

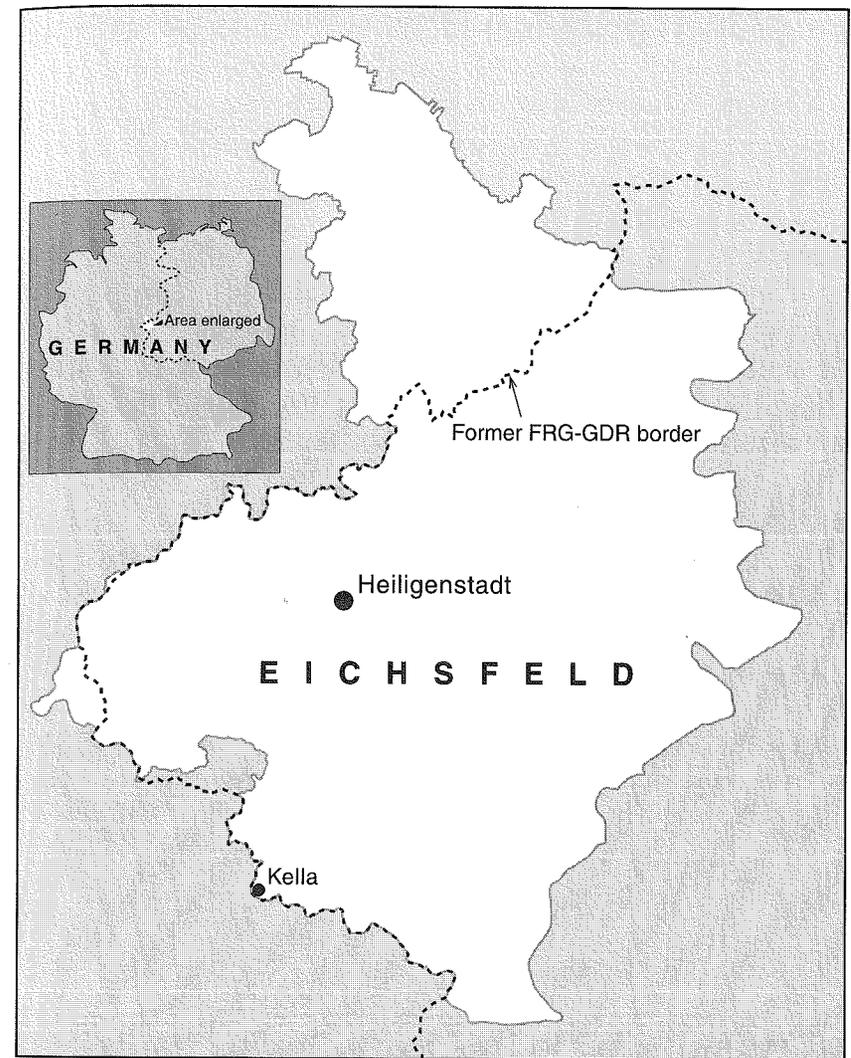
## SHIFTING BOUNDARIES

When I first arrived in Kella in 1990, crossing the border from West Germany to East Germany entailed much more than a simple territorial passage. The gradual transition in the roads leading to the village was itself a liminal space, a product of the roads' borderland location as well as of a consciousness of their temporary remoteness that was heightened by the new pavement and construction that surrounded other border crossings. To reach Kella, you had to exit the fast-paced western German highway (B27) near the town of Eschwege, follow wide, well-paved roads through the western village of Grebendorf, and then take a narrow asphalt road winding through the hills to the spot overlooking Kella known to locals as "Braunrode." An "Eschweger Klosterbräu" placard signaled the entry to an abandoned restaurant that used to serve the

tourists who would come for a glimpse of the famous Iron Curtain and the people it enclosed.<sup>1</sup> At this point, the end of the western German terrain, the winding road turned to gravel; a sharp two-meter drop on the right forced you to slow down and weave through large potholes, a stark contrast to the smooth pace of traffic in the West just moments, even meters, ago. A wide, rough-edged opening in the three-meter-high border fence that surrounded the village marked the passage into the "East;" seconds later, a colorful wooden crucifix on the left indicated that you had also entered the Catholic Eichsfeld.

