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Ulrike Winkler’s book is part of the collaborative project on “people with disabilities in the German Democratic Republic” undertaken at the universities of Kiel and Munich and that was supported from 2018 to 2022 by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research. Previous general histories of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), as well as the history of architecture and city planning there, have hardly dealt with the living conditions of people with disabilities, so this book contributes significantly to filling this gap. Its title can be translated as “By Wheelchair into the Tatra Streetcar: People with Disabilities in the GDR: Living Conditions and Material Barriers.” As Winkler states, this book is the first to analyze the effects of the built environment on the lives of people with physical impairments (here meaning mobility impairments) in the GDR, as exemplified by the old city of Halle and the newly constructed city of Halle-Neustadt (a more accurate subtitle could express this specific focus). Winkler has carried out meticulous research on many types of physical barriers that people with mobility impairments, who wanted to live independently in this socialist society, had to deal with in the two cities. Located next to each other and typical of many cities in the GDR, Halle has an old city center with many traditionally built structures that were quite run-down, while Halle-Neustadt is a large area of new, prefabricated concrete-slab apartment buildings. Thus, the two cities present different problems for creating access and are instructive comparative examples. In general, the book details many individual cases, but at times more interpretation of the documents would be helpful. This could perhaps lead to some more general conclusions about the situation of people with disabilities within the centralized political system of the GDR.

Chapter 2 summarizes the political, social, and medical understanding of disability in the GDR, including a discussion of relevant terminology. In 1980, out of a population of about seventeen million, there were 1,320,229 people with disabilities (presumably meaning those with officially issued ID cards), and when the Berlin Wall opened in 1989, approximately 50,000 citizens used wheelchairs. Winkler discusses the internationally recognized concept of “complex rehabilitation,” which sought to combine medical, educational, work-related, and social measures with the goal of giving everyone a feeling of security. The book focuses on efforts to make living situations and public spaces more accessible, so it would be important for future research to examine workplace accessibility in this socialist society where citizens
were expected to contribute to the best of their abilities. In any event, it seems clear that ideals and reality were often far apart, generally not because of any ill intent, but because of lack of materials and qualified personnel.

Chapter 3 is a very useful general chapter that analyzes the basic parameters of the living conditions of people with physical disabilities in the GDR. It recognizes efforts by architects, planners, medical personnel, and disabled people themselves to create more access. After the Second World War, in which 65 percent of all buildings had been destroyed, there was a chronic shortage of living space for everyone. It could be added that, in contrast to West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany, or FRG), which received funding for rebuilding through the US Marshall Plan, the GDR received no such assistance from the Soviet Union, which itself had suffered widespread devastation. With some exceptions, resources were generally concentrated on building up heavy industry in the 1960s and 1970s. Although more housing was eventually built, a significant number of GDR citizens, whether disabled or not, were never able to find appropriate living spaces because of the chronic shortages of building materials. This meant that disabled people were sometimes placed in institutions even though they could have lived independently if there had been sufficient accessible apartments, as well as enough equipment such as wheelchairs, prostheses, orthotics, and spare parts. In the early 1970s, criticism began to intensify about the exclusion of disabled people from full participation in society. Winkler explains that there were four reasons for this change of consciousness: 1) the GDR had pledged in 1971 under its leader, Erich Honecker (1912-94), to raise the living standard of all citizens; 2) the GDR Society for Rehabilitation became more active in calling for removing architectural barriers to accessibility, and various architectural degree programs began to include accessible building in their curricula; 3) the United Nations International Year of the Disabled in 1981 brought questions of accessibility to the fore; and 4) disabled people became less willing to resign themselves to being confined in their inadequate living spaces and became more outspoken in voicing their needs.

In terms of general issues of accessibility, while a very small number of disabled people built or renovated one-family homes, by far the vast majority lived in apartments. Older buildings often had larger rooms that were easier for wheelchair users to navigate, but these buildings had no elevators and almost always had entrance stairs. Newer apartment buildings also usually had entrance stairs, often did not have elevators, and generally had smaller rooms. In the 1980s, some wheelchair-accessible apartments were created in both old and new buildings, but this did not come near to meeting the needs of disabled people, or, for that matter, of many older people. For example, in 1981 in Karl-Marx-Stadt (Chemnitz) about four thousand of the most severely physically disabled people were awaiting an appropriate apartment. Official guidelines for accessibility in the 1980s often could not be realized, but show that experts were aware of problems in such areas as medical facilities, service centers, cultural institutions, public transportation, and stores. There were no plans for making educational institutions accessible; instead children with mobility impairments, who were not able to function in inaccessible schools, were placed in separate schools.

