

# Escapes across the Iron Curtain



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Incredible stories of individuals with the drive and courage to escape the Soviet Bloc

- ▶ Czechoslovak veterans of the RAF make the first triple passenger-plane hijack in history
- ▶ From the Budapest Uprising to glory with Real Madrid
- ▶ Through tunnels to the West Berlin metro under East Berlin and then digging back to the east to fetch the family
- ▶ Across the Baltic Sea in 116 hours



# Escapes across the Iron Curtain

In 2021 it will be 75 years since Winston Churchill's famous Iron Curtain speech depicting the post-war division between democratic and undemocratic regimes in Europe.

The series, *Escapes across the Iron Curtain*, will show – through human stories – the tragedy of a divided Europe, the various motivations for escape to the West, and the means deployed by the authorities in Soviet bloc countries to curtail the rights and restrict the movements of their citizens.



The project will cover significant historical moments in the Cold War period that touched the lives of families and society throughout the frontline border countries behind the Iron Curtain:

- ▶ the copycat Stalinist terror of Czechoslovakia in the early 1950s, complete with show trials and collectivisation;
- ▶ Hungary, a country to all intents and purposes at war with itself and the Soviet Union in 1956;
- ▶ the construction in 1961–62 of the Berlin Wall as the ultimate symbol of the Cold War;
- ▶ Poland in the 1980s under martial law – the final attempt by the Soviet Union to maintain the artificial division of Europe before the Iron Curtain was finally ripped to shreds at the end of the decade.

Each episode will work as an enthralling adventure/escape story, but at the same time will explore on a deeper level the reasons why someone would have risked his or her life to escape across the Iron Curtain, illustrate the lack of freedoms in the Eastern Bloc, and highlight the lengths to which the Communist regimes would go to stop people escaping.

The stories include heart-breaking choices, not least the dilemmas surrounding escapees' decisions to either leave without their loved ones – knowing there could be dire consequences for those left behind – or stage an escape that would bring their families to the West as well. One of the cruelest traits of the Communist repression was the propensity to blackmail citizens by threatening retribution against their family members.

In short, the series will explore the underlying context and motivations for flight to the West rather than simply relating the tales of each escape. Through the storytelling, the escape and its context will be revealed to the viewers step by step, building up suspense as to what will happen next. The suspense will be authentically sustained, since many of the escapes could have ended in death for those fleeing to freedom, and one of the stories does indeed end in the death of a border guard. Such details will be held back until each story unfolds the actual course of events.



The episodes will include interviews with survivors, relatives, and expert historians. A voice-over will be used to provide clear coherent narration.

Visually, the series will combine archive footage from the period, location shoots where the events took place – very much from the perspective of the participants in the escape and minimalistic re-enactment – mood camera pieces without dialogue, and only sparse re-enactment.

The balance in each episode in terms of types of material used will depend both on the subject matter and the number of survivors still alive, but stylistically they will all feel part of a coherent whole with the same voice-over, similar technique in re-enactment and post-production effects in the use of archive material. However, each part will also stand on its own – with its own dramatic feel to match the situation and setting. The claustrophobia of the boat sequence in the Polish story will be very different from the co-ordinated drama of the Czechoslovak triple airplane hijack.



## Episode 1: Czechoslovakia 1950

The project started with an idea for a single documentary about a group of Czechoslovak pilots – all of whom had flown as RAF pilots during the Second World War – who undertook a dramatic escape from then Czechoslovakia after the Communist takeover of 1948. The escape was the first time in world history that a triple hijack of passenger-planes had taken place.

A link to a short promo can be viewed here:

▶ [Vimeo link](#)

Password: RAF

The RAF veteran pilots were facing persecution by the Communist authorities who distrusted anyone with any contacts in the West. Their colleagues were losing their jobs, being interrogated by the secret police, and in some cases arrested, tortured and condemned to forced labour in the uranium mines.

The pilots first left their country during the war to help fight to free their country from an invader, and now three of the same pilots felt compelled to leave their country for a second time, this time determined to leave their country in search of freedom for themselves and their families.

