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Then the Americans Came: A Tribute to the Veterans of the Berlin Airlift

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In March 1948, in the English Zone-of-Occupation, I lived with my mother Hedy in a rotting former *Wehrmacht* barracks, located off the north end of the Fassberg air base runway. I was a boy of 13, a *Fluechtling*, a refugee from the East. We refugees, still the unwanted human debris of an evil war, had just survived another terrible winter in this windswept part of northern Germany. During those long winter nights, with cold, hunger, and fear of tomorrow our steady companions, there were times when many of us thought we couldn't survive until spring.

At winter's end the three times weekly hot-cocoa-and-peanut breakfasts at school were discontinued. Without this breakfast I went hungry until evening. I got used to it. It didn't hurt anymore. But I felt thankful to whoever provided that wonderful food for us children throughout the past winter. I remembered every cup of hot cocoa, every handful of peanuts.

The eternal grayness of March passed. Stirrings of life returned in April, as they did every year, as if to spite the persisting wintry gloom. When the sun emerged from behind the scudding clouds it shone warm and strong. And with its warming rays it stirred something else in our gloomy barracks rooms--a glimmer of hope--maybe, just maybe, in the third spring after the war things would get better for us.

With the warming rays of the sun our annual spring euphoria returned. People abandoned the prison of their barracks rooms and spent every minute they could outside in the rare and invigorating sunshine. Windows were opened, and worn blankets and patched bedding aired out. While we had no paint, we scrubbed walls and floors with water and rags and felt better afterward, even though the gray pine boards looked no different than before. Now and then, some people even smiled.

Young women emerged from their barracks warrens holding babies and trailing older children, to stand in small groups, enjoying the sunshine, many with hands held over swollen bellies. Standing together outside the confining barracks and making small-talk became the activity of the idle. There were now many men among them, as the Royal Air Force base at Fassberg remained closed, and every man and woman who once worked there was still out of work. We had stayed alive through the winter using the black market, selling aluminum scavenged from abandoned German military aircraft, begging potatoes and carrots from local farmers--doing whatever was necessary.

As April progressed, rumors of the Russians closing off roads and waterways to Berlin circulated through our barracks. Some said the Russians delayed trains with coal and food at the border checkpoints, not letting them pass until many days later. Slowly, fear again rose to the surface of our lives--fear of becoming part of the ever-expanding Soviet empire. It seemed that for us refugees the war just would not end.

One evening I overheard some men in front of my barracks talk about the Russians. I listened intently. A man I didn't recognize, a stranger, said to the others gathered there, "I know for sure that the Russians stopped an American military train on its way to Berlin. They even attempted to enter and search the train, but the 'Amis' wouldn't let them. Maybe there will be war again," I heard him whisper. I thought my heart would stop when I heard the word war.

The stranger, who seemed to know so much, continued to talk to his silent group of listeners. "The English are not strong enough to stand up to Ivan," he said in a firm voice. "Only the Americans can do that. You all know that, don't you?" Some of the men nodded their heads. "Maybe the Amis will just go home. They don't need us." He paused.

"Why should they die for us, die for people who were their enemies only three years ago?"

The stranger looked around the group of men. I looked too. They stood silently, with downcast heads, some smoking hand-rolled cigarettes. "Whatever the Amis do," the man continued, grinding his cigarette butt into the mud with the sole of his worn German army boot, "we have no place to run. You understand that, don't you?" The men whispered among themselves for a little longer as darkness descended. Then they left silently for the barracks rooms they called home.

That night, I was so frightened by what I had heard, I couldn't go to sleep until late. And then, when I did go to sleep, my nightmares returned. I awoke in my mother's arms, with my own screams echoing in my ears.

But neither the Americans nor the English abandoned us. Instead, within the next two weeks, there was noticeable new activity at RAF Station Fassberg. This time, curiously enough, it was not fighter planes I saw flying in and out of the base, as I had expected, but twin-engined Dakota transports. My fear of war subsided with the sight of the Dakotas. The English were hiring Germans again. My mother got a job.

Shortly after the arrival of the Dakotas, the former Trauen V2 Rocket Research Center, adjacent to RAF Station Fassberg, was turned into a German labor camp. Hundreds of German men arrived, riding in the backs of large army trucks. They wore English uniforms dyed dark brown, and on their heads they wore strange looking berets, just like the English soldiers wore. With childish curiosity I watched as they pitched their four-men tents on the grounds of the Trauen Center.

"What do they call you?" I asked one of the workers who was busy with three other shirtless men erecting their tent. He straightened up, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, and putting his hands on his hips said, "They call us GSO men, young man. That stands for German Service Organization." Then he laughed, "But that's just a fancy name for plain laborers. Now, why don't you run along and let us finish our work." He was a tall man, with brown hair and large brown eyes. He looked intelligent, like a professor I thought.

An older neighbor boy who had found work at the air base told me the GSO men were former German soldiers who couldn't find work. "They unload trucks and trains, and load English aircraft with supplies for Berlin," he said. "They work for their clothing, their housing, and for one hot meal a day." Then, as an afterthought, he added, "But the food is good."

