FEATURING: Rolling alone: the art of Ronnie Wood. Plus unseen pictures from the age of exploration

THE SUNDAY TIMES magazine

December 5, 2004

WHY GERMANY ISN'T WORKING

Is this the result of reunification? Fifteen years after Germany promised the west would rebuild the east, the nation is more divided than ever

THE IRONY

When the wall came down 15 years ago, east Germans were prom jobs flowing in from free Europe. Instead a new, invisible wall of leaving semi-derelict ghost towns and growing hostility. Special

Worlds apart: Lüneburg (left), a prosperous town in former West Germany; Wittenberge (right), a deserted town in the east

Y CURTAIN

ised their lives would be enriched with new homes, money and hopelessness has been erected – and millions have moved west,

investigation by Christine Toomey. Photographs: Thomas Meyer

The illuminated hands of a vast clock sweep relentlessly above the deserted Packhof quarter of Wittenberge; the span of the dial, over 20ft across, makes it the largest clock in continental Europe. That such a giant timepiece should dominate this small town on the banks of the Elbe river seems almost like a taunt; a larger-than-life reminder that, as far as many are concerned, time is running out for Wittenberge.

For this once booming town in the former Democratic Republic of Germany now has a more dubious claim to fame. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall 15 years ago and subsequent reunification of East and West Germany, Wittenberge has seen the most dramatic exodus of people of any place in the former communist half of the country. Contrary to the "blooming landscape" the former chancellor Helmut Kohl predicted East Germany would become, when he basked in the collective euphoria of 83m Germans celebrating turning into one nation again, all that flourishes among this town's many crumbling buildings are weeds.

Streets stand deserted. Nearly a third of the population – more than 10,000 people – have left. In the former DDR as a whole, nearly 3m – 17% of the population – have moved out, leaving well over a million apartments empty. Most have gone seeking work to the west of what was known as the "anti-fascist protection barrier" – the border that once split the country in two.

Wittenberge's famous clock tower looms 100ft above what remains of a sprawling disused sewing-machine plant, once the town's main employer. Alongside it sit the abandoned hulks of an oil-seed mill and textile factory. In recent years the brick facade of the mill has served as a backdrop for a small annual opera festival; an attempt by the town to breathe life into this abandoned part of town for a few days each year. The only other flurry of activity the Packhof quarter sees from time to time is the arrival of film crews shooting post-second-world-war dramas. There's no need to build a set: the partially derelict, deserted streets offer the perfect location.

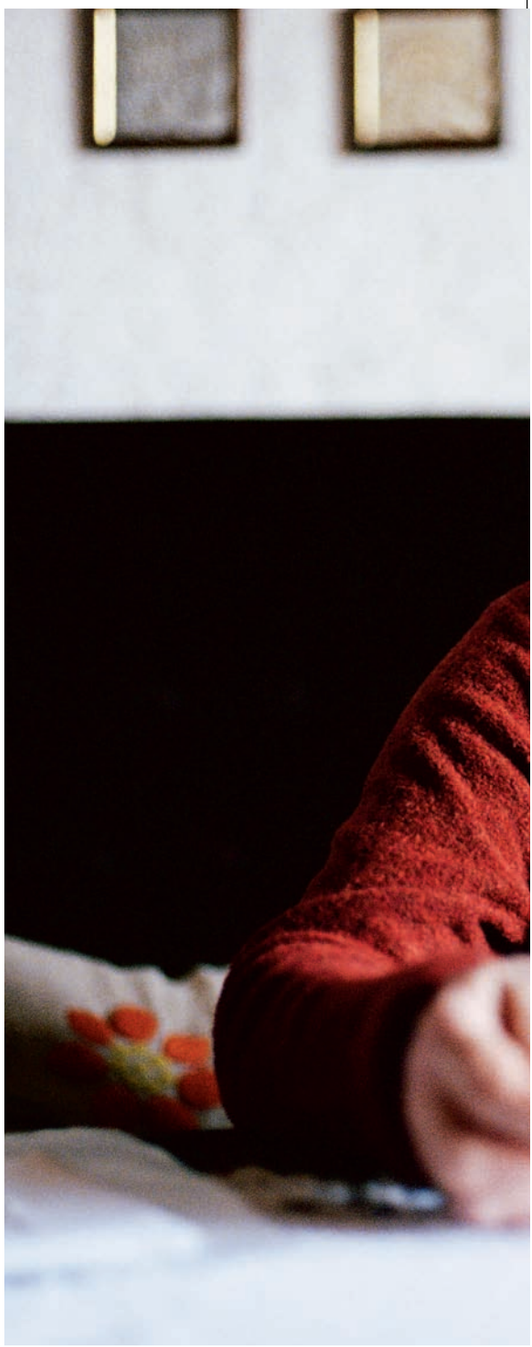
The one, hugely expensive, modernisation project completed here last summer, amid great fanfares, was a £52m upgrade of the railway station. But even this was blown a big raspberry by many residents, who viewed the upgrade, mainly of tracks, as a means for trains to thunder through the town even faster. Only once, early in the morning, does a gleaming Berlin-Hamburg express stop here for two minutes. On the rare occasions it stops a little longer, observed Der Spiegel, one of Germany's leading news magazines, it is so that the driver can hop out "to piss on the floor of this small town before leaving the place once more forgotten by the west".

