

IMAGES AND STORIES FROM THE BORDERLANDS

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Imagining life in Europe in the 21st century can be done through many different conceptual prisms, each of which would capture different geo-political and symbolic interconnections or divisions in this extraordinarily complex and multi-signifying entity. Examples of these might be a bounded Europe of borders or border communities, with changing dynamics throughout its violent history in the first half of the 20th century and the growing peaceful interconnections through the EU thereafter; or it might be a Europe of networks of the many diverse people who live in and across its territory; or one of neighbourhoods, stressing the need to (re)create spaces of encounter between its diverse people (for a detailed discussion of this, see Meinhof 2011). Each of these can be seen as both, a descriptive lense for capturing specific phenomena of social interaction in geo-political spaces and also as a metaphor for imagining human encounters across visible or invisible divisions, such as for example those offered up by different citizenship and nationhood, ethnicity, race, religion or gender.

In this essay I will use the prism of border communities to capture a very specific borderland –between Upper Franconia and Southern Thuringia in Germany– that underwent major changes in the lifetime of three-generation families living there, including my own, and which stands symptomatically -if in strong form- for many of the processes of bordering, debordering and rebordering experienced by all kinds of different people, in response to the disturbing events of the 20th century. Here I will draw on my own research in this region between 1999 and 2003, and again briefly in 2012. I will first present the geopolitical history of the region on both sides of the river Saale, which was part of one unified country - Germany - until 1945, then became divided by the ‘Iron Curtain’¹ into the respective borderlands of the two separate and mutually hostile states of West-German FRG and East-German GDR, and eventually (re)united as one German Republic in the aftermath of the collapse of the Wall in Berlin in November 1989, which led to free GDR elections in March 1990 and subsequent unification as one FRG on the West-German model on October 3rd 1990.

To link this to the theme of *border aesthetics* I will show with selected photographs from the time of division and cold war, how the German-German border became visually inscribed across the East-West divide in a hostile dialogue of signs pointed at one another. In the second section of the essay I will focus on the time of the reopening and disappearance of the border, symbolized by photographs of two bridge inaugurations in 1989 and 2007. A series of photographs presented to our informants – all of them members of three-generation families living on either side– triggered very different kinds of narratives irrespective of the aesthetic appeal of the

¹ The term Iron Curtain (Eiserner Vorhang) became the standard Western reference to the border between Eastern Europe under Soviet domination and democratic Western Europe, following Churchill’s ‘Sinews of Peace’ speech of 5 March 1946: ‘From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste on the Adriatic an “Iron Curtain” has descended across the continent’. http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Iron_Curtain_Speech

images in question. I will conclude with the testimonies of two women - one who grew up in Tiefengrün and another who has lived in Hirschberg all her life – where they describe their feelings about the region in 2012, twenty-two years after unification and more than a decade since the interviews with the informants of section.

Introducing the borderland

Straddling the northernmost part of Bavaria- or more specifically Upper Franconia around the town of Hof/Saale and the small nearby village of Tiefengrün in Western Germany- and the most southern part of Thuringia around the town of Hirschberg/Saale in Eastern Germany, the region in question ² was completely interdependent in social, economic and cultural terms until the end of the second World-War, with a unified infrastructure of rail and road connections and fully integrated trade links. This was reflected in the everyday and working life of the people living there: many of those working in the large leather factory in Hirschberg - including its owners, the families Knoch - had their houses and villas in Tiefengrün and surrounding towns and villages; the flower mill Kühnmühle in (Unter-) Tiefengrün, owned also by the Knoch family, and managed from 1921 first by my maternal grandfather and subsequently (until 1967) my father served the wider farmer and baker community on both sides. Most of the people in Tiefengrün went for their daily shopping to the larger town of Hirschberg; friends and family members lived on either side; many Hirschbergians had allotments in the ‘Schrebergärten’ across the river; the Saale³ itself in its pristine pre-war state, and weather permitting, offered leisure opportunities for swimming, rowing and ice-scating for everyone, just as the larger town of Hof in the West, famous for its many breweries, and the celebrated ridge walk Rennsteig connecting the Thuringian Forest and Highland with the Franconian Forest attracted people from right across the region. Some villages even straddled the boundary itself, such as the nearby tiny village of Mödlareuth with houses on both sides of a small brook -the Tannbach - that formed the official but politically irrelevant boundary between Bavaria and Thuringia.

Post World-War 2 division: 1945-1989

This interconnection ended however, when in the aftermath of Germany’s capitulation at the end of the war and occupation by the four Allied Forces, the boundary between Thuringia and Saxony on the eastern side, and Franconia on the western side became part of the dividing line between what had split by 1949 into two separate German states. Initially in 1945, movement across the boundaries between the ‘Occupied Zones’ (the so-called *Besatzungszonen*- in this region the Soviet- and the US-controlled zones) was feasible. However, rapidly deteriorating

² There is an even longer history of interconnectedness going back to the 12th century and the Holy Roman Empire: the larger region of the Vogtland – nearly identical to today’s Euregio Egrensis- of which this region was its southernmost corner comprises not only Franconian and Thuringian but also Saxonian territory as well as parts of today’s Czech Republic. It is still used as the preferred identification by some people in the region.