In the days after their arrival, when they had time off, the GSO workers could be seen walking aimlessly around the small village of Trauen. There was little for them to do there. Soon a stranger from Hamburg built a tavern across the street from our barracks. He named the tavern *Rote Laterne*, a name more at home in the not too distant, raucous sailor quarter of Hamburg-St. Pauli than in the staid landscape of the Lueneburg Heath. The red lantern was a well known symbol for prostitution, promising girls and sex. At least that's what my friends and I heard people say. The building itself--constructed of concrete blocks--remained unfinished on the outside. It was an ugly eyesore, even standing next to our barracks.

With my mother working again, the pressure on me to scavenge for food was reduced. After school I had a little time to myself. I heard that some GSO men had formed a chess club, and that they met in the *Rote Laterne* once a week. I went over to watch. I liked the mental skills the game required and learned it quickly. I asked the club president if I could join. To my surprise, he seemed excited to have a young boy join the club. He started me off playing in practice games, and when he thought I was ready, allowed me to enter their tournaments. I soon became the champion of our small chess club.

Then, on Sunday, 20 June 1948, to everyone's surprise and delight, new German money was issued. Our nearly worthless *Reichsmark* was no more. With the issuance of the new money I decided the war had finally ended. While the shooting war had stopped in May 1945, for the three years since then, my family's suffering had continued unabated: first in the East under the Russians in their Zone-of-Occupation, later in the West under the English. In many ways, after the shooting and bombing stopped our lives worsened. The dying continued. I watched my friends die of hunger, cholera, and typhus, and all I could do was try to forget their faces and their pitiful whimpers as they

begged God to keep them alive.

I never quite knew what it was exactly that would bring the war to an end for me. Now that it had happened I knew that the new money was the event I had been waiting for. With the appearance of the new money, just one day before the arrival of summer, a war that began when I was four years old finally ended for me.

My mother and I walked the four miles to Fassberg and stood in a long line to receive our share of the new *Deutsche Mark*, or D-Mark as it was quickly christened. At the instant of its distribution goods appeared on long-empty store shelves. Clothing, shoes, and food were available and for sale without the need of a ration card. The western zones of occupation instantly turned into a world of plenty--the world I believed I was going to find, yet didn't, when we first crossed the border fleeing the Russian Zone in December 1946.

It wasn't only the purchasing power of the new money that changed our world of subsistence and deprivation. More so, it was what the new money represented for us--a new beginning, a fresh start. Maybe it would provide the means for a transformation from what we had become to what we secretly wanted to be. Maybe the new money would put a stop to the despised black market.

The black market represented the darkest aspect of our daily lives. It was, above all, a market that traded in sex. It forced women to view themselves as chattel, as goods, valued by another as being worth a few cigarettes, a pair of nylons, three or four candy bars, a can of coffee. A full can of coffee if lucky, and not many cigarettes at that, a pack or two. That was all. Two packs of cigarettes was the worth of a woman--it was the value of my mother, my friend's sister, my neighbor's daughter, the ex-Stuka pilot's wife. With the cigarettes or the can of coffee she received for letting a man possess her, the mother, sister, daughter, or wife would then try to obtain on the black market the food she needed for her children or her aged parents waiting for her in a home no more than a ruin--or an abandoned *Wehrmacht* barracks.

The warmth of the spring sun, the new money, a new job, and the general excitement surrounding the reopening of the air base had also changed my mother. No longer did I see that haunted look of past violence and future fears in her eyes. Her face began to look younger, and she smiled and laughed again. As I looked closely at her over dinner one evening, I could barely discern the small scar on her neck made by a Russian bullet three years before. I knew there was a corresponding scar on the other side. It was almost unnoticeable, but I knew it was there. I admired this brave woman--my mother, my hero, my friend. I was happy to see her smiling again.

The level of activity at RAF Station Fassberg had increased rapidly since April. I saw more and more English Dakotas flying into and out of the base. And then one morning, on my way to school, I saw my first American plane. I stopped and gazed in incredulous amazement at this lone messenger of hope as it slowly rose into the misty sky. Spontaneously I thrust my hands into the air toward the vanishing plane and shouted, "Hallo, Amerikaner!" Tears of joy streamed down my face as I ran the rest of the way to school. I was excited all day long. I couldn't wait until my mother arrived home that evening to tell her the news--"The Americans are here." She understood, smiling at me as if we shared a secret, and gently stroked my hair with her hand.

All at once American soldiers appeared on the streets of Fassberg. Their presence provided me a sense of security that transcended all other aspects of our sudden and unexpected recovery. With them around I felt safe. Being with us Germans, placing themselves on our side, trying to save our Berlin, meant to me that we Germans were not someday going to be part of the expanding Russian empire. These soldiers, I thought, also gave us Germans something very special, something war had lost for my country, and not even our new money could buy--friends. Good friends, I hoped, who would be there each tomorrow, to help us if we needed them. I remembered what the stranger had said about the Americans only weeks ago outside my barracks--that only they could stand up to the Russians. With their presence I was sure we were safe. These American soldiers had come to help, to stand by us, not to take for themselves the little we had left--that's what made the soldiers of the Berlin Airlift different. As a 13-year-old boy I just knew it was so.

