

## 8. “When I got off at Friedrichstraße, I was so happy to be back in East Berlin!”

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*Mahmood Dabdoub*

My life as a photographer has been strongly influenced by several countries: Palestine, Lebanon, East Germany, and now the Federal Republic of Germany. All these places have enormously impacted my understanding of culture, politics, and the everyday lives of people living there. Both East Berlin and West Berlin became important places in my student life. I could visit both as a foreigner. In the GDR, I felt understood as a Palestinian because people understood when I talked about the separation of my people. As a Palestinian in Lebanon, I was already used to not really belonging. It was a bit like that in the GDR. In Lebanon, I was a second or even third-class citizen. It wasn't quite like that in the GDR, but I was still exotic for many people at first.

I was born in Baalbek, Lebanon, in 1958, ten years after my family was expelled from Palestine. Far from home, I attended school in a refugee camp. As a child, I often devoted myself to mentally escaping into different worlds and scenarios that I constructed far from the prevailing desolation and shortcomings. My favorite escape was to paint imagined worlds of houses with tiled roofs, waterfalls, and stone bridges. In addition, at school, I was often given the task of painting illustrative panels on various subjects for several classes. This gave me a lot of courage. With the moral support of my teachers, I painted even more passionately.

After graduating from high school in Beirut, I lived in West Germany for a few months starting in 1978, searching for a place to study before returning to Beirut. There I took up a job at the Palestinian cultural office in Beirut, hoping to become a painter under Ismail Shammout. Along the way, I took photographs with a *Praktika*, an East German camera, which I would carry with me as I wandered through the alleys of the refugee camp to capture the people there, going about their daily lives. My colleagues in the cultural office liked these works very much.

The famous Palestinian painter Ismail Shammout, with whom I was allowed to study and work, then said: “Mahmoud, I don't want you to stay in Beirut. I don't want to see you handling a Kalashnikov one day. I want you to go and study, and I will help you.”

With the help of a scholarship from the Artists' Association of the GDR, which was available to the Palestinian Artists' Association, I came to Leipzig in September 1981. There I learned German at the Herder Institute. At the same time, I took part in a photography workshop. After an exhibition of my photos from Beirut and the workshop results, the head of the department at the Herder Institute encouraged me to study photography. She made an appointment with the then-head of the photography department, Professor Peter Pachnicke, who, to my surprise, offered me a place at the university after an admissions interview. It was a great pleasure for me to be allowed to study at this university. However, I had to work very hard and learn a lot to progress in my development and keep up with my fellow students, who often had much more professional experience and opportunities than I did.

In Leipzig, the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst (HGB) offered the only opportunity in the entire Eastern Bloc to earn a diploma in artistic photography. The best-known teachers were Evelyn Richter, Arno Fischer, and Helfried Strauß. At the same time, it was possible to do more than simply illustrate political targets. The school gave me a lot: first and foremost, the best opportunity to become something.

I began my studies in 1982 under Helfried Strauß and would travel back to Lebanon regularly, always packing my camera and numerous films. My teacher remembered that I would bring mountains of contact prints back with me, which we would review together at a leisurely pace, armed with a strong NIKON magnifier. For me, taking pictures was primarily a means of self-help because to really “arrive”, I needed to get to know this unfamiliar society thoroughly.

Leipzig was a place of peace for me. I had no worries. I felt safe in the GDR; it became my new home. At that time, I took hundreds of photos in various cities, but they were never meant for the public. It was more like a seminar assignment at the university. I always went out and photographed what I saw. I came into contact with people quite easily.

Berlin was my second most visited city. Some friends there studied German with me at the Herder Institute. Berlin was a nice change. There I also had the chance to experience many tourists, and mostly they became the “target” of my camera – including the purchases they made – mostly teddy bears! I found especially many motifs at Alexanderplatz, a popular meeting place for us Arab Palestinians and others, including the Germans themselves. In addition, I would go out to the art college in Weißensee, where my friend was studying, or to Schönhauser Allee, a very busy area. Along the avenue and at the S-Bahn station were very different motifs: people, streetcars, merchants, etc. Even in our popular Viennese café, many interesting motifs would present themselves.

At that time, I was fortunately allowed to visit my brothers in West Berlin once a permit from the Foreigners Authority had been issued. After just a few days there, I came back. When I got off at the Friedrichstraße station, I was really happy to be back in East Berlin! There I felt free. I felt at home because nobody was asking for

a visa as they did in West Berlin, where I'd had a bad experience when I'd said that West Berlin is an international zone, and you didn't need a visa.

In 1989, when the demonstrations in Leipzig, Dresden, and Berlin were in full swing, I watched them on TV. I was in the FRG in Cologne “legally” at the time, participating in an exhibition. Then my friend in North Rhine-Westphalia persuaded me to extend my visa to see our other friends, which was made possible, and so I traveled around West Germany to visit German and Arab friends.

