

Memorial Sites

Hohenschönhausen – the remand prison of the GDR

(You will also find at the end of that document biographies of the eye-witnesses)

0:04

Narrator

Impressions of Germany.

0:07

On the sightseeing itinerary of a Swedish school group: the former prison in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen; in these cells often political prisoners like Regina Kaiser were held.

0:18

Regina Kaiser

“It was very important for me to come to this place as a free person...I only learnt relatively late, after the fall of the Wall, that it is a memorial site, and when I walked through the jail for the first time and a young woman who had not been imprisoned here explained something about the prison, the pictures and memories which had become buried deep down just welled up spontaneously and there was again almost a feeling of helplessness. Above all I saw things which I did not see as a prisoner, I got to know the history of the place. I saw the subterranean prison and the dark rubber cells which I didn't know anything about when I was a prisoner. And subsequently I became again terrified, terrified in a way that I had never been whilst in prison.”

(from 00:35: **Regina Kaiser, imprisoned in Hohenschönhausen for six months in 1981**)

1:12

Narrator

Until the end of the GDR hermetically sealed off and guarded like a fortress: a secret site in the Berlin district of Hohenschönhausen that wasn't even marked on city maps.

A former industrial site where after the Second World War the Soviet secret service established an internment camp before handing over the prohibited zone to the GDR Ministry for State Security. Here the “Stasi” (the East German Secret Police) moved in with its various departments.

1:42

Behind steel doors: the remand prison. One of many. But its proximity to the Ministry for State Security made it the embodiment of the injustice and despotism of the GDR regime.

2:02

Regina Kaiser

"Then I somehow realized that I was in a room and not in a courtyard, and there were stairs going up and that on each side of the stairs there were sentries who held up their machine pistols and said, 'Don't attempt to escape!' And I was scared stiff, but I found it so totally ridiculous that in a closed room which I didn't know – I could hardly see anything because I was blinded by the spotlights – in this room grown-up men with machine pistols were standing and saying, 'Don't attempt to escape!'. I just simply couldn't get that into my head. So I just had to cry and laugh, it was all the same to me, because it was so utterly absurd, threatening and yet at the same time so totally ridiculous."

2:50

Narrator

For "Stasi" (Secret Police) employees who served as interrogators the prison was a "normal" workplace. For Uwe Karlstedt, too:

3:02

Uwe Karlstedt

"I entered Department 9/2 which was responsible for political crimes, for everything which occurred in the areas art, culture, churches and youth. Our main job in Department 9 was of course to carry out the interrogations. Right up until the case was closed and handed over to the state prosecutor."

(3:04-3:12 **Uwe Karlstedt, 1974-1989 interrogator in Hohenschönhausen**)

3:28

Narrator

But the cell block was never entered by the interrogator.

3:31

Regina Kaiser

"For quite a long time I didn't realize and didn't even want to realize that I was here inside, I just didn't want to accept it. When as a prisoner you have got through the process of getting your convict's uniform and you then enter the cell, your first wish is to see where you are. In a matter of seconds all sorts of fears well up, and you don't know where you are. "

4:00

Narrator

The prisoners often didn't even know in which town they were. Apart from the guard commandos there was silence. Secrecy as one of the many methods of achieving the desired result in the interrogation?

4:20

Uwe Karlstedt

"It was a bit like a hunt. To get somebody to say something that he actually didn't want to reveal, to confess to activities that he didn't want to admit. There is a certain sense of excitement that you have and of success when everything turns out well, that's the way it is. I think it is above all about power. The feeling in whatever form of being able to exert control."

4:52

Narrator

May 1945. Soviet troops capture Berlin, Germany capitulates: the end of the Second World War.

5:02

Horst Jänchen

"For me a whole world collapsed, for me the 8 May 1945 was not a day of liberation, but a really awful day. Only much, much later did I become aware of the fact that this was the day of liberation. My imprisonment in a camp probably contributed to this."

5:26

Peter Ruegg

"The world seemed to collapse and then in the midst of this dreadful din there was a deathly silence, that was the end of the war and the new era began."

5:46

Narrator

The beginning of a new era with a conference of the victors: Stalin, Truman and Churchill shake hands in Potsdam. Berlin is divided into four sectors, an Allied Control Council takes over the administration of Germany.

