

# The betrayed escape tunnel on Sebastianstrasse

# 28<sup>th</sup> June 1962

## A murderous trap

Between December 1961 and April 1982, a total of 75 escape tunnels were started with the aim of passing under the Berlin Wall and bringing relatives and friends to the West, to freedom. But only a quarter of the tunnel projects were successful. Most projects of this kind failed in the preliminary stages – often because of betrayal.

A dramatic situation occurred on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1962, on Sebastianstrasse between Kreuzberg and Berlin-Mitte. From the basement of the building at Sebastianstrasse 82, over the course of several weeks, a group of escape helpers, including Siegfried Noffke and Dieter Hötger, had dug a 30-metre-long and 0.75-metre-wide escape tunnel under the death strip, which led under the basement foundation of the building at Heinrich-Heine-Strasse 45–49 on the East Berlin side. The aim was to bring their own families, from whom they had been separated since the Wall was built on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1961, to the West.



First-generation wall on Sebastianstrasse (photo taken circa June 1962) – the escape tunnel was dug from the building at Sebastianstrasse 82 (the old building in the centre of the photo).

However, the Ministry for State Security (MfS or Stasi), which wanted to prevent “attacks on the GDR’s Berlin state border” by any means necessary, had already been informed about the plan on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1962.

An informer (the code name of the unofficial collaborator was “IM Pankow”), who knew the wife of one of the escape helpers, went to his commanding officer and passed on information about the tunnel project: “For this purpose, a vacant shop has been rented in West Berlin’s Sebastianstrasse, from whose basement a passage is being dug under the street to the first newly constructed block (Heinrich-Heine-Strasse). [...] Approximately eight metres have already been completed. The operation is to be completed before Pentecost.”

The MfS wanted to prevent this at all costs and immediately launched extensive investigations. The operation was given the code name “Moles”. The first thing they did was send an informer to the houses in question on the West Berlin side of the Wall to look for signs of excavation. At number 82, the agent became aware of an “unoccupied basement flat” and found suspiciously “fresh building rubble” in the backyard.

During investigations of the border strip in front of the building, the MfS also discovered a hole about two metres deep under a pavement slab and suspected an air shaft. However, this had nothing to do with the betrayed tunnel that led from the house at Sebastianstrasse 82. The hole belonged to another escape tunnel that had been dug by a group of student escape helpers from Sebastianstrasse 81 and abandoned after it collapsed, without Noffke and Hötger knowing anything about it.

The MfS district administration had drawn up a precise plan for the “completion of the ‘moles’ operational procedure”, which was put into action on Thursday, 28<sup>th</sup> June 1962. The escape helpers were clueless and fell into the trap. Around noon, they used their jack to break through the basement floor from below. “IM Pankow” had given them the signal, by knocking that the coast was clear. Dieter Hötger was the first to leave the tunnel, Siegfried Noffke was still in the tunnel exit when the order was given at around 12.15 p.m.

in the hallway made sure that no residents went into the basement. In the room with the tunnel exit itself, which the Stasi could monitor through a small peephole drilled in the basement door, only “IM Pankow” was present.

But, at that moment, the operation took an unexpected turn: only ten seconds after the signal for action, an MfS officer tore open the basement door and fired. Critically, a Stasi report on the leader of the arrest squad reads: “Before the bandits could surrender, Comrade L. lost his nerve and opened fire on the bandits.” He fired several bursts from a submachine gun. Almost “simultaneously, a second staff member fired a submachine gun, and two other staff members fired a few shots from a pistol.”

Siegfried Noffke and Dieter Hötger were taken completely by surprise; they had no weapons and could not defend themselves. In the narrow basement, the numerous Stasi bullets ricocheted dangerously. Hit by several shots, Noffke collapsed directly at the tunnel

exit, while Hötger was riddled by seven bullets. But the traitor “IM Pankow” also suffered serious injuries, as did the MfS officer who opened fire. While the injured MfS staff members were immediately treated and taken to the People’s Police hospital in the waiting ambulance, the seriously injured escape helpers were “interrogated on the spot”. An MfS sergeant recorded that Noffke, with his last ounce of strength, denied that he had had a weapon on him.

## The aftermath

The refusal of first aid had immediate consequences. An MfS report succinctly states: “Noffke succumbed to his injuries on the way to the prison hospital.” The MfS later had his body cremated. He was not given a grave. Noffke’s son was raised by his grandmother; he did not see his mother again until he was six years old. As a result of imprisonment, she was a broken woman (according to her son), fell seriously ill, and had to be placed in a nursing home in her early 40s.

