



KEIL & KEIL LITERATUR-AGENTUR

Kati Naumann

WAS UNS ERINNERN LÄSST (WHAT WE REMEMBER)

Novel

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Synopsis

“The thing I most wish for in the year 2000 is that we are still at home and didn’t have to go away from the Rennsteig. Then Waldeshöh would be a tidy Free German Trade Union Federation vacation home, and everything would be fine once again.”

The Thuringian Forest, which is every bit as enchanted today as it was in the days of the Brothers Grimm, holds many mysteries. In her quest for deserted places, Milla comes across the ruins of a hotel, and in that hotel she finds a school composition dating back to 1977. The wish that little Christine wrote at that time for the year 2000 inspires Milla to look for her. In the process, she gets entangled in a family history that began in the restricted zone of East Germany and has yet to conclude. And as Milla learns the art of memory from Christine, Christine can finally begin to put her own past behind her.

Milla is constantly on the lookout, whether it is for sources of money, for recognition, for effective educational methods for her pubescent son, for the only proper nutritional principle, or for lost places. On weekends, she tracks down forgotten places for the Lost Places message board so that she can produce morbid photos and feel somewhat less lost herself. It would seem that there is nothing she can truly rely on and that nothing is worth saving. When she is at work as a staff member of a law firm in Coburg, Franconia, she often finds that everything in life is subject to interpretation and the rules don’t apply to everyone. As a single mother, she has avoided taking risks, and in social media she stages the life she could be having if she only displayed more courage.

Milla actually planned to spend the weekend with her son, but he is having the first date of his life. So she roams alone across the Rennsteig, the peak area of the Thuringian Forest, well equipped with her camera, compass, pepper spray, and forced entry tools. She is on the lookout for abandoned spots and hopes to be able to take pictures for the Internet community of places beyond those that



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are already quite familiar. She finally wants to be the first one to arouse a place from its deep slumber after many decades of oblivion. She goes farther and farther into the woods, where there are no more paths between the trees and her cell phone isn't getting any signal. She stumbles across train tracks that appear out of nowhere and don't lead anywhere. All of a sudden she discovers ruins rank with undergrowth. She clears away debris, breaks into the cellar, and finds a subterranean utility room. There is fine china stacked up in the cabinets, and in the drawers she finds starched linen tablecloths; preserved berry compote is lined up on the shelf. The delivery crates are marked *Hotel Waldeshöh*. Next to the stove there is a pile of bundled-up newspapers that don't go past the summer of 1977, along with a set of school notebooks. One of those is a German notebook belonging to a child named Christine Dressel, class 7d. The notebook contains a composition that was given a poor grade, addressing the assigned topic, "How I Picture the Year 2000." This Christine wishes for odd things, wishes that quite clearly did not come true. The composition reminds Milla of her son, Neo, who also maintains a naïve belief in a higher justice. For the first time she realizes that all these lost places, which she had simply found romantic before, are not mere backdrops. She decides not to publish her photographic trophies for the time being, but instead to seek out the old owners of *Waldeshöh* so she can find out more about them.

On the way back, Milla runs into a forest worker gathering up litter, and asks him about the property. The man doesn't say much, and she learns only that this woodland is named *Waldeshöh* and used to belong to the Dressel family. A few members of this family - the children, Christine, Andreas, and Viola, as well as an aunt and their descendants, are still alive.

Andreas Dressel is the easiest to track down, and Milla is surprised when she meets him face to face. Every Sunday he goes up into the forest and keeps everything in order, just as his forefathers had done. This stretch of land had been in the possession of his family for generations, and his ancestors were forest rangers and woodworkers. But then, one generation built a country hotel in an ideal location, in the middle of Germany, next to the Rennsteig tourist area, which provided the family a modest level of prosperity. After 1949 *Waldeshöh*



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suddenly found itself at the border of the GDR, in the middle of the restricted zone, and thus in a third German state with its own set of laws. In 1977, the family eventually had to leave the house and was forced to resettle. Andreas is upset about the fact that for some strange reason, even 25 years after the opening of the border the area is still a no-man's land that no one other than himself feels responsible for. He would prefer to see his home in the hands of the Conservation League, seeing as *Waldeshöh* is part of the Green Belt, the largest biotope in Germany, which could develop on the border strip untouched by human hands.

