Behind the Iron Curtain: Recollections of Latter-day Saints in East Germany 1945-1989 Garold N. Davis and Norma S. Davis; Faith Rewarded: A Personal Account of Prophetic Promises to the East German Saints Thomas S. Monson

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Even if they had planned it (and they did not), the publishers of these two 1996 works dealing with the Saints in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR or East Germany) before 1989 probably could not have produced more closely complementary volumes. They give a remarkable view of the Church in that country from 1945–1989—a unique chapter in Church history, since the GDR was the only Communist-ruled country in the world with fully operational branches and districts, a mission, an indigenous mission presidency, and, ultimately, a temple within its boundaries. The personal records of President Monson give a Church leader’s view of the struggle of the East Germans striving to practice their faith under an oppressive Communist regime, while the oral histories of individual members in the Davis volume document, from the rank and file, instances of faith, sacrifice, persecution, endurance, resistance, courage, and obedience that rival many accounts from early Church history. Together, they tell a marvelous tale.

While serving as missionaries in Dresden during 1989–90, Norma Davis, an associate professor of humanities at BYU, and her husband, Garold, a professor of German at BYU, began recording interviews with East German Saints. The editors returned to Dresden in 1994 and taped more interviews, to which they added written material they acquired from other members who had lived or still resided in the GDR—passages from journals, recorded personal histories, and written recollections of specific events or time periods. All this they translated into a highly readable compilation. A total of forty-four informants—some of whom contributed to more than one section—provided material arranged into thirty-one chapters.
The first four chapters on the destruction of Dresden give firsthand accounts of Saints who survived the bombing of February 13-14, 1945, that claimed sixty thousand lives. Only one Church member died in the bombing and the firestorm that raged and incinerated many victims after the air raid was over. Other members escaped miraculously, in at least one case because children encouraged their mother to follow the guidance of the priesthood when she wanted to take the more logical escape route instead of the one her husband chose.

The next eleven chapters, entitled “Rebuilding Zion,” deal primarily with the immediate postwar years and efforts to reestablish the Church. A section entitled “Living with the Communists,” which covers the period after the founding of the German Democratic Republic in 1949, details the constant tension felt by Church members who were trying to obey both the Lord’s law and the law of an oppressive government and describes the survival tactics they used inside their “little guarded borders” (351). The final chapters include an account of the temple that was dedicated in 1985, the first in a Communist country; conversion stories of five members who joined the Church in the months shortly before the Wall fell in 1989; and testimonies from two of the first East Germans to be sent on missions outside their country while it was still under Communist rule.

The book of excerpts that President Monson selected from his journal offers a non-German perspective on many of the same events and topics covered in the Davis compilation. It begins with an entry on July 12, 1968, when the forty-one-year-old Apostle, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve for just over five years, went to East Germany for the first time in his new assignment as supervisor of European missions. For the next seventeen years, he retained sole apostolic responsibility for East Germany, visiting the country many times and ultimately securing permission for a temple to be built there. His journal makes it clear that his commitment to Church members there was more than a routine administrative assignment. When he pronounced a dedicatory prayer on the GDR in 1975, he wrote, “I think I have not enjoyed a more spiritual experience as a member of the Council of the Twelve” (38), and in 1982 he notes, “I consider my service in the Dresden
Mission to be a highlight in my ministry thus far as a member of the Council of the Twelve” (74).

Even after he was called to the First Presidency (Elder Russell Nelson took over his assignment late in 1985), President Monson remained involved in matters concerning members in the GDR, whom he loved and admired, and he continued to visit the country. His journal documents additional visits and contacts up through August 1995, the most notable being those describing his role as the primary negotiator in reaching the 1988 agreement with the East German government that allowed the Church to send local members on foreign missions and noncitizens to East Germany as missionaries. After the Wall fell in November 1989, he continued to visit the country, oversaw work there, and hosted former officials from East Germany in Salt Lake City.

The Church in Germany has a long, distinguished history. The Dresden Branch, founded under the leadership of a young convert named Karl G. Maeser, has been in continuous existence since 1855—longer than most wards in Utah or anywhere else in the world. After World War II, somewhere between 4,500 and 5,000 members lived in what became the German Democratic Republic, some of them second- or third-generation Mormons. Their recollections (in the Davis book) of the hardships immediately following 1945 echo numerous published descriptions of those years by well-known German writers, historians, and public figures, but with an essential difference—they lack the tone of self-pity that the Nobel prize-winning novelist Thomas Mann sees as quintessentially German.

One might assert that a remove of four decades had dimmed or filtered the Church members’ memories, but there appears to be more to it than that. They reported the same events other Germans did—the Russian soldiers who raped and pillaged; the malnutrition that claimed so many lives between 1945 and 1949; the lack of even rudimentary housing and medical care; inadequate clothing, transportation, and protection against the elements; not to mention state-imposed obstacles as they tried to exercise their religion. But the tone of these recollections radiates the same spirit of courage and hope in dealing with hardships that we find in accounts of the 1846–47 exodus of the Church in the United States.
Faith, it seems, endowed the Saints with an attitude toward adversity that differed sharply from the general population.

