

Flight to the West

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(Editor's note: The original of this article was commissioned by NATO in July 1961 but was never formally published. NATO offered this to us for publication in response to our call for new material. Working from the draft manuscript and handwritten notes of the author, we have tried to keep the author's original voice intact, especially in his use of idiom. The photos accompanying the text were chosen by the editors and were taken from the authors original set of 716 photos to illustrate the text captions found at the end of the manuscript.)

While during the day Kennedy addressed the American public to explain the problem of Berlin and the Berliners, that same night we go to Berlin to help illustrate for you President Kennedy's speech.

Speaking about Berlin, the President of the United States said: "This is the great testing place of Western courage and will, a focal point where our solemn commitments stretching back over the years since 1945, and Soviet ambitions now meet in basic confrontation.

"I hear it said that West Berlin is militarily untenable. And so was Bastogne. And so, in fact, was Stalingrad. Any dangerous spot is tenable if men - brave men - will make it so."

Responding to the question "what is the problem of Berlin" we compare East and West at the time of Kennedy's speech while both capitals are only a ten-hour flight from each other by regular airlines.

If unrest is certain in West Berlin, do we see people living like they do in almost every capital in the world?

There were people who go out at night to restaurants, they go to the movies.

Whereas, in the East, the city is dead at night, there are no cinemas or restaurants.

We have touched closely upon the most dramatic problem, that of the refugees from the Eastern zone.

We visited Camp Marienfeld with its three or four thousand refugees. We saw young people who still have the hope of their youth, the life of tears for those who have left, and also this small four-year-old refugee who saw a chocolate bar for the first time. (This might seem incredible, yet it is the sad truth)

Finally, we answer the question: "how does one escape from East Berlin" because we had also better count ourselves having been in the Eastern Zone, from which we escaped, like hundreds of oppressed people do every day.

James R. Florent

I have seen the Berliners flee the East and the West

The pot is already boiling and today a new flame has just rekindled in the hearth, which risks exploding the whole thing.

Here in West Berlin, unrest reigns. Those who have something try to sell it cheap because they don't know what fate has in store for them.

Thus I saw the owner of a most luxurious mansion with a garden, swimming pool etc. on the edge of Grunewald, the Bois de Boulogne of West Berlin ask DM 100,000 for a property that was valued at five times as much; and the owner confided in me, "If I get even 80,000 DM I will still consider myself very fortunate and will leave immediately for Munich where I have family."

This is the situation in West Berlin, one price to sell and another to buy. Because a new Berlin Blockade is feared, people don't bother to plan a trip to Eiswerder island in the Havel.

This island could suffice to feed the city (of 3 million people) from 13 to 15 months.

But it's not just food stored in the huge Eiswerder fridges, all kinds of goods are stored and as a TV technician said: "We can work, there are even movies stored on the island"

At the western port, immense piles of coal line the docks and many are the walkers on Sunday coming monitor their provisions, reckoning their volume.

BERLIN PREPARES TO BLOCKADE

When people are asked the question, their opinions are of course divided. Most young people do not believe it, but it must be said that about 70% of the population thinks that the maneuvers of Khrushchev are destined to provoke a blockade as feared, and the grim memory of the Berliners remembers too many years: 1948 "Little by little," a trader said to me, "we sell, we will leave under threat...if the U.S. gives ground? This is what the Russians seek. "

BERLIN, A LOST ISLAND

"It is as if we are on an island surrounded by sharks."

Berliners have a habit of defining their situation in the West. You have to imagine Berlin: an island 70 kilometers wide, made up of 2 districts, and where close to 6 million residents live, lost in the heart of the Soviet sector.

The part of the city comprising East Berlin is made up of 8 neighborhoods where about 1.5 million residents live.

It is now impossible to know the exact number of residents because every day many make it to the West. We think that already a third of the city has crossed the line.

The demoralizing psychological effect of the incessant Soviet guard mounted around the city must contribute to this. The Iron Curtain is more severe around Berlin than in many Eastern bloc countries like Poland or Hungary.

