

Church service on the day of the German reunification in the village of Himmelpfort

October 3rd, 1990

In the following you will find a transcript and translation of a church service in the small village of Himmelpfort, in East Germany, as recorded on the 3rd of October 1990, the day of the German reunification. Pastor Erich Köhler leads the service. He is supported by his son, Harald Köhler and Markus Kliesch and Klaus Tischendorf. This document is published with the written permission of Pastor Köhler. Bible passages are not translated from the original but taken from the New International Version

[bells ringing]

Erich Köhler: I want to welcome everyone who is attending this very special service, or better ceremony. Tonight the bells rang. At first, we did not want to celebrate, but I have been told that at the end of 45 the bells rang when the Red Army occupied the village. But we decided that these very same bells should also ring in the peace, because today marks the end of the postwar period. The Iron Curtain broke down and Germany will become one again. We, as Germans, are now bound into the European Community and that brings us to the very first piece of music, which we will be listening to now. We all know it, I don't need to tell you. I only want to add that this piece shows us, that it's not just about us Germans, and we're not the only ones experiencing difficulties, we're bound into the new order of Europe.

Music: [Markus Kliesch, Harald Köhler]

Erich Köhler: The bible as a book is very up-to-date. I want to read out a few words, actually Harald [Köhler] will. Those words have been spoken and written down 2200 years ago. And I... we will read and listen to these words and I will comment on them, and you will see how relevant this old bible still is today.

Harald Köhler: King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them.

Erich Köhler: The party and its general secretary wanted to celebrate the 40th anniversary of their state, and invited many friends and people of power. There were big state banquets with fine foods and only the best wines. Only those belonging to the top 10,000 were invited, only those who were screened by the Stasi well before were allowed to join the festivities.

Harald Köhler: And while he was drink, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

In dinner speeches the wise policies of the government were praised. No power on earth would break its power. And literally they said: "Neither an ox nor a donkey is able to stop the progress of socialism."¹ [A man, how proud that sounds...] And the teachings of Karl Marx are true, because they are almighty and they were applauded by Ministers, diplomats, party secretaries, Stasi members, activists, bearers of medals, and the state's wise men, as well as the Scientists who supported the system with their wisdom, and top athletes. All joined in: "Long live the only, ever lasting, powerful, blossoming Republic."

Harald Köhler: Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lamp stand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. 6 His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.

Erich Köhler: Here too, fingers wrote mysterious signs on the wall, which those in power did not want to see, though they were visible to everyone. People left the country: Artists, doctors, young people, [...?], the environment died, the streets resembled a moonscape, groups formed, and were joined by more and more people, and even the highest guest of honour left a sign on the wall, when he said "Dangers await only those who do not react to life." And whilst within the system, it they celebrated, dined got drunk, thousands of people protested outside [...?/gathered in], the crippled, locked up church, as it was said back then. But how many more could they lock away in prisons?

¹Original by August Bebel (1840-1913), one of the founders of the social democratic party in Germany, often quoted by Erich Honecker. An example is a news headline regarding the development of the DDR's first 32bit micro chip in the SED party paper "Neues Deutschland" from the 15. August 1989, http://de.wikiquote.org/wiki/Erich_Honecker

Or, as [?] Brecht once said, “Would it not be easier//In that case for the government//To dissolve the people//And elect another?”²

Harald Köhler: This is what these words mean: Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

Erich Köhler: The signs on the wall meant: You have had your chance for 40 years, but you have passed it. You had it, splurged it, you grew affectation, harassed and chased honest people, thinking people, critical people. You let your power get into your head and you wanted to protect only your power. Your time has come to an end, because this is what I want. God, whom you declared dead, whom you belittled and ridiculed. Now I am with the people who are out on the streets, protesting and who become more and more. Your State Security³ will not help you. Your army is pointless. Your courtiers are shaking. Nobody knows how [...] Your time is up, the trial has begun.

Harald Köhler: That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain.

Erich Köhler: Nobody was killed here, but discharged. Some were put into prison. And you could see them in their entire paltriness and stupidity, like when the Minister of the State Security stammered: "But, I love you all."⁴ footnote{A common misquote of Erich Mielke, 13 November 1989, speaking in front of the people's assembly in the GDR. In fact he said "But I love – I love all – all people..."}, like the head of the trade union who had to disclose where the millions of the working people went, used to build huge hunting lodges and the pompous central building in Berlin. The people saw how antlers were nailed to the barn walls, because the mighty could not stop hunting animals. Like the kings in the old times, who were driven the animals [?] to butcher/kill them off. You could see them in their entire paltriness, how they bought luxury goods for cheap money, how they gave each other medals, houses and dachas⁴, on a small scale, as well as on the grand scale. Now judgement has been passed, history has spoken its verdict.