Chapter 4 deals with the living situations of people with mobility impairments in the old city of Halle, where because of the housing shortage residents sometimes still had to live in condemned buildings with outdoor toilets. Winkler recounts such situations and explains that many disabled people depended on relatives and others to help them function under extremely difficult circumstances. However, she also gives examples of how some apartments were made accessible by building ramps and widening sidewalks, at times due to the initiatives of disabled people themselves. Also,
as condemned buildings were torn down, new complexes occasionally included a few accessible apartments. Sometimes the detailed sources should be weighed against each other. For example, one source says that, in 1979/80, Halle had more apartments (332) for wheelchair users and disabled people than any other district, but another source states that there were 55 accessible apartments. In any event, the need for accessible apartments was certainly much greater than their actual availability. In terms of public infrastructure, the main central shopping street was made into a pedestrian mall in the 1970s, which was somewhat useful to wheelchair users, but public telephones, mailboxes, toilets, and stores were generally inaccessible. Recalling the book’s title, Winkler explains that the high steps on the Czech-made Tatra streetcars introduced in 1979 made it impossible for one wheelchair user, a research associate at Halle University, to board them. This would have been a problem for most people with mobility impairments throughout the GDR since these streetcars were used widely in other cities, including East Berlin. In order to remain mobile, this woman acquired an electric wheelchair made in West Germany (it would be interesting to know how GDR citizens could obtain these), but she was unable to use it, or charge it, in her small apartment. Determined to keep her job, she stored her wheelchair in a garage and her parents and friends carried her down the stairs to her wheelchair whenever she wanted to go out. Comparatively speaking, however, Winkler notes that accessible apartments were also still rare in West Berlin at the end of the 1980s, although one wheelchair user, who received an “invalid’s pension” and could therefore travel to the West, noticed that some buildings in West Berlin were more accessible to him than in the East. Here, it would be helpful to explain that such pensioners, like old-age pensioners, were allowed to visit the West because, if they should stay there, GDR authorities thought that this would remove a drain on the GDR economy.

Chapter 5 analyzes issues of accessibility in Halle-Neustadt, which was established as a new, independent city in 1967 to house workers in the chemical industry. By 1985, about 35,000 apartments had been built, and there were about 94,000 residents. Such “socialist cities,” which were also built elsewhere in the GDR, were intended to help shape the “new human being” by furthering the equality of all who lived there. While they featured amenities such as central heating that were often lacking in the old cities, they were generally not built to be accessible to residents with mobility impairments as they had entrance stairs and small rooms. One problem that was specific to the GDR was that only buildings with more than six stories were allowed to have elevators (it could be added that this was true throughout the GDR). This was because of the high costs for electric installations, especially after the military putsch in 1973 in Chile, which had been the GDR’s source for copper. And even if a building had an elevator, it generally only stopped on every other floor. As time passed and the number of disabled and older residents increased in Halle-Neustadt, the city council began to install some needed ramps and provide disabled parking places. Furthermore, the apartment buildings constructed in the late 1980s included some accessible apartments. Even in this “new city,” however, many public places, such as restaurants, banks, post offices, libraries, and train stations, were not accessible to wheelchair users.

Finally, chapter 6 presents the Support Group of People with Multiple Sclerosis (MS), founded in 1987 in Halle and with 130 members in several cities by 1989, as an unusual example of a self-help group in a country where the state claimed to be the exclusive representative of the people’s interests. Difficulty in getting accurate information about their condition led several people with MS to form this group, which provided relevant information to its members, helped with applications for assistance, and repeatedly criticized the lack of accessible apartments, public toilets, and
so forth. While state agencies sometimes interfered in the group’s activities, it was nevertheless an example of disabled people having some success at achieving their goals.

Winkler’s book is a pioneering study of how city planners, architects, medical personnel, and disabled people themselves gradually became more aware of problems of accessibility for people with physical impairments in Halle and Halle-Neustadt. While the GDR and the FRG both started out with destroyed infrastructure after 1945, the chronic shortages of materials and skilled workers in the GDR often made it impossible to provide for the needs of people with “non-standard” bodies (p. 185). In general, the one-party system of the GDR acted as a brake on self-help initiatives, but Winkler also shows that there were sometimes more possibilities for effective individual advocacy for the needs of disabled people than might be surmised. It is to be hoped that future researchers will continue along these lines in studying issues of accessibility in other GDR cities for people with all types of disabilities.

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