³ A famous German folksong ‘An der Saale hellem Strande’ from 1826 celebrates its sandy shores and many castles and ruins upriver.

relations between the Western Allies and the Soviet-Union, the initiation of two new state governances with very different political and economic systems, and their respective currency reforms in 1949, a rapidly increasing disparity between a much richer West Germany helped on by US aid and the poorer East suffering from reparation payments to the Soviet-Union – all of this contributed to a complete breakdown of any cross-border movement. The so-called ‘kleiner Grenzüberschrittschein’ (small border-crossing pass) which initially enabled local people to continue visiting or working on the other side was completely withdrawn by 1952, when the GDR began an increasingly aggressive policy of fortifying and militarizing the borderline, to stop the constant stream of refugees who fled the East. Only the boundary between East and West-Berlin remained open, since Berlin had been put under the shared control of all four Allies. However, the Berlin Wall erected overnight by GDR border guards on the 13 August 1961 put an end to the last open transit, after millions of East Germans had used it as a way of escaping to West-Berlin or via West-Berlin to West-Germany.

Along the territorial border of 1393 kilometers length between the FRG and the GDR, a 5 kilometer exclusion zone (*Sperrzone*) stopped East-Germans from getting anywhere near the actual border itself, with the exception of those people who were allowed to continue living in the immediately adjacent towns or villages. One of these towns was Hirschberg whose factory building stood on the banks of the river, and thus within the *Sperrzone*. Hirschberg’s citizens were given special permits allowing them to continue living there, though many families considered by the East-German authorities as potential escapees were evacuated further inland. Another such place was the village of Mödlareuth. Here as in many other similar border settlements, the houses immediately adjacent to the eastern⁴ side of the border were destroyed by GDR officials, but the remaining few on the GDR side remained close enough to be seen from the West.

The fact that such a small village with members of the same family living on both sides was split in two gave it notoriety throughout the Cold War, since as in Berlin the border installations of the GDR were all too visible for the many western private and official visitors. Similar to the ‘Mauer Museum’ in Berlin on Checkpoint Charlie (www.mauermuseum.de), the former division is still being commemorated in a special museum, today called deutsch-deutsches Museum (www.moedlareuth.de).

For the 40 years of the GDR’s existence, all traffic infrastructures between East and West – bridges, roads, railway lines, in-land shipping routes - had either been already destroyed during the war or were subsequently dismantled or otherwise rendered non-functional. The exception was a very limited number of access routes along a few specially guarded roads and motorways, three air corridors and two river connections with militarized crossing-points at the GDR borders to West-Germany and West-Berlin respectively. One of these was a transit road near Hof/Saale through the village of Töpen, which was replaced after the rebuilding of the motorway bridge by the official border crossing Hirschberg/Rudolphstein in 1964, approximately 4km away from Hirschberg itself. Today this bridge is called *Bridge of German Unity*,

⁴ I am using the terms eastern and western only as a political marker indexing East - (GDR) and West-Germany (FRG), not as a geographical marker.

celebrating its new identity as a link between East and West.

The border as text

During the years of the Cold War, the buildings and installations on either side but especially in the East, were the sites of a propaganda war, so that the border itself was inscribed as a kind of dialogic text. Signs on the leather factory in Hirschberg and on specially erected boards in Mödlareuth pointing across the border to the West praised the strength of Socialism and the new GDR leaders, warned of future wars, or accused the West of war-mongering. The West countered by reasserting the unity of Germany. A huge sign on the bridge stump in Tiefengrün, for example, pointing to both East and West read ‘Hier ist weder eine Ost noch eine Westgrenze. Für uns fließt die Saale noch mitten durch Deutschland’. (This is neither an eastern nor a western border. For us the river Saale continues to flow through the centre of Germany).

Below are a few pictures taken from the photo gallery of the Museum in Mödlareuth and our own family archive to illustrate these ‘border texts’.

Image 1 shows examples of East and West in one picture: the sign on the western side placed on the stump of the bridge in Tiefengrün orders everyone not to go beyond that point, but like the other sign just quoted, insists on this being a zone and not a national border: ‘Halt! Zonengrenze. Bundesgrenzschutz’ (Stop! Zone border. Federal Border-guards). The sign on the eastern side on the wall of the Hirschberg factory carrying a photo of Walter Ulbricht asserts the democratic credentials of the GDR leader (‘carried by the will of the people’) and makes claims that the future of the German nation would lie with a ‘state of workers and peasants’: ‘Vom Willen des Volkes getragen steht Walter Ulbricht an der Spitze des ersten deutschen Arbeiter u. Bauernstaates der Zukunft der DEUTSCHEN NATION!’ (Carried by the will of the people, Walter Ulbricht heads the first German workers’ and peasants’ state for the future of the GERMAN NATION!).



Image 2 is from Mödlareuth East pointing West, and under the command ‘Helm ab, Augen auf’ (Off with your helmet- open your eyes!) quotes a poem by Bertolt Brecht: ‘das grosse Karthago führte drei Kriege. Es war noch mächtig nach dem ersten, noch bewohnbar nach dem zweiten. Es war nicht mehr auffindbar nach dem dritten’ (Great Carthage made war three times. After the first, she was still powerful. After the second, she was still livable in. After the third she could no longer be traced.), finishing with the admonition. ‘Deshalb darf nie von deutschem Boden wieder ein Krieg ausgehen’ (Thus never again must a war begin from German soil).



And again from Hirschberg signalling West, this sign erected on the roof of the

factory is a triumphant message that neither of the two prominent West German politicians named- Franz Josef Strauss and Herbert Wehner - could stop the progress of Socialism.



There were many other signs not reproduced here, often using ironic quotations as a way of attacking West-German policies or politicians such as: “Zonenrandförderung” jetzt mit Atomminen. Das ist die Hilfe der Bundesregierung! (“Help for the border zone” now with nuclear mines. That’s the help of the Federal Republic).