Two divisions of Soviet soldiers, or nearly 200,000 men, mount a tightly vigilant guard over the city and the only point where one can still make a crossing without too much upset is the demarcation line where the famous Brandenburg Gate separates West and East.

A total of 22 divisions and more than 1,200 new tanks can be found in the German Soviet zone.

A corridor of routine communications has been feeding the southwest of the city, following the Hanover route it travels across the Eastern Zone and crosses the city at the Kol. Dreilinden checkpoint.

Of course the route is securely guarded over its entire length and has been carefully prepared for the few tourists who are not given the chance to see anything and have no way of communicating with the people behind the Iron Curtain.

However a certain privileged few who hold passports and special visas have crossed the Soviet zone westward to Hamburg have not gone without being surprised by the deployment of Soviet forces encountered along the way.

Some have told me:

"Out of sight, they are only stereotypical barracks with large movement of men and equipment."

But nowhere was it possible to approach them without being within earshot.

This vast deployment of forces is not done to fix things, it's a bit of a war of attrition, a war of nerves the Soviets are currently waging on the West Berliners and on those in the East who have not accepted the regime.

There is a purely psychological crisis in West Berlin. Morale was very low last week, I have been told by friends in Berlin even the taxi drivers who are famous for their good mood were gloomy and have made it clear to me that it is but a test.

Everyone has been very afraid of the May 3 Memorandum from Khrushchev to Kennedy, and lives in fear that a peace treaty will be signed with East Germany.

This is the sword of Damocles the Russians have hung over Berlin.

Indeed, if a peace treaty was signed between the Russians and East Germany the international peace would find itself seriously threatened, the West against the German Democratic Republic, which brutally broke the regime established by the Quadripartite Agreements in 1945.

These agreements recognize the right of access to Berlin from the west. If they should revisit this issue, it would lead to new negotiations with the Russians.

But the West refuses such negotiations, which would be recognition of East Germany.

People pass the time as you can in Berlin, on the lakes, in the Grunewald Forest or on the Kurfurstenstraße (the Champs Elysees), meanwhile the speech of Khrushchev to the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party must take place in mid-October.

Here, people firmly believe that the Berlin crisis may be negotiated in the fall of 1961 after Khrushchev's speech, but at this point we should wait and see.

WEST BERLIN EAST BERLIN

All these problems do not stop Berliners from going out and living normally.

I speak of course of West Berlin, a huge, vibrant city with its great main road, Kurfurstenstraße, comparable in breadth and luxury of its stores to our Champs Elysees.

It is the center of the western city and if we continue over another four to five kilometers, we come to the famous Brandenburg Gate, edge of the Soviet zone, the deserted district of East Berlin.

I think we can certainly compare Berlin to Moscow, but in any case one cannot do the same between West Berlin and East Berlin.

I believe that there is nowhere in the world a sadder, drier town, with people who seem so afflicted that one must have pity for East Berlin.

One gets the impression that the large stores built by the Russians are not quite built as shops, some forced on sterile soil and numerous piles of rubble, others not able to put a note of gaiety in this grim setting.

On both sides, there is a central avenue that is essentially the main road in the city.

To the west is the Kurfurstenstraße, about five to six kilometers long, with shops where you can find everything, cafes, restaurants that are always full, and especially at night, its extraordinary illumination that makes it compare to Broadway.

All this is flooded a teeming crowd, eager to live, who make purchases, go to the movies, to the theater and to concerts, and can afford once a week in one of the best restaurants in the am Zoo area, where dinner costs about 16 DM.

In the East the same road which is located in line with the first is the Stalinallee, the former Frankfurterstraße.

All along it are only dull gray administrative buildings and few stores in which there is nothing, or goods of such poor quality that East Berliners prefer to shop for western goods.

From time to time a large white building stands like a domino contrasting strangely with the Prussian style of its neighbors, on its front two letters, HO, meaning Handelsorganisation (town organization) who tells me that this is an Eastern store.

Of course housewives abandon the famous HO where there is not much and everything is more expensive than elsewhere: if you are lucky enough to find a pound of butter it costs something like five DM this turns out to be a little more than five hundred old francs at home. A pair of nylon stockings cost about 12 DM.