The pilots all worked for the Czechoslovak State Airline, which was reliant on RAF veterans, since there were so few trained pilots in the country. In 1948 – the year when the Communist Party took complete control of the government and set about crushing all opposition – the airline started to train more politically correct students with the clear aim of banishing the RAF from the airline. By 1950, those remaining RAF pilots were restricted to internal flights and no family members were permitted on board with them.

The pilots planned their escape meticulously – waiting for a date when each of them would be pilots on different flights from Brno, Ostrava and Bratislava to Prague at similar times of the day. They then organized for their families to be on the planes flown by the other pilots.



A few additional crew members and passengers were also involved in the plot, each with their own reasons for wanting to emigrate. However, all three flights encountered problems at take-off – a suspicious co-pilot, excess baggage from escapees requiring a reduction in the amount of fuel on board, and identity checks by suspicious officials. The passengers who knew nothing about what was happening included secret police officers, Communist officials and even the General Director of the state airline. The co-pilots and crew members who were not aware of the plan included two RAF veterans who could not take advantage of the opportunity to emigrate, once they learnt about the hijacking, as they did not want to leave behind their families in Czechoslovakia.

When the three planes steered away from their flight path to Prague towards the US airbase in Erding in West Germany, the pilot that took off in Bratislava faced the additional nerve-wracking risk that Russian aircraft might seek to shoot down the plane over Austria.

In spite of the skilful planning that was undertaken, it was still nothing short of a miracle that the flights went ahead, no one was killed, and all the planes arrived safely in Erding. It was a huge international incident, and the Czechoslovak Communist government demanded the return of everyone and later issued death sentences against all the pilots in their absence. The Czechoslovak propaganda machine went into overtime, describing the pilots as gangsters and in 1952 making *Únos* (Kidnapped), a major propaganda film directed by Ján Kadár, who went on to win an Oscar in 1966 (and himself emigrated to the USA in 1968).

The story will highlight the tragedy of Czechoslovakia's Second World War heroes and their treatment by the Communist regime. Their fate highlighted the determination of the government to eliminate anyone who symbolised a different way of life. Show trials were rife and huge fortified border areas were established, isolating Czechoslovakia from the West.



