

# Wir bleiben hier!

## HISTORY, MEMORY, AGING, AND CIVIC ACTIVISM IN BERLIN

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### INTRODUCTION

This project explored the connections between collective memory formation, identity politics, and civic engagement in Prenzlauer Berg, a neighborhood in the Pankow district of the German capital, Berlin. The neighborhood is home to the *Herbstlaube*, a senior center that helped establish and maintains a small adjacent house museum, which it jointly administers with district history museum. The research team traced the history of this unique relationship and examined its significance for seniors in the neighborhood and the staff/volunteers who work with them. The project was formulated and carried out by an international, interdisciplinary team of professors and students from UWEC and Winchester University. It is the product of a Department to Department collaborative initiative and was funded by a UWEC IFP grant.



A volunteer gives the research group a tour of the museum

### BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

During the Cold War, Prenzlauer Berg was located in the eastern communist half of the divided city. It was an outer district of East Berlin that was neglected by the communist regime. Because of its marginal location and its intact yet decapitated historic architecture, the neighborhood became a haven for "alternative" intellectuals, musicians, artists, and squatters by the 1980s. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and German Reunification in 1989/90, the neighborhood moved from the margins to the center of the reunited city. It is a neighborhood that has experienced rapid transformation and gentrification.

The project sought to explain when and how the senior center and its unique relationship to the history museum emerged in this neighborhood and document activism that rallied to maintain it in spite of government budget cuts and gentrification.



Participating in the Handarbeitsgruppe - a weekly routine for the Herbstlaube

### METHODS

The research team worked to reconstruct the origins of the partnership of the senior center and the museum. The house museum depicts every day life history of the lower middle class and working class at the turn of the city. The team wanted to understand why the senior center was interested in working with a museum that focused specifically on these themes and this era of the German past. It was also asked how and why the museum became meaningful its elderly visitors, as well as its staff, volunteers, and others in the neighborhood who came to defend it during times of financial struggle.

To answer the research questions, the team collected and analyzed on-line and print materials generated by the center and museum, as well as news stories about activism to maintain and protect it in the face of gentrification. We visited the archives of the district museum, collected documents related to its history, and interviewed archivists and museum staff. We met with local politicians to discuss the history of the funding challenges the museum faced. Finally, we engaged in embedded ethnographic research, collecting oral histories and documents from the staff and volunteers of the museum and senior center. Our team reconstructed the history of the connection between the three institutions, (district museum, the senior center, house museum), a complex story which stretched back to the period prior to unification and changed over time with the transformation of the neighborhood.



The UWEC and University of Winchester research team with Edith, an activist



UWEC research team with members of the senior center

### CONCLUSIONS

The research team found that the history of activists who established the senior center, and took on the administration and financing of the museum was linked their activism to left leaning East German political responses to reunification and transformation. The senior center and museum both serve symbolically in subtle ways to construct and express a local identity that is firmly grounded in memories and a sense of belonging in a neighborhood that was formerly in East Berlin.

### COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION

An important point of this project is to give back to the senior center and museum. In order to do this, the team is working to advertise for and spark interest in the museum. University of Winchester students worked to create an online blog detailing the project and the museum and senior center. The UWEC team will work to provide Spanish translations for the museum and establish future internships and service work with the center for German majors. The UWEC team will also develop outreach programs with German teachers in our region to engage them in lesson building and educational programs to teach about the history of the city, gentrification, the politics of memory and urban activism. We hope to inspire German teachers to not only integrate the story of the museum into their cultural curriculum, but also include a visit to the museum on future study tours of the German capital.

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