

Piece of Berlin Wall dedicated at Ronald Reagan Park in San Bernardino

By Josh Dulaney Staff Writer
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A section of the Berlin Wall stands in Ronald Reagan Park during a dedication ceremony in San Bernardino on Thursday. The city of San Bernardino acquired the last piece of the historic wall available by public auction. (Gabriel Luis Acosta/Staff Photographer)

SAN BERNARDINO - It's been more than two decades since Ronald Reagan made one of the most famous statements in presidential history by telling Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this wall."

And now a piece of that wall, which divided East and West Berlin, stands in Ronald Reagan Park. "When the wall came down, I was in Virginia Beach in my home, and for three days I was glued to my tiny TV and the emotion I went through...was just incredible," said Redlands resident Anke Otto-Wolf. "This release of emotion and hope and looking freedom in the face - I still feel that very, very close, especially when I am here at the park." Otto-Wolf joined hundreds of residents, officials and history buffs at a dedication ceremony for the wall segment held Thursday at the park at Irvington and Chestnut avenues.

The Berlin Wall came down after the Communist government of East Germany allowed its people to cross to the free West in 1989.

The piece of it here is expected to present teachable moments for generations to come.

"It's going to be the No. 1 educational tool for the Inland Empire," said 5th Ward Councilman Chas Kelley. For those like Otto-Wolf, the wall is a striking reminder of the years Communism stole from family and friends who could not reach each other.

A retired teacher and author of the book "My Peace of the Wall", Otto-Wolf, a 72-year-old native of Berlin, knew Germany before the wall was built.

After WWII, her family left Berlin, but her extended family remained in the part of the city that eventually would become walled off into East Berlin.

She recalled begging her cousins in August of 1961 to join the rest of the family before the border was closed.

"I urged my cousins to come with me and settle in the western part, just five days before the wall would shut them out," she said. "They stayed and then the separation of our city, family and country began on Aug. 13."

Otto-Wolf married a G.I. and came to America in 1963, but the couple were later stationed for several years in Frankfurt, Germany.

She described those years as "very, very trying times" being so close yet so far away from her cousins.

West Germans referred to the wall and its fortifications on the East as a "death strip" through the country, she said.

She was teaching in Virginia when Reagan made his famous remarks at the Brandenburg Gate in 1987.

"It was very interesting," she said. "It was super-emotional and I remember I started crying and all of my German friends said I can't believe he did that, and it was jubilation," she said. "And in the back of our heads we always (thought) it wasn't going to happen."

She was chosen by Berlin to represent that city at Thursday's dedication, three days before what would have been Reagan's 100th birthday.

The nonprofit group Friends of Ronald Reagan Park, which is helping design and construct the park, bought the wall piece at an auction.

The front of the artifact features a new mural of Reagan, with his famous words written underneath.

On the back of the wall, spray-painted words read: ACHTUNG! SIE VERLASSEN JETZT West Berlin - Attention! You are now leaving West Berlin.

John Backhaus of Redlands said the wall was inspiring, as it stood between an American flag and a German flag.

"I think it's nice, honestly I do," he said. "I really can't (find) words for it."

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