

# Today!

## Tomorrow Is Too Late!

*“Walter, tomorrow they will come for you and lock you up!”*

On a cold January day in 1953, my father, Walter Helmut Behnke (WHB), was informed by a friend in some government position that the next day the STASI<sup>1</sup> would be on our doorstep.

In no way, could this day be ‘life as usual’ at the Behnke Establishment in [Frankfurt/Oder](#) (DDR – East Germany). A usual day would have some employees arriving early in the morning at the Greenhouse-Nursery-Market Gardening business that Walter and Hildegard Behnke owned and operated just off the Lebuser Chaussee (Road). The family’s living quarters were attached to the greenhouse complex so that work- and family life were quite integrated. Since my mother was quite involved in business life, Tante Olga (WHB’s sister), was the Field Marshall of the home, acting as a nanny/housekeeper and keeping the five children in line: Wolfgang Walter (almost nine), Gerlinde (eight), Elfriede (almost six), Lothar (about three and a half), and Irene (literally a baby).

That January day took on a different rhythm. My father rose very early, dressed somewhat business-like and with his small attaché-style briefcase in one hand, middle-sister Elfriede on the other hand, he set off to catch the early morning train to Berlin.

Elfriede, in her recollection, tells it this way:

*One early morning in winter (January 1953) my parents awoke me very early, possibly 4 am, got me dressed and had a little suitcase packed with some of my things. The next thing I remember is walking towards the train station with my father and embarking on a train which was headed to Berlin. I was accompanying my father to West Berlin on a business trip for him to purchase seeds for the greenhouse. Another of our father’s sisters, Tante Ella, lived in West Berlin and I would be allowed to visit her on this trip. Apparently, my father had no significant luggage for himself but had worn two suits, one on top of the other as extra clothing. I do not remember particulars on the train ride or how my father may have answered my questions. It must have been made clear to me not to say a lot about anything. Upon arrival in West Berlin, we went to my aunt’s place where we would be safe. Then, I learned of the plan that our family was escaping out of East Germany.*

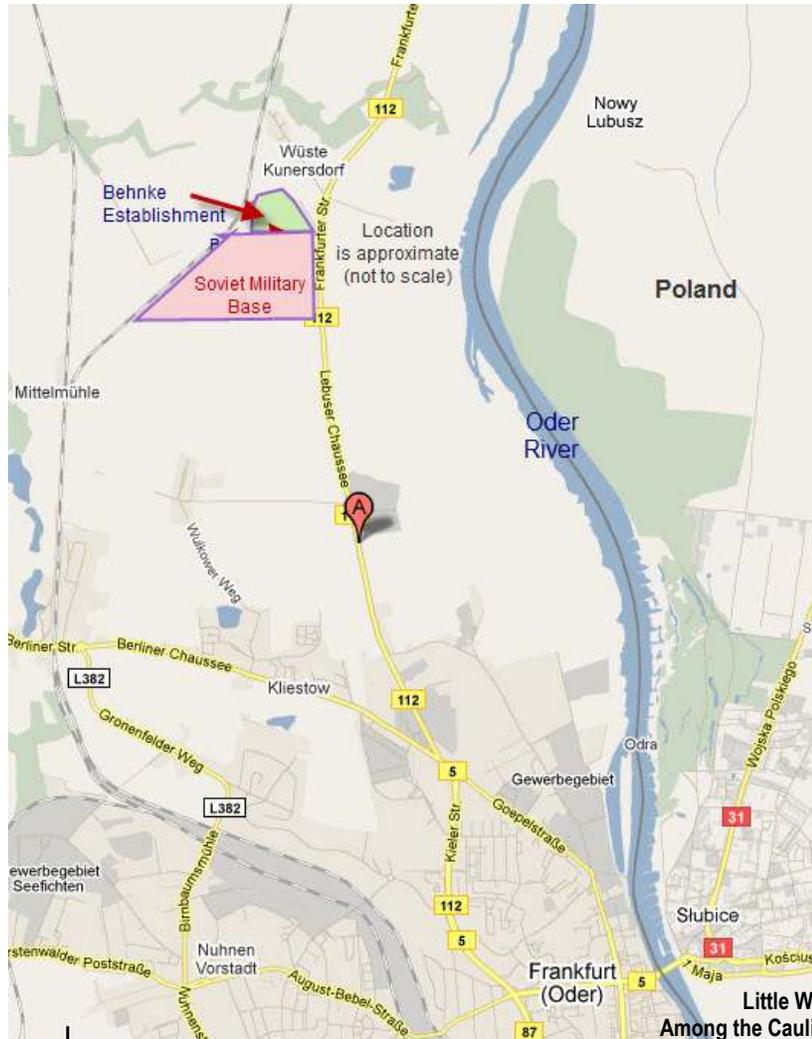
Later that same day, Tante Olga took Gerlinde and Lothar on a train trip to Eberswalde (a city northwest of Frankfurt) for a ‘vacation’ to visit Tante Alma (another of Dad’s sisters). Of course, that vacation trip was a very short-lived diversion, as they had to re-direct their travel to Berlin early the next day.

