Bedtime Biography: Stasiland

Introduction

Bedtime Biographies are best when listened to. Check out the audio version to get the full experience! Imagine a world in which every conversation you have – even the most trivial or mundane – is being spied on and reported to the authorities. A world in which the tiniest infraction against government rules can be held against you for the rest of your life. A world in which attempting to leave your country – or even the suspicion you might want to leave – can get you thrown in a dark prison located off the map, subject to endless interrogation and unimaginable torture. This was life under the “Stasi,” the nickname given by East German citizens to the Ministry for State Security, a government agency that oversaw their lives. Part police force, part spy service, the Stasi was the dominant force in East German society. From the end of World War II in 1945 until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Stasi operatives haunted East Germany. They taped phone calls, monitored workplaces, and installed informers into every aspect of daily life. In a nation of seventeen million people, nearly 100,000 were Stasi agents, and another 200,000 were informers paid by the Stasi to report on fellow citizens. If part-timers are included, some estimates reckon there was one Stasi informer for every 6.5 East German citizens. What did the Stasi want? What was the point of all this surveillance? The answer was simple: control. Without control, an East German citizen, whose government was allied with Communist Russia, might simply cross the border into West Germany, where the government was allied with capitalist Western nations like the USA, the UK, and France. Living in East Germany did come with certain perks: the state guaranteed jobs and housing for everyone, and it fought to keep prices low. But it couldn’t compete with the wages and political freedoms offered in the West, which prompted citizens to abandon their country in droves in the years following the creation of the two separate states after World War II. So East Germany’s solution was control. In tandem with the famous Wall that controlled its citizens physically, the Stasi emerged to control them mentally. Through a vast network of bugs, spies, and informers, the Stasi created the most intricate and complex surveillance apparatus the world has ever seen. In this Bedtime Biography, we’ll be considering the lives of normal people in East Germany. In particular, we’ll focus on two women who came into contact with the Stasi. What was it like to live in a surveillance state? How did the presence of Stasi informers shape everyday lives? Sometimes the impact could be dramatic, involving daring escapes and terrifying interrogations. Sometimes the impact could be more prosaic and insidious, shaping your life in ways you couldn’t fully understand. Whatever the case, few escaped the scars of growing up in Stasiland.

Chapter 1

Miriam Miriam Weber was born in 1952, seven years after the end of World War II. These were the early years of East Germany, when a new nation was being built in the wake of Nazi Germany. Like many children born and raised in this period, Miriam believed fully in East Germany’s communist ideals. Everyone, their government promised, was equal. Everyone was entitled to a free education, a good job, and good housing. And when it came to consumer goods, the state managed all the brands, and strove to keep them affordable and cheap for the everyday citizen. In 1963, when Miriam was eleven, the Berlin Wall was built. Like a lot of East Germans, she believed the story the government told her about the Wall. This wasn’t built to keep you in, they said. It was built to keep swindlers out! Because we keep prices low in East Germany,

people from the West travel over here and take advantage. They snatch up all our cheap bread, butter, milk, and eggs, then sell them for five times the price in the West! The Wall is for your own protection. It's to help us build the ideal communist state. But, as she grew older, Miriam, like many others, started to question this narrative. Major protests broke out across the country. At the time, Miriam was 16. The protests were especially intense in Leipzig, the city where she lived. Watching the protests on the street, she realized she wasn't alone in questioning the government's version of truth. The state responded harshly to the protesters, spraying people with fire hoses and locking up hundreds. This isn't right, she thought. Shouldn't people in an equal country be allowed to express their opinion? Miriam and her friend Ursula felt they needed to do something; take a stand of some sort. So, they decided to hang signs around Leipzig, showing their support for the protesters. There wasn't a big overall goal here; it was a youthful, impulsive expression of their solidarity with the protestors. After all, Miriam was only 16. Unfortunately, she had no idea what she was getting herself into.

