1 THE TROUBLED EMERGENCE OF AN IDEA

in: Dirk Philipsen, We Were the People: Voices from East Germany (Duke, 1993), 35-55

■ FRANK EIGENFELD, biologist and founding member of New Forum, and HARALD WAGNER, mathematician, pastor, and founding member of Democratic Awakening. ▮ *"I had felt imprisoned ever since 1961."—Eigenfeld* ▮ *"I learned from my sports experiences that there is nothing I cannot do just because someone tells me that I can't."—Wagner*

About two months into my research on the East German revolution, in July of 1990, I was invited to an oppositional Summer Academy in Erfurt, created two years earlier as an informal annual gathering ground for oppositionists from all parts of the GDR. This event had initially been set up by members of a dissident circle within the church, called the "Solidaristic Church." The overriding purpose behind the Summer Academy was to provide a relatively secure space for communication among disparate sectors of the East German opposition under the aegis of the Protestant church. As some of the founders told me, the strong but distant hope was that something collective, something "bigger," might come out of such a meeting. This hope was not entirely misplaced, as later events proved. In fact, the list of participants in the meetings during the previous summer of 1989 reads like a "Who's Who" of the East German opposition leadership. At the time of my 1990 visit, most of these people held some kind of elected position, in stark contrast to the year before.

The Summer Academy took place in the rooms of the Protestant church in Erfurt, a city of medieval origin and great beauty, despite the fact that large portions of its centuries-old architecture have been badly neglected over the last 40 years. The historic center of Erfurt is surrounded by the kind of shoddy, pragmatic, and cold architecture one can

find in most "socialist" cities: six- to eight-story concrete blocks, as cheaply built as they appear overwhelmingly inhumane. Erfurt was a city of tensions and contradictions, a city in which Luther spent five years studying theology (1501–5), and where, a little less than 400 years later, in 1891, the German Social Democrats voted to adopt a "Marxist" program which they hoped would help lead Germany to a free and egalitarian future. Narrow cobblestone roads, little marketplaces, solid stone houses, some built as far back as the sixteenth century, and more than 60 churches and cathedrals exude an atmosphere of "lived history" like few other places in Europe.

Oppositionists from every Eastern European country, including the Baltic republics and the Soviet Union, participated in the 1990 Summer Academy. For seven intense days, 46 people from 11 countries (I was the only "Westerner") talked, debated, ate, drank, laughed, sang, and argued with each other. We read prepared papers to each other and had discussions about the past, present, and possible future of each and every East-Central European nation; it was an experience, in short, that was as unusual as it was exhausting, energizing, and enhancing.

On the very first day of the conference, I had a long conversation with two East German oppositionists, Frank Eigenfeld from Halle and Harald Wagner from a small town near Leipzig. Neither of these men had been mere spare-time oppositionists; they had quite literally lived for "a free and democratic but also egalitarian" East Germany all their adult lives. Both turned out to be invaluable sources on the internal dynamics of the growing civic opposition movement during the 1980s. But above all, they in many ways represented—as close as one can get to "typical" examples—the organized East German opposition at large. Not nationally known, yet widely respected in their communities, not fighting for personal fame but rather for a better society to live in, articulate but not condescending, they had consistently pursued their objectives despite great personal hardships and many severe setbacks. Both were quite unpretentious, which I initially misread as a possible sign of insecurity, or even weakness. At first, I thus viewed them as people who could not really be "serious candidates" according to my notion of "genuine and dedicated oppositionists in a police state." The quiet but very determined way in which they explained the intricacies of political dissent in the GDR quickly revealed that this impression was quite wrong. Much of the Western cultural baggage I had brought with me concerning how people think, or how they "usually" interact with each other, it turned out, simply did not apply in the opposition milieu of the GDR.

In the following section, Frank Eigenfeld and Harald Wagner incisively address some of the problems and presumptions shaping democratic political organizing. For instance, one of the most basic issues of political activism—in East Germany as in any other modern society—revolves around the question of what to do in order to translate a "good idea" into a "tangible result"—a frustrating problem routinely simplified into the elementary decision of whether to work "within the system" or "outside of it." As the following interview makes clear, the real political issues were, and are, much more complex. In many cases the very distinction between "inside" and "outside" seemed impossible to make. In the movement's initial stages—and this interview focuses on these early stages—the tasks of simple survival far outweighed such lofty strategic questions. Eigenfeld and Wagner here illuminate the many arduous steps that needed to be taken in order to get from articulating political grievances to organizing local grass-roots groups and, ultimately, to some kind of larger network of oppositional groups nationwide.

The two activists agreed to participate in a joint interview late one evening, after a full day of discussions and events. As the three of us sat around a small table, Eigenfeld unpacked a bag full of home-grown fresh vegetables and some Czechoslovak beer ("you never know whether you can find good stuff when you go on a trip in the GDR, so I always take along as much as I can") and began to tell me about his childhood and youth, his experiences with the East German state, and about the twists and turns of how his initial grudging acquiescence to communist party control developed over the years from private dissent to increasingly outspoken resistance. He was born in 1943.