Milla gets contact information for Christine from Andreas. Christine feels responsible for her brothers and sisters and holds the extended family together, following the example set by her mother and her grandmother. When Milla hands her the old school notebook, Christine almost feels as though she is 14 again, as though she has gone back to the summer's day in 1977 on which she had to leave her parental home.

The demise of the house began as far back as 1949, however. After the war they no longer had any hikers finding their way onto this part of the Rennsteig, because *Waldeshöh* was situated not just simply in the restricted zone, but also in the protective strip, a mere 500 meters from the border. The family, which then consisted of Christine's grandmother Johanna, her father, Werner, and her aunt Elvira, was at first permitted to stay on, and had to work in the nearby Agricultural Production Cooperative. Even the wedding of Christine's parents was celebrated in the forest hotel. It was a quiet ceremony with a gloomy atmosphere, and many relatives had been denied the entry permit they had applied for so long in advance. After Christine and her brother Andreas were born, the family still lived as though on an island. The children thought it was normal for the school bus to be searched by the police on every ride, and for no one to be allowed to leave the house after dark. Every year government officials came to urge them to move, but the family did not want to leave the terrain of their forefathers. They lived in seclusion, trying not to stand out, and never complaining about anything. They said nothing when the school bus suddenly stopped riding up to where they lived, which meant that the children would have to walk a long way through the



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woods, and kept their mouths shut when the mail van no longer stopped at their house. In 1970, when the family's youngest child was ready to come into the world, no ambulance would come up to the peak area, and little Viola wound up as a home birth, without a midwife, having only the help of the women in the family. It seemed as though the world had forgotten *Waldeshöh*. Little by little, something resembling normality set in. Grandmother Johanna prepared and freshened up the guest rooms every morning at the break of day. When the children came home from school in the afternoon, they banged on the concierge hotel desk bell, stole the room keys, and acted as though everything was fully booked. The family lived in the cramped servants' quarters and reserved the good rooms for guests that never came. Yet even so, it was a happy time. They sat around the big table in the hotel kitchen together, stuck together, and kept up their hopes.

One day in the early summer of 1977, shortly before the beginning of the long vacation period, a truck with armed guards drove up in front of the house. Christine's family was forced onto it from one hour to the next, taking with them just a few belongings, and the family was brought to an apartment in a new complex. Christine was allowed to bring only her clothing and school things. She hid her doll and her children's books under the bed, intending to get everything later. But the very next day the house was razed to prevent any Republic refugees from settling down in them. Christine's family continued to reside within the restricted area in Meiningen, because that was the only way they could continue to see their friends and relatives. Her aunt Elvira built a house outside the restricted area.

At the request of their parents, the siblings learned professions in the fields of forestry and the hotel industry. The idea was to be ready to jump in as before if the situation should change. The family did not suspect that the hotel no longer existed. Christine and Andreas spent their youth in a holding pattern. The subject was discussed only among the closest family members, and they grew even closer. Immediately after the Berlin Wall fell, Christine's father applied for restitution of the property. Only when the area had been cleared of mines and was opened to hikers again was he permitted to go back, with his son, Andreas,



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to the home they had lost. They had heard the rumors about the emptied buildings being torn down, but had never wanted to believe them. Once they got over the initial shock, they decided they would rebuild the hotel with their own hands, just as the men in the family had done once before. The restitution of *Waldeshöh* was rejected after a long processing time, the rationale being that the family had received remuneration. Christine's father suffered greatly from this renewed humiliation, and accepted his sister Elvira's offer to see to this matter. After consulting a lawyer, she feared the costs of a protracted legal dispute with an uncertain outcome, and persuaded her brother to give up. Christine had never set foot inside *Waldeshöh* since locking up her room long ago and having to leave the forest hotel. She kept the key, and the house of her childhood continues to live on in her thoughts.

