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Photography with Consequences

"Would you please accompany me to headquarters to answer a few questions?" Such a simple question, from someone who looked like a "Sunday school teacher", changed Ronald Wiedenhoeft and our family's lives forever.[12]

Wiedenhoeft, an art and architectural history doctoral student and preceptor at Columbia University's Art History and Archaeology Department in New York City, had been photographing buildings in East Berlin for his dissertation, when he was approached by a man dressed in civilian clothes. Wiedenhoeft was studying housing projects designed by Bruno Taut, built in Berlin during the 1920s. Taut was a renowned German architect and urban planner, who became known for his theoretical works and his residential developments, many of which are now recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. While it had been easy for Wiedenhoeft to access Taut's work in West Berlin, he was still missing vital information of Taut's housing developments in East Berlin.

Tuesday, 5 September 1967, was meant to be one of his final days in Berlin before returning to New York City for his fall semester studies. Wiedenhoeft had spent the last three months in Europe with his German-born wife, Renate, and their two young daughters, six-year-old Sonja, and one-year old Sabina. Our family lived with relatives in West Berlin and traveled throughout Europe. One year earlier, in 1966, my parents had started a business selling slides of art and architecture for teaching purposes to universities and museums. They had spent the summer months in Europe producing slides for the business, the sale of which would offset their travel expenses and provide income to their growing family. My

father estimated that he had produced approximately three- or four thousand slides during the summer of 1967.[13] These photographs, produced between June and September 1967, were taken in Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Switzerland, and Austria. After such a productive summer, my father now wanted to use his last remaining days in Berlin to focus on his doctoral studies.

Ronald Wiedenhoeft with his photography equipment in front of the Louvre Museum in Paris, August 1967. Curtesy Saskia Ltd.

Wiedenhoeft had enrolled at Columbia University two years earlier. Before the summer of 1967, he had completed all his course requirements and had passed his oral examinations, necessary for his doctor-of-philosophy degree, but he needed to complete his written dissertation. Professor Edgar Kaufmann of the History of Art and Architecture Department at Columbia University had suggested the topic of his study the previous year.[14]

Wiedenhoeft had excellent libraries with relevant material at his disposal. The Avery Library at Columbia University held the largest architecture resource collection in the US at the time, and the New York City Public Library as well as the Metropolitan Museum of Art provided invaluable resources for his studies. Additionally, Harvard University offered a wonderful collection of documents and media print by German architects. Nothing, however, replaced the value of seeing buildings in-situ. My father needed to visit and photograph as many of Bruno Taut's residential developments as possible.

Since there was no published material at the time which listed the locations of all Taut's projects and several street names had changed since the war years, he had to piece together the locations on his own. In West Berlin, he consulted the city planning office and the city library. Finding locations in East Berlin, however, was more elusive, since East and West Berlin did not share geographic information with each other. It wasn't even possible to purchase a current East Berlin map in West Berlin at the time.

My father had befriended a West Berlin architect by the name of Günter Meier, a proponent of modern architecture who owned a large collection of architectural magazines from the 1920s. In June 1967, he visited Meier to discuss his research, and the two men collaborated on hand-marking an older city map that included portions of East Berlin, which were included on a West Berlin map.[15] This map consisted of a series of localized map sections, each marked with a 4-digit number, for the user to piece together different sections of the Berlin metropolitan area.

Wiedenhoeft made notes of probable locations of the 14 sites he wanted to visit, and following the grid system of the maps, he made some additional notes concerning other map sections, which he wanted to consult later. "Before going over I'd worked up a list

