

SHED NO TEARS

A short story from
the last days of the GDR

Max Hertzberg

About The Author

Often to be found in Berlin, Max Hertzberg is currently travelling around Eastern Europe and Germany, doing research for future novels. Previously an academic researcher (evaluating Stasi and SED files on opposition movements and on security on the Berlin Wall); more recently a social change trainer and facilitator.

Max is the author of the *East Berlin Series* of counter-factual political thrillers set in a post-1990 GDR.

Visit the author's website for background information on the GDR, features on this story and its characters, as well as guides to walking tours around the East Berlin in which this story is set.



www.maxhertzberg.co.uk

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THURSDAY

27th September 1989

Katrin's eyes opened on the last day of her life.

She sat up, leaned against the wall and allowed her eyes to focus on her room. A poster of the band *Silly* (the cover from their latest album, *Februar*) next to a picture of David Bowie (cut out of the *Western* magazine *Bravo*), various photos of friends from school and work, and pieces of patterned material hiding the damp patches on the wall. Next to her bed stood the old cupboard that the neighbours had thrown out. And on the floor beside that, in front of the guitar, the packed rucksack.

Even though it was already past seven o'clock she was reluctant to get up—once her feet touched the floor Thursday would officially start, and she would slide towards her future. By midnight (if all went well) she'd be halfway to the West. But first she had the whole day to get through (if it had been up to her she would already be on her way, but they had agreed to wait until the afternoon).

She folded back her duvet and swung her legs onto the thin carpet. Standing up, she stretched and yawned, then took a blouse off the hanger in the cupboard, pulling other clothes from the drawers. *Don't wear your best clothes, wear something normal.* She climbed into her knickers and her jeans, pulling the peasant blouse over her head, a bottle-green cardy on top of that. A look in the mirror, yes she

looked normal. A normal Katrin for a normal day.

He was sitting in the kitchen scanning the newspaper, a cup of coffee going cold in front of him. Four bread rolls waited in the plastic basket in the centre of the table, next to the five-fruits jam and a cube of margarine. Now, when she looks back on that scene she can see the headlines of his newspaper, Neues Deutschland: *By their actions they have ridden roughshod over our moral values—they have excluded themselves from our society. We shed no tears for them.* But she knows it's not true, her memory is playing tricks on her, throwing up adjectives like *treacherous* and *anti-social*. There would have been no Party newspaper in their flat. And anyway (she knew, she'd asked her father) that article hadn't been published for another week. Page two, he'd said, it was on page two: not the front page headlines, and not that week.

"Morning, Papa." She sat down at the table, reaching for a bread roll, cutting it in half.

Martin looked over the top of the newspaper, then folded it, placing it on the table.

"Still here? You'll be late for work, won't you?" She scraped some margarine off the knife.

He sipped his cold coffee. "Thought you might like some bread rolls. Shall I make more coffee?"

Do everything you normally do. Go to work. Stay 'til the end of your shift, don't leave early. But here they were, eating rolls on a weekday.

They had their breakfast in silence, each sharing the moment, the last breakfast together, here in the flat.

"You're right, I should get going," Martin broke the silence. "I should make an appearance at the factory or they'll be wondering where I am. I'll be back by four or five." He took his cup and plate over to the sink and left them on the side.

She heard the rustling of his *Dederon* jacket as he pulled it on. The flat door clicked shut and she heard his key scratch out of the lock. The latch was too stiff to just pull the door to

—you needed a key to shut it. It was one of the many things in this old flat that needed fixing. But it wasn't just the flat that needed fixing, it was the whole country.

She dropped the half-eaten roll onto her plate and left it there, following her father into the narrow world of East Berlin. Before pulling the door shut behind her she adjusted the cotton scarf she'd draped round her neck and cocked her head, trying to catch any sounds from the stairwell. Hearing nothing she removed the key and headed off down the steps.

