

## The Tunnel

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### Description

In this 1962 NBC News documentary, a group of West Berlin students dig a secret tunnel under the Berlin Wall into communist East Berlin in order to rescue 59 friends and family members. Produced by Reuven Frank as an NBC News White Paper, "The Tunnel" was originally scheduled to air on October 31, 1962, but NBC postponed the program until December 10 due to the Cuban Missile Crisis. The documentary would go on to win three 1962-1963 Emmy Awards, including "The Program of the Year," the first and only documentary ever to win that honor.

### Keywords

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### CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE

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## Transcript

The Tunnel

PIERS ANDERTON, anchor:

That is number seven Schönholzer Straße, a narrow tenement one-city block inside communist East Berlin. On Friday, September 14, 1962, twenty-six people walked by twos and threes down this street and through this door. Some had come two hundred miles. All were strangers to this place. They came here past the barriers of the forbidden zone and passed the armed People's policemen on patrol and on post. Across the vacant lot, they could see the Berlin Wall. They went quietly down these cellar stairs by ladder down a shaft and stood fifteen feet below the surface of Schönholzer Straße. There was a tunnel there, less than three-feet wide and three-feet high. Through this, they crawled--twenty-one adults and five children--one hundred and forty yards to West Berlin, and a free future. Some of the children had to be carried.

I'm Piers Anderton, NBC News, Berlin. And this is the story of those people and that tunnel.

This was the tunnel when it was finished. And this was how it began. In April 1962, three West Berlin University students toured the wall between East and West Berlin. The border is backed by a death strip, and by People's policemen, the VoPos, who shoot to kill. Along this border, as they re-enact here, the three students searched for just the right spot. They were going to build an escape tunnel.

To live in West Berlin means to live always in the presence of menace. It dominates the newspapers, the radio, the most casual conversation. For those who live or work near the wall or just walk by, it is right there--and the armed men, the watch towers, the tank traps, the cleared zones, the forbidden zones, the death zones.

If you live in Berlin, you stop thinking about it until you decide to act. Then each communist gun seems pointed at you, each policeman looking over the wall is looking at you, each stone is meant to keep you out, each strand of barbed wire to catch you and hold you. For prison, as many have been in prison perhaps, for death, as many have died.

These young men lived in West Berlin. Their decision to penetrate the communist East with an escape tunnel may have been foolhardy, but it was made with full knowledge of the price if they were caught. Their three days of driving included the old parliament building, the rebuilt Reichstag, with its back directly on the border; and the Brandenburg Gate, once the main crossing point between East and West Berlin, but walled up since the communists shut the border in August 1961--the typical tourist stops. These three young men were not tourists. They had seen the wall many times. This time, they were planning the most daring refugee rescue operation in Berlin's history. Its daring began with its location. They wanted an obvious, busy border point. They gambled that the communists would never expect such bravado. It was to be a classic trick- concealing something in an open place.

The leader was the tall, dark, and handsome one- an Italian, an art student. His name, Luigi Spina. The shortest of the trio was also Italian, Domenico Sesta, Spina's follower, his Sancho Panza. They had met seven years before at high school in Gorizia near Venice, and had pooled their money to go to college in Germany. Sesta for civil engineering, Spina for art. They roomed together at West Berlin's Technical University. In the next room lived the third youth, Wolf Schroedtere, who was reputed to know something of tunnels. They sought him out. The two Italians felt they needed a German partner. Together, the three of them picked five sites. Then, the open-air tours stopped and the secret planning went indoors. The sure hand of draftsman drew five rings on a map of Berlin. At one of these locations, they would dig their tunnel.

They had prepared an operations manual suitable for all locations. They checked the five sites against these standards they had set. Each had its assets and debits. One was too open on the eastern side. Any refugees could be seen when they came to escape. Another was too open on the western side. Hauling in tons of building materials would be too obvious. No location was perfect. But the best was deep in a cellar under one of West Berlin's busiest and best-known streets.

