Tunneling to Freedom

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Attempts to escape from East Berlin began as soon as the Wall was built. At first, it was not too difficult; the concertina-wire barriers and mortared concrete block walls that were thrown up by the East German troops were slap-dash and full of holes. East Berliners found ways to go over, under or wriggle through the Wall. Sewer lines or subway tunnels provided ready access. Attempts were made to swim across the River Spree and, in places like Bernauer Straße, where apartment buildings abutted right on to the dividing line between East and West, people could drop down or jump into the Western half of the city. West Berliners helped and the Fire Department tried to catch would-be escapees who jumped from upper-story windows. Some smashed through the traffic barriers in cars or trucks or simply legged it as fast as they could through the checkpoints. It was always dangerous, but the guards could be taken by surprise, or they might hesitate before shooting, or pity might stay their hands.

Maybe.

This did not last. The East German regime, confronted with the reckless attempts of their citizens to flee, quickly began to improve the barrier and to plug the holes through which they were escaping to the West. Gratings were installed in sewer lines, subway tunnels were sealed or blocked, windows looking out on West Berlin were bricked up; anything offering cover near the border was removed. The Wall gradually became a fortified zone, with guard towers, spotlights, dogs and a "death strip" swept by machine guns and filled with antipersonnel mines. At some point, the infamous *Schießbefehl* (Order to Shoot) was issued. Although not given written form until 1982, this secret order was implicit in the regulations issued to the border guards, which criminalized escapees and made preventing escape into the West an "absolute priority." Guards were further enjoined to use every means at their disposal to prevent unauthorized border crossings.[1] The fatal consequences of the border regime were made manifest on 24 August 1961, when 24 year-old Günter Litfin was shot dead trying to swim across the River Spree, the first of some 90 East Germans to be killed while trying to escape to the West.

Under these circumstances, tunneling quickly emerged as the most viable means of escaping to the West. It was not completely safe—the East German border guards were on the lookout for tunnels and were not afraid to use violent means—including explosives—to shut them down. But, with caution and luck, a single tunnel could be a path to freedom for dozens of people before it was discovered.

A total of 70 tunnels are known to have been dug, of which 19 are believed to have been successful. The first known tunnel was completed in October, 1961. Leading into Zehlendorf, at the south edge of the city, in the American sector, this tunnel was dug from East Berlin into the West: unusually so, for it was considered less dangerous to dig

from west to east and most tunnels took that direction. Between five and 14 East Berliners escaped through this first tunnel, the vanguard of at least 209 East Germans who crawled their way into West Berlin and freedom.[2]

Tunnels were attempted throughout most of the Cold War, but about half of the known tunnels were attempted in 1962. The year also saw the widespread appearance of *Fluchthelfer*, groups of "escape helpers" who worked with East Berliners to arrange escape attempts. Most were volunteers, students from one of West Berlin's two universities—the Freie Universität and the Technische Universität. Some worked for pay, some were con artists and a few were agents of the East German Ministerium für Staatssicherheit—the *Stasi*. They were invaluable for tunneling operations, which were intrinsically labor intensive and required organization, planning and considerable logistical support. The first tunnel project known to have involved Fluchthelfer was begun in September 1961. Dug from a rail freight yard in Schönholz, the tunnel emerged on the eastern side in the Pankow Municipal Cemetery. Between 20 and 100 people used it to escape before it was uncovered by the East German police in December—making it possibly the most successful tunnel ever.[3]

The appearance of Fluchthelfer highlighted what was perhaps the biggest problem in any tunneling attempt, that of security. Tunnels had to be dug and the more workers who could be brought in, the quicker a project could be completed. But the more people who were involved in any undertaking involving East Germany—even legitimate ones—the more likely it was to be compromised to the police. A successful group of Fluchthelfer offered some reassurance in that regard—since, if they were successful, they were unlikely to have been penetrated by the Stasi. But, the fact of their success made them all the more likely to be targets of the East German security services. Success in any tunneling operation meant, first and foremost, resolving this security dilemma. Failure to do so meant arrest, stiff prison terms and possibly even death.

Two tunnel projects in the summer of 1962 demonstrate this well. One, undertaken by a group of Fluchthelfer led by Fritz Wagner and Harry Seidel, was dug in the vicinity of Kiefholzstraße, at the borders of Neukölln in West Berlin and Treptow in the East—an area favored by tunnel builders because of good soil conditions and the configuration of the border. Wagner and Seidel eventually were joined by the so-called Girmann Group—formally known as *Unternehmen Reisebüro* (Operation Travel Agency)—which had been involved in a variety of innovative escape operations, but not usually tunnels. But, the Girmann Group was well-suited to the project, being efficient, technically proficient and security conscious—which was just as well, for the Girmann Group also was well-known to the Stasi, which made them a target for penetration and betrayal.

