Chapter 6
Silenced Pasts

Every one of us...who has passed the last forty years (or part of them) between Elbe and Oder notices, when he turns around to oversee his path of life, sites or whole regions where he or his surroundings were a puppet in the hands of powers that only showed themselves in disguise, so that – even if he did not suffer psychologically – he is still groping in the dark as to their exact workings (Günther de Bruyn, 1993).¹

The stories East Germans told me about their former Nische-existence were all equally rosy. All the aspects that dominate westerners’ representations of East German life were ostensibly absent. Painful subjects, such as the threat and fear of the Stasi, mutual distrust, and people’s collaboration with the regime, were almost never mentioned. Even when I finally came to understand my informants’ positive representation of their past, I still found it amazing that they appeared to succeed so well in cleansing their stories and recollections of negative experiences. The subject Stasi, for instance, was never mentioned. Except when talking to someone who had been kept under close surveillance by the secret service, this dark side of East Germany’s past was only referred to in the form of a few standard remarks, some rumors and an incidental joke.

Only once did I hear an anecdote that gave me a solid clue to my assumption that people’s one-sided positive view of the past was part of a selection process, hiding other elements from view. The anecdote came from Helmut – a middle-aged man who was active in local politics when I met him.

Long before 1989, Helmut and his wife Lotte were part of a circle of friends who were very close. They shared the same interests, frequently spent time together, and usually visited each other at weekends. They were so close that they even reprimanded each other’s children when they did something wrong. Suddenly, however, the group fell apart – almost from one day to another. This happened when some of them applied for an exit visa. From that moment on, they seemed to feel superior to the others. They befriended other people who wanted to leave the country as well – people with whom they would normally never have mixed socially – and they began to avoid their old circle of friends.
This happened more often, Helmut explained. Many friendships broke up when people decided to leave the country. Somehow, they then felt superior. Leaving the GDR?! Then one really was someone!

The anecdote evokes many questions. How is it possible that such close friendships fell apart so suddenly and rigorously when a number of people decided to leave the country? Why did they want to leave? Why did they not discuss their doubts with the others? And why was one “really someone” after deciding to turn one’s back on the GDR?

Apart from these questions, the anecdote also suggests that the East German Nische was not only a safe bulwark of warmth, mutual confidence and geniality which allowed people to really be themselves when amongst each other. It suggests that the stories about the former Nischen were also the result of selective memory, and that the Nischen might not only have been the stronghold of mutual trust and confidentiality they were alleged to be later.

Much was not allowed in the GDR, much was forbidden by the state. Apart from that, East Germans themselves also chose to remain silent about certain subjects. The question is whether this silence was merely the result of the selective memory process taking effect afterwards, or were my respondents aware that they were concealing the more painful elements of their past for their own sakes, as the famous East German writer Günther de Bruyn suggests in this chapter’s motto? De Bruyn describes how he and his fellow countrymen were puppets in the hands of powers that only manifested themselves in disguise, so that even afterwards, people were still in the dark about their exact functioning and effect. I feel there is a relationship between the disguised powers of the state on the one hand and the collective silence about the past’s painful subjects on the other – a relationship that could be summarized as conformity.

I agree with De Bruyn as I believe that many East Germans were unaware of the extent to which their existence was entangled with the dictatorial context they lived in, primarily because this entanglement had assumed unrecognizable forms. In my opinion, the clearest sign of East Germans’ adjustment to the pressures of the state was the existence of the Nische – the social institution that was primarily accredited with anti-state connotations in daily life. In this chapter I will show that the Nische, celebrated as a buffer of mutual trust beyond state influence, was also the result of conformity with the state, in which social tensions were encapsulated and made indiscernible.

Helmut’s anecdote of the collapsing Nische was one of the very few stories I heard which proved that life in the GDR had not only been cozy and warm. This chapter is therefore mainly based on archival material and secondary sources.
By focusing on the themes that were generally absent from East Germans’ recollections, I will show that the warm and pleasant characteristics of East German society also functioned as a screen behind which the less attractive aspects of the “intimate tyranny” and the “tacit agreement” between rulers and ruled remained hidden. Together with the previous one, this chapter aims to show the influence of the dictatorial regime on East German society. Although the themes of material goods and consumption may seem to disappear in the background in the following pages, it will become clear that they were important instruments in enforcing adaption and conformity to the socialist state.

Different Perspectives and Jokes about the Stasi

As I observed earlier, most media present a completely different perspective on East German history than the safe, warm and confidence-inspiring existence sketched in the previous chapter. The theme that dominates western media accounts of the former GDR is the atmosphere of fear and mistrust that was due to the omnipresence of the secret service – the Stasi. While I was doing fieldwork, new Stasi scandals were uncovered quite regularly. Famous East German politicians appeared to have worked for the service, spouses turned out to have spied on each other for years, and circles of close friends suddenly found out that one of them had been a Stasi informant. Even the past of the country’s most famous and respected writer, Christa Wolf, appeared not to have been completely clean. Such disclosures often resulted in public mud-slinging, in which victims and perpetrators disputed each other’s assertions. The public at large could delight in the rude accusations and insinuations spelled out in the popular media.

In most cases the people spied-upon had held a critical stance towards the former socialist state. They were members of an oppositional group, a religious community or discussion group, or were active environmentalists, pacifists, critical intellectuals, journalists or artists. These potential criticasters of the state were seen as a threat, and so the Stasi kept a sharp eye on them. Ordinary people had less reason to suspect they were being watched. This is not to say, however, that the Stasi did not influence ordinary East Germans’ lives. According to the main custodian of the Stasi archives, the former East German clergyman Joachim Gauck, the opposite was true.

In his work, Gauck repeatedly made it clear that the secret service’s presence deeply influenced the social, mental and psychological climate in the GDR: “The mentality of East German citizens was deeply influenced by a permanent feeling
of threat.” He is not alone in this. Many prominent German intellectuals are also convinced that the Stasi dominated all of East Germans’ existence. Some claim that East German society was characterized by a regime of fear which imprisoned everyone – irrespective of whether one was actually watched by the Stasi or not. The threatening presence of the secret service would have been like a hovering shadow, darkening all of East Germany. Maaz, for example, has frequently described the GDR as a society in which it was almost impossible not to become completely estranged from oneself. According to him, the presence of the secret service stirred people’s latent feelings of fear, and from an early age on, they collectively learned to only show their socially acceptable façades, behind which fear and insecurity remained hidden. De Bruyn’s final verdict is equally negative when he describes East Germany as a society where people “had been kept restrained, locked up, and repressed for decades. Because of their repression they were completely entangled in guilt.” According to him, the climate in the post-Wende GDR is characterized by “a moral crisis or its repression...which is unable to issue a solid fundament for emotional wellbeing.”