²The actual Brecht poem says:
Some party hack decreed that the people
had lost the government's confidence
and could only regain it with redoubled effort.
If that is the case, would it not be simpler,
If the government simply dissolved the people
And elected another?

“The Solution” [“Die Lösung”] (c. 1953)

³StaSi - Staatssicherheit, the secret police of East Germany

⁴Holiday houses

The next piece of music originates from music lesson at school. Teacher Tischendorf tried to make the children understand - well, they're not children anymore, they're youths now - which national anthem on should choose. The GDR national anthem was presented, the BRD national anthem and the "Ode to Joy" of the 9th symphony. And in this lesson, the following piece was created, and we want to listen to it once again. Although, it was more relevant yesterday, today it is already past again. But since we have to think about the past today, it is good to listen to it again.

Music: [Markus Kliesch, Harald Köhler/Erich Tischendorf?]

Erich Köhler: Dear friends, there are two ways we can bring life into today: On the one hand, we might bring on the tune "Winter goodbye, parting hurts, but our parting makes, that my heart awakes" [Old German folk song] In which case it will say: "Goodbye GDR, but our parting makes, that my heart awakes". In which case today would be a jubilee, with bells ringing and fireworks, farewell from the SED-state, from the state that suppressed human rights, farewell, finally, from the state security service (StaSi), farewell from the state of surveillance and prohibitions, farewell to a state that imprisoned its citizens, and that ordered them to drink water whilst its leaders drank wine. Farewell, too, from a state that left the country to rot and drove it into bankruptcy. This state that has many people's lives to answer for, that ruled and controlled even the details of our lives, that made us unlearn to think freely and that educated us to become creepers, not free human beings. From this state, where shortages were abhorred, where connections were everything, where no regard had to be paid for others, where dissidents were oppressed—Christians, too. From this state, in which the party membership was worth more than diligence, we are looking forward to part from indeed. Only those that enjoyed the benefits of this state, all the functionaries, StaSi people, the Spies, the diplomats, the politicians, the officers in the army, the many that have secured themselves an easy post, and now mourn the times where they were worry-free.

But there is another way we want to approach today: In this state, no one had to suffer from hunger. Life itself was cheap. No one was unemployed, no one had to worry—the prices remained stable, life was straightforward, and money didn't play a big role. There was hardly any drug crime, no bank robberies, and no one was subjected to the arbitrariness of home owners [landlords]. In these times, friendships between people developed, who helped each other, a kind of living community, who helped each other. So that we, despite all the suppression, would not give up on each other, but that we could learn to walk upright. And from this state I part with a faint melancholy, because it has shaped us like a distant relative, who was difficult,

but with whom one shared the last forty years, because there was no other way. Forty years, that's an entire generation.

And since we will have to affiliate, and West German law will be binding throughout, we are now people who are not contributing to the general order, and will remain beggars in the near future. Recently, increased prices are squeezing the money out of our pockets, and our savings are halved. We are facing a destroyed environment, a desolate economy, we find ourselves helpless in the freedom of the free market economy, and our experience is no longer in demand. Money becomes increasingly important. And do not just have reason to celebrate, this date of October 3rd represents a deep recession [break?] into our lives. Therefore it is not the time [?] for jubilee, instead we have gathered to contemplate God's Word and the forty years that have now come to an end. However, we should not just see the negative [?], in my view there is also reason to celebrate, that today represents the end of the postwar period, and finally the peace treaty that we have been promised in 1945 already is put into place, and which the SED fought and feared like the plague. Germany is once again a sovereign, not an occupied country. The troops of the allied powers are about to withdraw, and if all those who have suffered under them, those who suffered under these troops, who might have lived near shooting ranges, will appreciate this. We have been plundered and treated like an occupied country. This is now over. And for the sake of completion I also want to give a brief overview over the last 45 years. 1945 was the year of the conference in Potsdam. Germany had been defeated, and the victors distributed the haul: 110,000 square kilometres became Polish, or Soviet respectively. Five million Germans had to leave their homeland, the country was in ruins, and the dead of the plagues. Hunger was a daily occurrence. Germany was split into four zones, factories and livestock were seized, or destroyed if they could not be taken away. These were the consequences of a lost war, through the German guilt—one just needs to read Hitler's aims for the war in 'Mein Kampf'—being brought on the German people. We have tried to explain personal suffering through the collective guilt. And even if the individual may not be to blame, he still had to bear the suffering, because he was German. Soon there conflicts between the victors, the zones became spheres of influence and the Germans were needed again, also as soldiers. The Cold War began, and Germany suddenly found itself in the intersection of two world spheres: One, which was called capitalist, and the other one which called itself Socialist. 1949 the BRD [Federal Republic of Germany] was founded, and a few weeks later, on October 7th, the DDR [East Germany]. We can now say that both states were inspired by the respective victorious powers. They exerted their influence in the

election of the right politicians and the politics of the new countries. We can be certain about the influences in the DDR, where already in 1945 key positions were handed to the communists. But likewise in the West, the progression was not decided by a free state. Instead the will of the occupying powers was respected, even though it was less obvious.