In the Soviet occupied zone in the Eastern part of Berlin many put their faith in the new regime's socialist promises. In Hohenschönhausen an internment camp is established for Nazi functionaries.

(from 5:57 **July 1945, the Potsdam Conference**)

6:19

Horst Jänichen

"On the 23 April 1946, it was six in the morning and I had arranged to meet my friend, I opened the door, and there stood two men in civilian dress, one in an overcoat with the jacket of his Russian uniform peeping out at the top, the other was the translator. He told me to come with them and to take a pillow and a rug... I could be away for two or three days. That's how I was arrested by the Soviet secret police. My mother then said: Put on your thick jacket and your ski trousers. Thank God that mothers get their way. In the cold winter of 1946/1947 I had a thick jacket and ski trousers which all the others didn't have."

Horst Jänichen

"I was a platoon leader in (the "Jungvolk", that was) the junior organization of the Hitler Youth, for the ten to fourteen year olds. They wanted me to tell them that I was a 'Werwolf', but I couldn't confirm that. In the interrogations people were mishandled, kicked and beaten, there was not one interrogation I experienced without at least being punched in the face. And I was always terrified of these interrogations. There's a person who hits you in the face and expects an answer from you that suits him and if you don't give it he hits you again. The minutes were taken by hand in Cyrillic writing and if you said, 'I can't read what I am signing for', then he said, 'I've read it out to you.' Only once did you refuse to sign."

(6:34-6:40 or 7:19-7:27 Horst Jänichen arrested on suspicion of being a member of the Nazi terrorist organization "Werwolf")

8:09

Narrator

In this special camp they searched for Nazi criminals until 1951. And from here convicts were also transported to the Gulags in the Soviet Union.

8:22

Horst Jänichen

"When you arrived, your head was shaved. I considered that to be totally degrading. And then, behind this long wall, there were barracks and in the barracks there were plank beds, three-storey plank beds, each box was roughly 1.5 metres long, and three people slept there (, sometimes three), sometimes four or five depending on how full the camp was. The camp was planned to hold 2,500 people, but at times there were up to 4,000 people in it. The huts had no heating, were full of bugs and contained neither toilets nor washing facilities."

(8:32–8:44 Horst Jänichen, imprisoned (in the camp) in Hohenschönhausen for six months, afterwards for two years in the former concentration camp Sachsenhausen)

9:02

Narrator

Hohenschönhausen was one of 10 Soviet special camps. Until it was disbanded over 25,000 people were interned here. Hundreds died.

9:11

Horst Jänichen

"And each day just went by, nothing happened. You didn't talk very much about the past, only in very few cases did you know why people were in there. There were a load of former Nazi party members, block leaders and lower-level functionaries, who were there because of their position under the Nazis. But not much was said about these things.

But we had a camp theatre. And there were actors such as Heinrich George, for example, who was also held in Hohenschönhausen. I saw Heinrich George playing Goethe's Urfaust, a really great experience for me as a youngster. I was able to watch him several times and learnt the prologue from 'Faust' by heart."

10:16

Narrator

The Soviet Military Administration dictated the course which the political development in the Soviet run part of Germany was to take in accordance with Stalin's wishes: this led in April 1946 to the hegemony of the Socialist Unity Party – the SED.

10:36

Peter Ruegg

“To me the path that we were taking in the East seemed practicable and sensible. This was underscored by the propaganda which had an effect on us. There were a few haves and a lot of have-nots, and if you only reversed this situation then everybody would be well off. There was something irresistible about this idea and as a young man I joined the Free German Youth. I was convinced to be on the right side and when in the ‘50s there was a public appeal for young men to enlist as volunteers in the armed forces, I joined up and committed myself to 3 years’ service and was given my marching orders for the border police.”

(Peter Ruegg, second lieutenant with the GDR border police) - unfortunately no space

11:40

Narrator

November 1949.

Newsreel (Wochenschau):

“The People’s Council in the Eastern zone met in Berlin to establish the German Democratic Republic. The Chairman of the SED, Wilhelm Pieck, was elected President of the Eastern Republic by the People’s Council.”

