

PRISONERS

THERE WERE TWO STRIKING sets of images that the world found itself focusing on, in print or in flickering black and white, during the days that followed the building of the barrier that would become the Berlin Wall.

The first set showed ordered ranks of armed East German soldiers, police and paramilitaries, and barbed wire being rolled out to sever the nerve networks of a great modern city, posts being driven like nails into Berlin's prostrate body: Erich Honecker's 'Operation Rose' in all its totalitarian, machine-like efficiency. The second set was the terrible, messy human side. People fleeing, or trying to flee, as the barrier closed; making dashes towards the Western side, encouraged by watching crowds. Human beings waving, calling, holding up children and pets, making final, vain attempts to get close to people they were beginning to realise they might not see again for years, perhaps for ever. Worst of all, most heart-rending, were the scenes in and around the Bernauer Strasse.

The Bernauer Strasse was in the borough of Wedding, in the French sector. Just. This soon-to-be notorious street began at the Nordbahnhof S-Bahn station and ran north-east from there for about a kilometre and a half until it hit the corner of Eberswalder and Schwedler Strasse, where the Wall turned north along the eastern edge of what for many years had been a busy marshalling yard and was now essentially no man's land between East and West. It formed the near-straight advanced edge of a three or four city-block square area that jutted into the East.

Those who lived in that the area were surrounded on three sides by Communist territory. By a quirk of the settlement that established the district boundaries of Greater Berlin in 1920, the Bernauer Strasse itself was divided between the districts of Wedding and Mitte (Berlin Centre).

Wedding lay in the West, in the French sector, while Mitte was in the East.

For the first three or four hundred metres of the street, coming up from the Nordbahnhof, the border ran along the edge of the cemetery belonging to the Sophienkirche congregation. This was followed by another cemetery, belonging to the Elisabeth-Himmelfahrt (Ascension of Elisabeth) congregation. These two sets of permanent inhabitants might reasonably be expected to have gone beyond caring whether they were Communist or capitalist. But when blocks of nineteenth-century apartments began to line the street on both sides, filled with live human beings, the situation changed. Many, understandably, cared a great deal. The border ran along the southern (in the strictly geographical context, but in the political context 'Eastern') side of the Bernauer Strasse, leaving the buildings on the northern side and the entire roadway as part of West Berlin, but, starting from the thresholds of the buildings on the south side, placing the actual apartment blocks in East Berlin.

Those who lived in West Berlin, directly on the sector border, found their daily routine suddenly devastated. They were used to shopping in the East, the children to going roller-skating after school at the rink in the Gartenstrasse or on Sundays picnicking at the Märchenbrunnen (Fairytale Fountain) in the nearby Friedrichshain Public Park. Even their church, the nineteenth-century Church of the Reconciliation (Versöhnungskirche), was situated in the East, though its front porch opened out on to the West. Until its demolition, the church was doomed to a pathetic non-existence in no man's land.¹

Elke Kielberg, then thirteen, lived on the corner of Hussiten Strasse and Bernauer Strasse (and still does). Her closest playmate – since Elke remained an only child, almost a sister to her – was her cousin, who lived across the street. The closely related families were, of course, constantly in and out of each other's flats.²

The first inkling of catastrophe came at eight o'clock on the morning of Sunday 13 August, when Elke's mother went out to buy a newspaper. She returned to their apartment distraught and outraged: the streets that ran at right-angles to the Bernauer Strasse in the direction of Berlin-Mitte – Ackerstrasse, Gartenstrasse and Strelitzer Strasse – had all been closed off with barbed wire. There were Eastern police with guns blocking

access. Already paramilitary workers seemed busy constructing a more permanent barrier.

The Kielbergs had been planning to drop over to their relatives for coffee later that day, but now those on the southern side of the street, including Elke's cousin and her family, were immured in East Berlin. 'Barbed-Wire Sunday', as Berliners called it, would mark the greatest change in most of these people's lives. Ordinary streets became traps, sometimes death-traps.

This was why, within hours of waking to the new reality of a divided Berlin, many of those trapped in the East made frantic last-minute attempts to make the journey that just hours before would have involved a simple crossing of the street.

