

Building a “Family Wall” Against Oppression

In *Forty Autumns*, author Nina Willner tells a beautiful family history of life in a family divided by the wall between East and West Germany.

Particularly interesting were the coping tactics of her family in the totalitarian socialist East Germany. Her grandmother watched as this family weathered the arrival of the Soviets and the rapid transformation of East Germany into a surveillance prison state.

Neighbors were forced to spy on neighbors. And worst of all, children were trained to report on their own fathers and mothers. As a physical reminder of East Germans’ imprisonment, a border wall went up to keep citizens from escaping to the free West – best remembered in the form of the Berlin Wall.

In the face of this walled society, the family’s matriarch Oma begins guiding her family in building what she called a “family wall”: whatever politics might have prevailed outside, they weren’t allowed in the family. Even though Oma’s children were pushed through the Soviet-influenced youth programs and teacher training, within the Willner family itself there was none of the mutual distrust and betrayal and fear that hummed in the background of East German life.

Oma and her family put family – and doing the right thing – first, and it kept them sane and united until at last Germany reunited in relative freedom.

We can learn something from the Willners about surviving and resisting totalitarianism.

Organization is an important tactic for resisting totalitarianism, and the family is both the smallest and easiest group in which to organize resistance – even if that resistance is only psychological and internal. “A cord of three strands is not easily broken,” as the proverb says. It’s no wonder that family is always one of the first institutions to come under attack by those who would take power.

So it’s worth considering how to cultivate deep trust with those closest to you, even under better circumstances than those in East Germany. If you know you can trust a few people to put your wellbeing above ideology, above politics, and above even fear of an all-powerful state, you are better off than a great many people.

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