Comrade Rock Star

Reggie Nadelson

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DEATH IN BERLIN FOR DEFECTOR WHO CHANGED HIS TUNE

MYSTERY OF POP STAR IN LAKE: IT WAS MURDER SAYS MANAGER

DEAN REED, THE SINGER WHO WENT EAST AND THEN WANTED TO COME IN FROM THE COLD

The crumpled newspaper cuttings dated June, l986 were in my bag as I climbed up the viewing platform near Checkpoint Charlie and looked down at the Berlin Wall. It was the first day of my search for Dean Reed, how he died, and who he was; most of it lay on the other side of the Wall that split the world for as long as I could remember. It was November, l988.

Down a jumble of gray streets fifteen minutes from the center of West Berlin, the Berlin Wall wasn't marked on a lot of Berlin maps, but it felt like the border of the world. Whenever I heard the phrase "Iron Curtain", in my mind's eye I always saw the Berlin Wall.

I saw it for real now, in front of me, this curtain of fortified concrete, eight feet high, twenty-nine miles long, topped with balls of barbed wire, covered on the Western side with graffiti, splattered in the East with blood. I was on my way to the other side, to East Berlin, where Dean Reed lived and died, to see his house, to find his albums, to try to get a sense of who he was, this man who had haunted my dreams since I had first seen him on 60 Minutes.

Dean Reed's death had been the subject of plenty of speculation. It was variously believed that he had been murdered by the East German Stasi, the KGB, the CIA, and neo-Nazis.

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From the top of the viewing platform at Checkpoint Charlie, I could see not just the Berlin Wall but the other side. I looked at the unsmiling border guards in a watchtower peering through binoculars at the tourists, who looked back through their cameras. Between us was the dead zone of no-man's-land. A few months later, a twenty-two-year-old waiter jumped over the Wall because he could no longer wait, and he was shot dead. He was the last person to die there.

On the platform near me, a West German woman was showing the Wall to an English friend. Turning to me, she said, "Do you think they shall take this down? They are sometimes talking so."

"I hope so. Wouldn't it be great?!" I exclaimed.

She smiled knowingly, tucked her beautifully cut blonde hair behind her pink shell of an ear, and shouldered her Gucci bag.

"If they take it down, there will be trouble," she said. "First Turks shall come over, and then German nationals. These East Germans shall take our jobs. They will invade our department stores."

That's what really got to her: if they dismantled the Wall, the East Germans might charge into the KaDeWe, denuding it of most of its 400 varieties of sausage and all of the handbags. She didn't have to worry. Two years later, on the Sunday in November when the Wall was sliced open and East Germans raced into the West, the New York Times reported: "The big department stores such as KaDeWe were closed, despite recently passed legislation that would have allowed them to stay open."

"You know what I am thinking?" she asked.

"What?"

"If the East Germans take the Wall down, we in the West will have to build another."

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I climbed down from the platform and got back in the car.

The line of cars moved slowly into the border crossing. Leslie Woodhead, who was hoping to make a drama-documentary out of the Dean Reed story, was with me on this first trip East and I was glad. He had worked in Eastern Europe a lot and I figured he was knowledgeable when it came to doing business in Communist countries. As we pulled into the crossing proper, passing from West to East, then stopped, a man pushed a little mirror on wheels underneath the car in front of us.

"The spy's carpet sweeper," Leslie said.

My stomach turned over as we edged forward. A pale border guard put his head out of his cubicle like a jack-in-the-box and stared into the car. I had never been to the East before, but I'd seen all the movies.

The building where you showed your passport reminded me of a drive-through confessional; the young soldier, like an angry priest, snatched my passport, then snapped his window shut, leaving us to wait without any identity under a sickly white light in no-man's-land.

Eventually, the guard returned our passports and we bought day visas inscribed on what felt like cheap toilet paper, stiff, slick, brown, foreign.

Creep, I thought silently. "Have a nice day," I said, and the guard looked startled.

Whenever Dean Reed went through Checkpoint Charlie, though, he apparently always said "hi" to the guards, and Hans, or Heinz, or Hermann, whoever was on guard duty, would go home and say, "Dean Reed passed by today." He was so famous that for years you could just write DEAN REED, EAST BERLIN, east berlin on a postcard and it would get to him.