After recovering in the Stasi prison hospital (today part of the Hohenschönhausen memorial), the seriously injured Dieter Hötger was sentenced in a show trial to nine years in prison for “acts of violence endangering the state and inciting citizens of the GDR to flee the Republic” and transferred to the special GDR State Security prison, the “Bautzen II”. On 28<sup>th</sup> November 1967, he was the only prisoner in the history of the prison to break out. Like the “Count of Monte Christo”, “Tunnel Dieter” (his nickname in prison) had worked his way through 65-centimetre-thick masonry with a stolen screwdriver and a teaspoon, scraping the mortar out of the joints for weeks. The resulting debris disappeared down the toilet, and he stacked the loosened bricks in the ever-growing hole in the wall behind his worktable in cell 19. Finally, on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1967, he was able to escape through a 40 x 30 centimetre hole.

After a nationwide manhunt, wanted by warrant (1,000-mark reward!) and chased by up to 7,500 men, he was only caught after nine

days on the run on a road near Kleinsaubertitz, about 20 kilometres north-east of Bautzen. He was subsequently sentenced to eight years’ imprisonment in a further trial. In September 1972, the Federal Republic of Germany bought his freedom. In addition to the two escape helpers, a total of eleven escapees betrayed by “IM Pankow” were caught by the MfS. With the exception of “four arrested children”, including Noffke’s son, they were sentenced to long prison terms.

Jürgen Hennig, alias “IM Pankow”, on the other hand, received a gold “NVA (National People’s Army) Medal of Merit” and a bonus of 3,000 marks from the GDR, on the personal instructions of Stasi boss Erich Mielke, for his “self-sacrificing and courageous personal commitment”, through which “the West Berlin border provocateurs were caught in the act and rendered harmless” “even before the tunnel had been used for smuggling.”

## Interview with Dieter Hötger

### How did you find a suitable site for a tunnel?

**Dieter Hötger:** Finding the place ... So I basically wandered around there for days after work, I worked in construction, and thought to myself, so one day, Sebastianstrasse, there might be something there. Of course, it was a long way from number 82 to the other side of the street. There was actually no other suitable place for me because the others had somehow already attracted attention with their escape tunnels. Trenches had then been dug so that it was no longer possible [Heidelberger Strasse] ... [...].

### How long did it take to dig the tunnel?

**Hötger:** So, it took us about six weeks to get to the house over there ...; we also interrupted the work once because the soil was caving in. And under a slippery road. When there is soil and I dig my way underneath it, it no longer had any grip and gave way ... And I was so fucking scared ...; I thought I was suffocating in there ... We didn’t fiddle around down there with electric cables, but with lights, tallow light ... [...].

### Did you shore up the tunnel?

**Hötger:** Yes, yes. Left and right with boards, and a board over the top. Then we dug away another ten centimetres of sand, put in the side boards again and put another board over the top. That’s how it went on and on ... [...].

### How many people worked on your tunnel?

**Hötger:** Well, at first there were three of us. Bergmann, who was also a colleague, dropped out; he got sick [...], and then there was me and the caretaker. And later Noffke joined us. He never had much time because of his work, while I went almost every day after work at 4 p.m., poof, into the subway and then there. [...]

### Did you also remove the sand or was the basement big enough?

**Hötger:** The sand stayed in the basement! And at the door that led outside, we nailed up boards and poured the sand behind them. [...]

### How long did the breakthrough take?

**Hötger:** The breakthrough, that didn’t take long. It was done in half an hour, three quarters of an hour. I only had to widen it enough so that my belly could get through. I was as thin then as I am now. [...] I was the first one out. First, I looked ...

### And there was still no indication that maybe something was wrong?

**Hötger:** Yes, Hennig [“IM Pankow”] was already in the basement. When I uncovered it, I saw him sitting behind the door waving exaggeratedly. He was already in the basement. It had all been arranged that way [...]. So, now I pulled up the jack, kept going – he was already inside – then I crawled out and stood in the corner, there he was, there was the tunnel, I was there in the corner with the window, and Noffke was right behind me. And Noffke’s upper body was just going through, he was about to pull himself out, when the door was yanked open, Hennig was standing behind the door – that was probably arranged with the Stasi so that he wouldn’t get shot, I bet – so he was behind the door, then they stopped for a moment, three or four bursts of fire ...

### So, they shot right away? Without any ...?

**Hötger:** Without what? Without anything! I immediately fell backwards because of the shot in my lung, and I saw that Noffke was motionless in the tunnel. [...]