■ *Frank Eigenfeld:* I had realized very early, even before the Wall was built, what it meant to live in the "East" as opposed to the "West." The exchange rate, for example, was 1 Mark West for 5 Mark East at the time, and in addition our wages were much lower than in the West. So even though there were plenty of things in the stores in West Berlin, there was very little I could buy with my money. . . .

The Wall was erected one week before my eighteenth birthday. This was the first genuine shock in my life. All of a sudden it became strikingly clear to me that there are certain people out there who have the power fundamentally to curtail your wishes and your plans. This was something I wasn't used to from home, and something I was never able to accept. To this very day I am deeply moved by resentment when I am in Berlin and I see the Wall.

Back in 1961, just like today, I simply perceived such constraints, whether on a political level or on a personal level, as very unjust. Wherever I can, I try to defend myself against it. I don't think the implementation of such restrictions can ever be justified, whatever the cause may be. A political structure like that simply has no right to exist. . . . But still I, as most everyone else, did not know how to respond to all this. I felt unable to respond; I felt completely powerless. . . .

Of course, these things were part of our discussions at home or at work, but there was nothing we could do. We all felt a sort of helpless rage. We talked about it, we felt angry and shocked, but we never did much about it.

Political discussions picked up in earnest during the Prague Spring of 1968. I can remember—we listened a lot to Radio Prague—that we invested a lot of hope in a possible new development. Most of all we hoped that this new development would also begin to take place in the GDR. . . .

So you can imagine the horror we felt when Czechoslovakia was occupied in '68. During that period we spent most of our days listening to the radio, hearing the calls for help from Prague. Again we experienced this feeling of powerlessness, the feeling that there was nothing we could possibly do. . . .

There were very few signs of solidarity in East Germany. A small number of people wrote slogans on streets or on walls, but we could not find anything meaningful to do in terms of putting up some resistance [to the violent crackdown of the Prague Spring].

So this was my second experience with a system that cold-bloodedly killed certain important developments, a system that I thus came to perceive as simply inhumane. . . .

During the seventies, hope blossomed again because of the Warsaw Pact treaties with the Federal Republic, and when those did not end up changing much, we began to hope again during the so-called Helsinki process. . . .

In 1977–78, the debates surrounding the arms buildup began. Again, it became very clear to me that a danger was developing here that could be potentially disastrous. The saying at the time was that "the Germans can see each other from now on only through a fence of missiles." . . .

In light of all these developments, it increasingly dawned on me that one cannot always continue to sit still as a victim and say "it's terrible what's happening around us, but basically we are helpless."

Once I had fully realized that, I consciously moved away from this position of powerlessness and began to think about what one can do, at least as an individual. You see, this was, for me, very similar to the

dynamics of the Third Reich. We had asked our parents about their position during that time, knowing, or at least being able to know, what had happened around them. But what had their role been? To what extent had they been responsible? In short, there was a growing desire in me to become active in order not to have to accuse myself of not having "done anything."

My wife and I thus joined a so-called "open group" [in 1978] that had been founded by a open-minded pastor in Halle. We quickly developed good contacts with the members of this group since they pretty much shared our objectives. Soon thereafter we began to organize a number of initiatives. . . .[11]

There were only a few older people like us. Most of them were young activists. . . . The group called itself "Open Work." We dealt with a variety of problems, concerning the school, the workplace, or the parents of some members. We were open toward all these problems and tried to deal with them in any way possible, always trying to point out the larger political relevance. . . .

In addition, we began to develop ideas as to how we could try to get involved with the whole debate surrounding the arms race. For example, we began to stage small demonstrations. To our utter surprise, we actually managed to conduct these demonstrations in the beginning. Obviously, nobody within the state apparatus had expected any such activities. I can remember when we organized the first one in Halle, on the occasion of a so-called official "peace meeting"—it must have been around '81—all the "blueshirts" [members of the party-controlled Free German Youth, an organization not dissimilar to the Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts in the United States, except that it had a more blatantly ideological, party-oriented emphasis] were ordered to go there, and we, a colorful and mixed bunch as we were, started off in order to participate as well. The official slogan back then was "Make Peace Against NATO Weapons" [Frieden Schaffen und gegen NATO-Waffen]. Sure, we were opposed to NATO missiles as well, but we were also against the Soviet missiles that were supposed to be deployed throughout the country.

In any case, we successfully "participated" and got all the way to the grandstand where all the district party bosses were standing. At first, they simply did not seem able to grasp at all what was happening down there.

11. Frank Eigenfeld is here describing the genesis of the grass-roots groups in Halle, which, as reproduced in other East German cities, became the energizing fulcrum of the opposition movement.

But immediately after they had realized what we were doing, they attempted to cover us up by surrounding us with blueshirts who carried flags, banners, and so on.

Those blueshirts, of course, also did not understand what was happening at all. When we began singing a few harmless songs (we numbered about 80) they began to yell "long live the party." Nobody else was yelling that, so everyone else began to look at what was going on, and we suddenly got a lot of attention. Anyway, we caused a great stir, and they could not prevent it anymore. But this was the only time we were that successful and did not have to deal with any forms of repression, summonses, and such. . . . They only took pictures of us that time. . . .

Since you were talking about these stages between resignation and hope, how would you characterize your relationship toward the existing state in East Germany, to socialism—however one may interpret that word—and what specifically did you mean when you said that you had hope that something might open up or change? Was it hope for . . .

