



The Tunnels: Escapes Under the Berlin Wall and the Historic Films the JFK White House Tried to Kill

By Greg Mitchell

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A thrilling Cold War narrative of superpower showdowns, media suppression, and two escape tunnels beneath the Berlin Wall

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As Greg Mitchell’s riveting narrative unfolds, we meet extraordinary characters: the legendary cyclist who became East Germany’s top target for arrest; the Stasi informer who betrays the “CBS tunnel”; the American student who aided the escapes; an engineer who would later help build the tunnel under the English channel; the young East Berliner who fled with her baby, then married one of the tunnelers. Capturing the chilling reach of the Stasi secret police, U.S. networks prepared to “pay for play” yet willing to cave to official pressure, a White House eager to suppress historic coverage, and the subversive power of ordinary people in dire circumstances, *The Tunnels* is breaking history, a propulsive read whose themes still reverberate.

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Editorial Review

Review

"The greatest strength of *The Tunnels* is in the details... Days after finishing the book I could not escape one of Mitchell's images—of a hat with a small hole in it landing softly on the Western side of the border while its owner's dead body fell back into the East, waiting for the guards to hurry it out of sight. For those who see walls as the answer to policy problems, this book serves as a stark reminder that barriers can never cut people off entirely but only succeed in driving them underground."

—**NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW**

"Engaging... the book vividly describes the harrowing conditions under which strong young men based in West Berlin dug the tunnels... Mitchell's interviews with the tunnelers, couriers and escapees put a human face on this dramatic experience... These are heart-racing tales, and Mitchell — author of several books on U.S. politics and history — narrates them with emotion and evocative detail... The political and media angles in *The Tunnels* are indeed intriguing... The intense drama and risks involved for the tunnelers and the escapees offer a compelling context for today's refugee crisis."

—**HOPE M. HARRISON, WASHINGTON POST**

"Fascinating and deeply researched... Mitchell's book provides a welcome reminder of the ingenuity and courage that people can display when politics and walls separate them from loved ones and a better life. But it's also a testament to just how forcefully even ostensibly liberal administrations can suppress the media."

—**CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR**

"A story with so much inherent drama it sounds far-fetched even for a Hollywood thriller... Mitchell tells a kaleidoscopic cold war story from 1962, recreating a world seemingly on the edge of a third world war. "

—**THE GUARDIAN**

"Shows the trade-off behind the scenes at one of the most pivotal moments in the standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union... A fascinating and complex picture of the interplay between politics and media in the Cold War era."

—**STEPHANIE KIRCHNER, WASHINGTON POST**

"*A terrific new book about a heretofore obscure episode regarding the wall in 1962. A must for all the JFK fans.*"

—**CHARLES P. PIERCE, ESQUIRE**

"*Thrilling and meticulously documented... Mitchell masterfully guides the reader through a labyrinth of details, intertwining the narratives to show how the tunnelers, the NBC crew (led by correspondent Piers Anderton) and the politicians played their parts on the stage of history... A fitting tribute to the brave men and women who did all they could to tear down the Wall.*"

—**DALLAS MORNING NEWS**

"*Mitchell delivers a gripping, blow-by-blow account of one grueling dig and dramatic rescue... Mitchell's tense, fascinating account reveals how the U.S. undermined a freedom struggle for the sake of diplomacy.*"

—**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY (starred review)**

“The author ably captures the dedication of the men and women trying to get family, friends, and complete strangers to freedom... A gripping page-turner that thrills like fiction.”

—KIRKUS

“The Tunnels is one of the great untold stories of the Cold War. Brilliantly researched and told with great flair, Greg Mitchell’s non-fiction narrative reads like the best spy thriller, something Le Carré might have imagined. Easily the best book I’ve read all year.”

—ALEX KERSHAW, author of *Avenue of Spies*

“Every hour of my year in East Berlin—1963/64—the escape tunnels beneath our feet were being dug. This is their story: those who dug them, those who used them and those who betrayed them to the Stasi. Fascinating—and it is all true.”

