

The Tunnel - Tunnel 29 Part 1

It all began with a knock at the door. Joachim, a 22-year-old engineering student, was in his room at university in West Berlin. He had been studying there for a few months, spending his free time taking photographs, or going to jazz nights.

At his door were two Italian students he knew in passing who had come to ask for his help. They needed to get some friends out of East Berlin and they wanted to do this by digging a tunnel.

This was October 1961, just two months after the Berlin Wall had gone up. It was built by the East German government to stop the flood of people leaving the communist dictatorship for a better life in the West. But what was so extraordinary about it was the speed with which it had been built.

Tens of thousands of East German soldiers had gone into the streets of East Berlin in the dead of night, stringing barbed wire from posts and making concrete barricades. By the next morning, this barrier cut through the whole city, snaking through parks, playgrounds, cemeteries and squares.

Although the wall had been hastily put together (and wasn't as tall or as heavily guarded as it would later become) it changed the city overnight.

When people woke up on 13 August 1961, they suddenly found themselves on one side of it. Wives were cut off from their husbands, brothers from their sisters. There were even stories of newborn babies in the West now separated from their mothers.

Life before the wall had been tough enough - people were fed up with the poor living conditions and the Soviet tanks that showed up every time protesters went out onto the streets. But now, with the wall, the government was displaying its desire for even greater control.

And so the very day the barrier was erected, the escapes began. Some people just jumped over the barbed wire, others were more inventive, like the couple who swam across the River Spree pushing their three-year-old daughter in front of them in a bathtub.

Even East German soldiers and border guards were among those trying to get out.

Then there were the people who sneaked into houses next to the wall, and threw themselves out of the windows, hoping that firemen on the other side would catch them.

Joachim himself had crawled through a field in the middle of the night, making it into the West just as the sun rose. "I didn't want to be part of this new world," he says now. "A world where you couldn't say or think what you want."

Now he was in West Berlin, making a new life for himself. But here were these two students, asking him to tunnel back into the country he'd only just escaped from. He could be thrown in prison, even killed.

Despite this, he found himself agreeing to help them.