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Jantzen's "The Wrong Side of the Wall: An American in East Berlin During the Peaceful Revolution" - Book Review

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In this book, Mark Jantzen describes his three years in the German Democratic Republic, from October 1988 to September 1991, under the aegis of the Mennonite Central Committee. While studying theology at the Humboldt University, the state university in East Berlin, Jantzen directly experienced and lived through the dramatic events surrounding the fall of the Wall, and German reunification.

Jantzen sees his book as "a modest attempt to explain what life in East Germany was like, how the peaceful revolution came to pass, and what some of the ordinary people of that country thought before, during and after the momentous events that ended the division of Germany" (vii). While chronicling these events, Jantzen attempts to convey the mood of life, especially as he found it among theological students at the university.

This task is not simple. On the one hand, as Jantzen concedes at the beginning of the book, an East German might well find his account too general. On the other, as he suggests by the end of the book, Americans may well have difficulty in bridging the gap between the two worlds.

Jantzen is both a good reporter and a good storyteller. His writing is clear, and his facts are accurate. He has a good eye for symbols and gestures that capture the significance of the moment, as when he describes the colorful trash that appeared in GDR dumpsters the weekend after the opening of the Wall: Coca-Cola cans and candy bar wrappers had changed the GDR forever.

Jantzen is also good at describing his own feelings. One admires his persistent efforts to make the GDR his home, and to understand its people. After several months in theological studies, he realized that he had no contact with Marxists, so he arranged to join his fellow theological students in their mandatory classes in Marxist-Leninist ideology, taught by professors who were party members.

Jantzen is at his best as he describes events in early October 1989. The situation was becoming explosive. Thousands of East Germans had left their country, first by way of Hungary, then through Czechoslovakia. In response, those seeking political change at home began to go public. Not only did these two groups disagree between themselves, but over against both stood the state, with its extensive state security forces. Prayer services in the
churches became the flash point where all three rubbed up against each other. Jantzen describes the situation at the Gethsemane Church in East Berlin: the peaceful, but surging crowds, frightened police, confusion, the general fear of a Tianamen Square solution, and, finally, the night that the authorities "blinked," abandoning their tactics of intimidation and confrontation.

Equally powerful is Jantzen's account of the night that the Wall fell. Racing back and forth between the border crossing and the state travel agency, where he and hundreds of others had lined up in the dark, hoping to get an official visa, he and his friends finally just followed impatient crowds through the Wall and its "air locks." He describes the incredible elation of that night: crowded subway trains, West Germans applauding the arriving East Germans, free taxi rides, his awakening and surprising West German friends who had not yet heard the news.

Sometimes with a wry sense of humor, always with deep sensitivity, Jantzen captures the human element in the midst of political drama, as when panic-stricken he slips around police lines at the Gethsemane Church, only to discover that a friend has to go to the bathroom. A few days later, Jantzen listened quietly to his Russian teacher lament the fact that a "few rowdies" were keeping her policeman husband working overtime, as though she scarcely realized that her whole world was about to crumble. Similarly, Jantzen is able to recognize the human dimension to the feared Stasi. In January 1990, he joined in the storming of the Stasi headquarters in East Berlin, entered the Stasi library, and--to his complete surprise--found children's books. It suddenly dawned on him that members of the Stasi were also mothers and fathers.

Written soon after his return to the U.S., Jantzen's book is good at capturing the immediacy and drama of the events but lays no claim to contributing to scholarly knowledge or analysis of them. A great deal of his chronicle depends on published sources, and his interpretations break no new ground.

Even his personal illustrations reflect the limits of his account. While Jantzen had his finger on the pulse of the emotions that generally characterized those days, his experience was largely confined to theological students at the university and to the small Mennonite community in East Germany. We do not find him sitting in on meetings of the church-related opposition groups. He appears to have had no direct contact with the persons who were actually organizing and leading the peaceful revolution, even though many of them were pastors. The people who could have helped him interpret these events in greater depth are almost completely missing.

While the basic chronology is essential to a popular American audience, Jantzen does not include many of the mundane yet essential details of everyday life. What did he eat?
How did he wash his clothes? Did he ever go to a doctor or dentist? What did Christmas 1989 feel like? What was it like going into the police station to apply for a visa?

Similarly, one wishes for more detail and variety in his sketches of the people whom he came to know and love. What made these people tick? What were the different ways in which they reacted to events? Whom did he most respect for their judgment and insight, and why?

A concluding section of the book is a "scrapbook" of materials that Jantzen has translated, such as a school textbook explanation of the rise of Christianity, eye witness reports to the clashes between police and demonstrators in October 1989, and prayers and sermons from the services at which people gathered before demonstrating in the streets.

The one theme that helps tie the book together is non-violence. As a member of a peace church, Jantzen wrestles with the viability of a peace witness. He concedes that the military might of the United States was partly responsible for the attention that his passport won him. He speaks of his contacts with U.S. military personnel in West Berlin and of their conviction that they too were working to keep the peace. While admiring of the East German church's role in shaping events into a peaceful revolution, he also acknowledges the ambiguity of the matter: without access to arms, the opposition had no choice.

Jantzen does not make an ideological case for peace, as if he somehow needed to counter Marxist-Leninist ideology, its glorification of the military, and its call to fight the imperialist enemy. His plea for peace is all the more powerful for being personal. It was person to person contact and the process of mutual understanding that helped him and his new friends overcome their stereotypes of each other as the enemy. Jantzen's commitment to this strategy appears not only in his relations with students but also in his commitment to getting to know his Marxist teachers as people and in his commitment to arranging meetings between American G.I.'s and his East German friends. Jantzen lived out a daily witness of peace. From the beginning, he believed that it was worth devoting his life to reaching over cultural and political walls.

Understanding life in a system as different as the GDR requires much time and many encounters. Jantzen took the time, but now there is no longer a GDR that Americans can get to know. As inspiring as his account is, questions remain. One wonders, for example, why the biblical witness that was so important to the shaping of the peaceful revolution proved so impotent in the attempt to articulate a "third way" after the revolution.

Moreover, one questions whether person-to-person contact is a sufficient strategy for peace making between nations. That visits like Jantzen's were even possible was a consequence of institutional policies and structures of negotiation between church and state. Similarly, the problem of coming to terms with the past involves more than getting former victims and victimizers back together to practice confession and forgiveness, no simple matter
in itself. A whole complex of issues is at stake: how a society builds genuinely democratic institutions, how it decides whether to grant amnesties or to prosecute members of the old regime, and how it reconstructs and assesses the past through historical commissions, museums, and scholarly research. As a basic, introductory understanding of life in the GDR, Jantzen's book nonetheless makes a valuable contribution, especially because few East German accounts of these events are available in translation.

Jantzen published the book independently. A minor complaint is a number of typographical and spelling errors.

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