In light of these conclusions, it is even more remarkable that my discussion partners in Rudolstadt generally responded rather half-heartedly when the subject Stasi came up. Many were of the opinion that it was of course terrible, but that the subject was completely blown up in the western media. The representation of the GDR as a completely degenerated society, permeated by the secret service and the resulting threat, distrust and fear, was seen as a gross exaggeration. The elderly judge referred to before, whom I visited regularly, told me that of course he had always known that they existed, but even if they did watch him, he had no problem with that as he had nothing to hide.

He expressed an opinion of the Stasi that many East Germans shared: of course it was bad, but it was not that awful. A fair summary of the widespread attitude would probably be something like: “We knew that they existed, and we suspected that their employees were everywhere, but it didn’t really bother us.” The only place ordinary East Germans felt a little wary about the Stasi was when they entered an Intershop. It was generally known that “they” were there to see who visited the shops and to take notes on what people bought, how much money they spent, how often they came, etc. Since no-one really knew what the secret service was going to do with the information they gathered, people generally felt a little uneasy when entering those shops. But apart from that, it was not so bad. The Stasi really did not have so much influence on East German life as is now suggested – so they claimed. Even Werner, a middle-aged intellectual who worked for the local administration in the cultural field and who was generally quite willing to share his thoughts on
all kinds of topics with me, was a little reluctant when I asked him his opinion on
the discussions taking place. It was so complicated, he answered evasively, that
he advised me not to pursue the subject further – making it clear that he was not
prepared to discuss it with me.

Jokes were sometimes made on the subject. For instance, when I was standing
in a bar, talking to Axel, and the bartender shoved a scrap of paper in my direc-
tion – ‘a secret note,’ written by someone else and signed with the designation IM
Freund. Much later I heard that the person who wrote the note had been watched
by the Stasi quite intensively and for a very long time. This also applied to the
local politician who worked for Rudolstadt's social democrat fraction and who,
during a theatre performance by two famous East German cabaret artists, sud-
denly appeared on stage, dressed as a Stasi-collaborator with a big black hat, dark
sunglasses and a long leather coat. The artists welcomed him, saying, “Ah, here is
our regular guest. Please, sit down,” and offered him a chair in a corner of the stage.
He sat there for the rest of the performance, making notes, listening to what was
being said, and looking round very furtively. Sometimes the performers warned
him that they were about to tell a joke which he had already heard at one of their
earlier shows, so he could go to the toilet for the next ten minutes or so.

His actions reminded me of myself in my role as anthropologist. I was there-fore not surprised to be frequently introduced to people as follows: “Here is some-
one who wants to know everything about us, but who is not from the Stasi.”

To the point and amusing. It was not so amusing when I once wanted to ask
Michaëla – a close friend whom I met quite regularly – whether I could interview
her father (a designer). I tentatively tried to ask: “Do you know whether your fa-
thera...” But she interrupted me: “Was with the Stasi? No, I don’t know and I don’t
want to know either. I am not interested.” For an uninteresting theme, it seemed to
be one that rather preoccupied her, but Michaëla stuck to it: she was not interested.

According to Joachim Gauck, such reactions, and particularly the glossing-
over attitude towards the Stasi that was widespread in the former GDR, are the
most serious consequences of the GDR’s “really solid dictatorship.” During a lec-
ture he gave at the Goethe Institute in Amsterdam in 1998, he explained that many
East Germans “suffered seriously from the dictatorship’s heritage.” This was not
surprising, he explained, when one realized how omnipresent the secret service
had been. Over 90,000 people had officially worked for the Ministry, then there
were at least 170,000 IMs, and the Ministry for the State Security Service had left
more than fifty miles of archive records. Gauck explained that more than twice
as many people had been involved in the East German state security service than
under Hitler (in all of Germany). One out of every sixty East Germans had col-
laborated with the Stasi. Below I will give a brief description of the activities they undertook and the kind of methods they used.

The Stasi’s main task, apart from controlling East German post and telephone communications, was to gather detailed information on often assumed opposition groups and individuals. In some cases this could take rather extreme forms. The Stasi archives contain records that show how the secret service did its utmost to upset and sometimes even destroy individuals’ lives. Spreading rumors was one of the most common techniques to disrupt people’s existence and to discredit them and their work, even in the close circle of their intimate relations.

How this was done was explained to me by Georg. When I met him he was about 55 years old and lived in a hamlet near Rudolstadt. He told me that he had always suspected, and from a certain moment knew, that he was being watched by the Stasi. Nevertheless, he was shocked when going through his records after the Wende. He had never imagined that they would go so far to bring him down. Looking back, suddenly all the bad luck and misfortune he had suffered fell into place: everything that had gone wrong or not worked out the way he had planned, the promotions that did not happen, the research applications that were turned down, the friendships that suddenly broke up, the relationships that ended. Not until he read the Stasi reports did he realize that everything had been planned by them. They had systematically tried to destroy his life and had succeeded quite well.

Maybe he should have known and could have prevented some things by being more careful, he considered afterwards. But he did not want to be preoccupied with wondering whom he could trust and whom not all the time. He did not want to live like that, he explained.

I have always considered that because my heart and conscience were clear, they should act as they pleased. But then to find out that one of the few people whom I really thought I could trust, had been an IM and had for years passed on information about me...These notes were often quite meaningless, like my pig’s weight at slaughter, and that I had bought this and that amount of coal for next winter...But that was not the issue.

The issue was that among the few people he really trusted, there had been one who had passed on information about him. The issue was that they had been able to come that close.

According to an employee of the main Stasi archives in Berlin whom I interviewed, the official aim of such activities was “to organize personal and professional failure up to the point of suicide.” In the Department of Operational Psychology
at Potsdam’s College of Law (the so-called Stasi University), people were not only taught how to instruct and lead IMs, how to hold on to them and even make them dependent on them, they also learned numerous tactics to combat hostile and opposition groups and individuals, for instance by:

Systematically discrediting people’s public reputation, standing and prestige on the basis of the intermingling of true, controllable and discrediting statements with untrue, plausible, irrefutable and equally discrediting ones; systematic organization of professional and social failures in order to undermine individuals’ self-confidence.11

It is a short quotation. The list of suggestions on how to destroy people’s lives is much longer. The Stasi archive employee told me that the archives also contained statistics with all Stasi-orchestrated suicide attempts per year. When the attempt succeeded and people actually committed suicide, it was booked as a success. From the early 1960s, the MfS (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, Ministry of State Security) had been making plans for the establishment of concentration camps. Although they were never built, the Stasi kept records of all extremely suspect individuals who had to be interned within 24 hours, as soon as the situation threatened to become politically explosive.12

These are some of the most extreme examples of the notorious East German security service’s methods. Even putting them aside and only focusing on the Stasi’s more common activities, Joachim Gauck asserts that they have had a deep and lasting influence on what in his lecture he called, “East German attitudes and conditions of life.”