Standing on the pavement she considered which way to go. There was nothing she needed to do, nowhere she particularly wanted to go, everything was ready, she just had to get through the day.

She turned left, swinging her arms as she went, enjoying the dusty sunlight that filtered through the leaves of the lime trees lining the street. Wooden scaffolding shored up the neighbouring house, and as she stepped out into the roadway to pass the obstruction a Trabant whined past, the engine skirling as the driver moved down a gear. She was drifting along, letting her feet carry her where they would. She gazed around her, taking in the browns and greys of the pied buildings, the pink brickwork showing through derelict rendering. She'd grown up in this neighbourhood, it was her *Kiez*, she knew every crack in the pavements, every ripple in the thin tarmac of the road. But now she had the feeling that she needed to look—not in the way a child does, accepting of her environment, but to really drink in every detail, store it away so that in future, when she looked back at her old life, she could describe it all to herself. So that she could remember what she'd left behind.

The children played in the little park. Katrin stood just outside, on the street, looking in. Three nursery teachers sat on a bench and gossiped, the hand-trucks with the rows of seats for the children stood abandoned by the entrance. A

little girl shrieked down the slide—a concrete trunk, part of a concrete elephant. He used to bring her here on the way home from nursery. Later on she'd come by herself, stopping off between school and home. She'd loved that elephant, it was the best elephant in the whole world.

“There are plenty more elephants like this one,” he used to say to her.

“Where?”

“All over the Republic, little children play on elephants just like ours.”

“Just like ours? That's impossible, Papa, we have the only one!”

“It's the only one in Berlin,” was his answer.

Always the same conversation, and Katrin had always been pleased to be playing on the only *Rüsselrutsche* in the capital.

It seemed so long ago now, yet those childhood memories were little more than a decade old.

“It's you, isn't it?” A young woman, a few years older than Katrin, was standing next to the little gate that led into the park. Katrin didn't recognise her.

Suspicion leached out of the knot in her stomach, clawing its way up to her throat.

“I'm Ute, Daniela's big sister, you know, from school?”

Katrin breathed out, allowing pent up air to escape. Daniela's sister. From school.

Back then Ute had seemed glamorous, grown up. She wore make-up and went dancing in clubs. Now the age difference was less pronounced and Ute didn't look much older than Katrin felt herself to be.

“How are you doing? Haven't seen you for years. Daniela's doing really well, she's starting the final year at the EOS, got her exams in spring, and then university ...” Ute blethered on, arching her back and holding both hands over a distended belly.

Pregnant, Katrin thought to herself, *a few years out of school and she's pregnant*. Like everyone else in this country, first child in her early twenties, best way to get a flat; get a marriage-loan from the state and pay it off with children.

Katrin wanted more for herself, she'd wanted to go to university, like Daniela. But unlike Daniela she hadn't been assigned a place at the EOS, the school where she would take the higher examinations that would allow her to study. She'd been shunted off into an apprenticeship *with the possibility of taking matriculation exams at a later stage*. But even that distant hope had been buried within weeks of starting her training as a precision engineer.

"Lacking in social and political maturity," the leader of the youth brigade had reported to the factory trade union functionary.

The trade unionist stroked his salt and pepper goatee while he mustered Katrin. He'd seen lots of young things like her: too much spark, too much independence. Not prepared to knuckle down, to follow orders and work for the good of the collective.

"Perhaps colleague Grobe would like to volunteer for solidarity work," suggested the representative of the social forces.

After that the policeman with responsibility for their *Kiez* had paid special attention to the tenement in which she and her father lived. He'd drop by regularly, checking the *Hausbuch* and having long chats with Herr Witte over coffee (*With a bit extra*, Herr Witte would wink as he unscrewed the bottle).

"It's really nice talking to you but could we sit down? Do you have time?" Ute's hand fluttered against Katrin's sleeve.

The two women headed towards the bench next to the kindergarten teachers, Ute talking the whole time, pausing only to breathe a heavy sigh as she settled onto the seat.