On the night of May 9, 1962, a half hour before midnight, the tunnel started. The concrete was chipped away by hand. In three nights, the shaft was dug down fifteen feet. And they went back to their drawing board to plan the tunnel itself. They had begged and borrowed confidential charts of the public utilities from friends in the city government. The water lines were only seven feet below the street, but this busy street also had streetcar lines, which made for added stresses. They worked out engineering equations for driving deep under all of these, and deep into East Berlin.

A triangle, they decided, would be the best shape. The great depth was vital. Most dangerous was the digging right underneath the Forbidden Zone, with its constant VoPo patrols. Most delicate was the

location of the waterlines. All through that spring and summer, their lives would be balanced between brutal hand labor and precise planning; and even more delicately balanced between the work and the nightmare. Communist police might suddenly tear open a hole overhead and fire. It had happened in other tunnels.

At first, the digging drove swiftly through Berlin's sandy soil. They could even use an electric drill during the first hundred feet, until they neared the border. Then the communist guards were exactly overhead.

Some nights, the diggers in the tunnel could hear them talking. The noisy drill was put aside.

Here the re-enactment ends. From this point, all pictures were made as they happened. The first week, they had only eight workers and dug only at night. On May 19th, they set up three shifts around-the-clock. Three men to an eight-hour shift- one on his back digging, two pulling the cart holding twenty-five pounds of dirt eight-feet up out of the hole and pushing it to one of the seven empty rooms in the cellar; from six in the morning to two in the afternoon, from two to ten at night, and through the night to six in the morning.

The smell inside the earth itself is like no other smell. Not like a forest or a field or a river or wet rock. Not like the smell of anything outside. It is a wet, old smell. A smell of undisturbed centuries. A smell of forever passed and forever to come.

Eight young men dug endlessly in that deep earth, dumped endlessly in that damp cellar.

Now, it was nearing the end of May, the first month; and violence was increasing along the border overhead. On May 23rd, for the first time, a VoPo was shot to death by West Berlin Police. He had machine-gunned a fourteen-year-old refugee swimming across the border canal. There was no reaction in the tunnel. "That shooting is above ground," they said, "We are not." Already, they were losing that sense of unity between what they were doing and what was happening above them. The problems of digging were so absorbing, they tended to blot out the dangers. Then suddenly they would be jolted back to the fact that incidents along the wall and the escape tunnel they were digging underneath, were parts of a single story. There was a third Italian, Orlando Casola, silent, undemonstrative, never replying when they teased him for wearing sunglasses in the cellar. He worked along with them from the beginning through to the end.

Above them, Bernauer Straße. The building they were digging from was a factory, one of West Berlin's half-ruins damaged by World War II bombings, but still used; used in fact for the manufacture of plastic swizzle sticks for cocktails. This window was directly above the tunnel opening. It fronted on Bernauer Straße, one of West Berlin's best-known streets. Bernauer Straße is famous among tourists and television audiences because the eastern sidewalk is still West Berlin. East Berlin starts at the building line on the right. In this street, which is barely a mile long, the communist authorities evacuated two thousand people and bricked up fifty doorways and thirteen hundred windows. The western side is the main street of West Berlin's principal working-class district Wedding. On a Sunday morning, the factory workers who lived hereabouts are out in force and leisure, crowding the western sidewalk.

But the eastern sidewalk is blighted by the wall. The grass rose among the cobbles because no one from the neighborhood walks here, even on Sunday. Tourists walk anywhere and buy anything. Their favorite souvenirs- pictures of Bernauer Straße, before and after the Wall. Bernauer Straße was the center of labor

union and Left Wing activity in pre-war Berlin. It is documented that Hitler never ventured on Bernauer Straße in fear of those who live there. After the communist took over East Berlin, the street became a frontier and a center of anti-communism. With the Wall, Bernauer Straße became better known around the world than some national capitals. Tourists from Asia, Africa, the Americas were encouraged to come see the Wall and its subsidiaries.

The triangular tank traps. The concrete barriers, so no truck could get running room to smash through. The wooden screens saw that East and West Berliners could not even wave to each other.

