

A trip to last a lifetime

Interview by Jennifer Alexander

"It was 1984. Nobody was taking family holidays camping in East Germany - except us!"

Musician, composer and linguist Julian Wagstaff thanks his nonconformist dad for a life-changing trip behind the iron curtain, aged 14.

Growing up in Edinburgh in the 70s and 80s, Julian knew his father, Howard, was not entirely mainstream. As a teenager, this could be embarrassing, but Julian sees it more positively in hindsight. "He was pretty unorthodox. In many ways, he was a bit ahead of his time." They took part in a car share with another family, for example. "The car we had was not entirely ours, we took turns. We did a lot of cycling, but they insisted we wear helmets and high vis - now, that's commonplace, but back then it wasn't. My brother and I were the first people to have cashline cards among anybody we knew, because my dad saw that was the way things were going; we were really early adopters of those. He was always trying to reduce consumption, recycling and reusing things and not throwing stuff out. Back then, that wasn't widespread at all."

Howard lectured in economics at the University of Edinburgh. He was essentially a socialist and the family were actively political, so the proposed trip came as no great surprise. Mum, dad and the four children, 14, 13, 10 and 9, piled into their battered old Renault 16, custom-modified to sit 3 across in the front, and drove all the way to the other side of the cold war divide. Does Julian remember how he felt at the time?

"I couldn't wait! In the 80's, global nuclear war and confrontation between the superpowers was a very real prospect and pretty terrifying. My parents were active in the CND, we were always being dragged off to anti-nuclear demonstrations in Glasgow and London and nuclear bases God knows where else. Scotland was voting [predominantly-mainly](#) for Labour and questions about socialism and capitalism were thrown into sharp relief. It's logical you'd get interested in these countries calling themselves socialist - what was that like in practice? School friends of mine were also interested in the Soviet Union, one was very pro-Soviet. So I started reading up about it. Of course, there were always spy movies, spy thrillers and I was really quite into those. The idea we were going to go through the frontier and into the East, I was like, bring it on!"

There was a bit of paperwork to be dealt with in advance, but it was perfectly possible to travel west to east at the time; it just wasn't the norm. How did arrival there measure up to his young expectations of excitement, difference and danger?

"I do remember it vividly. We were camping at Eschwege in West Germany the night before. The campsite gave you a leaflet about the border fortifications with a map showing the barbed wire, fences, dogs, trenches, minefield all this sort of stuff. So, we had this very vivid impression. There was a big firework display and of course we were in our tents thinking that world war three was starting, because the border was just a few miles down the road!"

In the event, crossing the border was quite mundane: a wide road, no barbed wire visible and hundreds of people crossing in both directions. Despite noticeably thorough checks, with mirrors

wheeled under the car and car boots checked for stowaways, it was not quite up there with the sinister drama he'd expected.

"In most of the spy films, it's always bleak and cold and winter and you got the impression the sun never shone in Eastern Europe. But it was a sunny day. Nobody appeared particularly oppressed or more miserable than your average Scot. There was no obvious police or security presence once you got past the border."

The roads were not in a great state, and the family were surprised to find slip roads off the motorway made of cobbles and tight bends to slow the traffic - but they felt just like many streets of Edinburgh. "They'll not catch us out with these! It's just like Easter Road" Howard exclaimed. So, the stereotype of the dilapidated, run down east didn't ring entirely true. "Large parts of Edinburgh were incredibly run down, particularly in the 80s. The idea that the west was gleaming, bright and modern and the east rundown, well if you were from where I was, the distinction wasn't quite so noticeable."

"As kids we were surprised that wherever you went you heard Western pop music. With all the cold war prejudices of the time we were amazed to hear the exact same songs *we* listened to, on the radio." People, and the way they treated each other didn't differ all that much either. Even one of the border guards showed he could have a laugh with them in a similar humour to their own, about their "very new car, ha, ha, ha." So humans were just human here too.

That's not to ignore striking differences and awkward moments where Julian remembers being reduced to the "naïve Westerners." Immediately the children felt the absence of western-style advertising, not to be found, as they had noticed before on trips to France, for example. Here, no familiar products with funny foreign names. Julian remembers a German boy he met proudly showing him a Cadbury's selection pack. "I was asking how much they paid for that in the GDR. He looked at me like I was insane. 'You can't buy this here! This is a present from my West German uncle' or whatever. That was where you started to realise, this is a different world and a completely different set of rules." He remembers only basic ads for a few state-owned industries. Flags, though, were suddenly everywhere - red flags, GDR flags, Soviet flags, political slogans, pictures of Lenin and Marx - the politics was "really shoved down your throat." And of course, there was no evidence of the real material inequality they knew it from the West. No homelessness, no beggars, no vast differences in expensive to clapped-out old cars. "You did get the impression that it was a more equal society, which indeed it was, by any measure."

Another memory sees them in a department store, heading upstairs on the escalator. "I'm pretty sure now that there were upstairs floors of certain shops reserved for party hierarchy. The normal punters on the floor were looking at us like, what the hell do they think they're doing? I didn't understand that at the time, I think that was in Leipzig. There were things like that...that were part of the landscape and everybody in East Germany knew how it worked."

The impact of this trip on Julian was to go further than amusing anecdotes, further, probably, than his dad anticipated. Julian went on to study German, live and study in Berlin, and work as a translator and interpreter of German before going on to a career in music. He has a long-standing relationship with Germany, mainly the east, which also appears in his work today. While his siblings have strong memories of the trip too, the encounter with the GDR touched Julian unexpectedly.

"There are occasionally pivotal points in your life which do change your future trajectory. It's hard to overstate the influence that trip had." On return, Julian started to teach himself German - unable to change at school, "I spent the next four years annoying the hell out of my French teacher because I

didn't want to be there!" Had he simply felt a natural affinity with the country and language when he was there?

"Yes, it was just a click. I felt at home and intrigued and fascinated. Slightly scared, you know. Like falling in love, very much like that. And that stayed with me." Scared because, "the Eastern part of Germany has always been a little scary. There was a risk, not obvious on holiday, but that if you speak out of turn, go to the wrong place, say the wrong thing, you could end up in jail. After the fall of the wall it became dangerous for all sorts of other reasons, like the rise of far-right violence which I came to experience when I lived in Berlin and travelled post-reunification. It has always been edgy and that is something of its attraction."

The influence continues in Julian's work as a musician and composer. One of his concert pieces, *Treptow*, was written about the Soviet war memorial in Treptower Park, east of Berlin. It's a place he found incredibly impressive, and always wanted to do something artistic about. His song *Everything Solid Melts in the Air* is about the fall of the wall and another song, *Heart in a Field* is inspired by John Heartfield, a German communist artist. He admits "I'm always aware I can't make every song or piece of music about bloody East Germany", but says "the influences keep bubbling up."

Julian expects his father was pretty satisfied with their family adventure. Put in a similar position in today's world, I wonder, where would Julian head on holiday to give a young family an alternative view of society?

"It is difficult to find anywhere that has a radically different economy anymore. There are still places that call themselves socialist...I don't think I'd take a family to North Korea! Cuba is probably still worth a visit. Or there are little-visited countries in Europe like Albania or Montenegro. Cultural differences still exist and are worth treasuring, worthy of discovery. I'd be tempted to take them to Albania. Just to be different."