There were so many wonderful things for a young boy to discover about the Americans. They were very different from soldiers I had known before--those had been men with guns, whose faces were hard and whose fingers were

never far from the triggers of their guns. The American Airlift soldiers were not like that. They carried no guns, and they looked like people to whom life had been good and who didn't mind sharing their good fortune with their new German friends. That was a new concept for me to consider--being their friend, rather than a conquered enemy.

The Americans, whose numbers grew by the day, flooded the small town of Fassberg with their presence. Soon a Gasthaus catering exclusively to them opened its doors--"Mom's Place." Mom's Place was filled with young soldiers from early afternoon until late at night. The Gasthaus was only a few houses from my school, and on my way home I could see the soldiers sitting there, laughing, enjoying the German beer they liked so much, and smoking endless packs of cigarettes. If they weren't smoking or drinking, they were chewing gum. I couldn't figure out why anyone would want to chew gum. But they did, nearly all of them, all of the time.

I watched the American soldiers closely. They wore what looked to me like tailor-made uniforms, of fine quality material, fitting for a Sunday suit, with shoes and socks of matching color. They wore their hats at a jaunty angle, matching their friendly dispositions, their carefree looks, and their relaxed and easy-going manners. They seemed to have lots of the new German money to spend. A rapid influx of merchants soon provided ample opportunity. The merchants erected portable tables near the main gate of the air base and sold everything from fine Solingen knives with artfully carved stag-handles to Bavarian beer steins, from Black Forest cuckoo clocks to fine jewelry from Idar-Oberstein. The American soldiers with their seemingly endless supply of money kept the merchants smiling.

Among the merchants were money changers who operated out of the large pockets of their overcoats. As I watched them exchanging D-Marks, I discovered that an American dollar bought around 24 of the new German marks. I had no idea how money was valued and by what measure a dollar warranted 24 marks. I had received only 40 D-Marks when the new currency was issued, which was not even two dollars. I could only marvel at someone getting 24 of my country's new monies for one of his. The Americans had to be rich.

My mother initially took a job at the English NAAFE--the Navy, Army, and Air Force Exchange--but she switched to the American PX--the Post Exchange--when it opened. She was hired as a salesperson because she spoke good English, in contrast to me; I didn't speak a word of English--except for chewing gum, chocolate, and cigarettes.

The PX was a large store, as she described it, carrying everything from expensive Swiss watches to the much-prized nylon stockings and American cigarettes. Such items were not yet available on the German market and were much in demand. Nylon stockings began to show up on the legs of Fassberg girls, a sure sign to us boys of who was going out with an American soldier.

In late June, people in the barracks said the Russians had stopped all traffic into Berlin. The city was totally isolated except for three air corridors: one from Hamburg in the north, a central corridor near Fassberg, and another corridor from Frankfurt in the south. I listened carefully to the adults when they spoke of the city where I had lived in the early months of 1945. It was only a matter of time, some speculated, until Berlin was out of food. Then it would become part of the Russian Zone-of-Occupation.

By the middle of July ever more English Dakotas and American C-47s flew out of Fassberg. And then, in the beautiful month of August, almost from one day to the next, from one night to the next morning, a large American airplane appeared at the Fassberg air base. The new transport, very different from the Dakotas and the C-47s, had four engines instead of only two. And the aircraft did not sit on its tail like the others, but sat straight and level on its main landing gear and its nose wheel. Within a week the English Dakotas had left Fassberg and the base was filled with the big American four-engined C-54 Skymaster transports--as the Americans called their airplane.

From the day the C-54s arrived in Fassberg they started to fly to Berlin, not only during the day and in good weather, but day and night, seven days a week, rain or sunshine. When the wind blew down the runway from the northwest, as it usually did, the C-54s turned over our desolate barracks compound every 10 to 12 minutes. At night, I watched the exhaust flames from the four engines, as the full airplanes strained to gain altitude before entering the northern corridor to Berlin only 30 kilometers northeast of our compound.

When I walked to school in Fassberg and crossed the railroad tracks leading into the base, I now often met full coal trains arriving, or empty trains leaving, heading for the *Ruhrgebiet* to be filled again, to return and repeat the cycle. I

had heard that the GSO workers shoveled the bulk coal into sacks, which they then loaded onto 10-ton trucks. "One truck-load fills one airplane," a GSO worker told me over chess in the *Rote Laterne*. "We load the airplanes by handing 20,000 pounds of coal from hand to hand until the bags fill the interior of the plane. Each C-54 carries ten tons--20,000 English pounds. That's a lot of pounds, my boy." He paused to make his next move. Then continued, "The twin-engined Dakotas, or C-47s as the Americans call them, only carry two and one-half tons. They are too small and too slow, that's why the Amis don't use them anymore."

My GSO friend, all wound up that night, kept talking excitedly about the *grosse Luftbruecke*, as he called it, neglecting our chess match. Lowering his voice, as if passing a secret to me, he said, "The RAF and the Amis fly into Berlin along the northern and the southern corridors, and the empty planes return down the central corridor. I bet you didn't know that." I did though. He paused again.

