

Extract from:

## **Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War**

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### 1. Opening page – from the Introduction

On 2 August 1954, the Boston Daily Globe informed its readers that ‘Leaping Lena’ had landed in New York. Flown in by plane from Munich, this red-eyed carrier pigeon received ‘the kind of welcome usually reserved for human dignitaries’. Fifteen press photographers clicked away as the incomer was greeted by four ‘hero pigeons’ from the Second World War, including at least one prospective mate. Carefully primed pigeon fanciers had brought along several hundred other birds, which were ceremoniously released at the chosen moment. One carried a message telling President Eisenhower of the occasion.

‘Leaping Lena’ owed her celebrity to an exhausted landing she had earlier made in Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, having become disorientated while racing from Munich to her home loft in Klatzenbach, West Germany. A Czech had found the bird and, recognizing the band on her leg, sent her home with a message addressed to Radio Free Europe. This anonymous fellow begged for ‘speedy liberation’ and urged the west not to waver in the fight against Communism. Radio Free Europe had promptly adopted the pigeon that ‘crashed the iron curtain’ and brought her to New York as a fund-raising mascot for its ‘1955 Crusade for Freedom’.

Later that same day readers of the Boston Evening American were offered a story headed ‘Dog Busts Iron Curtain’. This told of a West German police dog which ‘seems to have piloted his dog house right smack through the Iron Curtain’. The dog in question hailed from Passau, and its odyssey had commenced early in July, when it was swept away by a flooded Danube. According to the Mayor of Passau, the creature was seen sitting on the gable of its doghouse as it ‘bobbed down’ the swollen river. It was spotted at the German-Austrian border a few days later, and again at Linz on 10 July. The floating hound’s passage through Vienna and Bratislava apparently went unrecorded but the mayor had now received a postcard from Budapest, some 350 miles downstream from Linz. Reporting that a police dog with a Passau tag on his collar had floated ashore on a doghouse, the Hungarian writer hoped that arrangements might somehow be made to ship the creature back to the other side.

In an atmosphere still pervaded by McCarthyism, these fleeting animal sagas must have had a particular charm. Such were the events of that summer, however, that they could scarcely outshine the human crossings. They were overshadowed by ongoing speculation about Dr. Otto John, the West German security chief who had mysteriously vanished some ten days before and then reappeared in East Berlin, vowing to work for the reunification of a Germany that was ‘in danger of being perpetually torn in the dispute between east and west’. They were further eclipsed by a drama that had opened even more recently in London . . .