The Stasi’s general activities and their impact have been well portrayed by Christa Wolf. In a short novel, Was Bleibt [What remains], she describes intriguingly how the Stasi entered her life and knocked it off balance. She describes the little clicks during telephone conversations and the kind of codes she developed in order to speak a secret language. The paranoia that gradually took hold of her, the fear and the feeling of being taken over by others and estranged from herself are sketched in poignant and succinct terms.

Apart from the general mood, I was particularly struck by a passage in which Wolf describes how and why she first began to wonder whether a particular acquaintance was gathering information on her. The first time the thought entered her mind was when the man in question took her to a bar. While they were sitting there, he made an unpleasant remark, after which she asked him: “Have I ever done you an injustice?” Wolf then describes how the dam the man had built around himself suddenly broke. Although he did not say it explicitly, she detected
a confession in his words. Amidst his outpouring, he also remarked that he found her arrogant: she thought she could get everything out of life without paying for it, without selling her soul. In order to break the tension, Wolf commented: “Come on, we are not living in the Middle Ages anymore.” Then he exploded:

Not in the Middle Ages? Oh yes, Madam, we are living in the Middle Ages. Apart from some external things, not much has changed. And nothing will change, if people want to use their knowledge in order to rise above the ignorant masses – then they have to sell their souls, as always. And if I really wanted to know what this meant: it meant bloodshed, even if it was not your own blood. Not always your own blood…

Now I remember what I had instantly understood at the time: they have got to him. And I remember that my pride – in this he was probably right, he was a gifted psychologist – compelled me to quietly ask him: ‘well, why don’t you quit?’ And how he then turned deathly pale, opened his eyes wide, put his face so close to mine that I could smell the beer on his breath, and then in a clear and stone-sober voice, he uttered three words: ‘I—am—afraid.’ Immediately after that he pretended to be drunk again, I stood up, tapped my knuckles on the table, and left. After that I did not see Jürgen M. for years. I have forgotten the scene that he will never forget, and now, he no longer has to know about me. He is in the house with the many telephones, where he happily collects all the material on me that no one else can obtain, every morning thanking providence that has brought him to a place where he can satisfy his passionate lust, while at the same time be of use to society.13

The first question this passage raised in my mind related to Wolf’s remarks about the person who is watching her (the so-called perpetrator). She describes that performing these activities enables him to “satisfy his passionate lust.” The second intriguing element is his reproach to her (the so-called victim) that she is arrogant because she wants to “rise above the masses” and “get everything out of life without paying for it.” Also overwhelming and fascinating is Wolf’s observation that not only she is afraid, but also the one spying on her. It made me wonder how this related to so many East Germans’ remarks that they had never been afraid of the Stasi at all.14

In his lecture, Gauck asserted that it is almost impossible for outsiders to imagine how deep an impact the above-mentioned collective experiences have had on the people of the GDR. According to him, East Germans had in fact always lived in fear: fear was the basis of their existence. Three successive genera-
tions had first and foremost learned: “Bow your head, feel the fear, adapt, and you will be alright.” As a result of this repression and the concomitant ideological indoctrination, people not only gave up their own conscience and individuality, but according to Gauck, referring to Hannah Arendt, it also generated a collective “loss of reality.”

Gauck did not elaborate on this conclusion during his lecture, but elsewhere he has made it clear that according to him, the omnipresence of the Stasi completely estranged East Germans from themselves. The main reason why the secret service could have such a profound influence on their existence was because no-one ever knew who they were.

Amongst our colleagues, we knew who the party clerk and the union representative were. We knew them. We knew how to behave towards them, we knew what their assignment was, and what sort of threat they posed. But with regard to the Stasi…one never knew. In every big company, big apartment-complex, and even at a big party, one might be talking to someone from the Stasi without knowing it and without knowing what kind of information he was interested in. People generally wanted to be open towards each other, but because we never really knew who they were, it was impossible to relate to them. That was the really threatening thing about them.

It is an interesting and plausible argument which, although contrary to the one I presented in the previous chapter, follows a similar line of reasoning. In both cases the normality of a power’s disciplinary techniques is assumed to give order and meaning to people’s lives. Following on from my informants’ comments, the previous chapter showed that the language of power was the all-influencing framework of East Germans’ existence (an influence which my informants valued rather positively). Gauck put forward a similar argument regarding the threatening aspects of power. In his view, it was precisely the secret service’s omnipresence which had a structuring – albeit largely unconscious – effect on the way people perceived and experienced the reality they lived in.

The argument sounds plausible and might offer an explanation as to why so many East Germans contended that fear hardly played a role in their lives. If correct, it would also shed new light on the narrative of mutual warmth, commitment and security that assumingly characterized so many East Germans’ lives. Perhaps even the nostalgically remembered Nische would look very different if seen from Gauck’s perspective. In order to get a better understanding of the Stasi’s influence
on ordinary East Germans’ lives, I submitted a request to investigate the Stasi archives on Rudolstadt.

The Stasi’s Methods and the Taboo on More

Based on the previous arguments, I had quite a strong inkling of what kind of information I would probably find in the Stasi archives. When I first saw the contents of the records on Rudolstadt that had been saved, I almost started to laugh: they were more like boys’ adventure books or the script of an old-fashioned, East German James Bond film than the legacy of one of the world’s most threatening secret services. I was struck by the Cold War slogans, the suffocating anxiety, and the constant warnings: People, take care, the class enemy is everywhere!! Although it was now and then amusing to go through the documents, they also presented a number of relevant issues (albeit at times only indirectly) for grasping the East German state’s means of maintaining power.

One of the things I came across was a pamphlet on East German leisure activities that was sent to all local Stasi departments in 1984. The pamphlet drew attention to a dilemma: although it was praiseworthy that holiday traffic between the socialist countries had risen, creating better opportunities to get to know each other’s socialist ways of life, it was also important to realize the potentially dangerous consequences. More and more people were opting to spend some of their holidays at camping sites abroad, but it was generally known that western secret services used the camping sites in Czechoslovakia to win over East Germans to their side, or influence them ideologically, making them dissatisfied with the East German state, party and politics. This was particularly threatening during the summer holidays, when people were in the mood to relax and be more open towards others. In such situations, even the most politically correct people were at risk. By distributing printed matter, through personal conversations and “by exhibiting certain aspects of the western way of life as subtle advertising for their lifestyle and system,” the GDR’s opponents tried to win over East German citizens to “realize hostile activities.” Particularly by way of “direct contacts,” Czech camping sites offered the GDR’s opponents “[f]avorable opportunities for a differentiated influencing of our citizens…It is relatively easy to determine someone’s profession, work station, political attitude, family relationships, but also specific features, like for instance reticence, thoughtlessness, boasting, et cetera.”

