Ten Years after the Wall

East German Women in Transition

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ABSTRACT Over a period of 10 years following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the author conducted interviews with 18 women on four separate occasions to determine their response to unification. The fourth set of interviews, which took place during the spring of 1999, revealed that the women had adopted one of three different ways of adapting to unification. In the first and largest group were women who were more engaged, active and upbeat about their new lives. A second, smaller group consisted of women who were frustrated, discouraged and bitter and had turned inward. Women in the third group were involved in their new lives but exhausted by their efforts to maintain their involvement. The most significant factor in defining these women's different experiences appears to have been the ability to maintain a sense of community. These biographies show that women who successfully adapted to unification held onto the community they had enjoyed in the GDR or else created it anew, while those who were discouraged and bitter had lost connection with the wider community.

KEY WORDS attitudes ◆ biography ◆ community ◆ East Germany ◆ GDR ◆ interview ◆ lesbian ◆ transition ◆ women

Over a period of 10 years after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, I conducted four separate sets of interviews with a sample of 18 women to determine their response to unification.[1] During the first two sets of interviews, performed in the winter and spring of 1990/1 and the summer of 1992, the women told me about their experiences making the difficult transition from citizens of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) to citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Many had lost their jobs (over 90 percent of GDR women worked outside the home), and all were struggling with new laws, new institutions such as schools and hospitals, and new bureaucracy. Supports for women with children provided by the socialist state, including affordable day care, had disappeared, leaving many anxious about their ability to provide for their families. As a sign of this anxiety, the birth rate in the new states, among

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the highest in Europe before unification, dropped by 60 percent in the first three years after unification (Frink, 2001: 76).

However, by the time of the third set of interviews, in 1995, the women had settled into life in the new Germany. They were now familiar with capitalism and democracy as practised in West Germany and realized that West Germans 'also cooked with water', an expression indicating that the image of the superior West German had started to recede. The anxiety had significantly abated and was in some cases replaced by excitement about new opportunities for self-expression and financial success, in others by disappointment that the social and economic equality experienced in the GDR had been replaced by a widening gap between rich and poor. While the responses to unification varied, all the women were now familiar with the demands of life under capitalism.

By 1999, interviews with these same women revealed three ways of adapting to unification. First and most prominent among my interviewees were women who were engaged, active and upbeat about their new lives. A second, smaller group consisted of women who were frustrated, discouraged and bitter and had turned inward. Women in the third group were involved in their new lives but also frustrated and exhausted by their efforts to maintain their involvement. Their response to unification was mixed.[2] The purpose of this article is to examine the biographies of these interviewees in an attempt to determine how East German women managed the transition to unification. Specifically, what made it possible for women in the first group to create a satisfying life after unification while those in the second group were unable to do so?

To understand the range of responses to unification exhibited by this group of 18 women, it is important to know who they were and how they were selected. Working between December 1990 and April 1991 from an apartment in the eastern part of Berlin, I initially sought out women who were actively involved with women's issues, that is those working in the newly formed women's organizations, such as the Unabhängiger Frauenverband (the Autonomous Women's Association) and in local, regional and national politics. These women led me to others in a variety of occupations such as medicine, unskilled labour, self-employment, academia and the arts. Still other women I met through chance encounters.

Ages ranged from 20 to 69, but despite my efforts to contact younger interview subjects, women in their forties and fifties predominated. Of the 18, two women were in their twenties, two in their thirties, nine in their forties, four in their fifties and one in her sixties. By the time of the fourth set of interviews in 1999, the age of the majority of the women had shifted to between 50 and 60.

In a conscious attempt to include women of varying occupations, I found members of a number of minority groups, including professing Christians, lesbians and women of other national origins. Not every

minority faction could be represented, nor was any group represented in proportion to its demographic distribution within the GDR population. Some groups were unfortunately not represented at all, for example women from small towns or rural areas. Even though a number of the interviewees did not grow up in Berlin, all had been living there for some time. The advantages of having resided in the capital city of the GDR – with all the supporting institutions that made it the showcase of socialist Germany – provided these women with a different experience from those living in other cities or in the country.

