

# My Friend, the Neo-Nazi

*How an away game in East Germany brought a Scotland fan into contact with the far right*

By Colin McPherson

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**The new internet package supplied recently by my television provider allows me to tune into football games the world over.**

From the comfort of my sofa, I can watch live matches and highlights on demand. They come at all times of the day and night fed into my living room for endless consumption. I find myself watching teams which were in the past just names to me: Flamengo, Central Coast Mariners, Kaizer Chiefs, Union Berlin. This last club is familiar, as I have deep roots through family links with their home city. Nevertheless, the football scene in Germany's capital city is not something I follow with any great interest or involvement. I tune into one of the broadcasts with distracted disinterest: Union, who are based in what was before 1989 East Berlin, appear to be like all other teams I see on screen these days: a diverse and multicultural assortment of players on the pitch, cheered or jeered by white faces, sitting in serried ranks in identikit stadia, fringed by electronic ads for global brands. The clubs, their grounds and fans seem interchangeable and indistinct. I flick the set off, cursing another wasted hour spent as a passive observer, numbed by my lack of connection with what I have just witnessed. Thirty years ago, however, in the scorching summer which preceded

the fall of the Berlin Wall, I found myself caught up in the political and social churn which slowly eviscerated East Germany, much of it playing out on the nation's football terraces. These were the dog-eared dog days of a country and a people who were soon to be enveloped in change and swallowed up by their big, capitalist neighbour. But before the hot weather turned chilly and the Cold War ended, there were battles to be fought, scores to be settled.

I had met Martin (not his real name) half a dozen years before during a three-month odyssey which had taken myself and a friend and fellow Scotsman around the German Democratic Republic. It was November 1983, a time when young people there were becoming restless, tired of being told what to do and bored by life under communism. The restrictions and strictures made people look to the West, casting envious eyes on our materialism and consumerism. Our freedoms. Visitors from the West were therefore a source of interest and intrigue, conduits of culture, information and ideas. During our visit, we went to cheer on Scotland's national team, who were playing our hosts in a European Championship qualifier in the crumbling and drab city of Halle, not far from Leipzig. The persistent drizzle and gathering winter gloom rendered the

place even more funereal. The smell of brown coal hung wearily around the place, draping us under a miserable blanket of pollution and smog. These were the days before cheap air travel and the routine mass movement of football fans across Europe. This fixture was for the hardy few, less of a Tartan Army, more like brigade from Brigadoon. Still, we were made welcome and fuelled by booze which cost just a few pfennigs. The atmosphere was hospitable and warm. People were pleased to see us.

It's easy to recall his face when I first saw it, even now the best part of four decades later. Martin was tall and stocky, thick black hair cropped roughly to his skull, but with an oddly-shaped swish at his hairline. He was about my age, early twenties. He leaned in, eyes appearing slightly squint through heavy, regulation-issue glasses. His English was staccato and scratchy, but he wanted to chat, to make new acquaintances amongst the 300-or-so travelling Scotland fans. He was from East Berlin, he told me, and showed me some magazine photos, clippings of his favourite players, he said. They were all Scottish. He would be supporting Scotland, he informed me and in the brief conversation we had before the game, I could tell he was no GDR patriot. I am German, he would tell me, years later, and leave it at that. By the end of the night, as he disappeared into the rain and back to his life as an apprentice locksmith, we had swapped addresses and promised to keep in touch by letter. There was no other way back then.

In those disconnected and distant days before the internet, and separated by the Iron Curtain, Martin and I did keep communicating. A steady stream of

letters would pass back and forward, containing content which was carefully curated. With the ever-present eye of the Stasi, East Germany's state security apparatus, keeping watch on its citizens, particularly those who fraternised with foreigners, it was impossible to dissect the great political forces at work through the 1980s.

