1989 was a year of revolution in Europe, paralleled only by 1789, 1848 and 1917. At the end of 1989 the invitation to a conference in Budapest the following August stimulated the idea of a trip by bicycle across what we then thought of as Eastern Europe, but which was already reforming itself mentally and politically as Central Europe, as a resurrected Mitteleuropa. The focal point of change in Eastern Europe was indubitably Berlin: where better to start?

Central Europe began on the train from Hoek van Holland, watching haute bourgeoisie Holland and West Germany slip by from the windows of the old-fashioned, starched linen table-clothed Mitropa dining car of the East German Deutsches Reichsbahn. Already we were in a new Europe as returning East Germans smoked dark cheroots and talked of first visits to the West: 'the English were much nicer than we had been taught to expect. It is difficult for us, we have to change our views about you and the Second World War.

The transformation of Berlin was unbelievable to those who had visited when the ever-dominant Wall appeared at every turning, and crossing took an hour or more in the bowels of the Friederichstrasse U-bahn station. Now half of Europe packed every hotel, and gravitated to the Brandenburg Gate to stroll nonchalantly across areas of no-man's land where months earlier only rabbits had walked. With characteristic humour the Berliners literally capitalised on their new fortune; pieces of die Mauer were sold in plastic bags, and postcards conjoined a January 1989 newspaper headline in which Erich Honecker proclaimed that the Wall would stand for a hundred years with pictures of the Wall being demolished just ten months later. Berliners themselves still seemed hardly able to comprehend what had happened, talking of 'before', and describing excited 'phone calls at 2 a.m: 'the Wall is open'.

East Berlin had lost its previous cold austerity, and now felt like a historical time-warp: the city that time had passed by, devoid of the vulgarity and glitz of West Berlin, but seeming, as Vopos strolled around in the sun, and the Prussian soldiers outside the memorial goose-stepped for the tourist cameras, to be more of a 'DDR theme park' than the capital of a once ruthless regime. Art students occupying a derelict East Berlin cinema recognised the forthcoming struggles within Eastern Europe with a huge banner proclaiming 'Freiheit macht arbeit', a reversal of the chilling slogan we later saw over the gate of the concentration camp at Theresienstadt, 'Arbeit macht frei' ('Work makes one free'). Here was the last act of the historical process that had started on that same street on Kristallnacht in 1938 with the burning of the (still gutted) Berlin synagogue.

Our route took us south from Berlin to Meissen and Dresden, and then followed the Elbe through the Ore mountains into Czechoslovakia and most of the way to Prague. Thence we crossed the Bohemian-Moravian highlands to Brno, followed the Morava river to Bratislava, traversed the flat flood plain of the Danube, entering Hungary at Komaron, and finally arrived in Budapest. We cycled 1,003 kms in 7 whole days, 4 half days and 3 rest days, averaging 111.3 kms (SD 11.8 kms) on a full day, a higher rate than on our previous trip from Paris to Rome [1] and more than we would have liked, but our conference deadline gave little room for manoeuvre.

Cycling was a joy in East Germany, with its considerate drivers and near empty roads, and it was pleasant in Czechoslovakia; Hungary was more redolent of the West.
Throughout the Eastern bloc all is change and flux. In Prague there is an air of intellectual liberation, as if events have simply restarted where they left off back in August 1968; posters of John Lennon were everywhere on sale, and The Rolling Stones were playing live, advertised with the slogan ‘The tanks are rolling out, The Stones are rolling in’. In the small Albatross cinema we watched Velvet Revolution, about the events of November ’89, in which the final scene showed the Staroměstské Nám, the old town square, ringed with water cannons and riot police, where now a group of adolescent Beatle lookalikes lovingly re-created the early songs of their idols.

In East Germany, where ideology and political thought have foundered along the route to Anschluss with West Germany, there is a growing sense of betrayal, loss and alienation: ‘You know, not everything was bad about the DDR; we did many things well.’ Small rearguard actions try to retain some sense of a separate society, a different tradition and a genuine merger of equals, seen in tiny details such as disks on cars saying ‘nr.DDR’. But society has changed dramatically and the new rules are not clear. Friends in Dresden were on the waiting list for a Trabant car for 14 years, and ought now to be near the top: ‘But now there is no list.’

The journey opened our minds to a far larger Europe than the narrow post-war conception of the European Community, and revealed our limited knowledge of Central Europe’s traditions, history, culture and contributions in so many areas — as we were reminded when we visited the graves of Mendel in Brno, Semmelweis in Budapest, and Brecht and Hegel in East Berlin. The media’s grim image of Eastern Europe was not fulfilled; we didn’t see vast smoky industrial complexes or forests devastated by acid rain, but instead found unspoilt countryside and abundant wild-life. As Londoners we envied cities without litter but with excellent, uncrowded public transport, and we admired a wealth of public art, particularly sculpture and ceramics, with little of the crude Socialist Realism so beloved of the stereotypes.

References:

Chris McManus and Diana Lockwood