When Chancellor Gerhard Schröder arrived to crack open a bottle of champagne to inaugurate the new station, he was greeted by a crowd of hecklers. The protest was just one sign of how deeply disenchanted many east Germans, "*Ossies*", are with their west German, "*Wessie*", neighbours and vice versa.

The days when millions of East Germans streamed across the newly opened border to be embraced and offered flowers by those in the west seem long past. The moment when ordinary Germans, eastern and western, stood, arms linked, singing "We are one people" is long forgotten. According to one recent opinion poll, 12% of east Germans think it would be a good thing if the Berlin Wall were re-erected; twice as many west Germans think the same. So why has the dream of a reunited Germany turned so sour?

Some have likened what has happened to a once friendly "company takeover" of the east by the west that has turned hostile. Certainly those in the west resent having poured over £1,000 billion into what has become an economic black hole; while those in the east are disillusioned that this investment, much of it in infrastructure, has failed to prevent huge job losses. But the truth lies deeper than economics. It has its roots in a split in the German psyche – a fundamental difference in mentality that exists between those living on either side of the former border, once so brutally enforced by the DDR that over 1,000 of its citizens were killed trying to cross it.

Heinrich August Winkler, one of Germany's leading historians, describes it as a "mix of economic weakness and long-term disposition", with its roots in the country's authoritarian past. "As West Germany was liberated by the western allies and not the Soviet Union, it had a chance



Below: in December 1989, after almost 30 years of brutal division, jubilant Germans mount the Berlin Wall, embracing the country's reunification

MAIN PHOTOGRAPHS: OSTKREUZ. THIS PAGE, RIGHT: NEWS UK LTD

'I PAID THE HIGHEST PRICE BECAUSE OF THE WALL. I CAN'T UNDERSTAND THOSE WHO WANT IT BACK'

INGE LEMME (left)
In 1974, Inge's son, Hans Georg, was killed by DDR guards while swimming across the Elbe river to the West. Above: a memorial stone 'for the border victims of the Elbe'

to open itself to the political culture of the West. The real tragedy for East Germany was that one form of dictatorship [Nazism] was exchanged for another, which had a tremendous psychological impact. It has taken West Germans time to realise this is a united country but still two societies."

In the heady first years after reunification, there was talk of the "wall inside people's heads", expected to last well after the watchtowers and concrete barricades were torn down; 15 years on it seems, for many, this mental wall has grown. To find out why, there could hardly be a more poignant place to start looking than Wittenberge, and from there trace the stories of those along a section of where the border once followed the Elbe river – across which East and West German soldiers once regularly exchanged fire.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

The headline of the newspaper cutting framed on Detlef Benecke's office wall declares him to be "the luckiest man in Wittenberge". Benecke runs a removals company and business is brisk. The stocky 42-year-old is a born entrepreneur. Even under the old communist regime, he launched a series of lucrative black-market schemes, including reproducing pop posters as a boy and learning how to blow glass, rolling out dozens of orders a week for family and friends.

