

145 Meters To Freedom



13+

Maja Nielsen

Tunnel Constructor

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Berlin 1961: Things couldn't be better for Achim - he has his Abitur in the bag, a place at university is secure and Chris, the girl he secretly loves, seems to like him too. But everything changes overnight: with the building of the Wall, the GDR regime takes a tougher tone. Distrust, persecution and arrests are the order of the day. When one of his friends ends up in prison, Achim makes a difficult decision: he must get out of East Berlin and leave everyone he loves behind. Once on the other side, he does everything he can to help people escape from the GDR. Together with other helpers, he digs tunnels from West to East Berlin - in constant fear of being discovered by the Stasi and full of hope that one day he will see Chris again.

A gripping novel about the legendary tunnel escapes from the GDR, based on a true story.

"The book describes the events of the time very realistically. It is exciting and very sensitively told and brings the most exciting years of my life very close to me once again. A piece of German-German history!"
Joachim Neumann, tunnel constructor

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Maja Nielsen's stories have been released as books, audiobooks, and radio features. Her hit series *Adventure!* With Gerstenberg Verlag has garnered numerous awards.



The Tunnel Constructor

Summer of 1961: Achim (who just got out of high school and is about to study in Cottbus) and Chris (laboratory assistant at the Academy of Sciences in East Berlin) are spending some vacation days with Bea (Achim's sister), Janna and other friends, in particular Hase and Lampe on the island of Usedom. When a group of young people is dancing in a beer tent to very loud music, the police brutally intervenes. Lampe is taken away with other "rioters". Still on the beach - it is August 13th - the group of friends hears that the sector border in Berlin is being sealed off. When Achim and Hase learn in Berlin that Lampe is now in custody, they collect signatures in favor of their friend. Achim and Chris, who have developed strong feelings for each other since their Baltic vacation, meet again and fall in love.

The Wall, the sentencing of Lampe to eight years in prison, interrogations by the police and the Ministry for State Security (MfS) and finally Hase's intention to run away, are the decisive impetus for Achim: He wants to leave the GDR. This escape succeeds on December 21, 1961 via the Friedrichstraße border crossing - with dyed blonde hair and the passport of a Swiss national.

A little later Chris is interrogated for hours by the Stasi and finally forced to make a "voluntary commitment", which means she has to cooperate with the MfS. She enters into a sham

liaison with Sascha, a colleague and son of a strict SED functionary, and keeps her friends Janna and Bea at a distance (shortly after, the two of them manage to escape to West Berlin). Meanwhile Achim is involved in three tunnel constructions in Bernauer Street, which run from west to east. Chris sends him a hidden message: "I want to come to you. Make that possible. C." The first tunnel has to be rerouted due to two water ingresses. On September 14, 1962 – earlier than planned - the breakthrough in a cellar of the house at Schönholzer Straße 7 takes place. A total of 29 refugees gets through. Chris is not there because she could not be informed in time. But Achim doesn't give up.

The next tunnel to Brunnenstrasse 45 at a depth of twelve meters deep is revealed, however. Achim and Bea learn that their mother, Chris and other friends have been arrested. Chris is held in the Stasi detention center in Pankow. After being sentenced to 21 months in prison, she is transferred to the Barnimstraße women's prison. Likewise Achim and Beas mother.



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In the meantime, Achim joins another group of escape helpers, who have just started a disused bakery to dig a new tunnel. On October 3, 1964 the tunnel ends unintentionally after 145 meters - but favorable for the escapees - in an unused toilet block in the courtyard of Strelitzer Straße 55.

Chris, who had been released early, had written to Achim: "I'm back now." At the tunnel entrance Achim and Chris finally see each other again. On the second night – after 57 men, women and children have crawled through – the escape operation was discovered by Stasi officers. All the escape helpers manage to escape through the tunnel though. The novel ends with Achims and Chris' wedding with their friends around, including Lampe, who has since been ransomed by the West.

The escapes are described realistically and excitingly. The descriptions of the humiliating Stasi interrogations and the oppressive prison conditions are particularly moving.

The descriptions of the work in the tunnels, the claustrophobic atmosphere prevailing there, the arming of the tunnel diggers, the monotonous rations and the days of barracking show that careful research has been carried out here - on the basis of numerous publications on Berlin's tunnel history.

The author Maja Nielsen has succeeded in writing a gripping novel about a piece of german-german history that is almost impossible to fully comprehend these days. She uses the example of the real person Joachim Neumann, shows how overwhelming responsibility can be. Neumann could have started a whole new life but even in West Berlin, he remains tied to the East. Instead of really studying civil engineering at university, he practiced civil engineering underground as an escape helper in the student union. And luckily, in real life, just like in the book, there was a happy ending: Achim was happily married to Chris until her death.



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