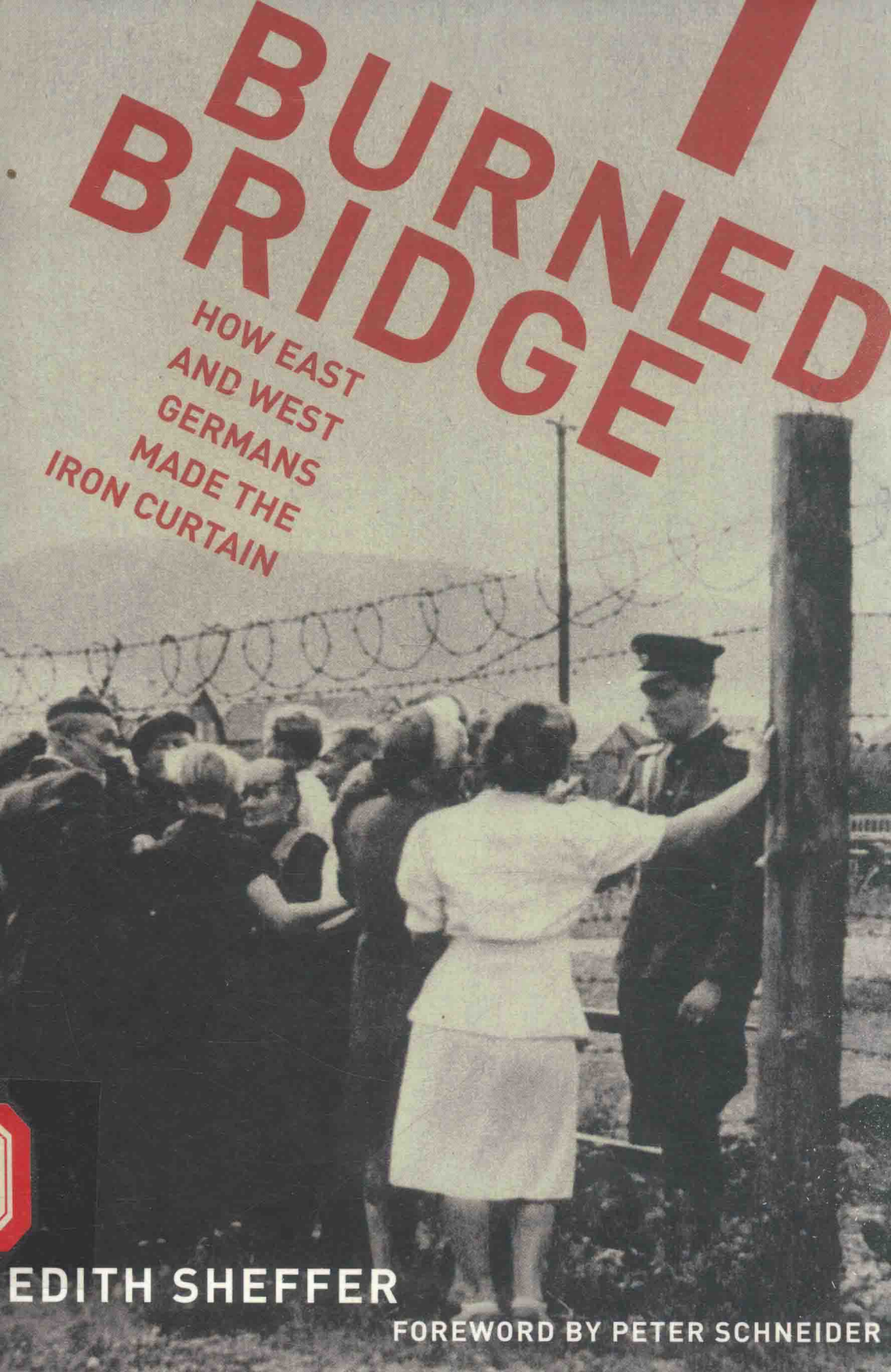
I BURNED BRIDGE

HOW EAST AND WEST GERMANS MADE THE IRON CURTAIN



EDITH SHEFFER

FOREWORD BY PETER SCHNEIDER

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Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out

—Robert Frost, "Mending Wall"

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I would also like to express my gratitude to my cousin Tracey Ledel, who sparked the idea for this project with her wedding present of a world atlas. Upon unwrapping the volume and glancing at the former border between East and West Germany, I noticed the adjacent cities of Sonneberg and Neustadt bei Coburg and wondered: what happened there?