This group also contained a disproportionately high number of well-educated women. In attempts to meet less well educated women through my original contacts, I discovered how thin the veneer of the classless society in the GDR truly was: educated women did not know or at least could not put me in contact with women who were not equally well educated, and thus professionals are overrepresented in my group.

After unification half of my interviewees lost their jobs, primarily those women who had worked in some way for the state apparatus, for example at East German television (DFF), at the DEFA film studio, at the Institute for Urban Planning or the Academy of Sciences. However, in 1999 all but one woman of employment age had found employment and several had officially retired but were still actively engaged in their work.

While not all the women in my group were satisfied with the GDR, all chose to remain there. That does not mean that all supported the socialist state. Indeed, they presented a range of political responses. Some had been members of the Socialist Unity Party, the SED, and remained true to their socialist principles after unification as members of the SED's successor party, the PDS. Others held socialist principles but rejected the Party. After unification, a number of women joined one of the mainstream parties, the CDU or the SPD, while others eschewed all political parties or declared themselves apolitical. Criticism of the GDR was as likely to come from interviewees who had been in the Party as from women who had been politically active in one of the opposition groups.

As an outsider and a non-German, I was seen as sympathetic by my interview partners. I was invited to meet with many of the women in their homes, where they offered me afternoon coffee or dinner. On several occasions I met their children, husbands or partners. All the women but one – the 20-year-old university student – gave me written permission to use their real names, although several asked that their last names be indicated using only the first initial.

The accuracy of materials gathered from interviews is problematic since interviewees remember their experiences selectively, depending on the circumstances surrounding the interview (Niethammer et al., 1991: 68), and in some instances interviewees cannot recall past events completely. In this case, some women may have wanted to justify their lives in a

country that had been painted with a monolithic and negative brush. The much discussed experience of *Ostalgie*, remembering the GDR with nostalgia rather than with a realistic and critical eye, is also present in these interviews (Schlegelmilch, 2000: 48). However, biographies have an advantage over data-based studies in that they are not chronological-historical, but rather capture a moment in time (in this case four moments in time) (Fischer-Rosenthal, 2000: 29). They are not a completed product, but rather a work in progress (Ferree, 2000: 111).[3]

The biographies of my group of 18 reveal that most of these women were highly educated, professional women who had better access to resources than less educated women. Most had been involved in a public way in the GDR, either politically or at the workplace. Their GDR professions included, among others, documentary film-maker, physical therapist, physician, fashion designer, urban planner, city administrator, university lecturer and university student. Many performed at high levels at their jobs, like Petra P., who worked as a manager in construction, Helga Schütz, a well-known writer who read from her work in the FRG and the USA, and Maria Curter, who was a research biologist at the Academy of Sciences. Some, like Jutta Braband, had been engaged in opposition activities either through the peace movement or through the church.

After unification, most of these women maintained this high level of involvement in the public sphere. Over half of my group remained active and engaged either through their work or through political involvement. However, a small number of them, despite their high level of education and the advantages of living in Berlin, had become bitter and disengaged. They had been involved in a public way before unification, and in 1999 all of them were employed at the time of the interview, or had been employed for most of the years since unification and only recently retired, and thus appeared to have moved successfully into the new society. However, these women had not maintained their involvement in the new Germany. The most significant factor in defining these women's different experiences appears to have been the ability to maintain a sense of community. Those in the first group had held onto the community they had enjoyed in the GDR or else had created it anew, while those in the second had lost connection with a larger group. A look at the biographies of several women in each of these two groups will support this claim.

I begin with three examples from the first group of women, those who were engaged in public activity during the GDR and continued a high level of involvement in the unified FRG. The first of these, Heike Prochazka, born in 1961, the year the Wall was built, loved her life in the GDR and joined the Party as soon as the opportunity presented itself. She attended an elite sports school in the 1970s, when the GDR was using its sports programme to achieve international recognition, and had been

groomed to be an Olympic swimmer. The experience of representing her country in swimming competitions in Eastern bloc countries bonded her with the GDR. This connection to the GDR held despite the fact that she was a lesbian. She lived in an intimate relationship with a woman for six years in an apartment across from the West German diplomatic representation (*die ständige Vertretung der BRD*)[4] and thus it is certain that the State Security, the Stasi, was watching her activities. However, she said she never suffered any negative consequences because of her homosexuality. Nor did her gay brother, who owned a gay cafe. Indeed, she said she chatted with the 'Stasi-men' who visited the cafe regularly and feared that she might experience discrimination for the first time in her life in a united Germany. She said she had felt in control of her life in the GDR and was wary of unification because she thought she would lose the autonomy she had achieved in the GDR.

