

Report on a Successful Flight to the West via an Underground Tunnel (May 19, 1962)

Abstract

West Berliners were heartened by accounts of unique and successful flight attempts such as the one described below. East Germans used ingenious methods to escape, digging tunnels under the Wall, ramming reinforced vehicles through border crossings, swimming across lakes or rivers with the help of diving equipment, or flying across the border in homemade hot air balloons.

Source

“We Couldn’t Go on Like That Any Longer!”

The Flight of the Septuagenarians

Of all the daring undertakings through which people from the [Soviet] Zone and East Berlin have managed to escape to freedom time and again, despite all the barriers and the violent measures of Soviet zonal authorities, this must be among the most astonishing: through arduous work, twelve elderly people managed to dig a tunnel under the zonal border in the northern section of Berlin and fled through it to West Berlin. The group was led by an 81-year-old man from Glienicke; he owned a piece of land and his own hauling company there. Most of the other men involved are about 70 years old. A 16-year-old boy joined the group only on the last day.

It is truly indicative of conditions in the Zone State that even elderly people, whose material livelihood is assured and who have been inwardly rooted in their immediate surroundings for decades, decide to flee. Anyone who knows what it means for a family like that of refugee Max Th. to leave the business they owned for forty-one years, their house and garden, and risk their lives, can appreciate the kind of pressure that people in Ulbricht’s SED-state are living under. Yesterday, the refugees were introduced at a press conference hosted by the Berlin [Political] Prisoners’ Circles; when the 81-year-old Th. was asked why he took upon himself the hardship and the danger of the flight, he replied, “Because we wanted to get to freedom. We couldn’t go on like that any longer. I don’t even want to be buried over there when I die.”

The tunnel that the seven men, four women, and 16-year-old boy climbed out of on May 5 in Frohnau, on this side of Oranienburger Chaussee, which forms the zonal border there, was discovered five days after the escape by the “People’s Police.” The home of Max Th., in whose henhouse the tunnel began, is now occupied by the People’s Police. According to the escapees and the Berlin Prisoners’ Circles, reports on the circumstances of the escape represent no danger to others.

The refugees reported that they worked on the tunnel for sixteen days. The two 70-year-old men removed almost 4,000 pails of dirt and carried them to a shed 80 feet away; all the while, Max Th. pretended to be working in the garden and warned the workers whenever a People’s Police patrol approached. Since a border patrol passed the house on Oranienburger Chaussee about every fifteen minutes, work had to be constantly interrupted. Nevertheless, according to their reports, the families were in very high spirits. The women described how they brought their husbands beer and cooked for them. There was never any “moment of crisis” in which they wanted to abandon their efforts.

The entrance to another tunnel through which 28 people successfully fled to the West in January was

only four houses down from Max Th.'s house. At the time, the elderly people who knew of the escape plan were left behind because it was feared that they would be a hindrance.

The twelve elderly people completed their work with particular thoroughness. They created a passageway through which they could walk almost completely upright: at some points it was 1.75 meters high. It was 32 meters long. When asked why they built the tunnel so high, which made their work so much harder, they gave an astonishing answer: "We and our wives wanted to walk comfortably and unbowed into freedom."

Source: C. Gennrich, "‘Es ging so nicht mehr weiter!’ Die Flucht der Siebzigjährigen," *Tagesspiegel*, May 19, 1962.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: Report on a Successful Flight to the West via an Underground Tunnel (May 19, 1962), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-827>> [January 16, 2025].