The battle of words was mainly a state-imposed discourse, though some of it filtered through to the people as well. Thus one of my respondents from the oldest generation in Tiefengrün, told me that he and his friend had countered some of the eastern propaganda slogans by putting up a sign saying: ‘Wir *sind* satt und ihr *habts* satt’, (we *have* enough and you *had* enough) a pun on the word ‘satt’ that cannot so easily be rendered into English since it depends on two contrasting German idiomatic constructions playing with the word “satt”. ‘Wir sind satt’ literally translates as ‘we have eaten enough, or more colloquially ‘we’re full’, whereas the second ‘ihr habts satt’ means ‘you’re fed-up’. When the first Social-Democrat / Free-Democrat coalition government under Willy Brandt (1969-74) initiated some improvement in the relations between the FRG and the GDR, the ‘sign war’ also stopped.

The ‘Wende’, (Re-)Unification and the new FRG

The momentous events of November 1989 were sparked off by a somewhat muddled announcement by the press officer of the GDR politburo Günter Schabowski.⁵ His reply to a journalist’s question that the border checkpoints were to be opened as of now, led to tens of thousands of East-Berlin citizens crossing over to West-Berlin,

⁵ There is a plethora of books and articles that describe the history of German/German relations, the opposition movement in the GDR, the events leading up to unification and its aftermath in much more detail than is possible here. For a good accessible overview see, for example, Thomanek and Niven (2001), also available as an electronic resource.

and hundreds of citizens from both sides celebrating on top of the wall itself, unharmed and uninhibited by the fully armed and ‘ordered-to-shoot’ GDR border guards. The ‘Wende’ had begun. Schabowski’s announcement and the TV images and news from Berlin were instantly felt with the same intensity along the territorial borderline in the Hirschberg and Hof region. Thousands of East-Germans crossed over the existing roads and bridges into Franconia, causing hour-long cues of Trabant cars, with the first port of call for many the shops of Hof itself. However, as we shall see in the next section, with the help of the ‘welcome cash’ (*Begrüßungsgeld*) of 100 D-Mark available to each adult GDR citizen on arrival in the West, many took the opportunity of visiting cities and countries much further away, fulfilling their life-long desire of unrestricted travelling. In our interviews with families in Hirschberg we heard moving and amusing stories of how several of them bought bus-tickets to Paris on a 3 night package tour offered almost instantly by opportunist bus companies in nearby Franconian towns and villages. It is stories such as these, relating the experiences of ordinary citizens in East and West and their reactions to the collapse of the border that will be the focus of the next section.

Bordering, Debordering, Rebordering

My research interest in the cultural identity construction of members of three-generation families in this region – spanning the periods of their lives in Germany in pre-World War 2 (oldest generation), in the two Germanies of post World war 2 until 1989/90 (middle generation), and again in unified post-Wende Germany (youngest generation) is on the one hand based on a series of theoretical reflections about the ways in which sociopolitical and cultural changes impact on the ways in which people experience their personal lives, on the nature of cultural identities during times of public changes and crises, and the *discursive* realization of identity in narrative (see for example, Hall 1992, 1996, Bauman 2000, De Fina 2003, Baynham and de Fina 2005, Georgakopolou 2007) At the same time, my own personal history and a growing interest in ethnographic observation and participation in a region where my maternal family had lived for centuries meant that the research process itself- both the ethnographic/ linguistic method of approaching ‘data-collection’ and the subsequent discourse analytical investigation of the data - were deeply embedded and intertwined with stories, anecdotes and pictures of my family members and family archives. Many of the people living in these communities were personally known to us: on the western side in Tiefengrün several of the members of the middle generation went to primary school with me and my sister; some of the older generation on both sides had been friends of my grandparents and my mother; a retired school teacher Elsbeth Mord (real name) in Hirschberg, who helped me in the search for three- generation families still living there in the late 1990 and early 2000s, had been taught by my mother at the Hirschberg primary school between 1943 and 1945. And it was my mother who supported me in the first pilot interviews in Tiefengrün and Hirschberg for what developed into the first ESRC- funded project on the German – German and German – Polish border, (Meinhof and Galasinski 2000, 2002, 2005, Galasinski and Meinhof 2002), and subsequently expanded to the EU 5th framework project on EU Border Discourse (see especially Meinhof 2002,

2003 and 2004, Armbruster and Meinhof 2002, 2005).⁶

Methodological issues

As a result of these personal links a great deal of care had to go into the construction of an appropriate research method, to allow us to take advantage of the obvious empathy created by the shared experience with the people of the region on the one hand, whilst on the other ensuring the necessary analytical distance in interviewing technique and discursive evaluation. A second issue of a more theoretical nature also deeply affected the methodology for eliciting experiential narratives. Our aim was to ‘read’ the narratives we collected through the rigorous methods of (critical) discourse analysis (see for example Fairclough 1992, 2003, Fowler 1991, Hodge and Kress 1993, van Dijk 1997, Wodak 1999 and many more recent works since then). We knew from our own experience that German division and the hostility of the times as well as on-going unresolved post-*Wende* tensions meant that the formulation of any kind of semi-structured interview questions would lead us into a linguistic mine-field, rendering a finely-tuned subsequent discourse analysis of co-constructed narratives very difficult. How could we ask about experiences during the time of division and unification when all linguistic labels referring to the different historical phases especially in relation to the East were already ideologically loaded? How could we ensure that the labels that our informants selected from a possible lexical repertoire (or others that they avoided or circumscribed) were their own choices and not already preconfigured by our questioning? Lexical choices, not previously introduced through our own questions, hesitations or avoidances of certain labels and the context in which they would emerge could provide important insight into the ways in which our interviewees placed themselves in their present and past socio-political and cultural realities. Just to give some examples: choices such as ‘*Ostzone*’ Eastern zone- referring to the Soviet occupation but still used by many Westerners, the ‘so-called GDR’ or ‘GDR’, the officially sanctioned description in line with the ‘Hallstein doctrine’⁷ until the eventual recognition of the GDR by the Brandt government in 1972; GDR as the official designation, but for a now collapsed state; *Ostdeutschland*, or ‘der Osten’, ‘*neue Bundesländer*’ (new federal states- post-*Wende*), or a preference for the naming of the local regions as Thuringia or Upper Franconia, all offer significant insights in this respect.