No mention of Glasnost or Perestroika, or Chernobyl or the proxy wars being fought between our two systems in Africa and Asia. Even the banalities of everyday life were best avoided and for us both these opaque letters kept our contact – our friendship – going. Young East Germans wanted to be like us in the West, not to feel inferior, but equal. So by comparing our experiences as football fans, describing matches, discussing players and analysing competitions and tournaments, Martin and I seemed on the surface, at least, to be living similar lives if not sharing the same life experiences. Partners almost, rather than deadly and untrusted enemies which our respective states had us marked out as. Martin was a passionate and diehard fan of Union Berlin, but even that was viewed as an act of rebellion and subterfuge by the state. They were, at best, tolerated by the East German regime and footballing authorities. Stripped of any promising young players, their fate was to play second fiddle to East Berlin's favoured team, Dynamo, a scion of the state and its military apparatus. To support Union, suppressed artificially in the nation's second tier, was to be a member of the country's counter culture. Martin's spidery handwriting criss-crossed the trademark squared paper favoured by Germans. In his letters he described games and compared the things he

liked about certain clubs with those which drew his contempt. It was coded criticism of the system he lived under, dissatisfaction with his lot and a rejection of the socialist dream which his fellow countrymen and women had little choice but to endure.

The teams and towns about which he eulogised all had their roots in a Germanic past which pre-dated the post-War schism. Clubs he scorned were those which were artificially constructed: FC Karl-Marx-Stadt, Vorwärts Frankfurt/O and most definitely the despised and distrusted BFC Dynamo, the embodiment of the East German establishment. He wrote occasionally about other facets of his life, but only carefully and sparingly. Trips to the Baltic on his moped, the places he visited there. There was no doubt he thought about life in its broadest sense, and was well-read and informed. But he kept his knowledge close to him. Just in case. In the end, he was always more comfortable returning to his favourite subject: football.

It was just three months before the collapse of communism, so visually illustrated by the events in Berlin on that November night in 1989, that I made my final visit to the GDR. I had been a semi-regular interlocutor in the preceding six years, spending time with other friends and contacts, or just making day-trips as a curious voyeur from West Berlin. I hadn't seen Martin in almost six years and arranged to stay with him for a few days, ostensibly to sample some football and generally get a flavour of a life which had been self-redacted on the pages of our correspondence down the years.

Martin lived in an environment which was almost purely Soviet in its inspiration. His flat was housed in one of the big, stark blocks which had sprung up in the 1950s and 1960s as East Germany began the process of construction and nation-building. Devoid of character or charm, these monolithic structures were functional, orderly and quiet. Suburban East Berlin exuded discipline and purposefulness. It resembled nothing more or less than a place to call home for everyone from families, pensioners to single men, like Martin. Over the following week, I would get to know much more about Martin and the company he kept. It should have given me clues about the drama which was about to unfold across Eastern Europe, but like most people, we could not countenance the chaos and upheaval which would mark the end of communism on the continent.

On the face of it, Martin's friends were, like him, normal, law-abiding if slightly truculent citizens of the GDR. They were all young men with trades: bricklayers, joiners, turners, plumbers. Men whose working lives were mapped out for them by the state, each employed according to which skills they were deemed to have and what was required to make the GDR prosper. At weekends, they were football fans, looking for a release from their weekday lives, happy to drink beer, sing songs and follow Union Berlin around the country. But this ragged army did not follow the German football fashion of the day: frayed denim, scuffed shoes, scarves draped from wrists, patches sewn onto to every inch of jacket and mullets. Martin's friends had shorn heads and bomber jackets and long laced-up boots. An altogether different uniform. They were loud and boisterous but seemingly harmless.

The day after I arrived, they would be taking a train down to a small industrial town two hours south of the capital to play a cup tie against a team from a couple of leagues below. But the more I talked about their team's chances that day, the more the carriage of the grimy and grubby Reichsbahn train filled with something more ominous and dangerous: politics. It was clear to me that the priorities that day lay away from football. Violence and confrontation with the detested VoPos, the Volkspolizei, was on the agenda. The train spewed out an angry and beer-filled mob in Schkopau under a searing midday heat. In underpasses and streets, groups peeled off and ran, confronting and charging the local police, who were hopelessly outnumbered and outmuscled. It wasn't a violent confrontation intent on causing damage or injury. It was a visible protest against a system that they hated living under. A communist system. An un-German system. Here was their motivation, to demonstrate that they were true Germans, that their patriotism took precedence over the artificial layers imposed by the Soviet Union and applied by their willing apparatchiks. These weren't East German hooligans: they were German hooligans. By mid-afternoon, tired, spent and bored, the 150 Union fans slunk into the stadium and watched quietly and impotently as their team surrendered to the local amateurs. Defeat did not seem to matter. They had confronted their government in the only way they knew how. The train dragged us back to East Berlin. Never was I so happy to see that place again.