When the wall came down, Benecke started a business repairing umbrellas. But as one factory after another closed in Wittenberge, and the mass exodus from the town began, he saw a new opening in the market – he invested first in one removals van and now has a fleet. Discussing the fate of the town where he was born, he switches off his phone and becomes earnest.

"When the factories closed, everything went to the dogs. Those in the west just decided the east would become a region of consumers, not a place where anything was made any more. Little thought was given to what the future would look like here after that. So, first, the men left to find work. Then they took their wives and children. Most of those left are either old or very young or have nowhere else to go. This place is turning into a 'pair of dead trousers' [a ghost town]."

One of the reasons the east's economy was gutted so quickly was Kohl's decision to exchange old East German ostmarks for deutschmarks on a one-to-one basis. While populist and politically shrewd, this was largely aimed at stemming a potentially disastrous flood of people moving to the west. And in the short term, it did boost the east's economy by giving those with limited savings some spending power. But in the longer term, it wrecked any chance many East German industries had of remaining competitive; overnight, the wage costs of a much less efficient workforce were hugely inflated, virtually quadrupling the cost of their products.

Winkler, a professor at Berlin's Humboldt University and author of a recent two-volume history of Germany, accuses west German politicians of "lacking imagination". The assumption was that the east would soon be pulled into line with the west. Some talked ⟩⟩→

33

‘EVERYTHING WENT TO THE DOGS WHEN THE FACTORIES CLOSED. FIRST THE MEN LEFT, THEN THEIR WIVES AND CHILDREN’

DETLEF BENECKE (right)
A shrewd businessman, Benecke started up a removals company when the residents of Wittenberge began a mass exodus to the west

of a “second economic miracle”. Much was made of the “confident, powerful” nation a united Germany would become. Some boasted: “Germany will be unstoppable”. That is not how things now look from Wittenberge.

Benecke, who has become a city councillor to try to shake up the local political status quo, blames a lack of innovative thinking among those in power. The same “old sacks”, he says, have dominated Germany’s political landscape for too long. The bureaucracy, hidden taxes and social-security payments burdening German employers are so onerous, they stifle new enterprise. Instead of stimulating the creation of new jobs by stripping away the red tape, the country has artificially propped up certain industries and manufacturers and continued with a lavish welfare system that the country’s ageing population can no longer afford.

Decades after West Germany’s economic miracle dragged the country from the rubble of war to the height of economic power, books have started appearing with titles such as Germany: The Decline of a Superstar. With unemployment at its highest in recent history, and growth stagnant, the country is experiencing what some are calling a “gloom boom”. West Germans blame it on reunification. But economists argue that the decline would have set in anyway, as Germany had evolved one of the most rigid and expensive labour markets in the world. Reunification, they argue, actually concealed the problem for years as the country went on a huge borrowing spree to pour money into the east, leaving a national debt that has breached euro-zone guidelines each year since the launch of the single currency.

In recent years, Schröder has begun the painful process of reform, causing controversy by cutting cherished social programmes. One fallout is that extremist politicians, both on the left and right, have been voted onto local councils. But from January 2005 these cutbacks will begin to bite even deeper, as unemployment benefits will be slashed from two-thirds of previous salary to a fixed welfare payment of under £100 a week. With the official unemployment rate in the east running at around 18% (unofficially the rate is closer to 40-50% in some places), compared with just over 8% in the west, this will lead to much greater hardship for those in the former DDR.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Rudiger Overlach is bent low over a small artificial pond, absorbed in creating a miniature Japanese landscape in the garden of his modest home on the outskirts of Wittenberge, as his wife starts talking about how she believes he will fare once the new reforms take effect. “From January my husband will receive €340 (£235) a month,” says Daniella, 48, who has an advanced terminal illness. “Once I’m gone, Rudi is planning on starting his own business designing Japanese gardens.” From the look of the wilted rushes surrounding the pond her 53-year-old husband is tending, this could be an uphill struggle.