Beyond all these, East Berlin. In that communist capital on a Sunday morning that summer, leisure time was spent standing in line. One line in front of a food shop for rationed meat and potatoes. Another line in front of the post office for packages of food and clothing from relatives in West Germany. The life you saw when you looked into the East was not only a life of poverty, but it was lived without grace. It seemed to be life only as a function. And on the West side, the pathetic public promise- "There is only one Berlin."

Underneath, they were laying five tons of steel rail to guide the cart. By now, the clay and sand and stones hauled from the tunnel totaled hundreds of tons, one cart load at a time. The one in front was known only as Der Kliener, the little one. He was large and muscular, but baby-faced. That is Spina behind it.

Although the young men mechanized their equipment more and more, their basic machine was the human hand. At least now, there were more hands, more volunteers. After the university examinations, they had twenty-one workers in two twelve-hour shifts. The work moved forward. They were into East Berlin by the end of May.

Up to this one, all escape tunnels had been crude boroughs, running a few feet below the surface and only a few feet across the border, mostly at lonely points. Any refugees had to come close to the border, close to the VoPos patrolling every foot of the Forbidden Zone along the Wall, and checking every passerby. These students determined to build the most carefully engineered tunnel their special training could provide. This one was fifteen-feet underground with electric wiring, wooden floors and ceilings, and supporting timbers.

There was even a telephone; the only private telephone they pointed out between East and West Berlin. The tunnel was a difficult place to record sounds. Besides the diggers, there was room for the cameraman if he lay on his back and pointed the camera forward. There was room for the man to hold the lights if he lay on his stomach. So they were head-to-head and light and camera were together. But there was rarely room for the sound recorder, and never for a third man to run it. So very few sounds were recorded, but among them were these- the sound of the tunnel itself, a streetcar running along Bernauer Straße, fifteen feet straight up, the tourist buses. You could tell the difference between a man's footsteps and a woman's. If they could hear sounds made fifteen feet above, could the VoPos hear sounds fifteen feet below? The VoPos, they knew, had listening devices. Picture of a man going to work. Each foot closer to their goal brought them one foot nearer to the danger of capture. They could not know who waited for them at the other end. One big tunnel attempt had come up into the arms of communist police. There were arrests, short trials, long prison terms. By June 6th, they were digging under the Death Zone, which stretches back from the border.

They had bought more machinery. The cellar, empty, and dead for years, acquired daily the facts of their life- steel rails, lengths of pipe, quick success machinery which didn't work, and wood. Wooden supports for every foot of the tunnel. They bought and loaded and fetched and secretly unloaded twenty tons of wood, each piece to be sawed and fitted to hold up the tunnel lest it collapse, burying them in the depths under the city.

What was it all for, the digging and the dangers? For the two Italian students, it was immediately for this family. For Peter Schmidt, an art student, who lived here in East Berlin with his mother and his wife and eighteen-month-old daughter. Spina and Sesta had known Peter at school before the Wall ended his studies in West Berlin. Sesta took these pictures. They were all especially dear to Sesta, an orphan, who had known little family life of his own. Peter was half Spanish. He had lived in Italy and spoke Italian. The wall sealed Peter and his family into the functional, graceless life of communism. Peter told the Italians, we have no future here. And that in fact is why the tunnel under Bernauer Straße was born. As engineering students, they wanted to build the best tunnel and the longest. So long, that about halfway in, the air grew bad and digging impossible. They bought a compressor, installed pipes, and blew in air from the street outside. They connected a hundred and sixty sections of pipe, each three-feet long and each costing two Marks. The ventilation pipe moved into East Berlin--in step with the digging, the steel rail, the board floor, and especially the wooden support system.

Western air blew under the wall into East Berlin. Every six feet, they planted two uprights and across them, a shaped four-by-four which held up the wooden ceiling. Later on, when they struck crumbly soil, the supports were put closer together. The early triangular shape was abandoned after thirty-five yards. It took too long to fill in between the wood and the earth, which pressed down with the force of fifty pounds per square inch. So they built the tunnel square.