Since my father and Tante Olga had already left with three of the five children, my mother was left at the homefront in Frankfurt, alone with her eldest (Wolfgang) and her youngest, Irene, the baby. Think about that ... a mother with her two remaining children ... the only ones left in the home and greenhouse complex ... facing the daunting task of being the last of the family to flee from the clutches of the Soviet-Puppet State of the DDR. Another element of concern had to be the proximity of the Soviet Army Base (Kaserne) – the soldiers, the tanks, the barracks right next-door as the closest neighbours of the Behnke Establishment. The Soviet Base faced the Lebuser Chaussee (Road) with guards posted around the clock. Anyone heading into the inner city of Frankfurt/Oder would have to pass in front of the Base along the Lebuser Chaussee.

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<sup>1</sup> Read about the STASI at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stasi>

Location of the Behnke Greenhouse-Nursery-Market Gardening Establishment in Frankfurt/Oder



Map 1 - Map of 1953 location of Behnke Establishment - Frankfurt/Oder (DDR)



Photo 1 - Walter and Hildegard Behnke with Son (Wolfgang) in front of Greenhouses



*“Mutti ... it’s so early!”*

My words as I was awakened in the very early morning hours (possibly between 3:00 and 3:30 am), the day after my father and the others had left Frankfurt. Mother insisted I put on two layers of clothes – I obeyed but couldn’t understand why. I was told that we were going to catch the early train to Berlin and it was a very cold January morning. Mutti reminded me why we were heading for Berlin:

*“You have to go to the Charité.”*

Why would we be visiting the Charité, a world-famous University Medical Centre in Berlin, now in existence for over 300 years? Well, it goes right back to my birth. I came into this world *‘with my head not right on my shoulders’* – some might insist that’s still the case. As I developed in my early childhood, it became quite evident, that my head was tilted toward my left shoulder. Medical advice was to have an operation on the left side of my neck to stretch tendons/ligaments, muscles to set my head straight. My parents had a letter in their possession which directed them to take me to the Charité at some point, to have this operation performed. My mother explained to me that this was the day to make the trip to West Berlin



‘to set my head straight’. Of course, it meant that she also readied the baby carriage and my baby sister, Irene, for this journey. Since it was a very cold night, Irene was totally submerged and snuggled into the baby carriage and warm enough to keep sleeping. In full darkness, as we headed out to the main road, my mother cautioned me to be totally quiet to make our way past the Soviet military base. To this day, I can only count it as a miracle that no one became aware of our passing in front of the barracks. Typically, sentries with dogs would be posted around the compound ... we went by unnoticed. It was a bit of a challenge to trek through the crusty snow surface for about two and a half to three kilometres to the nearest streetcar station at the intersection with the Berliner Chaussee. There to my surprise, we were met by a lady from the Baptist Church. She was a choir member friend who had come to assist my mother in this journey to Berlin.

The old Frankfurt/Oder train station no longer registers in my mind – since the ‘Wende’ (the ‘turn-around’ of the Soviet-dominated DDR to the unified German state), the Hauptbahnhof main station had been completely renovated. In 2001, Ruth and I stopped by there, for me to reminisce and recall my 1953 train journey to Berlin.



The early morning train from Frankfurt/Oder to Berlin was quite full that January day in 1953.