Heike Prochazka claimed to be able to act autonomously in the GDR, despite living as a lesbian. This claim and her description of casual banter with the Stasi in her brother's gay cafe contradict widely acknowledged reports of state-sponsored oppression of and discrimination against gays and lesbians (Kleres, 2000; Sillge, 1991). Laws against homosexual activity existed in the GDR in various forms until the last years of its existence. Up to the end of the Second World War, homosexuality between consenting adults in Germany was criminalized in Paragraph 175 of the penal code, but applied only to men. In 1968, Paragraph 175 was replaced in the GDR by Paragraph 151, which applied to both men and women (Sillge, 1991: 75). In this new version of the law, only homosexual acts between adults and minors were criminalized. Hoping to take advantage of the temporary political thaw that came with the rise to power of Erich Honecker in 1971, homosexuals who had met privately or under the protection of the church, became more publicly political and in the mid-1970s attempted to win official recognition of a newly formed organization, Homosexuelle Interessengemeinschaft Berlin (HIB). The petition was denied, and in 1978 the Stasi shut down plans for a GDR-wide gathering of lesbians, saying that sexuality was limited to the private sphere within which one was free to do as one wished, and thus a political organization for gays and lesbians was unnecessary (Kleres, 2000: 53). Official policy towards homosexual activity acknowledged its existence but relegated it to the private sphere. Homosexuals countered that a true socialist state must allow for the integration of gay men and lesbians into society (Kleres, 2000: 56). Finally, in 1988, the last vestiges of legal discrimination against homosexual activity were struck down by the GDR high court, and the age limit for homo- and heterosexual acts was made the same. However, while the fight for equal treatment of gays and lesbians in the GDR made gains on paper, suspicion and lack of understanding vis-a-vis homosexuality, along with discrimination, remained

(Kleres, 2000: 61). As late as 1988, Party officials found that homosexuals were not 'socialist personalities' (Sillge, 1991: 82).

However, Heike Prochazka was never involved in the lesbian movement, whose meetings took place primarily in private in women's apartments or in the church. In addition, she had received preferential treatment by the state and had been an enthusiastic and early member of the Party. Her public activity had been in support of the state, never critical of it. Thus it is understandable that she did not experience harassment at the hands of the Stasi, and that she feared a narrowing of her opportunities after unification.

Still, in 1999 Heike Prochazka claimed that she felt freer than ever to be open about her homosexuality. She had joined a lesbian swimming club and had competed in the Gay Games. In 1998, she had a job as the Women's Representative of all the Berlin public swimming pools (*Frauenvertreterin der Berliner Bäderbetriebe*), and in 1999 she had taken a job as head administrator of a pool in the eastern part of the city. She was now living with her partner in the western part of the city and had established a new community among lesbians there:

> In some ways I am better off now. In the GDR, I always had the feeling of being looked after. There was always some institution or other that regulated things for you. Everything was clear and manageable. In the GDR I was able to achieve everything I ever wanted, and that's happening now too. But now I feel like I'm more intimately involved. I never felt like I used the Party for my professional advantage, but it's clear that those things just aren't important any more. Now it's only who is competent, and when it's only competence that counts, I feel more directly involved and can control my success. Six years ago my relationship with Susanne [from West Berlin] wouldn't have worked because I was too shy, too inhibited. I don't think that I have more self-confidence – I always knew what I could do and what I could not do. What's different now is how I handle my self-confidence, how much I allow myself to do, and I allow myself a lot. That's why our relationship works. Six years ago I would not have even been attracted to Susanne.

