was a "concrete solution," the building of the Berlin Wall in August of 1961.

The uprising in East Germany in June of 1953 was the first of its kind in the Eastern Bloc. It foreshadowed the revolt in Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland in1980–81. It was also the only uprising in the DDR until November 1989, when the Wall came down and the East German State collapsed.

THE BERLIN WALL[4]

At the end of 1960 and the beginning of 1961 the gap between the economic development and standard of living in the East and that of the West had become overwhelming. More and more people decided to take the plunge and escape from East Germany even if it meant that they had to leave most of their belongings behind and start over. They brought nothing with them except their determination and ability.

Crossing the border from East to West Germany was becoming increasingly difficult and dangerous. The former "green" border had transformed into an "iron" border. Stretching for hundreds of miles from the Baltic Sea to the Czechoslovakian border, the East German regime had built an almost impregnable barrier of barbed wire. It was a no-man's land controlled by police with watchdogs, minefields with self-shooting devices, and watchtowers every few hundred meters with police manning search lights and machine guns. The border between East and West Germany became one of the most impenetrable

4 After I finished this chapter I read a new book by the British historian Frederick Taylor, "The Berlin Wall – A World Divided, 1961 – 1989, Harper Collins Publishers, 2006. It describes in great detail based on meticulous research the background and events surrounding the building of the Berlin Wall.

sections of the "Iron Curtain" which Churchill, with great vision, had predicted in his famous speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri in March of 1946.

The only hole in this iron curtain was Berlin, located smack in the middle of East Germany. Though the government of the DDR had declared East Berlin as their capital, the whole of Berlin was still formally under Allied control with the Soviets controlling the Eastern sector and the three western allies controlling the American, British and French sectors. This meant that traffic within Berlin was still fairly unrestricted. So East Berliners took the city train or subway to Zoo station and walked to the Kurfürstendamm to have their coffee and cake at the famous Cafe Kranzler. This was an expensive luxury because they had to pay in West-mark. West Berliners went in the opposite direction to enjoy Russian caviar with vodka in some of the noble restaurants in East Berlin, which was less expensive when paid with cheap Ost-mark. Needless to say, this traffic back and forth was a thorn in the side of the East German authorities. West Berlin provided too glittering and tempting a window to the Western life style. Attempts to control the traffic by having police patrol the city trains, buses and subways were not very successful. People became very imaginative in fooling the police. This was especially true for people who lived in East Berlin and wanted to store as many of their possessions as possible

with family and friends in West Berlin before leaving for good. Men were wrapping carpets around their bodies under overcoats and women put the table silver in their underwear.

I had an amusing experience which I am sure was very serious for the people involved. On a ride on the Berlin S-Bahn, as the city trains are called, two young men entered the car in which I was sitting at the Alexanderplatz station with a Singer sewing machine under their arm. All passengers watched with great fascination as they chained the machine to an iron bench, snapped a strong padlock around it and left our car at the next station to move forward to another car. At Friedrichstrasse station, the last station in the East, the train stopped as usual for a few minutes longer to allow the police to walk through the train. When they came to our car they stopped and asked who owned the sewing machine. We all shrugged our shoulders. Two policemen tried unsuccessfully to remove it. Since the train had to leave to keep to a certain schedule they gave up and left the car swearing loudly. Sure enough at Lehrter Bahnhof, the first station in the West, the two men came back to our car. One of them gave the machine a friendly slap and said, "Well, here you are", took the key out of his pocket, unlocked the chain, and took the Singer machine. The two left with it under their arms and with wide grins.

We all smiled, admiring the imagination and spirit of the Berliners.

The people who came across to West Berlin usually went straight to a so-called receiving camp ("Aufnahmelager") where they were registered and interviewed. Because of the limited capacity of these camps the majority of the refugees were soon flown to West Germany. The flights by allied air carriers, Pan Am, British Airways and Air France, went through the three air corridors to Frankfurt, Hamburg, Duesseldorf and Cologne. After arrival in West Germany the lucky ones went straight to family and friends or, if they had nobody in the West, to another camp until they found work and a place to live.

In the summer of 1961 the flow of refugees increased to a flood. On the ninth of August the West Berlin camps registered 1926 persons, the highest number of refugees ever received on a single day. (Wolf, p. 128) Two of them were my sister and her husband. Less than a week later the Wall went up. The story of their escape is one of many thousands.

