



Clouds and sunshine

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WEATHER, A8

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SAT

May

Places

Reflections on Germany, the Cold War and 'the wall'

"The wall is down, the school is closed, and no one else will ever know what it was like. They just don't understand fully."

Yhoshekia Loftin Lowe, '83,
Houston



"We all lived through something very special, and we all felt different from (state-side) kids, and that's why we're all attached."

Jim Branson, '62,
High Point



"We were a pretty close-knit school to begin with, but we became even tighter after the wall went up. We took care of our own."

Charlie Warnock, '63,
Tampa, Fla.



"You knew if something did happen, there was the possibility of not getting out. It was just one of those things you lived with."

Ogden Lazenby, Beaufort, S.C., teacher, 1975-94



'Berlin Brats' meet in Asheville

Americans who came of age in Germany share bond of history

By Barbara Blake
STAFF WRITER

No one who wasn't there will ever understand what it was like.

Living in Berlin during the Cold War, the children of American military personnel and diplomats shared an experience that spanned six different decades and yet was much the same.

The faces of Soviet soldiers with guns. Tapped telephone lines. Twelve-hour train trips to play an opposing team in basketball. And an unspoken understanding that they would stick together no matter what happened on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

Today, they call themselves the "Berlin Brats," as in military brats who lived in Berlin. Now in their 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s, they still share a bond unrestricted by age, geography or circumstance.

On Friday morning, these self-named Brats began streaming into the Ramada Plaza Hotel from points across the country, bringing smiles and



Steve Dixon photos/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Bernard Beausoleil of Houston videos a wall of memorabilia brought by alumni of the Berlin American High School in Germany as part of a reunion of the "Berlin Brats," who are gathered for the weekend at the Ramada Plaza Hotel on Smoky Park Highway.

To find out more

For more information, visit www.berlinbrats.org, write to Berlin Brats Alumni Association, 41630 N. Rolling Green Way, Anthem, AZ 85086, or call (623) 551-1105.

memories they will share this weekend during a reunion celebrating their years at the Berlin American High School.

Please see BERLIN on A5



Old photos and school annuals occupy a table in one of the hospitality rooms at the Ramada Plaza Hotel on Smoky Park Highway. The Berlin American High School is having its reunion in Asheville this year.

BERLIN: School closed 5 years after wall came down

Continued from A1

A special bond

More than 300 of the Berlin Brats registered for the reunion, held every few years at spots around the country since 1986.

"Across the board, it was a family, and 40 years later it's still the same," said Charlie Warnock of Tampa, Fla., who attended the seventh-12th school from 1958 to 1963 and witnessed the construction of the Berlin Wall. "We took care of each other, and it didn't matter if your father was a private or a general. Everybody was together."

The Berlin American High School opened in 1946 to serve the children of military personnel, U.S. State Department officials and other Americans stationed in Berlin to help with the postwar rebuilding of Germany.

Like most military families, the students often moved from place to place. Few were lucky enough to stay at the school from start to finish.

But there was something about the high school years they shared, even decades apart, that cemented their bond.

"We had each other, and that's all we had," said Jeri Polansky Glass of Phoenix, class of '72 and executive director of the high school's alumni association. "We were isolated from everybody else, and you either made friends very quickly or you became a very lonely person. I think that's why we're still so bonded."

Never seeing East Germany in daylight

After the building of the wall in 1961, with armed guards at checkpoints all along the way, adults and teenagers at the Berlin school tried to continue a normal life as cheer-

leaders, athletes, yearbook editors, band members, faculty advisers and coaches.

But they had to travel 12 hours by train to play a rival American high school elsewhere in West Germany. And those who got on the "S-Bahn" subway controlled by the East Germans rather than the "U-Bahn" controlled by West German allies risked causing international incidents.

And private telephone calls? Never. Someone, either a Soviet or American security officer, was always listening.

"We were told that everything we did would reflect on America," said Yhoshekia Loftin Lowe of Houston, class of '83. "If you mentioned that your dad was going to the field or was out of town, you might be giving (the Soviets) information about troop movement. Every time you picked up the phone, a voice would come on and say, 'This line is not secure.'"

Glass said the occasional daredevil — always a boy — would hop on the S-Bahn and ride into East Germany, risking being stopped by guards, taken into captivity and grilled about his father's military activities.

"I knew what my dad did for a living (a Russian linguist with the Air Force)," Glass said. "And I could see them pulling my fingernails out one by one, torturing me until I told them what he did."

To attend a sports event with a rival American high school in West Germany, students, coaches, band members, cheerleaders and faculty chaperones were loaded

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YHOSHEKIA LOFTIN LOWE, class of '83

on the military "duty train" at 7 p.m. on a Thursday or Friday.

"We had to travel under the cloak of darkness when we went through East Germany, because the Russians didn't want us to see anything," Glass said. "We'd arrive in Frankfurt at 7 a.m., and we'd be bused to other American high schools for the games."

The return trip was the same, 12 hours on the train, never seeing East Germany in daylight.

Doo-wop, dances and a military drawdown

There were fun times as well. The school had the extra activities of most high schools — they were just contained within a geographically isolated area.

The Teen Center in the American community was the focal point for high-schoolers, with weekly dances, pool and ping-pong tables, a snack bar and music,

from doo-wop in the '50s through the Beatles and Bee Gees in the '60s and '70s and on through the early '90s.

But always, there was the knowledge of the Cold War.

"I guess we were at one point threatened with another world war while we were there," said Jim Branson of High Point, who attended the high school from 1960-62. "Even though we were there at different times, it was an identical experience for each of us, being away from the United States in a foreign country, being friends with people we might only know for a year or two before we had to move on."

When the wall came down in 1989, a military drawdown slowly began, and the school was closed five years later. It is now a German boys school.

Ogden Lazenby taught at the high school for 19 years, from 1975 until it closed. As he walked out the door for the last time, he was overwhelmed with sadness.

"I knew that it was the end of an era, that there would never be another time like it, that it was the end, forever," said Lazenby, who is attending his first reunion of the Berlin Brats. "It's something you have to experience to understand."

"I don't consider these my high-school buddies. I consider them my family."

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