In all its banality, the memo is significant: it shows that the Stasi preferred people not to leave the country at all, but if they did leave, to remain observant at
all times and in all circumstances. Noteworthy as well is the reference to “certain features” that could apply to some of East Germany’s holidaymakers abroad who thus could be abused by foreign secret services. As I will show further on in this chapter, the East German secret service was very well aware of the importance of certain features when it came to the extraction of relevant information. Reticence was therefore strongly preferred over openness and light-heartedness as far as East German citizens were concerned. Open-minded East Germans with good communication skills might too easily be persuaded to divert from the socialist track.

The memo consists of eighteen pages. The terminology that is used, the kind of problems it addresses, and the undiluted Cold War language are all characteristic of the entire Stasi legacy. A similar tone and contents could be found in the notes that were used to determine whether or not someone qualified to be admitted as member of the so-called Reisekader [travel executives]. When someone applied for permission to travel to capitalist countries for his work, it was necessary to find out whether he was in fact “the right and reliable executive to maintain the necessary contact with executives from the nicht sozialistische Wirtschaftsgebiet [non-socialist economic area].” In order to meet this requirement accurately, several IMs were selected, with partly the same assignments so that they could check each other’s reliability and meticulousness. They had a list of guidelines that served as a basis for the report they were to write, in which a wide-ranging series of issues had to be addressed. Relevant information was to be gathered, for instance, on the amount of mail someone received, what time he would get up and come home, his political and professional development, attitude towards the party and the state, and what kind of activities he undertook at his workplace.

The resulting reports mentioned all the so-called weak spots of the people concerned. When one of Rudolstadt’s residents wanted to visit a scientific conference in Rumania, it was reported that his uncle and aunt lived in the FRG, that his wife did not vote in 1967 (the report was written in December 1986), and in addition, that he appeared to have contact with West Germans. With regard to another man (X) who was to represent his company at Leipzig’s international fair, it was to be investigated whether the important position of trade-department manager was “sufficiently covered by comrade X” because although he was friendly, he was also “very self-aware” and had an “exaggerated degree of assertiveness.”

Once people were admitted to the highly desirable Reisekader and allowed to visit the class-enemy, they were carefully watched during their trips abroad. The notes and impressions below are written by a colleague of the person concerned, for whom the trip to France was his first introduction to a capitalist country. I cite
this report quite extensively because some of the details provide a good overview of the Stasi’s concerns and points of interest.

He was very impressed by everything that the capitalist country was able to outwardly present. Thank God he also witnessed a scene that showed capitalism’s other side, i.e. when a woman...was sheltering on a hot air vent, probably because she was homeless...He owns a weekend cottage...I presume his financial position is very good...He is basically rather quiet, but he is also a sociable person and he is probably easier to interrogate than other people. This possibly also leads him to easily trust others...For obvious reasons he was very insecure during the entire journey...He has not made any personal contact with others during the trip. I have been able to conclude that he talks quite a lot. This is not automatically a negative evaluation, but he could be briefer – also in negotiations.\(^{23}\)

The memo clearly illustrates the Stasi’s concerns for East German citizens’ ability and ideological perseverance in resisting the seductions of western prosperity. Furthermore, it is evident that the Stasi had a strong interest in people’s character and way of life and in their material and economic conditions.

In view of this interest, it is hardly surprising that the secret service indeed had an unofficial employee at every Intershop – as East Germans appeared to have rightly surmised – who passed on information about the people visiting the shops, mentioning who accompanied them, what they looked at, what they bought, who paid for the purchases, and how much money was spent. The notes which the secret service received from the IM working at the Intershop in Rudolstadt’s main hotel on the market square excelled in both their detail and apparent meaninglessness: “A female person, whom I do not know by name at this moment, purchases for about 100 DM a week. She is about 40 years old and 5½ feet tall. She usually has her child with her.”\(^ {24}\)

In spite of the apparent irrelevance of such statements, it is clear that the Stasi’s routines are comparable to those of an anthropologist in the field. During their respective education, both professional categories learn to take notes of every possible piece of information, because even ostensibly meaningless details may later turn out to be valuable and telling.

The Stasi’s task was to gather as much information as possible. When working on someone who was potentially dangerous or suspect, they should overlook nothing, and even the tiniest, petty details of someone’s personal particulars (his hobbies, relations, material situation and consumer preferences) were noted. Even when things appeared to be completely irrelevant at first glance, they might prove
to be significant (sometimes much later) for blackmail, bribery and extortion (if necessary, even of the secret service employees). The reason the Stasi was interested even in the minute details of people's lives was because they might be useful in order to “have influence over the candidates.” This is why the archives contain so many memos pertaining to suspect, extortable and otherwise striking or deviating behavior. Everything that might potentially be useful to put pressure on someone was carefully documented. Relevant traits were, for instance, too lively an interest in western goods, too strong a craving for luxury, or, as the clergyman in a small village in the Rudolstadt area discovered after reading his files, someone's inappropriate eating behavior; this man appeared to have burped and slurped.25

The Stasi recorded people’s habits, allowing the party leadership to keep an eye on the population’s thoughts and moods. But the recorded information was also used to steer the population’s behavior – through blackmail and other forms of pressure. The records therefore offer an insight into the behavior, way of life, etiquette, and attitude that were desired from above.

Even the most nonsensical records therefore contain information that might be interesting and relevant for social scientists. I previously referred to memos pertaining to an individual’s presumed character traits and way of life. It is remarkable that the Stasi’s observations were primarily focused on the extent to which people were ostentatious, sensitive to luxury and riches, desirous to have or appear more than others, wanted or dared to attract attention, were different or wanted to be different than others. The clergyman had strange eating habits, someone else was attracted to gold necklaces, another was very open, or self-assured, or markedly impressed by wealth. One man was noticed for being extremely ambitious.

Going through the files, a certain profile becomes evident, based precisely on these kinds of small, hardly noticeable details, which after a while reveal a rather puritan frame of reference. For instance, it was always recorded if someone was sociable, conspicuous, different, eager to make friends, talking loudly and frequently, uncivilized or voluptuous, gaudy, susceptible to comfort, self-assured, etc. Although it was also noted whether people were modest or quiet, subordinate, insecure or correct, the way such valuations were documented demonstrates that the secret service assessed the latter category as safe, in contrast to those who behaved in a more conspicuous manner. It seems that people who attracted attention – even if they were not suspected of oppositional or GDR-critical activities and attitudes – also risked attracting the Stasi’s attention.

