

Television lights from the West silhouetted Brandenburg Gate.



EYEWITNESS TO HISTORY

Blue Swords and the Wall

Few people are ever in the right place at the right time. Even fewer are lucky enough to be in the right place when history is made. Members of the U.S. International Figure Skating Team achieved both in November in East Berlin at the Pokal der Blauen Schwerter (the Blue Swords Competition).

The team was made up of single skaters Robyn Petrosky (St. Paul, MN)

and John Baldwin, Jr. (San Diego, CA) and pair team, Aimee Offner (Norristown, PA) and Brian Helgenberg (Philadelphia, PA). They were accompanied by team leader, J. Barlow Nelson and his wife, judge William (Will) Smith, (all of Tulsa, OK) and coaches Bob Young (Wilmington, DE), Nikki Reinke (St. Paul, MN), Donna and John Baldwin, Sr. (San Diego).

"We arrived on Monday, and everything was normal at customs. The U.S. Embassy had assured us that things were stable and safe," Barlow Nelson explained. "Then when we got to town, we could feel the tension. There were demonstrations every night in the square right below our hotel windows. They intensified, and it seemed as if something had to give.

"The first day we walked down to the Wall—the East Wall—and the Brandenburg Gate," coach Bob Young recalled. "Most people think of one wall, but there are really two: the West Wall and the East Wall with a no-man's land of mines and barbed wire between.

"We took pictures of the team in front of the Gate and at Checkpoint Charlie. We couldn't go to West Berlin because we didn't have exit and entry papers. Since we had less practice time assigned than some of the Eastern bloc countries, we had a little free time to explore the city which is beautiful with magnificent buildings and architecture.

"Everything had been a little intense, yet routine as far as the competition was

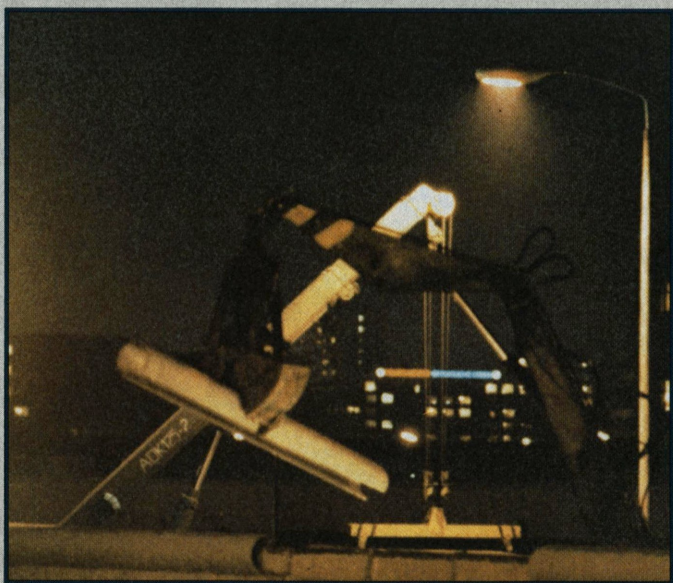
concerned—until we were at dinner Thursday night and the announcement came that the Wall was open. People were shocked. Some were scared, not knowing if it was a trap.

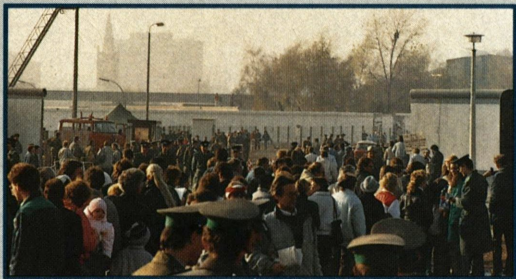
"At the table was the translator assigned to our group who told us she had applied to leave East Germany and had been waiting for official approval," Nelson explained. "When the news came about the Wall, she burst into tears. 'We're free. They're letting us go,' she said and started to cry. She promised that she would stay with us through the competition . . . but we never saw her again after that night."

"I went immediately down to the Wall when I heard the news," Young relates. "There was a huge crowd. All the publicity really came from the West Wall, the one covered with graffiti. People were climbing on it, lined as far as the eye could see, celebrating and attacking it with axes. You could hear the singing and cheering and announcements on the loud speakers.

"The East Wall was a total contrast: heavily guarded by soldiers and ab-

At midnight, the first piece of the East Wall was broken away to make a new crossing.





East Berliners mass at the border for a first visit to the West.

solutely quiet. It is painted a plain white without a scratch on it anywhere—a bleak barrier.”

It is an ugly wall. It divides people of a common heritage. It divides families. It is an insane invention of political negotiations. It is the most famous wall in the world.

—Will Smith

“We were there nine days and did not see another American,” according to Nelson, “but you could look across the other side and see Americans climbing the wall and the lights from American TV crews.”

“I was headed back to the hotel when I ran into a British news crew,” Young tells. “I happened to have on an NBC jacket I had traded for ages ago. They saw it and assumed I was there for the same reason they were and told me that

at midnight the first hole was going to be opened in the wall for a new crossing. The check points couldn’t handle the thousands of people. Everyone else was gathered at the main gates waiting for something to happen. No one knew about this.”

“Get your crew and get down there,” the Englishman said.

“I raced to the arena and grabbed Will (Smith) who had just finished judging and Brian (Helgenberg). We dashed to the hotel and changed and then went to a tiny side street about four blocks from the Brandenburg called Potsdamerplatz.