Housewives more often make it a joke: we will do our shopping in the Wedding HO.

The Wedding is a heavy mercantile district of West Berlin bordering the Eastern Zone.

Crossing the area inside of Berlin without making too much trouble and I have also seen a woman from the East in a western store to buy a pair of shoes ask that they give her a single bag so that she could come back more easily twice without being noticed.

This is an example to illustrate how the regime seen by the Kremlin as socialist is imposed on westerners.

It is like this throughout the Eastern Zone outside Berlin. There are few professionals and all workers belong to the State. Farms have been nationalized and peasants work for the state from 8 am to 6 pm without worrying about cultivation or if the harvest will be good.

We must also say that he barely earns the equivalent of 45 NFs (new Francs) per month and the rest of his time including Saturday and Sunday is reserved for military training until the age of 35 years, politics (the battle groups), the preparation of the collective farms and if need be "help out" in a group of urban dwellings.

As one realizes, the life of a citizen of the East is busy. He has little or no time to spend with his family.

The peasant problem is very important in East Germany because there is almost no one to work the land.

A peasant earning seven units per day of this sum must save a unit for the collective farm. A unit is worth one mark.

If everything is limited in East Germany, such that one cannot find butter, potatoes, garlic etc. and lines in the stores are endless, a woman told me that she once waited six hours for three bananas costing 1.50 NFs each, however there are pineapple and paprika coming from Cuba for free.

It is true that East Germany has given ten million dollars to Cuba for its redevelopment plan.

Of course in every system and in every society there are those who are disgruntled, but here it does not seem so. It just seems that discontent has given way to indifference, which is worse.

While for some the socialist regimes from Moscow have done well, I would not wish to fail to mention here the small sample of the employee, chief of staff at Zeiss factory in Jena.

The testimony of this man is trustworthy. He is forty-five years old and has worked for twenty five years at Zeiss factories where he is still chief of staff.

This man told me, "You have also traveled from West to East. Look, one day I received seven boys and I had part of a team working at the plant.

Of the seven, three looked adventuresome, and I think they were here because they had done some bad things on the other side. The other four did not seem to be coming so much out of political conviction, at least three out of the four because one of them seemed to me to be here to "see."

Well, after three months two of the seven returned from whence they came, and one of them did not even last a week! "

But the same story of this simple man who was a great boss is quite moving.

A hard worker, one night when he left his office he was contacted by one of the members of the party who had been told that there was that night a meeting of the battle group, always consisting of "volunteers" and who would be happy to have him.

This man did not reply to the invitation. After several months of incessant remarks about his lack of participation in the political life of the country, he was told one day that he would no longer be chief of staff but should be working on political investigations of the plant, and thus he would have been demoted to being a simple worker if on his vacation time he hadn't taken the opportunity to slip out to the Western Zone.

EASTERN ZONE ESSENTIALLY AGRICULTURAL

The peasants of Saxony, of Brandenburg, of Thuringia, the banks of the Elbe are certainly the most unfortunate of the Soviet bloc.

They were forced to "voluntarily" collectivize into an LPG (agricultural production cooperative).

Apart from some model farms, LPG are directed by incapable officials. Farmers see their fields fall fallow, crops diminish, livestock reduced in performance and buildings decay.

Agricultural machinery which are available to production cooperatives are refused to the individual farmer. If he keeps a machine for himself, it serves as an obscure pretext for police checks without a single chance for recovery thereafter.

The same awaits the individual farmer who is quickly forced to collectivize at the LPG.

This is the same constraint that the state places upon even independent artisans.

It could declare: From today there are no more artisans, no more professionals, no more independent peasants; everything is nationalized, nobody has the strength to oppose it.

Gone are the days when pitchforks or flails could be used as arms of insurrection.

The memory of the Hungarian revolution is still too fresh in minds. Everyone said, "What good is a new Budapest?"

Here, the red power is overwhelming, the cost for her is not in expropriation, it is in men.

REFUGEES-

THEY CAME TO MARRY IN THE WEST

There are three refugee camps in West Berlin: Marienfeld, Giessen and Uelzen.