Eigenfeld: . . . Well, hope for liberalization, for more freedom. Something free and democratic, but still egalitarian.

I had felt imprisoned ever since 1961. I never got rid of this feeling. For me, the people who were responsible for that fact were the state's leaders; it was the party, it was the society in which I lived. Therefore, I also always argued against the excuse invoked by many of being merely "normal fellow travelers," because we all had to realize what the actual situation in our country was like, and that most of us were not doing anything about it. I simply could not fathom that, particularly in light of what had happened in the Third Reich. I thus never, in any way, identified with this state, or with what it represented.

My only hope was to get out of this prison, to get out legally, through normal channels, as a result of a normal development, without having to leave it. My hope was that this could be achieved through the so-called "East Treaties" and with the Helsinki process.

And beyond this opening, did you have any ideas as to what should become of the GDR?

Eigenfeld: I cannot remember that I had any concrete ideas about that. My hopes did not encompass the idea that the existing state had to be toppled, if that's what you mean. . . . I would always have accepted the existing state if it had only lived up to its promise of granting basic human rights.

In fact, I believe to this very day that citizens all over the world care very little about who exercises political power, that is, as long as it is exercised

in such a manner that everybody can move around freely. Whether it is a monarchy, Mr. Kohl, Mr. Ulbricht, or the New Forum, that, to me, is not significant. And I don't believe it is significant to most other people either.

Well, that is in fact a fascinating question which we should come back to when we talk about New Forum and what it did and could have done during the Fall of 1989. But let's first turn to you, Harald. Could you also provide us with some relevant biographical information?

Harald Wagner: Perhaps in contrast to Frank, I am a person with close ties to home. I was born in 1950 and grew up in a tiny village with a population of 70. I am still living there. I was raised with a deep appreciation for the environment and for some sort of inner freedom. My parents were completely apolitical. With the exception of one person, there was no one in my environment who could have been considered "political." Yet when it was time to go through Jugendweihe [the party substitute for church confirmation], I simply refused to go along. If someone asks you to do something you don't want to . . . well, from very early on I valued my right of self-determination, even against my parents' will . . .

. . . *It sounds as if you were not socialized "properly." Were you some sort of genetic rebel?*

Wagner: [laughing] . . . Well, maybe. Since I really wanted to finish school and get my Abitur [highest German school diploma, required for university entrance], I probably should have . . . well, but I didn't.

In the fifth grade I got to know someone who would turn out to be a very important person not only for me, but in fact for this country, a man who later became state representative of the Saxon state church for environmental questions. He was the son of my parish's pastor. He became a very significant person in my life.

In a small circle which he organized, we began to read things like the first report of the Club of Rome as early as 1970–71, and subsequently wrote a petition to the Council of Ministers. One could say that I was thus politicized early on concerning environmental questions.

The other experience that was very important to me was that I did a lot of sports—decathlon, to be specific. I continuously moved up, first participating in competitions in the biggest district town, then in the state's capital, and then on the national level, and I realized that I was just as good as all the others. That experience would later turn out to be extremely important in political terms as well. . . .

I learned from my sports experiences that there is nothing I *cannot* do just because someone tells me I can't. . . . I think the barrier which one has to overcome in order to realize something like that, however, is very high.

There are too many pseudo-needs. In any case, in 1970 I began to study math in Leipzig, and ever since that time we tried to do environmental information work within the church. . . . The church was the only place that was relatively safe from the encroachments of the security police.

Anyway, early on in our church group in Leipzig, we began to learn about Marxism because we thought that the party did not at all live up to its own ideology. We also thought that a critique that stayed within the dominant field of thought would be the most promising. Around 1975–76, we began to read Rosa Luxemburg, for example. . . . We read texts, debated them, and tried to figure out what our relationship was to all of this. We also tried to connect with other groups and tried to work together with them—in activities such as putting provocative graffiti on walls, or writing and distributing pamphlets. Even such minor activities were extremely dangerous at the time.

One interesting thing we did was to write up lists of all the books that were in our possession, and to exchange these lists among ourselves. This turned out to have disastrous consequences for me. I had given my list to one of my friends, a politically very active person who was specifically working on trying to establish contacts to people who would later form Solidarność in Poland. Shortly thereafter, they arrested him. . . .

Of course, they found my list of books when they searched his apartment. Ever since that day I was arrested on numerous occasions, questioned by the Stasi [the East German secret police], and constantly followed and observed by them. At one point, I drove to Berlin and I was followed by three Stasi cars. . . .

First they tried to catch me by surprise, searching my apartment, but they discovered that the books on the list were not even in my possession at the time. Of course, I did not tell them why I did not have them or where they could find them. Instead, I told them that I had merely compiled a list of books I might be interested in taking a look at when the International Book Fair came to Leipzig. Probably they did not believe a word, but they could not prove the opposite either.

The next thing that happened had to do with my job as a teacher at the Karl Marx University. They told me "we can see that you are very engaged and extremely talented, and it would be nice if you could advance in terms of your career, perhaps you want to become a professor," and so on. In short, they tried to buy me through possible job-advancement offers and such. I brusquely turned them down, however.