“Life was good for us before. I worked in a bakery. Rudi was a builder. We raised a few pigs on the side and made enough money to build our own house. Our life was secure. When the wall fell, we thought life could only get better.

The huge clock tower in Wittenberge marks time for the all-but-abandoned town in the east

But the small man has been forgotten. Our lives have become very hard. We feel used.”

Not that the Overlachs were great lovers of the old system. When he was a teenager, Rudiger escaped to the West by swimming across the Elbe. Incredibly, he swam back, undetected, a few days later after feeling guilty about leaving his ailing mother. Loose talk about what he had done led to him being jailed for two years. When Daniella applied for a passport to leave the DDR, it was denied. She became one of millions subject to surveillance by the Stasi, the secret police, among whose bizarre methods was the compilation of a “smell database” comprising stolen items of clothing such as socks and underpants, to help sniffer dogs track supposed subversives.

“We wanted freedom and now we have it,” says Rudiger, finally slumping in a chair in the garden. “But what good is it doing us? There is no work. Our young people are leaving. Our police state has collapsed, but what we have been offered in its place is an ‘elbow society’ where everyone is just out for themselves.”

As hard as it was for them, the Overlachs encouraged their only son to leave Wittenberge to find work in the west. Before I meet him at the end of my trip, when the deep divisions that still exist between those living on either side of the former border become startlingly clear, a series of encounters serve as painful reminders of how brutally divided physically Germany once was.

One road out of Wittenberge winds through a small village, little more than a street lined with old farmhouses, where 75-year-old Inge Lemme lives. One wall in her home is lined with photographs of a handsome, smiling young man with unruly blond hair; the last photograph taken when he was 21, just a few months before he was killed. This is Hans Georg, Inge’s son.

The last time Inge saw her son, he was waving at her as he cycled away from their farm after paying a short visit home during his period ⟶

‘IT IS THE EAST, NOT WEST, THAT IS THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY’

SILVIO OVERLACH (right)
Disillusioned by their new life in Lüneburg in the west, Silvio and his wife plan to return to Wittenberge, where his parents (above) still live

of compulsory military service with the East German army. It was a sunny Sunday afternoon, August 1974. Later that day, Hans Georg was due at a nearby military base, before being posted as a guard to a high-security camp for political prisoners in the north of the country. When he failed to report for duty, soldiers were sent to question Inge and her late husband. They genuinely had no idea where he was. “He wanted to protect us,” says Inge, absently stroking a photograph of her son. “Only later did we discover he had admitted in a letter to his uncle that he did not know how he was going to get through his military service.”

Inge believes the prospect of being posted to guard political prisoners, and the cruel conditions her son was expecting to have to enforce there, pushed him to attempt to escape. He was a strong swimmer, a lifeguard. He thought he could make it across the Elbe. But as soon as he was reported missing, border guards ordered floodlights to be trained on the stretch of the river nearest to his home. He didn’t attempt to cross that night. The next night, the floodlights were still on, but he felt desperate enough to attempt his escape.

The details of what happened next only emerged after the Berlin Wall fell and records of border fatalities were scrutinised by authorities seeking prosecutions of both politicians and military officers considered responsible for the shoot-to-kill policy enforced along the border.

Hans Georg, it was recorded, almost made it to the western bank of the Elbe before being seen by an East German patrol boat that had been ploughing back and forth looking for him. When the boat drew level with him and tried to pull him on board, according to one crew member, he dived below the surface, shouting: “It’s now or never.” The captain of the boat then systematically raked his craft backwards and forwards at speed until he felt the propeller meet resistance, then announced with satisfaction: “That’s got him.” The propeller had sliced through Hans Georg’s skull. His body was left to rot in the water for three weeks in the hope that this would disguise the exact cause of his death.