11:58

“The message of Generalissimo Stalin was the most important act of international recognition and culminated in the words: The foundation of the German democratic and peace-loving republic is a turning-point in European history.”

(11:45 7 October 1949, foundation of the GDR)

12:13

Narrator

Walter Ulbricht: head of the SED. Under his leadership the Ministry for State Security (the so-called “MfS”,) is set up on the Soviet model soon after the foundation of the GDR.

12:27

“We remember Felix Dzierzynski and his first trusty followers. His motto ‘A cool head, a keen heart and clean hands’ is also the motto of our work.”

(GDR Film: “A cool head, a keen heart and clean hands”, 1967)

12:41

Narrator

Wilhelm Zaiser is the first Minister of the MfS (Ministry for State Security).

But in the background there is already a man who, trained in Moscow, will shape the MfS for over 30 years: Erich Mielke.

Under his aegis the "Stasi" (East German Secret Police) with its headquarters near Hohenschönhausen will develop into a mammoth department with 91,000 official employees.

Their activities are beyond the control of parliament and the Ministerial Council.

Mielke receives his orders directly from the Central Committee of the party.

13:16

Uwe Karlstedt

"My brother and my brother-in-law were in the guard regiment of the Ministry for State Security, so for me the latter was nothing special, it was the security organ, it was so to speak the country's elite, they were the ones maintaining the security of this country.

I had always learnt that this country represented social progress, at least on German soil, and that the enemy was on the other side of the border, (there) where all the Nazi criminals had fled to, so it was a pretty simple view of things which made it easier for me to function according to my upbringing and to "function" for the state."

(13:27-13:34 Uwe Karlstedt, 1974-1989 interrogator in Hohenschönhausen)

14:07

Narrator

For a career in the state institutions one had to ignore inconsistencies.

(Insert: **17 July 1953, the workers' uprising in the GDR due to the increase of production quotas**)

14:16

Peter Ruegg

"During my time with the border police there were of course several key events, for example there was the workers' uprising in the GDR in 1953 which gave me much food for thought. Workers from Hennigsdorf, from the large factories in Hennigsdorf near Berlin, took to the streets and marched together from Hennigsdorf to West Berlin to demonstrate there. That just didn't fit in with my philosophy. The workers were meant to be on the side of the GDR, that was what I had been taught and that was what I believed. You saw things, but you couldn't and daren't speak about them, on the surface you had to convey the impression that they were all counter-revolutionaries who were silenced thanks to the friendly intervention of the Soviet army."

(14:34-14:44 **Peter Ruegg, second lieutenant with the GDR border police**)

15:13

Narrator

In order to divert attention from its own deficiencies, the party leadership presented the workers' uprising as the failure of the State Security Service. In the future the MfS was bound to be more vigilant.

15:25

Uwe Karlstedt

"I am pretty certain that after joining this ministry your personality changed bit by bit. It starts when you cut yourself off, you hardly have any friends outside, barely any other social activities outside, you spend your time with your equals. You live inside a cocoon, this cocoon of the State Security Service which is a conspirative society closed off from your family, from all outsiders and even from those working in another department of the Ministry for State Security. Your view of everything then becomes blinkered."

16:16

Narrator

This conspirative society is Mielke's own (– and in the party leadership highly valued –) contribution to the "setting up of Socialism".

16:23

Voice of the newsreel (Wochenschau):

"The work of the security services and the successes in the achievement of socialism in the GDR are dependent on each other and complement each other. The more effectively we work, the quicker everything will progress jauntily."

(GDR Film: "A cool head, a keen heart and clean hands", 1967)

16:38

Narrator

Mielke's office. Even loyal employees were not safe from being spied upon by the "Stasi" (Secret Police).

16:46

Peter Ruegg

"I was on holiday with my wife and three year old son in Thuringia when, at three o'clock in the morning, the light goes on, a Second Lieutenant is standing at the door and he hands me a sealed letter. It states that because of my excellent political and practical work I am to be appointed a teacher at the officers' school of the border police and that I should travel back to Berlin with the special courier who has delivered this letter. I would, of course, be compensated for lost leave.

