

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



**Der Raketenmann -
Wernher von Braun und
der Traum vom Mond (German)**

**Wernher von Braun:
Rocket Man for War and Peace (English)**

October 26th 2012 • 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

Donations \$15, Members \$12

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

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Although von Braun and his band of engineering brothers, having done their due diligence for Hitler with the V2, may still have been *mondsüchtig* in 1945, hope abounded among their new masters that with some tweaking such a gadget might be able to reach new enemies, whether cold or hot, with unimaginable speed. The prospect of killing your enemy quickly at a distance has always been exhilarating.

Hence for the Americans the V2 was neither too soon nor too late, but right on schedule, vaulting them to the forefront of weapons technology. Glimmering on the developmental horizon was the prospect of an eventual mating with the “rapid rupture” device being crafted at Los Alamos.

Von Braun and his reassembled team spent five years mostly twiddling their technological thumbs at Fort Bliss, Texas. Coinciding with the outbreak of the Korean war von Braun became head of the rocket development team for the army in Huntsville Alabama. When the insufferable Russians induced *Sputnikschock* around the world in 1957, the US suffered a scientific panic attack and Ike’s administration came under intense pressure to launch a satellite in response. The navy got their chance first, but their Vanguard rocket became known as *Kaputnik* after exploding on the launch pad.

Then von Braun’s Juno I rocket (a descendent of the V2) lifted the Explorer I satellite into orbit on Jan 31st 1958. This was the beginning of his mega celebrity. Huntsville gave him a parade. Time put him on its cover, calling him the Missile Man. A movie was made about him in Munich, starring Curd Jürgens, sponsored by the US Army.

In the sixties space history accelerated. The Russians put the first man into space. Kennedy set the goal of going to the moon.



Von Braun, now at NASA, proceeded with the development of his gigantic Saturn V, a multi stage great-great grand child of the V2, capable of powering the requisite payload into orbit. He was back at the center of the action, closing in on his dream. In July of 1969, they once again counted down from ten to zero and von Braun was yet again a great hero.

He died in 1977, and for the last time his timing proved to be propitious, accustomed as he was to giving history big shoves rather than having Clio shove back. His colleague Arthur Rudolph was to learn that timing was just as important with exits as with entrances. There were some loose ends to be tidied up, according to diligent lawyers in the Office of Special Investigations. Rudolph, a natu-

ralized citizen for nearly thirty years, left America under legal duress in 1984, his welcome having expired.

Perhaps the same type of treatment would have been accorded to von Braun if he had lived longer. We will never know, although such retroactively retributive justice will likely be popular as long as there are wars. And was he a Great Man? Assuming those fascinatingly futile debates about history will continue ad infinitum, the current verdict on Wernher von Braun can only be that he was a rocket man.

Der Raketemann - Wernher von Braun und der Traum vom Mond (German) Wernher von Braun: Rocket Man for War and Peace (English)

Commentary – A. Krumm

Rocket Man

“*Per aspera ad astra ...*“ So said Wernher von Braun in his eulogy for the three astronauts who died in the Apollo 1 pre-launch test in 1967. *Ein rauher Weg führt zu den Sternen ... A rough road leads to the stars.* The workers at Mittelbau-Dora would have concurred, as well as the citizens of London in 1944.

“*Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down ... That’s not my department, says Werner von Braun.*” So said Tom Lehrer in his hit spoof song from the sixties. “*You too may be a big hero, Once you’ve learned to count backwards to zero. . .*“

Notwithstanding Lehrer’s acid lyrics, Wernher von Braun was indeed a big hero by the sixties, the primus inter pares among the very large cadre of German *Raketennänner* who gave the USA a huge boost in the NASA space program. He was that rare phenomenon, a two time MVP, once for the Third Reich and later for the USA. An emerging consensus is that his career in the American league worked out better for all concerned.

Von Braun gave history a couple of sizable shoves, altering the face of the future in the process. He was called by some the “*Kolumbus des Weltalls*”. For those foolish enough to debate whether a man makes history or history makes the man, or whether history is just “one damn thing after another“, he represents a robust case for the Great Man thesis, albeit seasoned with a healthy dose of serendipitous “one damn thing after another.” Even embryonic great men need enabling coefficients.