The Bernauer Strasse was the scene of people jumping from the windows of apartment blocks, which were part of the East, down into the street, all of which belonged to the West. The *Vopos* and *Grepos*, realising the potential for escapes, had begun entering these buildings. Their ultimate aim was to clear the immediate sector-border area of 'unreliable' elements, but this would take time.

The escapes in the Bernauer Strasse soon turned into a human drama watched by an entire world, which, through the cameras of the press and the recently established television stations, enjoyed a grandstand seat. Crowds, police and fire fighters arrived on the Western side. They shouted encouragement as Easterners hesitated at upstairs windows. Fire fighters extended jumping sheets to break escapers' falls. In one case, as a man slid from a first-floor window, he found himself seized by *Vopos* from inside the room he had just left. Westerners in the street below managed to grab his ankles and pull him down. A tug-of-war ensued. In this case, with gravity on their side, the escaper and his Western helpers won.

Others were not so lucky. A number of would-be escapers died in the hours and days before the buildings were cleared. Ida Siekmann, fifty-nine years old, fell into the West from an upper floor and died,³ as did Rudolf Urban, forty-seven, who suffered terrible damage after a fall from his apartment window. He lingered almost a month in a West Berlin hospital before succumbing to his injuries.⁴ Even after the windows were bricked up, people tried to escape over the apartment-block roofs.

One of the last victims in the Bernauer Strasse was Bernd Lunser, a

Berliner who on 4 October was spotted by *Grepos* as he prepared to abseil from the roof of 44 Bernauer Strasse to the West, using a washing line. East German police rapidly appeared in the building. Lunser was forced to move elsewhere, pursued across the rooftops by the representatives of the Communist state. All the while, he called out for help from the West.

Below, on the street, the fire brigade set up a jump sheet. Several hundred Western onlookers assembled. As the police closed in, Lunser sprang from the roof. He missed the sheet and died on the ground minutes later. He was thirty years old.⁵

There was as yet no 'wall' in place, as it would later be understood, but even the improvised barrier erected during the night of 12/13 August proved surprisingly effective.

The Marienfelde reception centre in West Berlin remained full of refugees, but mostly ones who had arrived before Sunday and were awaiting processing. On Monday, when registration began, several thousand fugitives presented themselves, but they were mostly East Germans who had been visiting West Berlin for the weekend and decided to stay after the border was closed. The same applied to the few hundred who registered on Tuesday.

Twenty-eight escapers, according to official figures, managed to make it over during Sunday night, and forty-one the next. Some swam the Teltow Canal; another, a fifty-year-old railway worker, Alfons Dubinski, managed to sneak through the no man's land covering the remains of Hitler's Reich Chancellery and find his way through the barbed-wire fence of the Ebertstrasse into the Tiergarten and the safety of West Berlin. On Monday night, shots were fired at a couple swimming the as yet sparsely fortified Teltow Canal towards the American sector. No one was hurt, and they had made it safely to the West, but it was a grim warning of what might happen to future would-be escapers.⁶

Again, the East German regime's leaders could congratulate themselves on their success in carrying out their mission with minimum cost. And they did.

The party's official mouthpiece, *Neues Deutschland*, crowed over the triumph that the 'anti-Fascist protection barrier' represented. This was 'a black day for the warmongers . . . the track-switch has been set to peace

. . . the workers' response: production records'. A front page editorial was headlined 'Clear Conditions!' and said of the West Berlin authorities: 'With one stroke it becomes evident how bankrupt is their policy, how hopeless their position.' A crestfallen Brandt, according to a report of his rallying speech to the people of West Berlin, had 'held a funeral oration for the traders in human beings'.⁷

To a young journalist on the paper and convinced Communist, Günter Schabowski, this feeling of triumph was genuine. The regime he supported had won a wonderful victory. It had outwitted the capitalists, and for him and his colleagues this was a 'great day'.⁸

Beneath the façade of self-congratulation, though, the SED state was as insecure and paranoid as ever. The party was never satisfied. It was not enough that the GDR's citizens were quiescent. They had to love the party and everything it did.

