

I SPY... A CITY'S FASCINATING HISTORY

Twenty-five years since the Wall fell, now is the perfect time to visit Berlin

WORDS Sue Chester

Steeling myself, I enter the 'submarine'. Left and right, iron doors reveal small, damp, windowless cells where lights were once left on day and night with just a wooden bed and bucket for a toilet. Trailing my guide and former political prisoner Cliewe Juritza, everything he shows me in Berlin's Hohenschönhausen prison compound is eerily authentic, left exactly as it was when the final victim was released on 6 December 1989.

This year, Germans are celebrating the 25th anniversary of the reunification of their country, once divided by opposing political systems and the notorious Berlin Wall. Many former East German institutions have new exhibitions for the anniversary, remembering those who lived through a shadowy era of political oppression.

The Stasi (state security) headquarters reopens with a new exhibition on 15 January, the Berlin Wall Memorial opened a restored exhibition on the 25th anniversary (9 November 2014), and Berlin's first Spy Museum is opening in early 2015.

Back in what was once East Berlin's main Stasi jail for political prisoners, I ask Cliewe about the attempted escape that led to his imprisonment. He recalls the day in 1984 when he tried to flee over the Austrian-Hungarian border, believing it would be easier to manage than Berlin's concrete barricade. His dream slipped through his fingers when he triggered an alarm on an electric fence. Luckily, he escaped capture, but was arrested on the train as he headed home to East Berlin.

'I must have looked suspicious,' explains Cliewe, 'so the border policeman asked me "Do you want to escape?" I said "Yes!" and he replied "Come with me." And that was when he arrested me. He didn't even ask to see my ID.' ☹



Cliewe Juritza, a former prisoner, now works as a tour guide of East Berlin





I ask him about what it was like living behind the Wall. ‘There was a tennis court next to the Wall where I could look over and see the buildings in West Berlin. I could only look, not more. I felt like a second-class citizen.’

That tennis court is where today’s Berlin Wall Memorial is located, at Bernauer Strasse. Declared a historical monument on 2 October 1990, this particular section of the wall was chosen due to its poignant history – Bernauer Strasse’s houses formed part of the border and in early August 1961, after the city’s division, the world’s press recorded dramatic images of East Germans dropping from houses’ windows into to the West.



In the Berlin Wall Exhibition, the watchtower forms a poignant reminder of bygone years

The Berlin Wall Memorial’s Window of Remembrance is dedicated to those who died trying to escape, just a few metres in from the remaining 1.4 km section of the original wall. Along this section, there are markers with audio, video and photos of escape attempts, as well as a huge picture of East German soldier Conrad Schumann’s now iconic leap to freedom across barbed wire two days after the city was divided.

The Stasi headquarters was next on my list, now known as the Stasi Museum. In the main building, Haus 1, home of Stasi chief Erich Mielke’s offices and private rooms, the lifts carried state bureaucrats like automatons through a revolving system of never-ending surveillance. Mielke’s bland office and imperious conference room are the sites where thousands of honest lives were ruined, while at the same time Stasi badges were given to the perpetrators to mark loyal ‘service’. The piles of dossiers that were shredded in panic when the East German Socialist Unity Party collapsed late 1989, along with the Wall, have left a dry and dusty atmosphere that is suffocating.

My penultimate visit is to the Museum Haus am Checkpoint Charlie, 3 km south of Bernauer Strasse. Founded by human rights activist Dr Rainer Hildebrandt in October 1962 close to Checkpoint Charlie, Berlin’s main border post from 1961, its walls are packed with escape stories, including that of Tunnel 57 (of 700 tunnels built in Berlin, many intercepted by the Stasi) where, in 1964, 57 people managed to escape to West from the basement of a bakery on Bernauer Strasse.

Other exhibits include some of the astoundingly inventive contraptions that East Germans used to escape, such as a car with a petrol tank modified to

Checkpoint Charlie was the city’s main border post until 1990

The new Berlin Wall Memorial is close to the original stretch of the wall



See original meeting rooms and old spying equipment at the Stasi Museum, former HQ of the secret police

leave room for a hidden person (It succeeded a few times, until a slightly larger lady gave the game away). There's also a device that slid refugees between tall buildings on a zip wire, a homemade plane constructed by one brother to help another, painted with red stars on the wings so guards would think it was a Soviet plane.

Then there's the DIY hot air balloon that triumphantly drifted the Strelzyk and Wetzel families to freedom in 1979. Built in their homes, their first two attempts failed. However, when a West German radio station forecast favourable winds, the courageous group took off early on 16 September 1979 from a forest clearing 15 km from the border.

'I felt sure we'd manage it that night, otherwise I wouldn't have done it,' says Mr Strelzyk, now 72 years old. 'As we set off, searchlights started up after us so I took the balloon up to 2,600 m. We didn't have a basket,

but stood on a bullet-proof steel plate in case we were shot at. As we arrived over West Germany, locals saw the gas flames in the sky and called the police thinking we were a UFO, but by then we had landed.'

I end the day by taking a look at the kind of life the Strelzyk and Wetzel families fled, at the DDR Museum tucked away by the River Spree. It's a relief to be able to see some 1970s and 80s socialist fashion; dance the Lipsi (a special dance introduced by East German authorities in 1959 to stop people dancing to American rock'n'roll) and play table football, East vs West Germany; before a thrilling experience in the virtual Trabi-drive – a simulator of an East German-made Trabant car, complete with squeaky pedals and wobbly steering.

To complete the experience, I head for some hearty communist cooking at the DDR Museum restaurant. Parking myself beneath Ronald Paris' vibrant mural *In Praise of Communism*, I brace myself for Solyanka soup followed by Hunter's steak and cabbage roulade. Mmmm, *lecker* (delicious)! 🍷



The Trabant car was an important fixture in everyday Berlin life

Dine on traditional East German dishes at the DDR Museum



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