My parents, Robert and Carol Replogle, have assisted all my endeavors wholeheartedly. They inspired, fostered, and partook in my long education. I believe my mother, the consummate English professor, has edited every draft of everything I have ever written, from elementary school to this book. I can only hope to repay their generosity by offering my own children the same.

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FOREWORD

PETER SCHNEIDER

One of the impressive aspects of Edith Sheffer's major work is her method. Instead of writing a general historical overview of Germany's division and reunification—of which there are dozens—she takes one exemplary case and delves deeply into it. Rather than focusing a wide lens on German division as a whole, she provides a close-up of two small neighboring towns in the central German provinces. With great care and narrative skill, she follows the local history of her two "protagonists"—the neighboring towns of Sonneberg and Neustadt bei Coburg—which became the border towns between two hostile world powers. Using an extraordinary wealth of archival material and an eye for detail, the American author successfully paints a portrait of rural Germany in the great tradition of Studs Terkel.

The questions that Edith Sheffer investigates are interesting not only from a historical perspective but also from human, even literary, points of view. How do the inhabitants of two neighboring towns, who previously shared "one heart and one soul," behave when a strange twist of history suddenly turns them into outposts of competing world orders? How do their relationships develop when they are unwillingly subjected to a powerful social experiment? When Neustadt, the city to the west of "Burned Bridge," lives according to the rules of the capitalist West, while Sonneberg, the city on the other side, must follow the principles of "really existing socialism"? Sheffer looks at the questions raised by this parallel research in terms of a large-scale experiment that was conducted, in a sense, by history itself and that is still not finished twenty years after reunification: which is stronger, nature or nurture? Which influence has proven more enduring after sixty years of political division and twenty-eight years of separation by the Wall—shared traditions and history, or the effects of two different, even contrary, political systems and ways of life? One might, as some researchers and observers have done, see communism as a kind of freezer, putting traditional values and emotions on ice. According to this theory, the old passions and feelings pick up where

they left off, unchanged, once the freezer is set to defrost. But is this theory accurate? Is there not also a secret life within the ice—bacteria, perhaps, that break down and transform the "essentials" of a society during its years in deep freeze? It is a testament to Edith Sheffer's thoroughness and curiosity that she does not fall prey to a single, all-encompassing interpretation. Her work also benefits from the fact that she does not restrict her view of Neustadt and Sonneberg to their years of separation by the fortifications. Is it possible that the two communities aligned themselves with the borders drawn by the Allies long before the Wall was built, distancing themselves from one another? Was the border built up by both sides from within, even before it was constructed in concrete? And how long will it take to break down this much older inner wall after the fall of the physical Wall?

