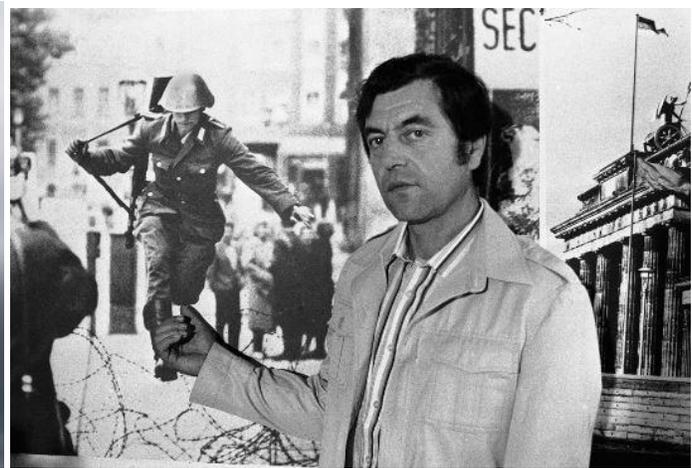# Aug. 15, 1961: Jumping the Berlin Wall – The courageous leap that made history

by Alex Q. Arbuckle

2009 - A sculpture based on Leibing's photo of Schumann is unveiled in Berlin to celebrate the 20th anniversary of reunification. ---- 1981 - Twenty years after his jump, Schumann stands before the iconic photo by Peter Leibing

At midnight on Aug. 13, 1961, East Germany sealed the borders around West Berlin. Germany had been divided into four occupation zones in the aftermath of World War II, each administered by an allied nation: France, Britain, the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The Soviet zone completely encircled the capital of Berlin, which was further divided among the four powers. The portion of the city controlled by France, Britain and the U.S. — West Berlin — was thus a capitalist bubble in the middle of the new Soviet state of East Germany.

East Germans fled the new regime in droves, increasingly through West Berlin, with 2,000 escaping each day by August 1961. To stem the bleeding of economic power and educated professionals, East Germany rapidly sealed the border with barbed wire barriers, which would later be fortified into the Berlin Wall.

Two days after the erection of the barriers, 18-year-old East German police officer Conrad Schumann was assigned to guard a section at the corner of Bernauer Strasse and Ruppiner Strasse. There, he nervously paced back and forth, smoking cigarettes and occasionally pushing down the two-foot-high coil of barbed wire. His behavior drew the attention of press photographers covering the border including 19-year-old Peter Leibing, who watched Schumann for more than an hour.

With the other guards distracted by a gathering crowd, Schumann swapped out his loaded submachine gun for an unloaded (and thus lighter) one. At 4 p.m., Schumann flicked away his cigarette. With West Berliners calling "come over!" to him, he took a running start and deftly leapt over the barrier, his gun clattering to the ground as he was whisked into a waiting West German police car.

A cameraman recorded a 16mm film of the jump. Leibing captured a single frame of Schumann soaring over the barbed wire, legs outstretched and head down in determination. Leibing's photo instantly made Schumann famous, immortalizing him as the first East German soldier to desert over the wall. Over 2,000 more would follow his example in the coming decades.

Though his moment of daring won him a degree of freedom, Schumann became lonely and isolated, only able to communicate with his family through letters — which were monitored and dictated by the East German secret police, who wanted to lure him back for punishment. He settled in Bavaria, started a family and worked on an Audi assembly line for 27 years.

When the Berlin Wall finally fell, Schumann was able to reunite with his family and friends, but was shunned by some for his desertion. In 1998, without leaving a note, he walked into the woods near his home and hanged himself. (He never earned a cent from the photo) Despite the sad end to his own story, the photo of Schumann's jump remains one of the most potent and recognized images of the Cold War.