As male Church members serving in the German army returned home to East Germany in 1945, many of them immediately set out on missions (foreign missionaries were no longer allowed to enter). They went without any means of support and in most cases stayed for three, four, and more years before the state disallowed further missionary callings by the Church in the late 1950s. Almost without exception, they suffered severe consequences for their missionary service—for the rest of their lives, almost all were permanently barred from all but low-paying jobs. Nearly all members also suffered job discrimination because of Church membership. Such discrimination usually took the form of blocked promotions, especially if they declined invitations to join the Party. And with rare exceptions, children of Church members were mocked by their teachers, disadvantaged in school advancement, and denied entrance to universities.

In part because the Church was seen as an “American sect” and also because of the official stance against any religion, the Church endured varying degrees and forms of harassment by the government for at least the first thirty years after 1945. Several accounts in the Davis book describe how branch members found a building or rooms in which to meet, refurbished them at great personal expense and sacrifice (they acquired the materials and performed all the labor themselves), only to have the government confiscate the space and assign them other run-down quarters. In several branches this happened twice, and in one case, three times. Members also recall how, for many years, branch presidents had to report all meetings and assigned speakers in advance; they were not allowed to hold youth dances or conferences, since these competed with the state-run youth organization; the State Security service regularly sent agents to observe meetings; and neighbors became informants for the State Security.

Until 1960, the members’ hunger for Church literature, which was forbidden in the GDR, fostered an underground distribution system. Lesson manuals, tracts, books, and magazines would be brought in, usually through West Berlin; then designated members would type some or all of a certain publication, making seven
or eight carbon copies, and circulate them among members. This practice caused a dilemma of conscience for some when the presiding authority in East Germany, President Henry Burkhardt, who himself had assisted in bringing materials in illegally, in 1960 asked members to become law-abiding citizens and destroy copies of all illegal Church literature in their possession.

Nearly all complied, however reluctantly, but at least one brother describes his pain at burning all his Church materials in an open stove (it took him two days) and admits his mild subversion in saving only one book—a bound copy of four years of typed priesthood manuals. "I don't care if they throw me in prison," he thought to himself, "this is one book I am not going to burn" (Davis, 159). He nearly regretted it later when the State Security visited him and examined his books but failed to find the incriminating one. Suddenly he saw the wisdom in obedience, and he concluded, "This actually gave us more encouragement to study our lessons more thoroughly from the standard works" (Davis, 160).

Youth conferences, which attracted young people from the entire district, figured strongly in most of the recollections recorded by the Davises. Though technically illegal at first (this gradually changed), young people and leaders once assembled a conference by having every individual person apply separately for a permit at a designated campsite. Sometimes the leaders registered an event as a worship service, which was not forbidden, but appended activities to it which looked suspiciously like those of a youth conference. Youth dances, too, were popular but illegal unless scheduled as part of a worship service and not advertised as a dance.

President Burkhardt, who was named mission president for all East Germany in 1969, cautiously tolerated this "letter-of-the-law" obedience. His strategy was to prove to the authorities that members of the Church were reliable, law-abiding citizens of their state, and he emphasized adherence to the law of the land as the only means by which the Church would thrive. His success in conveying this message to government authorities ultimately paved the way for approval of the temple built in 1985.

It was this dilemma of obedience to a state that denied members the right to exercise important aspects of their religion—such
as, receive patriarchal blessings, attend the temple, have access to Church literature, and travel outside their country to do genealogical research—which captured President Monson’s attention when he first visited East Germany. For a time, President Burkhardt had issued temple recommends to members who had visas to travel only to West Germany—notably retired people. But to visit a temple, they had to cross into Switzerland illegally, which made the Church complicit in an action that broke the law of their country. Therefore he discontinued the practice.

On his second visit to the GDR in November 1968, President Monson, speaking in Görlitz, was so moved by this denial of blessings that he made a prophetic promise: “If you will remain true and faithful to the commandments of God, every blessing any member of the Church enjoys in any other country will be yours” (5). Later journal entries suggest mild concern about his boldness in making this promise, but he remained firm in the conviction that the Lord had inspired him to utter it, which in turn motivated him to work for its fulfillment. Repeatedly his journal records miracles connected with it—the granting of government permission for President Burkhardt, his counselors, and later other local authorities and their wives (couples together were never allowed to travel to the West) to attend general conference in Salt Lake; healings of local leaders; the ordination of a patriarch who was allowed to travel outside the country for instruction; a chance meeting in Frankfurt between President Monson and a government official from East Germany at a time in 1984 when it appeared that the temple project would be canceled because the government perceived that the Church was growing too visible; the temple open house in 1985, which government officials later told him would never have been allowed if they had known the interest it would generate among East German citizens; and permission for East Germans to serve missions outside the country and for East Germany to receive missionaries from non-Communist countries.