When his body was returned to his family, his parents were told they were to blame for “bringing him up improperly” and “filling his head with false ideas”. The family had relations in West Germany with whom they exchanged limited correspondence. Six years ago an attempt was made to prosecute the captain of the boat for manslaughter. But his crew mates suffered a sudden bout of amnesia, claiming they could not recall what had happened, and he was acquitted.

“I paid the highest price possible because of the wall,” Inge says. “I understand how desperate a lot of people feel because they have no work. It is not an easy situation. But I cannot understand anyone who says they want the wall back.”

Gerhard Schröder reopens the railway station in Wittenberge; he faced a mob of disgruntled locals

Further along the river, in the hamlet of Vockfey, Hans Ebeling, an elderly farmer with a smallholding that had once sat precariously close to the electrified fence following the line of the Elbe, recalls sometimes hearing gunshots fired at those trying to cross the border. “We never thought contact with the west would come so rapidly. The sudden freedom was both beautiful and unexpected,” says Ebeling, who became a local councillor when the wall fell, and fought hard for the community of Neuhaus, within which Vockfey sits, to be incorporated back into the west German region of Lower Saxony, to which it traditionally belonged. This has brought the area some financial benefits. But it still lags far behind the prosperous Lüneburg across the river and, further afield, Hamburg, one of the wealthiest cities in Europe. “Young people today have no idea how it was back then,” says Ebeling. “They look back and think things were better.”

You do not have to search far to understand what he means. The young in nearby Neuhaus are unanimous in their belief that their only hope of a job lies across the river in affluent Lüneburg. And yet they express a strong sense of nostalgia – or “*Ostalgie*”, as the Germans have dubbed it – for the East German way of life their parents knew.

Drawing a veil over the fact that it was a society more spied on than any other in history, they, like many others, talk of the former DDR as a cosy, communal *Heimat* (homeland). Such sentiments have made the recent German film Good Bye Lenin! a hit, and meant former food staples such as Bulgarian plums, ersatz coffee – made from charred vegetables – and the old-fashioned Trabant cars that families waited years to acquire are now undergoing a revival. ⟩⟩→

Without meaning it as a metaphor, Iris Goigal, a 17-year-old pupil at Neuhaus's high school, says: "At least you knew where you were when the wall was there." She means it literally, explaining that her mother used to get lost in East Berlin and could only orient herself by looking at the wall. But it is as if not only her mother's generation but hers too now feels so lost, they can only find their bearings by referring to the psychological barrier that still separates east and west.

Little remains today of the real Berlin Wall. Most of it was ground to rubble and used as the foundation for a network of new autobahns across east Germany. Potsdamer Platz, once a no-man's-land across which concrete barriers and barbed wire stretched, now has a McDonald's and Starbucks. When an artist recently re-created a portion of the wall in the capital near the former Checkpoint Charlie, erecting 1,065 wooden crosses in memory of those who lost their lives trying to cross the border, it caused an outcry. The installation was condemned as a "Disneyfication" of the cold war. But many saw the row as a sign that those in the west would prefer to forget the country's troubled past.

Sitting in a classroom discussing their hopes for the future, Iris and other pupils in Neuhaus constantly repeat the message they receive from their parents: that life was more secure before the wall fell. A job, at least, was guaranteed, health care was free and the education system better. Only one boy, Denny Lengkeit, dares to say: "We wouldn't want the wall back, or the spies or the border guards." But, with the brashness of youth, he voices the belief, widely held but rarely expressed so openly that: "Even so, there was a lot about the old system that was good." At this the girls in the group talk enthusiastically about the "community spirit" their parents once enjoyed and they crave. There is little doubt that under the extreme conditions of a totalitarian state, neighbours and friends (ones not signed up by the Stasi, that is) had to support each other more to devise ways of loosening society's straitjacket.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

On the outskirts of Lüneburg, in the driveway of the smart house that Daniella and Rudiger Overlach's 29-year-old son, Silvio, has built for his family, a new Mercedes CLK 200 sits as a gleaming symbol of newly acquired wealth. While the car is mainly used for driving back to Wittenberge to visit his father and ailing mother, it is clear that, in material terms, moving to Lüneburg has enabled Silvio, his wife, Kathrin, their young son and baby daughter, to achieve a comfortable lifestyle. Not that it wasn't hard won. When Silvio first moved west he says he encountered the sort of discrimination many East Germans complain about. Employed by a construction company for almost half the wage paid to his West German counterpart, he and the other *Ossies* were given accommodation in a removals container. "We were considered cheap labour, so naive and desperate for work that we would take whatever we were given."