Clutching a beer and staring out of his small apartment, Martin did not dissect the day's events with any

great enthusiasm. He gestured to the apartment block opposite. The day had passed, an ink black sky heralding a dark, cloudless night. Look, he said, there are almost no lights on. No-one is there. My mind flashed to the possibility that everyone was out enjoying themselves, dancing and carousing on a typical Saturday night. They have gone, he said. To Hungary. To Bulgaria. To the West German embassy in Prague. I wasn't quite sure why he was so unenthusiastic about his neighbours' flight to the West. The borders were tumbling across central Europe. Escape was possible. But to Martin this seemed like a treasonous act. To leave German soil when they should have stayed to fight? Unpatriotic is one word I remember from the conversation.

The following day, we embarked on a tourist trip round East Berlin. An air of normality pervaded. There was a bustle about Alexanderplatz and as you always did in the eastern section of the divided city, the fact that West Berlin, the living symbol of rebellious, glitzy, showy capitalism was within touching distance, could be ignored. We ascended the 368m Fernsehturm, an embodiment and literal apex of East German aspiration. Constructed in 1969, it towers over the city, and is visible to this day from all corners, east or west. The irony was that from the revolving cafe 207m up, you get a magnificent and uninterrupted view into capitalism's beating heart. The aspect of West Berlin was unsurpassed. As we gently rotated around, I pointed out the places familiar to me beyond the Wall, all unknown to Martin. Kreuzberg, where my family lived, appeared pin-sharp on this clear, late August day. I could almost smell the kebabs and Turkish bread made and baked by the

Gastarbeiter who had made West Berlin their home and gave a rich diversity unknown in the east. Martin pointed to the tan-gle of railway lines at Ostkreuz, while I showed him where the equivalent lay on the other side at Westkreuz. One day, I said, you'll visit there. He didn't believe it. Neither did I. He cried. Three months later, the Wall came down. By then, I was gone.

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Those unforgettable and historic scenes showing bewildered and ecstatic East Germans flooding through the breached Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 will live forever as one of the great moments in human history. The sight of a divided city reuniting was a symbol to people the world over that systems change and repression could be countered and defeated. For almost every East Berliner, it was the opportunity to taste and experience a way of life they had only seen fleetingly through a distorted prism. In the early hours of the following morning, Martin and his trusty East German moped sped off to the West, to see for himself what lay beyond the boundaries of his existence. He was not impressed and quickly realised that he wasn't interested in West Germany. There's nothing there, he would report to me later, waving his hand in front of his face as if to indicate that they were all crazy in West Berlin. No, the one place he wanted to visit was Scotland.

In March 1990, he arrived at my door in Edinburgh. He looked like a man reborn. Gone was the careworn expression and the latent but futile anger he stored up in the GDR. Liberation to him meant being in Scotland and he threw himself

into exploring and travelling around the country. We set off in my little car and went on an odyssey which took us as far as Sutherland and the Angus glens and back down to Glasgow and the Borders. We watched a couple of Scotland matches, attending World Cup warm-up games in an era when the national team qualified for major international tournaments. Martin consumed Scottish beer by the gallon and smoked salmon by the ton and proclaimed himself an honorary Scot. He seemed truly liberated and free. He ignored the fact that Scotland was enduring the ordeal of Thatcherism which was destroying and changing much of the country's social and economic fabric. It was invisible to him. In Scotland he saw beauty, hope and freedom. I couldn't blame him. On his last night, drunk and lost, he stumbled alone into one of Edinburgh's notorious housing schemes and was beaten to a pulp by a gang of locals. The facial cuts and angry bruises on his body would not deter him. The following year, he was back for more.

