

# Sophia's Longing – An East-West German American Story

By Angela Thompson

## Chapter I - With a rented car to East Germany

On a night in the spring of 1977, Sophia drove with low-beam headlights over completely desolate streets through of a part of the city of Leipzig that she didn't know. She had rented a car in Los Angeles for pick-up at the Frankfurt Main airport, and coming from the East-West German border crossing Herleshausen/Wartha, she had illegally exited the autobahn leading through the GDR to Berlin at Leipzig West. She was looking for the address of a family Nickels whose fate she had read about several months earlier in an article in the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*. The headline, "The Case of Günter Nickels – Convicted Again", had caught her attention.

The journalist Günter Nickels had filed a petition for permission to emigrate from the GDR for himself and his family. The petition had been denied, and he was debarred on political grounds to continue to work as a journalist. After several more petitions for exit visas, a suit was filed against him, and he was convicted and imprisoned for engaging in subversive activities against the state.

The fate of the Nickels family touched Sophia. Had she not resolved long ago to do things better than her parents? Had she not reproached them for their passive attitude, for deliberately or conveniently looking away during the Nazi regime? The article had lain

on her desk for several days before she finally wrote to the editorial office of *Die Zeit* to ask for a contact address.

By return mail she received information about Norbert Nickels, one of the journalist's brothers, and wrote him immediately. Norbert Nickels was living in Dortmund since his escape from the GDR two years earlier. Overjoyed, he sent Sophia a detailed report about the events that had led to his brother's imprisonment and what had happened since then. He also included several newspaper articles. At the end of his letter he asked Sophia to contact American politicians for help in obtaining his brother's release, whose life was in acute danger due to health problems brought on by his imprisonment, and to plead for his family to receive permission to leave the GDR. Finally he pointed to the Helsinki Accords that had been signed in 1975 by 35 countries, including the Soviet Union at the conclusion of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, and that stressed equal rights and self-determination of peoples.

Sophia had deposited her briefcase with the records that she would need for her business contacts after her return from East Germany in a locker at the Frankfurt airport. She had carefully studied an old map of Leipzig and memorized the Nickels' address, but the street signs on the corner buildings were hardly recognizable in the pitch-dark night. There was a new moon. The air was cool, she felt chilly and shivered, most likely also from an inner agitation. Where on earth was her jacket? And why had it not occurred to her in Los Angeles to plan her trip to be in Leipzig during full moon? The American calendars didn't

keep track of that, and no one had pointed it out to her. Or was it part of the plan? Was the moonless night supposed to give her additional protection?

It was not the first time she had entered the GDR in a rented car, but before she had always driven straight to her aunt Annelies, who lived in a small town not far from Dresden, and who had always sent her a letter with an “official” invitation. This time was no exception. The following morning she would have to register with the police at the town hall. She knew her aunt’s street and the house from her early childhood days, and could have found her way in her sleep, but Sophia wouldn’t have been able to tell her aunt about the people in Leipzig because she would have never understood her intentions and would have been worried sick about her.

Sophia was getting uncomfortable. What if the police stopped her on this highly illegal side trip? Frau Nickels had rejected a meeting in a park or another neutral place during the day. They couldn’t write each other, it was difficult to call, and once the connection was established they had to talk fast and use cryptic language because someone was always listening; all lines were bugged. That’s why Norbert Nickels had planned the meeting. He still had contacts to former colleagues in Leipzig who secretly carried news to his sister-in-law. Sophia could only hope that they had all reached a common understanding.

As she was driving through town almost blind, she doubted the wisdom of her decision for the first time. Shouldn’t she have planned her visit differently after all and simply have driven boldly through

town in broad daylight? As always, she had taken along several packs of Wrigley's chewing gum and American cigarettes, just in case she had to ask directions. She could have inconspicuously asked an old woman, or children. But wasn't everything conspicuous that she did, in her car with West German license plates? Was she not self-conscious and scared like everyone who traveled to the GDR? Even if the border guards had once again been satisfied with examining her papers that had disappeared through a narrow slit below a blind windowpane of a barracks for half an hour and the almost superficial inspection of her luggage in the trunk and on the back seats?

Suddenly Sophia felt tired from the long trip. She pulled over and stopped at the curb, turned off the engine and got out to orient herself. To her amazement, she saw on the blue and white enamel street sign above the entrance of an apartment building that she was not only on the right street, but had also stopped in front of the right house. And there was the nameplate of the Nickels' next to their doorbell. Relieved she locked the car and then rang the bell gingerly. Her finger twitched as if electrified as she touched the round button. The shrill sound would get everyone's attention in the entire house! But nothing stirred inside. Were they all standing behind their doors now, listening to find out who was ringing the doorbell so late at night? Should she ring again? Suddenly she heard footsteps in the dark staircase. A moment later she heard a key turn in the lock and the door opened a crack.

"I am Sophia Schwartz," she said in a low voice.

“And I am Anja Nickels. Come in, please, Frau Schwartz,” the young woman whispered. Silently they climbed upstairs in the dark. It was deadly still in the stairwell, only a few wooden steps creaked treacherously. On the third floor they disappeared into a door that stood ajar. The light that came through the glass of the living room door dimly lit the hall.

“Would you like to take off your jacket? And here are house shoes for you,” Anja said.

Sophia knew that she should take off her street shoes and slip into a pair of trodden-down felt slippers, but she made believe she hadn't heard it and stepped toward the living room.

Anja overtook her and opened the door for her. “May I introduce you to my mother, Frau Nickels, and my twin sister Anke?”

They shook hands, and Frau Nickels said, “We were already worried that you might have lost your way, or that you were held back at the border, or that you might have changed your mind after all.”

The living room table was set for supper, and Sophia suddenly noticed how hungry she was.

“What may I offer you to drink, apple juice or tea?” Anke asked while closing the window and drawing the curtains tight.

“Tea, please,” Sophia answered looking at her wristwatch. It was ten-thirty. After an initial insecurity, they quickly entered into a conversation. Frau Nickels wept. They showed Sophia photos of Günter Nickels and some letters from prison. All three looked at her

helplessly and with great anticipation. She still had to continue on to her aunt's. That would be another three-hour drive. Just under an hour later she took her leave. They would meet again in two days at three in the afternoon, and this time they chose a park for the rendezvous after all.

As she sat down in her car, Sophia leaned back and closed her eyes. Only for a moment, she said to herself, as visions of that afternoon at her grandmother's in Dresden emerged once again, images from a time when she was a little girl. This same fear had filled the living room back then and had kept them prisoner, the same muted voices, the same helplessness in the eyes of the five women sitting around the coffee table.

Translation by Angela Thompson from her book

“Sophias Verlangen: Eine deutsch-deutsche amerikanische Geschichte”

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