

Tale from the beat, Part 3



Philip
Dine

This involves a single—albeit months-long—reporting episode. As before, the aim is to offer insight into journalists and their travails for those of you who deal with the media, or just some change-of-pace reading on a chilly winter day.

Communist authorities erected the Berlin Wall in August 1961 to divide East and West Berlin. It did precisely that for 28 years, before it fell in November 1989—sparking German reunification, Communism’s demise in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union’s collapse.

Hard to believe, but the 30th anniversary of the Wall’s destruction occurred two months ago as I write this. Harder still to believe: This anniversary marks the first time the Wall has been down longer than it

stood as a symbol of the Cold War.

In February 1989, I was covering the AFL-CIO’s executive council meeting in Florida. Hoping to justify my newspaper’s decision to send me, one morning I approach Al Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, who’s relaxing by the hotel pool. I do so with trepidation; I’m a new labor reporter, he’s a legendary figure in the labor movement, having vaulted to national prominence after leading the 1968 New York City teachers strike. And he’s famously gruff.

Lacking the knowledge to ask an actual question, but hoping to tap into his experience as head of the AFL-CIO’s International Affairs Committee, I throw a Hail Mary: “What’s going on in the world that nobody knows about?”

His response fascinates me: Independent labor movements are quietly forming in Hungary, Bulgaria and elsewhere in the Eastern bloc, challenging the government-run unions. If they blossom, they could delegitimize the Communist regimes, allegedly built on working-class support.

Hungary’s Liga, the strongest autonomous movement, is expanding from scientists and academics to industrial workers and taxi drivers. The AFL-CIO is trying to subtly help the fledgling efforts, says Shanker, who is about to be designated to lead a new panel to forge ties with the rebel unions. Meanwhile, three AFL-CIO staffers have just returned from Budapest after lending support—a delicate exercise that could easily boomerang.

This is a chance to use the labor beat to break major news, so I write about it. My editors hold the story for days before finally burying it inside the paper.

Inexplicably encouraged, I call Pal Forgacs in Budapest, a Shanker acquaintance who runs the Liga. He speaks about worker restiveness bubbling throughout the region. I write

about him as well.

A top editor, now convinced I’m dialing Hungarians at random, runs the story but asks me to refrain from using information gathered in Florida to cover Eastern Europe for a St. Louis audience.

Fast forward to fall, 1989: I’m in Western Europe reporting on economics, when the same editor alerts me that thousands of East Germans “vacationing” in Hungary are fleeing to Austria, and that Eastern Europe might be unraveling. Go there, he orders; nary a word that maybe I’d been onto something months ago.

I land the next day in Budapest, and shortly I’m in Liga activist Mihaly Csako’s tiny apartment, bookshelves crammed with tomes about working-class issues, taking notes on what he’s saying about the role of the maverick unions.

At Hungary’s Austrian border, I interview East Germans as they escape; Hungary’s leaders having removed the barbed wire barrier. In late September I’m in tense East Berlin, secret police and security forces everywhere to quell any rebellion—making reporting a dangerous endeavor.

Protestant churches are a place where politics are discussed, though cloaked in religious allegories. At a service, I try to be inconspicuous while taking notes in the notepad hidden in my pocket as the reverend uses a story about Moses to discuss freedom.

As parishioners exit, I approach two couples in their 30s, seeking insight into East Germans’ hopes and fears. I identify myself as an American journalist.

One of the women glares at me, then instructs the others not to talk. “You’re a state security officer,” she says; I wasn’t praying, I was looking around, and I speak German. I protest, but she’s unmoved.

One of the men eventually tests my knowledge of St. Louis jazz and blues music, then tells the others: “I believe he’s genuine.”

Emotions pour from the woman: “We are not free. This is no life,” she tells me. “It will take a long time, many years, for changes. We will all be old.”

In October, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev visits East Berlin and urges the headline leaders to show restraint; in early November, the wall opens and the world changes. But I’m back in St. Louis—my brilliant editors sure that writing the West European economics story is the priority.

EDITORIAL STAFF:
Director of Communications and Media Relations Philip Dine
Designer/Web Editor Mike Shea
Writer/Editor Rick Hodges
Writer/Editor Jenessa Wagner
Editorial Assistant Clare Foley

The Postal Record (ISSN 0032-5376) is published monthly by the National Association of Letter Carriers. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Membership Department, NALC, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144.

Subscription included in membership dues. First-class subscription available for \$20 per year (contact Membership Department).

© 2020 by the National Association of Letter Carriers.

Circulation: 287,000. Union-printed using soy-based inks.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS? Contact the Membership Department.

Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube by going to NALC.org.