Then my friend drew for me an imaginary grid in the air with his fingers, depicting Berlin and the three corridors radiating out from it to the western zones of occupation. "And the Russians will shoot down any English or American plane that strays out of those narrow corridors," he added in a grave tone of voice. "They are only 20 miles wide, and it's easy to stray left or right."

"That's pretty wide," I postured, trying to sound like I knew a little about what he was talking about.

"No, no," he said. "That's not wide at all, little boy." I felt myself blushing in embarrassment. But then he gently explained, "When you fly at 170 miles an hour it takes less than seven minutes flying time from one edge of a corridor to the other. At night and in bad weather it is easy for a pilot who flies down the middle of the corridor to drift left or right. There are winds up there, you know, and they don't just blow from one direction and at a steady velocity. Once outside of the corridor Ivan's fighters are waiting for them." He paused again, looked at me, and then with a sly grin he said, "You didn't know I was a Ju-88 pilot in the war, did you?" I didn't.

He pushed the chess set aside, leaned forward on his elbows, looked straight at me, then whispered, "It makes me feel good to work with the Amis," and his eyes shone brightly when he spoke. In a more normal voice he continued, "Let me tell you something else, my young friend. You know the Fassberg planes fly their coal into Gatow, don't you?" I nodded my head, but I really didn't know that. "It takes them an hour to fly to Berlin. They fly a straight-in approach to Gatow, and if they miss their approach they have to return to Fassberg. There is no second try. It's like an assembly line in an American automobile factory. A plane takes off right after one has landed and that cycle repeats itself hour after hour, day and night."

"You are exaggerating," I said. "I can't believe it. They don't have that many airplanes."

Another GSO man who had joined our table said, "Werner is right. They fly and they fly and they fly--like it is a war they are fighting. The Russians will not get Berlin, going against the Americans," he said emphatically, pounding the table with his fist, making our chess pieces jump, "I'll take any bet on that."

September, October, and November passed. The days became shorter again; the nights longer and colder. In December it didn't get light until after eight in the morning and it was dark again by four in the afternoon. The rains came too, as they always had, interspersed with sleet or freezing rain. The big, four-engined American transports continued to fly day and night, without interruption, regardless of weather. I heard the big planes turn over my barracks even when I knew the rain clouds were nearly touching the tips of the tallest trees in the surrounding pine forest. At night, lying in my old army cot, on my straw mattress, I thought about the American pilots: those brave men, whom I imagined sitting in their cramped cockpits holding onto their control columns, staring out into what must seem to them impenetrable cloud. I wondered if they were ever afraid to fly. And I wondered how they found their way to Berlin in such ugly weather, and why they didn't crash.

On a clear December night one of the American C-54s turned over our barracks and then fell like a rock out of the sky. I didn't see it happen or hear it crash because I was inside, but I heard the commotion outside. Several men who lived in my barracks saw the plane fall to its death. "Not far from us," one of them said. Later we learned the coal had shifted in the turn. The two pilots and the engineer were killed. I went to the crash site after the Americans removed most of the debris. The site was black from fuel which had seeped into the soft, marshy ground. One engine lay half

buried from the impact, useless now; another was underground, buried too deeply to ever be seen again. I felt deep sorrow for the Americans who died for us Germans. Only three years ago they fought against my country, and now they were dying for us. The Americans were strange people; I didn't really understand them, even though I had read about them, met them first in war and now in peace. I wondered, as only a boy can wonder, what made the Americans do the things they did?

In the spring of 1949, my mother came home from work accompanied by an American sergeant. The sergeant wore the usual brown uniform with the Ike jacket and the large stripes on his sleeves. He was tall and lanky. There was something different about the man. I was immediately attracted to him. I felt that he was someone special, someone I would like to have as a friend. I studied him carefully.

Slowly and deliberately the sergeant took a pack of Camel cigarettes out of the left breast pocket of his meticulously pressed Ike jacket, hit the new pack several times against the side of his left hand to firm-up the tobacco, and then opened the cellophane wrapper of the new pack by pulling a small, red cellophane string, which very neatly took off the top of the wrapper. Then he peeled away a section of the silvery paper wrapper, about the width of four cigarettes. Finally, he appeared ready to remove the first cigarette from his pack.

He did this by hitting the pack again against the side of his left hand. A cigarette popped from the tightly packed package. Slowly, he pulled the cigarette out of the pack and put it between his lips, smiling at me as he saw that I was watching him intently. I smiled back. Before lighting the cigarette he first replaced the pack in his breast pocket and extracted an English Ronson lighter from his right pants pocket. Then, unhurriedly, he lit his cigarette. He leaned his head back, as if to say, there is nothing better in life than a good cigarette--this cigarette. He took a long first puff, finally exhaled the smoke, blowing it out of his mouth up into the air. I stood totally captivated by the American sergeant's performance.

"My name is Leo Ferguson," he said, in twangy, slow, American-English. "Call me Leo, please." He stretched out his right hand to shake mine. I noticed his fingers were long and slender, his nails clean and manicured.

I didn't understand everything he said and he could tell I didn't. "Leo," he said again. "I am Leo."

"*Ich bin Wolfgang*," I replied in German. He smiled a big smile; his teeth were regular and white, and his bright, brilliant blue eyes laughed at me. "W-o-l-f-g-a-n-g," he repeated very slowly, as if savoring the sound of the strange name. "That's a very fine name. I like that name."