My sister Gisela and her husband Karl, called Charlie by everybody, lived in a nice little apartment in Erfurt, not far from Apolda, where our parents lived. Charlie was originally from Cologne. His uncle was a teacher at the famous music school in Weimar. He invited

Charlie to study there. Obviously the politics of the East German regime were of no concern to these two musicians. They only lived for their music. While studying in Weimar Charlie met my sister. They fell in love and married. But Charlie was soon confronted with a brutal reality. Being a resident of the DDR and having married one of their citizens he was treated like any other young man and was drafted into the East German "peoples" army. He rose quickly to the rank of major in the music corps. At this time it dawned on the young couple that this was not the life they had dreamed of and decided to flee. In the summer of 1961 they booked a vacation at the Baltic Sea. All the trains from Erfurt to the Baltic went through East Berlin. On their way police on the train checked them, but they could show their registration forms for the hotel on the East German coast and a check of their suitcases revealed only holiday dresses and bathing suits, so they were allowed to proceed. When the train stopped at the East Berlin station they simply left and took the S-Bahn to West Berlin.

The most critical moment occurred at Friedrichstrasse station where the police went through the cars. My brother-in-law had the nerve to take out one of his music scripts and write some notes. The police briefly looked at him and left him alone. Shortly after this incident, they arrived in West Berlin and were free. Only then did it sink in what they had done and what danger they had faced. If they had been caught,

Charlie would have been treated as a deserter from the East German army and if not shot, surely would have faced many years in prison.

They were extremely lucky. Charlie's parents had deposited money in West Berlin, so they bought two tickets to Cologne and after a short flight were united with his parents. My parents did not know about their plans, which was good because the police interrogated my mother and father and they could truthfully state that they knew nothing. Though it was very bitter for them to be left behind they were glad that both of their children lived in freedom. It took another ten years to get my parents out. When my father turned 65 years old and became eligible to receive a state pension, the government permitted my parents to move to West Germany to get rid of "social ballast." What an irony this was because this was the same government that claimed to head up the first German "worker and peasant state," caring only for the welfare of its people. In contrast, the West German State took responsibility for the obligations of the whole of Germany and thus provided social security for all Germans. This allowed my parents to enjoy their retirement in freedom in the West. They moved close to my sister in a suburb of Cologne.

Only four days after my sister's escape, the Berlin Wall went up and the last hole in the Iron Curtain was closed. East Germany had become a big prison for more than sixteen million people. The erection of

the wall came as a complete surprise, not only to the public but also, as later historical sources revealed, to most politicians in East and West. I remember the day vividly.

The thirteenth of August was a Sunday, the day after my thirty-first birthday. I lived at this time in southern Germany in a suburb of Stuttgart. The morning news on the radio brought some initial reports. I switched on the television where I saw the most amazing pictures taken from the other side of the border by Western camera crews. East German police were rolling out barbed wire, some of them jumping over the wire to freedom in the last moment, people were using blankets to rope out of windows of houses standing directly on the border and others were handing their children over to West Berliners before they jumped. Most people stood silently on both sides staring in disbelief at what was happening. Many of them had been living on opposite sides of the same street for many years as neighbors, or members of the same family, parents and children, brothers and sisters who suddenly found themselves separated by a wall.

The shocking effect was probably triggered by the enormity of this undertaking. It was hard to imagine that a city the size of Berlin could be divided by a solid wall. Could an average American ever visualize a wall going through Chicago? That is exactly what happened in Berlin. Since the territory of the DDR surrounded West Berlin, the Wall had to be extended

beyond the city, eventually going around the whole perimeter of West Berlin.

At the beginning, the Wall consisted mainly of barbed wire and stretches of empty houses standing directly on the border with their windows blocked by concrete. But the East German authorities did not waste much time before fortifying the wall. After a few months, with typical German perfection it was transformed into a solid concrete structure several meters high with watchtowers every few hundred meters stretching for miles through and around the city. One had to see it to believe it. Millions of tons of concrete and iron must have gone into the Berlin Wall. One has to imagine the tremendous cost, not only to build it but also to maintain it. This was in addition to the cost of maintaining a fortified long border in the west. The burden on the East German economy must have been enormous.

The cost of maintaining fortified borders to keep their own people inside came on top of heavy reparation payments to the Soviet Union, the maintenance of a colossal state apparatus of government and economic planning bureaucracies, police, secret service, and a standing army whose size was way out of proportion to the size of the country and its economy. Although the East German regime tried to justify the erection of the wall as a protection against infiltration of fascists and saboteurs from the outside, the people in the west called it a "wall of shame." Historical sources

show that the only purpose of the wall was to stop citizens leaving the DDR. Actually, during the summer of 1961, Ulbricht was in close secret negotiations with the Soviet government on this issue. He repeatedly pointed out that the stability of the DDR could not be guaranteed without some drastic action. It was Khrushchev who personally gave Ulbricht permission to build the wall. Formally the member states of the Warsaw pact requested the government of the DDR to establish an effective control of her borders, so Ulbricht could claim that he did not act alone but in concert with the orders of the Warsaw pact.

After some official notes of protestation the Western governments reacted with relief. President Kennedy was on a sailing trip. After sending his obligatory protest note he continued his trip. When General Clay, whom Kennedy had sent to Berlin at the height of the Berlin crisis, tried to show some muscle by sending tanks to Checkpoint Charlie he was recalled.