After that we continued our work, smuggling hundreds of copies of Rudolf Bahro's book [*The Alternative: A Critique of Real Existing Socialism*]

into the GDR, copying his articles and putting them into people's mailboxes. The friends of mine who had organized these particular actions were later indicted and given jail sentences of between five and seven years. . . .

Since they did not seem to have enough on me, they just constantly summoned me. It was stunning to discover later on, after they arrested me, that they had detailed day-to-day knowledge of what I had done over the previous years. For example, they would ask me questions such as "what were you doing on 15 August 1977 in the early afternoon"? Since I did not know, of course, they would then proceed to tell me.

Incredible. What was the specific reason why they arrested you in 1980?

Wagner: Obviously they successfully tricked one of those imprisoned into some kind of statement implicating me with the possession of some of this literature. They worked with vicious tricks. . . .

They subsequently arrested me, and I spent seven months in jail just awaiting trial, and 11 months later I was sentenced for "collaboration in derogating the state" by possessing and disseminating subversive literature. Wolfgang Schnur was my lawyer. [Ed. note: Schnur defended most political dissidents during the eighties. Later, he was active in the opposition movement himself and became the first chairman of Democratic Awakening in October of 1989. In the spring of 1990, however, it was revealed that he had been a secret police informant whose task it had been to infiltrate the opposition.]

A question I would like to ask both of you. Did you know about comparable activities by other people, and if so, did you try to establish contacts with them?

Eigenfeld: Not in the beginning. At first, our activities completely centered on our own group. The first contact we had with the outside was to [the Protestant pastor] Rainer Eppelmann [see pp. 55–67]. In 1980, we went to see him in Berlin simply in order to find out what was happening there and to establish first contacts.

Why Eppelmann and not someone else?

Eigenfeld: Even then, Eppelmann was already a kind of leading figure for us. He was generally well known. We knew about his contacts with Robert Havemann [a former cellmate of later General Secretary Erich Honecker in a Nazi prison camp, who became a leading communist dissident after the 1960s], for example. . . .

But we did not know anything about other, similar groups. Perhaps this was partly due to our initial assumption that we might, in fact, be the only ones engaging in oppositional activities. We simply did not know that other groups existed as well. That did not change, in fact, until we established

contact with Eppelmann in 1982. Even afterward, a long period of time ensued in which nothing happened. . . .

Wagner: I always had good contacts with other groups—artists, human rights activists, and so on—and that turned out to be, I think, very important later on. We even worked together with Marxist groups. . . . We had a lot of conspiratorial meetings with scholars from the university, debating Marxist theories of revolution, or the works of Rudi Dutschke [spokesperson of the late '60s student movement in West Germany, author of the widely read tract, "The Attempt to Turn Lenin Upside Down"], or of Rudolf Bahro [former party member until deported for publishing his book *The Alternative*].

In other words, you also had good contacts with party people, like those in the university?

Wagner: Oh, yes. If I may jump ahead a little, just to give you an example. Of the seven people who wrote the new party program for the PDS [Party for Democratic Socialism, the successor party of the Socialist Unity Party, the East German communist party] in November of 1989, I know four people personally, and one is a close personal friend. It all goes back to the early eighties, when they all began to talk to one another more or less clandestinely . . .

. . . *So you also trusted people in the party?*

Wagner: . . . Sure, I trusted these people; in fact, I still do. . . . You see, on the one hand, I would be in favor of the total disintegration of the party. On the other hand, I also believe that people who want to do that kind of politics should be able to do it; after all, it's completely legitimate. . . . There are some good people among them, I have really no doubt about that.

Of course, out of the seven I know, four have subsequently left the party for Democratic Socialism, because they also came to realize that it doesn't work, that the party *is,* in fact, the corruption. My close friend ended up with Democracy Now in Leipzig. . . .

But, politically speaking, you had no problems with people who remained in the party, or had most of them left at some point?

Wagner: Either they left, or they were people like Michael Brie [brother of André Brie, see pp. 171–81], people for whom I had great respect because they tried to do everything that was possible within the limits imposed by the party. They spoke up to the extent they could. They had problems with the secret police themselves. Therefore, they also represented the people with whom we started the local round tables, such as in Leipzig.

The people around the brothers Brie also played a key role in convincing the local party leadership in Leipzig to rescind their order to suppress the demonstrations on 9 October "with all means necessary." They were the ones who wrote a petition to the Politburo on 6 October that tried to explain the situation in the country, and they did so after they had first consulted us.

To what extent is what Harald described different from your situation, Frank?

Eigenfeld: I have to say that *our* goal was not primarily to engage the system in a theoretical debate, but rather to confront it with realities.

Our early experiences had been that the party pretty much determined people's lives, that nobody had the opportunity to participate freely in this society, that "they" always decided everything. Above all else, we wanted to defend ourselves against such repressive domination.

The theoretical debate as to why conditions were the way they were picked up much later. In fact, it always happened after we had tried something practical and failed, after we had realized that we had little or no chance of achieving much with what we were doing, after we had realized that we were dealing with a structural problem within the system, and not just a few flaws here or there. . .

Wagner: . . . Your goals were probably very similar [to ours], we just approached the problems from two different directions. But we *also* massively fought against the system, against what was being done in this country. . . .