The village of Kella, like the Eichsfeld region of which it is a part, has a long history as a borderland (Map 1). In fact, it has been a village on many borders. Over the past two hundred years, the boundary line on which Kella is situated has delineated not only East and West but also Prussia and Hesse, Thuringia and Hesse, Catholic and Protestant, and the Eichsfeld and a variety of states and principalities (Figures 1 and 2). Fluctuations in this multilayered and shifting boundary have influenced many aspects of the community's history, economy, and social landscape. As I discuss at various points in the book, these multiple boundaries—regional, religious, territorial, national—are also an important part of a local identifying narrative.

The first mention of Kella in the public record dates back to 1141. The village name reportedly stems from the old German *Kēla*, meaning valley or ravine, and alludes to the community's location at the foothills of the eastern Hessian mountains. The locality's history is closely tied to that of the Eichsfeld, a rural area nestled between the Harz mountains to the north and the Thuringian basin to the south. From the twelfth century until 1803, the Eichsfeld was a principality governed by the archbishop of Mainz; as an ecclesiastical territory, the region remained a Catholic enclave after the territories surrounding it became Protestant during the Reformation.<sup>2</sup> Its territorial borders thus became cultural boundaries as a sense of beleaguered religious isolation shaped a regional identity of the Eichsfelders. This cultural, religious, and, to some extent, economic separation from its neighbors continued after the region came under Prussian control in 1803. In the aftermath of the defeat of Prussia by Napoleon and the Peace of Tilsit in 1807, the Eichsfeld spent a brief



Map 1. The Eichsfeld.

(Cartography by the University of Minnesota Cartography Laboratory)



period under French rule as part of the newly formed Kingdom of Westphalia. It returned to Prussian rule in 1813 until the redrawing of boundaries at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 divided the Eichsfeld between Hanover and Prussia. Kella, in the southwestern corner of the Eichsfeld, bordered Hesse and remained under Prussian control. The Eichsfeld remained divided until Prussia annexed both Hanover and Hesse, along with several other states, after the Austro-Prussian War in 1866. Although partitioned into different administrative districts, the Eichsfeld as a geographical, religious, and cultural region remained united under different German states for the next eighty years.

The bonds between villages in the northern Eichsfeld, forged by centuries of common interest, religious unity, trade, and intermarriage, were



*Figures 1 and 2.* Old boundary stones of Prussia (left) and the GDR (right) along the same borderline near Kella. (Photographs by the author)

ruptured after 1945, when the boundary between East and West Germany was drawn through the northwestern part of the region. Using the boundaries of prewar administrative districts, the Allied powers divided the country into four zones of occupation. Like the East-West border near Kella that was also the boundary of the Eichsfeld as well as a demarcation between the lands of Thuringia and Hesse before the war, many of these boundaries corresponded to earlier lines of division drawn during the various treaties of the nineteenth century. The division of the Eichsfeld after the war was especially devastating to the area because nearly one-half of the eastern Eichsfeld was located in the Sperrgebiet, thus making it inaccessible to the majority of Eichsfeld residents. As we shall see in the next chapter, villages in this zone, especially those like Kella within the even more restricted 500-meter Schutzstreifen, were subject to particularly strict surveillance and control by the East German regime.

Much of Eichsfeld history, memory, and local identity is thus ordered through a notion of boundaries. There are *the* border (the *Grenze*, or former inter-German border), the Sperrgebiet and Schutzstreifen boundaries, the Protestant-Catholic boundaries of the Eichsfeld enclave, and linguistic boundaries. These linguistic distinctions denote a local Eichsfeld dialect separate from the surrounding region as well as a boundary within the Eichsfeld that differentiates a Low German from a Thuringian dialect.<sup>3</sup> The latter linguistic boundary runs southeast of the former east-west border and historically distinguished the "upper Eichsfeld" from the "lower Eichsfeld," a distinction alluding to geological elevation. The border of 1815 (and later of 1945, which ran along the same line) shifted the boundary between the upper and lower Eichsfeld north, where it is today. This historical distinction corresponds to an enduring economic inequality between the two Eichsfelds resulting from the richer, more fertile soil of the lower Eichsfeld—a gap that was widened by the region's division into the capitalist West and socialist East.