For Milla, her son is her only and most important friend, so she takes him with her when she is invited to have coffee with the Dressels. Christine's aunt Elvira, a nervous and frustrated woman, is quite displeased to find that her niece has brought along a stranger, one who even sticks her nose into family matters. The place is cramped, it is loud, and Milla cannot keep straight all the names of the many nieces and nephews. Milla now also meets Viola, Christine's youngest sister. Viola has always hated the dark woods, the remote house, and the miles-long walk she had to take to school. The bright, warm set of new buildings adjacent to it, where her friend lived, and where the co-op was right across the street, looked like a relief to her back then. She did not know that she was marked with a blemish for her new neighbors and she did not understand any of the whispering in the stairwell. The forest hotel is now no more than a spectre in her memories, suddenly reawakened by Milla's inquiries. Each of the three Dressel siblings is carrying around a different memory of past and the forced resettlement is a topic that always resonates in the background, yet is always avoided. When they speak about the events of the past, they divide time into only two periods: a "before" and an "after."

But there is one point on which the siblings are in agreement, namely that their grandmother never signed a waiver and did not receive any restitution either. They recall the many discussions at the kitchen table, which always ended with a



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fist slammed down and an emphatic “over my dead body!” And Johanna kept to that statement quite literally: shortly after the forced expulsion she died of a heart attack brought on by all the commotion. In 2010 Christine’s father, Werner, died, a few years after his wife, and left his possessions to his three children. His savings account did not even cover the cost of the funeral.

When everyone goes their separate ways after the family get-together, it seems to Milla that the story of *Waldeshöh* has come to an end. In the past few years, Milla has neglected her friends, so she is surprised when Christine takes her noncommittal “Let’s stay in touch” seriously. Christine impresses her with her straightforward attitude and with the clarity of her ideas, which block out any superfluous details and focus on the essentials, on what has to be done here and now, and as a result, these two very different women actually do stay in touch. Christine, who feels no hatred, but only homesickness, transforms Milla’s thinking. When she now copies documents for the dissent to a deportation order, she is reminded of her new friend.

Neo can’t understand why his mother, who is ordinarily so smart, lets everyone boss her around each day at work. Milla had actually thought that as Neo grew older, her life would get less complicated and she would once again grow more independent, but the opposite seems to be the case. She is torn between the wish to cast Neo’s father out of her life or to take him up on the promise he has been ignoring completely for years. Not a week goes by in which she is not called in for a parent-teacher conference. The household money keeps falling short of what is needed, because Neo gives it away to a needy person. She has to go to the police station because he has taken part in a protest rally without any clear idea of what was going on. He also has a firm opinion about *Waldeshöh*. And even though Milla thinks that he sees everything with excessive idealism, she starts to realize that sometimes it is simply not enough to be a little indignant and then go right back to a daily routine.

Milla persuades the siblings to apply once more, with the help of her law firm, for a retransfer of the family property. There are good reasons for the Dressels to agree: Viola is in urgent need of money, Andreas hopes that the property becomes a nature conservancy, and Christine simply wants to hear from officials



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that there had been an injustice in the past. Milla goes through the law firm to request an inspection of the records. Christine assumes that in the process she will also learn who endorsed her forced expulsion apart from the mayor and the community policeman, because this action required three signatories. Her father suspected his best friend for the rest of his life.

Milla talks Christine into going to *Waldeshöh* with her once again. Christine barely recognizes anything from the past; the forest has undergone great changes and has recaptured everything. But then she finds scarred marks in the bark of a beech tree, remnants of a treehouse, and a slate rock with scribbles. She goes down into the cellar, squats down on the floor, and all of a sudden, she is at home again. Later, the two women sit in the moss at the peak area of the forest with a view out over the mountains. The trees rustle with the steadiness of a surf and the sunlight glitters through the leaves. Milla realizes that the family had truly picked out an ideal spot back then. And while Christine helps her to see the extent to which memories can give you a firm footing, Christine learns from Milla how to let go and forget at long last.