The man digging at the tunnel face was always first, behind him every foot of the way, two men placing uprights and cross beams. The tunnel was now eighty yards long, forty yards inside communist territory. Sesta and Orlando are seen on shift, installing timbers. Twenty tons of wood and each board must be hauled into the tunnel on the cart.

Each upright must be fitted into the walls of the tunnel. Each four-by-four must be jacked into place by hand. For the digger who was digging in front of the supports, and for the two men who were setting the supports, there was always the chance of being buried in the collapsing earth. But that spring and summer, as all other escape methods grew more dangerous, tunnels emerged as the surest method.

In the year following the Wall, more than forty died escaping from East Germany--on the sidewalks, in the sewers, in the tunnels, in the canals, in the barbed wire. A year before, right after the border was closed, the easiest escape route was jumping from a roof or window. Rough memorials on the eastern sidewalk of Bernauer Straße mark four of these who died.

Ida Siekmann, fifty-nine, leaped in her desperation from a fourth-floor window before West Berlin fireman could spread the safety net. Six weeks later, a case of murder. Two young East Berliners were waiting for the net at the edge of a roof. It was night. As the communist police advanced across the roof, one of the young men jumped. He was blinded by searchlights and missed the net. The other was seized and beaten to death. The one who jumped was Bernd Lünser. Olga Segler, eighty-one, jumped from her

third-floor apartment. She died four days later. Her daughter and grandchild remembered the first anniversary of her death. Rolf Urban helped his wife and cousin escape down a rope, then he jumped. He died a month later.

And so on this street where the wall separated the congregation from their church, the living from their buried dead, twenty-one young men gave their summer to build a tunnel.

It was a cold, rainy summer all over Europe, the worst in years. Very bad for the beach resorts. And June was the cruelest month. The cold rain beat on Berlin two days out of three. Sparing neither the just, nor the VoPos. Seeping into the soaked earth, the ground relaxed, settled; and a crushing weight fell on the waterlines below the surface and on the tunnel supports below the waterlines.

On June 21st, Secretary of State Dean Rusk toured Bernauer Straße and announced the Wall must go. Fifteen-feet below, two young Italians contemplated a flood. Shoes and supports disintegrated. They had been digging six weeks.

They bought a hand-pump and hundred yards of hose. Sesta did most of the pumping. Half a pint at a stroke, they pumped eight thousand gallons in one week. But the tunnel would not dry. The water was coming in faster than they could push it out.

They bored a hole in the city pipe running through the cellar and pumped into that, impudently draining their overflow into East Berlin. Back at the technical university, some friends in a laboratory analyzed the flood as rainwater. But after a week of pumping, it had to be a break in a water main. Through their own channels, they let the West Berlin Water Department know that a main under Bernauer Straße was broken. It took time and ingenuity to get action without revealing the tunnel.

Meanwhile, for three weeks, there was only pumping in the tunnel. No digging. Mud everywhere, like war. Fungus and rot from wet clothes, like war. Above the cellar, the room they had rented as a front--research work they had said--became the drying room for their work clothes. The room had its own outside door, but they dare not be seen going in and out in muddy clothes. So they made their own entrance from the cellar where the tunnel started.

Then one morning, a city work crew appeared on Bernauer Straße to repair the main. Their message had seeped through without giving them away. The flood stopped.

During the three weeks they lost to the flood, they had electrified more of their equipment. For one thing, they installed an electric motor to haul dirt. Most of the improvements were installed and improvised by Der Kliener, who was an advanced student of electrical engineering. But the tunnel was no place for a specialist. As soon as the flood receded, Der Kliener was back digging.

Tunnels are romantic, hauling dirt is not. Most tunnel romances ignore what happens to the dirt. Those digging real tunnels must face the problem. Those digging secret tunnels must not only haul out the dirt but hide it or it will give them away. They hauled out the dirt, but they kept it in the cellar.

By now, the tunnel was one hundred yards long. By now, dirt filled four rooms in that cellar. On July 14th, the day the tunnel was dried and they started digging again. Spina, the leader, was rushed to the hospital to have his appendix taken out. For most of the remaining weeks, he could not dig. Sesta visited him in the hospital every day.