#### POSTWAR KELLA

As many older villagers are apt to remind the younger generation, Kella fell on the eastern side of the border through an accident of

history. The village, along with several other regions of Thuringia, was first occupied by American troops in April 1945. Following an agreement between the Allied powers on June 5, 1945, the United States and Britain traded their occupied parts of Saxony, Thuringia, and Mecklenburg for regions of Berlin. On July 1, the American troops left Kella; five days later, Russian troops arrived, and the village became part of the Soviet occupation zone. "They traded us off for Berlin," villagers say.

Like many large-scale historical processes, these shifts were manifested locally and specifically through their instantiation in particular events and individuals. World War II and National Socialist rule in Kella were experienced, among other things, in the loss of forty-one young men in battle; a few regional Nazi party members who lacked broad support among the local population; struggles with the state over freedom of religious expression; the bombing of Kassel 60 miles away in 1943, which reportedly shook village window panes; the bombing of the Eschwege airstrip in 1944, which claimed the life of a local father of five; the influx of war refugees, which reached its peak at 200 evacuees housed in village homes during the winter of 1944/1945; and the downing of two German fighter planes near Kella on April 2, 1945, the pilots of which are buried in the village cemetery. The end of the war was signaled by the arrival of American troops in Kella, as reflected in the following account written by a thirteen-year-old girl in September 1945. The Americans arrived in Kella on April 8, the Sunday after Easter and the day of Kella's annual first communion celebrations.

When mass was over and we were on our way home, we saw a white flag up on Braunrode. I said to mother: "Who could that be?" And mother said: "That's certainly nobody from Kella!" And she was right, because we learned that one of the evacuated women from Cologne, along with her father, had gathered the courage to head out carrying a white flag.

There was much excitement when we got home, but I thought without really thinking, that it was somehow fitting that the Americans should come the Sunday after Easter. Just as I was going to look in on my sick brother I heard a woman in the street yelling, "The Americans are coming! The Americans are coming!" Mother said: "I'm going to look from upstairs to see if it's true." As she looked out the window, she saw an American standing below. She was frightened as she came

down the stairs and yelled, "Get dressed, they're already standing down below!" Then an American came inside and said [in broken German]: "[Have] no fear. Everything [is being handled] at the mayor's." We started to cry right when we saw the strange soldiers, because we all thought the village would be set on fire and ransacked. We also realized that we had lost the war.<sup>4</sup>

This image of emerging from the church to see American troops standing on the Braunrode hill appears frequently in residents' accounts of the end of the war. During the two months of American occupation, still referred to locally in typical GDR terminology as the period "when the Americans first liberated us," the village housed between 6 and 150 troops.<sup>5</sup>

The transfer of the region from American to Soviet control was also noted initially in the movement of troops. On July 1, 1945, the Americans suddenly left Kella. Two days later, without notice or explanation, access to Eschwege was barricaded. For the next several days, American troops fortified the new border, reportedly shooting at anyone who attempted to cross illegally. The unrest generated by these actions, coupled with the news that the region had been transferred to Soviet control, led to a sudden increase in people attempting to flee eastern Germany. Kella and the surrounding region were inundated with refugees, as the priest's 1946 chronicle describes: "There was much unrest in the village. All at once many strangers appeared. Evacuees wanted to get over the border quickly—mothers to their children and children to their mothers. . . . One could hear many a groan [of exhaustion] at the foot of the Silberklippe and see many anxious faces scurrying through the bushes." On July 6, five days after the Americans' departure, Soviet troops arrived in Kella. Shortly thereafter, a Soviet commander attempted to allay villagers' fears of Soviet occupation by calling a community meeting. According to the priest's chronicle, the officer announced: "We may be in power here, but we don't intend to oppress and we will leave the church in freedom." Several homes along one village street were emptied to house the fifty newly arrived Soviet soldiers.

Despite the commanding officer's assurances, however, the border quickly became increasingly fortified through stricter Soviet surveillance and curfews, the establishment of official border crossings, and the con-

struction of sentry boxes and underground bunkers at control checkpoints. Because the densely forested hills surrounding the village made surveillance of the border difficult, the operating borderline was drawn at the base of the woods. As Kella's priest wrote in his 1946 chronicle: "Our Stations of the Cross fell into 'foreign territory.' . . . Kella had become a border village."<sup>6</sup>

