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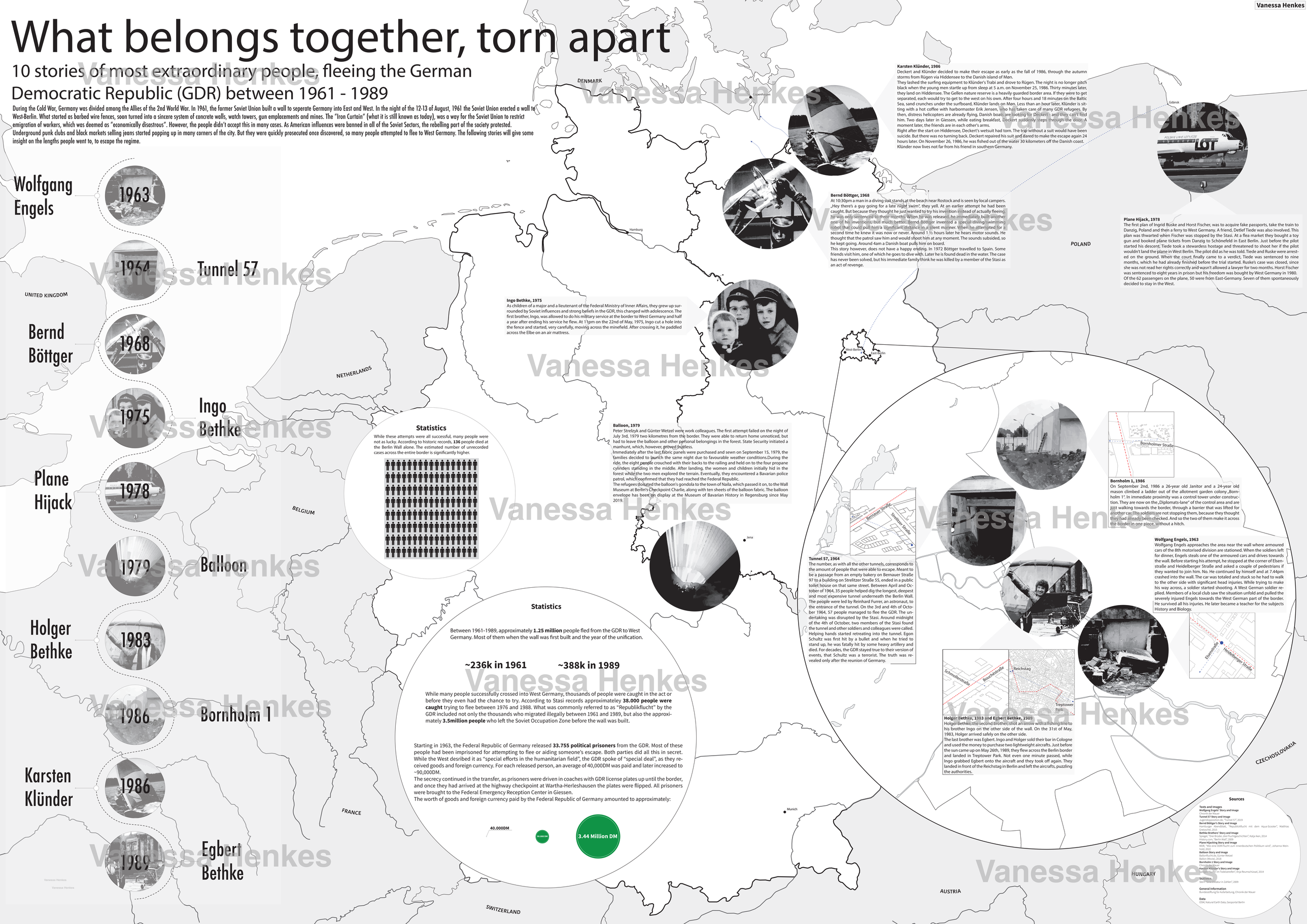
What belongs together, torn apart

10 stories of most extraordinary people, fleeing the German Democratic Republic (GDR) between 1961 - 1989

During the Cold War, Germany was divided among the Allies of the 2nd World War. In 1961, the former Soviet Union built a wall to seperate Germany into East and West. In the night of the 12-13 of August, 1961 the Soviet Union erected a wall to West-Berlin. What started as barbed wire fences, soon turned into a sincere system of concrete walls, watch towers, gun emplacements and mines. The "Iron Curtain" (what it is still known as today), was a way for the Soviet Union to restrict emigration of workers, which was deemed as "economically disastrous". However, the people didn't accept this in many cases. As American influences were banned in all of the Soviet Sectors, the rebelling part of the society protested. Underground punk clubs and black markets selling jeans started popping up in many corners of the city. But they were quickly prosecuted once discovered, so many people attempted to flee to West Germany. The following stories will give some insight on the lengths people went to, to escape the regime.