Interesting in this respect is that the same category of people who attracted attention also risked being regarded as Stasi collaborators by their fellow countrymen. The clergyman whose uncivilized eating behavior was mentioned tried to
put into words what the secret service’s presence had brought about in his country in a poem – the Song of Distrust – of which especially the last line (the only line where the author used capitals) is significant:

Die war dies Jahr schon zwei mal im Westen
she already visited the west twice this year
Das geht sicher nicht mit rechten Dingen zu
she is obviously not righteous
Und ihr Bild hängt in der Straße unsern besten
her image hangs in our leaders’ streets
Damit ist bewiesen die gehört dazu
which proves: she is a part, she belongs
Ach mißtraut euch Freunde, ach mißtraut euch nicht
oh, mistrust my friends, do not mistrust each other

Die Verbrecher sind nicht wir in diesem Land
we inhabitants of this country are not the criminals here
Kneift die Augen zu, doch schaut euch ins Gesicht
turn a blind eye, but look each other in the face
Denn nicht jeder Beste ist ein Denunziant
because not every BEST ONE is a squealer

The last two lines of the next two verses are consecutively: “because not every NEW ONE,” and “because not every DIFFERENT ONE is a squealer.” With these lines Winter suggests that everyone who appeared to be better, new, or different risked being regarded with suspicion because he could be a Stasi collaborator. During my fieldwork, this conclusion was confirmed one time in a very strange way. The immediate cause was a question I had asked Helga, who worked at the little bar below my apartment, about a certain Gerhard Richter and his restaurant.

Until 1993, Gerhard and his wife Bärbel had owned a restaurant in a little village near Rudolstadt. The restaurant had a good reputation, and on Sundays many residents of Rudolstadt used to go for a walk to the little village to eat and drink something at the restaurant and then walk back. When I first came to Rudolstadt, I stayed at the Richters for two weeks. After that, I continued to visit them regularly. For me, they somehow represented the many unpretentious, hard-working East Germans I met. Their daughter was married to a butcher, and their son was a dedicated socialist who deeply regretted the GDR’s downfall. Every Sunday the
whole family met for lunch at Gerhard and Bärbel's place. She always prepared a fine piece of meat with Thuringian dumplings.

Both of them liked to talk about the old days, and because they had worked in the catering industry, I found their stories very interesting: it was fascinating to hear how they constantly had to fix and wangle to obtain an extra barrel of beer or a little more meat than they were allotted.

At one point after having visited them, I realized that there was one specific detail of Gerhard's stories which I did not understand. He had told me that in the old days when a group booked a table at his restaurant, he had always been obliged to report that beforehand to the *Rat des Kreises* [district council] and afterwards write a report about it. I could not understand the reason for this obligation and was curious what such a report should be about, so when I came home, I decided to ask Helga, the lady who worked in the pub near my apartment. During the GDR, Helga had also worked in the catering industry, so she might be able to clarify Gerhard's story.

Helga did not understand what I was talking about: write a report about groups before and after their visit? She had never heard about it and turned to talk to her friend Astrid, who had previously worked for the *Rat des Kreises*. While discussing the matter, both women suddenly exchanged a meaningful look: of course, now they understood! This could mean only one thing: Gerhard had been with the Stasi! When I said that I could not believe that, the women sniggered. How could I know!? It was generally known that in the old days Gerhard had always managed to offer something extra with his dishes: there were always tomatoes and cucumber with his pork chops, and had he not been able to build an extension on his house?!! Wasn't that telling enough: he apparently had acquaintances... Yes, they were certain: he had been with the Stasi!

Gerhard had been with the Stasi because of the extra services he had offered. As ridiculous as the conclusion may seem, it is slightly reminiscent of the Stasi report about the danger of going to a barbecue on a Czech camping site. The association made by the two women is striking. It is a telling illustration of clergyman Winter's words and the impression I gained while going through the Stasi files: in the GDR it had been imperative not to attract attention. One should certainly not try to be different, seem different or stand out. That attitude had worked in Gerhard's favor when he still had a restaurant and made the effort to organize extra vegetables with his dishes. This had attracted people. But afterwards, when he said something strange or incomprehensible, people still nailed him to the Stasi pillory because of his vegetables.
Although this was almost the only time that I was informed (without having to ask) about the way the Stasi’s presence had influenced daily life in the GDR, the anecdote confirmed that it had been important not to act conspicuously but to just adjust oneself. People who acted conspicuously seemed to have risked becoming ensnared in the Stasi webs: either because they were being watched by the secret service or because others considered them to be part of it. This impression is indirectly confirmed by Joachim Gauck’s conclusions on what he considered the most difficult question regarding the Stasi phenomenon: “Who were the perpetrators?” – more on this issue below.27

Contrary to what one would expect, only a small minority of those who worked as IMs for the Stasi did so because they considered it their civic duty to help the secret service.28 The majority of those who appear as IM in the Stasi files decided to cooperate after having been approached and put under pressure by the secret service. In most cases, the decisive factor was that not cooperating could have harmful consequences for someone’s future career. A story I recorded in Rudolstadt is a clear illustration of this. Reiner, a young man who came to work as press spokesman at the town hall after the Wende, told me that, long ago, a good friend of his confided that he had once been approached by the Stasi to supply information about Reiner. The friend had promised to do so, and he also told Reiner why: he was a photographer and wanted to achieve something in life. He wanted to leave the GDR, to be allowed to go abroad and cover major stories, which would only be possible if he was cooperative.

It is a well-known, very profane and imaginable argument, where someone’s personal responsibility and part of his conscience are set aside for fear of social decline or desire for social advancement. A similar motive was highlighted by Christa Wolf in the passage referred to earlier. When Wolf lets her IM speak, he accuses her of being arrogant because she wants to stand out from the masses. She, in turn, suspects him of being driven by a “passionate lust,” later on described as his desire to “outdo” her. According to her interpretation, he wanted to prove to her that he was “the real master, the true king.”29 Wolf furthermore describes that she was somehow susceptible to this challenge and took up the gauntlet. She entered the struggle for power and noticed that she somehow enjoyed the fact that she was apparently so worthy that they wanted to know all about her.

As will be clear by now, the vanity she discovers in herself is to a certain extent comparable to what she suspects in Jürgen M. He wanted to win by outdoing her. Not only was she vain enough to (also) like that, she even entered the power struggle in order to prove that it was impossible to beat her. Both seem to have
been driven by a comparable motive or desire, which could be described as standing out above the crowd.

Apart from the categories described so far, Gauck points out that a small group also existed that was driven by idealism to collaborate with the Stasi. Interestingly, they were mainly people with a rather critical stance towards the GDR who concluded that change was only possible from the inside. For outsiders this sounds unbelievable. I might not have believed it myself, had I not discovered that I happened to know someone to whom this applied. It came as a shock to find out that Werner’s wife Paula (Werner being the middle-aged intellectual who refused to talk to me about the Stasi) had worked as an IM. I knew Paula as an intelligent woman who had been socially active in a critical way – both then and after the Wende. In an anonymous letter, she revealed some of her motivations to become an IM. In the letter she explains that she decided to cooperate with the Stasi because in that way she hoped to contribute to “the reform of socialism” by exerting pressure on the Stasi through her Führungsoffizier [officer in charge]. She continues that only afterwards did she come to realize how grossly she had overestimated herself. The designation Selbstüberschatzung [overestimation of oneself] is telling and relevant in order to better understand the mechanisms of the Stasi.