#### ECONOMY

Throughout much of its history, economic development in the Eichsfeld was hindered by the region's distance from its ruling electorate in Mainz, a problem that was compounded by the frequent boundary changes and political affiliations after the end of ecclesiastical control during the nineteenth century. As in the rest of the Eichsfeld, Kella's economy was largely supported until the mid-nineteenth century by small-scale agricultural production and, from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, by cottage industries, particularly spinning and weaving.<sup>7</sup> The unique lime soil surrounding Kella was especially fertile for fruit trees; efficient use of the land as both an orchard and a grazing pasture for sheep enabled many villagers to earn a living close to home. The tradition of partible inheritance, however, which was practiced throughout the Eichsfeld for centuries, had substantially reduced the size of family property holdings; by the early nineteenth century it was difficult for most Eichsfelders to earn a living from the land. Economic circumstances of the local population worsened throughout the nineteenth century after the Industrial Revolution displaced the once prosperous local textile production in the Eichsfeld. Many residents of Kella, together with people from throughout the region, were forced by economic necessity to seek work elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Many villagers were able to find employment in nearby Hesse, often taking away work from the Hessian population because Eichsfelders were willing to work for lower wages. Others were forced to seek work through seasonal migration. Leaving at Easter and returning in the fall for Kirmes, men from the Eichsfeld, including many from Kella, earned their livings as masons in

the Rhineland or as laborers in the brickyards of most German industrial cities; in the winter, many found work in the sugar factories of Saxony. Although less common, women from Kella (usually unmarried) also found work as seasonal agricultural laborers in Magdeburg or as day laborers in Hesse. The opening in 1911 of a small cigar factory in Kella, a typical Eichsfeld industry, enabled many local women to find work close to home. For many villagers, however, the economic need for seasonal work continued into the twentieth century: in 1924, for example, more than 25 percent of the working-age population in Kella earned a living as migrant laborers (Müller and others 1966: 11).

During the period of National Socialist rule and World War II, most women in Kella continued to work in the local cigar factory until production was halted in the final war years. Men who were too old for military service found employment in nearby Eschwege. The jobs generated by Hitler's war machine, including street and Autobahn construction as well as work at the Eschwege airstrip, were a welcome relief not only from the mass unemployment of the Weimar period but also from the many years and generations of migrant labor throughout the Eichsfeld's history.

As part of the socialist state's campaign to industrialize the Eichsfeld and thereby end its plight as the "poor house of Prussia," several industries were established in the region after the advent of socialist rule. Kella's village economy was principally supported by two of these local industries until 1989. The local cigar factory was reopened in 1953 under the direction of the state-owned VEB Gildemann Dingelstädt and provided work for fifty women from Kella. In 1966, the facility was taken over by the VEB Kleinmetalwerk Heiligenstadt for the production of suspender clips. Approximately eighty women, more than half of the working-age women in Kella, assembled clips here until the factory closed in the spring of 1991. A toy factory in the neighboring village of Pfaffschwende (three kilometers from Kella) opened in 1955; the vertical organization of its production line employed more than one-third of working-age adults in Kella as draftspeople, toolmakers, masons, mechanics, bookkeepers, cooks, or assembly line workers. It, too, dismissed nearly all of its employees during the course of my fieldwork. Other villagers worked on the regional collective farm, and a few commuted

thirty kilometers to Heiligenstadt, the regional center and seat of the *Kreis* (district).<sup>9</sup> Most of these jobs also disappeared after the collapse of socialist rule.

The rapidly increasing unemployment rate in the former GDR was thus reflected in Kella: during the period of my research, nearly every household had at least one member without work, usually a woman. Despite this relatively high unemployment rate, however, Kella was able to escape the worst of the economic crisis that hit the former GDR after reunification. Owing to its close proximity to the West, many villagers were able to find employment in western Germany, usually in the nearby town of Eschwege. Within two years of the *Wende*, more than half of the men and many of the younger women had found work in the West. Aided by their training in masonry and extensive construction projects made possible by the federal government-subsidized efforts to "rebuild" East Germany after re-unification, the vast majority of village men employed in the West worked in construction. Women, who were primarily hired as part-time workers, worked as office assistants, as store clerks, or in housekeeping.

In many respects, these one-sided border crossings from East to West have entailed a resumption of economic ties that existed before the establishment of the border between East and West Germany in 1945, when many locals worked, shopped, or sold their wares in Hesse. Residents of Kella and its neighboring villages go to Eschwege to shop, to visit relatives, and to work once again for lower wages—not as Eichsfelders now but as Osis.

