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Escape From Berlin

*Reviewed by Theodore A. Borrillo**

KEMP, Anthony, ESCAPE FROM BERLIN, Boxtree Limited, London, England. (1987); Price 9.95 British Pounds, ISBN 1-85283-202-9, 173 pp.

This past summer I visited the Berlin wall and experienced the stark reality of its presence.

The total circumference of the wall that encircles West Berlin is 167.5 kilometers, and consists mostly of reinforced concrete, while at distant locations there is a mesh fence. There is a death strip between the outer and inner walls in which there are 295 watchtowers manned by soldiers of the DDR, anti-tank obstacles and anti-vehicle ditches to prevent attempts to crash through the wall, bunkers, floodlights, trip wires to release flares, dog runs and patrol roads.

The wall even cuts through the beautiful Havel river near the Glieniker Bridge to Potsdam, where one can view the omnipotent presence of the Soviet Union, with its flag flying over the military encampment on the other side of the bridge.

One may imagine that West Berliners are walled in, but that is not really the case as they may leave any time. It is their compatriots on the other side who are imprisoned and whose escape to the West has meant death. Hundreds more have been wounded and literally thousands have been caught and imprisoned.

Anthony Kemp's book deals with the history of escapes carried out by East Germans either over the border into West Berlin or into other countries. It is the story of courage and bravery and of the grim reality that "peace" and "freedom" for many are empty promises. While the wall abounds with the graffiti one customarily sees on New York subway trains, it is also sprinkled with words that echo the tragic history of Berlin. Along the wall are crosses erected for those who died in search of freedom.

Anthony Kemp has a journalistic free-flowing style of writing, enticing and easy to follow. Kemp acknowledges the cooperation of many individuals and organizations "for opening my eyes to the realities," including information from sources he does not feel free to identify. Many of the

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source materials obtained for the book came from interviews of those who succeeded to freedom and from materials and instruments and objects actually used to escape that are displayed at the museum at Checkpoint Charlie. Kemp did not have the cooperation, however, of various officials of the German Democratic Republic he invited to participate in his information gathering, presumably because "their hands were tied from above." In that sense, Kemp explains, the book may appear to be somewhat one-sided in its viewpoints.

On August 12, 1961, the Berlin wall was erected practically overnight notwithstanding earlier representations by Walter Ulbricht, the Party Secretary of the DDR,¹ that "nobody has any intention of building a wall."² While Berlin slept, families were divided, loving couples were separated and an entire community was disrupted. Prior to the wall, in excess of 50,000 East Berliners crossed into the West for work. Now, along the wired-off frontier, the small businesses that had lived off trade with East Berlin waited for customers who never came. Many pondered the impact of the world and the response of West Berlin and the free world, most of all, America.

In Theodore Sorenson's book on *Kennedy*, his chapter on "The Berlin Crisis" makes clear that Kennedy was willing to risk nuclear war to maintain three basic American objectives: "(1) the freedom of the people of West Berlin to choose their own system; (2) the presence of Western troops as long as the people required and desired them; and (3) unimpeded access from the West to the city across the East German *Auto-bahn*, air lanes and canals."³ Khrushchev's efforts to exclude allied powers from West Berlin were not successful, but the wall remained as a fact of life.

While many were disappointed that the wall was not destroyed by the West, its presence rapidly unified the trust between America and other members of the free world, particularly West Germany. While the wall has succeeded in confining East Berliners, its presence to thousands

1. Deutsche Demokratische Republik (German Democratic Republic). One of the old jokes in West Germany is that the DDR (East Germany) is neither German nor Democratic nor a Republic, which to a large extent is true. KEMP, *ESCAPE FROM BERLIN* 2 (1987).

Walter Ulbricht had been a long time member of the German Communist Party. "Ulbricht's long years in office - he dominated the affairs of East Germany from 1949 to 1971, longer than any German statesman since Bismarck - provided the DDR with the kind of political continuity that Adenauer's shorter tenure gave the Federal Republic, without, however, the quick prosperity or the internal stability that were notable in Western Germany." CRAIG, *THE GERMANS* 50-51 (1982).

2. "Between 1949 and early 1961, the exodus (from East to West) averaged 230,000 a year. Seventy-four percent of these refugees were under forty-five, and fifty percent under twenty-five, and they included many specialists whose skills were badly needed in the DDR and some whose loss could hardly be hidden, as when the entire law faculty of the University of Leipzig defected within a year. In August 1961, despite increased vigilance on the part of the police, the number of escapees reached 2000 a day." CRAIG, *supra* note 1, at 52.

3. SORENSON, *KENNEDY* 584 (1965).

of visitors each month to Berlin is the most persuasive reminder that we in America and other parts of the free world truly live in freedom. Glib tour guides in East Berlin would have one believe there are dancing girls in the streets and no unemployment in East Berlin, but they never mention the wall in their "lip service" (rather, they euphemistically refer to "the border").

The present wall is referred to by many as the Fourth Generation Wall. With each ingenious escape described by the author, the wall was improved to overcome the deficiency. The success in strengthening the wall has led to less and less successful escapes.

In many instances, the border of East Berlin was adjacent to houses where one could leap into West Berlin. Kemp describes an unforgettable scene of a 77-year-old lady hanging out of a window held from above by a member of the Volkspolizei, while below, young Westerners were pulling at her legs. Finally, she dropped into safety and was whisked away to the hospital. Now, those houses and churches that lined the border have been destroyed, removed, and replaced by a death strip of vacant land except for soldiers, dogs and flares.

