



# Our Family

by

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## A SHORT HISTORY OF BERLIN

Berlin, in the province of Brandenburg, was until 1945 capital of Germany. It had developed from two small fishing villages, Coelln on the island of the river Spree, and Berlin on the northern bank of the river. Both Coelln and Berlin became towns in the 13th century and united around 1500.

In the latter part of the 15th century Berlin became the seat of the Court of the Hohenzollern, the Electors of Brandenburg. Berlin grew and during the 17th century a new town, "Friedrichswerder", rose on the other bank of the Spree. Frederick William, the Great Elector, erected a city wall around the towns in 1674 and Berlin remained a fortress until 1745.

The Electors in time grew ever more powerful and gained many territories and in 1700 the Elector Frederick III. of Brandenburg crowned himself King Frederick I. of Prussia. Berlin now became the capital of the Kingdom of Prussia. The city had grown and spread beyond the city walls, forming separate townships there, which were united under one administration in 1709. Over the next 50 years Berlin saw many occupations. In 1757 it was occupied by Austria, in 1760 by Russia, between 1806-08 and again in 1813 by France. When on 18 January 1871 Prussia united with other States to form the 2nd German Reich, Berlin became the capital of Germany. Wilhelm I, King of Prussia, became Emperor of Germany.

During the 19th century, particularly the second half, there was a terrific influx of population mainly from lands east of the river Elbe, but also from the south and west of Germany, and Berlin became the third largest city in the world. Industry and trade developed and the town became very prosperous. The large influx had however caused a great housing shortage. Speculative building started resulting in the notorious "*Mietskasernen*", four to five story high apartment blocks. Some of these, behind their street frontage, had several small yards with further blocks across these yards, where often large families lived crowded in one room or one and a half rooms, sharing a toilet somewhere in the building or yard.

Berlin, situated on the river Spree, a navigable river, which was through an extensive canal system connected with the major rivers of North Germany. So Berlin became the centre of this waterway system and in the 1930s it was the fourth largest inland port in Germany. As railways were built Berlin, through its position, also became the centre point of Europe's railway system. The town spread, and further industrial areas and living accommodation developed around the outskirts of the town, eventually combining to form "Gross-Berlin" - "Greater Berlin".

In 1929 the population was 4,312 000. It was then the fourth largest city in the world, after New York, Tokyo and London. Most surprisingly, accordingly to the Oxford Encyclopedia, Greater Berlin was then larger in area than either New York or London (without its suburbs).

Berlin has many parks, including the beautiful "Tiergarten" in the centre of the city, and is surrounded by beautiful countryside, rivers, many lakes and woods. 40% of the city area consists of woodlands and water.

During the Hitler period much of the face of Berlin changed. The lovely old lime trees on either side of the wide pedestrian promenade, which formed the centre of a very broad beautiful avenue, the well known "*Unter den Linden*", leading from the Brandenburg Gate to the "*Lustgarten*", a square flanked by the river, the National Gallery, the Cathedral and the Schloss - the Royal Palace - were felled to allow Nazi troops to march to and gather on a big parade ground established on the *Lustgarten* and in front of the Schloss.



**Brandenburg Gate**

(photo: Heinz & Thea Skyte)

The Second World War caused terrible destruction in Berlin, tens of thousands of buildings were destroyed and much of the town had been reduced to rubble.

After the end of the war Germany was divided into East and West. Berlin also became a divided city. It had however a special status, being administered by a Four-Power-Administration and divided into four sectors, each having its own "*Kommandatura*". Of the twenty districts of Greater Berlin, twelve came under the administration of the Western Allies (Britain, France and America) and eight under that of the Russians. In 1949 East Berlin was integrated into the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany and Berlin became the capital of the G.D.R. (German Democratic Republic) . Berlin was entirely cut off from West Germany, becoming an island within the G.D.R. To make room for a huge parade ground for the May Day Parade and for the building of their "*Palast der Republik*" (Palace of the Republic) the Schloss, the Royal Palace was demolished.

There were two currencies within Berlin, the East and the West Mark, but soon these were only able to be used in their particular sectors. East-West disagreements became worse and worse. Travel and communication between the four sectors of Berlin however still remained possible. Very many people left their homes and moved to the West, creating a big shortage of workers in the East.

On August 13th 1961, streets between East and West Berlin were ripped up overnight and a wall was built, physically separating the two parts. Crossing from the eastern to the western sectors now became an impossibility. Many people lost their lives trying to escape by trying to climb out of windows, over walls or swimming across the river.

After 28 years, through pressure from the population of East Germany and political change in most of the eastern countries of Europe, the wall between East and West Berlin started to be breached on 9th November 1989. Several openings were made into the wall and it was torn down in places, allowing, once again, free passage between East and West and vice versa.

During 1990 agreement on re-unification of the two Germanys was reached, the border between east and west removed completely and the wall between East- and West-Berlin pulled down. Official re-unification took place on 3. October 1990.

Berlin will also once again become the capital of the united Germany.

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**Breaches in the Wall, 1990**

(photo: Heinz & Thea Skyte)