Paula is critical about misjudging herself. No matter how individual and personal this desire may have been, there is a certain connection between Paula’s Selbstüberschatzung and Wolf’s description of herself and her IM as people who both wanted to stand out from the crowd. As also remarked by Gauck, undertaking espionage activities for the MfS often made people feel meaningful and important. Or, according to Maaz: in order to be a good IM, people had to have “a clear desire to throw their weight around, and be regarded as important and significant.” Although phrased in individual terms, it refers not to an individual, psychological characterization but to a deeply social phenomenon: the only way one achieves standing is in the eyes of the outside world.

Wanting (to have, to be, to mean, to achieve) more than others was difficult in the GDR. It did not fit in with socialist equality principles, and a pliant, docile population was imperative for a well-functioning East German dictatorship. People were made “to choose” not to attract too much attention. “From an early age, it was instilled into East German citizens that they must...never stand out in any way that might attract attention.” If people were unwilling or unable to do so, they entered a domain controlled by the Stasi. When someone claimed the right to be different, they risked being watched by people (in their capacity as IM) who were selected because they themselves also wanted more (career opportunities) than was otherwise possible in the normal way. The example given by Wolf about
her spying acquaintance showed that people also became IM because they secretly enjoyed scoring off their countrymen.

I certainly do not mean that people were driven by pleasure to become an IM—on the contrary. As Wolf pointed out, both she (the victim) and her IM (the perpetrator) were afraid. This is confirmed by Gauck. He gives poignant examples: of people who were imprisoned after trying to flee the country, and who then were set up against their spouses; of boys who were caught drinking alcohol during military service and were told that this was the definite end of their future career, only to hear a couple of days later that something might be done for them, if only... they were willing to convincingly show their loyalty to the state.

Fear of being blackmailed, fear of extortion, fear that a secret might be revealed, fear that one’s spouse would be confronted with compromising pictures... After the Wende, Stasi officers often claimed that if they had wanted, they would have been able to “win everyone over to cooperate.”35 This may be somewhat exaggerated, but almost any inhabitant of the GDR could be extorted – if only because so much was forbidden. One could therefore say that those who were not involved in the Stasi in any way simply had the good fortune that they, their life or their acquaintances were not threatening, striking or different enough to have been approached by the service: “Many may not have become spies for the Stasi because they were useless for ‘the firm’.”36

Partly due to the threats of the security service, forms of behavior were exacted in the GDR that I referred to above as puritan; public displays of modesty and moderation were its most striking characteristics. Those who demanded the right to publicly attract attention or be different entered a climate of fear that Wolf has portrayed so poignantly. Wolf was afraid, always afraid.37 But when one was able to adjust, there was no reason for that.

This explains why my informants collectively stated that fear was not really an ingredient in their former lives. By adjusting to what they thought was expected of them, most people avoided a direct confrontation with the (potentially threatening) dictatorial powers and were thus able to uphold the notion that their lives were unfolding quite normally, unhindered by repressive factors. Because not attracting attention was probably not a tall order for most people, they could think that they were merely living their lives, without acknowledging to what extent these latter were enmeshed with the regime and the state.

Although it is probably true that most people never experienced any real fear, I do think that a regime of fear existed in the GDR. Because a deeply ingrained attitude prevented the majority of East Germans from having reasons to be afraid, fear was actually the mental framework within which they arranged their lives.
East German psychologist Annette Simon describes this very well, when explaining how it was possible that, whereas she was never afraid while the GDR still existed, after the *Wende* she began to recognize and feel the fear which she apparently had been able to elude before.\(^{38}\) And Mary Fulbrook also concluded that “The climate of fear was the outer parameter of existence…it did not have to be a feature of everyday life.”\(^{39}\)

The conclusion that life in the GDR was characterized by the urge not to attract attention because it could result in Stasi monitoring demands another reading of East Germans’ sniggering laughter and the *Nische*. The simple fact that the secretive, universal laughter could not be expressed publicly reveals to what extent most people adjusted to the demands of the state. Something similar applies to people’s withdrawal in their *Nische*, where they were said to be true to themselves. The mere fact, however, that this so-called true self could only be manifested indoors and not in public is a clear indication of the extent to which East Germans’ existence was colored by dictatorial rule.

Both East Germans’ *Nische* and their sniggering (albeit incomparably different phenomena) speak of secrecy and surreptitiousness. The same applies to East Germans’ main adjustment mechanism: not to attract attention. All three mechanisms imply a careful attitude to life.

In the former chapter I described my personal struggle to understand the invariably repeated *es war nun mal so*, expressing the existential fact of living with a lie. Because this fact applied equally to all, it functioned as a unifying element, indirectly forming the basis for feelings of warmth and solidarity. Regarded more negatively, the phrase *es war nun mal so* also expresses a dull resignation, a “*mentalité* of popular powerlessness...of people who have internalized their own surveillance.”\(^{40}\) The warmth East Germans said to have shared was the warmth of people who had learned from childhood to accept that they had no other choice but to adjust, and to make the most of it within the confines set by the state. This does not mean that everything people made of it was pitiful, but the confines within which they were able to act were set by the state.

Several authors, including Vaclav Havel, have shown that in dictatorial societies, adjustment is not only achieved by the state but also by social processes within society itself. When people openly refuse to accept that the confines of their existence are set by the state, their fellow countrymen tend to expel them from the community, treating “any non-involvement as an abnormality, as arrogance, as an attack on themselves, as a form of dropping out of society.”\(^{41}\)

Inspired by Marx and Gramsci, social scientists still struggle to understand how it is that subordinated people to a certain extent come to support their own sub-
ordination. This question is central in French anthropologist Maurice Godelier’s work. In his famous ethnography on Baruya women’s subordination by men, *The Making of Great Men*, Godelier states: “Men’s greatest strength lies not in the exercise of violence but in women’s consent to their domination; and this consent can only exist if both sexes share the same conceptions, which here legitimate male domination.” Godelier’s thesis is that shared ideological convictions or a shared ideological domain between oppressors and subordinates help to legitimize existing relations of inequality. The same may have been true in the former GDR. There as well, suppression was not only enforced by the state, it was also the result of people’s widespread adjustment, partly inspired by the acceptance that they had no other choice.

But they did have another choice. Although it was difficult, it was possible not to adjust. The consequences were such that it may rightfully be called “a Faustian choice…the choice confronting each individual is really no choice at all and that is why the system is able to keep itself in being.” Apart from adjustment, it was possible to apply for an exit visa, as Helmut and Lotte’s friends did. By deciding to leave, people were demonstrating not only that they wanted to get more out of life than was possible and allowed within the borders set by the state, but also that there were other acceptable options. This revealed that the mutual involvement was to a certain extent the result of adjustment and fear.