"Consultation, not fire hoses!" the leaflets read. Making these was not as straightforward as you might imagine. You needed a special license to buy printers and typewriters in East Germany, so Miriam and Ursula had to think outside the box. They went to a stationer's shop and bought a children's stamp set, and letter-by-painstaking-letter, they printed the series of leaflets.

That night, they snuck out to hang them around the city. They put leaflets everywhere – telephone booths, tram stops, even the local Communist Party headquarters. They were very careful, too. They wore gloves and masks, and crept around unseen. But, on their way home, they made what would turn out to be a fateful mistake. Passing the apartment of a boy they knew from school, they stuffed a few leaflets into his mailbox. Later that night they would go to bed happy, believing they'd pulled off a successful, and brave act of protest. The very next day, officers from the Stasi showed up at Miriam's school. The boy's parents had turned the leaflets in. Possession of protest leaflets was a crime of sedition, and sedition was a major offence in East Germany. Afraid of repercussions, the boy's parents did what the government encouraged everyone to do – report every crime, no matter how small. The Stasi interviewed anybody connected with the leaflets, which were clearly the work of teenagers. Over the course of the next few weeks, they interviewed teachers, parents, and fellow students. As they did, it quickly became clear that Miriam and Ursula were the prime suspects. As the Stasi's suspicions closed in, the teenagers struck a deal with each other – neither would rat the other out, no matter what. Not long after that, the Stasi arrived at Miriam's house with dogs and gloves. Much to her horror, they discovered a few rubber letters from her stamp set, hidden under the rug. She thought she'd thrown them away! But brave as always, Miriam insisted she had no idea where the letters came from. Even so, the teenagers were taken to a prison, where they were held in solitary confinement for a full month. Miriam and Ursula kept their promise to each other, and didn't disclose the truth. That didn't sit well with the Stasi interrogators. They wanted a confession. The Stasi preferred confessions when prosecuting a crime like sedition – if the suspect admitted their actions before the trial, nobody could question the verdict. They even tried to deceive Miriam, insisting Ursula had already spilled the beans. But, in reality, she hadn't. The month in solitary confinement was their undoing, though. It was all too much – Miriam broke down and confessed. Following that, and shortly before Christmas, she was released from prison. Her trial would take place in a few months. But Miriam had no interest in waiting patiently for a verdict that was already a foregone conclusion. Desperate and traumatized, she decided she'd escape over the Wall.

Chapter 2

It’s New Year’s Eve. 16-year-old Miriam is wandering around Berlin, the capital of East Germany. It’s a strange island of divided territory in the middle of East Germany, carved up at the end of World War II between the Allies and the Soviets. Miriam’s never been here before, even though it’s just a two-hour train ride from Leipzig. It’s cold and dark, and she’s afraid. Everywhere she goes, she sees the Wall – a huge concrete fortification, cleaving the city in two. In the rest of East Germany, it’s almost impossible to approach the border to the West, but here in Berlin, the West is tantalizingly close – it’s right there, over the Wall. But, as Miriam quickly discovers, there are, in fact, two Walls. There’s the big one that defines the border, and a smaller one topped with barbed wire and spikes, one hundred meters away. In between lies what’s known as the “death strip,” a long stretch of land filled with sand, patrolled by watch dogs, and spotlights. Everywhere you look there are sentry towers bristling with guards and machine guns. It’s common knowledge that if you manage to find a way past the death strip and into West Berlin, you’ll be granted asylum and allowed to make a new life. This is what Miriam was looking for when she came to the capital. But, staring at the imposing Wall, she can’t find any gaps. There is no escape. Defeated, she decides to go back to Leipzig and accept her fate. Miriam’s on the train home now. She’s resolved to serve out the expected jail sentence for the grave crime of distributing leaflets. Then, as the train crosses Bornholmer Bridge, she sees it. A chink in the Wall. Instead of a big concrete fortification, the stretch of the Wall near the bridge is just a tall wire fence. This could be her way into West Germany! She gets off the train at the next station and walks quickly back in the dark toward the bridge. She grabs a ladder from a worksite nearby, and carefully approaches the fence. Nobody seems to be patrolling the area, maybe because it’s New Year’s Eve. She scales the ladder. No one sees her. At the top of the fence, she gets tangled in the barbed wire, which shreds up her legs. She tumbles to the ground. Still no one sees her.

