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We Escaped

As bullets sprayed the water about the icy waters of a canal—to freedom

Editors' Note: The wall that seals off East Berlin is effective. Ninety-five percent of the men, women, and children who have tried to escape since it was erected last August have failed. Yet attempts continue. This is the story of a recent—and successful—attempt. Karl Ernst is not the author's real name; that must be withheld to protect relatives still behind the wall.

EAST BERLIN'S wall of shame and tears cannot be imagined. You must see it as I have with border guards patrolling its 28-mile length of ghastly bricks, concrete, and barbed wire.

Only then could you know why escape seems impossible—and only then could you understand the feeling that compels an imprisoned people to try to scale the eight-foot barrier in full view of Communist submarine guns.

My wife Erika and I had talked for years of fleeing to the West. Our apartment was only a few yards from the American sector. We could have walked across the street to freedom at any time. But when the door of escape is open, it is easy to put off such a decision.

Then, in the early-morning hours of Aug. 13, 1961, the door slammed shut.

The evening before, we had been in West Berlin celebrating my wife's birthday with friends. On our way home after midnight, we noticed nothing alarming. Four Vopos (border policemen) were standing around the check point looking bored as usual.

But two hours later Erika and I were startled from our sleep by the ringing of the telephone. A man who worked with me was calling. He said: "Karl, the boss wants you to assign me a car from the motor pool. I have to install a telephone line at the sector border. Do you have any idea why?"

Switching on the radio, I tuned in RIAS (Radio in the American Sector), which we always listened to, and heard the incredible news. By Communist decree, all travel and communication with West Berlin were cut off. East German troops and tanks were stationed at strategic positions to enforce the order, and Soviet tanks and infantry units had ringed the city to discourage an uprising.

Erika and I knew we could postpone our escape no longer. The question now was: how can we get out?

The first thing we did was to send for our seven-year-old daughter Helga, who was staying with her grandparents in the country. Then I took a "vacation" from my job as telephone repairman and began searching for a place along the border where we could escape.

Every day I covered a new district. For weeks I searched for some gap, some rent in a fence, some unpatrolled garden, thick-et, or cemetery. But I found none.

I had almost given up hope of escape when I played my last hunch. Near our apartment there was a large factory compound that bordered the Teltow Canal. The 15-foot-deep waterway forms part of the frontier with the American sector. Although the Communists had strung a barbed-wire fence six feet high along the canal's bank, I still felt it could somehow be used as an escape route.

Dressed in my telephone repairman's uniform and carrying my tool kit, I visited the factory area one morning as if on a routine job. The guard let me enter the grounds without difficulty.

Climbing a staircase in a building that jutted over the canal, I found what I was looking for. It was a window on the water, large enough for a man to squeeze through. Its individual panes were framed by metal bars, but there was a center opening 25 inches wide and 40 inches high which they had forgotten to seal off.

I went home and told Erika that we would try our escape the next day. We would leave everything behind except our life's savings of 800 East German marks (about \$40), which I planned to stuff into a bag and fasten beneath my clothing.

Early the next morning, I left the house alone to avoid arousing suspicion. Later, my wife and daughter followed.

At the factory gate, the guard I had talked to the day before waved me by with a nonchalant good morning. Erika and Helga were following about 75 feet behind me. As they approached the gate, the guard asked Erika where she wanted to go. She told him firmly, "I want to visit the foreman of our street." She aroused no suspicion. Foreman is a Communist weasel word for neighborhood informer.

from East Berlin

them, a family of three swam through

By **KARL ERNST** as told to Helen Zotos



Clutching my child, I leaped into the icy water. Erika came hurtling down after us.

The guard signaled her to go through. I met Erika and Helga at the window. The previous day I had carefully pinpointed its location for my wife on a rough sketch I had drawn.

I was to jump first. Opening the window, I climbed onto the sill. Erika handed me the child.

Helga had been brave so far. But she had never learned to swim, and when she saw the water churning 18 feet below, she began to cry and scream.

AS LONG AS I LIVE I shall never forget clutching my child to my chest and leaping through the air into the freezing water. Erika came hurtling down after us.

Then the worst happened. The three of us had hardly hit the water when machine-gun bullets began slamming into the canal all around us. Helga gripped me so tightly that my body ached. I was almost as terrified as she was, but I kept my eyes fixed on the shore ahead and swam on.

We had agreed that once we started there would be no turning back. We would get through singly if not together. I struggled on through the icy water, dragging Helga under one arm. She grew heavier and heavier each moment. I felt my strength giving way. Fifty yards to freedom seemed an eternity away. But I numbly clawed at the water and somehow inched my way forward.

Suddenly the western shore drew near. Friendly hands and arms came reaching toward Helga and me. "Hurry," voices said, "they are still firing guns over there." With my last ounce of energy, I flung Helga toward our rescuers and then sank back into the water.

Later, in the hospital, I learned that Erika had made it safely, too.

As this is written, Erika, Helga, and I are at Marienfelde, the West Berlin reception center for refugees, waiting to be flown into West Germany. My wife and I are still young enough to start our lives anew and to forget past horrors.

God willing, Helga will forget, too. But right now she is down the hall playing "Flight" with four other refugee children. Two of them are the Vopos, the stairway landing is the border, and beyond that is the West. Whoever is slapped twice on the back by the Vopos is dead. "Flight" is a children's game, 1962-style!



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