When his wife joined him and started work as a book-keeper, they were able to rent a small flat. Silvio then started an internet company selling ornamental swords and daggers, which grew out of his passion for the martial arts. To his surprise the company quickly took off, enabling the family to buy a plot of land and start building their own home. But this led to further trouble.

Their elderly neighbours appeared to take an instant dislike to them, eventually complaining to the police that Silvio had exposed himself in the garden, a complaint that the police found groundless. Silvio believes at its root was a feeling of resentment many *Wessies* feel for their *Ossie* neighbours. "People here seem to simply look for reasons to pick a fight," he laments.

In the comfortable setting of Lüneburg town hall, Ulrich Medge, the mayor, tries to explain what he believes lies at the root of such antipathy. "In the beginning, those from the east were welcomed with open arms. But when the euphoria subsided and reality set in, west Germans realised east Germans would be competing with them for jobs, and then there was this huge outflow of money from their pockets to try and shore up the former DDR. When all they heard in return were complaints from those in the east about how hard their lives had been, things began to wear thin. From the west German perspective there is a feeling that we struggled for 40 years to pull this country out of the ashes of war and yet those in the east expect their lives to be transformed overnight."

Medge is too diplomatic to admit that basic prejudices arising from different mindsets also run just below the surface. While *Ossies* see themselves as more open- and social-minded than those in the west, *Wessies* view them as whiny and slow-thinking. And while *Wessies* see themselves as modern, sophisticated and experienced in the ways of western capitalism, they are viewed in the east as arrogant and making *Ossies* feel like second-class citizens.

As far as Medge and most Germans are concerned, it will take another generation, maybe two, before the tensions between east and west ease and the mental wall that continues to exist in many people's minds finally crumbles. But right now, for Silvio Overlach, the differences are simply too great. He has recently decided to try and move back to Wittenberge. His expanding business, he feels, can be conducted just as well from there – if not better. "Workers in the west have had it so good for so long they don't put much effort in and, I have found, are unreliable," says Silvio. "I'd rather employ someone from the east any day. I know they'll show up for work. They need the money." There is some documentary evidence to support this:

'YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE NO IDEA. THEY THINK IT WAS BETTER BACK THEN'

HANS EBELING (above)
A farmer from Vockfey, a hamlet just next to the Elbe river, Ebeling used to hear gunshots fired at those attempting to cross the border

one recent banking report noted that east German workers, on average, clock up 100 hours more per year than their western counterparts.

"As far as I'm concerned it is east Germany, not west, that is the land of opportunity," Silvio concludes. "Just like in America, when the pioneers started moving out to the Wild West."

Few exemplify this "pioneer" spirit better than Detlef Benecke; even if, in his case, it has a rather macabre edge. Once Benecke has helped all those who want to leave Wittenberge, I inquire, what direction does he see his business taking? Without missing a beat, he replies that he has been thinking about opening a funeral transportation service, maybe a crematorium. "It looks like only the old will be left here soon," he says. "They will need catering for eventually."

But if others like Silvio Overlach start moving back, bringing new business opportunities with them, there may be hope for Wittenberge yet. The future of the east, says the historian Winkler, depends on a "renaissance of civil society". And already, he says, there are "positive symptoms".

On my way out of Wittenberge, I glance up at the giant clock and note it is running 15 minutes fast. Rather than time running out for places like this, optimists like Silvio would argue they could, eventually, find themselves ahead in the race to galvanise Germany and rid it of its reputation as the sick man of Europe. But at the moment, in east Germany, optimists are in short supply ■