When Milla gets a copy of the Dressel files, she is not sure whether she ought to show them to the siblings or keep the matter to herself. Their case was not one of forced expulsion, but rather one of forced expropriation. Christine's aunt Elvira had signed the declaration of consent for this action in the name of the family and accepted restitution in the form of a piece of property. Milla goes to see her and finds out the reason. Elvira had had quite enough of the surveillance and the regimentation, and most of all, she suffered from not being allowed to get visits from her fiancé. She tried to ease her bad conscience by negotiating better terms for her brother's family. The family was able to move immediately into a newly constructed building, and did not have to live in cramped temporary housing first, the way other families did. How could she have had any inkling that at some point the situation would go the other way around? Later, Elvira tried to cover up everything by acknowledging the court decision for herself and her brother. Milla gives Elvira the opportunity to speak to the family herself, but she fails to do so. When Christine finds out the true story, she is devastated, and for a moment her



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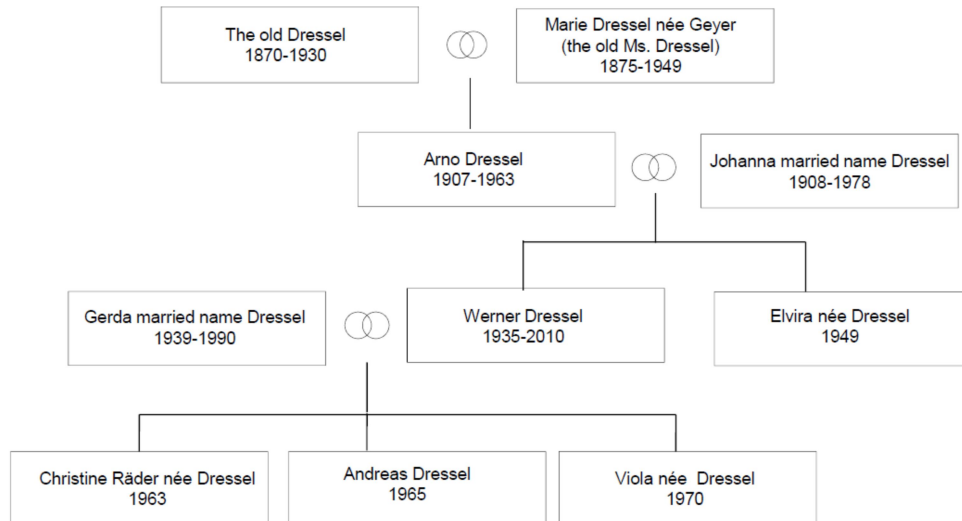
world is turned upside down. Then she realizes that her aunt was just a victim as well.

Since Elvira did not have the right to forgo a property that did not belong to her, the legal situation is now different from that of the first hearing. A renewed assessment of the case would also mean, however, that Elvira might have to give back her own property. Elvira blames Christine for dividing the family. But Milla makes it clear to Christine that it is not her fault if Elvira has to live with the consequences of her actions. A new proceeding is opened up and there is a good chance that the Dressel children will get back their half of the forest.

Viola hopes that this will give her a grip on her financial problems. Andreas contacts the nature conservation association and Christine makes plans with Milla. A forest hotel would offer a future to the whole, widely dispersed family. She wants to rebuild *Waldeshöh*, run it with Milla, and at long last set the table again with the dishes that have been waiting in the cellar to be used for forty years.



The Family Tree of the (fictitious) Dressel Family in the Novel





The Author

Kati Naumann was born in 1963 in Leipzig and lives with her family in Leipzig and London. She spent a large part of her youth in Sonneberg, in the former restricted zone in the Thuringian Forest. She studied museology and worked as a museologist in the Book Museum of the Leipzig German Library and in the Musical Instrument Museum of the University of Leipzig.