It was in the camp of Marienfeld that I met this young couple, with their moving story.

These are two young engaged persons. He is a skilled worker on electronic machine, and is called Helmut. She is hairdresser in a nationalized store, and is called Isolde.

Strangely enough, they are both 21 years old--they were born at a time such that they have never known the war, but it has now brought them to this refugee camp with nothing but a small luggage bag.

They have also profited from the holiday period to escape Dresden about 250 kilometers from Berlin.

And their escape is a true atonement in four days. To avoid being accused of deserting the Republic during identity checks on trains, common in Berlin, they left without luggage, and they stayed in a small group, but they were forced to maintain a certain gap between movements.

Whenever they saw the People's Police, they left the train for the station and waited for the next favorable time for their departure.

Their savings are only 660 DM, and wish to make it to Cologne where they have family, and intend to marry.

Even the inhabitants of border regions usually prefer to go through Berlin to escape the East because, since the leaders insisted on the Pankow "border" demarcation line in 1952 and have fortified about 1500 km by barbed wire and watchtowers, escape across the "green" border means the danger of death.

When I asked Helmut the reasons for his departure he did not say he fled the regime, because here people are wary of everyone, even journalists-- they are French, there are spies everywhere, and it seems that they go and it seems that they swarm around the camps.

He answered me:

"I earned 450 DM a month and Isolde 200 DM, I think we can do better. And we want to get married here.

What was I doing? Oh, always the same work on electronic machines in a shop. Until 7:00, and then I would go to the meetings of the people's militia.

Saturdays and Sundays I worked at the collective farm because a new law requires us to work on the land.

Saturday and Sunday are not paid.

Yes, Isolde and I each have a small apartment. "

Here, the look of the young man escapes me and is lost in the distance. He sees all the familiar things to which he may never return. He has left everything for a new life in the West where everything is new.

And the young man continues while his companion put her face in her hands so as not to hear.

"Our furniture will be sold and our homes will also be sold or given to a staffer."

But here, despite the discomfort of the camp they feel free. I offered a Gauloise to Helmut; he eagerly pulled on his cigarette and said to me with a meager smile

"This is my first day as a free man!"

The uninterrupted flow has also swelled to three million refugees per week, and steadily growing.

Some days 1,500 refugees arrive in Marienfeld and we can say the camp receives an average of about 700 refugees per day.

There they will wait 3, 4, 5 days perhaps in this transit camp for a plane, the plane of freedom, to take them to Cologne, Frankfurt, Munich, or to the United States of America or South America.

All aviation companies in the western world reserve in their departures from Tegel or Tempelhof a number of places for the transport of refugees.

HOW I DID NOT ESCAPE THE EAST

Many people escape from East Berlin to West Berlin but this is not the real problem, because it is relatively easy to cross the Brandenburg Gate that separates the two sectors.

It is much more difficult to cross the green border with barbed wire and watchtowers which separate the eastern sector from the rest of the city.

Yet every day about 1,000 people find a way to cross the dreaded "green border," which is no more nor less than the Iron Curtain, which I have already said is much more terrible in some countries such as Poland and Hungary.

I wondered how people as who are called refugees from the East make their way to the West. I asked in the camps, I was given "tips" and after having tried some, I attempted for three days and nights spent on the border area to find one that worked.

For me the problem was already more complicated because I was first required to go to the East in order to get back out.

HOW I ENTERED THE EAST

Contrary to what one might believe, the operation did not take place at night. No, I left in full day. As a normal traveler, with a string bag and a dozen potatoes in it (all the people who return to the East have a net provision string bag with some potatoes) I left my hotel in the Kurfürstenstraße, at 8:00. I went to the central station at Berlin West BHF ZOO where I bought for 50 Pfs, about five new francs, a ticket for Staaken which is in the far central west of Berlin at the border with the Eastern Zone.

On a Monday, all around me there were, people a lot of people returning to their work, almost no young people.

