we wrote in this letter, 'Oh look, we're' - you know, 'cause we typed the letter on the computer and printed it out - and said, 'Oh, we're sending you this letter that we typed on our brand new typewriter!' Umm, but it just shows the incredible changes that we've seen in our world from that time to this time. And like you said, you've been back to Germany quite a few times, and to Berlin, and so the changes that you see in Berlin over this 25-year period are amazing, right?

⁴ gee: sarcastic interjection (in this case, which is Australian slang). It can also mean 'gosh' as a non-sarcastic interjection.

⁵ there's no escaping: it's certainly true, it cannot be denied

⁶ flock: go in great numbers

⁷ typewriter: a no-longer-used word processor that predates computers, where you type directly onto a page

Tim: Yes, I do remember, umm, my trip. I've got a prop⁸ here which is not going to go down too well⁹ on your, uhh, podcast. I do have my original visa.

Nick: Is that right?

Tim: To transit into East Berlin. Umm, I remember very clearly that you had to pay twenty Deutschmarks, or twenty East Ger ... twenty West German marks, I should say. And you would get twenty, or it might have even been twenty-five, but you would get the same returned to you in East German marks, which of course was, umm, nowhere near the, uhh - not that there was an official exchange rate, but, umm, twenty-five West German marks was probably more like, uhh, two hundred East German marks. But, umm, I do remember going down the, umm, the main street near to the Brandenburg Gate which is Unter den Linden, and felt like being transported back, umm, I would imagine, back to when the Wall was built in the sixties. Umm, the shops contained very, very old products at very, very, very high prices. Everything was rather gloomy¹⁰, umm, perhaps because there was so much happening around us that people weren't going to the shops or they weren't going about their normal day-to-day business because of all this excitement. So maybe that made it feel even gloomier than it was, but it didn't, it really didn't feel like the vibrant, wonderful city that Berlin is today.

Nick: Yeah, so it's interesting, because, so you would have been there right at that moment when change was coming, but yet you still have all of these relics of East Germany there as well.

Tim: That's right, and here it is: *Transitvisum, Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (German Democratic Republic, the official name for East Germany).

Nick: So, if you don't have any more of the Berlin Wall, at least you have your transit visa as a souvenir.

Tim: That's right.

Nick: OK, so thank you very much.

Tim: You're very welcome.

⁸ prop: any kind of physical object to help in acting or storytelling

⁹ go down (too) well: be well received or be successful (in this case, Tim is saying this because it's an audio podcast and listeners cannot see the prop)

¹⁰ gloomy: dull, not bright or colourful

Comprehension Questions

1. How did Tim feel about the changes taking place in Germany while he was there?
2. Why did Nick tell the story about the computer/typewriter?
3. What are the two souvenirs that Tim has (or had!) that are related to a divided Germany?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. Celebrity culture is very powerful these days. When Hollywood stars make public appearances, people will _____ to see them and try to get a selfie.
2. His comedy routine was OK but for one of his bits in particular, I thought it would have been better if he had a _____ to better illustrate the joke.
3. The teenagers held a party when their parents went out of town, and it did not _____ with their parents when they returned and saw the damage.
4. I don't know anything about basketball, so when I saw LeBron James play, his greatness was _____.
5. She grew up in the _____, so she had no idea how many different brands of chocolate were available in the west until she went to London.
6. "What was it like last night?" — "Dark." — "_____, that's really helpful."
7. He didn't mean to go that far, but _____ the fact that he committed a serious crime and needs to be punished.
8. In the movie [Wonder Boys](#), Michael Douglas' character is an old-school writer who still uses a _____ to write his novels.
9. They got sick of the _____ weather all the time in the UK and moved to Australia, where it's much warmer and sunnier.
10. It's better _____ carefully at the marble rather than trying to bash it really hard. There's less risk of damaging the marble that way.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Are you old enough to remember the fall of the Berlin Wall? If so, what do you remember about it? If not, did you learn about it in school and what do you know about this historical event?
2. What do you find more interesting: modern history such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, or ancient history like the civilisations of Egypt, Greece or Rome?
3. Tim talked about a couple of atypical souvenirs that he has from that trip. Do you have any interesting or unusual souvenirs from trips that you've made?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. He was too young to appreciate what was happening so the events didn't have much of an impact on him at the time.
2. He told this story to illustrate the changes between 1989 and now, which can be seen in technological advancements and also in the development of Berlin.
3. He has some pieces of the Berlin Wall that he chipped away himself, and a transit visa for East Germany.

Exercises

1. flock
2. prop
3. go down well
4. largely lost on me
5. eastern bloc
6. Gee
7. there's no escaping
8. typewriter
9. gloomy
10. to chip away