It was common for business people to travel early to conduct their business in Berlin for the day. The early 50s were a tense time as Soviet control was exerting its heavy hand on the East German people. Already, the DDR’s state communism was omnipresent and had its eyes and ears everywhere. Among the crowd on the train, a businessman addressed my Mom: “Mrs. Behnke, you wouldn’t be thinking to leave us – would you?” Belying my mother’s slight stature, she declared with a firmness in her voice:



“Oh no, I have to take my son to the Charité in Berlin.” That put a halt to unsettling questions in public. Questioning the actions of citizens became more common as a ‘Brain Drain’ trickled from the East to the West. Although the building of the infamous ‘Wall’ was not yet in sight, the DDR instituted some basic roadblocks and border controls to keep East Germans from defecting. The train from Frankfurt/O stopped at the last station in the East Sector of Berlin, requiring all passengers to get off and face some level of questioning to explain their reason for travelling further and crossing into West Berlin. Sure enough, we caught the attention of a very burly German police officer, who confronted my mother and fired questions at her: “Where are you going and for what reason?” To a nine-year old, he appeared as an ominous, towering figure. My mother replied calmly and pulled out her letter: “I’m taking my son for an operation at the Charité” “So why are you taking the baby?” he demanded. Again, my mother responded kindly, that she was still nursing the baby. He sternly instructed us NOT to get on the train to West Berlin but to “stay right here”. Then, his attention shifted to a man in a trench coat and carrying something that looked like a portable typewriter case. Next, we see him taking this man downstairs for interrogation and searching. We waited as we were told and the two ladies prayed. Then, the next train to West Berlin rolled in. We looked around and still waited. Just before the train took off, our friend from Frankfurt helped my mother get the baby carriage on to the train and then, she disappeared very quickly. The train chugged off and crossed into West Berlin. We had entered the FREEDOM sector!

At our stop in West Berlin, we were met by my father at the train station. Great joy and praise to God was expressed as my dad hugged my mom and me in turn. It was but a short distance to my aunt Ella's small studio apartment. Tante Ella was a single lady and worked as a housekeeper for a doctor. My dad left later that morning to meet Tante Olga who was to arrive with Gerlinde and Lothar at the same train station. Vati (dad) returned to us at Tante Ella's place rather downcast – Tante Olga and the other two children were not on that train as expected. As always, my parents turned to God in prayer and trusted Him for an answer. My dad left later, I believe it was early afternoon to check on the next train coming in from Eberswalde. Great Joy – they were on that next train! The size of Tante Ella's living quarters did not allow for us to stay there for any length of time, Vati proceeded immediately to make arrangements for us to move on. Here is a crucial link in our family's escape saga from East Germany – he made direct contact with the Americans in West Berlin, one of the four nations administering post-war Germany.

“Today ... Tomorrow is Too Late!”

So – what was behind this warning to my father to leave Frankfurt in East Germany immediately?

If one takes the perspective of the communist DDR, Walter Behnke would have had at least ‘three strikes against him’: First, he was a property owner – not only the business property of land and greenhouses next door to the Soviet base but he also purchased an apartment complex in the inner city so that the Baptist Church to which we belonged would have a church meeting facility at the back portion of the apartment complex.



Second, my parents were

obviously profiled as active Christians who fronted the purchase of the church facilities within the apartment complex. The third and probably the most serious strike against my father was the allegation that he was an informer to the Americans. Although Vati was not inclined to talk much about this issue, both Lothar and I gleaned bits of information that revealed some facts about his involvement. My dad had a permit (call it a visa) with which he entered into West Berlin periodically – he talked about it as a permission to buy seeds but also the opportunity to sell some cyclamen and azaleas in Berlin. At some point, a relationship had developed so that he had some ongoing contact with Americans in West Berlin. Lothar learned from dad that one of his employees probably observed him embedding some papers in the bottoms of some cyclamen and azalea pots before taking them to Berlin. It should be no surprise then, that the day might come for that ‘tip-off’, “leave TODAY, tomorrow is too late”. Lothar and I feel that one would not categorize Vati as a ‘spy who came in from the cold’ but we concur that he probably was an informant to the Americans in the west-sector of Berlin.



Once our family had re-united in West Berlin, it was natural for Dad to approach the Americans to assist us in leaving West Berlin to get out to West Germany. Since the whole metropolitan area of Berlin was surrounded by hostile East German territory, the only way out was by air. So it turned out to be a quick exit for us by airlift in a DC-3 to the Hannover area of West Germany.