Now she’s in the infamous death strip. Over her head, fireworks are exploding to celebrate the New Year. It’s 1969. But Miriam isn’t celebrating. She’s crawling her way to freedom. She creeps forward, exposed under the bright spotlights, but no one seems to notice. Ahead of her, a dog rises from the ground. It sniffs the air, but it doesn’t bark. Miriam keeps edging forward. She reaches the second fence. Through the wire mesh, she can see it. West Berlin. There are shiny new cars that don’t exist in East Germany. A tall skyscraper rises in the air. She can even see Western guards at their posts, ready to grab and spirit her to safety when she gets across. She takes one final step, but her foot grazes a trip-wire. The sirens go off. From the sentry towers, spotlights shine down on her. Miriam freezes, and before she knows it, she’s surrounded by guards. “You piece of shit,” one of them says. They grab her and throw her in the back of a police van. In the glaring light, she suddenly realizes she’s absolutely covered in blood. Miriam is taken straight to a Leipzig prison, where she’s thrown into a 2-by-3 meter cell. For ten days and ten nights, she isn’t permitted to sleep and is forced to endure interrogation after interrogation. The Stasi are determined to find out who helped the 16-year-old hatch her escape plan. Who taught her how to get past the guard dog? Who told her about the Bornholmer Bridge? She insists she came up with the idea and plan herself, but they don’t believe her. Eventually, delirious from lack of sleep and from days of relentless interrogation, Miriam gives the Stasi what they want. She invents a ridiculous story about a secret organization that recruited her to cross the Wall. Satisfied, her interrogator lets her return to her cell, where she can finally get some sleep. A few weeks later, he drags her back. They’ve found out that the story was a fabrication. “How dare you make up that story!” the interrogator shouts. “You’ve earned yourself a longer sentence!” Miriam would spend the next two years of her life in jail. They prove to be long, difficult years, with frequent beatings and a workday that starts at 4:30 am. As you might imagine, these years will profoundly shape the course of her life. We’ll leave

Miriam's story here, and return to it at the end of this Bedtime Biography.