Wolfgang Engels — 1963

1964 — Tunnel 57

Bernd Böttger — 1968

1975 — Ingo Bethke

Plane Hijack — 1978

1979 — Balloon

Holger Bethke — 1983

1986 — Bornholm 1

Karsten Klünder — 1986

1989 — Egbert Bethke

Karsten Klünder, 1986
Deckert and Klünder decided to make their escape as early as the fall of 1986, through the autumn storms from Rügen via Hiddensee to the Danish island of Møn.
They lashed the surfing equipment to Klünder's Trabi and drove to Rügen. The night is no longer pitch black when the young men startle up from sleep at 5 a.m. on November 25, 1986. Thirty minutes later, they land on Hiddensee. The Gellen nature reserve is a heavily guarded border area. If they were to get separated, each would try to get to the west on his own. After four hours and 18 minutes on the Baltic Sea, sand crunches under the surfboard, Klünder lands on Møn. Less than an hour later, Klünder is sitting with a hot coffee with harbormaster Erik Jensen, who has taken care of many GDR refugees. By then, distress helicopters are already flying. Danish boats are looking for Deckert - and they can't find him. Two days later in Giessen, while eating breakfast, Deckert suddenly steps through the door. A moment later, the friends are in each other's arms.
Right after the start on Hiddensee, Deckert's wetsuit had torn. The trip without a suit would have been suicide. But there was no turning back. Deckert repaired his suit and dared to make the escape again 24 hours later. On November 26, 1986, he was fished out of the water 30 kilometers off the Danish coast. Klünder now lives not far from his friend in southern Germany.

Bernd Böttger, 1968
At 10:30pm a man in a diving suit stands at the beach near Rostock and is seen by local campers. „Hey there's a guy going for a late night swim", they yell. At an earlier attempt he had been caught. But because they thought he justwanted to try his invention instead of actually fleeing, he was only sentenced to three months. When he was released, he immediately built another one of his inventions, but much better. Bernd Böttger invented a special diving swimming robot that could pull him a significant distance in a silent manner. When he attempted for a second time he knew it was now or never. Around 1 ½ hours later he hears motor sounds. He thought that the patrol saw him and would shoot him at any moment. The sounds subsided, so he kept going. Around 4am a Danish boat pulls him on board.
This story however, does not have a happy ending. In 1972 Böttger travelled to Spain. Some friends visit him, one of which he goes to dive with. Later he is found dead in the water. The case has never been solved, but his immediate family think he was killed by a member of the Stasi as an act of revenge.

Plane Hijack, 1978
The first plan of Ingrid Ruske and Horst Fischer, was to acquire fake passports, take the train to Danzig, Poland and then a ferry to West Germany. A friend, Detlef Tiede was also involved. This plan was thwarted when Fischer was stopped by the Stasi. At a flea market they bought a toy gun and booked plane tickets from Danzig to Schönefeld in East Berlin. Just before the pilot started his descent, Tiede took a stewardess hostage and threatened to shoot her if the pilot wouldn't land the plane in West Berlin. The pilot did as he was told. Tiede and Ruske were arrested on the ground. When the court finally came to a verdict, Tiede was sentenced to nine months, which he had already finished before the trial started. Ruske's case was closed, since she was not read her rights correctly and wasn't allowed a lawyer for two months. Horst Fischer was sentenced to eight years in prison but his freedom was bought by West Germany in 1980. Of the 62 passengers on the plane, 50 were from East-Germany. Seven of them spontaneously decided to stay in the West.

Ingo Bethke, 1975
As children of a major and a lieutenant of the Federal Ministry of Inner Affairs, they grew up surrounded by Soviet influences and strong beliefs in the GDR, this changed with adolescence. The first brother, Ingo, was allowed to do his military service at the border to West Germany and half a year after ending his service he flew. At 11pm on the 22nd of May, 1975, Ingo cut a hole into the fence and started, very carefully, moving across the minefield. After crossing it, he paddled across the Elbe on an air mattress.

Balloon, 1979
Peter Strelzyk and Günter Wetzel were work colleagues. The first attempt failed on the night of July 3rd, 1979 two kilometres from the border. They were able to return home unnoticed, but had to leave the balloon and other personal belongings in the forest. State Security initiated a manhunt, which, however, proved fruitless.
Immediately after the last fabric panels were purchased and sewn on September 15, 1979, the families decided to launch the same night due to favourable weather conditions.During the ride, the eight people crouched with their backs to the railing and held on to the four propane cylinders standing in the middle. After landing, the women and children initially hid in the forest while the two men explored the terrain. Eventually, they encountered a Bavarian police patrol, which confirmed that they had reached the Federal Republic.
The refugees donated the balloon's gondola to the town of Naila, which passed it on, to the Wall Museum at Berlin's Checkpoint Charlie, along with ten sheets of the balloon fabric. The balloon envelope has been on display at the Museum of Bavarian History in Regensburg since May 2019.