This day, Sesta also went to visit Peter Schmidt's family in East Berlin. He passed through Checkpoint

Charlie on Friedrichstraße, the crossing point for foreigners. The first guard of VoPos carelessly waved him into the customs shack when he showed his Italian passport.

These are his own home movies of the one-hour ride on the East Berlin elevated railway. It is forbidden to film here. He got off at Wilhelmshagen, a suburb clear across East Berlin. Peter was at work, but his wife Evelina was home with the baby.

Then Sesta checked the church near the border where the refugees were to assemble the night of the escape, the night the tunnel would be finished. Like all escape organizations, this one would send its contact couriers into East Berlin to round up the refugees, lead them to the place of assembly, then guide them to the mouth of the tunnel.

Sesta returned through the checkpoint, satisfied that all was in order. He went first to see Spina in the hospital. But all was in disorder. Spina told him that one of their co-workers had been captured helping out on another tunnel. That tunnel had been betrayed. They must assume he would be made to tell a few facts he knew about the tunnel under Bernauer Straße. The VoPos would learn where in East Berlin it was to break through. A new rendezvous and a new breakthrough point must be planned. The church was out. The news of the betrayal of the other tunnel forced the diggers to recognize the world outside. Their problems up to August had been internal. They have not forgotten why they were digging, but it had moved to the back of their minds. Now it had to come to the front. There had been problems with air supply, with hauling dirt, with the flood, with boredom, with fatigue, with lagging spirits. Now as they had at the beginning, they thought again about communist police, about capture, about prison, about death. That tunnel had been betrayed. This one could be. They began to watch each other.

Spina came out of the hospital early in August. He could not dig yet, so he spliced wire. The tunnel was now a sophisticated installation.

Constantly, as they took out more dirt, they brought in more electricity. The work picked up a steady rhythm. Then a second flood, far worse than the first; again a water main. But this time, no chance of repairs because they were far inside East Berlin. They bought an electric pump, primed it, and pumped out forty thousand gallons.

The water washed away floorboards and twisted the track. Only the pump worked now, night and day. Sandwiches were soggy as they waited. Some slept the schedule away. The neatly arranged duty roster hung limply on the wall.

Hasso Herschel used his time wisely. He studied for his driving licence. Orlando just sat, silent as always. Sesta, the fun-loving rover. He was happier than the rest of them and easier to talk to. But he was in many ways the new European youth. He was an orphan. When he was six months old, his father died fighting for Franco in Spain. His mother died soon after. He had, he said, no use for governments--capitalist governments, communist governments, any governments. People had to do things for themselves. He said politics is a game between capitalism and communism. The man in the street wins nothing in this game. He doesn't think of Adenauer but of where his mother or his wife is.

Sesta said I saw and heard what happened after the communists closed the border. I saw women in East Berlin weeping because their husbands are in the West, and they will live forever without them. The East German rulers are swine, not because they are communists, but because they keep people living frightful

lives. People should live in happiness he said with good eating and loving, not by an idiotic theory of a future one hundred years from now. I must help my friends like Peter and his family. Friendship is not just sitting and talking and drinking coffee. One must act to help friends and to help anyone whose freedom has been stolen. We must give the East German government no rest he said no peace. They should know that there are simple people who want to do something against inhumanity. That is what Sesta said while waiting for the tunnel to dry.

On August 17th, Peter Fechter, an eighteen-year-old East Berliner, was killed by the VoPos. They shot him down at the wall while he tried to escape. And they left him gasping away his life with little cries for help. No government helped him. The diggers were upset by Fechter's death and posted his pictures. The water stopped suddenly, at least for a while. They never knew why. And suddenly the pump caught up and the tunnel cleared and dried.

This digger, the man with the beard, Hasso Herschel, was a refugee himself. He had fled East Germany after four and a half years in a communist prison. Now, he wrenched the clay out of a tunnel's face with a spade, twisting to fill the cart in a space three-feet-by-three-feet, barely roomier than a coffin. He was working to rescue his sister who lived in Dresden with her husband and baby.

