

A Warning from East Berlin on Book Censorship

ANNE AKE

ABSTRACT

Anne Ake recounts her experience as a military wife in West Berlin between 1979 and 1983, crossing over to East Berlin before the fall of the Berlin Wall. She reminds us that the censorship of books is nothing new, and that unless we defend and protect our liberties, we might find ourselves nervously hiding 'forbidden knowledge' in a brown package, as she witnessed Herr Heuss do in East Berlin not so long ago.

Years ago, a friend talked me into smuggling illegal contraband across a border. Going through the checkpoint I was acutely aware of the brown paper package tucked securely under the driver's seat. I watched other vehicles being searched with large rolling mirrors and various detection devices. As a military dependent, I was exempt from these indignities, but the fact that what I was doing was not just a game began to dawn. Safely through the checkpoint, I parked on a side street, and with my brown package clutched under my coat I walked nervously down the street. I went into a small photo shop and cautiously asked, "Herr Heuss, bitte?" The clerk identified himself as Herr Heuss and I quietly told him that I had been sent by Herr Edwards. Now, noticeably nervous, he began showing me shoddily made cameras from the case. I laid the package on the counter and examined a camera. The package was quickly whisked away, and Herr Heuss disappeared through a curtained door. Moments later he reappeared, empty handed, but smiling broadly. As we continued our charade of looking at cameras, he quietly thanked me and nervously sent messages of gratitude to Herr Edwards.

I stepped back into the harsh wind blowing down the East Berlin street with relief--and a great sadness. I was saddened by this young man's heartbreaking joy over receiving my contraband --a handful of out-of-date American photography magazines.

Censorship had suddenly become real to me. As had the value of freedom of expression and the importance of guarding that freedom with your very life, if necessary. That day in East Berlin was the seed for this article, which inspired me to turn to magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time*, plus local media coverage of some close to home events. I also interviewed George Vickery, then director of the Bay County Library and left his office weighed down by reams of his personal files on the subject. Once I started following the trail, I got caught up in it and the more I read, the more appalled I became. I grew up in a household of books and was encouraged to read and to use the ideas in books to build my own thoughts and dreams. I was never told I **could not** read anything. Nor did I deny my children permission to read anything they chose. I had taken all of that for granted until that blustery day on the wrong side of the Berlin wall.

I loved West Berlin. It was a beautiful vibrant city--but in those days we lived always in the shadow of the wall. So it was with some relief that I left behind exciting West Berlin and, in the East, Herr Heuss and his pathetic collection of forbidden reading and returned home to the land of the free.

Some time after our return to the states I was handed a list - a list of reading material deemed by our worthy school superintendent as unsuitable for the innocent minds of our children. It was a roll call of old friends with whom I had shared rainy winter afternoons and hot summer days. I saw books I had slipped into to escape the bad times of my life. Steinbeck, Hemingway, Dickens, even Shakespeare....they were all there. And of course, there was Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*.

Fahrenheit 451 is a novel of censorship. 451 degrees Fahrenheit is the temperature at which books burn. It is the story of a society where books were systematically burned and book hoarders severely punished. I had always considered it far-fetched, now I wasn't so sure. The memory of Herr Heuss scurrying away with his little cache of illegal books was chilling. Could it happen here? Possibly, if those of us most firmly on the side of reason sit back complacently and let our freedoms gradually erode.

Censorship is not about four-letter words in print. It is about restricting the free exchange of ideas. It is an attempt to control the flow of ideas and of new and untried opinions. New knowledge, new science, new political notions, new religious beliefs, and new attitudes toward sex have all come under the close attentions of censors. Censorship is about fear. The fear of losing control because of new ideas.

Censorship is not new, but it keeps coming back to haunt us. In 399 BC, Socrates was sentenced to death by the court of Athens. The charges against him? Impiety and corrupting the morals of the young. It was felt that he popularized knowledge in such a way that it could lead to skepticism or disbelief. But the charges were really about the fear that new ideas may undermine the authority of religion or the state.

The word *censor* was the title of magistrates in the ancient Roman Republic. It was the responsibility of the censors to take the census, and while they were counting, to inspect the morals and conduct of citizens. Yes. The quieting hand of censorship was well known to the early Greeks and Romans, but they defied it. And the ideas born of that defiance still shape our thoughts today.

But the censors are still with us. With a little research, I came up with reams of information on book burnings and censorship of all kinds around the world and across the ages. But let's stay closer to home. In the mid-eighties something wonderful was happening at Mowat Junior High School. The kids were reading. They were *choosing* to read. The English teachers at Mowat were filling their classrooms with books. Not just classics, but books about modern kids who faced the same choices and problems as the Mowat students. Kids were reading and avenues of discussion were being opened between them and their teachers. In 1985, Mowat's English program was named one of the 150 "centers of excellence" by the National Council of Teachers of English. The average Mowat ninth grader read at the twelfth-grade level. Some parents were frightened. Their children were being exposed to ideas that they were not comfortable with. The kids were reading about and talking openly about things their parents preferred to pretend didn't exist.