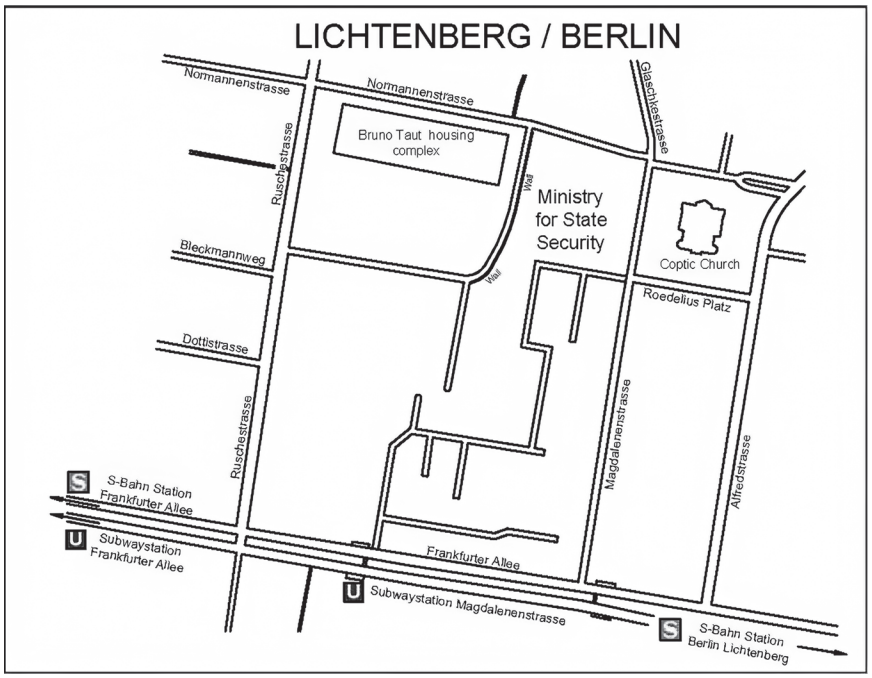
of developments I wanted to photograph. I had not actually visited them until that day. Since the city planning aspects of the developments were very important, I had to walk through them and get the feel of them; not just look at pictures. I didn't have their exact locations either. I did have a map cross hatched in the areas where the apartments were supposed to be and an architectural guide to the city written in 1931."[16] Wiedenhoeft's personal notes, including a reference to four additional map sections, were later confiscated by the Stasi. The Stasi initially claimed that the 4-digit map numbers corresponded to West Berlin phone numbers of known CIA and Allied military personnel[17].

During the morning hours of 5 September, my father left our family's Barstrasse apartment in West Berlin, made a few stops in West Berlin, then traveled by subway to East Berlin. He was the only passenger on the crowded subway to exit at Friedrichstrasse, near Checkpoint Charlie, around noon, giving him a somewhat ominous feeling right from the start. Emerging from the tunnel, he showed his American passport to a guard, filled out paperwork and made the mandatory five-mark currency exchange. He said: "I looked like the typical tourist with two camera bags and a tripod, even with luggage tags [from the airline] still attached".[18]

His aim was to photograph as many of the Bruno Taut housing developments in the most efficient manner. Initially, Wiedenhoeft headed to the northeastern part of East Berlin, to the Carl-Legien neighborhood and Buschallee, traveling by tram (S-Bahn) between areas. By mid-afternoon, he headed back south, towards the Lichtenberg area. He was eager to reach a large apartment development called Onnenhof by the German architect, Irwin Gautkind, which included a kindergarten in a park-like setting. On the way was a lesser-known Bruno Taut "rather cubistic, rectangular flat-roofed"[19] housing complex located along Normannenstrasse.

> I was interested because of these apartment developments of the 1920s represented a great change in the traditional way of housing in Berlin. I photographed them diagonally as I approached and again as I got a little closer. I had photographed these from the north side of Normannenstrasse and then I wanted to go around the buildings to

the south to get it from the back and I went into the side street which led south from Normannenstrasse and as I went on this street, there came what should have, I suppose, been a revelation to me. It should have told me to get the hell out of there because I saw a wall running down the street from right behind the houses going straight down south — a stucco stone wall, I guess — as I recall, it was just a plain white surface maybe 14 feet high or something like this. I just sort of felt well you know you're not going to take any pictures from this side. It looked like some sort of official complex or something and the only thing I thought was you're certainly not going to take any pictures around something like that.[20] [see map of area].



Map showing the route Wiedenhoeft took from the train station to the housing complex and its proximity to the Stasi headquarters. Map drawing by Bernd Feuerherd.

Unbeknown to Wiedenhoeft, behind that stucco wall was the Ministry for State Security. While there was a sign posted by the main entrance, there were no other obvious signs that the Ministry was housed there. Maps of East Berlin showed only a blank spot for the area and the building itself was not imposing and gave no indication of its significance.