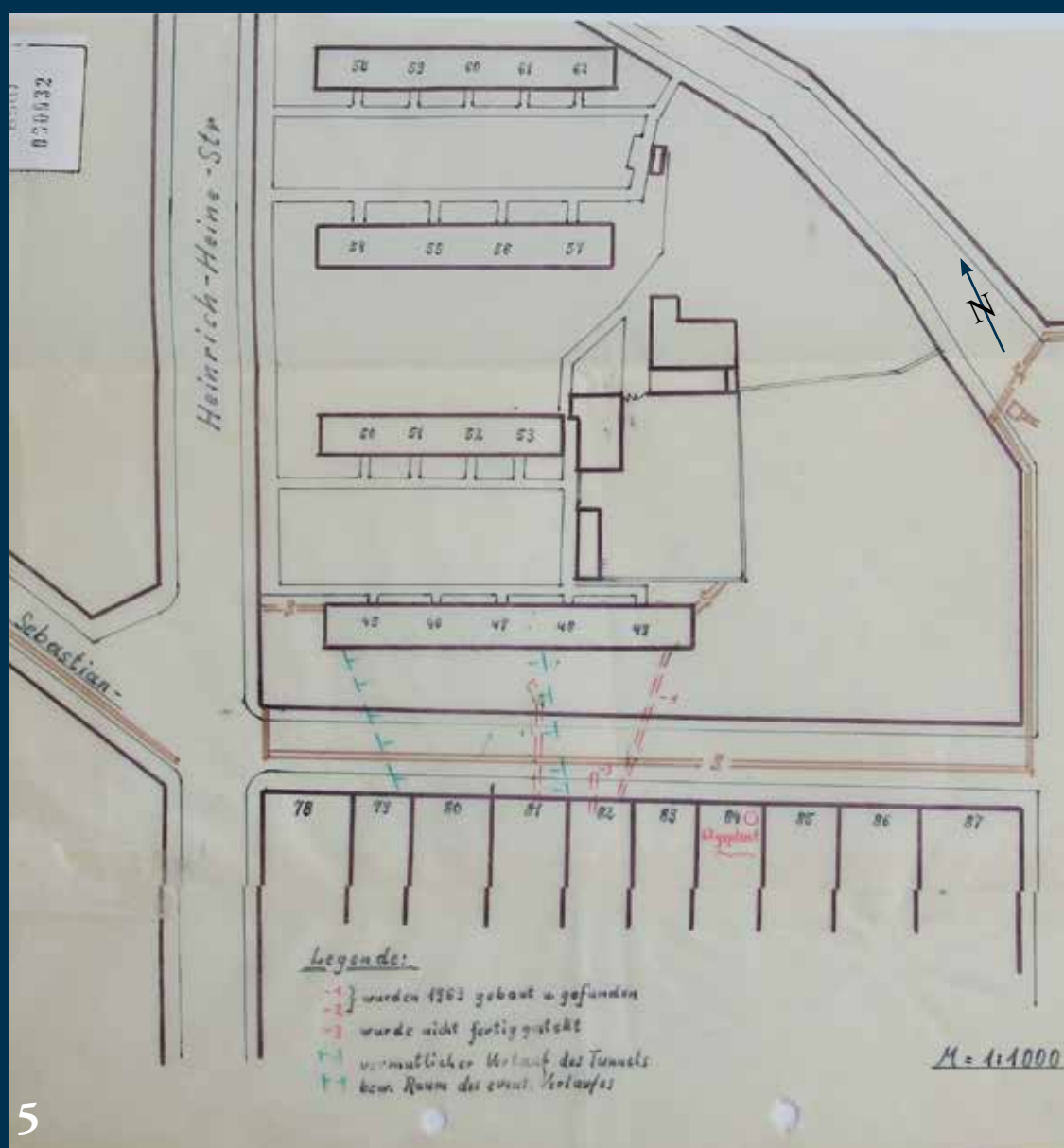
### And where were you injured? You took a real volley from the Kalashnikov ...

**Hötger:** Yes, at least two of them fired, I mean, I saw two barrels flashing. Of course, a submachine gun, when it’s set to continuous fire, well, that’s quick. Tens of shots go off. I took seven shots alone. [...]

