

The New York Times

May 4, 2009



HIROKO MASUIKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Alexander Wind, in tie, was a speaker Sunday at a Brooklyn festival whose theme was freedom.

Recalling the Day That Ripped An Opening in the Iron Curtain

By FERNANDA SANTOS

The scene at the waterfront park in Brooklyn where Alexander Wind spent Sunday hardly resembled the spot near his hometown, St. Margarethen, Austria, where a seminal moment in the fall of the Iron Curtain unfolded almost 20 years ago.

Instead of dirt under his feet, there were rubber tiles. Instead of open air, there was a white tent overhead. The only similarity was the rainy weather, though Mr. Wind remarked that it was warm that August day in 1989, when hundreds of East Germans pushed through a border gate and crossed from Hungary into the West.

"The Hungarian soldiers had their pistols in their pockets and they just stood there, watching the people stream past them, without firing a shot," he recalled.

An elementary school principal in St. Margarethen at the time, Mr. Wind, now 63, shared his account with the 80 or so people who had gathered to honor the historic border crossing, in spite of the cold and steady rain.

On Aug. 19, 1989, hundreds of East Germans attending a demonstration called the Pan-Euro-

pean Picnic escaped into Austria from Hungary by storming a border gate that had been opened as a symbolic expression of unity. They walked through a forest to reach the gate, leaving behind everything they owned.

Mr. Wind recalled that most of the escapees wore sandals and by the time they reached Austria, their feet were covered in blisters. He said that one of his neighbors cleaned some people's wounds. Others opened their

A 1989 picnic led to freedom for some East Germans.

homes, offering the refugees food and water. One man let them use his phone so that they could call relatives in the West.

"I was there to see it all," Mr. Wind said.

The event on Sunday, at the Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park in Dumbo, began with brass-band music, like that heard at the picnic that preceded the crossing. Back then, the celebration was part of a peace demonstration organized by Hungary's opposition party in an attempt to weaken the Communist regime. The celebration on Sunday was part of a literary event, the fifth annual PEN World Voices Festival, and meant to stir reflection about what freedom means.

The festival's theme this year is evolution and revolution, "and in a way, one of the questions of the events of 1989" — the picnic at the Austrian-Hungarian border, the rise to power of the trade union federation Solidarity in Poland, the collapse of the Berlin Wall — "is, which was it: evolution or revolution?" mused Kwame Anthony Appiah, a Ghanaian philosopher and novelist

who is the president of the PEN American Center.

Mr. Wind, who still lives in St. Margarethen, was the day's honored guest; he spoke in heavily accented English, his dark glasses resting near the tip of his nose. There were remarks by others, like the Hungarian essayist Eszter Babarczy, who was not at the picnic but shared her memories of the day the Berlin Wall fell.

Assembled in the audience were people like May Coffin, who lives in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, and Luca Mihaly, who lives on the Lower East Side. Ms. Coffin, 29, strolled under the tent with her parents, who were visiting from South Carolina, and said she had no idea what the event was about.

"We came in because we heard the music," she said.

Ms. Mihaly, 26, was born in Budapest, but moved to the United States with her parents while still a child, soon after the Iron Curtain fell. She found out about the event by accident, but made sure to mark it on her calendar.

"I'd never heard about the picnic. It was just on the drive over here that I read a little bit about it," she said. "It's all so fascinating."

It is said that at the time, the Hungarian government had quietly spread word about the picnic, saying that if anyone wished to cross into Austria, all they had to do was show up for the festivity. The border gate, a heavily guarded structure made of wood and barbed wire, stood open for three hours. Once they entered the West, the East Germans were greeted by a sign that read: "You are in Austria. No more danger. We are helping."

Those like Mr. Wind, who witnessed the crossing, went home that day in 1989 with a memento: a piece of barbed wire from the gate. Those who attended Sunday's event left with a souvenir of their own: a goody bag with Austrian pastries, like hazelnut and pecan-and-coffee cakes.