Eigenfeld: Later on, we organized various demonstrations that, each and every time, resulted in our short-term arrest, such as an environmental demonstration in which we wanted to bike to Buna [an extremely polluted industrial center near Halle], with banners, signs, petitions, and so on.

At about the same time, four of us had also founded a little group that wanted to draft a particular petition about the current situation in the GDR. This was, by the way, the first time that we tried to approach the problems in theoretical terms, even though it was still very much based on our own specific experiences. The attempt failed, however, because we got arrested. Two of the group were subsequently indicted. . . . Another guy and I were detained only temporarily, and no legal proceedings were initiated against us.

How did they know about your group and your plans?

Eigenfeld: Apparently all of our meetings had been bugged. They had very detailed knowledge about our plans, details that only the four of us could have possibly known about. And I am certain that none of the four of us were informants. . . . [The group was defended by Schnur, who was an informant.]

The next big event was the arrest of my wife on 31 August 1983. We had planned a peace demonstration for the "peace day" on September 1st. We wanted to march from one church across the city to another church. Again, because many activists were arrested, the event never took place. They wanted to send a message to all circles of opposition activists that they could stop us anytime they wanted to by simply arresting the initiators of such demonstrations.

To some extent, of course, they were successful in these attempts. Again Schnur came, and his main line of argument was "no publicity." He said he could only do something for us without any publicity. Publicity would only hurt us.

Fourteen days later Sebastian Pflugbeil [grass-roots activists from Berlin, see p. 160] was arrested on the street in Berlin. Richard von Weizsäcker was mayor of West Berlin at the time [later elected president of West Germany and, since October of 1990, president of the new united Germany]. He had a meeting with Honecker and asked for Pflugbeil's release, which in turn was immediately granted.

What was important about this event was that it became clear to us that the strategy of quietly waiting in the dark and letting other people handle the affair was wrong. What we needed was publicity.

How did you hear about this whole affair?

Eigenfeld: Well, that's precisely the point. We heard through the Western media. So then I drove to Berlin and told people our entire story, about my wife's arrest, and so on. Very few people had heard anything about that. . . . Our group knew about the women involved in the Berliner group "Women for Peace" [Bärbel Bohley, Ulrike Poppe, et al., see pp. 131–39 and 292–303], and I knew their addresses. In Halle we also had a group, Women for Peace, which my wife had helped to organize. Yet we had no previous contact with the Berliners. You see, everyone had vague notions about other groups, but until then we had not attempted to establish any contacts.

So in this emergency situation, after we had realized that only publicity could help, I drove to Berlin and asked for help . . .

If I understand you correctly, Harald, you had a slightly different relationship to the state, the party, and to the question of what could be done. You said you had good contacts with "reasonable" people within the party. Did that mean that you also had hopes that something could be done through the party as well?

Wagner: This very question was always an issue of dispute in our groups. Personally, I never thought anything positive could be achieved through the party. But those who were members of the party carried around this idea about "the march through the institutions," an idea that had been developed by West German left-wing intellectuals during the late sixties and early seventies.

Our friends in the party had taken Bahro's idea seriously that the party could, in fact, be reformed. Their argument against our strategy was "you will not achieve anything anyway, you are too much on the margins, you are too far below, things will only change through the Politburo. If, one day, we manage to gain access to the Politburo, then fundamental change can finally take place." Our reply usually was to point out that this was exactly the path that would not work, that would not result in anything.

In short, we worked together with them because we shared many of the same ideas, but we did not agree with their strategic vision as to how to achieve anything. . . .

Let me ask you how much you knew at the time about two other issues that seem to have been important.

First, the peace movement that called itself "Swords to Ploughshares" [after a monument that was donated by the Soviet Union to the UN and erected in Geneva in 1963]. What exactly did you know about this group of people, and did you have any contact with them?

And related to that, could you tell me something about the whole affair surrounding Roland Jahn of Jena, who was arrested for nothing more than riding his bicycle with a Polish flag across the marketplace in Jena on the second anniversary of the formal recognition of Solidarność in Poland?

Eigenfeld: It had been my impression early on that there was a very active circle of people in Jena. It seemed to me that they focused primarily on the question of emigration . . .

Wagner: . . . That's not true. At least the inner circle did not. Only those who increasingly began to hang on to such grass-roots groups were mainly would-be émigrés [people who had applied for exit visas in order to move to the West]. The core people like Jahn, however, did very similar work to what you and others did in Halle. They did not work so much on a theoretical level as they tried to organize an opposition against people in high places, who completely determined their lives. It is true, though, that the Jenaer circles were quickly taken over and instrumentalized by would-be émigrés . . .

Eigenfeld: . . . This is precisely what our impression was . . .

Wagner: . . . I knew Jahn pretty well. I don't think one can accuse him or his group of focusing on emigration issues.

Basically, we are talking about very small groups, political grass-roots groups, six to seven people who tried to organize something until, all of a sudden, a large number of new people tried to attach themselves to the

already existing groups. What happened after that was usually beyond the control of the initial groups. . . .

When exactly did this would-be emigration movement pick up—in '83 or so?