Bornholm 1, 1986
On September 2nd, 1986 a 26-year old Janitor and a 24-year old mason climbed a ladder out of the allotment garden colony „Bornholm 1". In immediate proximity was a control tower under construction. They are now on the „Diplomats-lane" of the control area and are just walking towards the border, through a barrier that was lifted for another car. The soldiers are not stopping them, because they thought they had already been checked. And so the two of them make it across the border in one piece, without a hitch.

Tunnel 57, 1964
The number, as with all the other tunnels, corresponds to the amount of people that were able to escape. Meant to be a passage from an empty bakery on Bernauer Straße 97 to a building on Strelitzer Straße 55, ended in a public toilet house on that same street. Between April and October of 1964, 35 people helped dig the longest, deepest and most expensive tunnel underneath the Berlin Wall. The people were led by Reinhard Furrer, an astronaut, to the entrance of the tunnel. On the 3rd and 4th of October 1964, 57 people managed to flee the GDR. The undertaking was disrupted by the Stasi. Around midnight of the 4th of October, two members of the Stasi found the tunnel and other soldiers and colleagues were called. Helping hands started retreating into the tunnel. Egon Schultz was first hit by a bullet and when he tried to stand up, he was fatally hit by some heavy artillery and died. For decades, the GDR stayed true to their version of events, that Schultz was a terrorist. The truth was revealed only after the reunion of Germany.

Wolfgang Engels, 1963
Wolfgang Engels approaches the area near the wall where armoured cars of the 8th motorised division are stationed. When the soldiers left for dinner, Engels steals one of the armoured cars and drives towards the wall. Before starting his attempt, he stopped at the corner of Elsenstraße and Heidelberger Straße and asked a couple of pedestrians if they wanted to join him. No. He continued by himself and at 7.44pm crashed into the wall. The car was totaled and stuck so he had to walk to the other side with significant head injuries. While trying to make his way across, a soldier started shooting. A West German soldier replied. Members of a local club saw the situation unfold and pulled the severely injured Engels towards the West German part of the border. He survived all his injuries. He later became a teacher for the subjects History and Biology.

Holger Bethke, 1983 and Egbert Bethke, 1989
Holger Bethke, the second brother, shot an arrow with a fishing line to his brother Ingo on the other side of the wall. On the 31st of May, 1983, Holger arrived safely on the other side.
The last brother was Egbert. Ingo and Holger sold their bar in Cologne and used the money to purchase two lightweight aircrafts. Just before the sun came up on May 26th, 1989, they flew across the Berlin border and landed in Treptower Park. Not even one minute passed, while Ingo grabbed Egbert onto the aircraft and they took off again. They landed in front of the Reichstag in Berlin and left the aircrafts, puzzling the authorities.

Statistics

While these attempts were all successful, many people were not as lucky. According to historic records, **136** people died at the Berlin Wall alone. The estimated number of unrecorded cases across the entire border is significantly higher.

Statistics

Between 1961-1989, approximately **1.25 million** people fled from the GDR to West Germany. Most of them when the wall was first built and the year of the unification.

~236k in 1961 **~388k in 1989**

While many people successfully crossed into West Germany, thousands of people were caught in the act or before they even had the chance to try. According to Stasi records approximateley **38.000 people were caught** trying to flee between 1976 and 1988. What was commonly referred to as "Republikflucht" by the GDR included not only the thousands who migrated illegally between 1961 and 1989, but also the approximately **3.5million people** who left the Soviet Occupation Zone before the wall was built.

Starting in 1963, the Federal Republic of Germany released **33.755 political prisoners** from the GDR. Most of these people had been imprisoned for attempting to flee or aiding someone's escape. Both parties did all this in secret. While the West desribed it as "special efforts in the humanitarian field", the GDR spoke of "special deal", as they received goods and foreign currency. For each released person, an average of 40,000DM was paid and later increased to ~90,000DM.
The secrecy continued in the transfer, as prisoners were driven in coaches with GDR license plates up until the border, and once they had arrived at the highway checkpoint at Wartha-Herleshausen the plates were flipped. All prisoners were brought to the Federal Emergency Reception Center in Giessen.
The worth of goods and foreign currency paid by the Federal Republic of Germany amounted to approximately:

40.000DM — 90.000 DM — 3.44 Million DM

Sources

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