Heike Prochazka was only 29 at the time of unification and had many resources upon which to draw, and she adapted well to the transition to capitalism. But many of the older women in my group also adapted successfully to the transition. Eva Kunz, aged 42 at the time of unification in 1990, had led a more political life in the GDR than Heike Prochazka. As soon as the Wall fell, she had become a member of the SPD, and in March 1990 she successfully stood for election to the Volkskammer, which was still functioning as the East German parliament. Shortly thereafter she joined the new East Berlin government, the Magistrat, as Commissioner for Equal Opportunity, where she served until the interim government was dissolved by the all-German elections in December 1990. Eva Kunz

attributed the ease of her transition to her political and professional involvement. This involvement was shaped, she said, by qualities she developed during the GDR:

> In the GDR, exercising your self-confidence and independence wasn't thinkable. Those who did it did it in opposition to the accepted norms of behaviour. I did it. It wasn't anything heroic, it was just what I had always done. There are always those who don't agree with the societal norms, people who are adventurous or malcontents. The adventurous ones didn't have their adventurous natures beaten out of them in the GDR; in fact, you could organize adventures, and I did.

During the GDR her adventurous nature took her into the peace movement and a women's group critical of the 'traditional understanding of gender roles' that underlay the state's policies. She was critical of the GDR and never joined the Party, yet she never thought about leaving. After unification, she was appointed to the Department for Women in the Ministry for Work, Welfare, Health and Women in the new state of Brandenburg, where she was still working when I talked to her in 1999.

Eva Kunz's women's group, like many political groups, moved within the private sphere, meeting in friends' apartments, not in the public arena. In the GDR, genuine public politics did not exist. Elections for public office at the state level were largely predetermined, and public officeholders on the local level, such as mayors, were little more than rubber stamps for official Party policy. Even the privacy of a woman's apartment could be penetrated by the State Security, the Stasi, and thus there was no clear separation between political activity and one's private life (Miethe, 2000: 170). Indeed, the private sphere in the GDR was 'deprivatized' (Miethe, 2000: 171), and non-state-sanctioned political activity always involved risk. After unification, Eva Kunz joined the SPD, and for the first time was able to enter the public political arena, where she learned to function within the new community of the democratic political system (Miethe, 2000: 174). Helping to make policy for women in the new state of Brandenburg, she had remained a positive actor in the transition.

The third story from the first group belongs to Jutta Braband, a woman about the same age as Eva Kunz, who was critical of the form of socialism that existed in the SED state but was contemptuous of the new unified Germany and its capitalist economic system. Before the collapse of the GDR, she had operated in the forbidden space of opposition politics and had served a jail sentence for transporting illegal written materials. With a small group of friends, all of whom wanted to create a democratic and open socialist state, she participated in the demonstrations in the fall of 1989 and eventually founded one of the several pro-democracy groups that helped bring down the Wall, the United Left (Initiative vereinigte Linke).

As part of the leadership of the pro-democracy movement, Jutta

Braband was elected to represent the United Left at the Round Table, the unofficial advisory body that existed alongside the interim government of Hans Modrow from November 1989 to March 1990. After unification, she was elected to the Bundestag, the first all-German parliament. At the time of our second interview in 1992, she had stepped down from her Bundestag position after publishing an article in *Neues Deutschland*, the newspaper of the Party during the GDR and of its post-unification successor, the PDS, in which she admitted to working as an informant for the Stasi in her early twenties (Braband, 1991: 9). When her 'Stasi-father' asked her to inform on her friends in the opposition, she realized that real socialism could not be achieved from within the state apparatus, and at age 26 she left the Stasi and joined the opposition.

