



"For here on either side of the wall are God's children and no man-made barrier can obliterate that fact"

The Trip to Divided Berlin in 1964

In September 1964, at the invitation of Willy Brandt (then West Berlin's mayor, later West German chancellor) 35-year-old **Martin Luther King Jr.** traveled to West Berlin to speak at a ceremony commemorating the assassinated US president John F. Kennedy who had visited West Germany in 1963.



During his brief visit to East Berlin in 1964, Martin Luther King Jr. gave a sermon here in the Protestant St. Marienkirche. PHOTO © Hyde Flippo

Early in the morning of September 13, the day after King's arrival at Tempelhof Airport, East German border guards had shot and wounded 21-year-old Michael Meyer as he was trying to escape from East Berlin. He swam across the Spree River along the Berlin Wall but found he was still in East Berlin. After being struck by several bullets, Meyer was rescued by an American soldier who heroically managed somehow to pull him over the Wall to safety. When King learned of the incident, he hurried to the Kreuzberg district to witness the scene of the rescue himself. The Wall was then only three years old. (In September 2010 a memorial plaque was placed at the site of the Berlin Wall shooting on Stallschreiber Straße to commemorate Dr. King's visit there in 1964.)

After a ceremony at the Schöneberg city hall where JFK had given his "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech, King spoke to an audience of over 20,000 people in the Waldbühne amphitheater near the Olympic Stadium. The occasion was "Tag der Kirche" (Day of the Church).

"My dear Christian friends in East Berlin"

Not content to speak only to the West Germans, King insisted on visiting East Berlin – against the wishes of the US government. Even after the American embassy had confiscated his passport and detained his interpreter, King (accompanied by a second interpreter, Alcyone Scott, and Ralph Zorn, an American pastor working in West Berlin) arrived by car at [Checkpoint Charlie](#), where he presented his American Express card when asked for ID. After the Americans had exchanged the obligatory 25 East German marks for 25 West German marks, they drove the short distance to the historic *St. Marienkirche* (St. Mary's Church) in East Berlin, where he offered a sermon to an overflow crowd.

Although it was the same sermon he had delivered earlier at the Waldbühne amphitheater in the West, the East Berlin audience's reaction to his words of "freedom" and "civil disobedience" was dramatically different. His appearance was literally a godsend for the East German clergy, who were constantly confronted with opposition from the GDR government. In fact, the pastor of the *Marienkirche*, Werner Arnold, had recently been imprisoned by the authorities for his outspoken criticism of the Berlin Wall and helping smuggle people across the border.

Why King was in Berlin

"Dr. King's visit to Cold War Berlin in September 1964 had been prepared by Willy Brandt's 1961 visit to the U.S. and his meeting with King. Another important facilitator was Provost Heinrich Grüber, the former pastor at East Berlin's St. Mary's Church. Grüber had been an active opponent of the Nazi regime... Invited by U.S. churches, Grüber began to travel across the U.S. delivering sermons in the following years. He also met with Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and encountered the African-American struggle for civil rights firsthand. Perceiving this struggle as similar to his resistance to fascism, Grüber took up correspondence with Dr. King, already inviting him to Berlin in the course of 1963."

– from *aacvr-germany.org*



This 2010 plaque in Berlin commemorates Martin Luther King Jr.'s visit to a Lutheran hospice in 1964, now the Hotel Albrechtshof. The signature at the top is a copy of King's entry in the hospice guestbook. PHOTO: © Hyde Flippo

Dr. King also took time to speak with black students at East Berlin's Humboldt University, not far from the *Marienkirche*. Because of the standing-room-only audience at the first church, a second appearance was arranged at the last minute for the *Sophienkirche*, near the Brecht Theater. (In both cases, people learned of King's visit only by word of mouth.) King was mobbed by autograph seekers before he left the church. That evening, invited by his host Gerhard Schmitt, an East German clergyman, he visited a Lutheran hospice near the Friedrichstraße train station, met with other clergy in the hotel's restaurant, and signed the hospice guestbook. In May 2010 a memorial plaque was installed on the building, now the [Hotel Albrechtshof](#), to commemorate Dr. King's visit.³

It was midnight before King finally returned to West Berlin. No mention of his amazing visit to the capital of the GDR ever appeared in the East German media. GDR citizens were not allowed to hear or read words such as: "Here on either side of the Wall are God's children and no man-made barrier can obliterate that fact."

Back in the western half of the city, an exhausted Martin Luther King spent the night at the Berlin Senate's guesthouse and flew from West Berlin to Munich the next day. Several days later he had a private meeting with the pope before returning to Atlanta. In December he would fly to Oslo to accept his Nobel Peace Prize.