Those who decided to leave thus not only confronted those staying behind with their willingness to comply, their failing integrity and their sluggishness, but also with the fact that their friendship was partly the result of external conditions. By bringing into the open that the mutual involvement and warmth were partly the result of the unspoken necessity to make the best of it, their decision implicitly also showed that if conditions had been different, they could have made more of their lives than up till then they had done together. This ruined the friendship. The warmth resulting from a jointly shared fate seems to have implicated a ban on mutual differentiation as well. The fact that this ban was broken when part of the group decided to leave suggests that mutual differentiation, competition, and jealousy were smothered in and through the *Nischen*’ warmth.

**Egalitarianism, Crab Antics, and Adjustment**

The anthropologist George Foster has written extensively on what he calls “the image of limited good” that often thrives in peasant societies. The implicit assumption in these societies is that there is only a limited amount available of all the
good things in life. With one person’s gain automatically being seen as another person’s loss, the result is an inherently unstable social structure, permanently threatened by the undermining impact of jealousy. According to Foster, it is no coincidence that this “cognitive orientation” often goes hand in hand with a strong egalitarian ideology; striving for equality is one of the mechanisms to reduce jealousy. Referring to the sociologist Helmut Schoeck, Foster suggests that egalitarian ideologies would be the answer to the universally human, extremely threatening experience of envy: “The utopian desire for an egalitarian society cannot...have sprung from any other motive than that of an inability to come to terms with one’s own envy, and/or with the supposed envy of one’s less well-off fellow men.”

As Foster shows, egalitarian ideals hardly work. In practice, they turn envy into “the dominant device used to enforce egalitarianism, so that the cure is at least as bad as the illness.” Envy being refurbished as egalitarianism means that whenever someone stands out, others are ideologically allowed to punish him for breaching the norm.

In the anthropological literature, this kind of penalizing behavior is referred to as “egalitarian conspiracies” and “leveling coalitions.” These are cultural mechanisms which help to hold back real and potential social climbers. Such practices have been made famous by anthropologist Peter Wilson’s analyses of what he termed “crab antics,” the term referring to the behavior he observed in Caribbean communities with a strong egalitarian ideology. Whenever people in these communities succeeded in acquiring more than others, this caused the rest of the community to react like crabs do when put in a barrel: “[A]s one of them nears the top, the one below pulls him down.” Although all tried to climb out of the barrel, the lonely climbers who managed to resist the egalitarian ideology and reach the top were stopped by others and punished for climbing. Such behavior is not based on rational considerations, but on collective jealousy and envy.

Foster gives a brilliant analysis of how a public egalitarian ideology can be both the breeding ground and the hiding place for individual feelings of jealousy. When equality is an explicit and highly emphasized ideological norm, it sharpens people’s discernment of inequality. Achieving more than others is regarded as not proper, and individual feelings of jealousy get a free rein – not only because they are legitimate but because, according to the dominant ideology, jealousy is nothing to be ashamed of. It is the deviating behavior of the one who achieved more that is shameful.

As shown in chapter four, behavioral standards and morals were enforced in the GDR according to the main motto of socialist ideology, mutual equality. This legitimized feelings of envy and jealousy by institutionalizing them. If someone
was seen to have achieved more than others, his behavior was penalized – not because people were jealous, but because he did something that ideologically speaking was not right. The anecdote of Helmut’s former Nische suggests that these standards penetrated deep into the private domain. Breaking out of the mutual warmth meant the end of it.

Initially accepted to ward off painful collective experiences and legitimized by the official state ideology, in time the taboo on mutual differentiation came to function as a social defense mechanism. The fact that East German society was primarily experienced as warm and hardly as repressive was partly due to a social climate (legitimized by the socialist doctrine) in which public signs of differentiation and competition were not acceptable.

In spite of the socialist regime’s claim that it had accomplished a definite break with regard to the national-socialist policy after 1945, there seems to have been remarkable continuity. Continuity not only prevailed in the field Joachim Gauck referred to during his lecture, when he stressed that in the eastern part of Germany, three generations had primarily learned to bow their heads, feel the fear, and adjust to the state’s demands. In the course of my research, I was confronted with another manifestation of continuity: the continuity of silence. Silence not only reigned with regard to the painful characteristics of the GDR’s past; post-World War II experiences also appeared to be still shrouded in persistent silence – a climate so aptly captured in Christa Wolf’s words, “there is no silence as deep...as in German families.” When I tried to talk about this period during my fieldwork, I noticed Wolf’s conclusion still applied to the year 1994. Those who had not been committed socialists between 1933 and 1945 (or had become so out of true conviction right after 1945) still covered up that part of their past with an impenetrable silence.

Dr. Hartmann, for instance, with a PhD in history and one of Rudolstadt’s most renowned citizens, appeared unwilling to talk about it. The reason for visiting him was that I needed information on the Second World War in Rudolstadt: how many people had been killed, had there been any bombardments, had people been driven out, etc. He received me very enthusiastically: he was so pleased to finally meet someone from the Netherlands! Did I know about the many alliances between the Dutch royal family and Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt’s monarchs? The last of them had been guests of honor at Queen Wilhelmina’s wedding, but relations between the two royal houses dated from way back and had always been very hearty. One of Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt’s monarchs had been married to a direct heir of the House of Orange Nassau. He himself had known the last monarch personally because one of his family members had been secretary at the court then. He had
prepared a copy of an article for me which he had recently written describing in detail the relations between the two royal houses.

It was as if I was attending a formal lecture, and no matter how hard I tried to point out that my main interest was in recent history, he did not stop talking about the monarchs. I tried to change the subject by asking him about the local Heimathefte – a chronicle on Rudolstadt’s history. This turned out to be another of his hobbyhorses: “Well, yes,” he replied, and began to explain that he had initiated the series at the time, just like it had been his initiative to chart new walking-tours in the area around Rudolstadt. He had always had a keen interest in nature, and he was especially fascinated by Rudolstadt and its surroundings. It was so beautiful around here, so pure and rural. He really loved this country.

Beautiful country, rich history, old monarchy…When I interrupted him again to ask whether he could tell me something about the period following Germany’s defeat in May 1945, he replied that he would rather not talk about it. It was too painful, too close. “I don’t want to sow new hatred. It is over, it’s history.” After insisting quite strongly, he told me that he had served as a member of the Wehrmacht. When he heard about Germany’s capitulation, he was in Russia, north of Stalingrad. He walked all the way back to Rudolstadt, mainly at night. He slept during the daytime. I asked him how things were when he came back here. “Then I fully dedicated myself to rebuilding Rudolstadt,” he replied, adding that there had been some good communists as well – people one could work with. Again I had to insist: how were things in the summer of 1945, with the takeover of power, when the Americans left and the Russians came? What happened, and how did Rudolstadt’s population react? He smiled a little:

The Russians came to my door. They were looking for me. I was an officer, so I had to go with them. Then I went into hiding in the woods, together with my wife. We lived secret lives, we were always on the alert. It took years before the coast was clear and we could return to our normal lives. We were not the only ones. This is many people’s story. But don’t you write it down. It is too painful.

