

German students built escape route, connected East to West

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TOP: A woman along with 57 people escaped through a tunnel at Bernauer Strasse. Photo by ullstein bild via Getty Images.

Germany was defeated in World War II and the country was carved into sections under the control of France, Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States. From the late 1940s until 1989, West Berlin and East Berlin, were two separate cities in East Germany. The Soviets and communism ruled East Germany, and democracy ruled West Berlin and West Germany.

On August 13, 1961, 96 miles of barbed-wire fences and other barriers were suddenly set up around Berlin. It split the city in two. East Germany changed from being a country, to being a jail. Over the next 28 years, 250,000 people were sent to prison for planning escapes to the West. More than 100 people died after being shot by border guards.

People could still cross to West Berlin if they had the approved papers and promised to return. The East German guards and brutal Stasi, or secret police at the border, warned people about what would happen to family members if they did not return to East Berlin.

Fleeing In Secret

Joachim Neumann was a 21-year-old East German student who decided to escape to West Berlin.

In December 1961, Neumann stepped up to the checkpoint where guards waited to look over his papers. He had a fake Swiss passport and his pockets were stuffed with things, like a movie ticket stub and bus tickets, that showed he was a Swiss tourist.

He did not speak to the guards because his accent was German, not Swiss. A guard asked Neumann what he thought of Germany's capital city. He just stuck his nose in the air and grunted. After some follow-up questions, Neumann just growled. Finally, the guard gave up and waved him through to enter West Berlin. He left his family and girlfriend behind.

People tried many ways to get from East Berlin into West Berlin, like hiding in secret car compartments and even climbing the wall itself. Still, others built tunnels.

In almost 30 years, about 300 people escaped through tunnels. Many tunnels were dug all over the city, but they were often discovered before they could be used.

Searching For A Way Out

In West Berlin, Neumann found other college students who wanted to help East Germans escape. Neumann's first tunnel project failed. Someone had informed the Stasi, and his girlfriend, Christa Gruhle, was caught and sentenced to 16 months in prison.

Neumann tried to build another tunnel with many of the same students. They started in the basement of a closed bakery and dug a 100-yard tunnel wide enough for one person to slither through on hands and knees. This continued under the street, under the 40-foot-high wall, under floodlights and guard towers, until they moved up to the surface.

They worked in weeks-long shifts for five months and slept in the empty bakery. They weren't even sure where they were going. Luckily, they came out inside an old outhouse behind an apartment building at Strelitzer Strasse 55.

The tunnel was ready on October 3, 1964. The men sent the code word, "Tokyo," and the address to all their family members.

Anything But A Normal Evening

Hans-Joachim Tilleman was one of the people who escaped through the tunnel. "We were told the street address, and asked to pretend as though we were just on a normal Sunday evening visit to some acquaintances," he recalled of his escape.

"So we walked along the side of the street – right across the street was a watch-post where border soldiers were standing – and we counted house numbers, 53, 54 ... 55. The heart is going bump bump ... On a tall building, was a Fluchthelfer (escape-helper), who was watching the street to make sure it was clear ... they were supposed to shine a gold light when there was a problem. We continued to the building. There were some people inside, and we told them 'Tokyo'... we took off our shoes and tiptoed to a little outhouse in the back, they let us down a shaft, and we crawled through."

When the first groups of people began escaping through the tunnel, everyone worried something might go wrong. The border guards were everywhere. Some of the students carried pistols.

The next day, Neumann received an unexpected letter from Gruhle, who had been let out of prison early. Neumann got word to Gruhle about the tunnel and she appeared at the apartment house, whispered the code word, climbed through and reached West Berlin safely.

As the night went on, a few of the border guards noticed something was not quite right and they went across the street and knocked on the door of Strelitzer Strasse 55. One of the diggers standing watch at the door saw them coming and quickly crept back through to the tunnel opening to warn the others.

In the confusion that followed between students and officers, shots were exchanged and a young border guard named Egon Schultz was hit. He died later on the way to the hospital.

A Historic Escape

Schultz's death was blamed on the tunnel builders and the tunnel was demolished. The students sent balloons over the wall with a letter attached.

The letter read: "The real murderer is the system that addressed the massive flight of its citizens not by removing the cause of the problem, but by building a WALL and giving the order for Germans to shoot Germans."

In two nights, 57 people crawled to freedom in the West, so it was called Tunnel 57.

Years after the Berlin Wall came down on November 9, 1989, and East and West Germany became one Germany again, a case was opened concerning the death of Egon Schultz. It was found that the fatal shot had been fired by a border soldier, who was ordered by a Stasi officer to kill Schultz.

During the two days it operated, Tunnel 57 was the single most successful escape route in the history of the Berlin Wall.

Quiz

- 1 Which piece of evidence BEST supports the idea that illegally crossing the border required a lot of attention to detail?
- (A) People could still cross to West Berlin if they had the approved papers and promised to return.
 - (B) He had a fake Swiss passport and his pockets were stuffed with things, like a movie ticket stub and bus tickets, that showed he was a Swiss tourist.
 - (C) He did not speak to the guards because his accent was German, not Swiss.
 - (D) "We were told the street address, and asked to pretend as though we were just on a normal Sunday evening visit to some acquaintances," he recalled of his escape.
- 2 Which section of the article BEST highlights the idea that the border police relied on the use of threats to keep East Germans from permanently escaping to West Germany?
- (A) the introduction [paragraphs 1-3]
 - (B) "Fleeing In Secret"
 - (C) "Searching For A Way Out"
 - (D) "Anything But A Normal Evening"
- 3 Which is the MOST important reason Neumann decided to build a tunnel from West Germany to East Germany?
- (A) He wanted to rescue his girlfriend who was imprisoned in East Germany.
 - (B) He wanted to be able to help his family members escape from East Germany.
 - (C) He wanted all Germans to be able to enjoy the democratic freedoms he enjoyed in West Germany.
 - (D) He wanted to contribute to the gradual destruction of the wall dividing East Germany from West Germany.

- 4 Which of the following MOST influenced the guards' decision to blame Schultz's death on the tunnel builders?
- (A) Most of the guards didn't know who was actually responsible for Schultz's death because of the confusion that occurred between the students and officers in the tunnel.
 - (B) The guards were certain that the students were responsible for Schultz's death and wanted to report the truth to the East Germans as soon as possible.
 - (C) The guards wanted to make the students look guilty and violent so that East Germans would be angry at the students and less likely to try to escape or fight the police.
 - (D) Most of the guards were certain that Schultz had been helping the students dig the tunnel and they wanted to hide the fact that some of the officers were supporting escape efforts.