Eigenfeld: Well, in single cases as early as the late seventies, but those people did not then get any publicity. In Halle it did not develop into a larger movement until 1983, when they began to bombard West German politicians with letters asking for support in their emigration efforts. But at that time, they did not yet try to flood our groups that much—that did not begin to happen until about 1985.

In 1984–85 was the time when big waves of emigration occurred, a time in which it was apparently not yet necessary to engage in political activities in order to get out quickly. Emigration applications were dealt with much more speedily by the authorities back then. In '86, the overall number of people who were let out suddenly dropped sharply. I think in '84 about 44,000 were let out, in '85 again about 35,000, and in '86 the number had all of a sudden dropped to about 15,000, and that despite the fact that the numbers of people who wanted to get out had drastically increased.[12]

That's why people began to think about what they could do to speed up their emigration process, and, as a result, began to invade our groups for that purpose. . . .

What about the "Swords to Ploughshares" movement? When and how did that get started?

Eigenfeld: It started in 1980, as an idea that emanated from the Brandenburg Youth Convention. They had called upon people to organize a Friedensdekade ["Peace Decade"] in the context of the entire arms race debate going on at the time. They were also the ones who first used both the slogan and the symbol "Swords to Ploughshares" in this context . . .

. . . *Which is a statue that the Soviet Union donated to the UN, if I am not mistaken* . . .

Eigenfeld: . . . Yes, in 1963. It is a symbol that has been around for a very long time, but now it was suddenly made into the symbol for the unofficial GDR peace movement. These Friedensdekaden were always very active and very exciting events. Peace activists came together for some 10 days before the day of prayer and repentance. Such events were organized wherever peace initiatives existed within the church, that is, at least in all the big cities. . . .

12. The actual numbers of GDR emigrants and refugees to the West were 1983: 11,343; 1984: 40,974; 1985: 24,912; 1986: 26,178; 1987: 18,958. See Fischer Welt Almanach, *Sonderband DDR* (1990), 135.

Halle was one of the first to organize relatively big events around these Friedensdekaden with demonstrations of up to 1,000 people, marching from one church to another, always terribly harassed by the Stasi and the People's Police [as the regular police forces were called].

It was quite some job to keep people calm, yet we continued to be successful in keeping everything peaceful, despite the fact that it sometimes got quite dangerous. The police forces did everything they could to provoke the outbreak of violence. . . . For example, they drove their police trucks right into the crowd of demonstrators, sometimes at up to 60 miles per hour.

Wagner: You see, I know of no other city except Halle in which such a movement existed that early. Nothing comparable occurred in Leipzig at the time. The really terrible thing about all of this is that nobody knew that these things were going on in other places. Just knowing about it would have made a big difference. Then you wouldn't have felt so alone. It would have encouraged us a great deal.

Only a small number of people knew about anything going on outside of their own hometown, mostly about things that happened in Berlin. Rainer Eppelmann, Ulrike and Gerd Poppe, and Bärbel Bohley were all rather well-known, mostly through their oppositional activities. But no one knew about what was going on in Halle, for example. There was just not much of a chance that one would hear about that, even though we lived in Leipzig, which is quite close to Halle.

Eigenfeld: Well, that was partly our mistake as well. It was our position at the time that we were doing this for ourselves, and not for anyone else. In fact, we never tried to gain any publicity. At that point the Western media constantly reported about Jena, even though probably more was happening in Halle. . . .

Wagner: You see, this "publicity business" was really a very new thing for us. Friends in the West had told me that "what doesn't appear in our media might as well simply not have occurred at all." That was a new aspect for us. Events apparently had to be publicized, at least by some newspaper. Because otherwise, whatever you do, while it may anger some and please others, on the whole it has no effect, it just hasn't happened.

So no one outside knew anything about events in Leipzig, despite the fact that we did at least as much as the Berliners. In Berlin the route to the Western media was just much shorter and simpler. And the situation in Halle, of course, was even worse than in Leipzig. At least we had the International Trade Fair, so twice a year at least we could try to give the world an insight into the internal affairs of the GDR.

Eigenfeld: You know, it's very curious. For a long time we shied away from making anything public because we thought that this was not the way to go about doing things. When we decided to write this public petition about the current conditions in the country in September 1982, for example, we came together over a weekend and wrote this document. But what did we do with it? We sent it to the local party secretary, that is, we approached party and state officials, quite consciously, and told them what we planned to do. We also sent one copy to the church leadership. In other words, we very consciously did not channel these kinds of statements into the Western media, because we figured that this was something we were doing as East German citizens—it was an internal affair of the GDR that had nothing to do with the West . . .

. . . *In other words, you still had hopes that the existing system could be reformed?*

Eigenfeld: . . . Yes, precisely. We still nurtured the naive hope that some day we would receive a positive response through official avenues.

Wagner: The other side of the coin is that the people who now act as if they had always been against the party and everything it stood for—back then, when you cited some source concerning the terrors of Stalinism, for example, they always replied "but how do you know this? You could have only read this in a West book," and that was something largely discredited as a reliable source of information. So it really was a very desperate situation.

In that sense, Gorbachev was also very important for us in the GDR. For the first time he made it possible for us to cite "official primary sources" for crimes committed by communist regimes.