The new borders were more than just a little unusual: Now two million people lived in the GDR. They separated villages, rivers, families. But we cannot deny that the founding of the GDR wasn't accompanied by great hopes. Yet both states perceived themselves at least initially provisional. Until approximately 1958 the SED spoke of the German reunification, although they would only agree to it, if it was a socialist unification. And there the SED was right, fire and water cannot be put together. It was foreseeable that one of the new states had to be given up if there were to be a reunification. Yet it seemed possible: The first steps were promising and the country experienced a certain kind of excitement for the creation of a new state, to end the exploitation, to be there for the people, to create a just world for everyone. Of course, the economical development was lagging behind the BRD [West Germany], but we were promised that this would change, that one day we the liberated working class would allow us to overtake the BRD. As a matter of fact, like on June 17th 1953, when it was promised [?] and in 1960 where 15,000 people left the GDR every month. Soon it was August 13th 1961, the day of the construction of the wall. Under the influence of the disruptions and people fleeing over the border, the newly protected border was meant to allow for the creation of a state that would guarantee a better life for everyone. During a political discussion at that time I said "A wall has two sides. It is meant to keep those we don't want out, but it can also keep them in.", I was immediately called an enemy of the state. The "Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart", as it was called, was meant to perpetuate the German divide and the power of Socialism. Under the Wall's protection, the GDR was rebuilt in the image of the Party. Agriculture was professionalised, large state cooperatives were formed, the last private companies were nationalised in '72, independent craftsmen were demanded to join co-operatives. The schools became socialist, which implied squeezing out the remnants of a democratic anti-fascism. Again and again, the party was praised, and towards the end it had 2.2 million members. There were many occupational bans, not just for those in the BRD [?]. For a leading position, you would had to be a member of the party. If you wanted to study, it was easier if you were a party member. The consequences were a catastrophe. Woes to those who disagreed with the state. Either he would have to hide, live a second life or had to go into prison. This is how to

teach courtiers, with their faces fearfully looking up to where political decisions were made, and who were lacking all own initiative. I commemorate the times where teachers asked “Which Sandman programme are you watching?”⁵, where FDJ⁶-groups [brigades] flipped television antennas. Even history was forged, and war dates and numbers were suppressed. Just think about the occupation of East-Poland under Stalin and the destruction of the Polish army in Katyn. At the same time, due to the communist victims under Hitler, History was taught that everybody had to understand “It’s the SED who brings salvation”. The personality cult flourished, the general secretary was equivalent to the dear God himself. In Prenzlau⁷, dry nurses were being told that if they passed the Marxism-Leninism course, they would have passed half of their degree—and they are working with infants! Surveillance increased beyond imagination through the inflated wings of the state security. No bedroom, no telephone, no letter was safe. Every trip to the West had to be paid with a full screening of the person, whether he really [deserved ?] And throughout all of this, the economy declined. Towns and villages rotted away, the few beacon projects could not save us from chaos, the environment was ruined, whilst more and more alarming numbers were published. The party was like an ostrich with its head in the sand when danger approaches, hoping that it can see no one, it will not be seen, either. Culture was organised, brought into line and censored. During all of this, the black market and corruption blossomed. Everything was sold for Western money (Deutschmark), even humans were traded, and from the profit they bought us oranges for Christmas. Life made us sick, partly through primitive working conditions, but much more through our mental pain. And if our health is worse compared to those in Federal Republic, then it is not because we worked more, but because we lacked important foodstuffs and because of our mental scars, as we always lived in fear of being spied on. Our artists left the country, and so did our doctors, [?] and skilled workers [?].

And I am thinking about the ghastly jubilee celebrations on the 7th of October 1989, when the protesters were already on the streets and the situation as comparable to a volcano that is about to erupt

⁵Both countries, East and West Germany had a distinctive good night programme for kids called “Sandmann”, however they were recorded independently of each other, and differed in style and production. Thus, asking which of those the kids had watched was a good way to find out whether the parents were watching “Westfernsehen” (West-German television) or the East German programmes, and draw conclusions on their political views and allegiance to the state.