She has written poems and lyrics for rock bands, and song texts for meditative ethnopop and for a variety of artists (including for the classics duo Marshall & Alexander). Her successful musical, *Elixier* (music by “Prince” Tobias Künzel), which premiered at the Leipzig Opera, was described by *Der Spiegel* as “Eastside Story from Bitterfeld” and was compared with the “Rocky Horror Picture Show.” She has also worked on an array of music programming for NDR Broadcasting.

For the ZDF TV station, her work includes writing screenplays for the children’s program “1, 2, or 3.” For Universal Music Publishing, she has developed several series of children’s radio plays (such as “Monika Häuschen, The Little Snail”) and writes continuous episodes for them.





Novel publications:

Was denkst Du? (What Do You Think?)

(Kindler 2001, audiobook Litera/Random House 2002, Rowohlt paperback 2003)

Alte Liebe (Old Love)

(edition Büchergilde and as a Special Edition of Büchergilde Gutenberg 2004;
translation into Korean published by Woongjin Thinkbig Co., Seoul 2005)

Die Liebhaber meiner Töchter (My Daughters' Lovers)

(Knaur and Universal audiobook, March 2013)

Die große weite Welt der Mimi Balu (The Big Wide World of Mimi Balu)

(Knaur 2015)

Nachtflug (Night Flight) with Sofie Cramer

(Rowohlt 2018)

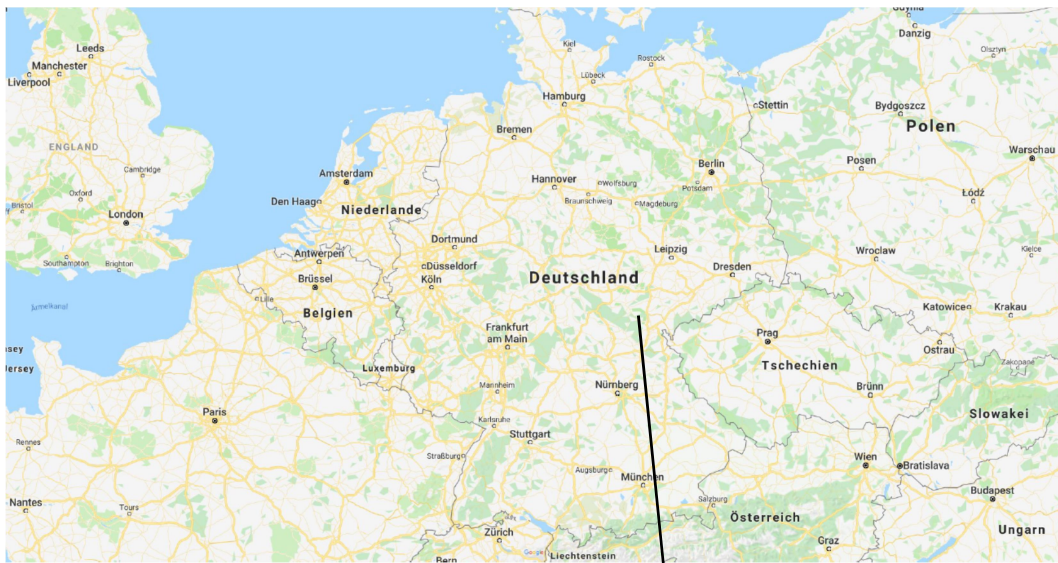
Schulcafé Pustekuchen (School Cafeteria Fiddlesticks), 1-3

(Kosmos 2018/2019)



APPENDIX: Historical Facts about the Thuringian Forest / Rennsteig region

The Rennsteig is the peak area of the Thuringian Forest and a historical border trail. The story takes place on the eastern Rennsteig.





