

Special Feature

My Life in the DDR

Bishop Theo Gill

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As I am one of those people who has lived in Socialist East Germany for almost the whole era of forty years, I am often asked about our life as citizens, as Christians during that time. And the second question is: How do you see the difference between then and now? I must admit that I feel a bit embarrassed by such questions, because all the quick answers may be true, but often the contrary is also true. Life is more complex than ideologies.

If you should have the same questions: How did you live in *Herrnhut*, in East Germany twenty years ago, and how is life today? — please do not expect a detailed response. I can give at best a few sidelights from my own memory, compared with my present feeling.

In three sections I will quote three characteristic sentences, spoken by partners from the West twenty or thirty years ago, and I'll tell how I thought about it at that time — and what I think nowadays.

The first one: A visitor from West Germany said — maybe in the seventies — “Next week we shall have elections. This time *I really don't know for which party I shall vote.*” I could hardly understand that. How glad would we be to have real elections! What was called elections in our part of Germany was rather a roll-call. You had to put your ballot into the box, the best

was openly. On the paper was only the list of the “National Front.” It was almost impossible to mark the ballot as negative or void. So it was always a matter of conscience: shall I go to the polling station or shall I stay at home? Not to vote was considered as affront against the state. Well, I could dare that, but the majority of the population was dependent on state factories or organizations and could hardly take the risk of missing the roll-call.

In 1990 we enjoyed the big event of free elections some months before the end of the German Democratic Republic. It was really a feeling of joy and satisfaction to have the possibility of choosing between several names and parties. Fifteen years have passed, years of economic reconstruction, organization of democratic institutions, the West German legal system, many things which were a real improvement compared with those we had before. But we had to learn also the lesson of election campaigns: all the programs and promises before the election and the reality after. To cut it short: Now I understand very well my West German visitor thirty years ago: “We shall have elections, and this time *I really don't know for which party I shall vote.*”

The second: In 1974 I had the privilege to travel to Jamaica as a delegate to Unity Synod. Such participation in international conferences

was one exception of the rule that citizens of the GDR should rather stay home. Another exception was granted for elderly people to visit relatives in the West for special occasions. On my way home from Jamaica I passed the USA. At the Kennedy Airport in New York one of our Moravian ministers came to say good-bye. I remember we stood there and talked, and suddenly he saw my luggage standing in a distance of seven or ten meters, and he said. "Oh, take your baggage, watch it — *we are in an open society!*" At that time I did not see any connection between society and a suitcase standing some steps from its owner. Maybe I was too much accustomed to our *closed society*. We were watched and observed very carefully, by police and secret service and other dear people who wanted to care for us that we might live in safety.

It was a wonderful feeling after 1990 when we could travel to our friends in West Germany without visa and could telephone without the suspicion that there might those in the background who controlled us. But it is also true that in the closed society some things went easier. For instance we had not many problems with keys. Often apartments and even house doors were not locked during the night. Now we live in an open society, we are thankful for its opportunities and facilities. But everybody has to look after his own safety. You have to watch your possession by a dozen of keys, and you have to watch your keys which watch your possession. Safety first! Insurances look after your safety. There is abundant richness in our country, but safety? I do not want back any kind

of closed society. But a couple of years ago I was shocked by a question of a guest from Tanzania, a young man. One evening he was to go five minutes within Herrnhut. He anxiously asked: "Is this here a safe quarter?" So I accompanied him for his safety. I was aware that not far from here a man of African origin had been knocked down in the evening — in our *open society*.

The third: It was not long before the end of the socialist regime. A Moravian brother from West Germany who helped for some months in one of our congregations heard the daily complaints and discontent of the people about the political and economic situation and the praise of all the good things in the rich West. When he tried to correct the black-white picture and said: "*we have so many unemployed*" the answer was: "oh, I should like to be unemployed in the West, must not work and get money from the state!"

Now we belong to the West, have many unemployed, but I don't think there is anyone who can really be happy about this.

These were three examples indicating the circumstances in which we used to live and in which we live now. A closed society where everything was under one rule, one party, no unemployed, so to speak a reform boarding-school with a big fence around. And now an open society, a global playground with winners and losers — I suppose more losers than winners.

This is not the end of my speech. I know you may ask: "What is the difference for Christians and churches who live under such

circumstances? Why didn't you tell us more about that?" Dear sisters and brothers, the longer I live on the "western" side of the globe, the more I am convinced: our task and mission in this world is — despite all difference and contrast — always and everywhere the same. We have to live under the heavenly Lord and in his daily presence and guidance in a world which tries to live without God. We have to resist, and we have to cooperate with those in power. Our resistance is necessary wherever power is being abused. Our cooperation is first of all prayer. And secondly it is participation in all efforts which help people to live in physical and spiritual health and dignity, and to be a voice for the voiceless.

And if you ask me: "How can we distinguish and decide how to act and react in a given situation? How can we find out, when

and where do we have to stand back and let the experts do their job, and when and where do we have to take a clear stand for and against, as ambassadors for Christ, as advocates for people?"

I do not have a formula as a guarantee to do the right thing. There is no formula, but there is a person, a divine person whom Christ has sent to his Church. The Holy Spirit — Zinzendorf would say: the Mother of the Church is ready to guide us in our decisions and deliberations, to help and comfort us in our troubles and struggles. This is my wish and prayer for you who bear a special responsibility in the Church and in her Mission: that you may trust and believe in God's guidance step by step, that you may be *steadfast in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain* (1.Cor.15:58).