After unification, Jutta Braband remained political, and in 1999 she headed the governing board for the House of Democracy (Haus der Demokratie), which in December 1989 had been given to the six pro-democracy groups that had helped to bring down the GDR government. The United Left was still housed there, as were 45 new organizations, all attempting to disseminate their concept of democracy or emancipation, while arguing among themselves over the degree to which the ideals of the GDR should prevail over the reality of the FRG. Jutta Braband struggled with her role in 'the other Germany', but despite the failure of the pro-democracy movement to achieve its goal of a reformed GDR, she held onto the sense of community she felt in the GDR. In 1999 she told me:

> I miss some things, but I haven't disappeared. I have held on to my history, my biography. I still think it will become harder and harder to convey to others what it was like. Sometimes my 16-year-old son says to me, 'Mum, the GDR is over; we're not living there any more, and it's not coming back, so give it a rest.' For him it's clear: it was, and now it's finished, and his mother is a little nuts because she keeps talking about it. He can remember a little bit, but he asks and then I say, this and such was my experience, and my experience is based on my life in the GDR. I can't just ignore it. I lived there for 40 years.
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> I'm proud to have lived in the GDR because I have a very strong feeling that I am different because of it. Actually it's more accurate to say I'm happy to have lived in the GDR. When I travel I say I'm from East Berlin; I never say Berlin, because I want it to have a meaning, and for many people it has a meaning. Many people react positively to it. I'm still plagued by doubts about the GDR, and so are my friends. It really wasn't good enough. Because they didn't allow dissent, they were weak. And the question whether we could have done anything differently in '89 can't be answered. The idea that you can educate people (*erziehen)* is somehow false. I think we did change some things with our protests. If I didn't believe that, I wouldn't get involved in anything any more. I have to believe that my actions made a difference.

Jutta Braband wanted democratic socialism, not the 'real existing

socialism' created by the SED in the GDR. However, she did not want the form of democracy that existed in the FRG, and in 1999, at age 49, she was working within the new community of the reshaped grass-roots political opposition.

Like Heike Prochazka and Eva Kunz, Jutta Braband weathered the transition to unified Germany by establishing new connections. All three of these women, like the others in the first group, had in common the fact that they had been fully involved professionally or politically before unification and had remained active and engaged throughout the transition from GDR to FRG. The same qualities that had made them active in the GDR, such as self-confidence, adventurousness and a desire for a humane society, had helped them create a second life for themselves.

I turn now to the second group of women: those who were unable to adapt successfully to the transition. The first of these, Tina F., aged 50 in 1990, had come to East Germany from the Soviet Union after the Second World War to help build a socialist state and had found satisfaction as an urban planner for public spaces and as an activist for women's rights. Having come to the GDR for political reasons and hopeful she could work with others to improve the socialist state, she was devastated when the Wall fell. However, she immediately became involved in the newly formed Unabhängiger Frauenverband (Autonomous Women's Association, or UFV), the organization for women's rights, which emerged in a rush of euphoria almost immediately after the fall of the Wall in the winter of 1989. In the UFV, Tina F. saw the chance to create new policies for a reformed GDR similar to what she had expected when she arrived in the GDR. In particular, the UFV took aim at the paternalistic *Mutti-Politik* ('Mommy Politics'), which kept women and men in their traditional roles, with women expected to bear the double burden of work and family (Ferree, 1993: 90). Women in the UFV believed that whatever benefits had accrued to GDR women, such as the period of maternity leave known as the baby year, had not come as a result of their own efforts, but rather had been imposed by a father-state (Dölling, 1991: 134). Thus, their first objective was to examine critically the policies of the SED state, from its uniform day care facilities to its promotion of heterosexual partnerships, with the hope that they could exert pressure on the GDR government to change. They hoped too that women would gain political power and enfranchisement by becoming involved in the newly opened public spaces (Dodds and Allen-Thompson, 1994: 24; Hampele Ulrich, 2000: 7).

While they were discussing these issues, however, women began to lose their jobs, as the second wave of social change washed over the GDR. It became clear that women could now lose the state-provided benefits, such as day care and the right to abortion, as political slogans proclaimed, 'We are *one* people', and the GDR citizenry moved away from reform towards unification (Dodds and Allen-Thompson, 1994: 24). The formerly private

political spaces were given less importance in the political turmoil of the transition and quickly disappeared, while women who had helped to form the various pro-democracy groups were often pushed aside by their male colleagues (Miethe, 2000: 174). In 1994, attempts to reorganize the UFV were unsuccessful, and in 1998 it was dissolved, leaving only a few independent regional branches (Hampele Ulrich, 2000: 7).