In the early thirties, the German army, ever eager for cutting edge weaponry, not to mention creative ways of circumventing the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty, was on the lookout for promising developments in the pioneering field of rocketry. Among other groups, they were keeping tabs on the slightly outré *Verein für Raumschiffahrt* in Berlin. Ultimately, the achievements of this eclectic assemblage of tinkerers and dreamers left them singularly unimpressed, but one member of the group, apparently the youngest, stood out for his talent, energy and remarkable knowledge.

Thus was Wernher von Braun brought into the orbit of the military when he was only twenty. Along with getting his doctorate on their dime, von Braun and the team he came to lead by the age of twenty-five spent the next decade developing and improving a series of rockets which would culminate in the *Aggregat 4* (rebaptized by Goebbels as the *Vergeltungswaffen Zwei* or V2).

In a few fleeting years (a mere five according to Michael Neufeld, von Braun’s leading biographer) von Braun and his team developed or radically improved the methodologies and technologies that laid the foundation of the space age. Propulsion, aerodynamics, supersonic wind tunnels, guidance and control, analog/digital computing, precision measurement – the terms just roll off the tongue (probably a bit easier than in German: *Antriebstechnologie, Aerodynamik, Überschallwindkanal, Steuerung und Lenkung, Rechentechnologie, Messtechnologie*).

How could such astounding progress be made in such a brief period? Presumably, if the prospect of death concentrates the mind, then the prospect or presence of war concentrates the mind of entire nations, not to mention marshaling enormous resources. Given this milieu, technological breakthrough is a young man’s game, in large part because Leviathan is so adept at harnessing the energies and ambitions of young men with dreams. Von Braun’s dream from his youth was to build rockets that would send humans to the moon and the planets. If he had to practice by sending some to London first, well, so be it. His nephew’s remarkably understated assessment was that “there was something Faustian about it all”.

Unlike many vaunted historical periods the space age has a well documented birth place and date. On October 3rd, 1942, the powerful liquid fuel rocket engine developed by von Braun’s brilliant propulsion engineer Walter Thiel hurtled a 12 ton V2 into the sky. In all of five minutes, the rocket had touched the edge of outer space at an altitude of just over fifty miles and plunged back into the Baltic one hundred and twenty miles from the Prüfstand VII launch platform at Peenemünde. The official report noted that “*damit sind sämtliche Weltrekorde gebrochen.*”

By late summer of 1944 the V2 was in full production and by the end of the war roughly 3200 of them had been fired, the bulk of which had zoomed down upon London and Antwerp, with the remainder hitting other locations in France and Belgium, altogether killing around 6000 people. Given the resources and effort expended, it was a rather paltry kill ratio. Bomber Harris would have scoffed at such numbers. As noted by many historians, the V2 was not very cost effective and not a game changer in terms of the war effort.

The essential irony for Germany, as Heinz Dieter Holsken points out, was not that the V2 came too late, but that it came too soon. An intrusion from the future, this *Urrakete* was an instrument upon which the nineteen forties could not get an effective grip. In order to realize its frightening potential, the V2 needed several complimentary companion technologies still lurking in the decades to come, particularly those of microelectronics and nuclear warheads.

Von Braun was only thirty-three when the Americans got their hands on him in May of 1945. This time he gave history a carefully calibrated nudge by making sure he was in the right place at the right time in order to be “captured”. His brother Magnus was sent out from Haus Ingeburg in Oberjoch, southern Bavaria where they were staying to make contact with the Americans because Magnus spoke the best English. Pfc. Frederick Schneikert of the 324 Infantry Regiment took him into custody.

Magnus was subsequently sent back to bring his brother and the other scientists to the Americans and prove he wasn’t “nuts”, as Pfc. Schneikert had initially suggested. On the army newsreels of that occasion you can witness an argument for the Great Man theory of history: Wernher von Braun stands among his captors, grinning, dragging on a cigarette, radiating an amiable aristocratic bonhomie suffused with supreme self confidence. And who could argue? He knew how valuable he was.

The mission of the Overcast (later Paperclip) team in the summer of 1945 was simple: *fette Beute machen!* A considerable portion of that booty consisted of von Braun’s own formidable expertise, the data from years of research, intact hardware deliverables and a superb team. Now he could bring all these assets to the US and continue to chase his dream. Naturally, in the hands of the Americans the V2 would be transubstantiated from a terror weapon into a force for good.