



# MONUMENTAL MILESTONES

## GREAT EVENTS OF MODERN TIMES

### The Fall of the Berlin Wall



And the walls came tumbling down.

KATHLEEN TRACY



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Printing                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7                      8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Tracy, Kathleen.

The fall of the Berlin Wall / by Kathleen Tracy.

p. cm. — (Monumental milestones)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-58415-405-5 (library bound)

1. Berlin Wall, Berlin, Germany, 1961–1989—Juvenile literature. 2. Berlin (Germany)—Politics and government—1945–1990—Juvenile literature. 3. Germany—History—Unification, 1990—Juvenile literature. 4. Cold War—Juvenile literature. I. Title. II. Series.

DD881.T74 2005

943'.155087—dc22

2004030262

ISBN-13: 9781584154051

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**PHOTO CREDITS:** Cover, pp. 1, 3—AFP/Getty Images; p. 6—Hulton Archive/Getty Images; pp. 12, 14, 15, 18, 20, 23, 25, 28, 30, 32, 39—Library of Congress; p. 26—Sharon Beck; pp. 10, 34, 36, 41—Sean Dougherty.

**PUBLISHER'S NOTE:** This story is based on the author's extensive research, which he believes to be accurate. Documentation of such research is contained on page 47.

The internet sites referenced herein were active as of the publication date. Due to the fleeting nature of some web sites, we cannot guarantee they will all be active when you are reading this book.

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\*For Your Information

# The Quest for Freedom

While the Berlin Wall—the wall that literally cut the German capital city in half—may have been the most famous symbol of political oppression in the latter half of the twentieth century, it was also the greatest symbol of the human desire to live in freedom. Thousands of people risked death sneaking across the wall to reach the safety and freedom of West Berlin and devised many ways to do it.

In the years after the Berlin Wall was built, a network of tunnels were dug, mostly by college students who burrowed under the wall to gain freedom. Unfortunately, the tunnels were discovered after a woman left her baby's carriage near the opening of one. East German officials quickly closed them off.

Two families, the Wetzyls and Strzycks, actually attempted to fly over the wall. Over the course of many months they bought small amounts of nylon. If they had bought a huge roll of nylon it would have raised the suspicions of authorities so they patiently amassed the cloth strip by strip. When they finally had enough, they sewed it together and made a hot air balloon. The families got into the balloon's basket and after two nerve-wracking hours finally floated far enough over the wall to land in West Berlin. When news of their successful escape was made public, the East German government was so upset it restricted the sale of all lightweight cloth.

The most popular way to escape was to make a run for it and simply climb over the wall. At first, it was fairly easy to climb the wall.



But so many people were successful that East Berlin outlawed the sale of all rope. The government also increased the number of guards patrolling the wall and issued a shoot to kill order. The first person killed trying to cross the wall was Günter Litwin, who was shot to death in August 1961. After that, anyone trying to escape knew he or she was literally facing death. But for many, like Chris Gueffroy, it was a risk they were willing to take for the chance to be free.

All Gueffroy had known growing up was the repression of living under the rigid rules and regulations of communist East Germany. His divorced mom, Karin, who had raised Chris and his older brother Stefan alone, had long ago accepted life in East Berlin. But Chris felt increasingly like a prisoner as he grew older.

Karin would recall in an interview with NBC news that, “At age 12 or 13, Chris watched political TV shows from the west and always told me that one day, he will travel to America, his dream country. I was startled by his remarks and replied that he will not be able to leave East Germany, that it will never work.” Her son refused to accept it and the dream to be free grew stronger. Karin added, “The mid-eighties were a time when many people left. I remember that we had to say farewell to a good friend of ours. After Chris had brought her to the door, he was angry, asking me why we [were] not leaving. Chris even called me a coward, said that he did not want to accept this lifestyle for the rest of his life. But he never talked about escaping or leaving the eastern part of Berlin.”<sup>1</sup>

But that was exactly what he planned to do. His mother never dreamed that her son would try something so dangerous but on February 6, 1989, Gueffroy, 20, and his friend Christian Gaudian put their plan in motion. Uppermost in their minds was their belief that the shoot-to-kill order had been lifted. Around midnight, they quietly approached the wall and climbed over a steel fence. Suddenly, alarms went off. Guards came running over, firing their weapons. Gaudian was shot in the foot

and captured. Chris was hit ten times, including once through the heart and died on the spot. In a terrible irony, Karin, who lived only a few miles from the wall, had been awake reading and heard the gunfire, never suspecting it was her son being shot.

But the next day, after her son didn't show up for a planned visit, Karin began to suspect the terrible truth. For two agonizing days she worried and waited. What she didn't know was that East German officials had placed her under secret surveillance to see if she was also planning to escape or to help others escape. Eventually, she was taken in for questioning by the East German secret police, the Stasi. Finally, they told her that Chris had been killed while participating in an attack on a military facility. His friend had been wounded but survived, was in custody and would eventually be sentenced to three years in prison for illegal border crossing.

For several weeks after Chris' death, Karin was regularly questioned. In the end, the East German authorities determined Chris' shooting was justified because he was a criminal.

Nine months later, the Berlin Wall fell, giving all East Germans the freedom Chris died trying to find. Geuffroy holds the tragic distinction of being the last person killed trying to cross the Berlin Wall.

The four guards involved in Geuffroy's shooting were at first hailed as heroes by East Germany. They received medals and a cash reward. However, after the reunification of Germany, they were put on trial in Berlin. Two were eventually released and another received a suspended sentence. The fourth, Ingo Heinrich, who, it was determined, fired the shot through Chris' heart, was found responsible for wrongfully causing Geuffroy's death and sentenced to three and a half years in prison, which was later reduced to two years of probation.

In all, over 5,000 people successfully escaped East Berlin between August 13, 1961 and November 9, 1989. In that same time span, 1,065 people were killed trying to cross the East German Border. On

what would have been his 35th birthday, June 21, 2003, the city of Berlin dedicated a monument in the honor of Chris Gueffroy, the last person killed attempting to climb the Berlin Wall in search of freedom.



The Berlin Wall stood from 1961 to 1989.

*Although 5,000 people safely escaped over the Berlin Wall, over 1,000 died. Just nine months before the Wall was torn down, twenty-year-old Chris Gueffroy was shot to death. After the reunification of Germany, the guard responsible for his death was convicted of wrongfully causing his death. Today there is a memorial in Berlin honoring Gueffroy as the last person killed trying to climb the Berlin Wall.*

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