As a photographer, I did well most of the time in the GDR. People were quite open to me. But there were also situations where the police prevented me from photographing events. The first time this happened to me was during a demonstration on May 1, 1986, or maybe in 1987. Later, when the big protests started in Leipzig at the fall of the Wall, I was very scared. It all felt like a crazy movie. I didn't dare photograph it, my fear of being caught and deported was too great. That's what happened to many photographers.

On the big day, November 9, 1989, I returned to the GDR to Berlin accompanied by a fellow photographer. We arrived in West Berlin by car in the evening, crossing at Checkpoint-Charlie. But I was not allowed through by car, as a non-German! Ok, I thought, and drove over to Friedrichstraße to wait for my colleague, who picked me up half an hour later. We then drove on to Schönhauser Allee, to her niece's place. She had already told me at the FRG/GDR border that she had a funny feeling. She told me, “You know, I travel to the East from time to time, but it's completely different this time,” and she burst into tears. As I found out later, she had had the right feeling,

At her niece's home, we had supper and tea while we watched the news, *Die Aktuelle Kamera*, on TV. Suddenly the announcer interrupted the news to hand it over to Günther Schabowski, who spoke the famous sentence, “To my knowledge, that means... immediately, without delay.” Uttering these words about the new GDR travel regulations, Politburo spokesman Günther Schabowski involuntarily heralded the end of the German division at 6:53 p.m. on November 9, 1989 and brought down the Wall.

We got ready to set off again to make our way to the border. The first gate was Bornholmer Straße. Luckily, I had three films with me. I took photos of the happy, jubilant people from the East and West, and was very taken and moved throughout that night of freedom. I had goosebumps and tears in my eyes as I accompanied this event. I was there on Bornholmer Strasse and crossed the bridge with all these people. We were all crying and so happy. And I wondered when this would happen to us Palestinians: when would we be allowed to open doors and cross bridges? It was indescribable. But I couldn't photograph any of it because I felt paralyzed. Even today I'm ashamed that I didn't capture it with my camera.

The crowds headed to the Ku'damm in the center of Berlin-West, and we were on the streets for hours until the early morning. Exhausted, I went to my brother's without fear of the police.

But then our situation began to change. We were uncertain what would await us scholarship holders of the GDR in the coming days. For the most part, many people moved to the Federal Republic to shape their future since the “new states” situation was very precarious. Fortunately, the authorities, who had known me over the years, recognized my residence permit without any problems and exchanged it for a “Federal Republic” one.

Looking back, I feel my student years were some of the best times I have experienced. They shaped me and made me the citizen of Leipzig I am today. I live in Leipzig with my wife and my three daughters, who are studying. They have learned Arabic and a lot about our original culture from us. In 2000 I became a German citizen. I see myself as a bridge builder between the Orient and the Occident. My illustrated books, the titles of which translate as “How far is Palestine?”<sup>1</sup>, “New home Leipzig”<sup>2</sup>, and “Land of the wounded cedars”<sup>3</sup>, are proof of my being anchored in both worlds.

I want to show in my work that I am connected to and appreciate both worlds, because both have their justification despite the stark differences. Humanity is what connects us, and that’s my motto.

As a freelance photographer, I am very busy documenting, among other things, the transformation of my city, Leipzig.

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- 1 Dabdoub, Mahmond; Latchinian, Sarkis; Latchinian, Adelheid; Karasholi, Adel (2003) *Wie fern ist Palästina? Fotos aus palästinensischen Flüchtlingslagern*. Passage-Verlag, Leipzig.
  - 2 Dabdoub, Mahmond (2003) *Alltag in der DDR. Fotos aus den 80er Jahren. Mit Texten von Gunter Böhnke und Bernd Lindner*, Passage-Verlag, Leipzig.
  - 3 Dabdoub, Mahmond; Shalha, Ahmad (2007) *Land der verletzten Zedern, Dokumente eines Krieges. Ein Fototagebuch aus dem Libanon*, Passage-Verlag, Leipzig.

*Fig. 8.1: Reichstag and the Wall of Berlin*



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*Fig. 8.2: U-Bahnhof Dimitroffstrasse, today U-Bahnhof Eberswalder Straße*



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*Fig. 8.3: The Marx and Engels Forum, against the backdrop of the (now demolished) Palast der Republik, the former seat of parliament for the German Democratic Republic (GDR).*



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*Fig. 8.4: "In Space and on Earth"*



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Fig. 8.5: “280 Leistungsverträge. Wissenschaft-Produktion”



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*Fig. 8.6: Bornholmer Straße, East-Berlin, 9th November 1989*



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