The other tunnel was on the other side of the city, in Bernauer Straße—an address known more for dramatic above-ground escape attempts than tunnels. This was a private endeavor, begun by Luigi Spina, an Italian student at the Technische Universität,

who wanted to help a fellow student and his family escape from the East. He was joined by, among others, fellow students Domenico Sesta, Hasso Herschel, Ulrich Pfeifer and Joachim Rudolph. Being engineers, they brought a level of sophistication to their project not hitherto seen. Herschel, Pfeifer and Rudolph served as a link with the Kiefholzstraße project, contributing labor in this tunnel when their own was inundated by summer rains.[4] This was, potentially, a hazard, for it meant that, if one tunnel was compromised, the other, through Herschel, Pfeifer and Rudolph, might be as well.

Both tunnel projects quickly experienced money problems. Both sought out an interesting source of funds for materials and equipment: American television.

From the beginning, the Kiefholzstraße tunnel was the more problematic. Security was chaotic—tunnel diggers and would-be escapees were recruited by word of mouth and the need for volunteers was widely broadcast in university circles in West Berlin, which meant that it was only a matter of time before the Stasi learned of the tunnel's existance. Reportedly, it was the local branch of the West German security service which brought the Girmann Group into the project, in an effort to establish some security discipline.[5] Nevertheless, it was with some alarm that the US Mission Berlin learned from old Berlin hand James P. O'Donnell—formerly on Gen. Clay's staff—that the diggers had made contact with CBS News Correspondent Daniel Schorr, with an offer of exclusive rights to the story and the opportunity to film the whole escape attempt.[6] Citing the "adverse effect on our relations with the German press and Berlin city officials," the Mission applied pressure, first to O'Donnell and then to Schorr, in an effort to dissuade them, eventually bringing pressure on the Head of CBS News from the Secretary of State.[7]

Fortunately for Schorr, they were successful. On 7 August 1962, as truck loads of would be escapees converged on the Eastern terminus at the corner of Kiefholzstraße and Puderstraße, the East German guards moved in. Fortunately, look-outs from the Girmann Group saw what was coming. At the last minute, the diggers—including Herschel, Pfeifer and Rudolph—were able to escape back down the tunnel. But, the East Germans arrested 37 East Berliners waiting to go down the tunnel that night and, after interrogations, another 52 participants in the project. Since Schorr was not there, a major diplomatic incident was avoided, while Schorr himself had escaped possible arrest and imprisonment.[8]

Ironically, it was the Girmann Group that had compromised the tunnel. At the end of March 1962, the Stasi had placed an informant (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*), codenamed, "Hardy," in the group. Hardy was assigned to the Kiefholzstraße tunnel, working as a courier. He blew the tunnel to the Stasi, who simply laid a trap, waiting until the tunnel was finished to gather as many as possible into the net.[9]

The Bernauer Straße tunnel was a much more closely-held affair. Luigi Spina and Domenico Sesta, who were really the driving force behind the project, spent much time reconnoitering likely sites, trying to balance accessibility, easy of construction and security. The site they finally chose was unusual. The western terminus of the tunnel from which (as was typical) the digging began, was in the basement of an abandoned swizzle-stick factory on the western side of Bernauer Straße. The eastern terminus was the basement of a deserted apartment building on Schönholzer Straße—ironically, vacated by the East German police because it was too close to the Wall and might be used for escape attempts. It was to be a longish tunnel—140 yards—and would require the engineers from the Technische Universität to make full use of their skills. The result was the most sophisticated effort thus far, employing extensive internal structure to reinforce the tunnel, electric lighting, ventilation, a miniature electric rail line to retrieve the excavated dirt and a pumping system to prevent flooding. All of which they would need.[10]

Work on "Tunnel 29" began in March 1962.[11] Almost immediately, it became apparent why other tunnel projects had paid more attention to soil conditions and less to security. Fifteen feet down, they were secure against East German sensors and below the cable and pipes of the Berlin substrata, but well inside the shallow Berlin water table. The soil was sandy and, when wet, turned to butter, requiring consider support to keep the tunnel from collapsing. Even though the tunnel was only three feet by three feet, it eventually consumed some 20 tons of lumber, while it was necessary for pumps to be running constantly, taking out 8,000 gallons of water a week.[12] Like all tunnel projects, this one was on a shoe-string budget, living off donations begged from local political groups, anti-communist groups and newspapers. These funds ran out before the tunnel was one-quarter done.[13] More money had to be found.