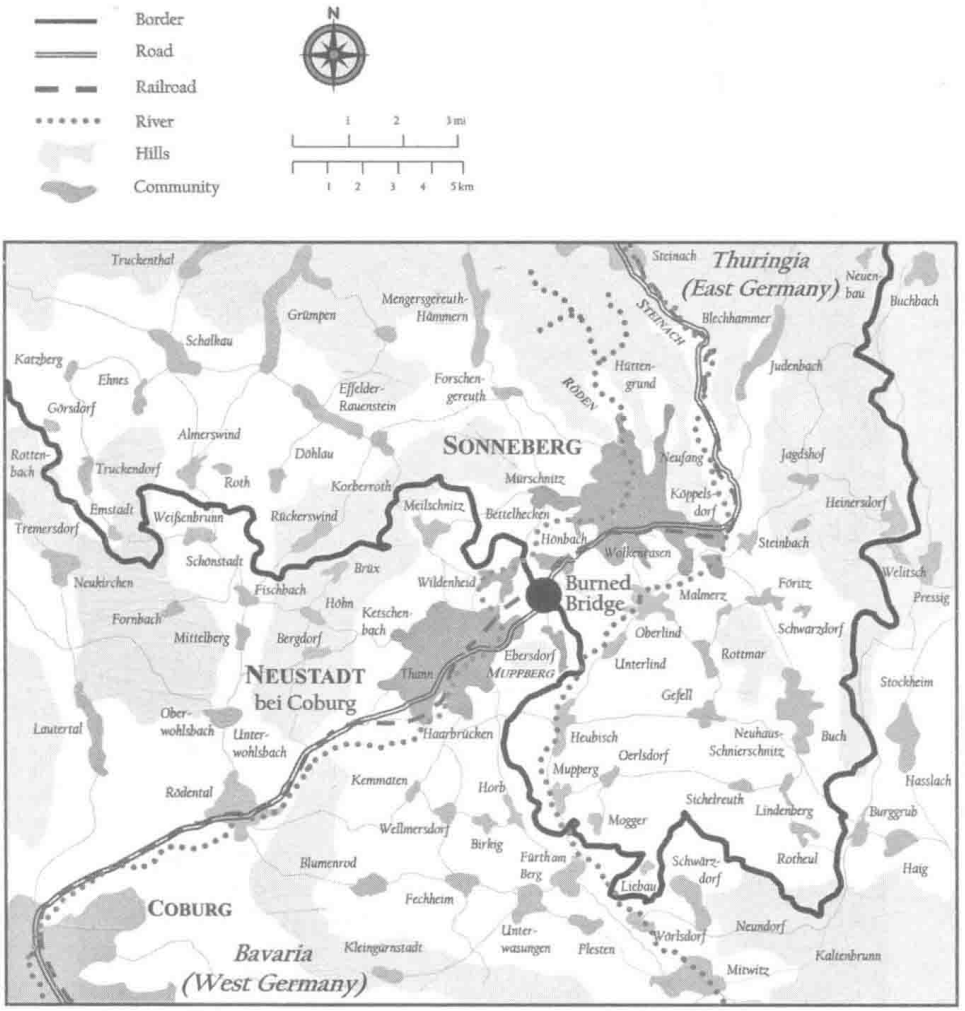
Edith Sheffer develops a biography of this border, investigating its many different influences on the lives of those who lived in its shadow—and on their ways of thinking. With an ethnographer's eye, she traces the astounding adaptations that people underwent in order to gradually accept, and even guard, the violent border that was forced upon them. She gives stunning examples of people's "participation" in their own oppression. For example, many East German refugees who sought a path to the West through Sonneberg were turned in not by GDR border guards but by the residents of Sonneberg themselves. Then there are the examples of being reunited—such as the happy discovery after the fall of the Wall that the long-separated neighbors were still speaking the same dialect, although each had incorporated new words that the others had never heard. There are also sobering realizations: after a short period of embracing one another, the people of Neustadt and Sonneberg became better acquainted and found that they considered each other more foreign than during the time when they were separated. The "Wessis," the Neustadt residents, said that they felt closer to the Turkish inhabitants of Neustadt than to their brothers and sisters on the other side, whom they saw as "German Russians"—while Sonneberg citizens could not get used to the foreigners who had moved into their neighborhoods. It was so hard for the two sides to agree on shared initiatives and investments that two shopping malls, very similar in style, were built on either side of Burned Bridge. Finally, there is the puzzling example of celebrations on both sides for the twentieth anniversary of Germany's reunification in 2009. The residents of the two towns actually held separate events for the holiday, each with its own small audience—reenacting the old familiar division in close proximity to one another.

Edith Sheffer has written a nuanced, exciting German "family history" based on the twin cities of Neustadt and Sonneberg. Of course the story has not yet ended. Even the small towns of Neustadt and Sonneberg may be examples of the kind of "trend reversal" that is already in full swing in Germany's capital, Berlin.

Behind the scenes of mutual shyness and disenchantment with the German reunification, a process I call "the Easternization of the German West" is under way. The victor's illusion always held that reunifying the two German states would change only the former East Germany, not the old Federal Republic of Germany, from the ground up. Ignorance and sheer pride led the "Wessis" to mistakenly believe that their brothers and sisters in the East would adopt the West German world view and historical perspective along with the Deutschmark and the West German Constitution. From the start, it was clear that much more would remain of the GDR than just the famous right-turn traffic sign. In *The Culture of Defeat,* historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch argued that those who were historically "defeated" were able to impose a good deal of their own culture and values upon the "victors" as a result of their greater flexibility, as well as their creative need to invent myths about their "defeat." In Berlin, the supposed losers have a palpable and growing influence on the city's fortunes, and this phenomenon may, in time, transform even Neustadt and Sonneberg.

Burned Bridge on Germany's Iron Curtain

Sonneberg and Neustadt bei Coburg



View from Sonneberg to Neustadt.

Burned Bridge following World War II. Johannes Seifert.

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