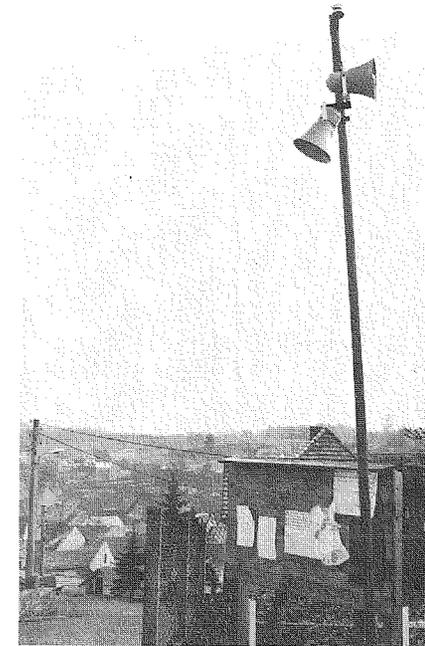
DECEMBER 1990

In 1990, a border crossing from West to East was most quickly and richly apparent to the senses.<sup>10</sup> The brown coal emissions from every chimney in the village, mixed with the oily blue exhaust of Trabants, the poorly built, slow, small, boxy automobiles owned by most East Germans, produced a very distinctive odor. The brownish haze that hovered over the village, trapped by the surrounding hills, confirmed visually what the olfactory senses had already perceived. As throughout eastern

Germany, this "GDR air" was largely responsible for the dirty, graying stucco that covered many of the buildings in the community, not to mention the reportedly related health problems (bronchitis, asthma, migraines) of the local population.

Kella sounded different, too. Many of these sounds emanated from the patterns of village life: the clucking of chickens, the bleating of sheep, the occasional terrified squeal of a pig headed to slaughter. In December 1990, most households still maintained some form of small-scale agricultural production, a leftover from life under socialism when such production had been necessary to ensure adequate supplies for household consumption as well as to fulfill prescribed amounts of eggs, poultry, or pork set by the latest five-year state plan. "Bio-hens," as local chickens came to be called by villagers who liked to poke fun at West German organic-food terminology, spent their days mingling on the village soccer field; at night they would return to their respective homes. Sheep, whose wool commanded a decent price in the GDR, spent their time in the barn behind the family home or grazing under the cherry or apple trees in a household garden plot.

Other sounds in Kella, and the habitual practices they generated, were more distinctly East German. The noise of spluttering Trabants could be heard from afar, giving most villagers enough time to make it to a window, peer out from behind lace curtains, and ascertain, as well as comment on, its driver and passengers. This practice was largely a product of forty years of life in a *Schutzstreifengemeinde*, people told me, when knowledge of villagers' comings and goings was not only the work of various agents of state control but also part of the social control that is frequently part of life in a small community; in Kella such social control was intensified by the village's enforced isolation. A local sense of sound was often so well developed that people could not only tell the difference between a Trabi (the nickname for a Trabant), a Wartburg, or a Lada (the range of automobile possibilities in the GDR) but could also make distinctions among them and thus identify individual automobiles. For some, the influx of western automobiles after the Wende was confusing, causing them to abandon this taxonomy of sounds; for others, it was an opportunity to expand their repertoire and thus adapt to a new range of



*Figure 3.* The loudspeaker that was part of the village public-address system used during socialist rule; behind it is one of the community bulletin boards that replaced the public-address system in 1991. (Photograph by the author)