President Monson’s journals allow readers to draw conclusions about the deliberations underlying Church administrative decisions on East Germany. It must have been unusual to leave an Apostle in the same assignment for seventeen years. Elder Monson persisted in his assignment, for, in a journal entry in 1982, he
observes, “Were it not for the continuity established by having one member of the Council of the Twelve monitor and watch over this particular area, I do not believe we would have made nearly the progress we have” (74–75), a point he reinforces again in 1990:

By keeping close to the work for this extended period, I was able to establish the continuity which developed trust on the part of government officials and resulted in our having missionary work permitted in the nation, which seemed to be the great breakthrough that preceded other blessings. (153)

It is certainly striking how closely the private persona in this journal resembles the public one known to the Church. Clearly President Monson is a man of deep affection. Repeatedly, his journal mentions his love for East German Saints and how “I feel right at home in this culture” (115).

The Davis book mentions Church leaders such as Henry Burkhardt, Gottfried Richter, Manfred Schütze, and Walter Krause, whom the Davises accurately call “a legend in his own lifetime” (49). President Monson shares this view as he calls him a “giant of the Lord” (15). The East German Church leaders, he wrote, are “equally as dynamic and spiritually powerful as [men] in any dispensation” (16). In his 1975 prayer dedicating the GDR, President Monson says of Henry Burkhardt, “We know of no man of greater faith in Thy kingdom” (37). His journal also provides numerous specific examples of why this description was not hyperbolic.

The same affection President Monson reveals in his comments is reflected in his behavior—going well out of his way to meet members, to give blessings, or to heal the sick. His deep compassion for the deprivation suffered by many East German Saints moved him to frequent acts of kindness, most of them spontaneous. For example, noticing the shabby clothing that a senior member of a stake high council wore, he was struck by the notion that his suit might fit the man. It did, whereupon President Monson gave him the suit on the spot, along with several ties and a shirt and “put on pair of slacks and a jacket” (80–81) to get to his next destination. He also surrendered a pair of his shoes to the stake patriarch’s son. On numerous occasions, he gave away candy and his pocket calculators. He also, “willingly” and “with no
regrets” (94–95), gave his well-used, personalized, leather-bound set of scriptures to Henry Burkhardt to help him learn English.

The sacrifices of the East German Saints which the Davises and President Monson record make almost embarrassing reading for Latter-day Saints in more affluent, free countries today. Yet the relative isolation and government persecution endured by these Saints generated blessings which they freely acknowledge—powerful unity, cooperation, strong self-reliance, willing sacrifice, extraordinary dedication, and a high degree of spirituality.

Amidst it all, several members remember that they never felt forgotten by Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. They could not know, as President Monson records in numerous journal entries, that the General Authorities spent unusual amounts of time dealing with their situation. As an entry of March 29, 1978 notes, “We all recognize that the Dresden Mission is different from any ecclesiastical unit in the Church and has to be approached keeping this fact in mind” (44). The East Germans did know, however, of numerous visits by General Authorities over the years, nearly all of which President Monson records.

One may well wonder how much the exceptional faith of the East German members and the extraordinary attention given by Church headquarters to this one small country (seventeen million people) contributed to the enormous changes that overtook the GDR in 1989. Based on members’ testimonies recorded by Norma and Garold Davis and the entries in President Monson’s journals, it is clear that an accumulation of seemingly minor miracles—a leitmotif in each of these books—led to the major miracles of a temple being erected in a Communist country and of members ultimately being allowed to leave the country for missionary purposes. President Monson saw those miracles from a leader’s perspective; the members saw the same events from an internal perspective. The complete convergence of those two views in these complementary volumes illuminates this unparalleled chapter of Church history.
NOTE

Because of the nature of this collection of reminiscences, the authors were careful to point out that

the stories do not present a complete or even detailed history. . . . The narrators do not always agree in detail or in their evaluation of the events they experienced. We have left the inconsistencies intact because these are their honest responses to the circumstances. By looking at the circumstances from various points of view, we sometimes come closer to the reality (xviii, xiv)

For instance, individual experiences and memories differed somewhat concerning the amount of governmental restriction on educational and professional opportunities. Some members felt there were definite restrictions placed on them professionally (197, 235), and others thought they were not disadvantaged nor discriminated against (225). Some confusion exists about the printed material Church members were allowed to have. After the construction of the Berlin Wall, governmental restrictions were tightened so that members were allowed to have no printed material for which they had no previous written authorization, and they could receive no new material. In addition to these clarifications, BYU Studies would like to correct an error on page 57. Forty to fifty kilograms would equal eighty-eight to one hundred and ten pounds. Four hundred kilograms would be over eight hundred pounds.—Ed.