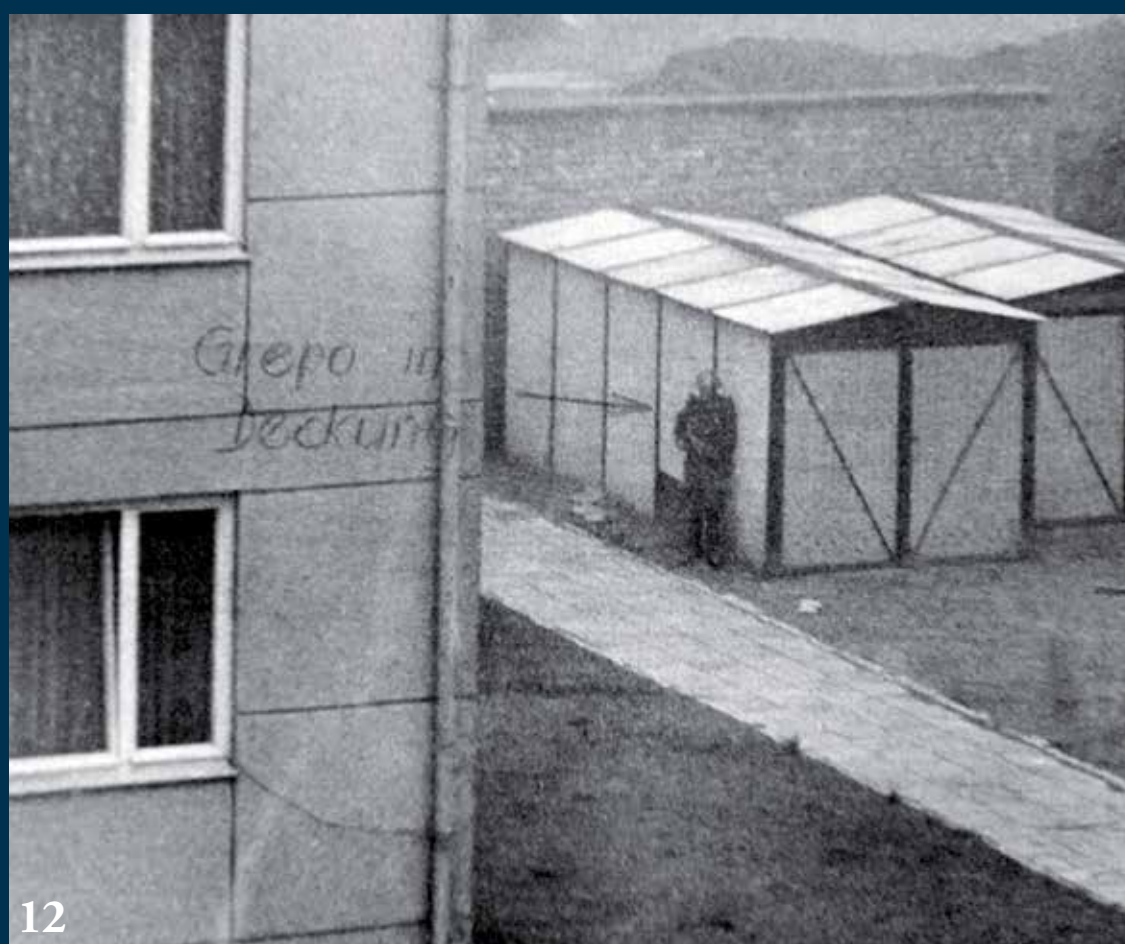
### But you were no longer able to walk then...?

**Hötger:** Yes, they just grabbed me, pulled me up and I had to go with them, I was bleeding here [points to his face] like a stuck pig, I remember ... Behind me there was two with a gun, and in front of me there was one. And then we went out across a compound into a school building, a gymnasium. And in this gymnasium, there were wooden beds. And they laid me down there, and then a major came, I remember. [...] He wanted to bandage me up, but before he did, he took out his gun, his Makarov, and put it to my head and said: “If you don’t tell me who shot you, I’ll kill you, you bastard”; and he spat at me. I remember all that, even though I was in so much pain because of the bullet in my lung. But I didn’t say anything – I couldn’t talk any more because everything hurt so much. [...]

Interview: Dietmar Arnold with Dieter Hötger on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2008 (extract)



Site plan of the MfS with the two tunnels begun in the summer of 1962. Only the eastern “Hötger-Noffke Tunnel” was completed on 28<sup>th</sup> June. The western tunnel dug by students collapsed and was abandoned.



After the operation is over, border guards with submachine guns secure the area.



The tracks of the armoured personnel carrier in the death strip, emptied sandbags, and a barbed wire-wrapped pole pushed into the alleged air shaft of Hötger and Noffke’s tunnel testify to the recent deployment of the border troops’ task force. The Stasi only discovered later that it was the wrong tunnel.



Third-generation wall (prefabricated construction, around 1970) on Sebastianstrasse, with steel speedbumps in front as a vehicle barrier.



Fourth-generation wall (“Grenzmauer 75”) / “Border wall 75” made of industrially manufactured reinforced concrete segments (1988).