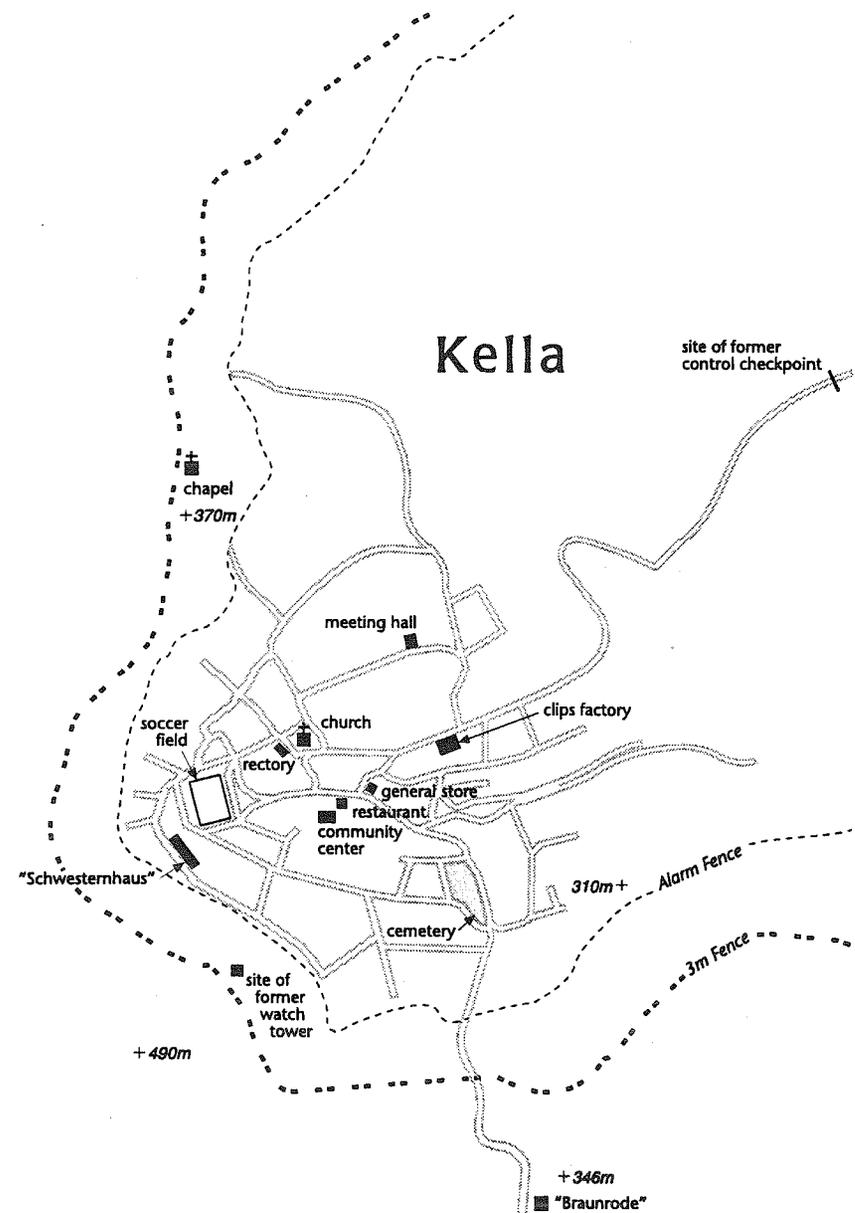
possibilities and their corresponding social distinctions as the status and value of eastern automobiles plummeted.

On any given weekday, but usually on Friday mornings, echoes of the village public-address system could also be heard on most street corners in Kella (Figure 3). Despite being renovated shortly before the Wende, the sound quality of the system was relatively poor. In order to alert residents of the coming announcements, music too distorted to even identify would typically blast for several minutes out of the cone-shaped speakers mounted on narrow poles. This would be followed by a clearer (although not always audible) voice of one of the women employed in the

mayor's office relaying information about garbage pickup, recycling drop-offs, village council meetings, mayoral office hours, or gatherings of local voluntary associations and clubs. Even in chilly weather, the distinctive sounds of this public-address system would bring people out of their homes, providing an occasion to gather, visit, and exchange information. On bitterly cold days, when people would lean out of their windows to hear the announcements, it provided an opportunity for brief, face-to-face contact and exchange of neighborly greetings. An important source of local knowledge, it was through the village public-address system that most residents learned of the dissolution of the Sperrgebiet on November 10, 1989.

In December 1990, the village landscape contained evidence of Kella's past interspersed with glimpses of an anticipated future (Map 2). The peeling brown stucco and faded yellow sign ("Goods for Everyday Needs") on Kella's only store, a branch of the Konsum retail chain in its last days of management by the state trade organization, contrasted sharply with the colorful advertisements and western products in its windows (Figure 4).<sup>11</sup> The bright yellow telephone booth just a block away, which had been installed after the Wende and contained a notice announcing its connection to West German lines—a point of pride as much as information—similarly not only contrasted with the gray and brown houses that surrounded it but also recalled the phoneless households of nearly all village residents. The once inaccessible chapel on the border, elegantly and efficiently restored less than half a year after the fall of the Wall, reflected the hopes and promises of progress to come.