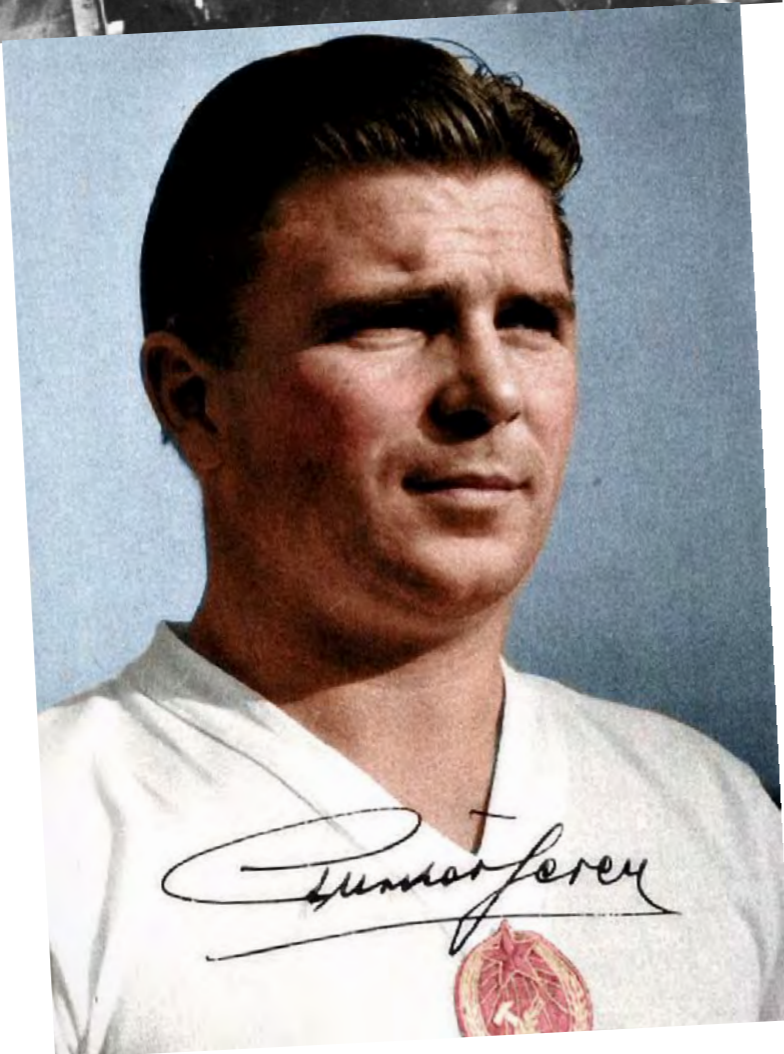




## Episode 2. Budapest 1956

In the early 1950s, Hungary had the best football team in the world. The country's most famous player was Ferenc Puskás, one of the greatest goal-scorers of all time. He served as captain of the national team until the Budapest Uprising in 1956 – a surge of support for freedom in Hungary – was crushed by the invasion of troops from the Soviet Union.

Puskás had travelled with his team, Budapest Honvéd, to the West just before the start of the invasion, and he and his team-mates decided not to return home. But what of their families back home? The footballing émigrés launched a fundraising tour of games in the West to collect money for their families, while the Hungarian government tried to enforce a worldwide ban through FIFA on Puskás playing football, which initially stopped him playing in any official game.



But the key focus of the documentary will be the plight of Puskás's wife, Erzsébet and four year old daughter, who remained in Hungary. A famous husband had asked for asylum abroad, and how were they to escape? Along with other families of the footballers they tried to escape on three separate occasions but were arrested near the border at the first attempt. In freezing cold weather and with the help of smugglers, paid for by Puskás, the families were told where to jump off a train near the border, who to meet at the nearby village and then take the final trip on foot across the border. In the dark and bitterly cold weather the group got split up but on 1 December 1956, Erzsébet and Anikó, finally made a successful attempt to evade the Soviet soldiers and escape into Austria.

The family were reunited abroad, but the difficult times continued for Puskás until the ban was finally lifted and he was signed by Real Madrid, followed by a period of incredible success for him and his new team.

Puskás is still considered to be one of the greatest footballers of all time. Against this glamorous story, the programme will explore how the quashing of the uprising in Hungary in 1956 represented the first manifestation that the Soviet Union would not tolerate any liberalisation of any of its satellite countries in the Eastern bloc, and how thousands of Hungarians strived to escape to the West.

## Episode 3. East Berlin 1962

The division of Berlin was the most poignant symbol of the Iron Curtain, but the building of the Berlin Wall did not commence until 1961. With its completion, the chances of escape to the West were reduced to a minimum, yet thousands still tried.

Two brothers and their families were determined to join a third brother in West Berlin. They climbed down an underground shaft and tried to flag down a train going between two Western stations. The train had to pass through part of East Berlin as part of its route. They made their way along the tunnel, which – luckily for them – was deserted. A train approached, and one of them signalled to the driver. The train slowed down and stopped, then one of the carriage doors opened. The West Berliners wasted no time and scrambled to help the family on to the carriage. They were then dispersed randomly throughout the carriage.

With all on board, the train continued its journey under East Berlin, passing five stations in the East – all with police on the platforms. Once the train had passed through the fifth station, the conductor came and told them they had made it.