While my father was busy photographing nearby, a Stasi informant by the name of GI "Kuba" was watching and reported him. GI "Kuba" was told to follow Wiedenhoeft, while two other agents, "Gen. Wählte" and "Gen. Großer", trailed behind, joining in the pursuit. They followed him as he walked towards Magdalenenstrasse, taking pictures of a historic church on Roedeliusplatz, before proceeding past the subway station Lichtenberg/ exit Frankfurter Allee to the S-Bahn train station Frankfurter Allee/Siegfriedstrasse. At that point, GI "Kuba" approached Wiedenhoeft, showed him his Stasi identification card, and asked Wiedenhoeft to accompany him for questioning.[21]

At first my father wasn't too worried, since he knew none of his photographs were of military installations or government buildings. He thought a few questions would clarify the matter. GI "Kuba" took him to a Trabant car, which was waiting for them around the corner with a driver. "He took me back to a building adjacent to the one I'd been photographing. I hadn't noticed it but on the façade of the building was a sign saying *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* (Ministry for State Security). On most maps, including mine, the building was listed as a finance office."[22]

Inside, Wiedenhoeft was asked in a "very correct objective sort of way" what he had been doing, "I hadn't panicked because I knew I hadn't done anything, and I knew all about these apartments. They could be suspicious, but I could demonstrate that I knew what I was doing and that ought to have satisfied them. They kept saying just think how important this building is. I said 'Yes, but I haven't photographed it.' They took my films and developed them that night."[23] After several hours of questioning that went nowhere, my father was transferred again by Trabant car to the Hohenschönhausen prison where he was to spend the next nine months. Although interrogators questioned him until four the next morning before he was assigned to a cell, my father "still figured it

would take time to check everything out, but in a day or so I'd be let out."

He was interrogated almost non-stop for the next two days. On the afternoon of the second day, he was called before a judge in the same building and had the order for his arrest read to him. He was charged with "having delivered information to imperialist secret services, with helping organizations who have smuggled people, and with customs and currency violations." In disbelief, Wiedenhoeft asked to have the charges repeated, "because it seemed so incredible. And then I just sort of laughed, and I said, 'What?! You mean murder isn't among the charges?'"[24]

Before he left the courtroom my father asked if he had the right to see a lawyer or the right not to answer questions. The judge answered no to both queries, adding "You're under a moral obligation to answer all questions." Under East German law, prisoners were not allowed legal counsel until their case was placed before the court. "You are not told of your few legal rights until it is too late."[25]

"They had never mentioned espionage before this. Never while I was there did they confront me with anything but the order for my arrest. They showed me the film they had developed the first night. Their building wasn't there. After that they sort of dropped the business of the photos."[26] "This is what really disturbed me, that they could have that attitude of just doing anything they damn pleased with me, taking my time, my freedom, just for the sake of writing down facts of my life."[27] And yet, recounting and writing down every detailed fact of Wiedenhoeft's life became his new daily prison routine.

Meanwhile, back in West Berlin, his wife (my mother) Renate was frantically trying to find her husband. When he did not return that first night, she and her sister-in-law, Emmy, came to East Berlin from her parents' home in West Berlin to look for him. Emmy had a Luxembourg passport, which allowed them entry into East Berlin, since West Berliners were not allowed to enter on their own. They filed a missing person report. The police checked the hospitals. Three days later, on 8 September 1967, my mother was brought to the East Berlin Prosecutor, General Joseph Streit, – the man who presumably had already signed the order for her husband's arrest – and he blandly denied knowing anything about it.[28]

Nor was there any official notice given concerning my father's disappearance. East German officials did not inform the American authorities. "We are quite concerned over this, as one would normally expect official notification in such a case," a spokesman said. "We view this detention as a blatant disregard of an individual… We shall continue to exert every effort we can to secure the release of Mr. Wiedenhoeft."[29] Normally, American officials would contact the Soviet Embassy in East Germany for information on missing US citizens, but those inquiries often remained unanswered.[30] A month later, the East German government finally released a statement regarding Wiedenhoeft's imprisonment. Robert J. McCloskey, the US State Department spokesman, made the following announcement. "The State Department has learned now that he [Wiedenhoeft] had been arrested in East Berlin on undetermined charges."[31]