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The empty streets that led away from the border were full of potholes. The walls of the dank gray buildings that lined the roads were still pocked with shell marks from a war that had been over for more than forty years. I was expecting posters with socialist slogans or banners or stylized graphics of Lenin's head, but here there were none. There were only the crappy streets with half the streetlights broken, crumbling buildings stained by the insistent rain, and shop windows that featured maybe a sparkly nylon blouse or a can of Spreewald pickles or some fancy china no one wanted. Still there was something thrilling about it, about being here; I had crossed the Berlin Wall. How could I have known then that, in two years' time, the Wall would be a pair of earrings in Bloomingdale's?

"I want a Dean Reed record, please," I said to the clerk at the Melodia record shop on the Leipzigerstrasse, where "Winter Wonderland" was playing. The saleswoman, who had thick ankles and thick glasses, ignored me. I shouted at her the way you do when you don't speak a language and feel that if you say it loud enough in English someone will understand.

"Dean Reed, please. Bitte?" I added and pointed vaguely at the albums.

"Winter Wonderland" was more her sort of thing. It was the most popular song in East Germany that year except for "Baa Baa Black Sheep". "Oh Tannenbaum" was also high on the charts, but it was almost Christmas.

"Dean Reed, Dean Reed," I insisted, my voice rising. A man with a little green fedora shot me a disapproving look.

"Shhh," he hissed.

The woman with thick glasses turned away impatiently, nodding brusquely towards the door, and so I began to speculate that, even dead, Dean Reed was a non-person, a subject not for discussion in this country where you could not discuss much, not out loud anyway.

Outside, in the streets, the shoppers plodded by, their expressions dour and disengaged. On the Alexanderplatz, a brutal piazza big enough for an army to

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maneuver in, a wind came up and drove the freezing rain in slanted sheets against us.

"Be Our Guest" in German flickered in neon on the Stadt Hotel. The doorman there loomed up out of the gloom, wielding his umbrella like a Kalashnikov.

"Nein! Nein! Nein!"

He was absolutely furious. We were not hotel guests. Only hotel guests were allowed inside. There were rules. He was the doorman. This was his door.

"Go," he shrieked and hid under the umbrella.

Across the square we found a forlorn espresso bar. Its walls were a sort of distempered duck-egg blue and the table tops were covered in scratched linoleum. But the Flying Pickets were on the sound system and the espresso machine, which had clearly been lovingly cared for, gleamed. It was an object that shimmered with the suggestive promise of sunny countries and laughter and good coffee.

"Halifax," Leslie said.

"What?"

"This is Halifax, 1951. Where I grew up. The Bon Bon Coffee Bar on Commercial Street. You could listen to Guy Mitchell and Frankie Laine and Ruby Murray on the jukebox . . . you don't know what I'm talking about, do you?"

I ordered something from the menu. It was some kind of chopped beef on toast. Minced, minced beef, I thought. Leslie shuddered.

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"That looks like dog's vomit."

The Dog's Vomit Café was how I came to think of the duck-egg blue espresso bar on the Alexanderplatz.

"How could Dean Reed have lived here?" Leslie asked, his voice full of disbelief and some despair. "What could he have wanted badly enough to live in this bloody place?"

East Berlin must have had something, something to entice a man like Dean Reed, I thought to myself. Maybe this was just façade; maybe it was too soon to understand. After all, I had friends in London who preferred East Berlin to West, who talked about the opera and museums, the Berliner Ensemble, and the socialist ideals. Maybe it was too soon for me to get it. People in the west sometimes spoke of the quality of friendship in the GDR, the way you could take the time to sit and talk because no one was rushing to work in a country where everyone was always fully employed. A couple of years later, however, when the Wall came down, it was revealed that what lay behind the façade was much worse that it had seemed that first day. Not only ugly, but polluted, impoverished, run by gray-faced old despots with a vicious secret police so ubiquitous that one in every three or four citizens was involved with it.

Right now, though, I wanted a record. There were none in the West because Dean Reed had never played in the West or recorded there.

On the Alexanderplatz was a second record store; in the drizzle, a line had formed outside it. A couple of muscular black American GIs, presumably stationed in West Berlin, passed us and held out their hands, palms up in despair as if to say, "They told us you could get cheap stuff here, but there's nothing to buy." I could see the record shop was almost empty. Still, our line of forlorn customers stood in the rain because you were not allowed inside without one of the orange plastic shopping baskets which were in short supply. As one customer left the shop, he handed on his basket to the next person in line.

