



A Berliner Grows Up With The Americans

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BERLIN (AP) - Mercedes Simon lost her father in the war, survived the Allied bombing and emerged from the ruins of her home to find her block full of Russian soldiers.

Her house at 15 Haehnelstrasse was ripped open by bombs as the Allies advanced on Berlin. The Simons cowered in the cellar.

"There was only one real bomb shelter in the neighborhood and most people tried to ride out the bombing in their basements," said Mercedes, who remembers seeing dead neighbors dug out from under collapsed buildings.

Little more than a shrapnel-scarred china cabinet could be salvaged when the family started to rebuild.

Along Haehnelstrasse, life was difficult and risky in the first weeks after the war ended.

The Russian commandant had his headquarters just down the rubble-strewn street and Russian soldiers raped several girls in the neighborhood. "The Russian bear was feared," said Mercedes, now Mrs. Peter Wild.

Then the street got lucky. When the city was divided, it fell inside the American sector. The bar on the corner became a GI hangout.

Four decades later, terrorists would bomb another bar a block away called La Belle. Two U.S. soldiers were killed in the bombing and Mercedes Wild watched from her window as bloodied Americans straggled down the block.

In 1945, little Mercedes was given milk by the Americans and inoculated with American vaccines. "They were not seen as occupation forces," she said.

In 1948, the Russians sealed off all land routes to Berlin and airplanes became the center of 7-year-old Mercedes' life. Her family lived about a mile from Tempelhof Airport, where the Americans landed food and fuel day and night.

"It was terrible, the noise, but one got used to it," she said, and soon the drone was lulling her to sleep.

One morning before dawn, an American transport crashed about 200 yards from the house, killing both pilots.

On another day, **Gail Halvorsen**, an Air Force pilot from Provo, Utah, was moved by a group of children at the Tempelhof fence who were too proud to ask him for sweets. After that, as he approached to land, he dropped candy bars attached to miniature parachutes.

Other pilots started doing it, too. By the time the blockade ended in May 1949, they had dropped 23 tons of candy, most of it donated by Americans.

Mercedes never caught any candy bars, but she wrote to Halvorsen and he mailed her some.

When Col. Halvorsen returned in 1970 with his family to take command of Tempelhof, she invited them to dinner and showed him the letter he had sent with the candy. She keeps it with family heirlooms in the scarred china cabinet.

This month, 15 students from Berlin's ballet high school will visit the western United States. They are part of a government-financed exchange program started by Halvorsen and Mercedes' husband.

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