

DIANE FORMAN

Berlin

MIST and clouds hung precariously over Berlin every day of my visit last September, as if the gloom provided some sort of backdrop for this ancestral trip. This journey I'd contemplated for a decade.

I've spent a lot of my life thinking about Berlin. It lives in my DNA, in my marrow. I can hear the language of my youth; my grandfather, always shrouded by cigar smoke, calling my nickname, "Di-chen," with his familiar soft guttural inflection. Berlin is the city in which my mother was born, the city my mother and her family escaped in 1939. The city where my great grandmother was left behind to die at the hands of the Nazis, and the one in which my daughter currently resides. Berlin is a part of my family like another cousin, although some want to ostracize that family member, leave her out, pretend she doesn't exist.

And now I'm here, standing in the drizzle by the Brandenburg Gate, leaning against a rented red Jump bike I found on a phone app and plucked from a nearby street corner. Soon I will try to keep up with my daughter Joanna as she speeds past on her own bike, darting in and out of chaotic traffic, far ahead, away from me. Having lived here for most of a year, she knows her way around the winding streets, while I am just a visitor in the familial homeland, the city to which my mother has refused to return.

"Why would I?" Mom asks. "Berlin took so much from us."

But now my daughter lives in my mother's exiled country. My mother and her family had no choice but to leave; however, it was my daughter's decision to move here. I need to understand this too.

I pump the Jump pedals and ride past austere Cold War architecture in a palette of grey and beige; nearby gentrified areas have been modernized with trendy cafes and shops. The city shows its scars like the fighter it's been for over a hundred years. Joanna is out of sight, but when I catch up, I'll ask no questions. We know this dance, and I won't jeopardize any part of this trip, one we couldn't have shared even a year ago, certainly not five. I'm careful not to say too much, and instead buy us coffees which we drink out of steaming glass mugs while looking silently through foggy windows at the streets beyond.

We spend the afternoon at Checkpoint Charlie and the Wall Museum. The drizzle has now become a cold, driving rain. The dreariness suspends the city, as 50,000 runners have this particular day to run the Berlin Marathon. We step between orange cones and police barriers, dodging runners and downpours. Rain, like grief, drips from my eyes, as we silently walk part of the Marathon route, part of the wall route. It was such a short time ago that Berlin was separated. Everywhere I feel the influence and impact of the war, which hangs over the city, thin as gauze, but present.

I can't help but question how my daughter and I got to this place of separate quietude, 4,000 miles away from home. Is Berlin her real home now, here in the ancestral homeland? For years we lived together in a single skin, and I wonder if this is why she chose to move so far away, to the city my mother associates with pain and loss. Joanna says she loves Berlin, that she feels she belongs here. I quietly try to understand, while remembering that Germany was responsible for gassing my great-grandmother and driving my grandparents from their home.

The next day we take a train to Dahlem, the town in western Berlin where my mother was born, because I want to finally see the house set amidst peach orchards where she played until her family was forced to leave. I hope it will help me understand something. My daughter is fluent in German now, and talks rapidly with the train conductor while I try to figure out the different lines and stops, a map which confuses me much more than my local Boston transit system.

"I love speaking German," she tells me earnestly, and I'm proud of her seamless language acquisition. People say she has no embarrassing American accent and speaks like a native, as if she has always lived here. As if Berlin were always her home.

Although the skies are still gloomy, I am cheered by hundreds of red and pink camellias which line the square of this charming little town. Dahlem has retained its original character from the previous century. I see no remnants of war at all, no apologies. On a corner near the train station, I immediately catch sight of the ancient stone church where my grandparents were married, which I recognize from photographs that I have studied for years. It's adjacent to the street, the street of my mother's house, which we walk down eagerly. Falkenreid #30, I know the number by heart.

We walk up and down the pavement, but can't find the house. I recall an old Google Earth photo which showed #30 hidden behind wildly overgrown trees, so we're looking for large groves reaching the sky. Eventually, we have to acknowledge that the trees simply don't exist, and the ever more obvious fact: my mother's home is no longer there either. Reluctantly, we note that there is a number 30, but it's a sterile modern house with strong parallel lines, a straight metal roof and locked gate. The orchards and welcoming family cottage with its thatched peaks have been destroyed; the new owners built a house more to their liking. I waited too long to travel to Berlin, and now this physical tie to my mother and my grandparents' past is gone.

"I know you're disappointed, Mom," Joanna offers, resting her arm on my shoulder. I lean towards her, letting her comfort me. Everything hurts right now. My knee aches. My heart aches. I want to be with her always. The years of estrangement have begun to break down, but unlike my mother's former house, I want softness, not a concrete monolith to be built in its place.

The next day it's drizzling again, and I'm back on the Jump bike. We have ridden to a Sunday market, where we taste honeys and hummuses and spices of different vendors. We giggle, despite the inclement weather. Afterwards the sky has cleared enough that we can sit lazily in an open air cafe, sharing lemon scones and small talk. There have been tense moments on this trip, but this is a sweet one, here in my daughter's adopted city.

The sky finally turns deep blue several days later, while I'm in the taxi on my way to Tegel Airport. As grey buildings blur past, I say farewell to Berlin, which was home to my relatives for centuries. And it is now my daughter's home. My heart tightens because I don't want to leave the lingering questions of my family's history behind. I don't want to leave my daughter behind. I want the cab to turn around so I can go back, so she can change her mind, so she'll get on the plane with me. To come home.

But then I remind myself that she is home. We may no longer share a skin, but we still share memories and love. Even when things are difficult, I know this is true. Soon I will be airborne, flying over the blue Atlantic, before landing in Boston. Eventually, I too will be home.