But it was still very difficult, because we certainly did not want to end up unwittingly applauding the wrong side . . . I mean, the West.

Eigenfeld: I agree, those were precisely the arguments . . .

Wagner: . . . It is in this sense that our actions, but also our options, were extremely limited. I think you have to understand that it was absolutely necessary first to try everything conceivable without making use of the Western media. People around us would simply not have understood and would not have supported it if we had gone public with the help of the Western media. . . .

Right up to 6 October [1989], Protestant pastors in Leipzig were blamed for talking to the Western media with the argument, "Why do you need to do this? Don't we have our own media? Don't you have any patience?," etc.

In other words, it took us a long time to understand the dynamics

behind this question. In '82–'83 we were still completely caught within this trap. . . .

Eigenfeld: . . . The main point is that we initially wanted to reform our own country by ourselves, that is, without any help from outside . . .

Wagner: . . . And fear continued to exist as to what any contact with the West might do to our movement—with plenty of justification, I might add.

I had a lot to do with Western media people over the last couple of years, I gave a lot of interviews, and what not. But often when I read afterward what they had done with what I had said, or with the information I had given them, I frequently thought, "This is absolutely unbelievable; they must have talked to someone else!"

I know many GDR oppositionists who were very angry and frustrated because of their terrible experiences with the Western media, because of reports that were completely distorted and that, in many cases, seriously hurt our cause. . . .

Eigenfeld: . . . Furthermore, the commentary of the Western media often did not at all reflect our intentions, did not represent what it was we wanted to achieve . . .

Wagner: . . . It took us a very long time to realize that the media in the West has to worry mainly about selling a product, and not about substance. Consequently, they have to work under a lot of pressure and strict confinements. . . .

Also, we did not know these newspapers, simply because we had never read them. If someone came to see us from the [West German] *FAZ* or the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* [comparable to the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Boston Globe,* respectively], I did not know what to expect. . . .

But there were groups who directed their political activities very much toward the Western media. The group Initiative for Peace and Human Rights, for example, founded in 1985, focused most of their political attention right from the beginning toward an efficient use of the Western media [primarily Western radio programs, which could be received throughout the GDR]. And it seems to me they did not do that with the strategy of using the means of the enemy, but rather in order to reach fellow East Germans through the only channels available.

Eigenfeld: My first political experience with the possible role and significance of the Western media had to do with the arrest and release of my wife, Kathrin. She got out on 1 November 1983, as a result of the intervention of the West German Greens who had petitioned Honecker to release her. One day after they had petitioned she was out.

So this public petitioning had proved effective twice, once with Sebastian Pflugbeil, and once with Kathrin. When we went to Berlin we had

already decided that we should try use the Western media as a source of security, because if we continued to work in isolation and engage in actions without letting the Western media know about it, no one would find out about them. Without them, we were perfectly walled in. . . .

Even though we had previously organized our marches and events right in the middle of the city, hardly anyone ever found out about it. That's really the curious thing about it, the Stasi pretty much functioned in the public sphere, but the public was somehow not aware of it. I guess most people simply repressed it. But if the information came in via the West, then all of a sudden it did exist, and people began to talk about it.

So after we had fully realized this dynamic—after all, what we did was very dangerous, you had to expect arrest without release any day—we said to ourselves that we need the kind of security that the Western media can provide for us.

We subsequently began to make use of them with great purposefulness, informing them of whatever we deemed helpful. So ever since 1983 this strategy represented an important component of our political work. . . .

We drove up to Berlin at least twice a month in order to inform them about what happened in Halle. That way we also gained our first experiences about what was going on in Berlin, and how to deal with media people.

Thus, when we wrote our public petition in '86 to the party congress, we also sent it to the West. I have to say, however, even then we gave the party a little time to respond first. So we first sent the petition to the Central Committee, to the Politburo, and to *Neues Deutschland* [main official party newspaper] about four weeks before the party congress was due to convene. In other words, we gave them 4 weeks to respond, which they did not. After those four weeks had passed, we no longer saw any reason to withhold it, and so we publicized the petition in the West. . . .

But let me return to 1983 for a moment. We already had some good political contacts with Westerners, like the Green Party.

As I said before, after the Greens went to see Honecker,[13] (it was a Monday) my wife was released the very next day. I immediately drove up to Berlin, and we all met each other in Bärbel Bohley's house. For the following Friday we had all planned the first German/German peace initiative [with peace activists from both East and West Germany]. We wanted to hand over a petition to both the Soviet and the American embassies, demanding that they both abandon their plans of deploying

13. Members of the Green Party presidium: Petra Kelly, Gert Bastian, and Antje Vollmer.

further nuclear missiles in their respective halves of Germany. We had even informed Honecker about it.

On Wednesday, there was a press conference in Bonn with a close advisor of Honecker and member of the Politburo. From Wednesday on we were also subjected to heavy surveillance by the Stasi, even though this Honecker crony said in Bonn that same day that the East German government perceived our plan as "helpful activity," something they wanted to support—which he said in front of the international press. But on Wednesday afternoon we discovered carloads of Stasi people following us around. The planned action never took place. Instead, we were all arrested. Even church superintendent Forck was put under house arrest; in fact the Stasi blocked off roads that led to our and Forck's houses. The Berliners were picked up at home, and so were we in Halle.