With the disappearance of the UFV, Tina F. lost a group of like-minded women, and then lost her job in an architectural firm in the eastern part of Berlin. When I talked to her in 1999, she had withdrawn into herself: 'I could get involved again, but I have distanced myself from all these political activities because I don't have the strength and energy. I have discovered philosophy and psychology.' Though a former urban planner, she had also withdrawn from public spaces:

> I've experienced a loss of place. For example, yesterday I wanted to go across town, and there was a detour. Again disrupted traffic. The city changes every day. It's unrecognizable. The heart of downtown was Marx-Engels-Platz, or what was called Schlossplatz before the War. How does it look now, and for the past 10 years? It's like a gaping wound. Or Potsdamer Platz: this architecture made by a computer, these aggressive corners, sharp edges, this alienated terracotta stone which you never see in Berlin, this glassing of everything. Too tall, too massive, too much stone. It's like a wind canal. You don't feel good. Everything stimulates you. You feel alone as soon as you see it. I refuse to go there. An opportunity was missed to bring East and West together. What's been created instead is a bank temple, a hotel temple and a consumer temple, these Potsdamer Arcades where people sit around chewing. East Berliners have lost their home (*Heimatort*) somehow. The city has become foreign to me. A new wall has been erected.

Tina F.'s move from a public life to an internal life of the mind had begun when she found herself isolated in her own country. Her response to the loss of meaningful work and of the community she had enjoyed through political engagement was to withdraw and turn inward.

In contrast to Tina F., the other women in the second group had employment in 1999. All were highly educated and had worked at satisfying careers in the GDR, and all were now performing jobs below their educational and intellectual qualifications. One of these women, Gerda Maron, a former translator for East German television, had lost her job when East German television was shut down, and was now answering phones and sorting mail for an international firm. She had cut herself off from her former friends and did not respond to my attempts to contact her in 1999.

Another woman, Ursula Sydow, who was 56 in 1999, had edited the respected GDR literary journal, the *Weimarer Beiträge*, for the state-owned Aufbau publishing house. The enjoyment she found in her job made up for her distaste of the socialist state and in particular for the Party, which

she never joined. Her job and caring for her sick mother gave meaning to her life in the GDR. However, when the staff at Aufbau was reduced after unification, Ursula Sydow was let go. She found another job at the Gauck Agency (Gauck-Behörde), which was responsible for reading, preserving and opening to the public the files of the East German State Security, the Stasi, and although she made a respectable salary, she felt overall poorer than she had in the GDR:

> I have the feeling that the radius of my life has been severely restricted. While before I was open, engaged, interested in many things and willing to try new things, now my life has become monotonous. I work my 40 hours, punch the clock – yes, they actually make us punch a clock – and come home. I read the [Stasi] files, I have my mother to take care of, and other than that I hardly have any other interests. After reading that stuff all day I have no energy to come home and read anything else. I can't read demanding literature any more. Now I read murder mysteries. In the GDR it was different. The work week was actually longer, but my work at Aufbau publishing was also my leisure. I didn't notice the difference between working and doing things that I enjoyed. Reading was synonymous with work and with being informed. Now I hardly go to the movies, and I never go to the theatre. Everything takes so much energy. I thought that I was just getting older, but my much younger colleagues at the Gauck Agency have confirmed that this work is so demanding and so wearing that after work on Friday they go home and sleep for two or three hours. I hardly have any friends left.
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> I was always critical of the GDR, and I see this new environment critically as well; I don't identify with this new Federal Republic. In no way do I feel like I'm helping to shape the state. I don't feel like a citizen of the FRG even though this is my government and I voted for it. In the GDR I had no chance to make a difference, and in the FRG I have no chance to make a difference either. I've noticed that I have become increasingly indifferent. I'm shutting down. I used to say that I would never stop fighting against social injustice, and I think I have already stopped because I am so busy organizing my own little life that I don't have the energy. Everything is becoming more and more anonymous. Within this anonymity I have become an observer.

Highly educated, critical of the new government, and isolated, Ursula Sydow had resigned herself to a life of unstimulating work and caring for her mother. In July 2000, she wrote telling me that her mother had died and that she felt more discouraged than ever.