Those who could be regarded as not loving the party were both obvious and less obvious. Obvious were the tens of thousands who had previously chosen to work in the West. They were the so-called border-crossers, and the regime had been persecuting them for years with every measure short of an outright ban. Equally obvious were those young East Berliners who had chosen (or their parents had chosen for them) to be educated in the West. Less obvious were those who put on a positive face in the workplace or at compulsory political meetings, but in private complained.

Now that the party had all these people in its clutches, unable to leave via the escape hatch of the open Berlin border, its policy towards all of them could, and would, change.

The former 'border-crossers' were easily dealt with. They were directed to labour exchanges to be found work in East German factories. But their status as doubtful elements would still cost them dear. They were subjected to a policy of discrimination. 'Concentrations' of such people in workplaces were to be avoided. They were not to be employed 'in key positions and especially crucial areas of production'.⁹ By the middle of September, the *Stasi* reported that of 32,000 registered former 'border-crossers', 24,000 had accepted new employment 'within democratic [i.e. East] Berlin'.¹⁰

Significantly, and given the regime's preoccupations unsurprisingly,

all qualified teachers who were resident in the East but had taught in the West were to be barred from the GDR's education system for life.

As for so-called *Weststudenten* ('West-students'), who had chosen to study in West Berlin or West Germany during the time of the open border, they were also to be punished. An element of 'class war' was clearly present in handling those who might be seen as privileged traitors to the 'workers' and peasants' state'. Such college or university students were 'categorically' not to be permitted to finish their studies in the East. Those studying technical subjects were to be directed into jobs in socialist industry where their knowledge might be exploited. They might after a while, with the agreement of their managers, be allowed to return to higher education in the GDR.

Those who had studied what might be called liberal arts subjects were to be treated with special vindictiveness. As the order put it: 'West-students who have been studying a social science subject in West Berlin – including those in their final semester – are to be placed without exception into the production process.'¹¹ In other words, anyone who had studied political subject matter in the West was to be put straight into unskilled factory work.

A thornier problem was that of children and young people from the East who had attended schools in the West before 13 August, and would now have to finish their studies in the GDR. Here, fear of 'contamination' was a major determining factor. If there were concerns about politically tainted border-crossers undermining innocent socialist factories, there were equal worries about these corrupted young people poisoning pure socialist schools. A concentration of 'former West-pupils' in individual classes or schools was 'absolutely to be avoided'. Questions of convenience or proximity to a particular school should not mitigate this policy.

At least most of the younger pupils were to be allowed to continue studying. Things got tougher as the subjects of the rule got older. In the case of 'West-pupils' from the 11th and 12th classes (the last-but-two and penultimate year of high school) they would not be allowed to finish school but would be assigned apprenticeships. No access to university, except in cases where this was considered 'appropriate in the interests of society as a whole' – which would decisively depend on 'the attitude of

parents with regard to our government's measures and their willingness to help educate their children in accordance with our educational laws'.

The price for (possible) educational reprieve for their children was therefore the total, abject conformity of the parents.

West-pupils in the 13th (pre-university) year were, like the errant social-science students, to be tossed straight into the work-force with no chance of higher education.

Although, or perhaps because, the East German regime distrusted the educated middle classes so strongly, the attitude of the intelligentsia, of whatever age, was a matter of intense concern to the authorities.

Papers submitted to the Central Committee included surveys, based on informants' reports, detailing the educated class's concerns. There were doctors complaining about the sudden shortage of Western medicines, and fears that they would no longer be able to treat some private patients along with the state-supported ones. There were actors who considered themselves cut off from their German heritage. There were self-employed members of the middle classes who feared that the government would now clamp down on their independence. 'Why do they ask us now?' one complaint went. 'This business [i.e. the building of the Wall] was a foregone conclusion. There should be consultation and discussion first, to see if we agree. That is democracy.' This view was reported to be 'widespread' in educated circles.¹²

Occasionally criticism went public. At a chemical works in Halle, open dissent was expressed at a meeting to 'discuss' the 13 August border closure. Workers declared that 'the measures were a crime'. The report curtly described the consequences of such frankness: 'Two bandits were consequently arrested'.¹³