⁶“Freie Deutsche Jugend”, the Party’s youth organisation

⁷Medium sized town near Himmelpfort

any time. And despite all of this, there were honest people, even in the party. There were many who were clean, who did not snitch on others. Friendships developed. The constant pressure did not just tire, but also hardened us and filled us with pride. I never suffered from low self esteem, I have always been proud to be a Christian in the GDR. The system had to shake, it outlived its purpose. It wanted the impossible and lost sight of what's real. Wandlitz⁸ was a wall in a country that was already walled in. There is no better way to describe the condition of the country and its government. They neither heard nor saw the signs, they didn't want to, and they perished because they were unable to reform. The last year was intense. For a few moments history compressed time for what usually takes decades. The revolution changed everything. It was a good time. Unfortunately it was too short. And we should also ask whether the right people came to govern our state. In March, a new question arose, that of a unification. I would have liked to live a bit longer in our GDR to rebuild it, but we were told that this was a one-off moment, that our country was bankrupt, thousands would leave to the other side, that the country was ungovernable, and therefore a quick union was necessary. And during all of this I was afraid a coup could destroy everything, and I am sure attempts were made. Modrow's government⁹ did everything to retain the status quo, or at least delay its destruction.

Now we are one people. Those with power, will decide the way. The Bundeskanzler [chancellor] is from the BRD, the federal president, almost all ministers, the legislation, the free market economy, the culture. There is very little of our experience that is needed, that we can contribute to the new state.

Christians know that no country is paradise. There is injustice everywhere. Over there [in the west], it is freer, but it is also more dangerous. Bank robberies, illegal drugs, prostitution, legal drugs. Over there, many are unemployed, not just those sham unemployed like in the GDR. We were able to overthrow a power without bloodshed, even though it appeared to be insurmountable. Yet we are no winners radiating with joy, but marked by our wounds and scars that still hurt. Even if it is just the fear of not being able to cope in the new life. But there's no turning back. We have to move on. Those who wall themselves in, you will perish. Those who resign themselves are already lost. And we are joining a country—or we are now in a country—that at least with regard to the economy, was stronger than we ever were, and always has been. I speak for all those here today, those able to work, the youths, the pensioners, the

⁸Town with a holiday spot for high ranking members of the Socialist ruling party.

⁹The government around Hans Modrow, East Germany's last Communist prime minister

men and the women: Do not let yourselves drown in the rallying cries from the left or the right. From the Left, telling us we will all die. So far we did not die, and we will not die either. They will have voices to turn to those who feel unhappy and insecure. Do not let yourself be taken in by those on the right, those who demand a greater Germany and who demand "Away with those foreigners, with those communists, Jews and the Poles". They too are dangerous. We should follow our new country critically, and I hope and pray, that we will all find our place in the new republic, but shaped by our experience of the last forty years.

In the church of Himmelpfort, on the Oct 30th, when it was still dangerous, the first meeting was held. And I am a little bit proud of that. For the first time since '45, the truth was spoken out in public, when the government (?) was still powerful and the police on red alert. And there's one last thing I want to say. Of course I have never been adjusted tot he system. But I am not free of guilt either. For too long, I believed that it was possible to improve Socialism. Only after my own first bitter experiences in the May of '89 I realised that you cannot fix this state. Radical change is necessary, away with the power of the party and a single group. Democracy must be introduced, there must be real elections, and not just folding ballot the paper, like it was until then. And thus I hope for all the people in the village, those on the left and on the right, as well as those of the large centre, I hope for the men and the women, the young and the old, for a peaceful future in a world that we are now a part of: Without walls and barbed wire, just because that's how we want it.

Thank you for your attention.

Musik:

Erich Köhler: I want to read out a prayer, and those who can pray, pray with me. Concluding, we will pray the Lord's Prayer together.

Lord, creator of the heaven and the earth, we come to you in this hour. We are grateful for everything you have done. You did not let us perish, even though the powerful wanted us to. You have continuously tried to win over people to continue the work in the church. You did not let the hope in us die, you are still there, you reveal yourself to us and show us that the power of the mighty will not last forever. We appeal for all those who do not feel like celebrating today, because they are unemployed, or they worry about losing their house. We also think of those who feel too old to start anew. Lord, we also think of those who lived nearby the death strip, and who are now free. We think of those, who suffered under the shots of the shooting range and who could no longer stand the loud noises [droning?] of the tanks and the bangs of the jet fighters.

Much has changed for the better. We thank you for that. Now let us continue our service in the village, and when the bells start ringing, then all the people shall know: They ring for everyone, Christians and non-Christians.

Parish: Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever.

Amen.

May the mighty, benign Lord, the father, the son and the holy spirit
bless you and keep you safe. Amen.

Before parting, let us listen to one more piece of music

Musik:

> [The end]