At the end of 1990, the local suspender-clips factory was still in operation. As in other areas of the former GDR, women were working fewer hours and employees over the age of fifty had been ushered into early retirement; but those with work were grateful for employment. The Pfaffschwende toy factory, too, was still in operation when I arrived in 1990, although an aura of uncertainty surrounded its future as well. "Who knows how much longer it will go on," was a frequent utterance in relation to both factories, reflecting a sense of collective anxiety after the loss of the guaranteed employment enjoyed in the GDR. Other



Map 2. Kella. (Cartography by the University of Minnesota Cartography Laboratory)



*Figure 4.* The village Konsum store, featuring the faded GDR logo, "Goods for Everyday Needs," which contrasts with colorful new emblems of western consumer goods, 1991. (Photograph by the author)

villagers were still employed on the regional collective farm, and several continued commuting to Heiligenstadt. A few local women also worked in the state kindergarten and day-care facilities, housed in the recently completed community building that was also home to a local post office branch and a hair salon. A few steps from this centrally located community building was the village pub. Run by a local family and administered by the same trade organization as the local store, the pub was patronized almost exclusively by village men, including a group of regulars.

The local pub, the community building, and the Konsum store were all in the village center, the part of Kella to which people still allude when they say they are going "into the village," even if they live less than a block away. Other landmarks of community life, located in the hills surrounding this village center, included a cultural center, whose large hall has long been the site of most village festivals and celebrations; two soccer fields, neither of which was in use in 1990 because the local soccer team had dissolved immediately following the Wende; and ecclesiastical buildings like the village church built in 1752, the *Schwesternhaus* (nuns' home), and the chapel between the fences. Two bus stops, one at the eastern entrance to Kella and the other near the main village soccer field, were the spots where many began and concluded their school or work days. In 1990, there was still regular bus service to Heiligenstadt and several villages along the way, including Pfaffschwende, where children from Kella attended school.

Also nestled in these hills are most of the village's 150 houses. Ranging from older, timbered homes to recently completed two-family dwellings, most houses in Kella border directly on the street. During my stay in the village, the private space of the household was most frequently demarcated by a fenced enclosure; to reach the front door of homes, one typically had to enter first through a heavy gate and then cross a courtyard separating living quarters from a barn or shed (Figure 5). In 1990, the intimate spheres of these village homes were usually being shared by several generations. Like many living quarters in socialist eastern Europe, domestic spaces in Kella had what Slavenka Drakulic has described as "the strange ability to divide and multiply" (1991: 82). Although the village population was always in gradual decline throughout the socialist period,<sup>12</sup> there was, as elsewhere in the GDR, always a shortage of living quarters—a problem compounded in Kella by the fact that building permits for new homes were more difficult to obtain in the *Schutzstreifen* than in other areas in the GDR. People thus creatively manipulated and reshaped space, turning one room into two, an attic into a small apartment, a bathroom into a kitchen.

In December 1990, many of these buildings in Kella appeared unfinished to a western eye, including mine. Like many houses through-

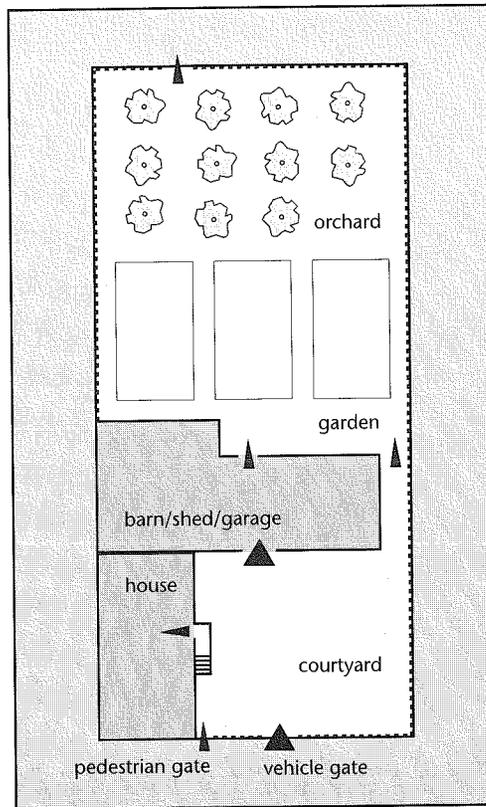


Figure 5. Typical organization of a Kella house, courtyard, barn, and grounds, 1990. (Drafting by the University of Minnesota Cartography Laboratory)