The baskets were too small for the records, though, I realized when I got one and went into the shop. The clerks didn't care if you bought anything either and they were irritated if you didn't have the right change; there was nothing much to want

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anyway.

Right there in the dreary record shop, I lost whatever was left of my political virginity, of any vestige of the socialist fantasies I was raised on as a "Red Diaper Baby" in Greenwich Village. My mother had been in the Communist Party when she was young, and I came of age in the Sixties when everyone believed in peace and love and universal disarmament. Even in the late l980s, I probably clung to some kind of sentimental version of it all. I had friends whose parents still stood up when they heard the "Internationale", in one case during a performance of Reds at the movies. ("Down in front," somebody shouted from the balcony. "We want to see them kiss!")

So my absolute conversion to capitalism came with a small orange plastic shopping basket in a record store on the Alexanderplatz in East Berlin. Simple-minded, maybe, but the practical effects, the everyday results of a system, were always a lot more potent than any theory.

Rock records were scarce in the East, though before long rock and roll would be the soundtrack for the revolutions of the late eighties. Swaying mobs with lighted candles would appear in Gorky Park in Moscow; the crowd in Prague's Wenceslas Square in l989 would rattle their key chains like a cheery punk band to celebrate the Velvet Revolution; in East Berlin, as early as l987, kids climbed into the trees near the Wall to listen to concerts in the West, or to look at the new Soviet premier who was a lot like a rock star.

"Gorby, Gorby," the kids hanging in trees near the Berlin Wall would shout, as if the Soviet premier were that year's rock star. And, in a way, he was.

Over that year, during my first encounters with the world where Dean Reed lived, I finally saw why. He had been a star. He was an American guy singing the music that everyone yearned for, the music that made you feel alive if you were young. It was the best, most joyful expression of the sedition which was the only way to keep from shriveling up in an oppressive society. In West Berlin, I met a man who smuggled synthesizers and cassettes past Checkpoint Charlie, not for profit, but as a gesture of solidarity with the rock and roll underground.

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In the record store on the Alexanderplatz, flipping albums methodically, front to back, in bin after bin, long after I had given up, Leslie scanned each cover and found nothing. Not for the first time that day I had the eerie sense that Dean Reed had never existed in this strange country, where the rules were made to fence people in, to make them conform, to keep them quiet. How could the exuberant cowboy I'd seen on TV have been part of it?

Suddenly, Leslie whispered at me, "Over here."

The album was titled Country Songs and Dean Reed's picture was on the cover. He wore a cowboy hat and he was smiling and he looked wonderful, full of life. I held the album. I touched his hat. I carried it gently in the orange plastic basket to the cashier, who glared at me because I didn't have the right change. I didn't care. Dean was real now; I could touch him.

Outside, we located the rental car and climbed in and decided to risk the trip to Schmockwitz, where Dean Reed had lived. It was not on the map of places you were permitted to visit, according to the day visa printed on the stiff oily paper. All day we had discussed if we should risk it. But it seemed innocent enough, the half-hour drive into the suburbs, and Leslie turned the key in the ignition.

I propped the Dean Reed album on the dashboard. My feet were soaked and I took off my shoes and hung my socks on the radiator to dry. Outside a thick mist, a kind of soaking drifting fog clung to the windshield. In an endless tangle of suburban streets, we got lost.

Then, all at once, it seemed, we bumped over the cobblestones into the village of Schmockwitz itself. I had assumed that Schmockwitz must be the Graceland of the East. There would, I hoped, be souvenirs, mugs and keyrings, albums and posters, all with Dean's face on them, maybe even a replica of his guitar or a talking Dean doll.

We pulled up in front of a tavern, one of those Berlin pubs with lace curtains in the window. As I opened the door, the buzz of voices went silent. Everyone looked up from their food. I felt like an interloper as, in unison, a half-dozen hefty burghers stopped their Sunday lunch and stared at my bare feet. No one smiled. There were no Dean Reed beer mugs.

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Backing off, I got in the car and Leslie drove down a narrow road between bare birch trees. Slush spattered the window. The rain, heavy now, fell from a greasy leaden sky. We took a wrong turn. We ended up in front of a large building that was shuttered for the winter. A sign I could just decode announced that it was a Communist Party Rest House. The car wheels squealed and we backed out in a hurry. We were lost. It was dark. The woods seemed to close in from both sides of the road. It was completely deserted.