We both laughed. I felt instantly that he liked me as much as I liked him. I felt he somehow didn't see any of the things others had seen in me, in my family, in our barracks--my worn out clothes, my sandals made from old German airplane tires, the mud, the flies, the always present smell of the community latrine, the snot-nosed kids. And I hoped he wouldn't leave like the others had. My mother joined us on the worn wooden steps in front of our barracks where Leo and I had sat down, side by side, close together.

Two little girls of three or four years, with dirty faces and soiled dresses came scampering up to us, sticking their fingers into their mouths as they came near us. They wore no panties and their thin dresses barely covered their fat little bellies. They had been playing in the dirt in front of their barracks. There was nowhere else for them to play. The two little girls stood in front of us, smiling, sucking on their dirty fingers, looking at the sergeant, at Leo.

Leo reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a yellow pack of Juicy Fruit chewing gum, the same kind of gum an American soldier had given me in 1945. He took a stick for each of the little girls and held it out to them. They took their fingers out of their mouths, giggled, and hesitantly took the offered gift. "*Danke schoen*," they said in unison and ran off skipping and laughing to their barracks across the way to show off the gum they had gotten from the nice American soldier.

The American sergeant, my mother, and I went inside, and she served a simple dinner of potatoes and hamburgers fixed in a brown sauce. Leo seemed to like it. After dinner, they talked together in English for a little while. I sat on a chair and looked at them, trying to understand the words. Then Leo rose to leave. He came over to me, smiling broadly

he shook my hand and said, "*Aufwiedersehen*."

"*Aufwiedersehen*," I replied, jumping to my feet. I knew he would be back.

After Leo had gone, my mother told me the sergeant had been coming to her PX counter for a number of days. "He stands around and acts like he is looking at merchandise, but really he is trying to work up enough courage to speak to me. Finally, he asked me if he could see me after work. I told him I lived four kilometers from the gate. If he wished, and since it was a nice day, he could walk me home." She paused, then said, "Do you like him?"

"Yes," I said quickly, "he seems like an honest and nice man. Yes, I like the American very much. His eyes are gentle and warm and they have no hate in them."

"I thought you would like him," she responded with a satisfied smile on her face. "I like him too."

Leo gave my mother some pieces of uniform for me to wear--one pair of precious uniform pants, a brown army shirt and sweater, and green undershirts and underpants, of which I had none. I had not owned underwear for a long time and wore my shirt and my sole pair of pants over my bare body. It felt good to wear underwear once again. Of course, now that I owned underwear I had to wash it too, which I did every five days, or when it was dirty.

As the weather got warmer, I frequently rode out toward the air base on my mother's bicycle and met Leo halfway between Fassberg and our barracks, at the forest's edge, where the ugly four-engine, Heinkel-177s used to sit. I waited for him, if he wasn't already there waiting for me smoking his Camel cigarette.

We usually met around five in the afternoon. He always shook my hand first, then sat down again to light another cigarette in his usual deliberate manner. He would sit there for a while quietly smoking, enjoying his cigarette. He seemed to be a man totally at peace with himself. I watched him in fascination, and respected the bonding silence between us, until he was ready to speak. Although I enjoyed watching him smoke, I never wanted to smoke myself. Nor did he ever try to get me to smoke.

When I felt it was all right to speak, I spoke to him in German. When he spoke to me, he spoke in English. I listened attentively to what he said, and sometimes I picked up a meaning because some words seemed to be similar to German words. Then I would nod my head, smile, and laugh. Neither one of us fully understood what the other said, but we didn't need to understand everything. We both felt we communicated with each other, and with every day that passed I thought we became closer friends. I felt drawn to Leo like a son to a father. I felt his caring warmth. In Leo's presence, I began to feel whole, sheltered, and protected--feelings I had lost in the awful days of 1945 when my childish world had come crashing down. I had fewer nightmares now that Leo was around, and the faces of the dead I saw in my dreams had somehow softened, become less distinct; their eyes no longer reached for me.

One Saturday Leo asked me if I would like to accompany him to the base. We left from our barracks riding our bicycles, taking the *Feldweg* across the potato fields into the forest. We followed the *Waldweg* alongside the tracks right into the base. There were no guard posts or sentries. We rode across the base to one of the large aircraft hangars. Parked inside the cavernous hangar were C-47 aircraft, no longer used for Berlin Airlift duty.

Leo's room was at the top of the hangar, directly under the roof. We climbed an iron staircase leading to a balcony which ran along three sides of the hangar near the roof line. Leo's room contained four neatly made-up cots, their blankets tightly stretched. He took a coin from his pocket and bounced it off the blanket on his bed. "Regulations," he said, smiling at me. At the foot of each bed stood a green footlocker. Two metal cabinets stood against one wall. Each occupant shared one-half of a cabinet. I saw no locks anywhere.

Leo took off his jacket and undid his tie. He removed his shirt and indicated for me to do the same. Then he took two towels, two bars of soap, and a bottle of shampoo from his cabinet and motioned for me to follow. I did, with some trepidation. We went to the showers. In the shower room Leo handed me a towel and a bar of soap and then pointed to one of the shower stalls. "A shower will make you feel good," he said, and then he undressed and stepped into a shower stall.

