In many Western European countries the memory of the end of communism in Central and Eastern Europe and of the *annus mirabilis* 1989 is dominated by the fall of the Berlin Wall – the most visible and media-appealing representation of the sweeping events across a range of countries. Frustration in Poland about how the small, conformist neighbour has managed to steal the limelight has found a range of expressions – not least through massive posters in Berlin on commemorative dates stating: «it began in Poland».

Away from the larger public perception in Western Europe, there is an important group of people that knows all too well where the East-German 1989 events began; and more specifically, where they began for them. Robert Żurek combines their viewpoints – those of an important group of East German oppositionists and independent intellectuals – in a volume of interviews under the title *Polen – Mein Weg zur Freiheit*.

Żurek did not intend to make the book into an academic publication. It has no explanatory footnotes, no exploration of existing literature, no critical afterword. As a conscious choice, this is to be respected. But nevertheless, it might have been a service to the readers to refer them to a list of existing academic literature comparing oppositional cultures in both countries or their mutual influences, such as the existing books and articles by Piotr Zariczny, Dominik Trutkowski, Karolina Pietras, Helena Flam, Marion Brandt, and many others – even if only in a short list at the end of the book.

Żurek has managed to interview almost all major names of the Polish-influenced East-German opposition – the list to a large extent even reads as a who is who in the GDR opposition or Polish-German cultural exchange – including Wolfgang Templin, Markus Meckel, Heinrich Olschowsky, Stephan Bickhardt, Ruth Leiserowitz, and many others. Most missed is Ludwig Mehlhorn, who passed away before Żurek could interview him – but his wife Heimgard Mehlhorn has agreed to lend her voice to the book.

Throughout the volume it is clear that even though there were different ways in which these activists came into contact with Poland, several common themes can be identified: the urge for reconciliation with one of the main victims of German aggression in the Second World War and the role *Aktion Sühnezeichen* played as a mediator; as well as religious motives of people who were often outcasts in the East-German education system and who
turned to Poland to find an intriguing language, an 'exotic' form of catholicism, and a sense of freedom that to the East German visitor felt like «a piece of the West» (p. 251).

Not only do the interviewees share similar experiences, but also do the same milestones pop up in several interviews: the war (for those old enough to have experienced it), the Polish 1968 events, the establishment of KOR, the creation of Solidarność (for which several of the interviewees smuggled materials across the border), the start and end of visa-free travel to Poland, the introduction of martial law, and of course 1989.

Despite the similarities in experiences and milestones, the interviews are in many ways very different from each other. Instead of following a similar structure in every interview, Żurek chooses to tailor each interview entirely to the interviewee and go with the flow of the conversation, as well as occasionally introduce his own opinions into the interview. This variety means that some interviews start with people's early childhood (for those born in German territories that later became Polish for example), while others largely explore professional or oppositional careers. In case of the odd one out, Roland Jahn (who was arrested and expelled out of the GDR for riding around with a Solidarność flag on his bike), Poland is just a minor topic in an interview about radical opposition. His link to Poland was decisive for his future, but in many ways a coincidental one among many other oppositional positions.

Despite the conscious lack of structure, comment, or embeddedness in academic discourse, the volume does offer valuable background and insights into Polish-East-German exchanges from below. Through the opinions and experiences of the persons directly involved the reader for example explores the motives behind and limits of reconciliation. They not only showcase the immense importance of *Aktion Sühnezeichen* as point of access to Poland, but also demonstrate how many of the book's protagonists became frustrated with the organization's exclusive focus on the past that excluded more political action. As Stephan Bickhardt voiced it: reconciliation is impossible without a link to the present, which should include political action (p. 28). This was a road followed by many among the interviewees and something that set them apart from many West German reconciliation attempts which lacked the same political antennae. As a result the West German *Aktion Sühnezeichen* either consciously (out of a détente-based urge to talk to everyone) or naively worked together with the official Polish institutions that the oppositional or at least Christian (and thus non-mainstream) East German 'conciliators' preferred to shun (p. 243).

Most clearly, the book shows that crucial processes that led to 1989 in the GDR did, in fact, start in Poland. Many of those influenced by the Eastern window on freedom were profoundly influenced and would end up being the main protagonists of the East German opposition in the 1980s. It is no coincidence that the first opposition organization that started to explore the topic of human rights had a close Polish connection, nor that only months after the Polish round table led to semi-free elections and a victory for the opposition, the GDR established a round table of its own. The influence of the Polish opposition on the opposition in the GDR was enabled by the many intermediaries interviewed in this book and eventually became much bigger than the influence that those intermediaries could exert individually.
Żurek’s book provides interesting background for historians of Eastern European oppositional history – laying bare transnational processes and influence – as well as for all those who are interested in the intersection of these two countries, with a troubled past which, as this book shows, did not preclude fruitful exchanges as well.

Zitierweise: