

Berlin Wall Activity Passages

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

On August 13, 1961, the Communist government of the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany) began to build a barbed wire and concrete “Antifascistischer Schutzwall,” or “antifascist bulwark,” between East and West Berlin. Over time, East German officials replaced the makeshift wall with one that was sturdier and more difficult to scale. A 12-foot-tall, 4-foot-wide mass of reinforced concrete was topped with an enormous pipe that made climbing over nearly impossible. Behind the wall on the East German side was a so-called “Death Strip”: a gauntlet of soft sand (to show footprints), floodlights, vicious dogs, trip-wire machine guns and patrolling soldiers with orders to shoot escapees on sight.

The official purpose of the Berlin Wall was to keep Western “fascists” from entering East Germany and undermining the socialist state, but it primarily served the objective of [preventing people from moving from] East to West. Before the wall was built, Berliners on both sides of the city could move around fairly freely: They crossed the East-West border to work, to shop, to go to the theater and the movies. Trains and subway lines carried passengers back and forth. After the wall was built, it became impossible to get from East to West Berlin except through one of three checkpoints.

The Berlin Wall stood until November 9, 1989, when the head of the East German Communist Party announced that citizens of the GDR could cross the border whenever they pleased. That night, ecstatic crowds swarmed the wall. Some crossed freely into West Berlin, while others brought hammers and picks and began to chip away at the wall itself. To this day, the Berlin Wall remains one of the most powerful and enduring symbols of the Cold War.

Historical Witness



Peter Fechter was an eighteen-year-old who wanted nothing more than to taste the sweet air of West Germany. His plan was simple: he and a friend would wait until an opportune moment, then sprint across the “death strip” (it was actually called that) and vault the wall to freedom.

Although his friend made it, Peter was shot in the pelvis by a guard and fell inches short of his goal. The whole drama took place in front of hundreds of witnesses, soldiers and journalists on the western side of the wall. Peter lay in agony for more than an hour, while sympathetic bystanders literally a few feet away could do nothing but watch as he died. When he finally passed away, an East German soldier picked up his body and carried it back to East Berlin, followed by thousands of futile boos.

Historical Witness



When six-year-old Andreas Senk was accidentally pushed into the water by a friend during play, it seemed at first that he was rather lucky. The stretch of water he fell into was heavily guarded by dozens of soldiers in patrol boats and watchtowers.

But no attempt was made by any East German official to rescue the child. Though it's arguable that the guards simply failed to notice the boy, they also refused to assist a West German rescue effort—even going so far as to train their guns on the firemen conducting the search. Four more children died in a similar way before an agreement was reached that put safety precautions in place.

Historical Witness



Bernd Lünser was a twenty-two-year-old student from one of Berlin's universities. When the wall went up, he was left stranded and unable to reach his place of study. Eager to continue on his academic path, Bernd planned to scale a rooftop and then use a clothes line to descend into West Germany.

But his plan was foiled by a group of guards. Bernd, struggling with the men, called for West Germans to aid him in some way; his compatriots quickly responded by creating a makeshift net for Bernd to leap into. Tragically, the struggle caused Bernd to miss his jump by a few feet, and he was killed instantly.

Historical Witness

Christoph Naumann

Age 19 on November 9, 1989

Christoph Naumann knew he wanted to study chemistry at a university but could not stomach the mandatory military service for a regime he loathed. So in August 1989, just weeks before the start of the protests that would eventually bring down the wall, Naumann decided to escape by traveling to Hungary and then walking over the border to Yugoslavia. Border guards were suspicious of young men traveling alone—many had tried escaping the GDR in this way—so Naumann's sister went with him on the train to Hungary, though in a different coach, hiding in her underwear the 40 Deutschmarks in cash that would start his new life in the West. Naumann also had help from a train conductor, who smuggled his academic records across the border. Some 20 years after he escaped from the GDR, during which he worked or studied as a chemist in France, Canada, England, and Australia, Naumann moved back to Berlin. He now lives a short walk from the Bornholmer Bridge, a former crossing between East and West, where the first crowds crossed to the West on November 9, 1989.

Historical Witness

Regine Hildebrandt learned about the Wall going up on August 13, 1961 when she was on holiday in Dresden. To get an idea of the situation, she hitchhiked back to Berlin. Since she lived on the street, she was able to get through the blockade on Bernauer Strasse and even attended the baptism ceremony of her godson on the west side of the city the next day. At that time it was still possible to access Bernauer Strasse from the border houses. Then she returned to Dresden to continue her vacation. When she returned home at the end of August, she was greeted by a walled-off city. The family no longer lived in their ground floor apartment. They had been forced to move to the first floor of the building at Bernauer Strasse no. 10. The front doors of the border houses had been blocked off and the ground floor apartments were evacuated. The buildings could only be exited through the back courtyards and were heavily guarded. But this situation did not last long either: A number of residents climbed out their windows and slid down ropes to the west side or they jumped into the rescue nets that the West Berlin fire department held ready. To put a stop to these escapes, the East German company militias evacuated all the border houses in September 1961. More than 2,000 residents lost their apartments and were forced to leave the familiar surroundings in which they lived.



Historical Witness

The Strelzyks built a hot air balloon out of scraps of cloth and a foot powered sewing machine. But things weren't all smooth sailing. The first attempt the balloon couldn't even get off the ground. On the second attempt the wind changed directions and took them deeper into East Berlin. But on September 16, 1979 the third time was the charm literally sailing them and another family over the wall into West Germany. Their story was made into a 1982 Disney film called *Night Crossing*.

Historical Witness

In the early days of 1961, the wall was built up against an existing house or building. Many East Germans snuck past the police and made their way out second and third story windows that had not been boarded up (yet). Using an mattress or rope they climbed to freedom. Often a passing West Berliner would help them get down.

Sometimes the West Berlin firefighters would be waiting. Again the police put an end to this by boarding up all windows and eventually demolishing any building close enough to the wall to escape from. The government even went so far as to ban the sale of rope strong enough to hold the weight of a person! Of course, climbing from a window was dangerous work. You could be pulled back in or shot by the Vopos (border police) patrolling nearby. If the Vopos didn't do you in the fall just might. This is what happened to Ida Siekmann who became the wall's first casualty when she died from injuries after jumping from a third story window.



Historical Witness

Our favorite escape story is about a group of young people who literally drove out to freedom. Their plan was to disguise themselves as soviet army personnel and simply drive through a checkpoint. After stealing a soviet-car and putting stolen military plates on it further added to the ruse by putting maps and other "official looking papers" on the dashboard. To make themselves look like Soviet officers they sewed cardboard stars onto their raincoats. When the three young men (with a women hidden under a blanket) drove up to the checkpoint they were waved through by the border guards, no questions asked!

