A medical student trapped behind the Berlin Wall, 1961

S. Robert Lathan, MD

In the October 2013 issue, I wrote of my Johns Hopkins medical student experience in 1961 at Guy's Hospital in London (1). After that visit, I traveled in Europe. In early August 1961, I was in the Hofbräuhaus in Munich and met a German man named Klaus who asked if I planned to go to Berlin, where he lived. I didn't have a scheduled itinerary in Europe, but Klaus continued to encourage me to go to Berlin and gave me his telephone number.

A few weeks later, I was available to travel to West Berlin and found lodging near the bombed church on Kurfürstendamm. The next day I had a bus tour to East Berlin and had to drive through the Brandenburg Gate, the landmark of Berlin. Later I called Klaus who invited me to have dinner with him at home. His father, who worked for the newspaper, asked if I had seen East Berlin. I related I had already toured it, but he said I should go back again. I asked why, and he said, "Something new is going on but I can't really say what."

I had one more day in Berlin and decided to go back again. It was Sunday, August 13, 1961, and I could see water cannons spraying against the crowds periodically. I walked right up to the Brandenburg Gate, and the guard asked for my passport and let me through. I immediately saw another man who asked if I was an American; when I said yes, he said he was Canadian and that we should stay together.

About 100 yards from the gate, we could see armed East Berlin (Russian) troops marching along with tanks. Along Unter den Linden, we had a small lunch, which cost only about 30¢, as the currency in East Berlin was only 20% that of West Berlin.

An hour later at the Brandenburg Gate, the troops and tanks had multiplied significantly. A guard at the gate crossed his arms against his chest and shouted "Nein! Nein!" to us every time we said that we had to get back to West Berlin. We and all other citizens were forbidden to cross through the gate into West Berlin. Finally, the guards explained that the only way we could get out was at Potsdamer Platz via the U-Bahn (subway). As we found the U-Bahn, it seemed that I was the

Figure. The Berlin Wall near the Brandenburg Gate.

only American in East Berlin. I told my Canadian friend that we "might be on our way to Siberia."

Somehow, we got to Potsdamer Platz into West Berlin. As we were taken back again to Brandenburg Gate, we could see the new wall being built with tangles of barbed wires, causing a divided city. The barricade wall was 103 miles long, an average of 12 feet high, and guarded by 300 watch towers. During the summer of 1961, over 1000 refugees a day left from East Berlin to West Berlin. The city's population was reduced from 4 million to 2 million. The border between east and west went up almost overnight while most Berliners were asleep.

From that day on August 13, 1961, a wall separated the city for almost 30 years (*Figure*). It was a struggle between Soviet Communism and freedom. The wall became a symbol of the Cold War. In June 1987, President Ronald Reagan challenged Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev at the Brandenburg Gate, "Tear down the wall!" It was finally taken down on November 9, 1989.

1. Lathan SR. An unforgettable, perpetual medical student, 1961. *Proc (Bayl Univ Med Cent)* 2013;26(4):425–426.

Corresponding author: S. Robert Lathan, MD, 122 Old Ivy Road, #17, Atlanta, GA 30342 (e-mail: rlathanmd@att.net).