Elsewhere, a certain 'colleague Richter' announced that he did not agree with the 'measures', which he said would harm the GDR. His own life, he declared, was in any case already 'ruined' (*verpfuscht*). In this case, the government informant confined himself to enclosing photographs of the 'ruined' man's pleasant apartment and penning a few sarcastic remarks. 'Richter also possesses a Trabant De Luxe automobile,' the report noted, 'a refrigerator, a television set, new furniture for his apartment, and two fat pigs'.¹⁴

The choice of a weekend for the sealing of the border was calculated to

catch the West asleep; but it also aimed at managing the response among the domestic work-force.

In June 1953, during the uprising, workers had downed tools to discuss their grievances, then streamed out of factories and construction sites on to the streets. It had taken Soviet tanks to quell their resistance. The party had learned a bitter lesson. On an August Sunday, it was calculated, those same workers would be with their families, relaxing at home, perhaps visiting their traditional German weekend allotments (*Gartenlauben*), or even off on vacation in the countryside. Much less likelihood of mass meetings and strikes.

By Monday, the East German authorities reasoned, the *fait accompli* would be unassailable. They were right.

Unlike 1953, the government arranged for meetings to be addressed by party officials and agitators, and for discussion to be tolerated. Iron glove in velvet fist. Only critics who went too far, like the fearless workers in Halle, were classified as 'bandits' or 'negative elements'. They were scooped up by the security forces.

There were thousands who did come into that category. Around 1,500 East Germans were arrested for political offences in the first half of 1961. That number increased almost fivefold in the second half to 7,200.¹⁵ As reigns of terror go, it was not comparable to 1953, when the jails had brimmed over, but it was bad enough. Those swept up by this purge entered a world that was little known to outsiders or even most GDR citizens, but that they would, if they survived it, never forget.

The East German gulag.

At the end of that weekend, nineteen-year-old Klaus Schulz-Ladegast returned to the city from his romantic rural interlude. He settled back into the comfortable family home in the inner-city East Berlin district of Mitte.

In the meantime, of course, 'Barbed-Wire Sunday' had intervened and the great world had changed. So had Schulz-Ladegast's smaller personal world, though he did not yet know this. Because he had no overwhelming feelings about the new 'border measures' – the woman he was in love with also lived east of the new barrier – he assumed his life would continue along much the same course. Considering where to study,

meeting his lover and his friends, hanging out in the cafés and bars of the city's historic centre.

It was not to be. Five days later, on Thursday 17 August, they came for him.

A car slid in alongside the kerb as he walked down a quiet suburban street in the August sunshine. Two men got out and he found his way blocked. They asked him to accompany them to 'clear up a matter'. Their polite language belied the firmness with which they took him by the arms and bundled him into the waiting Wartburg. A third man had kept the engine idling while the arrest took place. He now pumped the accelerator and the car took off quickly, rumbling over the cobbled street to God knew where.

Schulz-Ladegast's destination was a place that since the 1950s had been known as the 'forbidden area'. Catching the ordinary tram that started at the Alexanderplatz and trundled eastwards five or so kilometres along the broad boulevard of the Leninallee, the casual traveller would get out at the Gensler Strasse stop. Only when one tried to enter the small maze of streets north of the Leninallee did orientation difficulties begin.

The area was one of mixed residential and light-industrial use in the Hohenschönhausen sub-district of Lichtenberg. This was a busy outer district of East Berlin, yet a substantial part of it appeared on no city guide. Nearby streets were marked, but, on maps printed in East Berlin throughout the GDR's existence, they simply stopped and a blank area was shown. Even on Western maps, there were only vague outlines of buildings, plus a small goods station that had been there since before the war.

On the ground, had our traveller persisted in trying to find his or her way north from the Gensler Strasse tram stop, they would have reached a high wall festooned with warning signs. Had they turned into the Freienwalder Strasse, they would have seen a 'stop' sign, a checkpoint manned by armed guards in the uniform of the East German Ministry of State Security, and a set of high, panelled-steel barriers, blocking further progress along the street. This was the main entrance to the forbidden area.