## Two different MfS accounts of the shooting

“After the basement door was pushed open by the arresting group, Lehmann immediately opened fire. He fired several bursts from the submachine gun. Almost simultaneously, a second staff member fired from a submachine gun and two other staff members fired a few shots from a pistol. One bandit could be pushed out of the basement, another bandit was lying over the tunnel exit with bullet wounds. The wounded IM “Pankow” was helped out of the basement. The injured comrade Sub-Lieutenant Lehmann (Dept. VIII) was certainly hit by the shot of a co-worker. No weapons were found on the arrested bandits.”

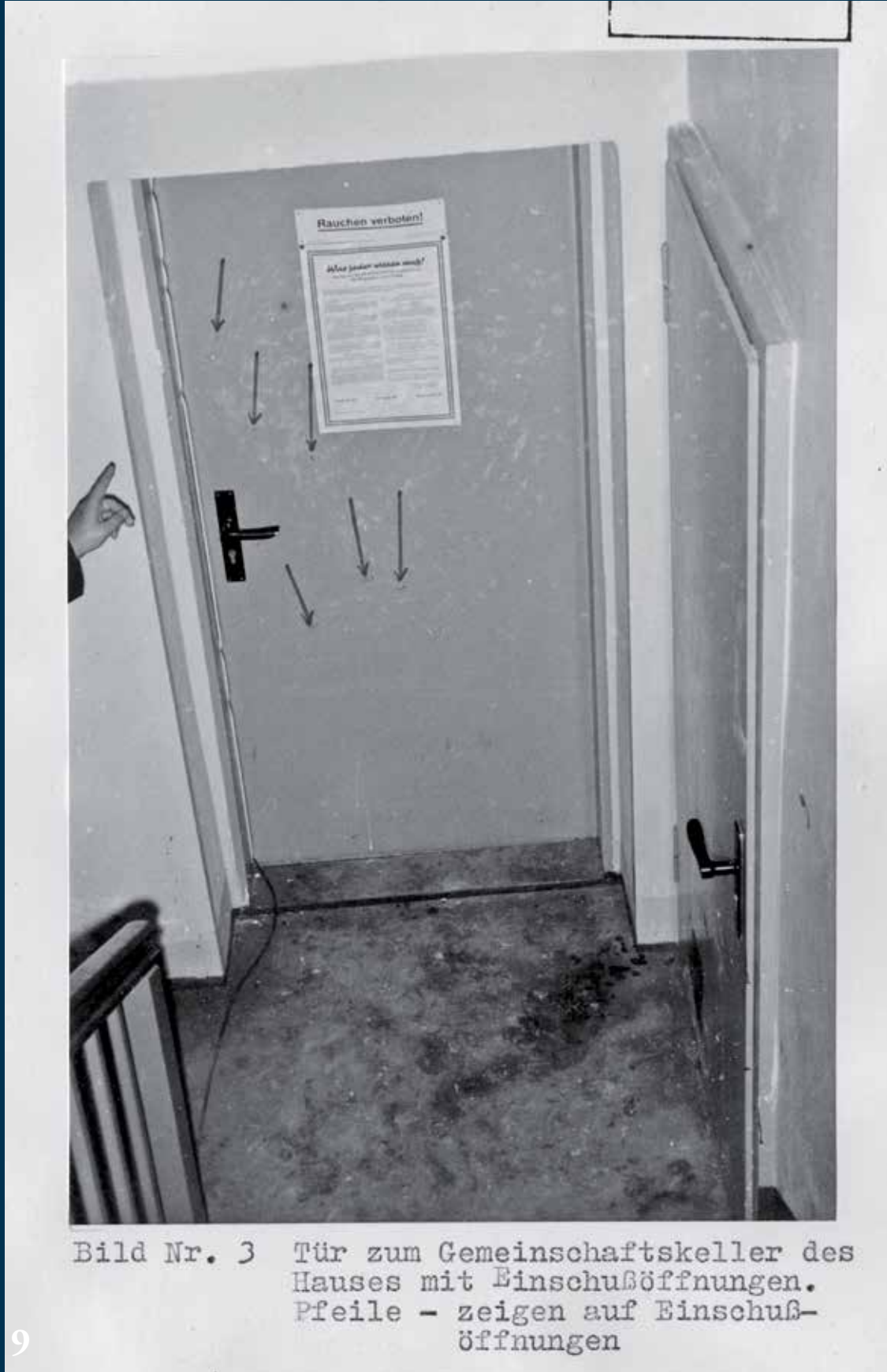
“On the afternoon of 28<sup>th</sup> June 1962, the vigilance of the GDR’s security organs enabled two terrorists entering the GDR to be apprehended after passing through the agent tunnel in the basement of the house at Heinrich-Heine-Strasse 48/49 in democratic Berlin. Since they resisted arrest, and the lives of the members of the security organs were threatened by the pistol fire of a terrorist who had remained in the agent tunnel and fled back to West Berlin – a member of the security organs was seriously injured – the members of the security organs made use of the firearm. In the process, the terrorist Noffke was injured; he succumbed to his injuries while being transported to hospital.”