An unusual sight: an East German border guard hands a piece of the Wall to a West German over the fence.

It was secluded and had a heavy military force. We got there about 10:30 P.M. and found a little building with people on top. We climbed up and joined what turned out to be foreign news crews.

“An announcement must have been made because TV lights and crews appeared on the west side; there were even cameramen in trees. Trucks began arriving and setting up. Between the walls, other trucks began paving the beginning of a road. Then a little before midnight a giant crane came rumbling down the tiny street under heavy security.

“It moved into place. The engines roared and slowly giant jaws started to lift off the top piece of concrete from the East Wall.”



All passports were carefully checked before East Germans could pass to the West.



Before the Wall opened, the team visited the border dividing East and West Berlin near Checkpoint Charlie.

"There were cheers from the West, but it was silent on the East," Smith recalls. "Then another piece of the wall was removed. Music and fireworks from the West. Silence on the East. Little by little the wall continued to come down.

Smith said that they watched almost hypnotic, in silence. "Little by little the wall continued to come down. We could see the West Wall, hear the people and the music. On our side you could have heard a pin drop. We stood in awe and slowly, I became aware that we were watching what might be one of the most historical moments of the century. We were eyewitness to history.

"My mind was reeling. I had come to judge my first international competition and found my eyes locked not on skaters but on an image that very few others saw and that I'll never forget."

The Wall had been built long before any of the skaters in the competition were born. Its existence was known, but the true significance of what the opening of the Wall meant was perhaps not as emotional or overpowering to them as it was to others. (And no one could have imagined what would follow in

other Eastern Bloc countries in the weeks that followed.) The opening of the Berlin Wall began to open a free Europe.

Ich bin eine Berliner.

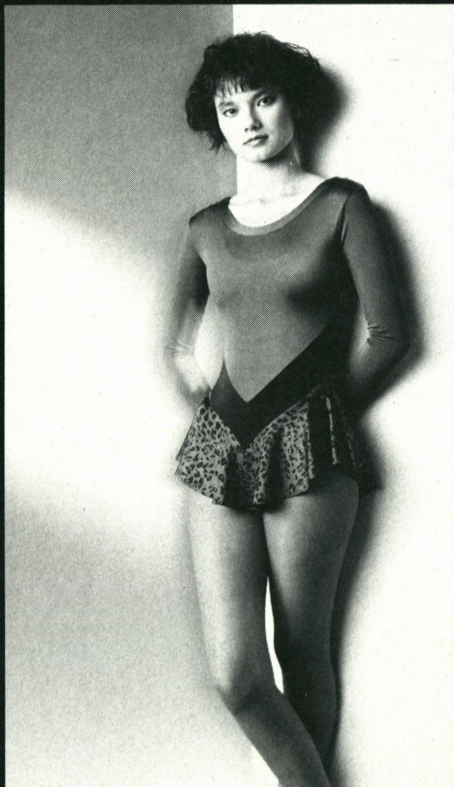
—John F. Kennedy

"When we got back to the hotel, it was like a New Year's Eve celebration in the city," according to Young.

One East German skating official was overjoyed with the news. While he had traveled throughout the world, his family had been confined. Early Sunday morning he took his 12-year-old son to West Berlin, the first time the boy had been there, and promises of Paris, Rome, or perhaps even San Francisco loomed for the young man, too young to fully understand the significance.

Young was relentless. "I was determined to get a piece of the wall. So, early the next morning I went down to the place we had been the night before just as they were finishing loading trucks. The guards were sweeping up debris to make everything look nice for publicity. I saw small pieces fly off the truck and

10 Years of Winning Designs



Unicorn Sport

The Skater's Edge in Fashion



Happy
10th
Anniversary!

For Catalog Send \$2.00

(REFUNDABLE WITH PURCHASE)
COMPLIMENTARY COPIES TO DEALERS

505 Lovenia Avenue, Knoxville, TN 37917
DIAL (615) 523-EDGE

tried to remember where they fell. I talked a guard into letting me go through the wall to take some pictures as people gathered. I had a shoulder bag and when no one was watching, started grabbing pieces I could find and stuffing the bag.

"I only picked up those pieces with white paint on them, proof they were from the East Wall. A lot of the ones just looked like pieces of concrete, but I only picked up those identifiable from the East side. And there were *no other Americans there*. Heaven only knows what the pieces are they are selling.

"Skating was interfering with wall watching," Young joked, "because I had to get back to the competition. So here I was with a bag of rocks running to catch the bus. They were laughing, not knowing what was in the bag, thinking I had been out shopping. I went back down that night, but there was nothing left at all. Everything was gone! But there were literally thousands of people starting to make the first crossing into the West."

The competition also suffered somewhat. The majority of volunteers did not show up, they just didn't care. They either had left the country or were at least taking the opportunity to visit West Berlin. But nevertheless, the competition went on, and the U.S. won medals in both Ladies and Pairs. After nine exhausting, yet incredible days, the team headed home, each with a piece of the wall hidden away . . . a piece of the *East Wall* which very few others would ever possess . . . and memories of seeing history unfold.

Smith summed up the emotions of the experience, saying, "I doubt if any one of us will ever again think of our individual liberty as anything less than the cherished treasure which it truly is, or take for granted the intrinsic value and worth of our freedom."