A section of this industrial area, covering half a square kilometre, had been Jewish-owned before 1933 and was expropriated under the Nazis.

This benefited the expansion of one local 'Aryan' business, a large-scale button factory that flourished on contracts for the *Wehrmacht*. Other favoured companies included the Heikle plant, which manufactured meat-processing machinery, and Asid, a pharmaceutical factory producing vaccination materials. The Nazi welfare organisation, the NSV, built a modern canteen kitchen (*Grossküche*) on the site, capable of providing thousands of meals for the local population under the aegis of the 'Winter Aid Fund'.

These facilities were extensively damaged by Allied air raids. Also affected by bombing were a small punishment camp run by the Gestapo on the Gensler Strasse, where Jews and conscripted workers from Eastern Europe were sent if they failed to fulfil their norms, and a *Wehrmacht*-owned warehouse used to store looted goods from occupied Europe.

On 22 April, the 5th Army of the White Russian Front, under the command of General Bezarin, overran Hohenschönhausen. Huge amounts of warehoused materials, plus most of the equipment from the canteen kitchen, went missing. So far, an average fate for a typical suburban industrial development of that time and place.

The peculiarity of this district, however, was that the Soviet 'People's Commissariat for Interior Affairs' (NKVD), predecessor of the notorious KGB, chose to set up its headquarters precisely here. With the aid of local Communists and other variously motivated informers, the Soviets began to round up those in the locality who had been guilty of supporting Hitler. Especially the bourgeoisie.

On 23 April 1945, eighty-year-old Richard Heikle, owner of the meat-processing machinery factory, was identified to a Soviet patrol and shot dead on the spot, on the corner of Freienwalder Strasse and Gensler Strasse, along with his housekeeper and a family friend.¹⁶ It was the kind of impromptu revenge killing common all over Eastern Germany in those tumultuous weeks, but soon such casual executions would be succeeded by a systematic purge. Richard Heikle junior, son of the dead meat-processing magnate, was arrested and disappeared for ever to a labour camp in the Soviet Union. Several other managers were imprisoned. Soon the NKVD requisitioned what remained of the Gestapo camp and the canteen kitchen. This area was in mid-May 1945 officially designated 'Special Camp No. 3'. One Major Smaroda of the NKVD was made its commandant.

Many thousands, prominent and obscure, suffered similar fates to Heikle junior. The most famous was the actor, Heinrich George. Star of the 1920s film classics *Metropolis* and *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, he had once been an opponent of the Nazis, but had allowed himself to be seduced by Goebbels and became a leading figure in the Third Reich's film culture. George was imprisoned here in June/July 1945 before being transferred to the former Nazi concentration camp at Sachsenhausen just outside Berlin. There he died a year later.

In the spring of 1951, 'Special Camp No. 3', now expanded to include almost all the half-square-kilometre industrial area, was handed over by the Soviets to the new East German Ministry of State Security. The area of the canteen kitchen and the former Gestapo punishment camp became the *Stasi's* main interrogation prison.

The area was peculiarly suited to this use. It was relatively isolated and easily closed off, the buildings were conveniently configured, and (last but not least) into the midst of the location ran a branch railway line. The 'goods' transported could just as well be human beings as machines or consumer durables.

On Thursday 17 August 1961, scooped up off the street by *Stasi* operatives, Klaus Schulz-Ladegast came to Hohenschönhausen by car. He had been blindfolded shortly after his journey began, so all he experienced of his arrival was the end of the cobbled street and the sound of a gate opening. Then he heard the car crossed a flagstoned area, and pass through another metal gate. Schulz-Ladegast now realised from the echo that they were inside a contained space. The gate clanged shut.

