

Part of a college-class paper written by J. Wanless Southwick on July 20, 1986:

The Day before the Berlin Wall

I remember August 12, 1961 when a companion and I were on our way back to West Berlin from a short book-buying trip in East Berlin. A strange tension saturated the subway station. Police paced briskly back and forth along the subway trains. They looked in windows to study passengers. Some people had to show identification papers before they could board the train.

It was just a short ride from one part of a city to another. Berliners had been doing it for decades. Why did they seem to worry? As we took our seats in the train, we felt secure with our American passports. The departure of the subway train seemed to be delayed. A policeman entered our part of the train. Passengers cringed imperceptibly. His eyes flowed from passenger, to suitcase, to over-sized shopping bag, to packages wrapped and tied securely with string.

I began to notice that passengers were wearing long coats, even though it was August. More careful observation discerned multiple layers of clothing being worn one on top of the other. All the overhead racks were stuffed with a variety of bags and boxes and more baggage was shoved under the seats. Why so much baggage for such a short trip? The crisp, click of the policeman's heels against the subway car's floor punctuated every measured step he took.

All eyes flitted away from the policeman. No one seemed to be breathing. The tension that stretched from one end of the car to the other was so tight that if someone could have started a tear in the canvas of our image, the painting would have ripped end to end.

I caught a glimpse of the policeman's face. Although the face bore a look of strength and authority, there was a hint of bewilderment across it, as if he knew more than he officially showed. His pace quickened slightly. With a quick turn and a duck of his head, he exited the subway car's door without a word. After an ever-so-slight nod of his head directed up the loading ramp, the subway train began to roll.

When the train passed the invisible line that marked the boundary between the two Berlins, tension peeled away like the wrapper on a candy bar. Breathing began. A low hum of whispers grew into animated talk. The train's screeching deceleration made us all lean toward the front of the train. People stood up and gathered their baggage, but... the doors didn't open! Tension reincarnated itself. Then, one more little lurch of the train and the doors popped open. The mass of passengers surged out of the train, up the stairs and out onto the open streets of West Berlin.

As my companion and I walked past a newsstand that evening, we saw a newspaper headline that declared a record number of 14,000 refugees had entered West Berlin from the East that week. The next morning, Sunday August 13, 1961, the communist government of East Germany used military forces to seal the border between East and West Berlin and then began building the infamous Berlin Wall that same day.