out the former GDR, these homes were lacking stucco, something that was particularly difficult to obtain during the period of socialist rule. I soon came to appreciate, however, that the rough, richly textured outside walls of these homes reflected not only the realities of an economy of shortage but also the care, effort, and resourcefulness that went into securing and creatively piecing together diverse shapes and sizes of building materials, often over a period of several years (Figure 6). Such creativity, I would come to learn, was not limited to the building of homes

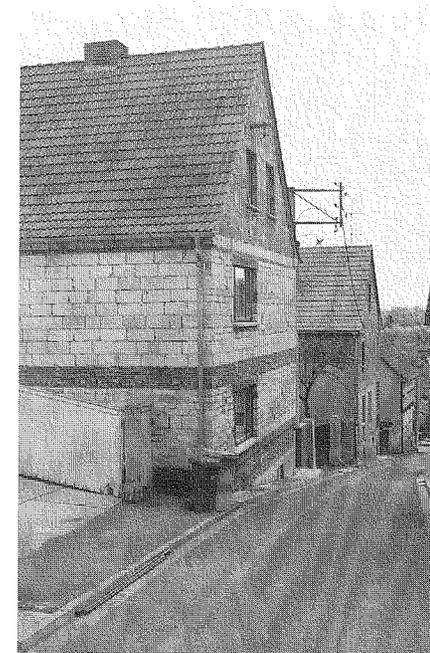


Figure 6. A house in Kella, photographed in 1991, in which the layering of bricks reflects scarce building materials patiently acquired and creatively assembled over time. (Photograph by the author)

but was reflected in a range of daily practices both during and after the period of socialist rule.

In December 1990, most of the local institutions that provided the fabric of daily life in the village were on the brink of dissolution, extinction, or, at least, transformation. By the time I left Kella two years later, most had disappeared. Except for a few remaining employees of the toy factory in Pfaffschwende, nearly all residents had changed or lost their jobs. Both the state-sponsored day-care center and kindergarten had closed due to lack of funds and declining enrollments of children whose unemployed mothers no longer needed child-care services.<sup>13</sup> The local pub had also



*Figure 7.* In one of many home and village “beautification” projects, photographed in 1992, a local worker finishes the renovation of a house facade with newly available building materials. (Photograph by the author)

closed, replaced shortly thereafter by a family business run by former Communist Party members near the village’s western entrance. Survival of the village Konsum store, now under private ownership, was threatened as villagers were lured by the wider selection and lower prices of western discount stores in Eschwege. The still-functioning public-address system had been replaced by community bulletin boards, thus supplanting the simultaneous collective experience of local news with individual responsibility for the latest community announcements (Figure 3). Face-to-face interaction similarly declined through the installation of telephones in every village home; no longer was the single yellow telephone booth the only line of communication to the outside world.

Like many areas of the former GDR, Kella often felt like a giant construction site. Roads were torn up in order to install cables for television and telephones; streets were newly paved; houses were whitened by stucco or paint; facades of community buildings were renovated; and

new communal spaces like walking trails, park benches, and green areas were created through make-work projects sponsored by the state or by the newly founded local Heimatverein. By the time I left in 1992, the feel of the village had changed. The experience of abrupt transition from West to East was dramatically reduced after the border crossing near Kella was paved in the fall of 1991. Similarly, the distinctive smell of “GDR air” had dissipated as Trabis became a second automobile for most families (usually relegated to the wife) and as brown-coal ovens were replaced with more prestigious and environmentally sound oil heating. With the widespread availability of quality meats, few families were still slaughtering their own pigs for domestic consumption; the sounds of bleating sheep and squealing pigs faded as barn stalls were renovated to make room for a garage for a western automobile or to create additional living space for an expanding family. On returning for a visit a year after settling in West Germany in 1991, one young woman exclaimed: “I don’t even recognize my Heimat!” The consequences of these dramatic changes, as well as what happened in between, is the subject of the remainder of this book.