

East German who announced Berlin Wall opening dies at 86

02/11/2015 17:29 by admin

Berlin: Guenter Schabowski, the senior East German official whose cryptic announcement that the communist country was opening its fortified border precipitated the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, died Sunday at 86.

His widow, Irina Schabowski, told the German news agency dpa that he died in a Berlin nursing home.

Politburo spokesman Schabowski's halting words at the conclusion of a plodding evening news conference on Nov. 9, 1989, put an end to Berlin's 28 years of division. Schabowski offhandedly said East Germany was lifting restrictions on travel across its border with West Germany.

Pressed on when the headline-making regulation would take effect, he looked down at his notes and stammered: "As far as I know, this enters into force ... this is immediately, without delay."

East German leader Egon Krenz later insisted he told Schabowski to tell reporters to withhold news of the new travel regulation until 4 a.m. the next morning, so citizens could line up properly to get exit visas.

Schabowski, a trained journalist, said he never heard Krenz say that and it would have been unrealistic anyway.

"It was one of many foul-ups in those days," he said. "We were acting under the pressure of events. I'm just happy that it went off without bloodshed."

At the time, East German leaders saw opening the Berlin Wall as a relief valve amid huge pro-democracy protests and a flight of citizens to the West via other countries. Instead, it set in motion events that led quickly to German reunification on Oct. 3, 1990.

Born Jan. 4, 1929, in the northern town of Anklam, Schabowski rose through the ranks of East Germany's media after World War II and became the chief editor of Neues Deutschland, the main communist party-controlled newspaper, in 1978. He became a member of the ruling Politburo in 1984.

In October 1989, Schabowski, then the communist party chief in East Berlin, became the first Politburo member to talk to opposition leaders. In another turnaround for East Germany, he also voiced support for "approved and well-ordered" demonstrations.

But amid mounting pressure from the emboldened pro-democracy movement, he resigned along with the rest of the Politburo weeks after the Berlin Wall fell.

Schabowski later became one of the most senior East German leaders to be convicted of manslaughter and jailed for the shooting deaths of East Germans trying to flee to the West.

He served 9 1/2 months of a three-year sentence before being pardoned by Berlin's mayor in 2000. He turned firmly against communism, publicly backing Germany's main conservative party in a 2001 Berlin election.

- AP