Report by the head of the BV Berlin, Colonel Wichert, 28<sup>th</sup> June 1962, BStU MfS HA I 6086, pp. 249f.

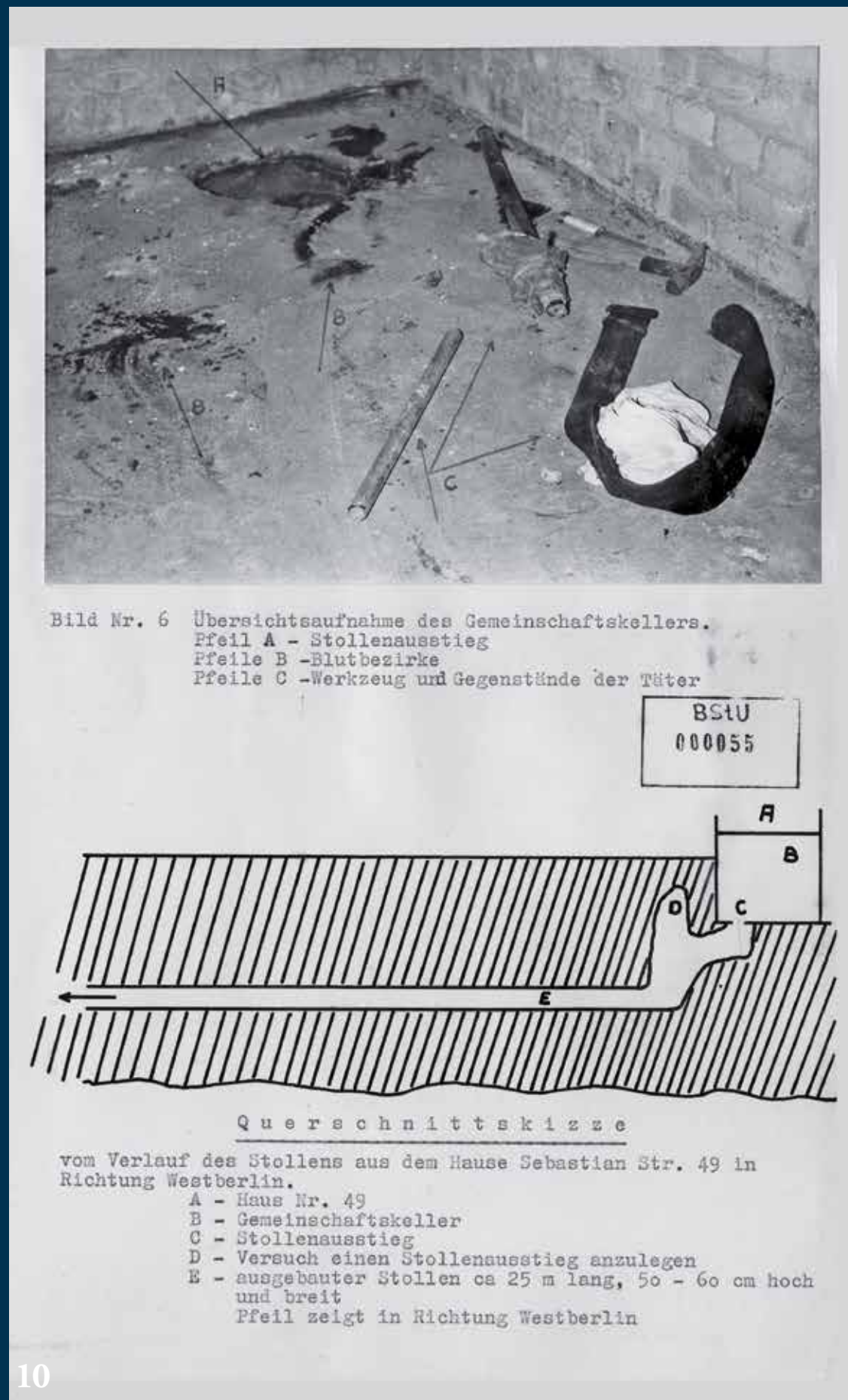
Information for the Foreign Ministry, Comrade Dr Helmut Kohl, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1962, BStU MfS HA I 6086, Bl. 285