That trip signalled the end of our friendship. We were both moving on from being boys with a passion for football into the world of adulthood, with its responsibilities, commitments and time pressures which lead to life-defining personal changes. On his second visit to Scotland in 1991, Martin was already growing frustrated by what he was seeing back home. The optimism and opportunities promised and symbolised so starkly by the fall of the Berlin Wall had not materialised. Instead, the economic system in East Germany had collapsed and the country was subsumed into the Federal Republic on terms very unfavourable to the East. While some

entrepreneurial and professional types were managing to recast their lives, for a population which had lived under a command system of economics for 40 years, adapting and competing was an alien concept. East Berlin looked like a war zone, with abandoned Trabant cars and rubble littering the streets and factories silent and empty. In contrast, the lochs and glens of Scotland must have seemed like paradise. Rather than drifting apart, I recall precisely the moment when we parted company, not so much in personal but rather political terms. In short, his nationalism was very different from mine. Where he saw blood and soil, I saw inclusion and internationalism. He was shocked. Although I had been able to see his politics for what they were, he had not been able to read mine. After he left, I stopped writing to him. It was a sign that so much was changing, our friendship was another casualty of the new world order.

In the summer of 2019, I was in Berlin, finishing off a long-term photography project which had seen me revisiting the city regularly over the past three decades. I was trying to re-make pictures I had taken in the early 1990s along the course of the Berlin Wall to show graphically how much the city had changed. As I travelled around Berlin by bike and on foot and using public transport, I admit Martin did not enter my mind. It was as if I was suppressing his presence in my past. It didn't occur to me to try to locate him to find out at the very least if he was still a Union Berlin fan. The club had just won promotion to the Bundesliga for the first time. Their rebuilt stadium and rebranded team was now a place where all Berliners could feel welcome. The skinheads and their far-right friends had moved on and left behind a vibrant and colourful club.

Near the end of my trip, the suburban train I was on came to a halt at a familiar station in the eastern side of the city. I recognised it immediately as Martin's stop and alighted. A sense of curiosity propelled me down the ramp and toward a vast block of apartments, towering over the neighbourhood. I wandered around, trying to retrace my steps from 30 years previously which had led to Martin's flat. Rain began to pour and I retreated, feeling slightly embarrassed and out-of-place.

Union Berlin made a good start to their debut season in Germany's top flight. Far from being also-rans, they were competitive and managed to pull off a few notable victories which kept them hovering above the relegation places as the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Wall came and went. As I sat at home, enjoying the luxuriant footballing fruits of my new digital package, the thought occurred to me to try to re-establish some sort of contact with Martin, or at least find out something – anything – about him or his current whereabouts. I am able to rationalise this by the fact that the 30th anniversary, and my photography project, had thrown up so many unanswered questions about that period in my life and about the layers of memory and history that each of us build up over the course of our lives. I felt drawn to it.

I click on Facebook, but there's no-one there who matches Martin's name or

location. The same goes for other social media platforms, but this doesn't surprise me too much. It is when I do a general internet search of his name that I am confronted with something big, ugly and very unpleasant. Over countless pages,

Martin's name is listed and referred to by groups of anti-fascist activists in Berlin. Again and again there are accounts of actions against immigrants, of placard-waving and speeches, of marches, rallies and gatherings of sinister-looking young men dressed in an eerily-similar way to those Union Berlin fans 30 years previously. Still disbelieving that it is the same person, I click on the accompanying images and discover a grey-haired, overweight individual, looking more like a grumpy school janitor than a dangerous far-right activist. Yet I am still unable to connect the person I once knew with what I am reading about and seeing. Zooming in on the clearest of the photographs, I find confirmation that it is one and the same man. The unique swish of hair is still there, albeit not in the lustrous black it once was.

I scroll through accounts of Martin's current life, a virulent blend of extreme German nationalism and racism. In one referenced social media post, he congratulates Adolf Hitler on what would have been the Führer's one hun-

dredth birthday. He campaigns against asylum seekers and refugees, trying to prevent them settling around him. Martin is denounced by local activists and then, in the most affecting and chilling reference I find, there is an account of how protestors had leafletted Martin's neighbours to alert them to the fact that they had someone with his views and reputation living in their midst. His address stares out from the page at me; it is the same apartment in the vast and sprawling tower block complex where I had visited him all those years ago. Now, the East Germans who vacated their homes and made a dash for freedom across the Wall 30 years previously have been replaced by new neighbours, many of them from far-off lands, themselves fleeing dictators and persecution. The fact that Martin and his violent cronies are resisting and railing against this is an irony not lost on me.

I am glad he is no longer my friend, the neo-Nazi.