I watched him turn on the water. Steam soon rose from the concrete floor. As Leo began shampooing his hair he saw me still standing there. I didn't know what to do. At 14, I had never taken a shower. I hadn't even had a real bath, in a real bathtub, since 1945. Leo again pointed at a shower stall. Reluctantly I started to take off the remainder of my clothes. I couldn't get myself to take off the new undershorts Leo had given me--so I entered the shower wearing them.

Once I adjusted the water temperature I really enjoyed showering. It felt wonderful to have hot water bounce off my body--what a luxury! I took the bar of reddish soap and soaped myself all over, and then rinsed with more of the glorious hot water. The soap had the word Lifebuoy imprinted on it and it smelled strangely of iodine. Not as good a smell as the Palmolive soap my mother had brought from the PX.

I thought about taking off my shorts, but I just could not get myself to do it. Leo was already out of the shower, dried, and dressed when I finally turned off the wonderful hot water and got out. He said nothing about my shorts. I started to dry myself and then decided I had to take the big step and take off my wet underpants. I did, dried, and pulled my pants on without underpants. Then I couldn't decide what to do with my wet underpants. I was sure Leo was laughing on the inside at my modesty and at the predicament I had gotten myself into, but on the outside he remained unnoticing and helpful. Once back in his room, without comment, he handed me a pair of dry shorts, and I put them on.

"Come on," he said, after I was finally dressed again, "let's go and have a Coke." This time I understood clearly what he said.

After taking the shower, I liked Leo even more. For the first time in several years I felt really clean. Not only my body, but also somehow inside of myself where the grime of hopelessness and despair was slowly washing away. I was grateful for the good soap he had given me and for all of the hot water. And I was especially grateful that he had not laughed at me for wearing my underpants into the shower.

We rode our bikes from the hangar to the PX, and parked them in an old, rusty bicycle stand. Leo and I entered the PX and came to a sign proclaiming "Snack-Bar." I knew what the word "Bar" meant, and I thought "Snack" must mean sandwich. A bar where you buy sandwiches? That was an interesting twist on words, I thought. Who had ever heard of a bar for food? Only the Americans would think of such a name.

"Would you like a Coke, Wolfgang?"

"Yes, please," I replied in English, hoping that the unfamiliar words would come out sounding right. They must have, because Leo got each of us a Coca-Cola. The drink came in heavy glass bottles. Leo also brought two glasses with straws and ice.

"*Setzen wir uns bitte,*" Leo said in good German. I was surprised. I didn't know he knew that much German. He must have picked up a few words, or more likely my mother was teaching him.

We sat down and I watched the comings and goings of soldiers. Most wore work uniforms, baggy gray coveralls with big pockets, and caps on their heads with the bills turned up. It looked very funny to see these men running around like that. They didn't look very military. There wasn't any saluting going on either, and no heel clicking at all as German and English soldiers seemed to like to do. The Americans in their baggy work uniforms came and went to and from the PX on clumsy-looking American bicycles with fat tires.

The Coke, as Leo called it, was an exquisite drink with a strange, wonderful flavor. I tasted coffee in it, or maybe caffeine. I let the Coke run over my tongue slowly so I could absorb its full flavor and not forget the pleasant experience too quickly. It was such a delicious drink. I was sure I had never had a cold drink tasting that good. It was even better than lemonade. I looked up at Leo. He was smoking one of his Camels again, relaxed and at ease.

After our Coke, Leo and I went to another area of the PX. I was overwhelmed by all the new smells enveloping me, smells I had never experienced before. A strange mixture of pleasant odors emanated from boxes of candy bars and chewing gum, from brewing coffee and from donuts laid out under a glass counter at the snack bar. Donuts, I could see, were *Berliners* fried in fat with a hole in the middle rather than jelly. My eyes must have been wide and big,

looking at all of the unaccustomed wonders. Leo just let me be. No hurry. He seemed to have a wonderful sense of knowing when another person needed time to absorb the new impressions rushing in upon him. He lit another cigarette instead and went over to the snack bar and got himself a cup of coffee, and a Hershey chocolate bar for me. We returned to the barracks late that afternoon. It had been a wonderful day.

Spring recess ended. School began again. For the first time in three years I had real clothing to wear. I was no longer uncomfortable and ashamed to be seen by my classmates or their parents. In school I was given a new name--"Ami." It was short for "American." Calling me Ami was good-natured fun, and I took it as such. I wore my American uniform pants every day, my American army shirt and sweater, and my English army jacket if it was cold enough. I really wanted to own an American Ike jacket, but I didn't dare ask Leo for one. I could only dream. And so my friends called me Ami, because of the clothes I wore.

At our weekly chess club meeting my GSO partner told me, "There are now three airfields in Berlin--Tempelhof, Gatow, and Tegel. Fassberg now flies to Tegel. Do you know about Tegel?" he asked. "Know what about Tegel?" I replied. "I don't know anything about Berlin airfields."

