

Berlin Seeks to Preserve Wall Remains

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BERLIN -- Wolfgang Mueller remembers exactly where the Berlin Wall snaked through what is now the massive mall at Potsdamer Platz. He remembers standing near Checkpoint Charlie as a 15-year-old, at a special spot where he could peer through into a cafe in the West.

The 61-year-old auto mechanic remembers the day East German officials began building the Berlin Wall on Aug. 13, 1961 _ 45 years ago Sunday _ and the day it came down, on Nov. 9, 1989.

He is among those who lament that city officials and developers have erased most traces of the barrier in the reunified German capital.

Almost 17 years after its demise, Berlin officials have realized the importance of preserving the most tangible symbol of its Cold War history, making a \$51 million proposal to protect the remaining parts of the wall.

"The people that tore down the wall in the center of Berlin are criminals," Mueller said, wandering through a memorial photo exhibit at the former Checkpoint Charlie crossing point in the city's central Mitte district.

"So much of this monument has been destroyed. Tourists should be able see the wall here in Mitte, they should remember," Mueller said.

In the euphoria that accompanied the wall's fall in 1989, few bothered to think about it as a monument to history _ or a tourist attraction.

"Many of the people who had lived with it for decades wanted to get rid of it as soon as possible," said Christina Lauer, a spokeswoman for the team of experts at the Berlin Wall Association, which oversees the Berlin Wall Documentation Center.

Between city workers and developers who tore down and built over stretches of the 12-foot high concrete barriers, and tourists eager to chip away their own piece of the wall, only a few strips remain scattered around the city.

The new project will include money for better preserving those stretches and building an information booth at the new Brandenburg Gate subway station. A clearly marked path will trace the former West Berlin's 96-mile perimeter. Approved by the Berlin city government in June, the project is scheduled for completion by the 50th anniversary of the wall's building in 2011.

Tourists are often fascinated with the city's past as the point where the Cold War superpowers stood nose-to-nose for four decades. In October 1961, U.S. and Soviet tanks faced off at Checkpoint Charlie _ a crossing between East and West Berlin for foreign tourists, diplomats and military personnel established by the U.S. Army that year.

President Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev resolved the dispute, caused by an American diplomat's being stopped at the crossing.

"For me, the wall is a symbol for the second part of Germany's 20th century history," said 27-year-old Matthias Awad of Chile. "Only seeing it you can imagine what the whole thing was like."

From chunks smeared with graffiti amid the bustle of the new Potsdamer Platz, to stretches that run along subway tracks in the former eastern neighborhood of Friedrichshain, 25 of 34 remaining strips of the original barrier are now under preservation as national historical monuments.

At the Berlin Wall Documentation Center in Bernauer Strasse, visitor numbers have doubled since 2003. Roughly half of them are foreign tourists.

At the East Side Gallery, Aviv Netter, an Israeli who lives in Berlin, showed a friend a nearly mile-long stretch of the wall that international artists commissioned after its fall covered with graffiti.

For him, the Berlin Wall recalls Israel's controversial separation barrier in the West Bank, which the Israeli government says is intended to keep out suicide bombers, but which Palestinians criticize as a land grab.

"As a guy from Israel, where they have a wall as well, I find it important to see this and remember what happened in the past," he said. "Only then can we learn from our mistakes."

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