Photographs as narrative triggers

To overcome this methodological dilemma whilst retaining a relaxed cooperative conversational interviewing style, we piloted and then mainstreamed for all participating researchers an innovative method, whereby we were using clearly identifiable photographs from the three different phases of the communities as

⁶ The ESRC-funded project was a shared project with my Polish colleague Dariusz Galasinski, who researched the Polish town of Gubin, whilst I undertook research in the German town of Guben, as well as in Tiefengrün and Hirschberg. On the basis of this and with a group of scholars from altogether 6 universities we developed the EU project Border Identities (2000-2003) which then mainstreamed the methodology for the entire borderline from the Polish –German down to the Italian-Slovenian border between 2000 and 2003.

⁷ The Hallstein doctrine, named after a West-German Foreign Office official of the time, threatened any foreign state that recognized the GDR with a refusal or breaking-off of diplomatic relations.

stimuli for our informants. Meinhof and Galasinski (especially 2000 and 2005) have elsewhere discussed this in more detail in the context of the narratives that were triggered by these means. Important for the topic of this paper is the *variation* in the reaction of different informants, irrespective of any aesthetic appeal one might want to assign to the images in question. For example, Armbruster and Meinhof (2006: 73-87) analysed the narratives that were elicited through images of three different phases of the leather factory in Hirschberg. They found that the beautiful white factory building from the 1930s with the old stone bridge connecting it to Tiefengrün triggered for the oldest generation stories of the hardship their own parent and grandparent generation had suffered whilst working there. By contrast, a grainy photograph taken in GDR times in the late 1950s of the same building behind barbed wire and the rough edge of the bridge stump, now in a dilapidated state and still painted in the dark war-decoy colours with propaganda slogans pointing to the west, aroused positive, almost nostalgic memories from some of the men who used to work there during GDR times. And again, a picture of the factory's office buildings, fully restored as a Museum⁸ in the 1990s, but left standing on an empty space where the factory proper had been dismantled, aroused strong negative reactions even from those informants who had previously stressed the harsh working conditions there.

New bridges, new stories

In this section I will turn to examples of the different kinds of narratives triggered by the pictures of the *reopening* of the bridges, iconic images of the initial reconnection and reunification of the communities after more than 40 years of separation, first through a provisional foot-bridge (image 1) and 8 years later through a stone bridge for traffic (image 2).

When we showed these two images to our informants they prompted very different kinds of stories that were indicative of the ways in which different people between 1999 and 2002 – that is a decade and more after the end of the division-positioned themselves in relation to German unification.

⁸ Museum für Gerberei und Stadtgeschichte, www.museum-hirschberg.de



Inauguration of the new wooden foot-bridge between Tiefengrün and Hirschberg on the 30th of December 1989 connecting the stumps of the old stone bridge destroyed by German military in the

last month of the 2nd World War.



Inauguration of the new stone bridge that replaced the wooden footbridge by one suitable for motor traffic on 3rd October 1997.

Regaining what was lost

Hans⁹, a Hirschbergian of the oldest generation, searches for the right words to express his pleasure in being once again able to cross the border. For him this is a return to an earlier time, a revisiting of an area he knew very well from 40 years before. To capture his feelings he considers but does not quite opt for ‘euphoria’ (but see Helena below); instead he talks about a ‘strange feeling’, to which he then adds the expression ‘erhebend’ to give it a sense of almost religious intensity (I translated ‘erhebend’ as ‘uplifting’ but the German word is much more intense in its emotional charge).

Hans (oldest generation Hirschberg)¹⁰:

Well, that was, how should I say, euphoria is not the right word- it was a strange feeling that after 40 years one could once again cross the Saale river and could read the verse on the wall of the mill ¹¹(Kühnmühle) - well, that

⁹ All names of interviewees are pseudonyms except for those of Elsbeth Mord, and those of my sister and mother (Cornelie and Ursula Meinhof) who have given permission to reveal their identity

¹⁰ All extracts are translations from the German originals. I have tried to stay with the English as close to the wording of the German as possible to give some flavour of the emotions expressed, including disturbances in the grammar, hesitations etc.

¹¹ The verse he refers to is a little poem written by my grandfather Max von Andrian-Werburg, and inscribed in black decorative lettering on the wall of the mill: ‘ Sechshundert fünfzig Jahre stund Die Mühle hier im kühlen Grund. Gott half in Sonnenschein und Not Er geb auch weiter Korn und Brot’

was somehow uplifting.

Erna, too, expresses the deep emotions that she felt at this moment when the other side and the people there were once again accessible to her.

Erna (oldest generation Hirschberg):

Oh when I see that photo, that was a deeply moving moment. Tears came to my eyes. Because I would have never imagined that this could happen, that the border would once again be lifted, and that we would once more be able to go for a walk from Hirschberg to Tiefengrün. Yes, I did shed a few little tears, when I saw all these people and I thought, that can't be true. I stood there with my sister-in-law... and both of us were crying.

Celebrating the new connections

For Helena, a Hirschbergian of the middle generation, whose brothers had escaped to the West in 1988, the same picture also recalls a very happy moment, leading to new contacts and opportunities for both sides. She remembers a feeling of 'complete euphoria', since for her it was the first opportunity to establish contact with the other side and also with the people of Tiefengrün. The opening of the border also makes her consider the feelings of the oldest generation like her friend Marianne (and Hans), what it must have been like for them to be suddenly cut off and isolated (*wie konntet ihr das dann so aushalten, dass die das zugemacht haben*; how could you stand it that *they* closed it off).