Of course it was her Papa's fault. If he wasn't such a trouble-maker then she'd have had a chance of going to the EOS. Two more years of school, then do her exams, get a place at university. She'd always done her duty, taken an active role in the FDJ youth group. She'd even been FDJ secretary in Year 9.

But her father was too restive, couldn't sit back and accept the petty injustices of everyday life in this country. He had to get involved. That's when he started meeting with other people, planning demonstrations, cycle rides, leaflets.

"You have impressive grades, Katrin," the school director had told her. "Yet we all know grades aren't enough." He was bald, his head pointing out of the fringe of hair that was left to him. Wire-framed glasses perched on the end of his nose, he would peer over the top of them when he wished to appear stern, or to be taken seriously (he was doing it now). "Those students who are selected to go on to the EOS, those who go on to do their higher exams and to study at university—they do so thanks to the generosity of the workers. It is the workers in our state who invest in education, they invest in our future, Katrin."

Katrin hadn't responded. This was merely the prologue, the political lecture that preceded the actual information, the real reason why she was here in the director's office. She sat with her back straight, knees together, hands on her lap, hoping without reason that the director would give her good news.

"Such an investment demands a sense of responsibility, Katrin. Not just to pay back, but to live up to the trust of our socialist society. Students and graduates are the models of the future, and they need to behave accordingly. Their actions need to accord with the Party-line, each and every student needs to show a strong class-standpoint."

That was the moment she knew she wouldn't be recommended for selection. She'd not listened to another word the director had said, she'd stared at him.

"But why?" she asked when the director paused for breath. "My grades are good."

He was taken aback by her response (perhaps he'd never been interrupted before). "Why yes, Katrin, it's true, your grades are very good. But as I have just told you ..." his words dissolved into more class-standpoints, enhanced roles in the socialist society, trust in the next generation, defence of the socialist achievements.

"Are you OK, Katrin?" Ute had taken hold of Katrin's arm.

"I'm fine, Ute, just a bit under the weather. That's why I'm not at work today. I should go, lovely to see you—greetings to Daniela." Katrin released herself from Ute's grip and left the park, heading towards Schönhauser Allee.

The day's newspapers and magazines were stacked on the counter of the kiosk, just at the bottom of the steps that led up to Dimitroffstrasse station. Ignoring Sibylle, Urania and the other magazines, Katrin focussed on the newspapers' headlines. *Junge Welt*, *Berliner Zeitung*, *Neues Deutschland* and *Der Morgen*. *Egon Krenz, the Party's crown-prince, leads a delegation to the People's Republic of China—congratulations are in order for forty years of the Chinese Socialist State*. His first official appearance: Tiananmen Square.

Turning away from the kiosk, covering the few steps to the traffic lights, Katrin waited for the brisk little *Ampelmann* to allow her to cross the road. Just a few weeks ago (it had only been a few weeks hadn't it?) Krenz had been the first to praise the Chinese Communists on their suppression of negative-subversive elements and for restoring order. And now he was over there, supping with the very people who had ordered tanks to crush dreams, hopes and people. It was some kind of signal, surely? Some

kind of message the GDR wanted to give its people? And, yes, here in Berlin people were whispering about the Chinese Solution. What were they waiting for? Guns, tanks, troops—they had all they needed, surely they'd drawn up their plans by now? Tension simmered in the capital.

The traffic lights changed and Katrin crossed the road. Only last week Martin had come home from a meeting, so agitated he couldn't sit down. He'd stalked around the kitchen, muttering about the arrogance of the Party—they'd not only rejected *Neues Forum's* application for official registration, they'd done it in the form of a press release. *An anti-state platform, aims incompatible with the constitution*, they'd said. Already over a thousand people had signed the new group's founding statement, openly announcing their support for change, for dialogue, for a fresh kind of politics in this stagnant land.

Last Monday thousands had marched in Leipzig, calling for the legalisation of *Neues Forum*, demanding free elections and singing the Internationale.

