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Off the wall

THE FALL OF the Berlin wall was to my generation what the moon landing or the Kennedy assassination was to my parents' generation. I remember precisely where I was on November 9th, 1989, and can conjure up at will the images and emotions of that extraordinary day.

It was a memorable time in my life. Recently sprung from University College Dublin, I had accepted a job as a business consultant and was sitting alone in a hotel room in London during my first business trip overseas. The wall had cast its shadow across Europe and beyond for as long as I could remember. I was 22 and it had just turned 28.

Trouble had been brewing for months as a creaking system ground inexorably to a halt and a new world order emerged. On this November day we held our collective breath as midnight struck and East Germany's rulers grudgingly gave permission for the gates to be opened. Thousands surged through to be met by jubilant West Berliners cheering and embracing their once-exiled compatriots. The euphoric crowds soon clambered on to the reviled wall and used everything at hand to hack chunks out of this crumbling edifice.

One such lump now sits on my mantelpiece. Years later I stepped off a train in Zoo station and discovered that the wall in its disintegrated state remained inescapable. Ironically, this great socialist symbol had been hijacked by naked capitalism. Street hawkers enticed passers-by to purchase huge chunks, brightly daubed with characteristic graffiti. Fragments had been converted into paperweights, key rings, doorstops, bookends and clocks.

I bought my chunk in what seemed like a reputable souvenir shop. Looking at it today, it has an authoritative-looking stamp, a depiction of the Brandenburg Gate with the words Berliner Mauer – and, yes, it has the requisite graffiti. However, my inner sceptic can't help but wonder how it is possible that one wall could be dispersed so widely. Admittedly, it was huge – 45,000 sections of reinforced concrete, each 3.6 metres high and 1.2 metres wide. By my calculations, 25 million chunks the same size as mine are in circulation.

Much of the wall was bulldozed and the resulting rubble was used in post-reunification road-building projects. Several sections were presented to world leaders. It is fitting, given his “tear-down-this-wall” speech, that Ronald Reagan got one, as did George Bush snr. A section in Moscow bears the graffiti “BER”. The once-adjoining section hosting the “LIN” is 845km away in Riga, Latvia. One slab was plonked in the demilitarised zone separating North and South Korea. Another sits outside CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, and several are being used as an anchor for a row of urinals in the Main Street Station Hotel and Casino in Nevada.

Nevertheless, no matter how much remains, I’m proud to own my little piece of history.

Eleanor Fitzsimons