The blindfold was removed. The lights were dazzling. As Schulz-Ladegast was dragged out of the car a terrifying chorus of shouting came from unseen voices. He was hauled through this din towards a door. The calculated psychological nightmare of *Stasi* 'interrogation-custody' had begun.¹⁷

The interrogation prison at Hohenschönhausen, as it existed in 1961, was part of a wider complex. It was not just a prison but also a *Stasi* administrative centre and a specialist labour camp. Elsewhere within the complex, long-term prisoners made false Western number plates that were used by *Stasi* employees operating in the 'capitalist abroad', plus there was a print shop for documents, forms and ID papers, legitimate

and otherwise. In the 1950s, tools of the spying trade such as miniature cameras and recorders had also been manufactured here, but the department ('special camp X') had been closed down after information was leaked to the Western press.¹⁸

The interrogation prison was different. It concentrated solely on getting out of suspects what the state needed to justify the usually pre-ordained verdicts that secret courts would inflict on them. Klaus was one among many hundreds, and the way he was dealt with by his jailers – Department XIV of the *Stasi*, responsible for the running of political prisons – was fairly typical.

On arrival, after the routine ordeal of reception, he was stripped and put into rough prison fatigues. Then he was marched to an isolation cell. Moving around the interrogation prison was a strict, carefully monitored procedure. Especially in the early stages of incarceration, no prisoner was permitted to converse or even see another. A system of 'traffic lights' at corners in the maze of gloomy corridors warned if another detainee and his escort were approaching. If this was the case, the original prisoner would be pushed into a man-sized niche specially dug into the wall, where he would have to stand, face pressed against the dark brickwork, until the other prisoner and his escort had safely passed.

The cell itself, when the prisoner reached it, consisted of just a bed and a latrine. A frosted glass window let in a little natural light, but allowed no view of the outside. The entire place was desperately lonely, eerily silent. The prisoner, especially one, like Klaus, who had just arrived from the freedom and fresh air of the outside world, would soon feel as if he was being slowly buried alive.

Klaus's experiences at Hohenschönhausen, and later at the notorious 'Yellow Misery', as the Bautzen prison in Saxony was known – four years in all – would mark him for life. He was sentenced for knowingly having introduced to his father a man from West German intelligence who wanted to discuss the affairs of the Brandenburg Church Community. His father had resisted at first, then agreed.

The West German agent had been very firm. Neither father or son should ever mention their meetings with him to anyone, anyone at all. Klaus's father thought this could not apply in the case of his best friend and colleague at the Church Council, with whom – certain that they

shared similar political sympathies – he discussed the meetings. However, this apparent soulmate was in fact a *Stasi* agent, specifically assigned to him as a 'minder'. Hence the arrest of Klaus and, unknown to him, also his father on that Thursday five days after the Wall went up.

Both father and son underwent the same torment of isolation and interrogation. The methods used on each were similar. A mild threat of violence at times, though none actually used. *Stasi* methods in the 1950s had frequently been brutally similar to those of the NKVD and KGB, but paradoxically, after the outrage of 'Barbed-Wire Sunday', East Germany began to seek international respectability, which encouraged the *Stasi* to switch mostly to psychological methods.

The classic scenario was the 'corner-to-corner' interrogation room. The room was on the second floor and overlooked the edge of the prison, allowing a tantalising glimpse of the outside world. The interrogator's chair and desk were situated at an angle to this window corner, facing into the room. When the prisoner was brought in, he was placed on an uncomfortable small stool in the far, interior corner of the room, so that he crouched there facing the interrogator, who was a good ten feet away. The psychological effect, which had been thoroughly researched, was to make the prisoner instantly uncomfortable and apprehensive, subject to an animal unease, which the interrogator could increase by simply staring at him, and saying things like 'I have plenty of time. I have nothing but time'. It was clear to the prisoner that, just out of his line of vision, a window revealed the world he had left weeks or months previously for a lonely, silent cell. Often the prisoner felt an overwhelming sense to talk, to make something happen that would get him off that stool and out of there. Many gave in to this compulsion.

Klaus talked. But he did not tell his interrogators what they wanted. He instinctively denied everything about the West German spies, though he fed his jailers a lot about his life as a gadfly in the East Berlin social scene and his regular visits to places like the fashionable 'Press Café' in the Friedrichstrasse. Luckily, he had never taken money from the West Germans, so they could prove nothing in that regard.