But many, many more were fleeing the country. The Iron Curtain had parted, a bolt-hole had opened up between Hungary and Austria. According to the West German news tens of thousands had already made their way to the West, and more than a thousand more were claiming asylum in the West German embassy in Prague.

It is time to decide, Katrin told herself. To stay and await the Chinese Solution, or to go and find themselves a new life in the West. But they'd made that decision already, why did she ask herself the same questions again and again? She would head West with him. A new life for both of them. For her: a place at university, maybe in Westberlin? He could get a decent job, something better than the factory they made him work at.

A tram clanked past, and the noise made Katrin start. She became aware of her surroundings, she was on Eberswalder Strasse, just near the bend where the tram turns on its looped track. She looked around, nobody was in sight, but there was no way to be sure. She hurried back the way she'd come, back towards the vitality of Schönhauser Allee. *Do nothing to attract attention to yourself. Don't go near the Wall, don't go near any prohibited areas. Keep your nose clean and don't attract attention.* What had she been thinking, going so close to the border, today of all days? Just a few more paces and she would have been able to see it. The Wall. Whitewashed cement slabs, and set before it the square flower pots made of reinforced concrete.

Just a minute or two and she was back in the heart of Prenzlauer Berg, surrounded by people. She hesitated, wondering which way to go. Turn right, go down Kastanienallee? But that was the way to the Zion Church and the Environment Library, the centre of gravity for oppositional activities. Her father was well known there, and it was likely that she would be recognised by whoever was watching the church buildings. With a firmness to her stride that didn't reflect her mood she headed down Schönhauser Allee, towards Alexanderplatz.

It would be a long journey this evening, down to Dresden, then to the border. *Most people are going to Bad Schandau, trying to cross the border there, but it's being closely watched, they're filtering out those who they suspect. So we'll go to the crossing point at Zinnwald—less traffic there, we can try to get into the ČSSR that way.*

As she went down the Allee the stem of the television tower rose before her. Beside her a train rattled down the ramp into a tunnel. She walked along, her feet providing a rhythm for her thoughts. How would it be, at the checkpoint in Zinnwald, answering the border guards' questions? They'd ask why they were travelling, where to, why now? *A long*

weekend, we'll tell them. Hiking in the Krušné Hory hills.

The old Jewish cemetery was on the left, and she crossed the road to look through the railings. The overgrown plots and the fallen headstones beckoned her in, a portion of calm among the haste of the city. Her pace eased as she wandered around the ivy-covered paths, bending now and again to decipher the names and words chiselled into the past. She found a bench and sat down, holding her cardigan close at the neck. Sitting there, listening to the busy sparrows, she was hardly aware of the tidal sweep of traffic beyond the cemetery walls.

Her mind slowed enough for her to pull at individual thoughts, to pick them up and examine them. She focussed on her dad. Martin had done the research, cautiously asking around, ferreting out information and working on the plan: how they could get over the border to Hungary. But she still wasn't sure that he'd go. She knew that his heart was here, that he wanted to stay, to see change happen. But she calculated that if she went then he would come too.

Her thoughts whirred on: *When we're close to Hungary we'll leave the car, try to cross the border on foot.* There was no point trying to take the car into Hungary, they didn't have the necessary visas. They'd be stopped on the border, they couldn't afford to be caught in the ČSSR—the Czechs would hand them over to the Stasi. But once they got to Hungary they would be safe. *They're not stamping passports any more. If they catch you they just send you back, no telexes to Berlin, no reports written, no stamps in passports.* Every day they'd listened to the rumours, greedy for information about the current situation. Every evening they'd watched the West German news—heard the statistics: numbers of refugees, numbers of registration centres opened, numbers of school gyms filled with beds to cope with the influx from the GDR.

If the rumours were correct, if the *Tagesschau* were broadcasting the truth, then it was now easier to get from Hungary to Austria—from East to West—than it was to get from Berlin to Czechoslovakia.