Fortunately, the word was out that NBC Berlin Correspondent Piers Anderton was looking for a tunnel. Spina approached Anderton and presented him with a demand for $50,000—which Anderton bargained down to $12,000. Anderton had virtual *carte blanche* from the head of NBC News, Reuven Frank, who was determined to produce a tunnel documentary and was equally determined that the tunnel be a successful one. Frank was willing to keep the tunnel builders on a long-lead and kept Anderton and his cameramen away from the tunnel until it was time to film the escape. Knowledge of the tunnel was strictly on a "need to know" basis at NBC. Frank himself never saw the tunnel, and only drove by the swizzle-stick factory once, the night of the escape.[14]

This coalesced with the innate caution demonstrated by Spina and Sesta. The group directly involved in the tunnel was kept small—initially only eight and never more than 21. University affiliation also may have been a factor. Drawing from the Technische Universität, they had a different labor pool than other groups, which drew from the poets and scholars at the Freie Universität.

Then, too, if they did know of the tunnel, the Stasi may have been convinced that it was doomed. Taking seven months to dig, the tunnel was constantly threatened by flooding. Work had to be suspended in June, when a nearby water main broke and then again in July, when the tunnel was inundated by 40,000 gallons of water. It was during this period that Herschel, Pfeifer and Rudolph went to work on the Kiefholzstraße tunnel. If they let it be known that the Bernauer Straße tunnel was abandoned, they may well have saved the operation.[15]

But then, finally, it was finished. A race against flood waters to the end, on 14 September the eastern terminus was opened. Over that night and the following one, 29 East Berliners made their way to freedom. At the last they were up to their faces in water—a terrifying experience, 15 feet underground. Late on the fifteenth a final flood closed the tunnel forever.[16]

The NDC camera men were on hand for the escapes. The documentary was kept secret until it was ready to be shown, on 31 October. A mix of actual tunnel footage and later reenactments by the participants, it employed no interviews, letting the footage and Anderton's spare narrative speak for themselves.

The State Department did not become aware of the film until October. With the Cuban missile crisis underway, they acted to delay or prevent its being shown on television. The government of West Berlin also was alarmed. NBC deferred to the "National Interest," but eventually broadcast the documentary in December.[17]

It stands as a masterpiece of Cold War journalism.

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[1] Sälter, Gerhard, "Zum 'Schießbefehl und dem Einsatz von Schußwaffen an der Berliner Mauer und der innerdeutschen Grenze," (Gedenkstätte Berliner Mauer, 2007 http://www.berliner-mauer-gedenkstaette.de), p. 2

[2] Arnold, Dietmar and Sven Felix Kellerhoff, *Die Fluchttunnel von Berlin* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2008), pp. 279-88. Because of the secrecy implicit and necessary in these dangerous enterprises, our information is incomplete. Probably more tunnels were attempted and failed, most likely because they were abandoned before much progress was made. Some others may have been discovered by the East German authorities, some may even have been successful.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 279.

[4] Nooke, Maria and Lydia Dollmann, *Fluchtziel Freiheit. Berichte vonn DDR-Flüchtlingen über die Situation nach dem Mauerbau* (Veröffentlinchtungen der Stiftung Berliner Mauer; Berlin Ch. Links Verlag, 2011), p. 28.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] NARA RG 84 Entry 256 Box 36, Memorandum for the Record, 3 August 1962.

[7] Daniel Schorr, "The CBS Tunnel Documentary That Never Was," Newseum, 12 June 2012 (Interview on Youtube). Schorr remained bitter about the whole affair until the end of his days.

[8] Nooke and Dollmann, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[10] Wyden, Peter, *Wall. The Inside Story of Divided Berlin* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 290.
[11] This, like other tunnels, became known for the number of people who successful used it to escape.
[12] Herschel, Hasso, "Seven Months to Dig a Tunnel, Newseum 12 June 2012 (Interview on Youtube); Wyden, *ibid.*, pp. 290-91.
[13] Wyden. *ibid.*
[14] *Ibid.,* pp. 288-89.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 292.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 293.
[17] *Ibid*.