

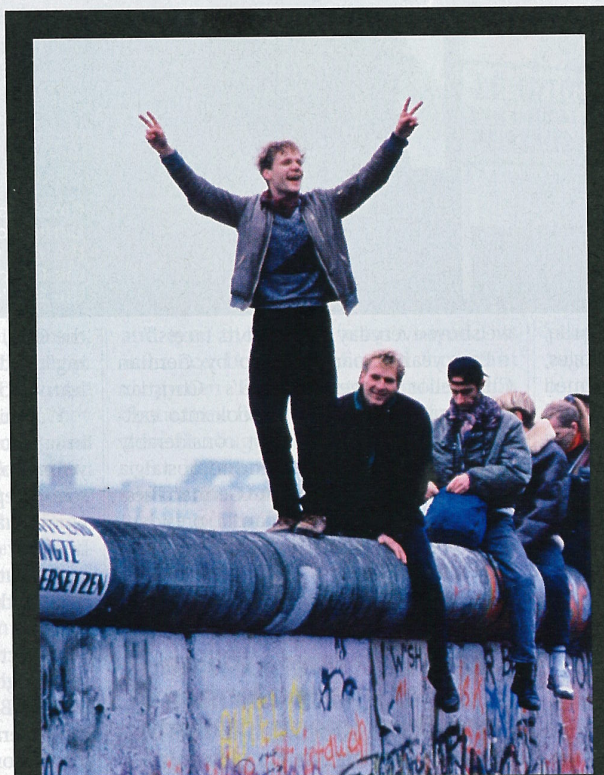
The 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall will be celebrated in that German city on November 9. But although they have their freedom, many former East Germans don't think there's a lot else to celebrate. Some even look back nostalgically on the "good old days" of life behind the Iron Curtain. BY JEFF KAVANAGH

On a chilly New Year's eve in 1989, the actor then best known as Michael from the TV series *Knight Rider*, David Hasselhoff, stood astride a breached and broken Berlin Wall and blasted out his hit song *Looking for Freedom*. A little more than a month after the wall's collapse, recently reunified Germans turned out in their hundreds of thousands to sing along and revel in the downfall of a repressive socialist dictatorship and the beginning of an exciting, if not uncertain, new chapter in Germany's tumultuous history.

Twenty years on from those heady days, and with the country once again holding reunification celebrations, many former East Germans feel failed by the system that replaced four decades of rule under the Social Unity Party, or SED. A survey in July this year by one of Germany's largest charities, the *Volkssolidarität* (People's Solidarity), discovered that only about a quarter of all easterners feel like fully fledged citizens of a reunified Germany. And despite the federal government having pumped well over a trillion euros into the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), unemployment, at 13%, remains close to double that of the western states, and almost two million people have left the old GDR since the fall of the Iron Curtain. Those who have stayed earn an average 30% less than their counterparts in the west.

They may have their freedom, but this sense of alienation explains, in part, the nostalgia many former East Germans feel for the perceived "good old days" of a simpler existence – a job for life and state-financed health and child care.

"It was a nice time, a nice life," says Renate Arnold, a 48-year-old municipal clerk from Schoenewerda, a small town in the former East German state of Thuringia. "People helped and supported each



## Divided loyalties

other and they were happy about the little things. Things weren't as complicated back then."

Stefan Ungefehr agrees. "Less was more," the 26-year-old quality controller from Dresden says. "We didn't need money. My brother and I used to swap the cherries we picked in our garden for toys and sweets. Nowadays we have too much choice."

Not that either one actually wants the "good old days" back. "They're just happy memories," says Arnold.

*Ostalgie* – a play on the German words

for nostalgia and east – is a phenomenon that has existed for a long time, and in a variety of forms, says Hans-Joerg Stiehler, professor of media and communication at the University of Leipzig. "It's a response to the domination of the West during the reunification process," he says. "The official way of dealing with the GDR is based on the delegitimation of it and its structures: the repression, environmental problems, ailing economy, and sports-doping programme." All of this was real, Stiehler says, but how people actually lived and dealt with the system has been largely ignored.

One place *Ostalgie* has found popular expression during the past decade, albeit in different guises, is on the big screen. Films such as *Sonnenallee*, *Good Bye Lenin!* – one of Germany's highest-grossing films of all time – and the Academy Award-winning *The Lives of Others* have gone some way to describing the lives of East Germans behind the Iron Curtain. There has also been a series of TV shows, celebrating everything from food to fashion, including the popular *Die DDR Show* (*The GDR Show*), which was presented by former East German poster girl and Olympic figure-skating double-gold medallist Katarina Witt.

Those in pursuit of a quick euro haven't been slow to latch onto the commercial opportunities inherent in a sentiment like *Ostalgie*, either. There are plenty of stores and online shops, with names such as *ostalgie-shop* and *Ossiladen* (literally "Eastie" – a pejorative term for former East Germans – "shop"), selling old East German products such as *Rotkaeppchen* sparkling wine, *Spreewald* gherkins and a multitude of souvenirs emblazoned with the *Ampelmannchen* – an iconic little figure that still adorns pedestrian traffic lights in eastern Germany. In Berlin, as well as getting your photo taken with an East German soldier