Workers, of small jobs with little tired clothes, some housewives who alighted from station to station

Many newspapers are unfolded, with headlines about Bizerte as well as Berlin. Little is said in the morning trains and the Germans generally speak very little between them in transit.

Beside me is a girl, blonde, with a chubby face, she is quite pretty.

I purposely let my newspaper fall at her feet and I chat with her. She explains that she works in a garage in Spandau where she works in accounting finance leaving me with no hope of a new encounter.

In front of me, an already old woman watching us, I cannot give her age, perhaps because she is very well dressed with very old clothes that do not lie, next to her on the bench a shopping bag full of vegetables and I'm sure she goes to the East.

Half an hour later, we left my pretty neighbor in Spandau. From there, we cross no man's land flooded with yards of all kinds, coal piles, sand, and brick tiles in uninterrupted succession. At nine o'clock I arrived at Staaken at the limit of the West.

It is a small provincial station with a single employee.

Some people left the train but very few, a dozen in all, each with their perennial shopping bag and with mine and I think I'm not making too bad a figure.

I go slowly like I am going along an old familiar path.

I get about thirty steps which lead me on a road that feels desolate and is the East.

A Bridge cuts it, and the bridge itself is divided in half lengthwise, East and West sides separated by a terminal. It is the same road that extends from the bridge on each end, also defined in the sense of its length by a concrete kiosk a meter high flanked about every hundred meters. This road is unbroken making its way around Berlin with a radius of at least thirty kilometers.

On the bridge I pass the German guard post, there are two soldiers who joke regardless of passersby.

People who cross the bridge before me from the other side of the kiosk, with their shopping bags, they are in the Eastern Zone. They go down a few steps and come to the other side of a similar station to the one I just left. But here, the show is different, this is the Russian zone. I see the green caps of two Russian soldiers who patrol the station. They ask for people's papers, searching bags, I approach the remaining half of the road that still belongs to the west and now I see their guns at their side, they share a joke between them, just like the two German soldiers were.

One of them enters the post, then he returns with a bottle, both drink a sip, then they return to the road where I am, on their chest hangs a pair of Jummelles shoes.

I retreated because I did not want to be noticed. I am in western area, it is true, but I intend to get to the other side and I do not have a visa, there is no question of me taking the train and go past the Russian post.

There are a few houses on either side of the road I stayed along the west side.

I feel I am at the end of a small provincial village and that I am alone in the street.

I walk for another quarter of an hour in western sector, on my left, fields of West Germany are cultivated with people who work in it. On my right, the Eastern Zone with tall grass, which I marked through the barbed wire border.

It is impossible even with a quick jump across the road to find myself on the other side.

I finally arrived at ten o'clock the last houses of the road, after which are fields as far as the eye can see.

On the western border where I now find myself is a bistro. In front there is a Post Office in the Eastern Zone.

While I drink a beer, I see people come out of this post office and cross the barbed wire in an area specially prepared for this purpose.

I think this is the only door that can be found in the line for miles. I do not see guard and wait a moment in case a Russian soldier is hidden there.

Half an hour later I crossed the barbed wire too and I think with my bag of potatoes that my pace does not seem suspicious. Like an ordinary customer I enter the post office and head towards one of the windows in order to buy stamps, but suddenly I remember that I do not have a single Eastern mark. This may be my fatal mistake.

In consulting a directory, I see through the window a garden and a small wood adjacent to the post office.

I turn around, there are three or four customers and behind the wickets two women and a man. No one seems to have noticed me. I leave normally, but instead of heading to the wire, I head around the post office into the woods and in the middle Eastern Zone. The whole operation did not last more ten minutes.

On leaving the woods, I am surprised to find homes. I take a side road that runs along them. In the middle of a small garden a man is building his house. At the end of the buildings is a farm which looks extremely modern, but next to other buildings that are falling apart.

I did not meet anyone on my journey and in the fields that are almost all fallow there are very few laborers.

I hear a sound of an engine, a tractor arrives, it is huge and black whereas at home they are uniformly red. The man who drives it does not seem unhappy, he smiled and wished me hello in passing.

I feel that on this side of the globe some cataclysm drove all human life and above the tractor noise you never hear anything, not even birds.