"*Ja*," he said expansively, "Tegel was built in only three months by the Berliners themselves. The runways were built from the rubble of bombed buildings. Isn't that amazing?" I agreed with him. "And then," he said, "some time ago, we opened a new American air base in Celle. They also fly coal, but they fly their coal to Gatow instead of Tegel."

"Who flies food to Berlin if Fassberg and Celle only fly coal?"

"*Ja*, the Americans have many other bases in Germany, and they fly food out of Frankfurt and Wiesbaden." Then he moved his knight and said in a whisper, "Checkmate." We both laughed.

At night, lying in my old army cot on my straw mattress, I thought about what Werner had told me. I thought about the Americans who were able to assemble a huge fleet of transport planes to supply Berlin from the air; just as they once assembled fleets of B-17 bombers to bomb Berlin when I still lived there. I listened to the big, four-engined transports turn over my barracks as I lay there thinking about them.

One weekend the Americans trucked all the German children from the surrounding villages to one of their clubs in the village of Mueden and fed them a huge dinner, with Coca-Cola and cake for dessert. There was a funny clown who made the children shriek and laugh. At 14, I was too old to attend the party and could only watch through a window from the outside.

The black market was still with us, but it had changed its character. Now goods were sold for money, not traded for other goods or sex. The black market was actually thriving more than ever with the introduction of the new German money. The new black market, however, supplemented goods already available on the German economy, and in my eyes it served a useful purpose, rather than a sinister one like the black market of old.

I listened to Leo one afternoon in front of our barracks as he was talking with a German man who had befriended him. Leo mentioned that at the base they had arrested a sergeant who wasn't selling just cigarettes and candy bars, something which was generally overlooked by the American military police. This sergeant, who worked in the motor pool, had on two occasions taken a tanker truck loaded with aviation fuel and driven it to Hannover and sold both the fuel and the trucks on the black market.

The German marveled at the ingenuity and brazenness of the American sergeant. "No wonder you won the war," he said good-naturedly to Leo. Both laughed loudly, each taking a sip from their bottles of German beer. "The black market and the new German money are made for each other," the German man continued. "You want our new money, and we Germans need everything you are willing to sell. So, everybody is happy. *Ja*, Leo?"

"*Ja*, Willi. Everybody is happy." They laughed.

The American planes continued to fly their never-ending relays to and from Berlin. Another transport from Fassberg

had crashed in January, Leo told me. He also mentioned rumors that the Russians were going to reopen the roads and rails to Berlin. The Americans kept on flying.

I could see it wasn't enough for the Americans to beat the Russians and to supply a whole city of two and a half million people with all their essential needs, so they made a game of it once the Berlin Airlift had become routine for them. At an open house on Fassberg air base I saw a huge, white banner draped across the front of one of the large hangars. "BEAT CELLE" it read, in large, black letters.

"What does it mean?" I asked Leo.

"Fassberg is competing with Celle to see who can fly the most coal to Berlin," he said with pride in his voice. I never learned who won the flying competition, Fassberg or Celle, but by the 26th of June 1949, the first official anniversary of the Berlin Airlift, the Russians reopened the rail lines and highways to Berlin. The Americans were gleeful that they had beaten the Russians without firing a shot. And I was happy for the Americans too, but at the same time it saddened me, for I feared our American friends, and Leo most of all, would leave as soon as the airlift ended.

After the Russians reopened the rails and roads to Berlin, fewer American flights left Fassberg. The intervals between planes became increasingly longer. The drone of straining C-54 aircraft engines overhead finally became infrequent during the day, and ceased at night altogether.

At dinner one evening Leo mentioned that everyone was expecting orders to transfer. I knew, once the *Luftbruecke*--the Americans called it Operation Vittles--was over, there was no reason for Fassberg to stay open. I didn't like to think about it.

On the 29th of July there was a parade at the base by American and English troops in honor of those who had died in the Airlift. My mother and Leo went to watch. The next day, the 30th, Leo told my mother that an announcement had been made that the *Luftbruecke* would officially end on 31 October 1949. The next day the last C-54 flew from Celle to Berlin. Celle was closing.

A month later, on the evening of 27 August, Leo told us that the last C-54 loaded with coal for Berlin had flown from Fassberg and everyone had celebrated the occasion at a party. He was a little tipsy when he arrived. "We'll be leaving very soon now," he said to my mother. There was no need for her to interpret. I understood.

On the last day of August my mother came home early with a wan smile on her face. "I've been laid off at the PX. That means I don't have a job anymore, Wolfgang," she lamented, "and I won't make any more money. Everything is closing now. It's all over. It's all happening so fast," she said in disbelief, and busied herself with some dishes. "Maybe Leo will know more when he comes tonight," she said. I said nothing. The GSO men at the Trauen Center also began to leave. Soon they would all be gone and there would be no more chess club in the *Rote Laterne*.

When I arrived home from school a week later, my mother was waiting for me at our front door. She greeted me as I rode up on Leo's bicycle. "*Hallo*, Wolfgang. How are you? Come in, quickly, I need to talk to you." I was puzzled. She had never greeted me in such a manner before when I returned from school. I felt something important must be happening. She didn't look worried, though.