This game of drip-feeding important-sounding but actually trivial information helped keep Klaus sane. Two other things also helped. First, within a month of arriving, he found himself afflicted with violent

stomach pains and had to be taken into hospital. There, though kept in an enclosed wing, he got two weeks of better food, relatively normal treatment, including the attentions of pleasant young nurses, and a breathing space.

Schulz-Ladegast returned to the prison, after recovering from the (probably psychosomatic) illness, much strengthened. Then he was moved into a cell with another prisoner, an older man who had served in the *Wehrmacht*. His cellmate taught him a few survival tricks. How to handle interrogators, and above all how to keep that vital element of self-respect while remaining within the rules. He told Klaus never to obey a guard's order immediately. They discussed how to judge that split-second pause when ordered to do something by a guard; the split-second pause that allowed the prisoner to make the guard wait, while at the same time avoiding punishment for disobedience. On such fine behavioural detail depended a prisoner's sense of his own dignity and therefore his emotional survival.

The original sentence intended for Klaus had been eight years, as he later found out from viewing his *Stasi* file. Through his skill at the interrogation game, he had managed, Klaus noted with grim satisfaction, to get that down to four.

Klaus survived Hohenschönhausen. He survived a further three years at Bautzen. It would be almost ten years before he once more set foot on Western soil, a changed man and in a different country. While the Wall existed, he never again set eyes on the woman he had fallen in love with that summer.

Ironically, his father had had his freedom 'purchased' by West German benefactors years earlier. He was one of the first East German political prisoners released by this route. It was a sign that the East German gulag would, unique among the prison systems of the Eastern Bloc, become a trading organisation, exchanging human beings for hard currency.

The sealing of the border had been a sudden coup, crude but effective in execution. Once the wire and the guards were in place, the fortifications would be intensified and the more durable structure that would be known as the Wall put into place.

Meanwhile, the dissidents and the amateur spies such as Klaus could

be scooped up and dealt with. And, behind the new barrier, other inconvenient details could be tidied up.

In the Bernauer Strasse and the neighbouring streets, as autumn 1961 turned into winter, the regime finished removing residents from the houses and apartment blocks adjoining the new border, especially in the Mitte district. Of the total of 497 households that made up the Bernauer Strasse, reckoned to total 826 individuals, in the five weeks until 19 September 143 families (276 individuals) were removed to other accommodation; it was planned that by 21 October the other 354 families (530) would also be gone. This would leave the area safe from escape attempts on the part of its residents, by dint of the simple fact that there would no longer be any residents.¹⁹

The same went for border areas in Treptow. On 13 August Till Meyer had seen East Berliners waving and shouting from their apartments in the Harzer Strasse to their Western friends and relatives on the other side of the barbed wire. This was no longer possible after 15 October. By then, 42 families (108 persons) were removed from those very same apartment blocks in the Harzer Strasse. Elsewhere in that small complex of streets adjoining the West Berlin borough of Kreuzberg, a further 134 households were also due for deportation.

The cold numbers cited in the official reports fail to express the angry, desperate reality of human beings forced from homes they had occupied for years, perhaps even for their whole lives. These were famously close Berlin neighbourhoods. All the worse for their inhabitants to be torn from everything that was familiar and dumped into the company of strangers, often in the soulless new high-rise concrete-slab housing developments that the regime was busily building on the eastern edge of the city.

This happened in many streets close to the border. Some of the inhabitants had to be ejected by force. One resident whose home lay on the border with West Berlin at Spandau, having initially left peacefully enough, later 'returned to his flat and, being in a drunken condition, smashed to pieces several window panes and a stove'. Another family tried to ignore the *Vopos* knocking on their door and calling out at six a.m. 'so that the apartment had to be opened up by force'. Another young woman was arrested for protesting – 'acting in a provocative manner' as the official description had it.²⁰

Eventually, the buildings on the Bernauer Strasse, as elsewhere on the East Berlin/West Berlin border, were entirely demolished. No more dramatic escapes from windows. No more abseiling from the roof. No more desperate fugitives plummeting to their deaths on the cobbled street below.

Nothing was to get in the way of the new, impregnable Wall. It would keep the state's citizens trapped inside the GDR until, like the detainees in the interrogation prison, they resigned themselves to their fate and simply stopped resisting.