

Lenin, mum and me - my communist childhood

Jo McMillan was brought up by her communist mother on cold war politics, summer holidays in East Germany and dreams of a socialist future - and then the Berlin Wall fell

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Jo McMillan Author London Photograph by David Levene 8/7/15

Jo McMillan ... 'From the start my mum and I would do everything together, including change the world'
Photograph: David Levene

Jo McMillan

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For my 25th birthday, my mother gave me 25 pairs of socks, all black. They marked our lowest point. They said all she knew for sure about me was that I had two feet, both size M. It felt like a jumbo pack of estrangement. I didn't acknowledge the socks. I didn't wear them. They went straight to Save the Children. They were East German, with an iron grip at the ankle and the name of the factory woven into the sole. It was October 1990. The German Democratic Republic had just become part of re-unified Germany, and my mum had moved to Zwickau, deep in the old East, "to show solidarity", she said. It was the kind of thing my mother did.

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She'd been born into the Communist party and stayed in it all her life. I was born into it, too, my birth announced in the Morning Star. As her child-rearing manual she chose Dr Spock's Baby and Child Care and the gist of that was: every life is full of possibilities and every life matters. If you set people free, there's no limit to what they can do. To my mum that sounded a lot like socialism. So she offered her daughter boundaryless encouragement. And general boundarylessness. Especially between the two of us. From the very start, we were Us. Is-and-Jo. We'd do everything together.

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Including change the world.

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We began with Tamworth, the Staffordshire town where we lived. We marched down Market Street against poverty and want. We had a pitch for the Morning Star. We tried to sell socialism to Saturday shoppers, who glanced over their shoulder, then went back to filling trollies with bumper packs and bargain two-for-ones. We set up a local branch of the Communist party. I was too young to join. I was even too young for the Young Communist League, but they let me in anyway, desperate for members. I was 11. "Here we go, Jo!" my mum said. Even though it was only me. On Sundays, I sat on the bus to the nearest branch - which even so was miles away - and read Lenin or the Beano to pass the time. I was made minutes secretary and my mum bought me an Olivetti typewriter so I could stab with two fingers at the Alphabetti spaghetti of party politics: CPGB, NCP, CND, AOB.

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Jo, bottom of stairs, and Isobel, top of stairs with glasses, at Tamworth Town Hall in 1981.

55 And soon I had muscular memory for the acronyms of the GDR.

East Germany.

60 Every August, my mum and I went to Potsdam for an English summer course. On the other side of the Iron Curtain, we were fêted as comrades fighting capitalism from the inside. We drank sweet bubbly in the Palace of the Republic. We ate ice-cream in the TV Tower, up in the socialist clouds. We dreamed on the grass of Sanssouci, forgetting the cares of the world. One month a year of Actually Existing Socialism powered us up for the other 11 in Tamworth.

65 On we went, year after year, skipping in sync towards the revolution, until one day we were brought to a sudden halt. It was 9 November 1989. Late that evening, my phone rang. “What the hell’s happening?” my mum said.

70 I’d seen the news. I’d watched the crowds at Bornholmer Bridge breach the Berlin Wall and I had no idea what was happening.

‘But it will be all right, won’t it?’ I could hear the panic in her voice and, in the background, whoops of joy from the telly.

75 Probably not, I thought. “In the end,” I told her.

“But what we going to do?”

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85 What do you do at the End of the World as you’ve known it? My mum wasn’t deterred by Armageddon. She’d believed all her life and she wasn’t going to stop now. So she rented out her London flat and went to live in East Germany, to witness its final weeks. She was at the Brandenburg Gate on 3 October 1990, counting down the seconds till, at the stroke of midnight, the GDR vanished. Then she went back to her flat in Zwickau as if it hadn’t happened. Not yet. Not really. She had a Trabant and an elderly neighbour who was a life-long party member and they kept the dream alive, swapping stories.

90 I had those stories, too, but for me the dream was dead. I was a realist, not a romanticist. I’d always been a truth-teller, and the fact of the matter was, capitalism had triumphed and that was that. So I got out my credit card and went shopping. I bought a wardrobe of office wear. I got a mortgage on a one-bed in the suburbs. I commuted to a job in quality management, took out a pension plan and had ready-made hols in the Med.

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100 For years, I avoided contact with my mother. As far as I could see, all my childhood I’d been sold empty promises of paradise and contact with my mum reminded me of it. But she didn’t want the collapse of the Eastern Bloc to mean the collapse of Us. So she reached out, sending me cards - olive branches - usually in the mouths of doves of peace. I replied with something glittery. For a while, I was deeply into glitter.

Occasionally, my mum would call. I’d tip the phone from my ear as she showed interest in quality management. I could tell how much research she’d done to prepare to talk with her daughter. Sometimes, at the end, she’d risk a personal question:

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‘How are you feeling?’

At first I felt anger, later on sad, and for many years, simply blank. Looking back, it was probably grief - for a lost world and a lost mother.

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“Are you well, though?”

I was well-off.

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“But are you happy, Jo?”

“Are you, Mum?”

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Silence from her end. I think, with each call, my mum was one step closer to accepting her GDR was dead.

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Jo, far left, and Isobel, Potsdam in 1984 on an English summer course with comrades.

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At the end of the 1990s, when the dream was finally over, my mum returned to England. By then, I'd moved to Asia. For a long while, we were half a world apart. But in 2009, we both found ourselves living in London. It was 20 years since the Berlin Wall had fallen - enough time for me to broach the past. I told her I wanted to talk, to piece together a story that seemed too improbable to be true.

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I met my mum at her place. “You all right on the sofa?” she said. Because it wasn't just a sofa. It was where she held her solidarity events. My mum still did solidarity. Every so often, people came round and sat in a line here, and drank tea and ate cakes for Palestine or peace.

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I got out my tape-recorder. My mum frowned. She wasn't expecting that. “Is it for the Marx Memorial Library?” Because that was what old communists did: donated their body for medical research and their history for class analysis. But I just wanted to record what had happened. To remember Us.

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And because my mother trusted me, she talked. She relived battles and summoned ghosts. Later, I typed up our meetings, minuted them, just like the old days. When I read the transcripts, I found a mother who might have been raised in the complicated politics of the Cold War, but whose own politics were simple: Capitalism is bad. War is bad. People matter. My mum had never stopped believing that life is full of possibilities and that all lives matter, and equally.

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There on the page, too, was my first life: an outcast and a hero, a young girl shouting old slogans and hoping to bring world revolution to a very small town. It was full of absurdities, but ones that made me laugh as well as cry.

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It turned out to be a good time to revisit my past. In the aftermath of the financial crash, the system that had triumphed didn't look as glossy anymore. As I read those transcripts, it seemed to me that, as a youngster, I might have been sold delusions about the difference we were making and the success of the Eastern Bloc, but we weren't far off the mark about capitalism. If I felt regret, it wasn't about the politics; it was for the years that came after - the ones in the wilderness of shopping malls, trying to buy my way back to happiness.

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165 This year, for her birthday, I gave my mother a book. “Let me guess ...” She knew, of course. She’d agreed I could write it. I was giving her back the story she gave me. But what she didn’t know was that it was a love letter. The longest one I’d ever written. It even had an ISBN. My mum went straight to the back. I thought she was going to read the last page, find out what happens to us in the end. But actually she found the acknowledgements. She’s in there, of course. She gets the first mention. There. My mother, her story, after all these years: acknowledged.