

The Death Strip - Tunnel 29 Part 5 What is the atmosphere? How did they feel?

By the end of June 1962, the students had dug around 50m - almost all the way to the border. They'd been digging for 38 days, eight hours a day. With the NBC money, they had bought new tools - enabling them to recruit more people to dig - and bought steel to make a rail line for the cart.

The tunnel was soon looking pretty hi-tech, with Joachim its chief inventor. He strung up electric lights, attached a motor to the rails so the cart full of earth would whizz along faster, and he taped hundreds of stove pipes together to bring in fresh air from the outside. Filming all of these contraptions were two Bavarian brothers.

There is no sound in the NBC footage because the tunnel was too small for a tape recorder. On one occasion when they were able to bring down a microphone, you can hear a tram, a bus, and footsteps. "It was incredible," says Joachim. "You could hear everything."

But as they dug further into the East, the sounds above the tunnellers disappeared. Now they were right under the "death strip", a section of land next to the wall, patrolled by armed border guards who were on the look-out for tunnels.

Theirs wasn't the first tunnel to be dug under the wall. There had been others, but most had failed. Only a few weeks earlier, border guards had caught two men digging - shots were fired and one was killed, the other badly injured. "The border guards had special listening devices that they'd put on the ground," says Joachim. "If they heard something, they'd dig a hole and fire a gun into it or throw in dynamite. So as we dug, we knew that at any time, the ground above our heads could suddenly be ripped open."

Sometimes they could even hear the guards talking. "And we knew that if we could hear them, there was a chance they could hear us. So we couldn't talk anymore when we were in the tunnel."

Fans had to be switched off, which meant it was hard to breathe at the front of the tunnel. All they could hear was the wind and the sound of their own breathing. "Then there were the sounds that you could never work out," says Joachim. "Was it the Stasi? Were they coming for us?"

One evening, Joachim was digging when he heard a dripping noise. The tunnel had a leak. Within a few hours, water was flowing in. The tunnellers realised a pipe must have burst, and they knew that if the water kept coming, they'd lose the tunnel.