—FREDERICK FORSYTH, author of *The Odessa File* and *Day of the Jackal*

“Greg Mitchell is the best kind of historian, a true storyteller. The Tunnels is a gripping tale about heroic individuals defying an authoritarian state at a critical moment in the Cold War. A brilliantly told thriller—but all true.”

—KAI BIRD, author of *The Good Spy*

“This is not just an exciting escape narrative, but also an extraordinarily revealing political thriller, centering on ruthless government attempts to control what the public gets to see. Mitchell presents us with a radically changed perspective on one of the Cold War’s most dramatic episodes. His book is both priceless as history and just about impossible to beat for sheer narrative grip—a rare achievement.”

—FREDERICK TAYLOR, author of *The Berlin Wall* and *Dresden*

“Eye-opening and an exhilarating read. Not knowing who made it out of the East, and who was arrested, or worse, kept me glued to this book until the last page. The involvement of the Stasi, two American TV networks and America’s State Department contribute to the historical perspective of this important work.”

—ANTONIO MENDEZ, co-author of *Argo*

*“When you have read the last page of Greg Mitchell’s *The Tunnels* you will close the book—but not until then.”*

—ALAN FURST, author of *A Hero of France* and *Night Soldiers*

*“Greg Mitchell has written a riveting story focusing on one of the most powerful documentaries ever broadcast on television, NBC’s *The Tunnel*. Those of us who saw it that December night in 1962 have never forgotten the experience. Now Mitchell, an exemplary journalist, goes beyond what the cameras saw, deep into the political dynamics of Cold War Berlin. John Le Carré couldn’t have done it better.”*

—BILL MOYERS

“Mitchell excels at describing the idealistic men and women who built the passageways that brought scores of refugees to safety, revealing the wall’s symbolic importance and how it endured throughout the Cold War. He provides interviews with many important players who contribute to the fast-paced narrative.”

—LIBRARY JOURNAL

“The Tunnels uncovers an unexplored underworld of Cold War intrigue. As nuclear tensions grip Berlin, a whole realm of heroes and villains, of plot and counterplot, unfolds beneath the surface of the city. True historical drama.”

—RON ROSENBAUM, author of *Explaining Hitler and The Shakespeare Wars*

“A compelling look at a wrenching chapter of the Cold War that chronicles the desperate flights for freedom beneath the streets of post-war Berlin and the costs that politics extracted in lives.”

—BARRY MEIER, author of *Missing Man*

“Enormously dramatic and extremely insightful.”

—JOHN BATCHELOR, ABC RADIO

About the Author

GREG MITCHELL is the author of a dozen books, including *The Campaign of the Century*, winner of the Goldsmith Book Prize and finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize; *Tricky Dick and the Pink Lady*, a *New York Times* Notable Book; *So Wrong for So Long*; and, with Robert Jay Lifton, *Hiroshima in America* and *Who Owns Death?* Mitchell has edited several national magazines, including *Editor & Publisher*, and he blogs actively about media and politics for the *Huffington Post* and other outlets. He recently coproduced the acclaimed documentary *Following the Ninth*. He lives in the New York City area.

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The Cyclist

FEBRUARY–MARCH 1962

Harry Seidel loved action, speed, risk. He found them all in bicycle racing. Harry might have been an Olympic champion—still could be, probably—if he changed his attitude, for at twenty-three he remained in his leg--churning prime. But that wasn't Harry. Once he set his mind on something he went full bore, and now he wasn't chasing the next turn, other racers, or a finish line. Just months ago he had competed before thousands of cheering fans in raucous arenas. His picture appeared in newspapers. Children might call out to the lean, dark-haired sports hero when they recognized him cycling on the streets of Berlin. Now he toiled nearly alone. No one cheered, even if he deserved it for victories far beyond any of his racing exploits. That would be too dangerous.