Helena (middle generation, Hirschberg):

Well, yes, that was total euphoria when we then, then had for the first time really directly contact. when everything was open. And one could see that also with all the Tiefengrünians. By now we got to know them from shopping. And that is also somehow nice, well I don't think here in the area, this is east and this is west. Not at all. And my son is playing football, that also cuts across the borders, is just one club. And they are playing another tournament this Sunday up there in Tiefengrün and so and there one knows the people, so it s never as if this had been somewhere separated. And I have always said, also to Marianne (pseudonym), how could you stand this, that they closed it off. That shocked me somehow even more. Because they said, because they had already known it when it was all open. Apart from that for the children it is lovely, I find, all that is [available], also for the schoolchildren, or when we now do school trips, and so, one travels to the Black Forest or one travels to the Baltic Sea or wherever, well that is all so really, all somehow equal.

Helena's account of the new shared life with the people of Tiefengrün is one of the most positive we heard from the middle generation. She stresses the new connections

(For 650 years the mill stood here in this cool valley. God helped us in sunny and in needy times. May he continue to offer us corn and bread).

between sides, the football club with youngsters from both Hirschberg and Tiefengrün playing together, the school trips to either western or eastern locations, and the general openness towards one another. However, in spite of this positive outlook one can sense a certain unease in the many hesitations, modifications and hedgings in her formulations. For example when she insists on no longer experiencing a division between East or West she introduces it first by the rather weak adjective 'nett' (nice) preceded by three downgraders (German original: 'ja-auch-irgendwo'-'Und das ist ja auch irgendwo nett', and that is also somehow nice), though it is followed by the much more emphatic 'not at all'. Later the phrase 'also das ist nie irgendwo, dass da irgendwo getrennt wurde' is a somewhat tortured avoidance of saying who had at one point separated what or who from whom. This is not surprising if one thinks of the many much more negative accounts of both Hirschbergians and especially Tiefengrünians about the debordering process and the mutual relations between them (see examples below)

A fellow Hirschbergian from the middle generation, Gerhard, compares the emotions of the two official bridge openings shown on the two pictures. Like Helena he recalls his own strong feelings – being moved by the fact that one could now simply drive close to the border without being shot at or arrested. Turning to the image of the opening ceremony of the motor-bridge 8 years later, he is reminded once more of a bit of the euphoria – the *Wende-Euphorie* – of the earlier times, all the curiosity and expectation of a generation who had been separated for 40 years, but which in his view had given way to a much more sober outlook in between. His narrative is marked by even more false starts, hesitations and hedgings than Helena's at key points in the narrative. Similar to many middle generation texts one can sense an alternative, more critical, possibly even disillusioned story about the relations with the neighbours in the West hidden underneath.

Gerhard (middle generation Hirschberg):

Well yes, I'd say, if one now, that for example, that picture is the one from 1989, from the 30th December. That was really very moving. Just the thought alone, that one, I'd say, drove to the border, if one had done that one would have been in danger, that one would have, what do I know, been shot at or arrested, that would have radically altered the life here. Well yes, that is what affected one's emotions deeply. When the Saale bridge was inaugurated, then in 97, the traffic bridge, then actually one could feel again a little bit of that Wende-euphoria, but actually it was sort of different, there was this, well, I'd say, Wende-euphoria, that was kind of there, because of the involvement with the bridge-building was there, I'd say, the the the whole atmosphere, the spoken words did return one to the time of 89, but in the daily life there had been nevertheless a certain sober distance, ah, it, one knew the opposite ah, let s say this generation which could relive that after 40 years that was a relatively small group, but there were many like us in our age group who had never known it, so there had been a lot of curiosity, a lot of expectations, lots of new stuff, and here one could see a piece a piece of of fulfilment of this unity, of this bridge which had once existed, this Heinrich-Knoch-Bridge.

So far all the extracts I selected show more or less positive reactions, most markedly by the oldest generation but also by the two middle generation Hirschbergians. However, the same pictures also triggered very different kinds of stories.

Indifference

Emma, a woman from Tiefengrün of the oldest generation does not express any joy when reminded of the reopening of the border, but shows her indifference both in what she says ('well, we did.. we did go there and it was open and we went through once) as well as in the modifying particles 'hm, na ja, halt', all of which signal a lack of involvement. She then, very typically for many informants who uttered negative views ascribes these views to others 'there are some who did not enjoy it', preceded by some nervous laughter 'hi hi hi' and the somewhat anxious repetition of the personal pronoun 'we, we, we'.

Emma (oldest generation Tiefengrün):

Ulrike: And I mean, did you enjoy that when it [the border] got opened up again?

Emma: Hm, well, what does it mean enjoy? Hm, hi hi, there are some who did not enjoy it. But we we we did go there and it was open and we went through once

Fears and shock of the new

A much starker reaction comes from Karin, a Hirschbergian woman from the middle generation, when she recounts the deep anxieties she felt at this moment.

Karin (middle generation Hirschberg):

That was (long pause), well, what shall I say, that was, as if I stood in front of a tunnel, a dark tunnel, and I must say, when the border was opened, by the end end of 89, yes, end of 89, that went straight to my stomach. I was really sick that weekend...

And I only said to myself: close your eyes and go through. It was as if I went down under (einbrechen = breaking through ice and drowning).

So far the extracts presented directly show people's reactions to the images of the border openings, especially the first one in 1989. They are recalling their memories of how they felt about it, but as some of the texts above already signaled, the narratives go much further than expressing feelings about the events of the border inaugurations themselves, but develop into how people evaluate the process of unification from the hindsight of a decade after the event. In the following extracts I have deliberately juxtaposed stories from Easterners with those of Westerners to show the ways in which they echo each other as co-constructions of what each dismisses as 'the other'.