Both Tina F. and Ursula Sydow had turned inward, Ursula Sydow into her family and Tina F. into herself. Politically, their experiences were very different: Ursula Sydow had never supported the state, while Tina F. had come to the GDR to have a role in building it. Both were close to retirement age at the time of the interviews in 1999, suggesting that age might have affected their withdrawal from active engagement. The difficulties they were having with their new lives might have simply been the result of exhaustion after a lifetime of work. However, Ursula Sydow stated

specifically that her younger colleagues at the Gauck Agency also felt demoralized and exhausted by the tediousness of the work.

In addition, there were several older women in the group who had remained upbeat and active. Among these was Gitta Nickel, 63 in 1999 and officially retired, the final woman to be discussed in this article. A recognized documentary film-maker in the GDR and Party member, she struggled after unification to re-establish herself in the new film environment, but by 1999 she had made 30 films for West German television and for the newly configured stations in the new states, ORB and MDR. In 1999, she described the changes she went through as she moved from a secure GDR job at the state-run DEFA film studio to life as a freelance film-maker:

> After unification suddenly my self-confidence was broken. Of course I always had work, but I couldn't pound on the table, which is what I did in the GDR. In this new Germany, you had to figure out who wanted something from you. And I think we asserted ourselves. When one of our films is shown on TV we get very high ratings.

Gitta Nickel had always worked publicly within the highly charged political space of GDR film-making. Although she had a reputation among younger GDR film-makers as a Party loyalist, she saw herself as a reformer and claimed to have made a difference in what was a heavily censored and also male-dominated profession: 'In my films I challenged people to have opinions and the courage to assert those opinions. The goal was always to change this society to make life in it better.' After unification she successfully adapted to the new public space of FRG television documentary film and by 1999 was rarely without work. She had also recently got married, and despite being officially retired, now moved comfortably within the newly defined community of television film documentary.

As it was for Gitta Nickel, the experience of community described by the women in these two groups was closely tied to the workplace. Work stood at the centre of GDR society. Not only did Marxist theory define work as liberating, the SED state required that all GDR citizens work. Work was perceived as a duty; not to work was considered asocial. Despite the double burden of job and family, work was also embraced by most women, in part because in the GDR the workplace separation between the public and the private spheres, common in capitalist societies, disappeared. Women shared stories about their personal lives at work; colleagues became friends with whom they socialized. One woman told me right after unification in December of 1990, 'In the former GDR a lot of social tension was taken care of at work; women were able to come together there and talk about their problems. My colleagues participated in my divorce. We helped each other. What women in the West call

self-help groups we had at work' (Dodds and Allen-Thompson, 1994: 48). Workers were not separated from each other by large differences in salary or purchasing power (Engler, 1999: 57; Frink, 2001: 222), and in a society where shortages of goods and services were common, colleagues developed important exchange networks (Wagner, 1996: 47). A 1997 survey asked women in both parts of Germany whether they would still choose to work if their husbands earned enough for them to live comfortably. Only 11 percent of women in East Germany (as opposed to 40 percent of women in West Germany) answered in the affirmative, evidence that East German women valued work for reasons beyond financial ones (Frink, 2001: 220). A study conducted in 1996 found that 97 percent of all East Germans believed that work was essential for one's personal development and sense of identity, not primarily as a means to buy goods, as is common in the capitalist West (Frink, 2001: 221). Even in a united Germany, work continued to be a defining feature of East German women's lives.

Schlegelmilch reported in her study of a small East German town that across ages, occupations and class, women remarked that social situations in the GDR had been warmer, more personal and less complicated. People had more time and were more willing to help others. This sense of community may have been exaggerated by the fact that it has now been lost, and remembering it fondly may be an example of *Ostalgie* (Schlegelmilch, 2000: 47). Still, virtually all of the women in my group mentioned a loss of warmth in social situations and particularly at work, as they adapted to a capitalist work mentality. According to Pankoke, the values of solidarity and the 'cohesion' of the collective in the GDR were displaced by the individuality required by the free market (Pankoke, 1997: 499). Schlegelmilch argued that community or its loss contributed to one's perception of the transition from GDR to FRG (Schlegelmilch, 2000: 48).