Any hope by the East Germans that the western allies would intervene and stop this brutal act of further limiting their freedom proved unfounded, as was the case in 1953 during the 17th of June uprising and 1956 in Hungary. What happened in all those instances was clearly within the boundaries of the Eastern Bloc and did not infringe on the rights of the West. The building of the wall actually stabilized the situation by

guaranteeing that the freedom of West Berlin in 1961 was accepted. The three essentials for West Berlin, presence of western allies, free entry, and guarantee of the viability of the city, were preserved.

After the Wall went up, the last hole in the iron curtain was closed and escape from the East became almost impossible and extremely dangerous. Many were killed trying to climb over the Wall or swimming the river Spree. The many crosses along the locations where the Wall originally stood bear witness to this. Still, the thirst for freedom could not be quenched. A private museum near Checkpoint Charlie vividly demonstrates the imaginative ways of escape, including the Western rock musician on concert tour in the East who used the space of his huge loudspeaker equipment to smuggle his East German fiancé out. There were also the families who flew across the border on a self-made hot air balloon in the middle of the night; an adventure so daring that it was ultimately depicted in a movie. There were the professional tunnel builders. Organizations sprung up which made digging of tunnels from West to East Berlin their enterprise. The price for an East German to escape through one of these tunnels ranged from 20.000 to over 100.000 West-mark depending on the importance of the person. Relatives or friends in the West, and sometimes, humanitarian organizations or churches, usually paid the price. The East German police discovered many of these tunnels so it became dangerous to use them.

The tunnel companies were not deterred however; they just built new ones.

Recently, I met a young woman in Berlin who originally came from Rostock, an eastern seaport on the Baltic. Ann was eighteen in 1989 and determined to get out. Hungary was part of the Eastern Bloc and a popular vacation place for East Germans. She had booked a vacation spot in Southern Hungary near the border to Yugoslavia. There the river Danube formed the border between the two countries. The Yugoslavian authorities had the policy of not returning refugees, and although Ann knew that she might be imprisoned she decided to risk it. Growing up by the sea she was always a good swimmer. One night she wrapped her passport and what little money she had in a plastic bag to hide under her swimming cap and with only a bathing suit and a tee shirt swam across the Danube. Strong currents and tricky whirlpools made this a dangerous undertaking, but she was strong and landed safely on the other side. Shortly after arriving on shore, she was picked up by Yugoslavian border police and thrown into prison because she had entered the country illegally. She did not regard this as particular hardship. She felt very lucky to be alive, especially after she met a young girl from Rumania who shared the same cell and told the story of her escape.

She was part of a group of four friends who tried to cross the Danube. While in the middle of the river they were discovered and shot at. Only this one girl

arrived at the other side. She did not know what happened to her three friends and was afraid that they were killed. After several weeks in jail Ann was released and hitchhiked to West Germany. As it turned out only a few months later her escape would have been much simpler to achieve.

The Wall came down as suddenly as it went up. Many had paid with their lives attempting to escape, many very young. The Wall came down the night of November 9, 1989. I watched the dramatic event on television in my U.S. home in Connecticut. I had seen the Wall go up. I never dreamt of seeing it come down in my lifetime.

Things began to happen at incredible speed. The first free elections in East Germany took place in March of 1990, the currency union on July 2 and the reunification of Germany on October 3. Surprisingly, people took all of this pretty well. They took it as a given, almost seeming as if the past had been wiped out. People behaved as if they had always lived in a unified Germany, where they could travel freely between the East and the West. I, however, have not forgotten the past. I have not forgotten the time when I traveled from West Germany, through the East German corridor, to West Berlin with my newborn son. I stopped for a few minutes at a hidden parking place where my parents, who at that time still lived

in East Germany, hoped for a glimpse of their new grandson.

There is another night to be remembered, a night fifty-two years earlier, the infamous Kristallnacht of November 9, 1938, when the intense persecution of the Jewish population of Germany began. Stormtroopers, the hated SA and SS of the Nazi Regime, walked through the streets of Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden and other German cities, smashing the windows of stores owned by Jews. The glass was shattered all over the streets, the sounds of which were heard all over the world but not yet clearly. Many German people obviously closed their eyes and ears. They did not want to hear or see what was happening when the biggest crime in history started, the killing of six million Jewish people. We German people will always have to live with the shame of this crime, and we must do everything to stand up and do our best in world history to make sure that it never happens again! But history goes on.

When I switched on the television on the night of November 9, 1990, I saw a report of the Gorbachev visit to Bonn. Helmut Kohl and Michael Gorbachev signed a historic agreement between the Soviet Union and the newly united Germany to guarantee peace and also to give economic support to the USSR. It looked like a meeting between two old friends and it was hard to believe that only a short time ago we