Re-bordering

Husband Martin and wife Verena (middle generation Tiefengrün with brief comment from daughter Elisabeth):

Verena: In Hof they used to say who wants to make a donation?

Martin: Yes a lot of donations were made the first years. We'll rebuild the wall and all that..Yes it s true you'll make a donation so that we can reerect the wall. It was really like that right from the start

Elisabeth: And who will lend a hand

Ulrike: But what do you think has it been getting better or worse? Have people got used to each other or are they further apart? ...

Martin: It 's difficult to say, one gets on together but

Verena: It always remains Ossi-Wessi. Ossi-Wessi somehow always remains...

On a private level one gets on with people but the gap is there in terms of work and they just can't get to each other. The greed, because they don't earn the same.

The reality of this 'out-grouping' and the effect this has on young Hirschbergians is sharply observed by Martina. Her's is one of many stories we collected that shows a deep disillusionment with the first encounters¹² with relatives and former friends. During the time of separation only the oldest generation in the GDR was allowed to travel to the FRG, so any contacts- in so far as they existed - were upheld by letters and the occasional parcel. The initial enthusiastic embraces at the moment of the border collapsing quickly gave way to a much more sober outlook, which for many turned to defensiveness and dislike.

Marina (Youngest generation Hirschberg):

Well, and the first times in Hof it really deterred me, one felt so silly, as if one was the last beggar and the people stared at you as if you'd broken our from a zoo, and and our and our- well we had some really silly stupid relatives, we went to see them the first time, cause they always sent us a parcel, and Granny

¹² A comedy road movie, *Go Trabi go* from 2001, about an East German family's first car journey to Italy via western Germany includes a witty-ironic sequence about such a failed visit to western relatives. The film became a major box-office hit in both East and West for the film-maker Timm, who was born in East-Berlin in 1950 but was forced to leave the GDR in 1973 for his critical attitudes. For an account of post-unification comedy see Allan Sedn (2006:105-126) in a volume on post-Wende cinema edited by David Clarke.

used to visit them off and on... And when we got there - uncle Karl with us, too, and aunt Ilse, and Freddi, and our family, my sister as well, well yeah, we were a few, and I think granny came too and we went inside their house one after the other and 'hello, hello, hello' – 'oh are there still more to come?' Then they offered us a few crummy salty sticks and we even had to say 'Thank you' for that, oh I felt so silly, I never went back and never exchanged another word. Well I was really fed up. They really weren't nice people, they were relatives alright, but I wanted to have nothing to do with them, all they thought was that we'd eat them out of house and home.

Othering

The second 'pair' of stories picks up on the ways in which East Germans – see below a second extract from Marina- feel observed, judged and dismissed for their ways of speaking, their behaviour and their clothing. The comments by a young woman originally from Tiefengrün who now lives in Hof, the nearby town, make this again very obvious. Although Francisca keeps on stressing her lack of prejudice in not wanting to generalize her critical comments, she is nevertheless confirming exactly the kind of outgrouping manoeuvres that we recorded in most of the stories, especially from the youngest generation in the West¹³.

Franziska (Youngest generation Tiefengrün/ Hof):

Well it is quite common, that the people react in quite an irritated fashion, that they can't stand the dialect, I think the dialect is the biggest problem, when they're here in a department store and all around they can only hear the Saxonian dialect, the people from Hof, they're not really keen on that... and partly one can also tell from their clothes. Those are no prejudice, but with Kelly for example there one can tell

Ulrike: And how, what do they do differently? I mean, youth fashion is pretty relaxed, isn't it? So what do they wear that's so different?

Francisca: well partly old-fashioned stuff, or combinations that I would never wear together. Red with pink, that kind of thing. Yes, orange with red, I'd never wear that together. Or carrot-coloured Jeans, I'd never wear carrot-coloured jeans to school. Yes, truly with some of them, I'd never want to generalize that, but with some.

Marina (Youngest generation Hirschberg):

And as I said, in Hof, I felt as if everyone was watching me all the time, as if they noticed somehow that I am from the East, I didn't care for that at all, at that age, I don't know, somehow one feels quite chic and one is wearing

¹³ I have elsewhere compared the attitudes expressed by West-German youth towards fellow East-Germans with those of (Eastern-) German youth in Guben on the border with Poland (Gubin), and have shown that the same outgrouping mechanisms are in place. Young people in Guben were as dismissive of the Polish neighbours, as the young in Tiefengrün and Hof towards their neighbours in Hirschberg (Meinhof 2004).

the best clothes and mmm then you get all these glances, oh I felt really uncomfortable, and from then on I did not want to move to Hof at all, that was out of the question, and in any case Hof was too small for me, was really only a dump, and not what I would have imagined. And in the cities it was different. Meeting other people that was not as blatant as here, and even today the situation has not really normalised yet, when we, well we don't say 'Grüss Gott', so when we go into a shop and we say "Guten Tag"- immediately that shows us up- aha aha and there I think it makes click, not with everyone, but Hof is quite extreme in this respect. I get around a lot these days, Cologne, Hamburg, Essen, Bonn, everywhere, and there this problem hardly exists, especially not in our generation. The younger ones are not so extreme I think, that they have already fixated on a difference and somehow one feels accordingly, and at the university there is no problem whatsoever. But as I said, when I go to Hof...