Since the emergence of the new barrier dividing Berlin on August 13, 1961, Harry's wife, Rotraut, had worried about him. Whenever he set off on one of his secret missions she wondered if he would fail to come home, perhaps forever. Friends called Harry a draufgänger—a daredevil. They urged him to quit his death-defying deeds, return to cycling, and open that newspaper kiosk he coveted, but they might as well have been shouting into a wintry wind off the River Spree. In just the first months after the Wall arrived, Seidel had led his wife and son, and more than two dozen others, across the nearly impenetrable border to the West. And in Harry's mind there were still countless others (that is, nearly anyone in the East) to rescue.

Seidel had drawn only praise from the state during his cycling career, which had culminated in several East Berlin titles and two medals at the 1959 East German championships. Barely out of his teens, he quit his job as an electrician when the state began paying him to compete full-time. Even as he was being extolled in propaganda organs, Harry revealed himself as insufficiently patriotic when, unlike many others on the national team, he refused to ingest steroids to enhance his performance. He also failed to join the ruling Communist Party. This cost him any chance to make the country's 1960 Olympic team, and his government stipend was canceled.

Now, in early 1962, his reputation in East German secret police files as an escape helper matched his fame as

a cyclist. The trade had not come without cost.

Seidel's first escape had been his own. Just hours after the wire and concrete barrier materialized to brutally divide Berlin on the morning of August 13, Seidel left the apartment he shared with his wife, son, and mother-in-law in the Prenzlauer Berg district to explore the border by bicycle. South of the city center he found a spot where the barbed wire was low. With guards distracted by protesters, he shouldered his bike and leaped over the wire. It was a test more than anything. He figured he could return to the East just as easily—which he did, a few hours later, passing through a checkpoint. (It was still no problem going in that direction.) Harry being Harry, he felt confident he could jump the border again in the hours ahead. He wasn't eager to abandon Rotraut and baby Andre, but he didn't want to lose the newspaper delivery job he held in the West. Even if he did get stuck across the barrier he would surely find a way to get his family, including his mother, out soon.

Later that day Harry considered another vault to the West, but it looked like the border guards were tightening their controls. Just after dark he wrapped his passport in plastic and dove into the Spree to swim the more than two hundred yards to the West. Coming up for air he nearly head-butted an East Berlin police boat. Treading water, he finally heard one of the cops say, "Let's go, nothing to see here." After they left he swam the rest of the way to the shore.

While Seidel pondered how to rescue his family, one of Rotraut's brothers tried to get them out using West German passports bearing photos that resembled them. When that brother attempted to smuggle the fake IDs through a checkpoint, they did not pass muster. Harry's mother and mother-in-law were arrested. His wife remained free only because she had a baby to care for. Harry, enraged, vowed to retrieve his mother when she emerged from prison—and to spring his wife and son immediately.

After another bicycle tour, this time along the Western side of the Wall, he determined that the safest place for a breakout was along Kieffholz Strasse, near Treptower, one of the city's largest parks. There was nothing but barbed wire—no fencing or concrete—at the border there, and plenty of trees and bushes in the American-occupied zone for cover. To provide a blanket of darkness he shot out a couple of spotlights with an air rifle.

On the evening of September 3, 1961, three weeks after the coming of the Wall, Rotraut, slender and blue-eyed, received an unexpected phone call at her apartment. Harry, calling from a café in the East, announced that he would pick her up in an hour. Rotraut, whose family had emigrated from Poland, was as anti-Communist as her husband and had been considering ways to escape on her own, so the invitation from Harry was most welcome. When he arrived he told her to dress in black, give their baby part of a sleeping pill, and follow him. Soon they were penetrating the underbrush along Kieffholz Strasse, where Harry had already cut the barbed wire. He crawled through, then stood and lifted the top wire. Rotraut passed him the baby and stepped into the West. Then with Harry she ran like hell to his Ford Taunus. Minutes later the three Seidels were relaxing in Harry's apartment in the Schöneberg district.

The ending was not so happy for two of Rotraut's brothers, who were arrested on charges that they knew about or assisted the escape.

