

Prologue

THE ANTHROPOLOGIST WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD

IT TOOK ME OVER A YEAR to finally sit down with Klaus-Dieter Baumgarten, the general in charge of the Grenztruppen der DDR—the East German Border Guards. I had slowly worked my way up the “chain of command” that still regulated much of my work, including whom I could talk to and whom I could meet. While it was generally not a problem meeting with lower-ranking officers and their families, gaining access to high-ranking former officers was a tricky process of vetting, knowing who to talk to, observing military courtesies and customs, of using the right words and phrases at the right time.

I often had the feeling that among a certain group of former NVA officers, a “shadow government-in-waiting” existed, a group of men who had held power, and who—however tenuously—clung to a hope that they would one day have power again. They were a group of men who had had power, lost it, were still dazed by the loss, and had not quite recognized that power had slipped away from them forever. These men still used their ranks, observed the hierarchy of the NVA, and demanded a strict observance of the hierarchy. Working one’s way up the chain meant observing the hierarchy, of paying deference at each stage of the ladder.

One afternoon, I received a call from Baumgarten’s “adjutant,” a former NVA *Volksmarine*—“People’s Navy”—captain. My request for a meeting with General Klaus-Dieter Baumgarten had reached him, and he had decided, based on discussions with other officers who had met with me and who I had interviewed, that he would present my request to the general. If successful, I would receive a call from the general himself in the next few weeks.

A few weeks did indeed pass. As I was getting ready to go to the archive one morning, the phone rang. A slightly gravelly voice began, “Are you Herr Bickford, the American student interested in the National People’s Army of the German Democratic Republic?” I was somewhat

taken aback by the abrupt question, but realized quickly that the person on the other end of the line was Baumgarten. “Yes, I’m Herr Bickford,” I answered, and waited for him to continue. “Good,” he said. “This is General Baumgarten. I have received your request to meet with me and discuss the experiences of the officers of the National People’s Army and Border Guards of the German Democratic Republic. I will meet with you tomorrow. You will do the following: Take the S-3 train to the Erkner station, arriving at eleven A.M. You will have a copy of tomorrow’s edition of *Neues Deutschland* with you. Proceed down the steps from the station, and stand under the third light post on your right. You will see a Trabant appear. I will flash the lights at you twice, whereupon you will transfer your copy of *Neues Deutschland* from your right arm to your left. I will flash the lights twice again. I will know it is you and pick you up. Click.”

With that, our conversation was over, and our meeting had been arranged. I felt like Richard Burton in *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold*, although, unfortunately, I didn’t own a trenchcoat.

I arrived at Erkner shortly before eleven. It was—perhaps wonderfully—a typical winter day in Berlin: cold, gray, dreary, and wet. What better way, I thought, to meet the former head of the Border Guards, the man who had issued the shoot-to-kill orders for the Berlin Wall, and who was now serving time for murder for issuing those orders. The weather only enhanced my feeling that I was taking part in a Cold War thriller, heading out to some secret meeting from which I might never return. I didn’t really think I would never return, but it definitely added to the fantasy-performance of Cold War intrigue. Of course, ten or twenty years earlier, a call such as that from Baumgarten indeed would have carried the threat and menace of the possibility of not returning.

It was raining steadily when I found the third lightpost on the right. There were a few people around, but otherwise, it was a very quiet and subdued morning. I stood by the light post, but I really wasn’t sure how to stand. I put my copy of *Neues Deutschland* under my arm and leaned against the light post. But was that the right way to stand? I wanted to look nonchalant, but not disinterested. I didn’t want to stand completely upright, either, looking as if I were standing at attention for the general. These things meant a lot, I had learned; body posture among former

officers could communicate indifference or disrespect, deference, and sincerity, and set the tone of the interview. I finally figured out a compromise: I would stand up straight and lean against the light post. I felt like a slanted matchstick.

I have no idea if Baumgarten saw me trying to figure out how to stand, or if he did, if he knew what I was doing. Shortly—mercifully—after figuring out my posture, an old Trabant approached me slowly. As it came closer, I squinted to see the driver, but because of the rain and mist, I couldn't really see into the car. The car stopped. Twice, the lights flashed. I slowly shifted my copy of *Neues Deutschland* from my right arm to my left. The lights flashed again, this time a bit more quickly. The Trabant's engine roared, as Baumgarten pulled up in front of me. "Get in!" he growled. I got in. I had entered a time machine.