This silence is a little scary, but it seems there is a little further along huge factories which employ 80 percent of the population, which was forced some time ago to desert the fields and go to the plants to meet the requirements of the 7 year plan provided by the state.

I empty my bag of potatoes in the grass.

Two hours later I returned the item the same way, this time it is much busier, and when I go on my walk, I'm not alone. Others like me have a little bag a little fuller, and head to the train station. I cross the street to the west, past the kiosk that separates the two areas. Like all these people I am a refugee, no one asked me anything and if I wanted I could go directly to Camp Marienfeld I would be sure to find there the faces of hundred people who come to ride with me in the little freedom train to the Staaken station.

Picture captions



1) This is a look at living in West Berlin. The illuminated Kurfürstenstraße makes one think of Broadway.
03034-16, 03034-27





2) Here is a look at dull East Berlin at the end of the Stalin Allee. 03031-01



3) West Berlin cafes are full. 3043-12



4) In East Berlin there are no cafés, but deserted streets that are crisscrossed by the carts from the collective farms. 03033-27



5) Here is a refugee from the east. He has never eaten bananas or chocolate. 03051-09



6) A chocolate bar is a discovery which makes him a little friend in camp. 03051-22



7) At a run, he takes his bar of chocolate. 03051-32



8) The problem of food is paramount in East Berlin, more so than the empty shops.



9) Refugees in Camp Marienfeld. 03049-13, 03049-16





*10) For hours
they will wait
until we
decide their
fate. 03032-
03, 03032-23*



11) *We save what we hold most dear. Here, this young girl has brought her violin.*



12) *Midday soup in the canteen. 03037-04, 03040-32*





13) In recounting her misfortunes this old woman wipes a tear. She told everyone about what she had left behind. 03037-14

14) The Russian memorial at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in East Berlin is the epitome of everything that makes people leave the East. 03035-05





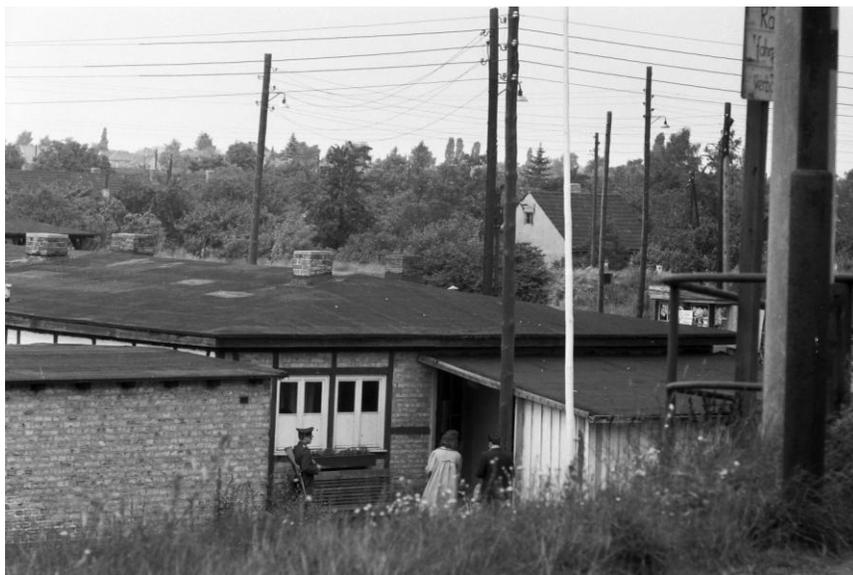
15) In East Berlin a woman came to sell soap bars on the corner of the street. Look at the faces of these people. Never in the West would we see such a picture. 03041-17, 03041-18

16) Unity Bridge, it separates the West from the East. The West Berliners go there for a walk on Sunday. 03031-31, 03047-12





17) Here are three pictures: how we escaped from the East. Here, in front of the two guards is the West, a free country. 03050-11, 03050-07



18) Here is what it takes to pass the guard post, in front of which stands a young Russian soldier. 03044-13



19) Then, it is the plane to freedom.03037-29, 03049-27