Few in East Berlin imagined that any sort of wall—or "anti-Fascist protection barrier," as East German leader Walter Ulbricht dubbed it (proving he had read his Orwell)—could last for years. But Harry Seidel was not among the optimistic. He believed the vast, ugly scar and police state were meant to be permanent. And what could the West do about it? Berlin was a fractured island floating precariously in the middle of the Communist state, one hundred miles from West Germany. Harry Seidel sensed that his adventures at the

border had barely begun. For one thing, he still had to rescue his mother.

After years of shortages and rationing, East Berliners liked to quip that even when they could afford to buy apples and potatoes they often found worms in them—and “they charge more with the worms.” Another bitter joke: “Did you know that Adam and Eve were actually East Germans? They had no clothes, they had to share an apple, and they were led to believe that they lived in a paradise.”

Since shortly after World War II, a wavy line on the map had separated the two German states, even before they took the names German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). West Germany was divided into sectors occupied by the Americans, the French, and the English. The Soviet-dominated GDR was Germany’s junior half, in landmass, population, and increasingly, economic performance. In 1955, with its economy booming and jobs plentiful, West Germany achieved full sovereignty, even as the three occupying forces remained. The Communists in the East, meanwhile, scrambled to stem an embarrassing refugee crisis. From the late 1940s to 1961 some 2.8 million East Germans fled to the West.

Most of this human tide, nearly 20 percent of the East German population and a high concentration of its skilled workers and professionals, exited via Berlin. GDR soldiers tightly policed the national boundary, but the sector border at Berlin, deep inside East Germany, remained porous. Levels of security varied wildly where the city’s four sectors met. Berlin remained, in most ways, one city, with interconnected telephone service, subway, train, tram, and bus lines. As many as sixty thousand East Berliners with official passes—teachers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, technicians, students—crossed into the West every weekday to work or attend classes at the Technical University or the Free University. They were known as *grenzgänger*—border crossers. Many never returned. By 1961, West Berlin’s population of 2.2 million doubled that of the Eastern sector.

The Soviets grew alarmed. Premier Nikita Khrushchev considered West Berlin “a bone in my throat,” even as he also likened it to testicles he could squeeze whenever he wanted the West to scream. Khrushchev had issued an ultimatum in November 1958 giving the three Western nations six months to agree to make West Berlin a “free,” demilitarized zone, and then withdraw. The Allies rejected this. They held that the unnatural division of the city had to end in free elections in every sector and, ultimately, in reunification. Khrushchev backed down for the moment. Running for president in 1960, John F. Kennedy predicted Berlin would continue to be a “test of our nerve and our will.”

The first Kennedy–Khrushchev summit took place in early June, 1961, in Vienna. The sixty-seven-year-old Soviet leader opened by calling Berlin “the most dangerous place in the world.” Testing the inexperienced JFK, he threatened to finally sign a long-promised “peace treaty” with East Germany, ending the four-power agreements on sharing Berlin. The East Germans would thereby gain control of all Western access to the city via air, rail, and autobahn. Again, the three Western nations rejected the idea. Yet a fumbling, intimidated Kennedy hinted that the United States now accepted the semipermanent division of Berlin, which only emboldened Khrushchev.

As the summit ended, Kennedy privately called it “the worst thing in my life. He savaged me.” JFK told aides there was little America could do for the East Berliners—the sole goal now was to defend the interests of those already in the West. He assured a top aide, “God knows I’m not an isolationist, but it seems particularly stupid to risk killing a million Americans over an argument about access rights on an autobahn . . . or because the Germans want Germany reunified.” After all, he added, “We didn’t cause the disunity in Germany.”

In a July 25, 1961, speech, Kennedy declared that the United States was not looking for another confrontation on Berlin. Still, in light of the Soviets' growing belligerence there, JFK ordered a military buildup. "We seek peace," Kennedy announced, "but we shall not surrender." West Berliners focused on another element of the speech: Kennedy seemed to suggest that while America would remain a strong defender of West Germany, it would let the Communists do pretty much whatever they wanted in the East. Amid the growing tensions, the number of East Germans arriving at West Berlin's refugee center, a colony of twenty-five buildings at Marienfelde, spiked. The rate had averaged 19,000 a month in 1961; this more than doubled in early August. East Germans had never been allowed to participate in free elections but they were voting with their feet.