When Ursula Sydow and Tina F. lost their jobs after unification, they also lost a sense of connectedness to the larger society. In the GDR, Ursula Sydow's editorship was the central activity of her life, and when that was replaced by uninteresting work at the Gauck Agency, which allowed little opportunity for interaction or warmth among colleagues, her life lost a good deal of its meaning. Although Tina F. had joined an architectural firm in eastern Berlin after unification, the fast pace required to keep up in the market economy had increased the tension and decreased the opportunities for meaningful communication at work. She had finally lost her job and with it, connection to a larger community.

While Heike Prochazka also felt connected at work in the GDR in ways that were lost with the move to capitalism and competition, in contrast to Ursula Sydow and Tina F., she willingly exchanged the warm interaction among colleagues in the GDR for a work environment that encouraged individual effort and responsibility. Heike Prochazka recognized and

accepted the need to separate her private life from her public life: 'In the GDR everyone looked out for others, even at work where friends and colleagues were often the same people. That's not the case now. You separate work and friends.' She found personal connection through friends outside work, participation in a lesbian swimming team and her relationship with a woman from the West.

The ability or inability to find community either at work or in one's private circle was the only consistent identifiable trait among my interviewees. Other factors, such as age, education level, membership in the Party, activity in opposition groups, membership in the church, harassment at the hands of the Stasi, or attitude towards the GDR, were not indicators of successful adaptation to unification. While half of the younger women managed the transition, half did not, and of the women in their forties, fifties and sixties, successful women outnumbered those who failed to make the transition. Women with the highest levels of education were among those who had the most difficulty after unification, though my group also contained women who successfully used their education to adapt to the transition. Women who had been critical of or harassed by the socialist state were happy to see its demise and consistently embraced unification, but not all of them were successful in creating a new life. Several women who criticized the GDR still preferred it over the capitalist FRG and thus did not embrace unification, but had managed to land on their feet. All four former Party members had been supportive – though not uncritical – of the state, but after unification had not continued membership in the PDS, the successor to the SED, and managed to do well after unification. Women who had never joined the Party chose a wide variety of political paths and demonstrated a mixed response to unification.

Thus, my interviews show that the most significant experience of GDR women after unification was the move from meaningful activity or work, with the social contacts that came with it, to meaningless work or unemployment and the accompanying isolation. In the GDR work provided women with self-confidence and self-esteem, financial independence and a connection to a larger community. The displacement of unification was overcome when active and engaged women were able to remain active and engaged both in their professional and personal lives. Resignation resulted when work was lost or without meaning and connections were broken.

NOTES

1. The first interviews (1990–1) were translated and edited and then published in Dodds and Allen-Thompson (1994). The second interviews, in 1992, were

summarized and appeared in the same volume. The 1995 interviews were described in Dodds (1998).

2. East German social scientist Ursula Schröter also identified three groups of women in a 1993 study performed by the ISDA (Institut für Sozialdatenanalyse) (Schröter, 1997: 56–60). The first group described by Schröter agreed with the statement, 'I am more active than before'. Schröter's second group consisted of 'those without hope' (*die rundherum Hoffnungslosen*), and her third group combined elements of the other two.
3. Using biographical materials, a significant number of studies have been published on the process of unification (Breckner et al., 2000; Fischer-Rosenthal, 2000; Schlegelmilch, 2000). The interview as resource material enjoyed considerable popularity during the GDR and immediately after unification. In 1990, Erica Fischer and Petra Lux published *Ohne uns ist kein Staat zu machen*, a volume of 16 interviews with ordinary women from Leipzig and Berlin. That same year, noted East German writer Helga Königsdorf published another such volume, *Adieu DDR* (1990), which was followed in 1991 by *Gute Nacht, du Schöne*, by Anna Mudry, whose title was a direct reference to the book of interviews of East German women published by Maxi Wander in 1977 and widely read in the GDR, *Guten Morgen, du Schöne*. Mudry's volume contained interviews with nine GDR women writers.
4. Since the GDR was not recognized by the FRG, West Germany did not have an embassy in East Berlin.

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