Welcome money

The last of the three pairs juxtaposes the reaction to the 'welcome money', discussed above. To Francisca this means utter chaos, and she paints a picture of irresponsible easterners who rush to the west without proper precautions and planning, and then flood the shops in search of items such as the proverbial banana- a cheap daily fruit in the West, but a rare item in the GDR

Franziska youngest generation, Hof/ Tiefengrün:

I wasn't in Tiefengrün at that time. I only caught the chaos in Hof... When the border was opened that's how it was, the people just stuck their kids into the car, no jackets no nothing, and drove over here, and practically wanted to tear the welcome money out of our hands. It really was like that, there they stood in November, freezing, had nothing with them, so where does one go? One goes to the vicar, especially if the church is right opposite the town hall, where one gets the welcome cash. So we set up a tea-room in the parish hall, where the people from the parish could help to get them at least a warm cuppa and to get the children indoors to stop them from freezing to death. And all kinds of people came, because their Trabi had broken down, or they could not find their Trabi any more because they'd forgotten where they parked it... And yes, all the supermarkets were completely sold out, one could not get anymore bananas anywhere, so one grocery shop sold bananas at one Mark a piece, wel yes, that situation got really exploited.

By sharp contrast the story by a couple from Hirschberg gives an amusing co-constructed account of how they realized a long-held dream- travelling to Paris- by using this money. The story also shows the difficulty in making such a decision, whether to save these valuable Marks for their normal life at home, or blow it on a dream. Walter's narrative not only focuses on the purchase of the ticket and the journey as it was then happening, but provides a commentary that explains it in the context of then and now.

Husband Walter and wife Gabi, middle generation Hirschberg:

Walter: We went to Naila to get our money, left the town hall and walked down the market square, and there was a travel agency.

Gabi: For 49 Marks to Paris.

Walter: 69 Marks, a three-day trip by bus for 69 Marks.. so we went together to get our money. I say” do you know what I’ll do now?” “what” then she saw that I’d read the offer’ ‘I’ll go in there now, I go to Paris.’ ‘You’re mad’ ‘But we have the money, we have the 100 Marks, I’ll go in there for my 69 Marks I ‘ll never make it to Paris again’ I said. And she said ‘Gosh, he really means that’ and I said ‘of course I mean it’.. I said ‘You can decide here and now, if you want to come or if you want to stay’. There she stood, totally undecided, like ‘ Oh the lovely Westmark’- that truly had value then. You got to think- Westmarks were exchanged 1:8, eight Ostmark against one Westmark. And at that time a citizen of the GDR with even a good salary was earning between 800 and 1000 Marks per month, so the 100 Marks represented a monthly salary in exchange, we thought differently then. In the meantime that has changed, in the meantime that money is taken for granted... so in I went. ‘do you still have a ticket for that journey?’ ‘Yes, of course, you can book’. So I said ‘I want to book one seat’ ‘no no’, she came running through the door ‘I want to come too.’ So we booked the trip on the 18th of December- it was called a three-day trip- but we started on Friday afternoon at 4 and Sunday afternoon we were already back again. We drove practically through the night and a half past 8 in the morning we stood outside Notre Dame.

Belonging nowhere

The last extract from another young woman from Tiefengrün and nearby Berg makes two points that are again typical for several young people from that generation in the west: whilst the East lacks any kind of attraction for her, not even in the form of a big city such as Leipzig, the immediate region where she lives is also dismissed.

Karola (Youngest generation Tiefengrün/ Berg):

There’s more mixing nowadays (between East and West), but still I’d never imagine, I mean ok, I might drive to Plauen <nearby town in Saxony> or somewhere, but that’s not as if.. one doesn’t one doesn’t think to go for a shopping trip to Leipzig (largest city in Saxony) - there one thinks about Nürnberg (nearest larger city in Franconia) instead, that’s just how it is.

...

Ulrike: and how do you feel about here? Do you feel a sense of belonging to Berg?

Karola: NO, not in the least!

Ulrike: So to where would you say that you most belonged?

Karola: No idea, but certainly not to Berg.

Ulrike: Not Berg? How about Franconia or Upper Franconia or Bavaria?

Karola: I don't care. But definitely away from Berg. I'd like it in Würzburg (another larger city in Franconia, further away). There it's lovely. Everywhere it's better than in Berg.

Karola has no sense of local belonging- anything is better than her immediate environment. This is very different from observations we made with the middle and oldest generation for whom the local region was often the strongest identifier- more so than the national (Germany), or transnational (Europe) (Meinhof and Galasinski 2005 chapter 7). Although she gives no specific reason for her dislike, here at least we can detect some parallel to comments made by her eastern neighbours, if from a different perspective. Marina (section othering), who has already left Hirschberg to live elsewhere, and who travels around many of those cities aspired to by Karola, also dismisses Hof and environment- but she does so because she sees it as a place where prejudice against easterners is most rampant. To her, neither the cities in the West nor the people living there pose any such problems, especially not amongst the younger generation. This is particularly interesting – and also lends some hope for the future- since overall in our research in these borderlands we found that the attitudes to their respective neighbours were at their most negative amongst the youngest.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have addressed the issue of *border aesthetics* by focusing on two different aspects of images from a former border region of East- and West-Germany: one where the border itself acted as a kind of 'text' by virtue of the signs that were pinned to its boundaries. Facing each other across the divide this created a hostile East-West dialogue.

The second aspect also related to images from the borders but here they were photographs that acted as triggers for other people's texts: looking at sets of identical pictures released a very diverse set of narratives from members of three-generation families in East and West: of memories of happy and unhappy moments, of fears and longings, of positive and negative evaluations of the old and the new times, of indifference and dislikes of the 'others'. What these narratives show is that photographs in no way restrict memories to their temporal-spatial representation but trigger dynamic narratives about people and experiences across time and space and the ways in which they have come to be evaluated with hind-sight. Here the aesthetic quality of the picture is largely irrelevant for the emotional quality of the lived experience. 'Beautiful' happy pictures do not necessarily trigger beautiful narratives, nor do 'ugly' sites necessarily trigger bad ones.