Chapter 3

Julia Julia Behrend lived a very different life from Miriam. There were no dramatic acts of dissent. No attempted escapes. No prison sentences. Even so, her life was shaped by the Stasi just as significantly as Miriam's was. Her story demonstrates how a culture of surveillance seeps under the skin, influencing you in ways you can barely understand. Julia was born in 1966. Her family, the Behrends, were not outwardly political, and both her parents taught in the public school. They raised Julia to keep her head down, follow rules, and live an unremarkable life away from the attention of authorities. Even at home, they avoided discussing politics. By the time Julia was growing up, a generation after Miriam, the assumption was that you were always being watched in East Germany, even in your most intimate moments. East Germany had a complicated relationship with foreign travelers. Although East Germans couldn't visit the West without special permission, people from the West could come to East Germany with relative ease. However, it wasn't a popular travel destination, since movement was severely restricted and travelers were followed closely by the Stasi. One of the few exceptions was the Leipzig trade fair, which was held twice a year. The fair was a major occasion for manufacturers on both sides of the Iron Curtain to present their innovations to each other. It also was a time for people from the East and West to mingle in more informal settings. In the early 1980s, when she was 16, Julia got a job at the fair. She was talented with languages, and so worked as an usher for the international guests. One of her guests was an Italian traveler, a man in his early thirties who worked at a computer company. Julia was intrigued by his life outside the East, and, in the months after the trade fair, they began a long-distance relationship. He could only get permission from the East German state to visit Julia twice a year, but they also began meeting for short holidays in Hungary, a country that allowed visitors from both East and West. As her relationship with the Italian grew more serious, Julia started noticing signs that she was being watched. Strangely, letters from him would arrive torn up and taped back together, as if they'd been intercepted. Whenever he visited Germany, there were cars parked outside her home, and the moment they left the building, they'd be stopped and searched by police. Her parents told her not to worry. This was simply what happened when you dated a Westerner. This was life in East Germany. That made sense to her. Like most people, Julia had internalized the logic of the Stasi state. There was no reason to be afraid. It wasn't like she had any big secrets, anyway. On long-distance calls, Julia now simply assumed she was being listened to. "Goodnight," she would say to her boyfriend. Then, as a kind of joke for the Stasi, she'd say: "Goodnight everyone else." As she approached the end of high school, she was determined to become an interpreter. It seemed like a glamorous career – one that would enable her to travel the world or, rather, the world allowed to East Germans behind the Iron Curtain. Julia's grades were excellent. Her teachers assured her she'd have no trouble getting into university. All she needed was to pass her final exam. But, one day, seemingly out of nowhere, her parents got a surprise visit from the school's headmaster. "Your daughter," he told them, "needs to break up with her Italian boyfriend. Everyone assumes she's going to leave for the West when she finishes school. This isn't good for her career." Julia's parents were dumbfounded. What did the headmaster care about Julia's love life? This, they felt, crossed a line. Incensed, they told him to stay out of her business. And in so doing, after a life that'd been defined by compliance, the Behrends decided to take a fateful stand. A few weeks later, Julia was shocked to learn that she'd failed her exams. Although she'd aced all the academic subjects, she did poorly on the "political exam." Without proving

you had the right political ideology, you couldn't be accepted to university. Surprised, but optimistic as ever, Julia started studying to retake the test. Soon, her parents received another visit from the headmaster. "Listen," the headmaster said to Julia's father. "I'm telling you this because you're a teacher, too. Colleague to colleague, you should tell Julia there's no point trying for university. She'll never be allowed to pass that exam." The Stasi, apparently, had put a black mark beside her name. Julia's life had entered a new phase. For the crime of dating a foreigner, she'd made herself a target.

Chapter 4

For the next few months, Julia tried to make the best of her situation. If she couldn't be an interpreter, maybe she could work at a hotel. Being a hotel receptionist didn't require a university degree, and at least it would allow her to utilize her language skills. She applied for jobs everywhere – Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden. And after every interview, the hotel manager would assure her she was perfect for the job. She was smart, charming, and had a stellar resumé. She'd leave the interview excited. Then, a day later, she'd hear back. "We've given the job to someone else." What was happening? The only thing she could conclude was that her applications were being sent to the Stasi for approval, and then being revoked. Soon after this realization, Julia went on a trip to Hungary to meet with her boyfriend. Her life wasn't going as planned, and she was deeply unhappy. Maybe if she broke off the relationship, she'd get a chance to start over. They broke up, and she travelled back to East Germany. In yet another alarming turn of events, Julia was detained at the airport. A dour security officer led her to a backroom. Every piece of her luggage was taken out and scrutinized. The guard even took apart her hairdryer, as if to demonstrate that everything she owned, no matter how trivial, was under suspicion. Now, back home in East Germany, she still couldn't find work. Restaurants, hotels, tourist agencies. No one would hire her. She'd fallen into a crack between reality and fiction. Everyone had always said there was no such thing as "unemployment" in East Germany. There was free education, too. But Julia was unemployed, uneducated, and alone. In choosing to have a relationship with a foreign man, she'd fallen through the looking glass. One day, she got a surprise summons to the police station. The only instruction she received was to "go to Room 118." Confused, she made her way through the building. When she reached Room 118, she noticed the sign on the door: Ministry for State Security. She'd been called, she realized, to speak with the Stasi. An officer greeted her. "Julia," he said. "It's such a pleasure to meet you. I want to help you – It seems that you can't find any work in this country." He bent over his desk and pulled out some papers. They were photocopies of Julia's letters to her Italian boyfriend. He started reading them aloud: Embarrassing, intimate things, professions of love. Julia squirmed in her seat, humiliated. "What does he want from me?" she wondered. He continued by asking her questions. He knew everything about her family, down to the smallest detail, like her father's taste in books, and her sister's wish to study piano at the conservatory. He even knew details about her ex-boyfriend's family in Italy; details he could've only learned from international informers – The house where he was raised in Umbria; the model of car he drove. Julia finally understood what the Stasi officer was doing. He was making a demonstration. He was saying, "I know everything about you. I have you in the palm of my hand." Finally, he came to the point. "Julia," he said, "there's a simple way to get your life back." The Stasi officer made a proposal. If she agreed to become an informer for the Stasi, he'd take the black mark off her name. It was that easy. She'd have to write reports on people she knew, but she could finally have a career, an income, a purpose. Julia was indignant. "Absolutely not," she said. "At least take my card," the officer insisted.She left the room in a daze.