Walter Ulbricht, the sixty-eight-year-old East German leader with a Lenin goatee, had seen enough. With Khrushchev's blessing, he had weeks earlier ordered the stockpiling of massive quantities of barbed wire, fencing, and concrete blocks, his fantasy of a permanent barrier encircling West Berlin suddenly about to come to life. Somehow, despite their vast investment in intelligence operations in Berlin, the Americans knew little about any of this. President Kennedy's daily CIA briefings mentioned nothing.

Not that it likely mattered. American leaders were profoundly ambivalent about the prospect of any sealing of the border. Ulbricht took heart from a well-publicized July 30 television interview with J. William Fulbright, an influential Democratic U.S. senator. Asked whether the Communists might reduce tensions by barring refugee flight, Fulbright answered, "Next week, if they chose to close their borders, they could without violating any treaty. I don't understand why the East Germans don't close their border. . . . I think they have a right to close it at any time." West German media and American diplomats in Bonn, the capital, excoriated Fulbright. Some called him "Fulbricht."

President Kennedy said nothing in public. But at the White House he told an adviser, "Khrushchev is losing East Germany. He cannot let that happen. If East Germany goes, so will Poland and all of Eastern Europe. He will have to do something to stop the flow of refugees. Perhaps a wall. And we won't be able to prevent it." Khrushchev, meanwhile, assured Ulbricht, "When the border is closed, the Americans and West Germans will be happy." He claimed that the American ambassador to Moscow had told him the increasing intensity of the refugee flight was "causing the West Germans a lot of trouble. So when we institute these controls, everyone will be satisfied." Ulbricht assigned his security chief, Erich Honecker, to make sure the operation succeeded.

Just after midnight on August 13 the first barbed wire was unrolled along major boulevards at the border, the first step in sealing off the ninety-six-mile circumference of West Berlin. Thousands of Soviet troops stood in reserve in case demonstrators in the West tried to stop it. Khrushchev had wisely advised Ulbricht to make sure the wire did not extend even one inch across the border.

When Secretary of State Dean Rusk heard the news later that morning, he ordered that U.S. officials refrain from issuing statements beyond mild protests. Any American response at the border, he feared, would trigger an escalation on the Communist side. Then he left his office to attend a Washington Senators baseball game. U.S. diplomats hoped West Berlin mayor Willy Brandt would not hear about Rusk's outing, nor the reaction of Foy Kohler, one of Rusk's aides: "The East Germans have done us a favor."

More than ever, East Berlin was an armed camp, CBS correspondent Daniel Schorr reported that day. Troops were needed, he added, to hold back a "sullen population." That night, Edward R. Murrow, the legendary newsman who had left CBS to direct the administration's U.S. Information Agency (USIA), cabled his friend Jack Kennedy from Berlin, comparing Ulbricht's move to Hitler's marching into the Rhineland. He warned JFK that if he didn't show resolve he might face a crisis of confidence both in West Germany and around the

globe.

Residents in the East had adapted to the arbitrary division of their city, but the character of that cleaving had changed for the worse that morning of August 13. Tens of thousands suddenly lost their jobs in the West or a chance to complete their studies, as well as freedom to visit friends, family, and lovers. Finishing their routes in East Berlin, the U-Bahn subway and S-Bahn elevated trains now discharged passengers at the border.

On August 14, Kennedy nevertheless told aides, that “It’s not a very nice solution, but a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war.” In the same discussion, he said, “This is the end of the Berlin crisis. The other side panicked—not we. We’re going to do nothing now because there is no alternative except war. It’s all over, they’re not going to overrun Berlin.” American intelligence was almost sanguine. Kennedy’s CIA briefing on August 14 dryly referred to new “travel limitations” and “restrictions” in Berlin. The next day the CIA claimed that the East German and East Berlin populations were “generally reacting with caution,” with only “scattered expressions of open criticism and a few instances of anti-regime incidents.” The agency may not have known that at least ten East German border guards had already fled to the West.

