

Saylor Looks Back on Events in East Germany 20 Years Later

By Lance Meyer

On October 3, 2010, East and West Germany will celebrate the 20th anniversary of their reunification as one unified state or "die Wende" as the people of East Germany refer to the process. The German people will not be alone, however, as the world will also stop and look back on the historical event and the twenty years that have since gone by. Many people's lives were drastically affected by Germany's reunification, and to date, many stories remain untold.

Concordia history professor Thomas Saylor seeks to tell some of these stories in his latest oral history project, *East Germany: A Generation After 1989* which he hopes to release while the world is reflecting decades later on the effects of German reunification. According to Saylor, the idea for the book project dates back to 1990 when he was living in East Germany and experiencing first-hand both the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent reunification process.

In 1990, Saylor got a job teaching English at VHS Marzahn, an education center, in East Berlin. "Every day I saw students being forced to adjust to a new economy, political structure, and social situation," said Saylor of the formally East German people he taught. "Everything they knew was quote unquote wrong." People turned to English as a way to step away from their socialist past and adjust their lives to new capitalist ways.

"Right away I could see that some were going to make it while others, mostly those over 50, were not going to make it," said Saylor, hinting at the harsh reality many East Germans faced after 1990. Saylor was already beginning to wonder what was going to happen to the people he was meeting. "How would they remember the events of 1990, and where would they be in 10-20 years?"

These are the questions Saylor has sought to answer twenty years later. Since the beginning of last summer, Saylor has been on sabbatical leave from Concordia, an absence granted with pay for professors to do research, study, or travel. During this time he has traveled to Germany on three occasions to do research, establish relationships, and conduct interviews for his book. "I talked to over 150 people and collected around 55 interviews," said Saylor of the lengthy process.

Most people in the West, including Saylor's parents according to him, saw TV reports and the enormous celebrations that surrounded the 1990 reunification. These people thus saw the process as a happy story and seemed to think the story ended there. "I could see in Germany that this wasn't the case; it wasn't the end of the story but only the beginning for many East Germans," recalled Saylor.

Thus, Saylor's research has concentrated on the stories of East Germans who have either struggled mightily throughout the past twenty years or somehow found a way to approach the change as an opportunity. The success Saylor has had in collecting these stories has been great considering how personal oral history research can often be. "Most people felt relatively comfortable with me because of who I am; I lived there and have some under-

standing of what it was like," said Saylor. "Also, I am not a West German or an East German but rather an American who speaks the language; I didn't have an agenda."

Once people became comfortable with Saylor and the idea of his project, they were able to talk about their emotions and responses to the events of 1990 and the twenty years since. "I have found that memory is what it is," said Saylor in regards to oral histories. "I don't try so much to reconstruct events but rather work with people's emotional responses to what happened."

Saylor hopes to include 25-30 stories of normal individuals greatly affected by the reunification in his book along with historical commentary to put each of the stories in context. Martina and Gunter with one about Gerhard will likely be included in Saylor's final product as they have strong stories to tell. Martina and Gunter were good friends of Saylor's; Martina was the chair of the foreign language department where Saylor taught, and her husband Gunter worked for the state secret police.

"Martina was a true believer in socialism and thought they were building something better," said Saylor. "With the reunification, she had her whole world view shot down and faced a terrible readjustment." Martina's husband has also struggled over the past twenty years. "Gunter lost his job and became a complete social outcast," said Saylor. "He has been black-balled and has struggled for 20 years to find permanent work." Martina had a nervous breakdown in 90-91 and has since found out she has cancer which according to Saylor, "she feels is tied to the whole situation."

Gerhard on the other hand is an example of someone who hit the ground running and saw the transformation as an opportunity. In 1990, Gerhard bought up East German properties with West German money on long-term leases. "Since, Gerhard has built a private company that is today very efficient and profiting," said Saylor. Another story that might show up in Saylor's book is that about Stefan, a Lutheran minister whose church became a haven for people dissatisfied with the East German regime. You will have to pick up a copy of Saylor's book to read about other similar, yet unique stories of individuals drastically affected by the reunification.

Saylor has recently returned from Germany and his research for the final time, and it is now time to transcribe, organize, and make decisions about how to proceed with the information and stories he has compiled in the last year. He hopes to be done transcribing by May 15 which he will have some help with. "I just finished hiring a couple native speakers to create most of the transcripts," said Saylor. "However, I will transcribe the most difficult of the interviews and then go through all the transcripts at the end of the process to ensure there are no mistakes."

Once the transcription process is complete, Saylor will decide which stories to include in the final project and then develop the filler narrative to tie the stories together and to the events of the past 20 years. "I will need to fill in more background than I would for a book about something Americans know about,"

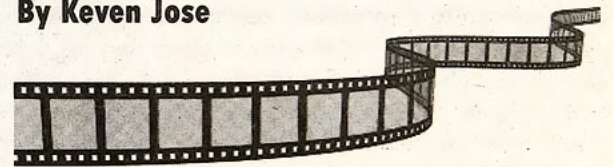
said Saylor. "I have a greater responsibility to provide enough structure on which to hang the stories of the people I interviewed."

At the end of the long process as mentioned before, Saylor hopes his book will be ready for release by the time anniversary celebrations get underway in 2010. Saylor is hopeful his book will do just that as it "is more interested in the impact on a human level and in those who were forced to react. Events happened like a title wave, and people had to stop and ask themselves, 'what are you going to do now.'"

Saylor would like to thank Concordia and especially Dean Amy Gort and Vice President of Academic Affairs Bob Deworf for giving him the opportunity to take a sabbatical to pursue this project.

Asian Heritage Month Film Nights

By Keven Jose



The Center for Hmong Studies and SEASA are working together to make the Asian Heritage Month Celebration even more exciting by featuring films about Hmong history, culture and migrations. These films English subtitled so come and join us.

Thursday, April 2, 2009 - LTC 214 Movie title: *Jao Fa (Caub Fab)* - This movie is about what happened to the Hmong in Laos after the conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1975. It is produced by *Hmong Media* and contains English subtitles. It is about 90 minutes long. Time: 6-8 pm

Thursday, April 9, 2009 - LTC 214 Movie title: *Nyab Siab Zoo (the Good Daughter-in-law)* - This documentary-like movie is about a young woman who lived with her mother-in-law after her husband passed away. Being a good daughter-in-law how culturally she is expected to take care of her mother-in-law until her death. Time: 6-8 pm

Thursday, April 16, 2009 - LTC 214/215 A lecture by Dr. Kay Madson entitled *Religious Identity in Hmong America: A Study of Changing Beliefs and Practices*. Time: 6-8 pm

Thursday, April 23, 2009 - LTC 214 Movie title: *Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America* - This documentary "powerfully exposes the struggle of Hmong refugees in America. The documentary traces the lives of three Hmong families displaced thousands of miles from their villages in Northern Laos and alienated in American cities. It reveals the challenges faced by the Hmong as they strive to maintain their culture. Time: 6-8 pm

All events are free and open to the Concordia University students, staff and faculties as well as community. If you have questions, please contact Tzy Lee Ya at csp.edu or Lee Pao at xiong@csp.edu.