And so I return to Berlin with the special courier, we drive up to a large green steel door, the driver gives the signal and the door opens, we drive in, the door closes behind us and we are standing in a sort of lock and the courier is suddenly holding a pistol: 'Ruegg, get out, you are under arrest.' In the first night I had an interrogation, that lasted ten to twelve hours, and I thought the misunderstanding – I thought it was all just a misunderstanding – would be cleared up. But it wasn't cleared up at all, instead I was bundled into a car and unloaded in Hohenschönhausen, although at that time I didn't know that I was in Hohenschönhausen.

A rug was pulled over my head, I was led down steps and I felt totally lost and helpless: Here they can do anything they want with you, no groans or screams will get out, nobody knows where you are and nobody can help you at all."

18:48

Narrator

A dungeon in the cellar. The second period in the history of the jail. In 1946 the Soviet secret service had a former canteen kitchen converted into a prison for those awaiting trial.

Five years later the "Stasi" (Secret Police) was in command of the subterranean cell block.

19:07

Peter Ruegg

"We prisoners called this jail the "U-Boat" (submarine) because we had the feeling that when you were down there it was like being in a submarine at the bottom of the sea. You couldn't see the sky either at night or during the day, the cells had no windows, and apart from a plank bed and a dreadfully reeking bucket with a lid there was nothing in them. When the door was unlocked you had to stand with your back to the door, you were called out, cell 72, number 3 come out for interrogation.

Then you had to run in front of the sergeant who wore felt slippers or trainers, you had to run up and down the stairs. I was 25 and it didn't bother me much. And the red light was shining. That was the signal: Warning, a prisoner is outside his cell..."

20:06

Narrator

The criminal prosecutions and the treatment of prisoners were dependent on the situation in Moscow. Stalin's death in 1953 brought in a period of détente - also in the GDR. But again and again this was undermined by the hardening of the Cold War.

20:23

Regardless of who was in charge at the top, loyalty to the big brother, the Soviet Union, was always shown – particularly at times of confrontation with the West. These periods also brought with them an intensification in the persecution of those thought to be critics of the state.

20:48

Peter Ruegg

“It was a very difficult and painful process which every political prisoner had to go through, until the realization sunk in that it was all part of the system which sought to secure the party’s rule by fear and that basically everything for which one had once stood for had evaporated in filth and tyrannical justice.”

21:27

Peter Ruegg

“The interrogation officer declared scornfully that at the moment it was only a matter of testifying and confessing and that they would find everything out anyway, and then there came the usual threats. ‘I’m not bothered if you rot away down there’, he said, ‘but I thought you would want to see your wife and son again, but if you don’t want to co-operate, that’s up to you.’ I have to say that at that point he had broken me. I gave up resisting, raised by hands and said, ‘do what you want with me, I will sign anything.’”

(21:36-21:46 Peter Ruegg, charged and convicted of denigrating the Soviet army)

22:04Narrator

Only after the fall of the Wall did Peter Ruegg discover in his files that he had almost signed his own death warrant – the State Prosecutor had wanted to have him executed in order to set an example.

22:15

Uwe Karlstedt

“The basic premise was that the result of our work had to serve the political interests of the party. The state leadership and the MfS formed one network, it was impossible to differentiate between them. How political prisoners were dealt with was actually dependent on the policy pursued by the party leadership at any one moment.”

22:40Narrator

Despite the self-confidence of the political elite, the citizens left the country. By building the Berlin Wall in August 1961 the GDR attempted to halt the mass exodus of its citizens. A new criminal offence was brought into being: “Flight from the Republic” („Republikflucht“). Even preparations for escape are punishable and it is the MfS’ job to seek out every potential escapee, arrest him and make him confess (once in custody). At the end of the 1970s there is an increasing number of prisoners in Hohenschönhausen who demand a reform of Socialism in the GDR.

23:20

Regina Kaiser

"I felt that I had to do something to breathe and continue living in this enclosed country, I had to try and do something against what was happening here in this country."

23:35

Narrator

Criticism of the system, however, barely had a chance in a country that was totally under the "Stasi's" control.

There were few prominent GDR citizens like the university professor Robert Havemann who voiced public criticism.

