

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Der Tunnel

Credits:

Producers: Nico Hofmann, Ariane Krampe
Production Co.: teamWorx, München
Director: Roland Suso Richter
Screenplay: Johannes W. Betz
Cast : Felix Eitner, Heino Ferch, Sebastian Koch,
Uwe Kockisch, Nicolette Krebitz, Mehmet
Kurtulus, Alexandra Maria Lara,
Claudia Michelsen

Length: 150 min.
Language: German with German subtitles
Awards: Audience Choice Award, Best Feature Film
and Best Foreign Film
St. Louis, Audience Award Washington DC

Precis – Karl Moehlmann

June 17, 1953 -Soviet tanks put down a popular uprising in East-Berlin and East-Germany. The number of people fleeing to West-Berlin and West-Germany in 1953 ultimately reaches 330 000, coining the term ‘the people are voting with their feet’. June 17 becomes the “Tag der Wiedervereinigung” (Unification Day) in West-Germany.

October/November 1956 – Soviet tanks brutally crush a popular uprising in Hungary. Several thousand Hungarians are killed.

1961 - More than 3 million people have left East-Germany since 1947, most of them through the open city of Berlin. This hemorrhage of highly educated professionals and well trained workers and specialists severely threatens the GDR both politically and economically.

Sunday, August 13, 1961 – The East German authorities construct a wall through Berlin, sealing off the border to West-Berlin and stopping the flood of refugees to the West(46 km wall – 160 km border around West-Berlin; 116 watch towers, 10 000 border troops). This “anti-imperialist protection wall” (anti-imperialistischer Schutzwall) with the barbed wire pointing East will ultimately claim the lives of 239 East Germans trying to escape (5000 escape attempts). Built for eternity, this symbol of the Cold War will divide the city, the country and the European continent for 28 years until a bloodless revolution in East Germany leads to the opening of the wall on November 9, 1989.

The Berlin Wall inspired many daring escape attempts. This is the true story of one of those attempts. Harry Melchior (Heino Ferch), a swimming star for East Germany, wants out. He had been jailed as a youth for his political beliefs. Thanks to his backstroke skills, he is coddled by GDR officials. Yet his sullen hostility to the regime is not tempered by this treatment. When the wall is on the verge of being built, Harry makes his break,

passing through Checkpoint Charlie on a false passport. He reluctantly leaves behind his beloved sister Lotte (Alexandra Maria Lara) and her young daughter, but swears that he will return to rescue them. Together with some other men who want to get relatives and loved ones from the East as well, Harry devises a seemingly impossible project.

After finding a suitable basement in West Berlin, the groups starts to dig a tunnel that stretches for 136 meters beneath the wall into the cellar of a building in East Berlin. With their money running out, they are able to get the NBC network involved. NBC is in Berlin to shoot a movie about an escape from East Berlin. (This movie was released a year later in 1992 under the title 'Tunnel 28: Escape from East Berlin'.) NBC agrees to finance their project in return for exclusive footage of the actual escape.

And thus the real wall and the wall for the movie, the real tunnel und the tunnel for the movie, and other parallels are melded in a media marriage of representation and reality. The essence of course are real events like the jump of a Vopo across the barbed wire and the death of Peter Fechter who was shot and bled to death at the wall. There are Kafkaesque scenes at the fake wall that could be construed as precursors of today's reality shows, yet the suspenseful essence of Der Tunnel inheres in the pervasive potential of actual failure and physical death.

After 9 months, despite cave-ins and flooding, the team breaks through into a building on the East Berlin side. Unfortunately the wife of Harry's friend and tunnel engineer Matthis is an informant and passes information to the East German Police (Stasi). The compelling denouement includes the sobering truth that while history may not necessarily repeat itself, human nature always does.

Cannes, the film was shown at numerous international film festivals, was nominated for the German Film Award and the Bavarian Film Award, and went on to win the 1986 Youth Video Prize. **Sven's Secret (1994)** received many awards including the 1996 Erich Kaestner Prize and the Rocky Award at the Banff Television Festival. Richter enjoyed further cinema success with **14 Days to Life (14 Tage lebenslänglich, 1997)**. In 1997, he directed the TV thriller **Buddies**. For his outstanding work as director on **The Bubi Scholz Story (TV, 1998)**, he received the Bavarian Television Award. His other films include: **After the truth (Nichts als die Wahrheit, 1999)**, which was shown in competition at San Sebastian in 1999, as well as **A Hand Full of Grass (Eine Hand voll Gras, 2000)** and **The Tunnel (2001)**, both of which screend in competition at Montreal.

The Director

Roland Suso Richter, born in 1961, achieved a breakthrough with his first feature length film **Kolp** in 1983. Following its screening at