And he continued to tell me about his efforts to rebuild Rudolstadt and initiate the Heimatheften.

His defense was clear: a beautiful country, but he did not want to talk about the recent past. That was history, and over. At the same time it was too close and too fresh. The differences and tensions, the internal betrayal, and the accompanying hatred that had risen to the surface so brusquely during and after the war had been suppressed, buried under the state’s principal banner of anti-fascism.
Gerd was also used to living in silence. Although no one ever talked about it, he always thought that everybody knew about his father. His paternal grandfather had been a confirmed believer in communism since the beginning of the 1930s. After he was captured by the Nazis in 1941, he spent many years in concentration camp Buchenwald. At this time his son (Gerd's father) decided to join the Waffen SS. According to Gerd, it had been a family decision in an attempt to clear the communist (grand)father's name, but it somehow sounded like a story which the family had concocted later in order to accept it. However, after the war, both father and son returned home: the first from Buchenwald, the second from the Waffen SS. The former was appointed mayor of a town near Rudolstadt, the latter (the mayor's son and Gerd's father) had to hide. He went underground on a farm in the neighborhood for over a year. Then he gradually began to take part in normal life. By that time, Gerd's mother recently told him, he had started to drink. He had not been able to reconcile himself with the GDR's existence. But in a family of confirmed socialist believers and being the son of the first communist mayor of a middle-sized town, it was impossible for him to air his opinions. Gerd did not elaborate on what must have been a family drama but confided in me that he secretly admired his father for his guts not to go with the wind and change his views, when everything he had believed in was suddenly forbidden and taboo. He had not been a Wendehals [turncoat] when that was required after 1945. He could not and would not, thus committing himself to a life of silence.

This was also the case with the designer Katrin's father-in-law. He too had remained silent, and only of late, since he retired, had he begun to talk about his time in the Hitler Jugend, which was the greatest experience in his life. In the past he had never spoken about it. He had always been a quiet person who kept to himself. Only now did his family realize that the reason for his reticence was mainly that he had never dared to share his experiences. If he had, he would have run the risk of being completely excluded or even worse: being taken prisoner – as happened to many captured after 1945 by the Soviet occupying powers, and who often did not return.

Many of them never spoke about their experiences or about their thoughts on the past. They withdrew within themselves and remained silent. One of their life stories compiled by a clergyman in Rudolstadt describes how a man returning after seven years in captivity at Buchenwald never talked about it: “All the suffering had caused him to lose the power of speech.”

These people kept their mouths shut about various pastime topics and events and for various reasons. For all of them, remaining silent was in some way due to the fact that their memories ran counter to the promise of mutual solidarity which formed the kernel of the new, post-1945 symbolic order. Their experiences and
memories, although unspoken, often lingered on in the form of fear of further persecution, sometimes with disastrous consequences for “relationships between members of their family and neighbors.”51 For many of them it was only possible to speak about their former experiences after 1989, “but the suspicion towards others, also towards close relatives, the disappointment, the bitterness about their fellow men and the distrust...never left many of them.”52

As described in chapters two and three, the promises of the new state seamlessly linked into a lesson in life (about distrust and fear of others), which was at the same time completely taboo. That lesson became the concealed core of the new symbolic order in the GDR and of the relationship between state and citizens. The solidarity and bond which developed in East German society were partly fed by the taboo on comprehending and exploring experiences of mutual distrust, jealousy and betrayal. And in time, the mutual equality and warmth in the Nischen were also the positive and therefore visible and demonstrable modification of feelings of jealousy and envy, for those who succeeded in being just a little less equal. In the Nischen it was warm – until they opened. The ideology of mutual equality’s wide appeal does not so much show that East Germans had completely internalized the ideology of equality collectively. One of the reasons for its wide acceptance was that it served to legitimize the type of crab antics people adopted among themselves to ensure that nobody thought they could get away with publicly positioning themselves above the community. You had to be very sure of what you were doing before you left your cosy fire, for there was no turning back.

Not sticking out in the crowd and the mutual warmth and solidarity in private circles were the two sides of one ideological coin. Through its administration and bureaucracy, mutual equality had become the GDR’s master code, which although initially nurtured by the taboo, eventually became so institutionalized and widely accepted that it grew to be the symbol of the GDR – not just officially but also perceived as such by its people. It became the fundamental characteristic of “their former consciousness.”53 The egalitarian grip which East Germans had on each other under a cloak of mutual warmth created its own contradiction. The passionate denial of inequality, mutual competitiveness and strife, because they did not fit in with the fine-sounding ideology, actually disguised the antics and endeavors that formed the Stasi’s breeding ground. The so-called politically ideological break after 1945 concealed the continuity that silently and subversively lingered on.

When trying to imagine life in a dictatorship, one of the words that springs to mind is adjustment. Ever since the GDR ceased to exist, people have pointed their accusing fingers at the East German population, blaming them because by adapting to the situation, they were partly responsible for the Stasi terror in their coun-
try. In a society such as East Germany it was extremely difficult not to conform: “Trying to live outside the regime’s influence takes tremendous effort, particularly when everyone else is going along with the authorities.” The stakes are high: one not only relinquishes professional and career opportunities, but social isolation also threatens; not belonging to the group, your fate is to be an outsider – see Havel.

The majority of East Germans chose to adjust, at least on the surface; laughing half-heartedly at the demands that were made on them. Laughing was a way of showing that their adjustment was not whole-hearted and that they were just pretending. Besides laughing, people also pointed to the Nische as a kind of proof that they had not forfeited their entire identity for the ideology. The state had no influence on the Nischen, they argued; there you could lead an entirely autonomous existence beyond the ideology. This population representation was just part of the truth.

The very fact that the Nischen existed is an indication of the state’s power. The fact that people simply presented a politically unthreatening image of themselves in public, while only able to show their less adapted face in private circles, demonstrates how far the power of the state went. “[P]ower resides not only in orchestrated displays of obedience, but also in the silence about domestic politics that characterizes daily life.”

Moreover, the warmth and mutual involvement, supposedly symbols of the Nische, were also the visible and spoken manifestations of the taboo on mutual differentiation and competition implied by the egalitarian ideology. As such, both the conspiring laughter in public as well as the Nische were not so much acts of resistance against state and ideology, as cultural forms in which the interweaving of private life with the state and its ideology became visible. Both were clear examples of the furtive connection between subordinates and oppressors which Mbembe has described for Cameroon. Although the laughter and the Nische were presented as a type of distant and implicit criticism, we have to tread carefully when interpreting “the expressions, symbols, and acts we intuitively may register as resistance.” Precisely the necessity to back away from the state reveals its power.