

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Die Luftbrücke - 2005

Script and Director: Peter Adler, Alexander Berkel,
Stefan Mausbach

Producer: Guido Knopp

Research Advisor: Gerhard Keiderling

Camera: Anthony R. Miller, Jan Prillwitz, Peter Ruppert

Music: Klangraum

Playing Time: 89 Minutes

Precis – Allen Krumm

Berlin in 1948 had become a symbolic pawn, a pawn with two million hungry human pawns within it. The political fate of Berlin - in terms of how it was re-integrated into Germany, and in turn how Germany itself was re-

integrated, if indeed it ever was - mattered very much to both the Americans and the Soviets. Shortly after the introduction of the new German

Deutsch Mark in June of 1948, the Soviets, fearing this currency reform was only the first in a series of steps which would inevitably lead to the reintegration of Berlin with the west, cut off land and water access to Berlin.

Lucius Clay, the military governor, knew that to hold West Berlin militarily was impossible, but he also was convinced that the Allies should not leave Berlin. President Harry Truman agreed, and endorsed the idea of an airlift. Realizing the enormity of the task, Clay, for practical assurance, consulted with the US Air Force's Curtis LeMay, who said "we can haul anything". For psychological insight, Clay asked Ernst Reuter, Mayor-Elect of Berlin, if the Berliners would endure. Reuter replied (in rough translation) "You take care of the airlift, I'll take care of the Berliners." Clay had no doubt that LeMay meant what he said, and Clay also knew and trusted Reuter, and hence the airlift was set in motion.

Historians of various schools endlessly debate the dynamics of history: are events contingent or inevitable? No one who was a child in Berlin in 1948 would side with the determinists. Like most children, they probably knew nothing and cared less about the exigencies of international politics, and most of them had probably never heard of Harry Truman or even Lucius Clay. But they did come to know in the spring three years after the end of the war that it was good to have a friend who had chosen to be your friend.

Most of their parents may still have justifiably been reflexively frightened at the sound of airplanes, but the children soon came to know that those airplanes were flown by friends. They did not know how to compute the amount of calories necessary for daily survival, but they knew that what they were eating mostly came from those planes. When a supply plane crashed in the night in a Berlin street shortly after the beginning of the airlift, a

good many of the parents began to believe in these friends as well. Berliners who came to the crash site that night noticed how the scene resembled a bomb attack; they realized the two young American pilots had given their lives to help them.

The logistics of the Berlin Airlift (or Operation Vittles, as the Americans nicknamed it) were amazing. Five thousand tons, including food and fuel, were eventually brought in every day. A plane landed every three minutes. A crew unloaded the contents in ten minutes. As is so often the case, most of the dangerous work was done by the brave young men who flew the planes. General William Tunner who assumed overall command of the operation in July of 1948, showed his organizational genius immediately.

Tunner organized the flight corridors as if they were one way streets, two going in, one in the middle coming out. His creed was "*ein beständiger Rhythmus*" (a steady rhythm). The planes came in at five different altitudes at precisely staggered distances. If a pilot failed in his initial approach, he did not get a second chance. He had to turn around and return to the west so as not to interrupt that steady rhythm for the other planes. Eventually the goal of 5000 total tons per day was achieved, with over 1500 flights daily.

Tunner cleverly enlisted the use of local citizens for both the unloading work and even as mechanics when they had the appropriate experience. When he realized the crews were wasting too much time getting refreshments between landing and takeoff, he setup mobile snack bars staffed by very pretty young German *Frauleins*, whose trucks came out to the planes so the pilots and crew could remain in the planes.

Tunner was not the only genius around. One of the young pilots, Gail Halvorsen, concocted the idea of dropping bags of candy and raisins on the approach to Tempelhof so the crowds of young children who were always there to watch would have treats. Hence, the advent of the immortal *RosinenBombers*. Halvorsen's commanding

officer was upset when word got out, but when General Tunner heard about it, he was so impressed he ordered this practice expanded, and dubbed it "Operation Little Vittles." Eventually children in the US were sending candy to help keep the supplies going.

The shooting war was over, but the propaganda war was totally intense. Rundfunk versus Rundfunk, RIAS under Bill Heimlich in the west versus *Der Augenzeuge* in the East. RIAS mission was to encourage the Berliners in their anti-communist sentiments, while that of *Der Augenzeuge* under chief editor Gerhard Dengler was to fortify those same Berliners in their socialist sentiments and to convince them that Uncle Joe was their best friend.

The clever sketches and skits of RIAS weren't the only psychological tool the West could employ on the airwaves. *Entladearbeiter* like Gerhard Burger and *Flugzeugmechaniker* like Walter Riggers became accustomed to hearing Hank Williams nasal twang belting out "Move It On Over" as they worked with the American pilots and crews while listening to Hillbilly GuestHouse.

On September 9th 1948, Ernst Reuter gave his famous speech before the Reichstag, encouraging Berliners to persevere, and in his peroration calling out to the allies:

Ihr Völker der Welt, ihr Völker in Amerika, in England, in Frankreich, in Italien! Schaut auf diese Stadt und erkennt, daß ihr diese Stadt und dieses Volk nicht preisgeben dürft und nicht preisgeben könnt!

He needn't have worried. As General Clay remarked when asked that fall about the prospects of continuing the operation: "We can increase it, and we can continue it indefinitely." Soon after, over 19,000 Berliners helped to construct another airport, Berlin Tegel.

There remained an extremely hard winter to endure, and sometimes extreme social and political tension to navigate, but perhaps Reuter's speech symbolized a turning point. By the early spring of the next year, the Soviets had indicated their intention to lift the blockade, and on May 12, 1949 it was officially lifted. As Gail

Halvorsen, the Ur-RosinenBomber later remarked, "It's a crazy world..." He was referring to the irony of having German mechanics, who a few years before had been the enemy, working on his plane. But, as he added, he and his new mechanics had formed a good partnership.

The same could be said for the Allies and the people of West Berlin. Enemies had become partners, in many cases even friends. *Die Luftbrücke* was something new, something unheard of in the annals of post-war occupations, but Halvorsen's phrase *auf Deutsch* captures the essence of the Airlift perfectly: it was indeed *ein gutes Mannschaft*.