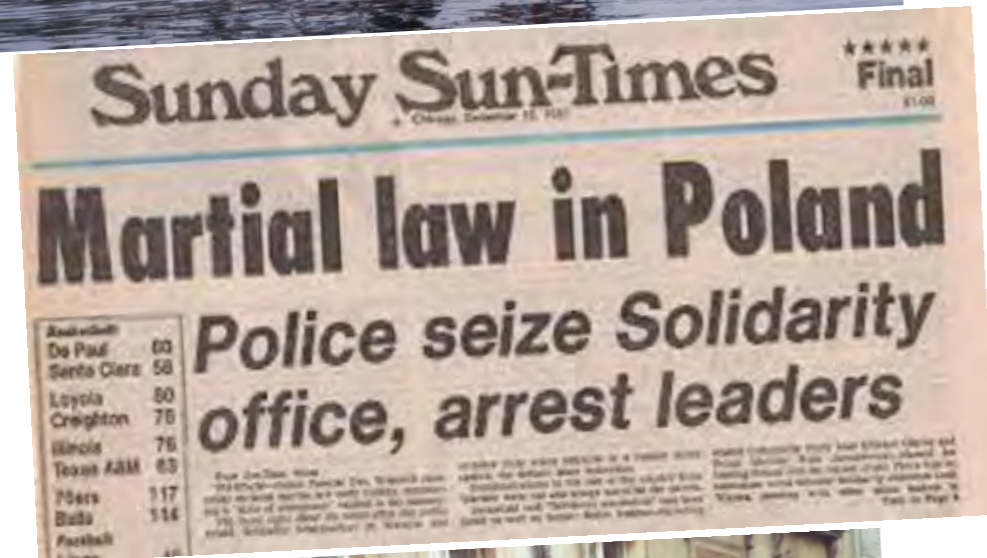


Later the same year, the brothers drew up a plan to return to East Berlin to bring to the West the wife and two children who had remained behind. They started to dig a tunnel that would go 25 yards under the wall and no man's land zone. The work was divided into shifts: four men per six-hour shift, four shifts a day.

Three weeks later, they broke through to the other side. One of the brothers was given a gun before he made his way to fetch his family. Having reached his family, he set off with them to escape back through the tunnel, but a guard stopped them on the way back. The brother instructed his family to keep going, prompting the guard to walk towards him, gun in hand. The brother pulled his gun out and shot the guard. This alerted the guard tower, resulting in a hail of gunshot raining down on him and his family. The family reached the tunnel, and climbed down the hole. The guards pursued and started shooting down the hole. Fortunately, no members of the family were hurt. The guard who was shot died of his wounds, however – and the brother who shot him continues to live with the guilt to this day.

As background to the escape, the documentary will examine the situation in Berlin in the early 1960s, when the division of the city tore many families apart.





## Episode 4. Poland 1986

Two men were desperate to leave Poland, then led by the Communist government of General Wojciech Jaruzelski. Even though martial law had been lifted in 1983, the level of repression in the country remained high.

One of the two men had secretly married an American whom he met during a sailing championship, while the wife and child of the other man were travelling in West Germany. Both men were expert yachtsmen, but neither had permission to leave from a Polish port, let alone to sail to the West.

A captain with permission to leave a Polish port was found, but only for a short trip within Polish waters. He, however, thought there was only one crew-member on board with him, since the other escapee had hidden in a minuscule compartment that was concealed so that the various police checks would not uncover him.



The boat embarked on a mammoth journey via Sweden and then on to West Germany. The various close calls with coast guards and Polish secret police were compounded by other dangers, as the hidden escapee was nearly poisoned by battery leakages. The escape was successful, although soured by the feeling of betrayal towards the captain who learned about the second passenger and the aim of emigration only when they were crossing into Swedish waters.



This documentary, while following the drama and claustrophobia of the yacht escape, will also explore Poland at a moment in history when its society was on the verge of a momentous revolution against totalitarian rule. For its citizens, with all its land frontiers bordering on Communist countries, the only escape to the democratic West was across the sea. The filming of the programme will visually exploit this to the full.



This fourth programme is set in the final years before the Iron Curtain was lifted, and Poland was the country where the breakthrough in protests against dictatorial rule to a large degree ushered in the fall of the first domino in the collapse of the Soviet system. However, few genuinely believed that the collapse would happen so fast, so the desperation to escape was as strong as ever.



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