Ten thousand cubic feet of dirt filled all the seven rooms and half the hallway. The rooms had to be boarded up like coal bins, and there was barely width to pass.

On Thursday, September 13th, they made their last inspection. Now all was as planned, except for that final breakthrough into the cellar. And then, who knew? In August, the builders of still another tunnel had broken through into a cellar and looked up into the eyes and gun barrels of communist police. Some were killed and some were captured. Those men were friends of these men.

Their target was across the Schönholzer Straße at number seven. The breakthrough must be made just before the refugees assembled at the new rendezvous point. That was planned for six o'clock in the evening of Friday, September 14th. And so they waited for a night and a day. Afternoon on Friday, Sesta's fiancée, a twenty-two-year-old secretary, boarded the elevated railway and rode to East Berlin to several rendezvous with refugees. She was to collect them in a bar near the border and lead them to number seven Schönholzer Straße.

As the train crossed over the border canal into East Berlin, she did not know that most of the other couriers would miss their assignments and that she would have to bring almost all of the refugees to the tunnel herself.

While the evening shift of the VoPos guarded the Forbidden Zone, the breakthrough was being made just across and under the street from that fence in the cellar of number seven. Again, the students chipped through concrete, as they had when they started. Five of them came up into the cellar of this building, carrying submachine guns. Twelve were posted at intervals in the tunnel to hurry the refugees along, to pass babies from hand to hand and to fight a retreating battle if the VoPos came down the eastern end. Five-thirty PM. Two VoPos walked past, one casually glancing in the shrapnel-pitted doorway of number seven. In ten minutes, the first of the refugees would come. They would come through in this order- first, Peter's wife and baby and mother; and then Peter would come through; and behind him, Hasso Herschel's sister and her family.

Only the faces of those who clearly consented are shown on this film. Others were edited out or where this was not possible blacked out.

It took twelve minutes to crawl through the tunnel, eight minutes for the younger refugees. Their torn and soaked knees steamed in the warm cellar. The students had provided heaters--electric, of course.

It was dark enough for the first group to leave the cellar and go into the city into West Berlin. It was dark also on Schönholzer Straße, but more refugees would escape this night.

To escape through a tunnel is as risky as to build one. What lies ahead is unknown. The couriers were strangers. The rendezvous could have been a trap. Death was not the greatest danger. Prison camps can be worse. Not all came. These came. These are ordinary people, not trained or accustomed to risk. What must they be leaving to risk this?

One of the diggers watched his daughter come through and then his wife. He had escaped from East Germany the year before. His wife had spent ten months in a communist prison for trying to follow him and their second child was born in jail. Tonight for the first time, he held his baby.

The party, four days later, was not a complete success. Most of those who escaped had gone on immediately to West Germany. The diggers had split into factions, and one faction would not come. They were the ones whose friends and relatives could not make it before the tunnel flooded and had to be closed. They had argued bitterly that it should be pumped out, but that was impossible. Those who came to the party alternated between gloom and raucousness.

In all during that weekend, fifty-nine people came through, the last thirty-one on Sunday, crawling in water over their faces. Finally, the rising waters reached the roof and the tunnel was closed. The Berlin Wall was then thirteen months old. During each of those thirteen months, a remarkable average of one thousand people who escaped somehow from communist East Germany, despite the dangers of death or prison for rescuers and rescued alike. Among the thousands who fled that thirteenth month were the fifty-nine who entered the tunnel at number seven Schönholzer Straße. If East Berlin maintained its water lines better, if the tunnel had not filled with water, more dozens, perhaps hundreds of people might have been rescued. That was what the young men had hoped. Twenty-one of them gave half a year of their lives to dig this tunnel. But there will be other young men and other tunnels.

Peter Schmidt, the first man rescued, was a showoff. Or perhaps he could express emotion only by clowning. He burlesqued his way through a serenade to Sesta and Spina, the friends who had saved him. (Peter Schmidt singing)