Chronology of Thuringia after 1945

1945

4-11 April – Battle for the Rennsteig line

16 April – Thuringia is captured by the Americans

8 May – End of the war

5 June – The four victorious powers officially take over the governance in Germany

1 July – Thuringia becomes part of the Soviet occupation zone

10 September – Law regarding land reform in the state of Thuringia. Property, including the forest amounting to more than 250 acres, and possessions of war criminals are confiscated without any compensation.

1946

7 March – Foundation of the Free German Youth

13 June – Windbreak catastrophe in the Thuringian Forest; in the years that follow there is major insect damage caused by bark beetles.

30 June – The closure of the demarcation line between the Soviet occupation zone and the Western zones in Germany takes effect. The free flow of tourist traffic is blocked off

29 October – The interzone pass for business and family emergencies is introduced.

1 December – Building up of a German border police presence in the Soviet occupation zone

The hiking trail along the Rennsteig is shortened, because both ends lie in the area close to the border and the southern portion crosses the inner German border at several points. Now the official Rennsteig begins at Vachaer Stein and ends in Neuhaus am Rennweg. Of the original 169 kilometers, 115 kilometers are still accessible.



1947

July – Enhanced construction of roadblocks and barbed wire barriers at the demarcation line on the territory of the Soviet occupation zone

29 October – Introduction of “local border traffic” to enable citizens at the border of the zone to get to their workplaces. Forest aisles are carved out for border surveillance.

The entire year is a year of drought, with devastating consequences for agriculture and forestry.

1948

1 April – Stiffer regulations by the Soviet military administration for travel between the zones are put into effect. At the demarcation line in Thuringia, 256,272 individuals are turned in or taken into custody during the first six months

24 June – Currency reform in the Soviet occupation zone

August 1948 – As a result of a bark beetle invasion, large parts of the Thuringian Forest are declared a major disaster area and helpers are called in from the entire Soviet occupation zone

1949

7 October – Foundation of the GDR

1950

8 February – Foundation of the ministry for state security (Stasi)

17 May – Lowering of the age of majority from 21 to 18 in the GDR

1951

1 January – Beginning of the first Five Year Plan in accordance with the Soviet model

14 April – The Ode to the Rennsteig, by Herbert Roth, rings out for the first time. It becomes the secret hymn of the Thuringian Forest and one of the most successful GDR hits of all time.

Russian is introduced as a required subject at the polytechnic secondary schools.



1952

26 May – Police regulation on the introduction of a special ordinance at the demarcation line. The 5-kilometer restricted zone and 500-meter protective strips are set up. Passes for farmers and commuters are rendered invalid. The demarcation line is further expanded: plowed 10-meter strip, 1.20-meter high barbed wire fence. Spending time in the restricted zone is subject to the most stringent regulations; orders to shoot have been issued, and railway lines and streets closed down. Residents of the restricted zone receive financial benefits.

5–7 June – “Aktion Ungeziefer” (Operation Vermin). Resettlement by secret order of the ministry of the interior. Politically unreliable citizens of the GDR are forcibly removed from the restricted zone and resettled to other regions. In Thuringia, 3,423 individuals are affected. They are loaded onto trucks with a major security presence and deported to the interior of the GDR. The abandoned buildings are razed.

August – The SED party and the border police develop an auxiliary service of “reliable” citizens for spying and surveillance functions, so-called helpers of the border police.

6 November – The ministry of the interior issues an order to keep house books that record the presence and absence of renters and visitors.

1955

April/May - The first youth initiation ceremonies are carried out in the GDR.

1 December – The German border police takes on the exclusive surveillance of the demarcation line. The Soviet troops are removed from the inner German border. Soviet advisers remain with the military units until 1958.

1956

1 March - Foundation of the National People’s Army

1957

Spring – Balloons with leaflets and information sheets land in the restricted zone. The GDR population is forbidden to read and distribute the propaganda material.



16 November – Leaving the GDR illegally is declared “desertion from the Republic” and carries the penalty of a prison term of up to three years.