I have also shown how many of the narratives from East and West implicitly echo each other. Hence just as the signs on the borders created an implicit dialogue across the boundaries, so the stories told to us were strangely interactive with one

another. Comments by Hirschbergians on how they felt observed, disapproved or made fun of by their immediate neighbours, be it for their clothing, their shopping habits, their dialect, their collecting the Begrüßungsgeld, their desire to travel, were easily relatable to comments by westerners that showed the everyday lived reality of such interactions and the difficulties in mutual acceptance. However, since the last series of interviews another decade has past, and whilst it is naïve to assume that prejudices, envy and mutual suspicion towards one another disappear overnight, the comments made by two women- one who used to live in Tiefengrün and one from Hirschberg in August of 2012 -throws a more hopeful light on the present and future for this debordered borderland:

Cornelie¹⁴ (middle generation, grew up in Tiefengrün and Hof and now lives further south, near Nürnberg). Conversation from 2012:

All my life, whenever something bad was happening to me, I always drove up there, and even nowadays, whenever I don't feel well, I always drive to Hof. As soon as I see the roofs, those dark roofs, I feel something coming up from deep down inside me, I get this really warm feeling around my heart, that's where my home is, that's where my roots are. I would not want to live there any more, that would be a bit too restricting now, but when I hear the burbling and pattering from the river barrage and I smell the scent of the Saale- the other day when we were rowing on there and then I swam in there- at that point I feel at home.

Elsbeth (between middle and older generation, Hirschberg):

Ulrike: What I am interested in, what has happened in the meantime with this space. Now that the Leather Factory is gone it's become so pretty here, but can one gradually see a coming together, that the people from Tiefengrün come across, and those from Hirschberg go over there, or is it still rather separate?

Elsbeth: It's more like what you said in the beginning. We were only talking about this the other day, and a woman said 'oh, there are still those differences, and some only think of themselves and are dismissive towards us and say bad things', but I must say, the young ones that I know- my nephew for example, he works in Hof, he had problems in the beginning, being called an Ossi and so on, but now there is nothing like that any more. He is a member of the "Friday club", and n there there are some of us, from the East, and a large group from over there, and they go on a trip every weekend whoever wants to join, and sometimes they drive around on our side, then he designs the route, and sometimes they drive over there. Well the other, where was I, oh yes, I went to see Hannelore (a friend in Tiefengrün) I was supposed to check that all was in order with her, and I went on foot, and on the way back just before the crossing

¹⁴ Cornelie and Elsbeth are their real names since they are happy to be identified. In fact, Cornelie is my sister, and both she and my mother were present when I recorded during the conversation in Hirschberg with Elsbeth Mord.

they had all come down to eat an ice, there is a café there open on Sundays, .. and they a waved me over, ‘cause many know me, cause we visit each other for birthdays and they also come to ours, and we sit in the garden under the big tent, and the ones from over there they come from all kinds of different villages, and so I thought, ok, you got time but I hadn’t brought any money, so Rudolf paid for me, and I sat right in the middle and did not notice anything, nothing whatsoever, they have their meetings , they drive around to all kinds of places , they have friends in the North, and they drive there, no , one does not notice anything any more, and the the grandson of Marianne, he also works over there in L. [Franconian town], he trained as a machine tool-maker, and in the beginning, he also was accosted in a silly way, silly idioms, but that is over. He gets sent to Switzerland for training sessions. Amongst the young it has once again turned out fine.

Ten years ago it was the then youngest generation in particular who, with some notable exceptions, shared the strongest prejudices and related the worst experiences with ‘the other’, not only in Tiefengrün and Hirschberg but also in Guben on the German-Polish border. In 2012, this last observation by someone who intimately knows and shares the everyday life of Hirschbergian as well as Tiefengrünians suggests that some bridge-building between East and West has begun – a very hopeful note to end on.

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Biographical note

Ulrike Hanna Meinhof is Professor of German and Cultural Studies at the University of Southampton and a specialist in discourse analysis. Her publications on discourse include: *Negotiating multicultural Europe: borders, networks, neighbourhoods* (2011) and *The Language of Belonging* (2005). Her main areas of research currently involve ethnographic research on transnational networks of migrants, especially musicians from African countries, in multicultural neighbourhoods across European border communities, in provincial regions and in metropolitan spaces across Europe. She has previously led the EU Border Identities and Changing City Spaces project; ongoing projects are SoFoNe: Searching for Neighbours: dynamics of mental and physical borders in Europe, and TNMundi: Diaspora as social and cultural practice: A study of transnational networks across Europe and Africa.

Summary

My paper introduces geo-political and symbolic dynamics of 21st century Europe through three conceptual prisms: those of borders or border communities, networks, and neighbourhoods. Each of these can be seen as both descriptive lenses for capturing specific phenomenon of social interaction in geographical spaces as well as metaphors for imagining human encounters across visible or invisible divisions, such as for example nationhood, ethnicity, race, religion or gender. In the first part, my paper analyses the implications for each of these imaginaries for theoretical and empirical research. In the second part I will show with different examples how these conceptual frames affected my own fieldwork practices in a series of European research projects during the last decade: *European Border Discourse, 2000-2003*; *Changing City Spaces 2002-2005*, *Sefone 2007-2010* and *TNMundi 2006-2010*. Examples will include a rich, multi-layered spectrum of every-day life narratives as well as examples of artistic productions. A version of this paper with the text of interviews in both German and English throughout is available on request from the author.

Keywords: memory, imaginaries, community, networks, neighbourhoods, Contemporary German history