



OVER THE WALL BY RENATE AHRENS

About the book

Karo's dad is dead - or so she believes - and when a stranger comes to the door one day looking for her mum, Karo wants nothing to do with this man. But Karo's mother won't see sense. She starts to spend more and more time with this strange man from her past, and can't see how unhappy it is all making her daughter. Karo squabbles with her friend, starts to skip school, she even runs away to her grandfather, but nothing she can do seems to have any effect on her changing family.

Set in Hamburg after the fall of the Berlin Wall, this is a story of how international events can affect the everyday lives of ordinary families

Background information

The reading of OVER THE WALL offers the opportunity to discuss aspects of German history in a context of world history: first, the division of Germany and the development of two global blocs in the East and the West in the aftermath of the Second World War, and secondly, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the unification of Germany which marked the end of the Cold War. For a brief period Europe seemed to be a more peaceful place, until the Civil War in the Balkans started in the early nineties.

In 1945, as a consequence of the defeat of Nazi Germany, the country was divided into four military occupation zones: the French zone in the southwest, the British in the northwest, the American in the south and the Soviet in the east.

In 1949 two German states were founded: the French, British and American occupation zones were transformed into the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG = West Germany), the Soviet zone into the German Democratic Republic (GDR = East Germany). West Germany adopted a democratic constitution, became a member of NATO and a founding member of the EU, whereas East Germany was turned into a totalitarian dictatorship allied with the Soviet Union, as a part of the Eastern bloc.

Between 1949 and 1961 travel between East and West Germany was restricted but still possible. In the 1950s every month thousands of East Germans left the country, usually by crossing the border between East and West Berlin. In order to stop the brain drain the East German government decided in August 1961 to build a Wall which cut off West Berlin from surrounding East Germany and from East Berlin. It started with the unrolling of barbed wire in the early hours of 13 August.



"We had all heard the news on the radio. A wall was being built right through the city, right through the country. There was barbed wire everywhere. Soldiers were pointing their guns at those who wanted to cross over to the other side. We came to a place where the Wall was being built right through a house that happened to be on the border. It would have taken too long to pull it down. So the house was divided, the people in the house were divided, our country was divided. We felt like running, but where could we run to? We watched the Wall getting higher and higher, inch by inch. We were petrified. We saw the faces of the people on the other side. They were petrified, too. But they were outside, we were inside, inside the Wall." (Renate Ahrens, *WHEN THE WALL CAME DOWN*, stage play)

For more than 28 years, the Wall between East and West Germany was the most highly fortified border in the world. People invented numerous ways to escape from the East: they dug tunnels, they tried to cross the border in DIY helicopters, in boats (via the Baltic Sea), strapped underneath a Western car or hidden in the boot. Some even swam. More than 1,000 people died in the attempt to escape. Those who were caught at the border were imprisoned. Young children were taken away from their parents and given up for adoption to childless couples in the GDR who were party members. West Germany paid large sums for the release of the prisoners. They had to leave East Germany immediately without a chance to recover their children. Hundreds of parents only found out about the fate of their stolen children after the fall of the Wall.

In the mid-1980s the Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev initiated reforms in the Soviet Union which led to political changes in all countries of the Eastern bloc. In the summer of 1989 Hungary opened its border and thousands of East Germans fled via Hungary to Austria and West Germany. After a period of civil unrest in East Germany the GDR government announced on the evening of 9 November that all citizens were allowed to visit West Germany and West Berlin. There was euphoria on both sides, people climbed on the Wall and celebrated all night, with the amazed soldiers looking on.

But it didn't take long for East and West Germans to realize that although they shared a history, a culture and a language, they had grown apart during more than four decades of living in countries with such different ideologies. Officially German reunification took place on 3 October 1990, but even today, the process of growing together as a people has not yet been completed.



QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

- How would you react if you found out that your mother had lied to you all your life?
- If you put yourself in the position of Karo's mother, can you understand why she hid the truth from her daughter? Why? / Why not?
- Ireland is a country which has also experienced division. Where do you see similarities between Germany and Ireland? And where are the differences?