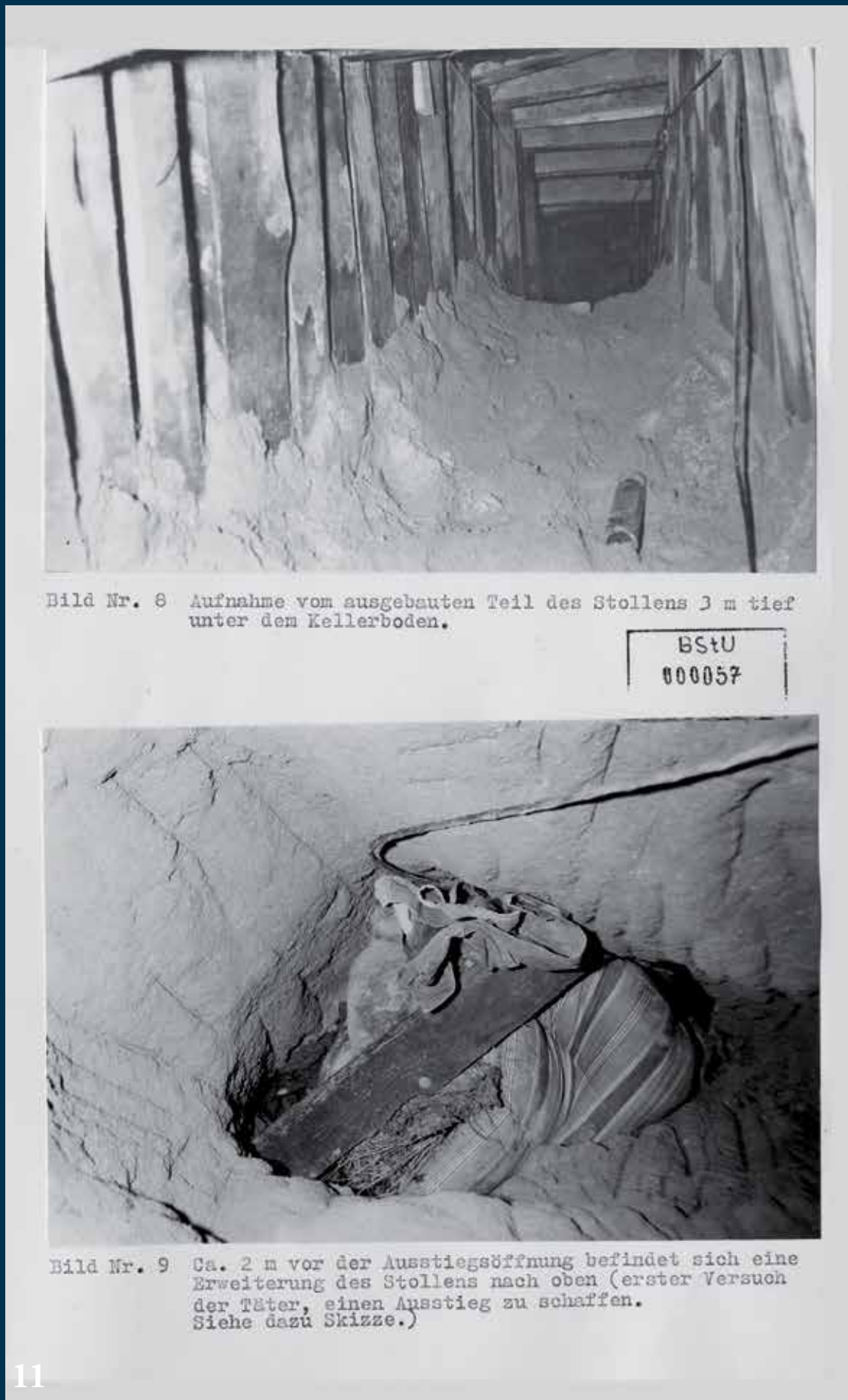
Viewing platform on the West Berlin side on the corner of Sebastianstrasse/Heinrich-Heine-Strasse.