In other words, it was quite obvious that this action had been initiated single-handedly by the Stasi, without prior arrangement or consultation with Honecker—it just couldn't have been any other way. Otherwise, Honecker's crony couldn't have said in front of the international press that this was a "good thing," while, at the same time, having us all arrested . . .

. . . *You don't think that it could have been an intentionally deceptive move on Honecker's part?*

Eigenfeld: No, I simply refuse to believe to this very day that Honecker was capable of intentionally double-crossing us like this. . . .

After that failed action, we wanted to organize a human rights seminar in Berlin, within the space of the church, because that was the only place where one did not have to apply for official permission, which would have been impossible to get. . . .

One parish had agreed to house the human rights seminar, but then we received a negative reply from the church leadership, because what we wanted to do somehow went beyond the state-imposed restrictions as to what was permissible within the church. In the aftermath, not only the Stasi, but also officers of the criminal division of the police came to see us, and we were subsequently prohibited from making any further trips to Berlin.

That was precisely the point in time when many of us realized that, despite the relative freedom within the church, we had to find some space independent of the constraints of the church. After that, we founded the "Initiative for Peace and Human Rights" [IFM], which was the first, and for many years the only group, that functioned outside the realm of the church.

Wagner: We should first mention, however, that there was a real down-

ward turn between about 1983 and 1985. During this period, very little happened in terms of political activity. It was not until '85 that things began to pick up again due to the founding of various human rights groups.

. . . You mean human rights groups also existed, aside from the IFM, inside the church?

Wagner: Oh yes, quite a few already existed within the church . . .

Eigenfeld: . . . These groups had already established themselves at the time of the first "Frieden Konkret," where they displayed their various activities with info tables. In the course of the peace movement against the arms race in general and the further deployment of nuclear missiles in both East and West, we realized that we were not at all accepted by the powers that be, and that we had little opportunity to articulate ourselves in public. That was essentially the reason for fighting for opportunities and space to make our voices heard publicly. We had simply realized that this was a "must," that without it we couldn't do anything. We had to demand this right of free speech.

So that's when the focus changed from the arms race toward human rights. In the beginning, human rights were not at the forefront of our attention. In other words, only after we had begun to run into enormous organizing difficulties did our focus begin to change.

Listening to both of you, I get the impression that you knew quite a bit about each other and about what was going on in other places in the GDR after all. More and more groups were founded everywhere, so that you had almost 200 different groups by early 1989. I don't know whether the exact number was ever established. How do you explain such variety, such a large number of different groups?

Eigenfeld: The variety of groups, in fact, became more and more colorful. Two hundred different groups is probably a conservative estimate. All sorts of topics were covered. In addition to various peace, human rights, and environmental groups, gay and lesbian groups were founded, groups for alcoholics, groups for students, and so on. . . .

So these problems and issues were ultimately "picked up" by what you might call "self-help" groups, which finally dealt with all those topics that the "official" society refused to deal with, with the things that were considered "taboo." . . .

And then there were groups like the "Church from Below" which consisted of people who wanted to pressure the church to support grassroots groups, and, at the same time, provide space for people outside of the church as well. In that endeavor they constantly ran into problems with the church hierarchy.

You see, we had very basic problems, such as finding rooms for people to meet. We had always depended on specific parishes to support such efforts and provide rooms for grass-roots groups. In most cases, it was far from easy to obtain such support from the parishes. In Halle, for example, only three out of fourteen parishes ever provided space for us. Even though it is always claimed that the church played such a crucial role in the formation of the East German opposition, most churches wanted to have nothing to do with us.

■ RAINER EPPELMANN, prominent oppositionist, founder of Democratic Awakening, subsequently minister for disarmament and defense.
▮ *"The topics that came up had to do with hopelessness, feeling incarcerated, fear, fear of the police, fear of the Stasi, fear of superiors . . . . He played a few blues songs, then we read a few texts . . . and 200 people showed up, for heaven's sake."*

Minister for disarmament and defense, pacifist, and Protestant pastor, Rainer Eppelmann, early on chose to be one of those church dignitaries who "wanted to have something to do" with dissident sectors in the GDR. Yet Eppelmann represents a very different kind of East German oppositionist from either Frank Eigenfeld or Harald Wagner, for he operated from the relatively safe realm of the church, not being subjected himself for the most part to the vicissitudes and dangers to which most other activists were invariably exposed.

Eppelmann not only started numerous political initiatives, but he was a much sought after contact person for political activists from across the country. A veteran "rebel," he became during the eighties one of the most prominent dissidents within and outside the German Democratic Republic.

Unlike most of his former friends and colleagues in the dissident movement, however, Eppelmann did not seem to have any problems accustoming himself to conventional forms of politics. In common with many Westerners, he deeply resisted communist party authoritarianism without questioning inherently hierarchical modes of political decision-making characteristic of both communist and capitalist systems. In fact, he never concealed his desires to play a significant political role as a "leader" himself.

On my 50-minute subway trip from West Berlin to Alexanderplatz in downtown East Berlin to interview Eppelmann, I reviewed for a final time the notes I had collected on him, and I stumbled upon a telling statement which I found particularly revealing in the political context existing at that