Everything was finally clear. Keeping her head down had never been enough. For no reason at all, Julia had become a target of the Stasi, and the only way out was to be an informer. How many people had they played this trick on? How many people took the Faustian bargain? Hundreds of thousands, apparently. They got you however they could. Maybe you wanted a promotion. Maybe you wanted to travel. Maybe, like Julia, you did nothing beyond committing some hazily-defined thought crime. As long as they had leverage over you, they could manipulate you for their ends. For her part, Julia refused to play the game. She spent the next decade of her life down the rabbit hole, jobless, living with her parents. She was traumatized by her loss of privacy, and found it impossible to trust anyone, even to form permanent relationships. Although she never used that officer's card, she was tempted to. If things had kept going as they were, beyond the 1980s, who knows what might've happened. Maybe she would've given in and called that officer. Fortunately for Julia, though, history was about to take a major turn.

Chapter 5

Over the 1980s, across the Iron Curtain, the communist grip on power was weakening. The economy was stagnant and protest movements kept growing larger. In Russia, Mikhail Gorbachev, searching for a solution, introduced the idea of "glasnost," meaning an increased openness to the West. In East Germany, however, the Stasi were determined to maintain their power. They started working on meticulous plans to thwart the protest movements, a playbook they called "Day X." When word came down from on high, 90,000 East Germans were to be arrested and imprisoned. Anyone suspected of disloyalty to the state would be swept up in the dragnet and neutralized. Fortunately, this plan never came to fruition. The protest movements had grown too powerful. In Leipzig, for example, 70,000 protesters surrounded the Stasi headquarters, demanding justice, refusing to be cleared out for weeks. It was obvious to them that even a plan as drastic as "Day X" wouldn't be enough. Some kind of reconciliation was necessary. And so, almost nonchalantly, it seemed, a decision was made on November 9, 1989: The East German Politbüro announced a plan to relax travel restrictions. The plan was made hastily, almost as if nobody had thought through the consequences. That evening, a low-ranking politician held a press conference to announce the news. In the spirit of glasnost, he declared, East Germans were now allowed to visit the West. "When does this relaxation begin?" asked a reporter. "Immediately, I suppose," answered the politician. He was on live television. Within hours, 10,000 cars were lined up at the Bornholmer Bridge – the same bridge Miriam had attempted to cross twenty years earlier. Befuddled guards, informed of the press conference, had no choice but to let them through. Tens of thousands of East Germans started streaming over the border. Suddenly and unceremoniously, the Berlin Wall had come tumbling down. In moments like this, history moves quickly. The East German government hadn't planned on surrendering any power, but the floodgates had now been opened. Within a month, crowds were knocking at the doors of Stasi headquarters in Berlin. Inside, officers were furiously shredding files. When their shredders broke, they started ripping the files apart by hand and setting them on fire. The sight of smoke was the final straw for Berliners. They weren't going to let their history be erased. In short order, they broke down the doors and occupied the building, saving whatever documents they could. By the end of 1990, the East German government had collapsed, its leaders arrested or fleeing the country. In the meantime, a process was launched that would lead to the creation of a new, unified Germany, and end of the Stasi administration, forever. In short order, a special commission was formed called the Stasi File Authority. Its task was to

