Clarion Review

Historical

Outpost Berlin: Cold War 1961-1964
Harold Schwartz
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Four Stars (out of Five)

In the early 1960s, Harold Schwartz was stationed with the US military in West Berlin. *Outpost Berlin: Cold War 1961-1964* is written with the kind of black humor known to people who are familiar with potentially hostile environments.

Schwartz calls his work "a novel of historical fiction" because he has created dialogue for a series of true stories. He has also created an alter ego, Karl Karlovich Ebert, a soldier he inserts into his stories to help facilitate their telling. Several of the incidents in which Ebert is involved, notably the game of "drunk chess" with a Soviet colonel, are very funny in a surreal (*M*\A*S*\H *or* Catch-22*) way. Others are more sobering, such as when Ebert finds himself at the center of the tense standoff that took place between Soviet and American tanks in October 1961*.

Schwartz makes the reader privy to the military and political puffery of officers and diplomats from both the East and West. Any of these episodes might have sparked World War III; some could and did see people killed. When ordered to ride into Communist East Berlin with weapon locked and loaded, Ebert voices his concern about possibly being one of the first casualties, only to be told by a superior: "You are so far down the food chain you are off the map. Consider yourself lucky. If we don't get ourselves killed tomorrow, you'll have something to tell your grandkids."

Many of Schwartz's former military buddies helped him with the research for this book, as did many German citizens, some of whom either escaped from East Germany or helped others escape. Their stories come across as both genuine history and true human drama.

Schwartz regales the reader with many true or true-as-remembered stories. The best include the exchange of captured U2 pilot Gary Powers for a Soviet spy, a glimpse of Nazi war criminal Albert Speer at Spandau Prison, and the sad and brutal death of Peter Fechter, an eighteen-year-old gunned down at the foot of the Berlin Wall by guards whose defense at their

trial more than thirty-five years later was that they were “only following orders.”

Schwartz’s book is a strong collection of stories of Berlin at the height of the Cold War. Each can stand alone, but characters and threads link all of them into a strong narrative. *Outpost Berlin: Cold War 1961-1964* is both entertaining as a novel and informative as a work of oral history.

Mark G. McLaughlin