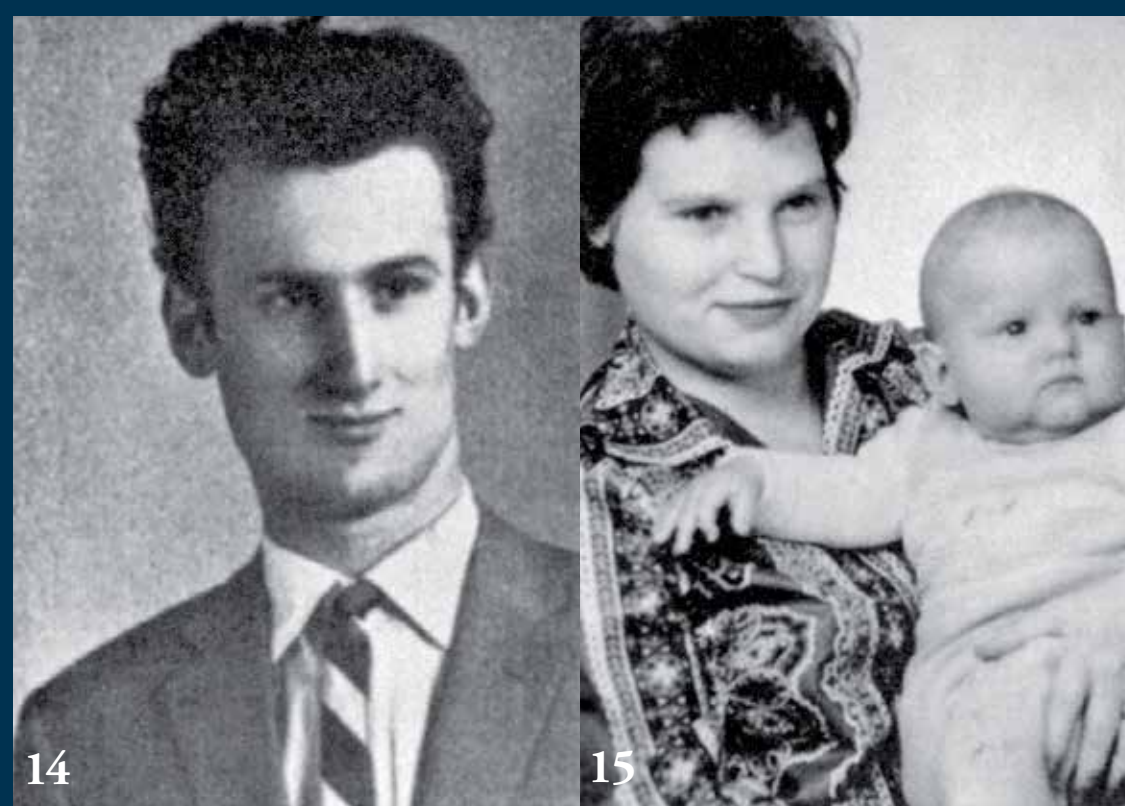
This crime scene photo contradicts all the testimonies of the Stasi employees involved. It shows that shots were fired from the outside through the basement door without it being opened first.



From the crime scene documentation of the MfS.



From the crime scene documentation of the MfS.



Siegfried Noffke, born in 1939 (1961); Siegfried Noffke's wife, Hannelore, with their son (1961).



Dieter Hötger, also born in 1939, and his wife (1961).

## Imprint

**Literature:** Dietmar Arnold, Sven-Felix Kellerhoff: Unterirdisch In die Freiheit – Die Fluchtunnel von Berlin (2., überarbeitete und erweiterte Auflage, Oktober 2019, Edition Berliner Unterwelten im Ch. Links Verlag)

**Text:** Dietmar Arnold, Berlin

**Translation:** Linda O’Grady, Berlin

**Graphics:** Friedrich, Berlin

**Printing:** Kass Medienproduktion GmbH, Potsdam

**Photo credits:** Abb. 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11 BStU; Abb. 2, 3, 4, 14, 15, 16 Archiv Berliner Unterwelten; V. Dieter Hötger (2–4, 14–16); Abb. 7 Berliner Mauer Archiv Hagen Koch; Abb. 12, 13 Polizeihistorische Sammlung (DBS)

This information and memorial plaque was donated by the Berlin Underworlds Association and presented to the public on 12<sup>th</sup> August 2009. It was updated on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2022.

We would like to thank the Mitte Memorial Plaque Commission for its support and the Berlinia eG housing cooperative for kindly granting permission to erect the plaque.

Other Berlin Underworlds Association information/memorial plaques on escape tunnels can be found at: Schötenhofer Strasse 70 (01018 Berlin), Krummenauer Strasse 15 (10435 Berlin), Bernauer Strasse 97 (13355 Berlin), Heidelberger Strasse 35 (12059 Berlin), Neuruppin Strasse 157 (14165 Berlin-Zehlendorf), Zimmerstrasse 8–9 (10969 Berlin) and Zimmerstrasse 54 (10117 Berlin).

**Contact**  
Tel.: 030-49 91 05 17, E-Mail: info@berliner-unterwelten.de

www.berliner-unterwelten.de

