

OUR VISIT TO BERLIN
5th - 8th MAY 2007
A REPORT

Our team consisted of Rita Roy, Babu Lal Sharma, Ramesh Sharma, S. Kulandaisamy (all Gandhi Peace Foundation), Aditya Patnaik (Antyodaya Chetana Mandal, Orissa) and Neema Vaishnav (Lakshmi Ashram, Kausani).

We arrived in Berlin, after almost missing our next connecting train, along with our heavy luggage, by late afternoon. Peter Ruhe, an old friend, who is running the GandhiServe Foundation in Berlin, welcomed us. One email from Rita, and he had graciously agreed to host us in the city and show us around its historic sites. Over the last 20 years, Peter has rendered pioneering service to the cause of promoting Gandhian ideas in the west. He was the founder of the Gandhi Information Centre in Berlin. He has painstakingly collected, conserved and preserved rare photographs of Gandhi, which he has picked up from many private sources on his many visits to India. Peter and his friend Eddie (a Buddhist by inclination) drove us to the UFA FABRIK, an alternative cultural centre which was to be our home for the next 3 days. Peter had already arranged for an Indian meal to be prepared by a Bengali lady residing in Berlin. Our group swooped down on the samosas and other snacks prepared by Neelima! Many had been missing Indian food.

After tea, Mr. Werner Wiartalla, one of the residents-cum-founders of UFA FABRIK took us on a guided tour of the area. Spread over 20,000 square meters the area originally housed cinema studios and a cinema hall. In the 1930's war-propaganda films were produced here. In 1961, when the wall was built, this place became culturally useless and was used as an armament dump. In 1968, a period of resurgence for youth all over Europe, many young people decided to get together and decided to occupy this place and start productive and creative activities, and work towards an alternative life style. Slowly, the people around began to appreciate this. And slowly, a community began to develop, which experimented with alternative sources of energy, architectural styles, organic food, an experimental free school, and so on.

Presently, the complex houses a guest house, 190 working places with 30 people living here along with children, five common kitchens and one big kitchen, an organic food restaurant, a bakery, a shop, an open air auditorium for concerts and plays, some interesting rainwater harvesting and solar and bio energy systems, organic farm, the free school and so on. In the common kitchen all the community members meet and take decisions by consensus. There are no rules, documents; it is family of minds, working towards self-sufficiency. Werner, himself an engineer, started work in the formal sector, but gave up, realizing that was not his world, and started working here.

The next day, Peter and Eddie accompanied us to see the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp and war memorial. Built over an area of 300 acres, the place was used to jail and torture all political opponents of Hitler and the Nazi regime, by the dreaded Gestapo and Secret Police. Over 100,000 people, including Jews have been mercilessly tortured and killed here. The gas chamber, which was used for mass killing, was already destroyed. One has read enough about the horrors perpetrated at these camps but to be present at that place and see the documented history made me very sick inside and I could not see the place, which was once a graveyard of innocent people. I cannot describe anymore.

The complex also has a special memorial in the memory of all those who perished here. It was touching to see the memorial wreathes placed by visitors, as also the stones and pebbles laid by Jews, as a mark of respect to the departed.

All over Germany, especially more so in Berlin, one senses the scars made on the German psyche, by the atrocities committed during the war. All efforts are made to preserve and document the history of those times so that the coming generations realize not only the destruction caused by the war, but also its utter futility. In fact, most of the present generation abhor the name of Hitler and are often apologetic about the cruelties inflicted by his regime.

Although it is also true to say that there are some who live in a state of denial and do not believe that any of these atrocities ever took place. In Berlin we also visited a permanent exhibition "Topography of Terror" near the site of what used to be the Headquarters of the Gestapo, and where most of these atrocities were planned.

No visit to Berlin could be complete without a visit to "Checkpoint Charlie", one of the more famous check posts along the dividing line between what used to be East and West Berlin. One had to pass through very stringent security check here, if at all one was permitted to cross it. A stone's throw from here is a building which houses the Checkpoint Charlie Human Rights Museum. Founded in 1962 by an activist-journalist, Dr. Rainer Hildebrandt, the museum is dedicated to nonviolent struggles all over the world. The section "From Gandhi to Walesa" vividly portrays the life and work of some eminent personalities who had changed the world through nonviolence methods. The exhibition narrates stories of various nonviolent protests in the world and tries to establish the significance and importance of nonviolent protest and the role Mahatma Gandhi played. Stories of how people managed to scale or penetrate the Berlin Wall are also depicted here. On display are vehicles and even baby 'prams' used by people, for this purpose. Since the death of Dr. Hildebrandt, 3 years ago, his wife has taken over charge of the Museum. She left all her other tasks and accompanied us personally through the section on Gandhi, on hearing that we had come. Her husband had been greatly inspired by Gandhi and had visited the Gandhi Peace Foundation in the 1980s. The Museum attracts over 2000 visitors every day.

During our walk through the city, we could also see the remnants of the Wall of concrete that had once divided not only the city of Berlin but its people and their hearts. We heard of the many heart-rending attempts to scale the wall, in which many were mercilessly killed. In some areas, artists, had painted pictures, while much of the debris left when the wall was broken down in a nonviolent upsurge, led by the masses, was now being sold as pieces from the "original Berlin Wall".

As it was 7th May, and the birthday of Gurudev Rabindra Nath Tagore, Peter had collaborated with the Indian Embassy in organising a panel discussion on Gandhi and Tagore at which our group was invited to participate. The discussion, moderated by Prof. Dr. Hiltrud Rüstau, evoked much interest. After a programme of dance and songs by children, we as panelists, answered a range of questions on the themes of caste system, women's upliftment, Nai Talim and constructive work, the relevance of Gandhi's ideas today, Khadi, and so on. We focused more on their similarities than on their differences, the great love and respect the two men had for each other: Gandhi's stress on action and practical work, Tagore's stress on Beauty and aesthetics. The audience also responded with a wide range of questions on Globalization and Indian culture.

At the end of the function the audience rushed to pick up the snacks that were being passed around. But I mustn't appreciate and congratulate Mr. Peter for his patience in getting us coffee and see that as guests we be treated well. Then Peter took us to an Indian Restaurant for dinner. We enjoyed it very much and appreciated Peter's efforts to provide us good Indian food every day.

All too soon, it was again time to leave. We realized that two days were just not enough for Berlin. However, thanks to Peter, we were fortunate enough to have an overall view and some fine impressions of this great city. Peter and Eddie accompanied us to the gleaming Berlin Hauptbahnhof (main station) and put us in the train to go to Cologne. In trying to help us put our massive luggage in the train, Peter was caught inside the compartment as the automatic doors closed. He could get down only at the next station and we all said goodbye to him.