And then the trouble started. Some of you will remember. It was a time of shame and embarrassment for my community of Panama City. All teaching materials had to be approved by the superintendent, who admitted he had read few if any of the books he was passing judgement on. To overcome this handicap, teachers were instructed to make a list of the "dirty words" in

the books they submitted for approval and to document the page numbers. The list of unacceptable books grew. It included *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Mister Roberts*, *Hamlet*, and it went on and on.

Panama City's rulings were so sweeping and the backlash of community reaction against them so biting that our little city made national and international news. Yet book banning was not exclusive to Panama City. It was then and is now happening all over the country.

George Orwell's *1984* was banned in Miami. Ironically the subject of the book is thought control. In Pontiac, Michigan 15 parents objected to "pornography" and "obscene language" in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Walter Edmonds' *Drums Along the Mohawk*. They were banned. In Tacoma, Washington the wife of a school board member wrote a letter of complaint about John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The school board banned the book. And so it went across the country.

Meanwhile, back on the beach, things were getting nasty. Many supporters on the book banning side were parents trying to protect their children from "the dark side of life"--not understanding that the best way to combat the dark side of life is with the light of knowledge and understanding. People who were incapable of fighting with reason and logic were turning to threats. One TV reporter pointed out irregularities in the anti-book petitions, she was bombarded with threatening phone calls. A few days later her house was set on fire.

The Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom stated, "In Panama City, too, fundamentalists see the censorship controversy as a battle between Christian morality and humanism. Pipkin (a Mowat teacher), and her colleagues see it as a struggle between people who want to teach children **what** to think and those who want to teach them **how** to think. Either way, it is a clash between two conflicting value systems."

In Bay County, thanks to public outcry, national ridicule, and class action lawsuits, the school board capitulated, and the decision-making authority was returned to the individual schools. The public outcry dealt a crippling blow to efforts by the Chamber's Committee of 100 to combat the redneck riviera image and convince business and industry that Bay is indeed a better place to live.

Everyone agrees that children should be taught values. But should they be taught through suppression or through enlightenment?

No library, school, or home can have every book on its shelves, nor should they. We must make responsible choices. My home is filled with books that I value and would like to see my children and grandchildren read. I can choose what my children are exposed to at home. I relegate to their teachers the responsibility to choose what they will discuss in class. But there are no restrictions. I have said to my children, "That is pure unadulterated trash." yet I have never said, "You cannot read it."

I am secure in the belief that my values, based on logic, reason, and humanity are strong enough to withstand any attack. So, I did not feel the need to protect my children from other opinions. They are now adults, and we sometimes argue, or perhaps debate is a better word. I respect the fact that they can think for themselves, analyze information, and form sound opinions, even when they don't mirror my own. We don't always have to agree. We only have to open our minds to the fact that there can be more than one way of looking at things, and there is often no clear cut right and wrong.

Human beings in all their diversity are wonderful, interesting, and beautiful creatures. And when it comes down to the nitty-gritty we are all more alike than different. It is through freedom of expression in speech, the written word, music, and the visual and performing arts that we can appreciate the richness and beauty of the great human experience. Protect that free-

dom, or we will find ourselves living in the darkness of burning books, and be like Herr Heuss scurrying to a secluded corner with tidbits of forbidden knowledge.

Author

Anne Ake has spent most of her life in Georgia and Florida, with the exception of a four-year stint in West Berlin, during which time the Berlin Wall separated Berlin. Her family of seven lived in a quiet neighborhood in West Berlin. They were separated from East Berlin and the rest of East Germany by a 12 to 15-foot-high concrete wall topped with barbed wire and broken glass. A second wall was located about 20 feet from the first and the space between the two was guarded by dogs, mines, and armed soldiers. As a military dependent armed with a ream of paperwork I could pass freely through Check Point Charlie. It was an experience that made me appreciate the freedoms that we tend to take for granted.

Back in the states, she worked in public relations and communications, producing camera ready brochures, magazines, posters, etc. I have written non-fiction books on topics ranging from sea turtles to art. Her book, *Everglades: Exploring a Wetland Like No Other*, recently won a gold medal from Florida Writer's Association Book Awards.

She currently resides in Lynn Haven, Florida with Tamara a border collie-pit bull mix, and Morris a big orange cat. Her children and grandchildren live nearby.