The courage of others led to their building tunnels for escape, or swimming at great risk across rivers. Rivers are now lined with mines and metal beds with sharp prongs that would severely wound or kill anyone who challenges them by a dive into the water.

Kemp's book contains many photographs showing the devices used to escape, such as vehicles and properties into which individuals were stuffed and brought across the border undetected. Now, mirrors are extended into all portions of vehicles and properties to inspect any suspected areas. Others invented a form of airplane to fly into West Berlin, and the success of which had to be achieved without the benefit of prior field tests. Others created a clothesline that could be propelled over the wall and a chute that quickly hoisted a family across the wall.

In another instance, a woman tailored a Soviet military uniform for an East Berliner to wear through the border into West Berlin with a mere salute.

A master escape planner from West Berlin is Wolf Quasner. Escapes planned and engineered by Wolf Quasner are as mindful and interesting as those in a Frederick Forsyth novel. Quasner's list of accomplishments include forgeries, disguises and doubles. One of his early coups was carried out at the time of the Pope's first visit to Poland in 1979. When the Pope's entourage left, it included three extra priests and two nuns - all East Germans and all in appropriate clerical garb. Kemp states that "forgery" with flare and imagination is Quasner's specialty. In this regard, Kemp writes as follows:

[Quasner] set up a complete organization to copy and reproduce genuine passports, and to manufacture the necessary stamps, visas and other papers. As an example of his cheek, he even concocted a passport from a country that did not exist except in his imagination. It is

perfect, complete inside with a signed declaration from the "President of the Peoples' Revolutionary Council" and an impressive gold embossed coat of arms on the front.⁴

Kemp devotes a chapter of his book to Wolfgang Fuchs, a living legend of West Berlin. A conservative estimate of the number of refugees he helped escape to freedom would put the total number over 500. He was nicknamed "Tunnel Fuchs."

In 1961, Wolfgang Fuchs was a young political idealist who, like many Germans, was anti-Communist. Many of his friends from the East attended universities in the West. One day, there were empty seats in the lecture halls, and messages for help passed through the wall. Fuchs became the focus of student groups.

Fuchs was initially interested in the sewer system which ran under the wall at several places. Unfortunately, about the time Fuchs was ready to utilize the system for escape purposes, the East Germans fitted solid metal grilles across the tunnels and keyed them to sensitive alarms.

Fuchs next considered digging tunnels under the wall to freedom. Through friends, Fuchs gained access to cellars of homes in the West close to the wall. Fuchs then dug tunnels to cellars in homes in the Western Zone. During 1963 and 1964, Wolfgang Fuchs built seven tunnels under the wall, with each new tunnel an improvement over the last. The early tunnels were twenty to thirty meters in length, and by the end of the period the length had increased to 130 meters, with the tunnels benefiting from electric lighting, artificial ventilation and timber for shoring the walls.

The last tunnel was known as "Tunnel 57", because on the nights of October 3-4, 1964, fifty-seven people were brought through to freedom. On October 5, 1964, the tunnel was discovered and it effectively ended Fuch's tunnel building activities. East Germans began demolishing the rows of houses adjacent to the border to create a wide death strip and prohibited zone. Patrols by armed personnel were increased along the wall and, with this, tunnel building became a difficult and unsafe route to freedom.

Today, Wolfgang Fuchs is the proprietor of two drug stores in a shopping area of Berlin. Fuchs expressed hope to Kemp that one day "the Wall would be demolished by a gradual thaw in East-West rigidity and drew a parallel between the Berlin problem and the situation in Alsace-Lorraine today. That bitterly fought over territory, for centuries the bone of contention between European powers is now at peace. Its peoples can speak either French or German and move easily across the borders."⁵

As security tightened along the border, the early idealists who sought freedom with the same courage as wartime resistance fighters, became

4. KEMP, *supra* note 1, at 108.

5. *Id.* at 82.

less and less. Kemp describes the "escape industry" created by professionals who trafficked in human beings. Organized criminal elements exploited the desperate human need to be free. Often, the goods were not delivered. For many, bungled attempts at freedom led to years of confinement in East German prisons for "attempting to flee the republic."

The future of West Berlin and the free world is unknown. The significance of Berlin, however, to the free world was poignantly described by President Kennedy outside the platform of the City Hall of Berlin on June 26, 1963, when he delivered one of his most inspiring talks.

Two thousand years ago the proudest boast was "Civis Romanus sum." Today, in the world of freedom, the proudest boast is "Ich bin ein Berliner."

There are many people in the world who do not understand, or say they don't, what is the greatest issue between the free world and the Communist world. Let them come to Berlin. There are some who say that Communism is the wave of the future. Let them come to Berlin. And there are even a few who say that it is true that Communism is an evil system, but it permits us to make economic progress. "Lasst sie nach Berlin kommen."

Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put up a wall to keep our people in. . . .

We . . . look forward to that day when this city will be joined as one - and this country, and this great continent of Europe - in peaceful and hopeful globe. When that day finally comes, as it will, the people of West Berlin can take sober satisfaction in the fact that they were in the front line for almost two decades.

All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words "Ich bin ein Berliner."

Those words of President Kennedy take on an even deeper meaning as the shadow of time falls on the 751st anniversary of Berlin. When one stands at the foot of the wall, fortified now more than ever before, looking across that no-man's land, the Brandenburg Gate stands alone and ignored as a monumental reminder of the Berlin of yesterdays.

