The Berlin Wall

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ANY visit to Berlin without a close look at the infamous Berlin Wall cannot be considered as complete.

Berlin is the capital of the Federal Republic of Germany. Before the Wall was demolished at the end of 1989 (it fell symbolically earlier on 9 November 1989 when tens of thousands of East Berliners crossed the checkpoints into West Berlin), Berlin was split into two parts, East Berlin, which was the capital of the Democratic Republic of Germany, and West Berlin. The capital of the Federal Republic of Germany then was Bonn.

The physical construction of the Berlin Wall started on 15 August 1961, exactly 16 years after the Second World War ended upon Japan's surrender on 15 August 1945. As a member country of the Axis Forces that was defeated by the Allied Forces led by the US and USSR, Germany paid the heavy price of being divided into two countries, East Germany or the Democratic Republic of Germany under the control of the USSR, and West Germany or the Federal Republic of Germany under the control of the US.

More than a quarter of a century passed and West Germany became an industrial powerhouse while East Germany remained relatively backward and poor. After the Berlin Wall came down, the two Germanys reached an accord to reunify and became one country again on 3 October 1990. This event preceded the disintegration of the USSR itself under President Mikhail Gorbachev on 26 December 1991.

My wife and I spent two days in Berlin in May this year during our longest train journey in the world. We made it a point to see what remained of the Berlin Wall that once separated many families in Berlin and aroused the curiosity of many people across the globe.

Three sections of the Wall still stand in different parts of the city. Of the three, I found the wall along the Spree River near Oberboumbrucke most interesting. That stretch of the Wall is known as the 'East Side Gallery'. There is some very colourful and interesting graffiti on a small section of that Wall, including a drawing showing Soviet leader Brezhnev kissing GDR leader Erich Honecker on the mouth.

Nearer to the city centre is the Berlin Wall Museum, right next to Checkpoint Charlie. Checkpoint Charlie was one of several checkpoints set up by the American forces in West Berlin to control the movement of people into and out of West Berlin. 'Charlie' is not the name of a WWII hero or any great man. It was just a name adopted to denote the alphabet 'C'.

The checkpoint is still there, complete with a little sentry shed, a stack of sand bags, an American soldier in full uniform, and an American flag fluttering in the wind. There is even a 200m stretch of wall nearby, re-erected by the museum owner. When I was there, a group of tourists was queuing to have their passports stamped with the words 'Checkpoint Charlie'. A few roadside vendors were selling fake Soviet army uniform and badges.

People do like to relive history. ■