The administration’s high-level Berlin Task Force, meeting in Washington, focused more on public relations than on countering the Soviet move with sanctions. Secretary of State Rusk stated that while the border closing was a serious matter, “in realistic terms it would make a Berlin settlement easier. Our immediate problem is the sense of outrage in Berlin and Germany which carries with it a feeling that we should do more than merely protest.” Attorney General Robert Kennedy merely called for a boost in anti-Soviet propaganda.

On August 16, the front page of the popular West German newspaper Bild Zeitung screamed, “The West Does Nothing!” President Kennedy, it complained, “stays silent.” Mayor Willy Brandt cabled a forceful message to Kennedy. He criticized the “inactivity and pure defensiveness” of the Allies, which could lead to a collapse of morale in West Berlin while promoting “an exaggerated self-confidence in the East Berlin regime.” If nothing was done, the next step was for the Communists to turn West Berlin into an isolated “ghetto” from which many of its citizens would flee. Kennedy must reject Soviet blackmail. At a giant rally in Berlin that evening, Brandt cried, “Berlin expects more than words! Berlin expects political action!”

Kennedy was unmoved, partly because he thought Brandt’s anger was motivated as much by electoral politics as anything else. He privately referred to Brandt as “that bastard from Berlin.”

Within days of the erection of the concrete and barbed wire, East Germans were jumping out windows of buildings adjacent to the border along several blocks of Bernauer Strasse in the Mitte (or “middle”) district, landing on the sidewalk in West Berlin. This was only possible in sections of the city where the façades of buildings marked the border. In some cases West Berlin firemen caught jumpers with their nets. A little more than a week after August 13 the first East Berliner died attempting to flee. This was Ida Siekmann, fifty-eight, who literally took flight after throwing a mattress and other belongings out the window of her third-floor apartment on Bernauer Strasse. Siekmann missed landing on the mattress and died on the way to the hospital. West Berliners were outraged. East Berlin workers bricked up windows facing West as quickly as possible.

Two days after Siekmann’s fatal leap, a twenty-five-year-old tailor named Günter Litfin was shot and killed at Berlin’s Humboldt Harbor. Litfin, one of the thousands of East Berliners who could no longer commute to a job in the West, had nearly finished his desperate swim to the opposite shore when he was shot in the back of the head by a border guard. Within hours, hundreds of West Berliners gathered there and screamed their protest. Police arrested Litfin’s brother and ransacked his mother’s apartment. East German media launched

a smear campaign against the dead man, labeling him a homosexual whose nickname was “Doll.” Each guard who fired at Litfin received a medal, a wristwatch, and a cash bonus.

A West Berlin newspaper declared: “Ulbricht’s human hunters have become murderers.” A few days after Litfin’s death, another young East Berliner was shot dead in the Treptow Canal. Within days, three more died after climbing out of windows or falling off roofs at Bernauer Strasse. In October, two more young men were shot and killed in the River Spree. Early in the Wall era, most West Berliners believed that however callous the system in the East might be, soldiers or border guards would not shoot their fellow Germans. This hope was already proving false, over and over

Determined escapees remained undaunted. One couple swam across the Spree to the other side—pushing a tub with their three--year--old daughter in front of them.

By mid-October an eight-foot wall had replaced the barbed wire in more sections of the city. A Berlin sculptor described the Wall’s disjointed, slipshod construction as appearing to have “been thrown together by a band of backward apprentice stonemasons, when drunk.” Where dissidents found they could scale or blast through the concrete, GDR workers made the barrier even higher and thicker, and guard towers sprouted like mushrooms. On the side of the Wall facing west, graffiti appeared: KZ, the Nazi initials for concentration camp. Hundreds still made it to the West—through the sewers, in vehicles that smashed through bricks, in a train that refused to stop at the border. The Wall was both too much, and not quite enough.

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