process the Stasi documents and bring the department's crimes to light. Hopefully, by exposing the past, people whose lives had been ruined could find some tenuous peace. This brings us back to the story of Miriam. When we left her, Miriam had just completed two difficult years in prison. After she was released, she had enormous trouble readjusting to society. In addition, like Julia, she was forbidden from studying, and she found it impossible to find a job. Although she was living on the fringes of society, she did manage to meet a man she loved – a fellow "criminal" named Charlie. Charlie's crime was that, when he was young, a friend had playfully dared him to swim into the sea to chase a Swedish fishing boat. When he came back ashore, authorities were waiting for him. Similar to Miriam, he was suspected of trying to escape, and spent the rest of his life being hounded by the Stasi. Charlie and Mariam married in the 1970s, and in 1980, Charlie applied to move to the West. This was a strange process in East Germany – sometimes, especially in the later years, the government would grant such an application, simply to get rid of a troublesome citizen. Charlie, however, wasn't so lucky. He was immediately taken to jail. His crime? "Attempting to flee the republic." He'd only been in prison two months when Miriam got a knock at the door. She opened it to find a policeman bearing shocking news. Charlie, the policeman told her, was dead. He'd hung himself in prison. Miriam didn't believe this for one minute. She knew her husband, and was positive he hadn't killed himself. Her visits to the prison only confirmed her suspicions. The commissioner in charge of Charlie's case kept coming up with new stories for how he'd done it. He'd used a sheet. No, he'd used his trousers. They couldn't get the story straight. Adding fuel to the fire, when Miriam tried to organize an open-casket funeral, the state-owned funeral home insisted it could only perform a cremation. Miriam had spent enough time in Stasi prison to know what this meant. Charlie had been killed during a brutal interrogation, and they'd already disposed of his body. There was nothing Miriam could do. For years, she petitioned to see Charlie's files, but got nowhere. After all, why would a totalitarian state admit to murdering a citizen? Even though she knew she'd never get an answer, Charlie's death haunted Miriam. She'd never be able to prove it wasn't a suicide. Then came the stunning collapse of the East German government, the invasion of the Stasi headquarters, and the creation of the Stasi File Authority. With these developments, Miriam found renewed hope that the truth could be unearthed after all. In a small village in West Germany, outside the city of Nuremberg, there's a building full of documents. When protesters entered Stasi headquarters in 1990, they found 15,000 sacks of files, all of them full of shredded paper. Those sacks were brought to this building. Today, a team of puzzlers sit at desks, putting the files back together. It's painstaking work. At the pace they're going, they can reconstruct 400 pages per day. With 15,000 sacks to sort through, it could take 400 years to finish. Even so, Miriam has started to finally feel a certain kind of peace. Somewhere in that building, she knows, buried in those sacks of shredded paper, lies the truth about Charlie's death. The Stasi fought hard to create a world in which it was normal to lose loved ones in the middle of the night. A world in which nobody trusted anybody, in which the tiniest infraction could be held against you for the rest of your life. More than anything, the Stasi fought to stay in the shadows, to keep their methods secret, to keep a veil between their lies and the truth. In the end, many, like Miram, have come to feel that some day, the truth will win out.

The End

You've reached the end of this Bedtime Biography. Thank you for listening. Why not pause listening now so you can stay in a relaxed state? And if you're off to bed now, I

wish you a good night’s sleep.