1958

28 May – Food ration cards are discontinued, but potato cards are kept in place until 1966, and coal cards until 1989.

5 June – The “Voluntary Helpers to Support the German People’s Police” regulation takes effect. Civilians are used to secure the border. For tourist travel, there is an increasing number of restrictions.

1960

Spring – So-called Socialist Spring in agriculture aims at collectivizing the farmers to form Agricultural Production Cooperatives (LPG)

1961

3.5 million people have now left the GDR. One of the causes is the forced resettlement from the restricted zone.

13 August – Building of the Wall in Berlin. Subsequently, 913,426 mines are laid at the demarcation line.

4 September – Aktion Ochsenkopf (Operation Ox Head) in southern Thuringia to prevent the reception of Western radio and TV programming

14 September – Enactment of the so-called “order to shoot” at the demarcation border

2/3 October – Aktion Kornblume (Operation Cornflower). Expulsion operation from the area in close proximity to the border. 8,000 military forces and communist agitators are brought in. 546 individuals are forced to leave, most of whom are workers and farmers who do not adhere to the party line.

1962

24 January – A law regarding compulsory military service is passed
Intershop stores are set up in the GDR. The goal is to absorb foreign currencies.



1964

9 September – Citizens of the GDR who are of retirement age are permitted to apply for visits to the Federal Republic. At the border, vehicle barrier trenches and concrete lookout towers are set up.

1966

Securing of the border in backland regions with a signal fence 500 to 1,000 meters in front of the border; construction of earth observation stands.
Drought year with devastating consequences for agriculture and forestry.

1968

12 January – The GDR penal code stipulates prison sentences of up to five years for illegal crossing of the border.
Suspension of passenger train travel to the Neuhaus train station at the Rennweg.

1972

Sonneberg, the center of toy production in the GDR, is excluded from the five-kilometer restricted zone for economic reasons.

17 October – In cases of urgent family matters, non-retirees can also apply for authorization to take a trip from the GDR to visit the Federal Republic.

1973

12 May – The first GutsMuths Rennsteig Run takes place, with four participants. In the years that follow, the event develops into a community run, with more than 15,000 people now participating.

1974

October – Additional expansion of the borders. The double fence is replaced in part by a 3-meter high expanded metal mesh fence. New mines are laid.



1975

The Rennsteig run develops into a popular sport in the GDR.

1978

1 September – Introduction of military education at the polytechnic secondary schools in the GDR.

1981

December – Snow damage catastrophe in Thuringia. The “Save our forest!” campaign begins.

1989

3 April – The order to shoot, at the inner German border, is suspended.

May to September – With the dismantling of the border fence between Hungary and Austria, more and more GDR citizens flee.

28 September – The offices of the ministry for state security issue operational plans and instructions for the detention of unwanted GDR citizens.

7 October – Festivities for the 40th anniversary of the GDR

October – The “Monday demonstrations” begin in various places in Thuringia.

9 November – Fall of the Wall and opening of the border.

13 November – The restricted zone is canceled. All the places situated in the protective strip are henceforth no longer in the border area and can be freely entered and exited.

December – The dismantling of the barrier constructions at the border begins.

1990

1 March - The GDR government enacts the foundation of a trust agency to administration property previously belonging to the state.

28 April – The Rennsteig is once again officially accessible along its entire length.

1 July – Union of currency, economy, and social services



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23 August – Resolution regarding the entry of the GDR into the Federal Republic of Germany on October 3, 1990.

12 September – The foreign ministers of the four victorious powers and the two German states sign the Two Plus Four Agreement, thus terminating the rights of the victorious powers.

Today

The German Green Belt – For forty years, nature was able to develop undisturbed along the inner German border strip. It thus became a sanctuary for more than 1,200 rare and endangered plants and animals. After the fall of the Wall, one of the largest and most significant nature conservation projects was created in the former restricted zone.

Translated by Shelley Frisch