23:49

Regina Kaiser

"When Havemann was on trial we were amongst those who travelled with and waited in front of the court. That somebody who had already been imprisoned in the so-called Third Reich should again be part of the opposition and that he very cleverly warned that this Socialism, this so-called 'real extant Socialism' had to be reformed and altered, for that we admired this man, and even more so when he was prosecuted."

24:21

Narrator

... and put under house arrest

24:25

Regina Kaiser

"I just didn't understand any more how I had been able to live like that, right up until I was an adult, accepting phrases like 'Long Live Socialist Internationalism' at face value and not being able to go any further than the wall, or not even that far, without raising suspicion. And so there was this wish to organize and shape the opposition movement in the GDR. That was the beginning of my path to jail."

24:59

Narrator

In order to gain international recognition the GDR improves prison conditions in a new building in 1961: modern facilities and no longer any use of physical violence...

25:12

Regina Kaiser

"In the first weeks there were interrogations daily and they were very, very thorough. When you were not being interrogated, you noticed that you were often being observed by the spy. That meant that you couldn't wash yourself without being observed - often several times - and you didn't know who is behind the peephole, whether a man or a woman. You couldn't use the toilet without somebody being able to watch at some time. This really was a very grave invasion of your privacy. The other thing was that at night there were light controls about every twenty minutes. At first you really suffered from sleeplessness, you had difficulty falling asleep, but after a few months that stopped. The only bad thing was that you had to move and only then was the light switched off.

My strategy was to always try to do exactly the opposite of what they did with me. And so when the guard took me from my cell to the interrogation wing, I simply said: "Thank you". I pretended to be in a hotel and did as if he were my bellboy. Simply as a way of escaping from this madness with the numbers."

26:34

Uwe Karlstedt

"There was already a long history to the cases, in the case of political crimes with operations and operative surveillance of people often being carried out over years, where for years people had been bugged and spied upon, documents collected and at the end of the day even their arrest meticulously planned. In other words, we tried to define already what we would find in the flat in the case of an arrest, during a house search. When somebody was arrested, it was no longer a question of whether this would suffice for a conviction, that was clear right from the start. It was just a matter of officially being able to use the evidence which had been secured illegally."

27:24

Narrator

By a confession

27:29

Regina Kaiser

"We had collected data on political prisoners and passed them on in the hope that they could be helped. I voluntarily made confessions because I simply wanted to tell these people that I considered completely right what we had done and that the laws which forbade this had nothing to do with the socialist democracy which was being celebrated every day."

(27:43 Regina Kaiser, 3 years imprisonment for "treacherous spying activity" and "treacherous passing on of information")

27:59

Narrator

In November 1989 the GDR collapses amidst celebrations of a different sort. Even Mielke's State Security Service can no longer protect the state from its own citizens' desire for freedom.

The "Stasi" fighting for a lost cause.

28:14

The last prisoner in Hohenschönhausen is Erich Mielke.

The gates of one of the most secret sites in the history of the divided Germany open in 1990.

Biographies of the eye-witnesses:**Regina Kaiser**

Regina Kaiser was born in 1949. Her parents were dedicated Communists and many of her relatives were active in the *SED* (Socialist Unity Party). Her upbringing in the GDR was therefore very conformist. After her *Abitur* (school leaving certificate) Regina Kaiser worked in various publishing houses and theatres. At the beginning of 1976 Regina Kaiser tried to join the *SED*, but was turned down.

The expulsion of the GDR song-writer Wolf Biermann in November 1976 led to Regina Kaiser distancing herself from the GDR government. In 1978/1979 Regina Kaiser, together with her husband, came into contact with oppositional circles. She joined a group which supported a West Berlin committee for political prisoners, collected information and produced leaflets. The group also planned to duplicate and distribute critical texts and books. But many of those associated with the committee were Stasi spies (spies of the Eastern Secret Police).

On April 6th 1981 Regina Kaiser was arrested by the GDR State Security Service and taken to Hohenschönhausen to await trial. She was accused of “treacherous spying activity” and “the treacherous passing on of information”.

In October 1981 she was sentenced to jail for three years and two months (on the basis of Paragraphs 99 and 100 of the GDR’s Criminal Code). She served two and a half years of her sentence in the women’s prison Hoheneck in Saxony. In 1983 she was bought free by the West German government.