When she arrived home there was a note written on the pad that hung from the door.

Hi Katrin, last swim of the year! The gang are going to some lake near KW—join us! Meet Sat. 9.30 at Ostkreuz. Bring bike.

It was Malte's handwriting. Malte and she had been all the way through school together. They'd kissed once, in Year 6, but that was ancient history. Whenever she'd scraped her knee or her heart Malte had been there, ready to pick up the broken pieces, put her back together again.

She tore the page out of the notepad and took it inside, sitting at the kitchen table to read it again. Saturday. She'd be long gone by Saturday.

Why hadn't she told Malte? She'd wanted to tell all her friends that she was planning to leave, that she wouldn't be coming back. She'd nearly told Malte, she'd wanted to. When they met up last Saturday night they'd gone for a walk through the dark and empty streets, Katrin had battled with the caution she'd inherited from her father, needing to tell her oldest friend that she would never see him again. He would understand.

But she hadn't been able to do it. She couldn't say goodbye.

She went into the living room, opened up the coal stove, screwed up a piece of newspaper and put it on the grate, then placed Malte's note on top. Lighting the paper, standing back to watch the brief flare of ignition.

She mashed the ashes with the poker.

She was cooking the evening meal when he came home. He came into the kitchen, giving her a wave before taking off his hat and jacket.

“How was your day?” She shook the pan.

They couldn’t talk, not really. There was no way of knowing whether the comrades from *Look & Listen* were paying attention. (It was possible that they hadn’t bothered to bug the flat, but who could tell? If you asked Katrin for her opinion on whether or not they had an infestation, her answer would depend more on her mood that moment than on any actual evidence.)

Martin came back into the kitchen and touched Katrin’s shoulder in greeting.

“What’s for dinner?”

“I’m just frying up some potatoes. Thought we could have *Bratkartoffeln* with sausage and bread. There’s red cabbage and apple salad in the pantry—we need to use it up.”

Martin took plates out of the cupboard and cut several slices from a grey loaf, then fetched sausage and margarine from the fridge. He laid the table and sat down, watching his daughter sprinkle paprika and salt over the potatoes. As the spice warmed, it scented the kitchen, making Martin think of brown coal, of all the cold winters they’d survived together in the flat.

“There’s tea in the pot,” she told him.

He left the pot where it stood, preferring to watch his daughter. She brought the pan over to the table, and slid the contents onto two plates.

They ate in silence.

Katrin stabbed her potatoes with a vicious practicality, chewing each mouthful carefully and without pleasure. Martin shuffled his food around his plate, a forkful ventured towards his mouth every minute or so.

“Are you still going out tonight?” He shovelled another piece of fried potato onto his fork.

Katrin crushed a piece of the bread in her fist, watching as the crumbs trickled onto the wax tablecloth. “What about you? Any plans?”

They were speaking in code, so simple it hardly deserved the name. But they spoke past the real meanings, interpreting each other’s words according to their arrangement.

“You know, just the usual.”

Their eyes met for a long moment over the table. Sadness, betrayal, resignation—how to describe the shadows that lay between them and the state they lived in?

The silent conversation was interrupted by a knock at the door. A normal person’s knock, not the pounding of state officials.

Katrin left the kitchen and opened the front door. Coming back down the hall she stood in the doorway, facing Martin. A boy slipped past her, gangly, the young body not yet filling his green parka. He went straight to Katrin’s bedroom, picking up the rucksack and guitar that were leaning against the cupboard. Returning to the hall he stood behind Katrin, a hand on her shoulder.

Nobody said a word.

Katrin stepped forward, shrugging off the boy’s hand. Her father stood up. They embraced. A tight hug, neither of them wanting to be the first to let go.

Martin looked over his daughter’s shoulder at the young man.

“You two have a good time tonight,” he said. “Keep her safe.”

The hug dissolved and in the next moment the front door clicked shut, leaving Martin alone in his country.