Paranoia turned on the projector in my head and the movie flickered into life: it was in black and white with a creepy grain and the pulsing soundtrack of an irregular heartbeat. Whoever had it in for Dean Reed, whoever killed him, was somewhere down this road. Someone who was looking for us.

We would miss closing time at Checkpoint Charlie; we were way out of bounds, beyond the limits of our visa. We would spend the night in an East Berlin jail among officials who were not only Communists but also Germans, and perhaps there was a small concentration camp still open somewhere . . . that would be it, a small camp. Rigid with fear, I sat, watching my socks flutter on the radiator. I thought I heard the wail of a German police car siren rise and fall. It was coming closer.

6A Schmockwitzer Damm was a low-lying, white stucco house with an orange tiled roof, a garage, a lawn. A large carved wooden R was perched on a post in the yard as if it were a ranch: the Double-R ranch; the Dean Reed Dude Ranch of Schmockwitz.

On the other side of the house from the road was a stretch of lake the color of tin. It was the lake where Dean Reed's body lay for four days before it had been dragged to shore in June of l986. The place felt deserted, lonely, desolate.

I took the newspaper clippings out of my bag and read the article by Russell Miller, a British journalist. Miller, by chance, had arranged to interview Dean Reed for a magazine the weekend he died. From West Berlin, where Miller was staying, he had called the house at Schmockwitz. The interview was scheduled for the next day, but Mrs. Reed told him that Dean was ill and could not see him. In the middle of the conversation, a man came on the line Ð it seemed to Miller that he had snatched the phone away from Mrs. Reed. He told Miller that Dean was in the hospital and that he should go home and would be contacted. Then he gave Miller his name and a telephone number in Potsdam. He was Mr. Weiczaukowski, he said.

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Puzzled, Russell Miller went back to London and, on the following Tuesday, when he heard the news that Dean Reed was dead, he called Potsdam. There was no Mr. Weiczaukowski at the number he had been given. He wrote a story for the Sunday Times, and so the mystery was cranked up. It grew and leaked and multiplied.

"I have over 2000 scenarios," Dean Reed's mother would tell me. "And it's about up to 3000 now, I think . . . each scenario brings up a new way I think he was killed."

"I read something about maybe there being drugs, or that there were some political implications," a friend of Reed's told me. "I've heard the CIA whack," said someone else. "I've heard killed by a jealous lover. Or the KGB."

And so it went. Eventually, the rumors spread so that nobody could unpick the truth about his death from the rumors. KGB, CIA, eventually I became hooked on the creepy network of conspiracy buffs. Already, for months, I'd been trying to get a fix on it, had talked to Russell Miller, who was as perplexed as I was. Now, finally, on this dank December day in l987, I was here in this silent, cold place. The house was shut up. No answers.

I said, "Let's go."

It was wet and dark and I was frightened; we had seen the house. I wanted to go. I felt we were out on a limb with no back-up, no way back if we got lost. But Leslie insisted on getting out of the car to take pictures of the house because, if he made a drama-documentary, his production designer would need them. He took his time while I sat in the car. It wasn't just for the production designer, I could see that. It was an obsession for him, this part of the world, this other place across the Wall. In a way he was addicted to Eastern Europe. It tested you and then you could go home, a no-exit with a revolving door, an adventure with a return ticket, he always said.

"Cheer up," he said now, turning to take yet one more picture, then getting back in the car and revving up the motor of the car loud enough to wake the dead. "Listen, honestly, this is nothing at all compared to when I was filming a documentary about torture in Brazil."

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Down that country road, in the encroaching gloom on the other side of the Berlin Wall was where I seriously began looking for Dean Reed. It was December, l987. The Berlin Wall had gone up in August, l961, which was just about the time Dean Reed had left America. He never lived there again, and he died in this lake in East Berlin. Who killed him? Who was he? A true believer? A spy? Just a guy, an American with a guitar and great looks and a lot of ambition?

Leslie drove a few hundred yards and stopped and got out of the car. I followed him to the little cemetery by the side of the road. A few wet flowers lay on a headstone. It seemed incredibly sad somehow that the dazzling American I'd seen on TV should end up in this lonely place. I bent down. On the headstone, in German, was inscribed simply: Dean Reed. Born Colorado, 1938. Died Berlin, 1986.

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