Uwe Karlstedt

Uwe Karlstedt was born in 1955 in the Eichsfeld area. After leaving school he did an apprenticeship as a lathe operator. In 1972 he enlisted for three years’ service in the army.

In 1974 the State Security Service offered to train him as an interrogator. From 1974 to 1989 Uwe Karlstedt worked for the GDR State Security Service as an interrogator in Hohenschönhausen. At the end of his career he was deputy unit head in the main department IX.

Horst Jänichen

Horst Jänichen was born on March 5th 1931 in Berlin. He was a platoon leader in the junior organization (boys aged 10-14) of the Hitler Youth and during the war served as an air-raid warden and in the *Volkssturm* (army formed in 1944, made up of every available male aged from 16-60).

As a fourteen year old he was arrested on April 23rd 1946 by the Soviet Ministry for State Security in Germany (MGB).

He was accused of being a member of the Nazi terrorist organization "Werwolf". According to Horst Jänichen this was a false charge.

There followed several weeks of imprisonment in the Soviet jail in a basement in Berlin-Friedrichsfelde.

In May 1946 Horst Jänichen was transferred to the internment camp (Special Camp 3) in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen. He stayed there for six months until October 1946. He was then transported to the former concentration camp Sachsenhausen in Oranienburg which the Soviet secret police used as Special Camp 7 for Nazi criminals and political opponents.

He was released on July 31st 1948. Horst Jänichen returned to East Berlin, where he was in touch with the *SPD* (German Socialist Party) and active in the anti-communist "Group against Inhumanity". He participated in the meetings and campaigns of this group and distributed anti-communist leaflets in East Berlin. On December 29th 1950 he was arrested by order of the newly-founded GDR Ministry of State Security. He was taken to the remand prison of the State Security Service in the Prenzlauer Allee.

Horst Jänichen was accused of "endangering peace in Germany and the world by spreading tendentious rumours."

After several months in custody he was sentenced to eight years in prison. He served his sentence in Berlin-Rummelsburg, in Halle and in Waldheim near Chemnitz in Saxony. In October 1952 his sentence was extended by two and a half years for a failed escape attempt and participation in a prisoners' mutiny. This period was subsequently commuted to a suspended sentence.

Horst Jänichen was released on January 9th 1959. Immediately afterwards he fled to West Berlin.

Peter Ruegg

Herr Ruegg was born in West Berlin in 1933. In 1948 he moved to East Berlin because he was offered an apprenticeship.

As a young man he became a member of the *FDJ* (Free German Youth). Peter Ruegg sought to be a committed supporter of the GDR.

In 1953 he answered an appeal to join the armed services and in the County Office enlisted as a volunteer. He enlisted for three years' service with the GDR border police. In 1956 he became a second lieutenant and was active in various bases as a deputy company commander. His last post as deputy company commander was in Perleberg (near Wittenberge). In this position Peter Ruegg was also responsible for the political training of the border troops.

Both the workers' uprising in 1953 and the Hungarian uprising of 1956 placed Peter Ruegg in a moral dilemma.

The political situation in the GDR also affected the military. In 1956 the number of desertions in the forces increased, with lots of soldiers escaping from the GDR. The Ministry for State Security responded to this with greater repression and high-profile arrests of those who were accused of being responsible.

On August 13th 1959 Peter Ruegg was arrested by the Ministry for State Security. According to Peter Ruegg an example was to be made of him by using false charges. He was accused of "glorifying fascism", "denigrating the Soviet army" and "taking part in illegal meetings".

For six months up until February 1960 he was imprisoned in the so-called "U-Boat" (submarine), a prison in the cellar of Hohenschönhausen. Afterwards he was transferred to the jail in Potsdam.

Before the sentence was passed there was even talk of the death sentence. But this was refused by Erich Mielke, the Minister for State Security, who instead suggested a life sentence. After months of interrogation Peter Ruegg was sentenced in 1960 to seven years' imprisonment.

He was released from jail in Potsdam in 1963 as part of a general amnesty.

Afterwards he became a builder's mate, before studying civil engineering at evening school and then working in the conservation of historical monuments.