

US Fed News

CHILD OF BERLIN AIRLIFT TELLS HER STORY

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WIESBADEN, Germany, June 25 -- The U.S. Department of Defense's American Forces Information Service issued the following press release:

A storybook came alive for German and American youth here when the tale's lead character appeared in person.

After having collaborated on a video project for the children's story, "Mercedes and the Chocolate Pilot," in celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Berlin Airlift, students from Aukamm and Hainerberg elementary schools on U.S. Army Garrison Wiesbaden and the nearby Nauheim Grundschule were treated to a visit by the book's real-life title character.

"I'm of course much older than years ago," said Mercedes Wild with a smile as she described what it was like to be a 7-year-old child in post-war Berlin during the Soviet blockade from June 1948 to May 1949.

"We had little to eat," Wild told her young audience, explaining that the western section of Berlin had very little farmland. And though the Soviets tried to entice Berliners over to the eastern side with promises of food, those in the west knew better than to sacrifice their freedom.

When Allied airplanes began delivering coal, food and other supplies, Wild said she was terrified bombs would once again fall on her city. "I asked my grandmother if we should go downstairs in the cellar once more, but she told me this time the planes were bringing food and coal."

Wild and her husband, Peter, described the brutal winter of 1948-1949.

"We had no good clothes, no shoes," she remembers. "But we didn't fear the cold; we feared the Russians."

When a plane crashed barely 200 meters from her house, killing the two pilots, Wild recalled everything in sight being coated in white flour, adding that as a child her thoughts were: "It might have been our house ... that the plane hit."

And she thinks back to "being very sleepy in the mornings because of the noise of the airplanes in the night."

Peter told the German and American students that the flights between Berlin and other cities in Germany were only the tip of the iceberg.

"The real airlift stretched all across the United States and the Atlantic Ocean, using airplanes, trains, trucks and ships," he said, describing the incredible logistical effort involved in moving massive quantities of supplies to Berlin.

He also described the phenomenal achievement of building Berlin's Tegel Airport from scratch as the airlift was in progress. "Ten thousand women built a new airport in three months," he said.

As recounted in the story by author Margot Theis Raven, a young Mercedes watched as planes flew overhead, wishing that one day the tiny parachutes bearing chocolate would find their way into her hands. After completing a suggestion by her grandmother to write the "candy bomber," Lt. **Gail Halvorsen**, Wild eventually received a response explaining the pilot was unable to spot her house and her white chicken from the air. Tucked in the

envelope was peppermint gum. Although she gave away the treat, having never before tasted anything like it, "The most important thing for me was this letter. ... Chocolate and chewing gum were unknown to us."

Having lost her father during World War II, Wild said, she looked to Halvorsen as a surrogate dad.

"My father was also a pilot in World War II, and he [went missing] early in the war. My mother and I didn't know what happened to him. ... The chocolate uncle became a symbol of my father."

In the early 1970s, when Halvorsen was visiting Berlin, Peter approached the American with the treasured letter he had written to Wild more than two decades earlier. The meeting evolved into a long-term friendship with the Halvorsen and Wild families that continues today.

And it grew into a partnership program between the Gottfried Keller Gymnasium, where Peter taught in Berlin, and Provo High School, near Halvorsen's home in Utah.

The Wilds also explained to the children how they learned "American, not English" after the war by listening to American Forces Network Radio. "The best teacher for German kids to learn [the vernacular] was AFN," Peter recalled.

In 1997, during the 50th anniversary of the airlift at Tempelhof Airport in Berlin, Wild was invited on stage alongside Halvorsen and President Bill Clinton, where she had "the honor to say thank you on behalf of the people of Berlin."

"Without the help of the Americans [and the Allies], I wouldn't be here," Wild said. "I wouldn't be alive to enjoy the freedom you brought to us Germans."

Mercedes Wild, along with **Gail Halvorsen** and other airlift veterans, will be on hand to meet visitors during the Wiesbaden Army Airfield open house June 29 from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

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