I parked my bicycle against the gray barracks wall, locked it up, and went inside. She was sitting on our small couch behind the coffee table. "Come sit by me," she told me gently. I sat down close to her. She put her right arm around my shoulders and stroked my hair out of my face with her left hand, as she liked to do at times. "You are getting so tall, Wolfgang. Where has the time gone? I was so worried about putting food on the table, I may have missed something as you grew into a young man. You are 14 now? Yes, of course, you are 14 already, my dear boy." I wondered where she was heading with this strange conversation which made me feel uncomfortable.

She took her arm from around my shoulders and moved away a little to face me. "Wolfgang, next week Leo is being transferred to an American air base in *Bayern*. He is going to *Fuerstenfeldbruck* near *Muenchen*." There was a lengthy silence. "Leo has asked me to go with him. Do you mind if I go? I won't go if you don't think I should," she added hurriedly.

"No, Mother, of course I don't mind you going with Leo." My response was instinctive. I had expected something like it.

"Will you be able to stay by yourself?" she asked, looking a little worried.

"Yes, Mother," I replied quickly, to dispel her fears and reservations. "I am a big boy now, as you just told me a minute ago. I can live in this place until I finish school next year. Then I have to go into some sort of apprenticeship, if I can find anyone to take me. If you are not back by that time we may have to give up these two rooms. But there is no reason for us to worry about that now. Next year is far away. Go to *Bayern* with Leo, Mother," I told her firmly, getting up from the couch so I could look out the window and not let her see the emotion in my face.

She rose, put her arms around me again, and kissed me on both cheeks. "You are such a good boy," she said with a smile on her face and in her voice, "and I am so proud of you. I'll write, and I'll come to visit for sure. It'll just be for a little while." Tears ran down her radiant face.

The following week, in the middle of a glorious September, Leo showed up with a surplus Army jeep with "USA" and "ARMY" painted in white letters on its sides. On the hood of the jeep was a large, white American star. Leo and another sergeant had bought the jeep from the Army to drive south to *Bayern*. Leo drove, and his friend sat next to him. My mother and another woman sat in back. Their things were packed in bags and boxes, stuffed all over the jeep. The little car looked hilarious with its four occupants and every bit of space filled with gasoline cans, bags, and boxes. They were having a good time; that was obvious. My mother looked beautiful in her happiness. The four of them drove off laughing loudly, waving to me and my grandparents Samuel at my side.

I wished I could go with them. I envied them. I felt lonely. They looked like people who had a future, people who were leaving their worries behind. At least that's how my mother looked. As the jeep disappeared down the road, I felt that for my mother the barracks were a thing of the past--they were out of her life forever. And in spite of my loneliness, I was truly happy for her.

On 27 September 1949, RAF Station Fassberg returned to caretaker status. "Mom's Place" and the *Rote Laterne* closed. The American soldiers and their money were things of the past. German guards controlled access to the base again, just as they had before the Americans arrived. An English soldier sat in the guardhouse at the main gate where an American MP once sat. It was as if the Americans had never been there.

So much had changed since the Americans had come to Fassberg more than a year before. Because of them I was no longer afraid of the future. I knew they were our friends, even if they had left Fassberg. I also knew that because of them there would be no war. As I stood looking at the base's main gate, a strangely empty feeling overcame me. I felt lonely, holding onto the handlebars of Leo's bicycle. I looked down the empty main street and up at the silent sky. I missed the Americans and their noisy C-54s. I missed being around those confident, generous and carefree people: the soldiers of the Berlin Airlift, the people who liked to play games--to win.

Postscript

Hedy and Leo eventually married. I accompanied them to the United States on the USS *Goethals*, a troop-carrying Liberty ship which departed Bremerhaven in January 1951 for New York. We eventually arrived in Denver, Colorado, our new American home. Both have died since and are buried in Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver. The 13-year-old German boy of 1948 is now a 63-year-old, but he has never forgotten the precious gift the veterans of the Berlin Airlift gave him--the gift of hope, the freedom to choose, and the uplifting smiles on their faces which spoke of a world that knew kindness and peace. They didn't just fly coal to Berlin and keep a city from freezing and the lights from going out. They inspired at least one German boy to want to be just like them when he grew up, and I know they inspired many, many more.

Colonel Wolfgang W. E. Samuel, USAF Ret., came to the United States in 1951 and served as an enlisted airman from 1954 to 1958. He graduated from the University of Colorado in 1960 and was commissioned through Air Force ROTC.

He later earned an MBA from Arizona State University and is a graduate of the National War College. After training as a navigator and electronic warfare officer, between 1962 and 1967 he flew 106 peripheral reconnaissance missions in RB-47H aircraft against the Soviet Union and its satellites. In 1967 he flew 76 combat missions in EB-66 aircraft supporting fighter, bomber, and recon aircraft over North Vietnam and Laos. In 1969 he flew with the 39th Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron, 52d Tactical Fighter Wing, from Spangdahlem Air Base, near Trier, Germany. He later served at Air Force Headquarters and at the National Defense University before retiring from the Air Force in 1985. From then until civilian retirement in 1993, he was a Program Manager with the Melpar Division of E-Systems Corporation in Falls Church, Virginia, now a part of Raytheon Corporation.

Reviewed 12 August 1998. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil